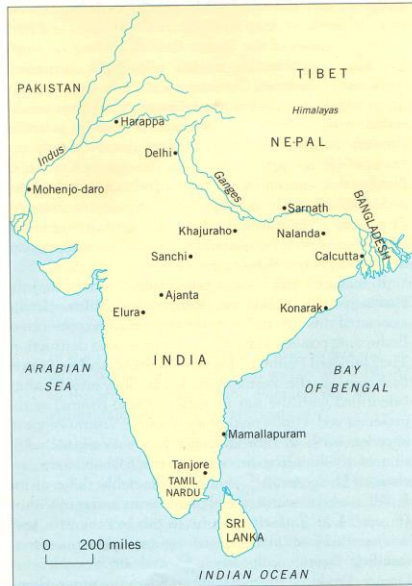


South Asian Art c. 2,500 BCE – 1200 CE



Many of the ideas people associate with Asia started in South Asia. This includes Hindu beliefs and Buddhism.



Indus Valley Seals, Pakistan 2500-1500 BCE

The roots of Indian culture go back to the ancient Indus Valley civilization. It was an advanced urban culture with multi-story brick houses and covered drainage systems.

They left behind over 2,000 stone seals with script that has not yet been deciphered. The average size of the seals is 1 ¼ x 1 ¼ inches and most include the figure of a human or animal.



*The Great Stupa, India, 100 BCE – 100 CE*

South Asia is the birthplace of Hinduism and Buddhism. The Great Stupa is probably the most famous of all early Buddhist architecture. Stupas are hemispherical Buddhist structures that house relics. Most Stupas have at least one walkway that wraps around the outside. Followers of Buddha can demonstrate their reverence and respect by walking clockwise around the stupa.

### **MUDRAS**

*Mudras* (Sanskrit word for “signs”) are ancient symbolic hand gestures that are regarded as physical expressions of different states of being. In Buddhist art, they function iconographically. *Mudras* also are used during meditation to release these energies. Following are the most common *mudras* in Asian art.

Here are some of the common mudras, or symbolic gestures, in Buddhist and Hindu art.

#### **DHYANA MUDRA**

A gesture of meditation and balance, symbolizing the path toward enlightenment. Hands are in the lap, the lower representing *maya*, the physical world of illusion, the upper representing *nirvana*, enlightenment and release from the world.



#### **ABHAYA MUDRA**

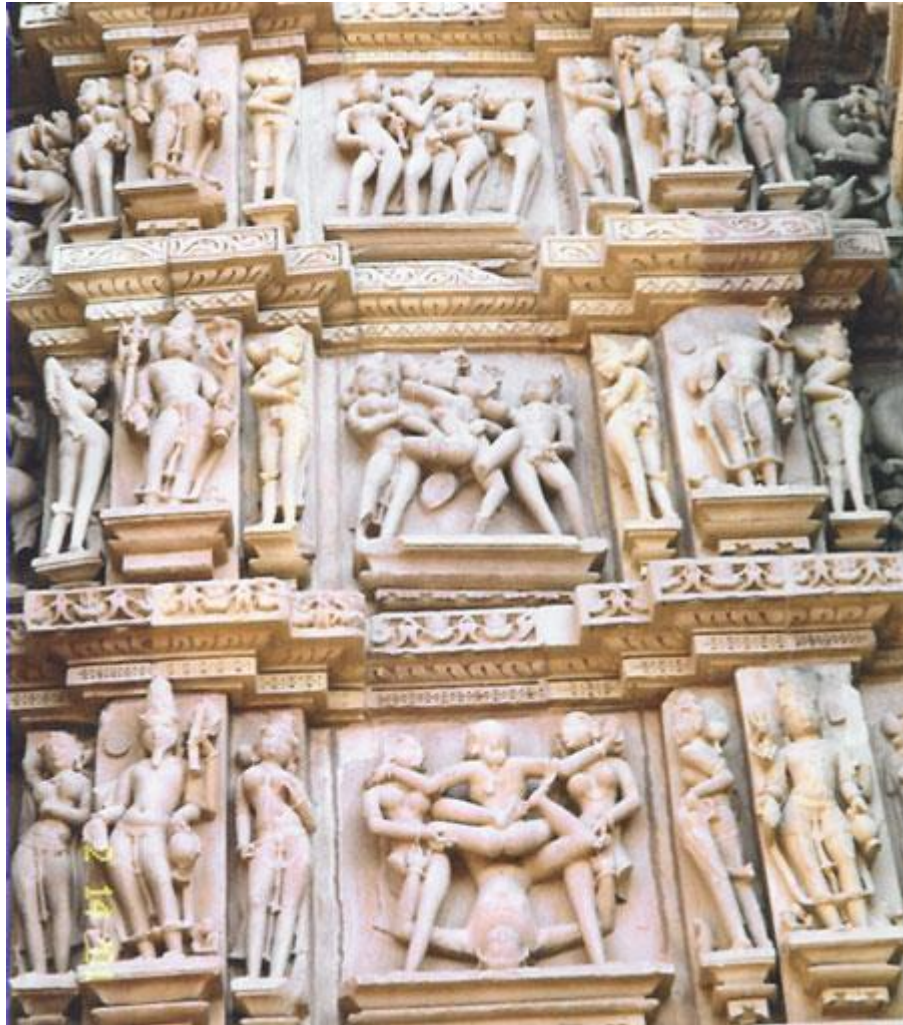
The gesture of reassurance, blessing, and protection, this *mudra* means “have no fear.” The right hand is at shoulder level, palm outward.



#### **BHUMISPASHA MUDRA**

This gesture calls upon the earth to witness Shakyamuni Buddha’s enlightenment at Bodh Gaya. A seated figure’s right hand reaches toward the ground, palm inward.





Detail of sculptures on temple wall, Vishvanatha Temple, Khajuraho, India, c. 1000 CE

Figures in medieval South Asia have characteristically curvy, sensual body types.

It is not uncommon to see figures engaged in sexual activity in the sculptural programs of the temples in southern India.

Sexuality and the physical act of love symbolize ultimate spiritual union with all existence. This illustration is expressed in the following text from the Upanishads:

In the embrace of his beloved a man forgets the whole world – everything within and without. In the same manner, he who embraces the Self knows neither within nor without.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, 4.3.21



Shiva Nataraja: Lord of the Dance, Chola Period, 11th century

In Medieval India, the three main deities were Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva. This figure of Shiva Nataraja, Lord of the Dance, is a version of one of Medieval India's most famous icons. This image, symbolizes the passage of time, creation, protection, destruction, release from destiny, and enlightenment.

When humanity has lost its way and gone off course, Shiva destroys the world and recreates it for a new start.

- In the palm of Shiva's left hand, **a flame** symbolizes the world's **destruction** with the promise of **renewal**.
- The **drum** is a symbol of **creation**. The hourglass shape of the drum symbolizes male and female.
- See the hand held up at shoulder level with palm facing outward? This **mudra** symbolizes protection and means “**fear not**.”

Shiva is **pointing** at his feet. Let's look at how the lower part of the sculpture adds to the message of the work.

- This foot, lifted off of the ground, symbolizes **salvation** and the final release **from earth bound things**.
- See how Shiva is standing on a **small figure**? This figure represents the demon Apasmara, the embodiment of **ignorance**. Shiva stamps out ignorance and destroys evil as he dances.