



The Body Adorned

*Dissolving Boundaries Between
Sacred and Profane in India's Art*

Publishing

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Columbia University Press / New York

a short waist-cloth held in place by a jeweled hip-belt, and his rich adornment includes a forehead band, earrings, necklaces, a waist-band, sacred thread, armlets, bracelets, anklets, and rings on all ten fingers and toes. The god's identifying attributes include the vertical third eye on his forehead, the crescent moon crowning his locks, and the serpent that peeps out of his "turban." This most powerful of gods, the greatest of yogis, destroyer of demonic forces that threaten the world, is portrayed as the most beautiful of beings, a gorgeous figure, "the thief who stole my heart."¹ Equally seductive is the broken image of a dancer from a temple in northern India, perhaps Jamsot near Allahabad, who pirouettes in space so as to present the spectator with both a frontal view of her full breasts and a rear view of the curvature of her behind (figure 2). A long necklace swings away from her torso with her movement, while her translucent, scarf-like drapery blows away in the opposite direction. Necklaces, jeweled waist- and hip-bands, armlets, an elaborate hairstyle studded with decorative pins, a forehead band, and a tiara complete her rich ornamentation. Whether she is a celestial dancer or a human entertainer remains debatable, but either way her glamorous body holds center stage.

These exquisite images in bronze and stone, as also the painted manuscript pages we shall examine in chapter 5, were all created for the discerning viewer, the connoisseur, a man (occasionally a woman) who belonged to the realm of the cultivated social elite. The world of Indian imagery was intended for the viewing pleasure not of laborer or farmer, but of king, courtier, aristocrat, and *nagaraka* (refined man-about-town).² The world portrayed in Indian imagery too was not the everyday world of the peasant and worker, but the stately world of royalty and the divine courts of the gods. When the everyday world entered the artistic vocabulary, it was in the context of its interaction with monarchs and gods. It is true that stone statues adorned the walls of Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain temples, and bronze images were created to be honored within, suggesting that the images were available for viewing by all who chose to visit such shrines. But it is fair to assume that the subtleties of the sculptural program of the major temples were not created for the general viewer. We may have to rethink the idea of great temples—the Kailasanatha at Kanchipuram, the Kailasa at Ellora, the Rajarajeshvara at Tanjavur, the Lingaraja at Bhubaneshvar—as places of worship intended for the general public.³ Most villagers worshipped, and still worship, in their own simple yet potent village shrines, generally containing nothing more elaborate than a rounded stone to represent the linga emblem of Shiva or a vermilion-daubed stone to suggest the presence of the goddess; grandeur and artistic merit were not their prime concern.⁴ I do not believe I am overstating the case for elite involvement in the building of large stone temples that required a substantial influx of resources. It would be well to keep in mind that major royal temples, lavishly adorned with sculpted images, were frequently built to affirm and establish the conquest of a region by a new dynasty, and that successive monarchs also constructed similar grand temples to reaffirm their own overlordship.⁵ The prime audience for such a



Figure 2. Dancer, stone, possibly Jamsot, Uttar Pradesh, twelfth century.



Figure 3. *Chowri-bearer (front view)*, sandstone, Didarganj, ca. second century.



Figure 4. *Chowri-bearer (rear view)*, sandstone, Didarganj, ca. second century.

the ancient Mauryan monarchs (320–180 B.C.E.).¹¹ The stunning Didarganj image has been assigned to the third century B.C.E., partly on the basis of her find-spot and partly because of the so-called Mauryan polish she shares with a range of columns erected by Emperor Ashoka and his predecessors. Her original context is unknown, and we have no clues as to whether she once stood in a palace complex, a Buddhist or Jain establishment, or a Hindu sacred space. One thing is certain: despite the scale of the sculpture, she is no divinity, since she holds an attendant's fly whisk (*chowri*) in one hand and could never have occupied the central place in any conceivable tableau. Additionally, since the Indian system of artistic proportions dictates that a female figure, whether attendant or consort, be of significantly lesser height than the central image, the group of which she was once part must have been of truly monumental proportions. Could she be one of two flanking royal attendants, such as we encounter in later groupings? If indeed she stood alone, she must have held a very special status within the courtly milieu to have