

Making the Images

—— Viṣṇu Icons called Viśvarūpa ——

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Introduction

Within Indian religious art, we find composite images of the well-known Hindu deity Viṣṇu, which are conventionally called Viṣṇu-Viśvarūpa or Viśvarūpa Viṣṇu. This Bahuvrīhi compound can be interpreted in two ways: its first member, *viśva*-, can be an adjective modifying the latter member, *rūpa*-. Then, *viśvarūpa*- would mean “[Viṣṇu] who has every form,” in other words, “[Viṣṇu] who is omniform.” Secondly, *viśva*- can be a neuter noun meaning “the whole world, the universe.” Then, *viśvarūpa*- would mean “[Viṣṇu] whose form is the universe.”

Such multi-faced and multi-armed figures have been produced in Hindu art since ancient times. The figures 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). This paper focuses on unraveling the icons belonging to Group 1.

1 Reconsidering the Icons of Viṣṇu Conventionally Called “Viśvarūpa”

1.1 Sculptures produced during the ancient and medieval periods (Group 1)

Sculptures that represented the iconography of Viśvarūpa Viṣṇu were produced from the fourth century until the 15th century. There are approximately 50 such examples in existence. They were made in or at least dispersed over a wide area, chiefly the present-day state of Uttar Pradesh and its neighboring states of Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan as well as Gujarat, eastern India, and Nepal. Most examples have the following iconographic motif: a statue of Viṣṇu is in the center, and multiple heads of animals and minor figures are found around him. As a sample, one may look at a sculpture of Viṣṇu produced during the Gupta period, from the fourth century to the sixth century A.D., preserved at the Government Museum in Mathurā (Fig. 1, Accession Number: 42-43.2989). Viṣṇu, the central

figure, has lost his lower body parts and lacks a part of the disc at the back. The head of a boar and a lion flank him on either side. He is also surrounded by figures with characteristic elements, such as small figures with a nimbus resembling a flame or a third eye on the forehead. This is a typical example of early sculpture depicting Viśvarūpa Viṣṇu.

The representatives of Group 1 can be roughly classified into three subgroups: (1-a) sculptures produced during the Gupta period, that is, from the fourth through the middle of the sixth century, mainly in Mathurā in Uttar Pradesh; (1-b) sculptures produced from approximately the sixth to the seventh centuries in Śāmalājī in Gujarat; (1-c) sculptures produced during roughly the eighth and ninth centuries in Kānyakubja, the present-day Kannauj in Uttar Pradesh. There are other early sculptures of Viśvarūpa Viṣṇu that lie outside this classification scheme and are thus not included in this paper.

1.2 Miniature paintings of the early modern period (Group 2)

Miniature paintings representing Viśvarūpa Viṣṇu abound. They can be roughly classified into three groups: (2-a) miniature paintings depicting Viṣṇu with many faces and many arms; (2-b) miniature paintings showing Viṣṇu's body as the universe with all beings inside; and (2-c) miniature paintings which combine both motifs (2-a) and (2-b), that is, which depict Viṣṇu as having many faces and arms, and whose body is the universe with all its beings inside.

1.3 Illustrations made and reproduced in modern times (Group 3)

Present-day illustrations that represent the iconography of Viśvarūpa Viṣṇu are too numerous to count. For example, one may look at the following postcard image, which was initially intended for a “calendar” image in the fourth quarter of the 20th century.¹ Moreover, it has been reproduced elsewhere in modern times, such as on posters (Fig. 2).

1.4 Previous Studies

When considering previous studies of the iconography of Viśvarūpa Viṣṇu, Thomas Stuart Maxwell must be mentioned first. He deserves much credit for being the first to take up this complex iconography earnestly. He conducted

¹ Ranjan writes: “The image has the typical appearance of a 19th-century oleograph, even though it is quite obviously a recent publication.” (Ranjan [2008] p. 141)

fieldwork in India for over a decade and reported on many sculptural works.² This study also owes a great deal to his documentation of these investigations. He takes the position that there is a specific iconographic tradition of Viśvarūpa Viṣṇu. My fieldwork experiences in investigating the actual objects can support this position.

