

Abstract

The Iconography of Viśvarūpa Viṣṇu: with a Special Focus on Sculptures Produced in Northern India during the Ancient Times and the Medieval Period

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This study aims to clarify the nature of the deity represented in images conventionally called Viśvarūpa Viṣṇu through an examination of their iconography. It therefore reveals some aspects of the relationship between visual representation and theology in ancient and medieval India. In addition, it provides a case study of Hindu art in response to the general question of how to visualize a God who is thought to be transcendent, that is, a God who is beyond human vision. The intention is to develop a better understanding of Hindu art, which has been less studied than other religious art that grapples with a similar problem (Christian art, Buddhist art, etc.)

In this study, I focus on sculptures that employ the iconography of Viśvarūpa Viṣṇu (Viṣṇu the omniform) produced during the ancient and medieval periods. My analysis focuses on 48 sculptural examples, mainly from India, including the surviving fragments of some sculptures. The production dates range from the fourth to the 15th centuries. The works are distributed over a wide area, from western and eastern India to northern India, mainly in the present-day state of Uttar Pradesh, as well as Nepal. Most examples share iconographic similarities. Notably, they include depictions of several animal heads and figurines located around or behind a central standing figure of Viṣṇu. At an early stage of my study, I had the following hypothesis: the iconography of Viśvarūpa Viṣṇu consists of a complex image of Viṣṇu encircled by the heads of animals and small figures; it cannot be identified with any other famous mythological scene of Viṣṇu. Following this hypothesis, I have concluded that there are two broad types of icons of Viśvarūpa Viṣṇu, as presented in Chapter 5.

This study is composed of six chapters. Detailed information on the existing sculptural works of Viśvarūpa Viṣṇu is provided in the Corpus of Appendix I. The figures are provided in Appendix II.

Chapter 1 serves as the introduction and presents the research object. The images of Viśvarūpa Viṣṇu can be roughly classified into three groups: (1) sculptures that were produced during the ancient and medieval periods (hereafter Group 1), (2) miniature paintings that were painted in the early modern period (hereafter Group 2), and (3) illustrations that were made and reproduced in the past two centuries (hereafter Group 3). The study focuses on unraveling the iconography of examples belonging to Group 1, which will be dealt with in Chapter 3. I briefly overview the representatives, explain the methodology of this thesis, and raise research questions.

Chapter 2 overviews the early iconography of Viṣṇu, which is a prerequisite for considering the iconography of Viśvarūpa Viṣṇu. It also focuses on how the iconography of Viṣṇu was established.

The early iconography of Viṣṇu may have begun by borrowing its iconographic elements from an earlier iconography of Vāsudeva-Kṛṣṇa. Therefore, the icons of Vāsudeva-Kṛṣṇa are also considered in this chapter. A proper understanding of this basic iconography is needed for interpreting various iconographic elements found in the iconography of Viśvarūpa Viṣṇu.

In Chapter 3, sculptural works representing Viśvarūpa Viṣṇu produced in northern India during the ancient and medieval periods are discussed in chronological order and broadly by region. The iconographic elements and details are examined based on a list of existing sculptural works stemming from fieldwork mainly in India. Emphasis is placed on the sculptures produced in Mathurā during the Gupta period, in Śāmalājī, mainly in Kānyakubja during the Gurjara-Pratīhāra period, and in eastern India during the medieval period. Finally, the process of forming such a complex image of the deity is discussed, considering the iconographic traditions and deviations from it, as well as the ingenuity of the artisans in the sculptural production.

Chapter 4 analyzes the textual sources. It makes an in-depth study of Sanskrit texts compiled from the first and second millennium B.C. to the medieval period as far as possible, in terms of how the word *viśvarūpa-* is used in an iconographic context, especially from the perspective of Vaiṣṇava worship. Specifically, it examines the Vedic literature established in the first and second millennium B.C., the *Mahābhārata* compiled from the fourth century B.C. to the second century A.D., and the *Bhagavadgītā* therein, the *Viṣṇupurāṇa* composed in the fifth and sixth centuries, the *Viṣṇudharmottarapurāṇa* compiled in the seventh and eighth centuries, and the *Agnipurāṇa* compiled after the medieval period. In addition, medieval iconographic manuals such as the *Aparājītapṛcchā* of Bhuvanadeva, the *Devatāmūrtiprakaraṇam*, and the *Rūpamaṇḍana* of Sūtradhāramaṇḍana, and the Pāñcarātra texts by the Vaiṣṇava sect characterized by Tantrism, are also considered. The chapter concludes with lists of Viṣṇu's manifestations in Sanskrit literature. The historical changes in the lists are instructive to refer to when identifying the iconographic elements of the manifestations of Viṣṇu that appear in the sculptures of Viśvarūpa Viṣṇu.

Chapter 5 presents an analysis of the artworks and the archaeological and textual materials. It also highlights the problems that emerge when combining all these sources. A comprehensive discussion of the iconography of Viśvarūpa Viṣṇu follows, ultimately reaching the following conclusion: there are two broad types of icons of Viśvarūpa Viṣṇu.