Nevertheless, his study can still be improved. One difficulty in dealing with the iconography of Viśvarūpa Viṣṇu is the identification of small figures. However, Maxwell does not provide a strong basis for individual iconographic interpretations of the crucial small figures. The results of his work on Viśvarūpa Viṣṇu are summarized in a published monograph based mainly on his doctoral thesis (Maxwell [1988]). However, the content is partly his interpretation of the iconography based on iconometric measurements that he “reproduced” himself.³ He used these measurements to identify each figure. However, we should rather identify the figures based on the iconographic features, not on measurements alone. Also, this may be a limitation of the methodology of iconography—in particular, the use of visual and textual sources for a comprehensive examination of the image—but I think that the textual sources Maxwell used read too much symbolic meaning into sculptural works. In other words, he “let” the icon speak too much. Despite the noted limitations, this does not change the fact that his contribution to research on the iconography of Viśvarūpa Viṣṇu is significant. Above all, I agree with the idea that there was a shared iconographic tradition of Viśvarūpa Viṣṇu in early and medieval northern India, which he has expressed in his series of studies.

A theory that takes a very different position from Maxwell’s is that of Doris Meth Srinivasan. She clearly states that “I cannot agree that the nomenclature “Viśvarūpa” in the technical sense explored above can be profitable applied to the images in Plates 1-47 in T. S. Maxwell, *Viśvarūpa*, Delhi, 1988.”⁴ Her approach is to decipher the symbolic meaning of Viśvarūpa in the vast history of Indian literature and thought, beginning with the Vedas. She sees the Viśvarūpa image as a bridge between theology and iconography.

² Maxwell’s reports (<https://ignca.gov.in/online-digital-resources/research-reports/the-visvarupa-iconographic-traditions/>)

³ See footnote 9.

⁴ Srinivasan [1997] p. 137, footnote 13.

2 The Iconography of Viśvarūpa Viṣṇu

2.1 The works produced in Mathurā during the Gupta period

Mathurā, according to Hindu scripture, was the birthplace of Kṛṣṇa, and it remains an important holy place for modern Hindu devotees. It was one of the major centers for religious art in northern India during the Kuṣāṇa and Gupta periods. Many Buddhist, Jain, and Hindu—including Brahmanical—artifacts have been excavated there. Previous studies have detailed the circumstances of the production of these artifacts at Mathurā.⁵ Seven Viśvarūpa Viṣṇu works produced during the Gupta period have been found in Mathurā and its suburbs. Most of the works have survived only as fragments, and the complete form of a given sculpture must be conjectured by analyzing and piecing together smaller parts from similar sculptures. Using this method, we can make an informed guess that Viṣṇu is situated in the center of the works, and multiple heads of animals and minor figures are found around him. The small figures represented with Viṣṇu range from animal faces, which indicate his manifestations, to deities such as Agni (the god of fire), ascetics (*ṛṣi*) engaged in austerities, and figures that appear to be flying celestial beings. The most striking iconographic feature is a halo whose periphery is framed by several faces radiating out behind Viṣṇu. Viṣṇu has four arms and initially held his attributes, typically a *cakra* (wheel) and *gadā* (mace), in his hands.

A representative of Viśvarūpa Viṣṇu produced during the Gupta period is preserved in the Mathurā Government Museum (Fig. 1). The central Viṣṇu, who wears a crown, is surrounded by two of his animal manifestations, Varāha and Narasiṃha, Agni, four or more *ṛṣi*s and a flying celestial being. Two iconographic motifs recur in the faces on the halo's edge. These faces have been interpreted as Rudra because they have a third eye on the forehead and are depicted next to what is likely a trident (Fig. 3).⁶ It is possible to make additional observations about these faces represented on the circumference of the halo based on several fragments. In particular, the following characteristics are noted for Fig. 4: small, delicate, round shapes like scales, or beards, are carved on the lower part of the cheek, around the mouth, and under the chin. These marks may provide a further clue for identifying these faces, which have been the focus of much attention.

Fig. 7 is unique in that Viśvarūpa Viṣṇu is worshipped in a series of narrative scenes represented in the lintel (Figs. 5–6). The scene is not detailed here,

⁵ Harle [1974] pp. 15–18; Williams [1982] pp. 29–33, 67–73.

⁶ Williams [1982] p. 72: “Rudras (“Red Ones,” an epithet associated with Śiva) are indicated by the large heads around the outer edge of the Mathurā images, clearly fierce and Śaiva, to judge from the third eye, in Plate 75.” *Rudra*- is precise in meaning “howling, running with a roar” (PW s.v. *rudra*-).

as many previous studies have referred to it.⁷ Still, it depicts a group of attendees, including several female figures, walking towards a sacred place like a temple. Candra, the moon god, and his female consort, seated on a crescent moon, are depicted on the opposite side of Viṣṇu, and Sūrya, the sun god, on a chariot pulled by horses, is shown on the other lintel. Viṣṇu is standing and has six arms. Above his head, an elongated animal head, perhaps a horse figure, is represented facing forward, and the figure raises both hands or is in a posture as if to raise something in each hand (Fig. 8: H). He is surrounded by small faces (Fig. 8: F1–9), some of which may have had fangs originally (Fig. 8: F2, F4, F7, F8).

2.2 The works produced in Śāmalājī

Schastok writes the following in the introduction to her monograph on the Śāmalājī sculptures: “Among the finest bodies of Indian sculpture from the late Gupta period are the Hindu images from the site of Śāmalājī, a village quite literally on the Gujarat-Rajasthan border but within the Sabar Kantha District of modern Gujarat state. Their pleasing proportions, radiant faces, and delicate gestures are characterized by a high Gupta sense of balance between stasis and movement, outward expansiveness and inward-looking contemplation, between flesh and ornament, volume and line, the reality of inner form and the play of outer surfaces.”⁸

Four sculptures of Viśvarūpa Viṣṇu produced in Śāmalājī, probably between the start of the sixth and end of the seventh century, are extant (Figs. 9–12). The political situation in Śāmalājī at that time appears to have been unstable. The area was probably part of the ancient region of Western Mālwā, whose capital was Mandasor. Still, it is also believed that there were various other influences on the production of artifacts, such as the Maitrakas and early Kaḷacuris. A fragmentary figure of Viśvarūpa Viṣṇu (Fig. 11) is said to have been excavated from the primary site of Devnī Morī, famous for Buddhist archaeological findings, including the remains of *stūpas* and *vihāras* and Buddhist artifacts from the third and fourth centuries. It is located 2 km from Śāmalājī in Gujarat, but the land is currently submerged in the Meswo reservoir.

Although most of the surface of the works are worn and the details are difficult to discern, the iconographic features of the Śāmalājī Viśvarūpa can be summarized as follows: Viṣṇu has three human heads, each adorned with a tall crown, and he wears various ornaments. He sits in a squatting position, with his feet on traces of the coiled tails of two *nāgas*. He has eight arms and displays a number of his attributes, including a shield and a sword. A horse-headed figure,

⁷ Joshi [1972] pp. 85–88; Harle [1974] pp. 22–23.

⁸ Schastok [1985] p. 1.

three-faced Brahmā—the three faces indicate theoretically four—and probably Śiva are placed above his head. The composition seems to have a single axis centered on Viṣṇu, from whom many small figures appear to spring forth. For example, there are Varāha, Narasiṃha, Candra, Sūrya, Vāyu, Ṛṣis and celestial beings. The sculpture's composition also reveals an awareness of space, with gods flying in heaven and serpents crawling on the ground.

Maxwell has created a simplified diagram of this iconography (Fig.13). However, I cannot entirely agree with all his identifications of the small figures around the central axis above Viṣṇu. He reconstructed the iconometrical composition by himself using descriptions from the *Atharvaveda*, *R̥gveda*, and other texts, because of the absence of a *śilpaśāstra* belonging to the same region and date.⁹ He then identified each figure based on its measurements and proportions,¹⁰ which is insufficient evidence. It seems his attempt is based on the idea that various beings “emanated” from a central supreme deity represented as a central axis.¹¹ Moreover, he tries to unravel this iconography using geometrical diagrams.¹² Indeed, it is a well-known fact that iconometry has been well-developed in Indian art, and a geometric composition such as the central axis appears to be intended in the sculptures produced in Śāmalājī. It is also undeniable that there is an idea that the central axis (*axis mundi*) should be the source when making divine images. However, the identification of each figure should first be

⁹ Maxwell [1988] p. 156: “In the absence of a *śilpaśāstra* of the same region and date as the image which might explain this dense pattern of divinities, the identities of all the figures and their interrelationships has until now remained obscure. Therefore, I intend to attempt a comprehensive analysis and explanation of the image in the form of a reconstruction of the way the composition was probably planned and the reasons for the method followed.”