The first type has the following features: (1) Forms of animals flank the central Viṣṇu, and (2) additional small figures, which are not just attendants or a part of the decoration, are presented behind or beside Viṣṇu. The small figures include the gods of the directions, manifestations of Viṣṇu, various gods such as Rudras and Ādityas, ṛṣis, celestial beings, and in some cases, Śiva and his family members, Pārvatī, Gaṇeśa, and Kārttikeya. In most works, (3) faces are arranged on a circumference that frames a halo behind Viṣṇu. In some works, (4) small standing male and female figures are placed on a plinth at the feet of Viṣṇu. Some iconographic elements or compositions seem to have been passed

on in the iconographic tradition during the image-making process among artisans. The conceptual and theological source for the iconography is presumed to be linked to the omniform (*viśvarūpa*-) manifestation of Kṛṣṇa (Viṣṇu) in Chapter 11 of the *Bhagavadgītā*.

The second type is a “four”-faced and/or “20”-armed Viṣṇu whose iconography is defined in iconographic manuals. The characteristics of the figures of Type II match to some extent with the definitions of Viśvarūpa in the iconographic manuals that flourished after the medieval period. Many such images were produced in eastern India during the Pāla period. In the medieval period, the sects of Vaiṣṇavism that emphasized Tantrism flourished, such as the Pāñcarātra. The Pāñcarātra sect considered Viśvarūpa to be one of many forms of Viṣṇu. As he became an object of meditation and worship in a practice-focused religious environment, he was understood more as a subdivided and embodied form of the Supreme God, an emanation rather than the Supreme God himself. In the inscription of a Brahmanical ruler of Gayā dating from 1042 A.D., Viśvarūpa is used as an epithet for a specific deity.

From the fourth to the tenth centuries, a solid iconographic tradition of Viṣṇu Viśvarūpa was handed down and shared among artisans in northern India. On the other hand, some later works are based on iconographic manuals that were more widespread during the medieval period. Most images can be categorized as belonging to one of these two traditions: Type I includes Corpus 1–39, and Type II includes Corpus 41–46. However, there is one exceptional piece that was probably produced to simultaneously follow both the iconographic tradition and the iconographic manuals: Corpus 40 (Fig. 79). Here, the central Viṣṇu is not surrounded by animal heads but instead displays the ten manifestations (*daśāvatāra*) placed around his nimbus. He has 18 arms and holds various attributes, including a *cakra*, *gadā*, and *śankha*. There are more small figures on the halo: the nine planets (*navagraha*), Śiva and his family—Pārvatī, Gaṇeśa and Kārttikeya, the seven mothers, the seven *ṛṣis*, the 12 Ādityas, and presumably the ten Rudras among others. As such, it is an example that may inherit elements of both types.

The iconography of Type I can be said to have its conceptual sources in Chapter 11 of the *Bhagavadgītā*. A sculptural work closely matching the textual description is the icon enshrined at the Changu Nārāyaṇa temple in Kathmandu, Nepal (Fig. 67, Corpus 27). Details of the iconography have already been mentioned in Chapter 3. The central Viṣṇu has nine heads at least, arranged in what look like three rows and three columns. He has ten arms and holds a *cakra*, a *gadā*, a *śankha*, a sword, and other objects. He is standing on the earth goddess supported by two *nāgas*, below which Viṣṇu is again depicted, this time as *Anantaśayana* (*Anantaśāyin*), lying and sleeping on the great serpent Ananta in the primordial sea. Garuḍa and Arjuna are posed in the worship of Viṣṇu, as are two flying celestial beings. The four gods of the directions are also clearly seen: Indra holding a *vajra* (thunderbolt), Yama holding a staff, Varuṇa holding a noose, and Kubera holding a bag. There are also many *ṛṣis*, with Brahmā seated on a lotus at the top. Small figures are depicted as being blown out from the mouth of

Viṣṇu in the second and third tiers. Not only is Arjuna seen with his hands together praying to the central Viṣṇu, but there is also a circular outline representing the moon or sun at the top (BhG 11.19, see Table IIA).

However, there is one iconographic element that is not seen in the Changu Nārāyaṇa icon, nor mentioned in the BhG, but that is found in most examples of Type I: Viṣṇu's manifestations (*avatāras*). This element is carried over to Type II in the form of four faces, namely the four faces that include a boar and a man-lion. In the early examples from Mathurā and Śāmalājī, Narasiṃha, Varāha, and sometimes a horse-headed figure (likely Hayagrīva or Kalkin) were represented around the central Viṣṇu (Corpus 2, 7, 8, 9, 13, etc.). Matsya and Kūrma were gradually added (Corpus 14, 17, 18, etc.). Finally, in the Kānyakubja pieces, the number of manifestations reaches ten: Narasiṃha, Varāha, Matsya, Kūrma, Vāmana, the horse-headed figure, Paraśurāma, Rāma, Balarāma and Buddha. This change in iconography relates to the development and acceptance of the concept of Viṣṇu's manifestation (See Table IV and Chapter 4). The earliest manifestations of a boar and a man-lion appear in the list around the second or third century. The ten manifestations appear around the eighth century, or possibly earlier, between the sixth and eighth centuries. The date of the Kānyakubja pieces is thought to be around the ninth century, which means that the iconography of the sculptures is consistent with the textual references. The addition of the manifestations to the iconographic elements of Viśvarūpa Viṣṇu may reflect a process by which the worship of Viṣṇu as the supreme deity expanded in various regions.

The iconography of Viśvarūpa Viṣṇu should be considered as an iconography of the transcendental form of the Supreme God. The form of Viśvarūpa Viṣṇu, in which diverse deities and manifestations appear gathered under Viṣṇu, iconographically symbolizes the essence of Hindu art. This henotheist polytheism unites other deities under the Supreme God.