¹⁰ For example, he appears to have interpreted the images of Vāsudeva Kṛṣṇa, Pradyumna, etc., on the basis that one figure appears to emanate from a previous figure. Then he combined this observation with the concept of “Caturvyūha,” in which the other three members—Saṃkarṣaṇa, Pradyumna, and Aniruddha—emanate from Vāsudeva. The “emanating” figure is, therefore, interpreted as Pradyumna, whose figure appears to emanate from the preceding figure—whom he assumed to be Vāsudeva-Kṛṣṇa. (Maxwell [1988] p. 144 ff.)

However, several aspects of this interpretation could be improved. First, in the general doctrine of “Caturvyūha,” it is Saṃkarṣaṇa who emanates from Vāsudeva directly, not Pradyumna. Secondly, even though the relationships among the four, that is, Vāsudeva, Saṃkarṣaṇa, Pradyumna, and Aniruddha, can vary according to the specific text, a more careful examination is required when discussing them. Finally, even if it is reasonable that the concept of “Caturvyūha” itself exists in Vaiṣṇava theology, I cannot agree with the methodology of directly relying on the concept for iconographic interpretation.

¹¹ This leads to the idea of the *axis mundi*.

¹² Maxwell states: “There are twenty-one figures in the oval ‘*maṇḍala*’ [here he cites the following reference: A. Mookerjee, *Tantra Āsana: A Way to Self-realization*, Basel; Paris; New Delhi, 1971, which notes in a caption (p. 47) that the ‘golden cosmic egg ... divided itself into two parts forming the twenty-one regions of the cosmos.’]. The organization is impressive. It was part of the designer’s intention to have three vertical rows of three overlapping figures, fanning slightly outward from a central vertical row of three. This design reveals another pattern, revealed by the physical interconnections between the central row and the upper two figures of the flanking rows.” (Maxwell [1988] p. 151)

made based on the features of the iconographic elements. He provides no basis for identifying figures such as Pradyumna and Aniruddha. The absence of a series of faces arranged on the outer edge in the Śāmalājī sculptures, which are present in the Mathurā sculptures produced during the Gupta period, deserves attention. This indicates that the Śāmalājī sculptures were produced in a different iconographic tradition from the Mathurā sculptures.

2.3 The works produced mainly in Kānyakubja during the Gurjara Pratīhāra period

These works can be broadly divided into two categories. The first consists of the sculptural works said to have been produced in the eighth century, probably under the influence of the Gurjara-Pratīhāra dynasty in Tumain and its vicinity in northern Madhya Pradesh. Two examples are extant. The second category includes works that are thought to have been produced in Kānyakubja, present-day Kannauj, where the capital of the Gurjara-Pratīhāra dynasty was located. It is not an exaggeration to say that among all the existing early works of Viśvarūpa Viṣṇu, the Kānyakubja sculptures bear the most vividly preserved compositions and detailed carving.¹³

2.3.1 The sculptural works produced in Tumain and its vicinity under the probable influence of the Gurjara-Pratīhāra dynasty

Two pieces survive from the eighth century which are thought to have been produced in a territory influenced by the early Gurjara-Pratīhāra dynasty. One sculpture was displaced through the art market to a private collector based in Philadelphia in the 1960s and is currently housed at the Linden Museum in Stuttgart, Germany (Fig. 14, Accession Number: SA01582; hereafter the Stuttgart piece). The other specimen is housed at the National Museum in New Delhi (Fig. 15, Accession Number: 78. 998; hereafter the Tumain piece). The latter piece is said to have been excavated from a temple site of Tumain, present-day Tumen, in Madhya Pradesh. The provenance of the former sculpture is unknown.¹⁴

Because each sculpture has missing parts, it is helpful to analyze them together. The original iconographic features of these examples can be summarized as follows: The central Viṣṇu has at least four arms and holds a *cakra*, *gadā*, *śaṅkha* (conch-shell), and a shield. Above him are the horse-headed figure,

¹³ The overall composition and iconographic elements change with time and region.

¹⁴ Maxwell states regarding the production area: “Exactly where it was found is not known, but both the post-Gupta style, largely of Mathuran inspiration, and the iconographical composition, which stems from the Guna area, indicate a point of origin between the north-western Madhya Pradesh borderlands and the River Yamunā.” (Maxwell [1994] pp. 98–101)

probably Hayagrīva, probably three(four)-faced Brahmā, and one more unknown figure. Many manifestations of Viṣṇu—Varāha, Narasiṃha, Matsya, Kūrma, Vāmana, Rāma and Paraśurāma—are represented around him. There is a place for Śiva and his family, with his consort Pārvatī and their sons Gaṇeśa and Kārttikeya, at the top right. On the opposite upper side, several gods of the directions, including Indra, likely Yama, Varuṇa, and Vāyu, are placed. The 11 Rudras, 12 Ādityas, and eight to ten ṛṣis are also represented. It is noteworthy that a zone for Śiva's family has appeared, whereas, in the Śāmalājī sculptures, Śiva is depicted unaccompanied, as are many other gods. Furthermore, in the composition of the Tumain piece, a line separates Śiva and Brahmā from the central Viṣṇu, who is surrounded by small figures; this line appears to delineate the sculptural space and symbolize heaven.¹⁵

2.3.2 The works produced in Kānyakubja during the Gurjara-Pratīhāra period
The remaining five examples are thought to have been produced in Kānyakubja during the Gurjara-Pratīhāra period. Two of them are enshrined in a small modern temple in the vicinity of Kannauj in Uttar Pradesh (Figs. 16–17), one of which is well preserved with little loss from top to bottom, making it easy to get a complete picture of the icon. Another well-preserved example exists in Kannauj (Fig. 18). However, after a dispute regarding its ownership in the 1980s, the sample is in a private collection that was closed to the public as of 2023. The current whereabouts of the two remaining fragments are unknown. Therefore, the following description of the iconographic features of these works is mainly based on the sculptures enshrined in the temple.

The central Viṣṇu has six to eight arms and holds several attributes including a *gadā*, *cakra*, *śaṅkha*, and a shield. The faces of Narasiṃha, Varāha, Matsya, and Kūrma surround him. Above him are placed the figures of Balarāma, Vāmana, Buddha, Brahmā, Paraśurāma, the horse-headed figure, and Rāma. Several gods of the directions, such as Vāyu, Indra, Agni, and Yama, are arranged in the upper part of the sculpture. 11 Rudras, 12 Ādityas, and eight faces are placed on the outer edge. The earth goddess is represented between Viṣṇu's feet, and several male figures are placed at the bottom of the sculpture. There is also an elephant-faced Gaṇeśa behind Viṣṇu to the left.

It is worth emphasizing that the typical ten incarnations of Viṣṇu (*daśāvatāra*) appear in this specimen—Matsya, Kūrma, Varāha, Narasiṃha, Vāmana, Paraśurāma, Rāma, Balarāma, Buddha and the horse-headed figure. Vāmana is placed immediately above Viṣṇu. The two figures above him are the horse-headed figure and Brahmā. It is possible that the figure immediately above

¹⁵ It should be noted that what precisely the actual forms under the figures were intended to represent differs: under Śiva are mountains and under Paraśurāma, Brahmā, and Rāma are platforms.

Viṣṇu in the Stuttgart piece was also intended to be Vāmana.¹⁶ In the Tuman piece, Vāmana is to the left of the horse-headed figure and is positioned close to Viṣṇu.

A common feature of the works produced during the Gurjara-Pratīhāra period is an awareness of the conventional number of deities in specific groupings or circuits. In some instances, the number of figures matches precisely with the number of deities fixed since the Vedic period, such as the 11 Rudras and 12 Ādityas. However, in some instances this not the case.

2.4 Other examples produced in northern India during the medieval period

2.4.1 The specimen at the Changu Narayan temple in Kathmandu

It is necessary to mention a particular work, the sculpture enshrined at the Changu Narayan temple in Kathmandu (Fig. 19). The temple is located on a hilltop 10 km east of the old town of Kathmandu in Nepal. Vaiṣṇava worship has existed in the temple at least since the fifth century, and this work could have been produced during the late Licchavi period (probably the 7th–9th centuries).

The work can be described as a highly accomplished icon of Viśvarūpa Viṣṇu. The central Viṣṇu has at least nine heads, three in each of the three vertical tiers. He has ten arms and holds a *cakra*, *gadā*, *śaṅkha*, a sword, etc. He is standing on the earth goddess who is supported by two *nāgas*. Garuḍa and Arjuna are posed in worship of Viṣṇu, as are the two flying celestial beings. The four gods of the directions are also clearly seen: Indra holding a *vajra*, Yama with a staff, Varuṇa holding a noose, and Kubera holding a bag.¹⁷ Brahmā is seated on a lotus at the top surrounded by many *ṛṣis* and a round outline, probably representing the sun or moon, appears in the background. Small figures are depicted as being exhaled from the mouth of Viṣṇu in the second and third tiers.

Below, a figure wearing a tall crown similar to Viṣṇu's is depicted cross-legged on a giant serpent. In his right hand, he holds a circular object and a long rod with an extruded center as its handle; in his left hand he has a hoe with a two-headed *makara*-like animal with a protruding pointed tongue at the end, along with a gourd-shaped object. If these implements are interpreted as a pestle and a hoe, they correspond to the attributes of Saṃkarṣaṇa. Since around the beginning of the Common Era, Balarāma has been portrayed holding a long pestle with an extruded center as its handle and a hoe with an animal-headed end; sometimes he is also shaded by a snake canopy composed of multiple serpent heads. Therefore,

¹⁶ The figure is not shown in the picture but is present in the real object (Fig. 14).

¹⁷ They are called a *caturlokapāla* group by Wessels-Mevissen. She states: "This representation of the cosmic elements is further completed by the depiction of the four *diggajas* (directional elephants) in the lower part of the panel." (Wessels-Mevissen [2001] p. 85)

this figure can likely be considered Saṃkarṣaṇa-Balarāma. He is surmounted by a canopy formed by seven snakes and reclines upon the long coils of a great serpent, evoking the image of Viṣṇu *Anantaśayana* (*Anantaśāyin*), lying and sleeping on the great serpent Ananta in the primordial sea. Saṃkarṣaṇa-Balarāma is also considered to emanate from Vāsudeva-Kṛṣṇa (Viṣṇu). This icon can be interpreted as a work in which multiple elements are integrated to express Viṣṇu as the transcendent Supreme God.

2.4.2 The sculpture found in Siṃhapānīya (Fig. 20)

The iconographic form reached its zenith in the Kānyakubja sculptures and gradually collapsed. See Bharat Kala Bhavan, Vārāṇasī, Accession Number: T361 for an example of the later less canonical style. In this work, various elements found in the Kānyakubja works are more simply depicted in the circular halo behind Viṣṇu, including his manifestations and the gods of the directions (Figs. 16–18). In the Tumain and Stuttgart pieces, the demarcation of the heavenly world had already been made explicit, demonstrating the artisans' greater spatial awareness in which the upper part of a sculpture is understood to represent the celestial realm, and the lower part, the earthly world or underworld. By contrast, in the later, less structured style we no longer see this explicit demarcation.

The Siṃhapānīya specimen uses a different method to represent small figures. The space behind Viṣṇu is divided by several lines, and the compartments are filled with figures such as the gods of the directions. The sculpture was found in Suhania, whose ancient name was Siṃhapānīya, in the district of Morena in Madhya Pradesh (Fig. 20). Unfortunately, the current location of this work is unknown,¹⁸ so only poor-quality photographs can be used as references. The central Viṣṇu originally had ten arms. He holds a *cakra*, *gadā*, *śaṅkha*, a shield, a long bow, and other objects. He stands on a lotus pedestal, supported by the earth goddess and two *nāgas*. Some of his attributes are personified, such as a *cakra* in the form of a man and a *gadā* in the form of a woman. The heads of animals, including a boar, a lion, a fish, and a turtle flank his face. Many figures are placed above him in roughly four tiers: 12 Ādityas, mainly in the uppermost section, eight gods of the directions (*aṣṭadikpāla*) in the middle¹⁹, nine planets (*navagraha*),

¹⁸ Maxwell [1990] states that the sculpture was kept at the Gujri Mahal Archaeological Museum in Gwalior Fort. However, it had yet to be observed in this museum as of 2023. Perhaps this piece was transferred to some other museum, but the curator had no record of a transfer.

¹⁹ The study by Wessels-Mevissen on the identification of gods of the directions is instructive: “The *dikpālas* are (from left to right): Varuṇa on a goose, Vāyu on an antelope? Kubera on an anthropomorphic figure, Īśāna on a bull, – central figure –, Indra on an elephant, Agni on a goat, Yama on a buffalo and Nairṛta on the usual unidentifiable quadruped.” (Wessels-Mevissen [2001] p. 87)

and eight goat-headed figures holding a long object in the lower section²⁰, and Gaṇeśa in the lowest section. This method of arranging small figures in compartments using lines will become more common in later sculptures.

2.5 The works produced in eastern India during the medieval period

In eastern India, this method of using lines to compartmentalize many of the small figures in the halo behind Viṣṇu is more developed. Three works exist that use this method to represent Viśvarūpa Viṣṇu. All three are thought to date from the 11th to the 12th centuries, with the first two being found in Kushinagar and the remaining one in Bengal, specifically the area of Vikrampur in Bangladesh.²¹

The two works found in Kushinagar have animal faces around the head of Viṣṇu (See Śrīvāstava [1994] pp. 206–207), with the halo behind him divided by lines into geometric compartments within which many figures are placed: the three-faced Brahmā, the gods of the directions, the *navagrahas*, the seven *ṛṣis*, the 11 Rudras, the 12 Ādityas, and others. In the specimen produced in Bengal (National Museum Bangladesh, Accession Number: 98. 259), the central part is reserved for Viṣṇu. The faces of the animals do not surround him but instead the *daśāvatāra* is placed around his nimbus. He has 18 arms and holds various attributes, including a *cakra*, *gadā*, *śaṅkha*, etc. There are more small figures on the halo: the *navagrahas*, Śiva and his family—Pārvatī, Gaṇeśa and Kārttikeya, the seven mothers, the seven *ṛṣis*, the 12 Ādityas, probably ten Rudras, etc.²² It can be said that this work represents a contribution to the development of the iconography of Viśvarūpa Viṣṇu, which is packed with various elements.

3 The Process of Making the Images

The previous section overviewed specimens representing Viśvarūpa Viṣṇu. Here, I would like to attempt some interpretations, especially with an eye to the iconographic traditions and deviations from them, as well as the artisans' ingenuity in the sculptural production.

²⁰ Maxwell identified eight Vasus: "They hold spears sloped upon their left shoulders, and their right hands are raised in the *abhaya-mudrā*. This octad of armed Goat-heads appears to represent the eight Vasus as reflexes of their leader, Naigameya Agni (*chāgavaktra*).” (Maxwell [1990] p. 135)

²¹ In the latter, Viṣṇu has more arms than the early examples of Viśvarūpa Viṣṇu icons mentioned. This feature is more common in works produced in Bengal during the medieval period.

²² The identifications are based on the study by Bautze-Picron [2020].

3.1 A possibility of borrowing iconographic elements and composition from older sculptural works such as the column in Nānd, Rajasthan

The four-armed figures having *cakras* and *gadās* represented in the sculpture preserved at the Bharat Kala Bhavan in Vārāṇasī (Accession Number: 152), likely produced in the fourth century, can be said to have borrowed the vertical alignment of their iconographic elements from the Nānd column in Rajasthan produced during the Kuṣāṇa period (See Schmid [2010] Fig. 42).²³ As this work survives only partially, it is not clear whether it was initially part of a larger image of Viśvarūpa Viṣṇu. However, in terms of locality, date of production, provenance, stone material, and style, it resembles the sculptures produced in Mathurā during the Gupta period, and it is classified here as a work of Viśvarūpa Viṣṇu. The caption at the museum where it is housed also describes it as a “fragment of Viśvarūpa Viṣṇu.”

3.2 Awareness of spatial composition: the realms of heaven and earth

Gods tend to be placed at the top of a sculptural work. This is likely because heaven is generally thought to be located above the earth (Figs. 15, 16, 20, etc.). When the gods are placed in the middle of a halo, they are often represented in a posture as if flying or riding a vehicle (Fig. 9). In contrast, the earth goddesses, *nāgas*, attendants, and personified attributes are placed on the ground where Viṣṇu stands. The serpents crawling on the ground are said to symbolize the underworld. The heaven and earth correspond to the upper and lower zones in each work through these arrangements.

3.3 Awareness of the number of deities

The artisans appear to have been aware of the conventional number of deities they should represent in each grouping or circuit. The number of deities in certain groupings has been defined since the Vedic period: 11 Rudras, 12 Ādityas, etc. The artisan’s knowledge of this becomes clear in the sculptural works produced during the Gurjara-Pratīhāra period. The 11 Rudras and 12 Ādityas are also represented in the Kānyakubja pieces (Fig. 21: R1–11, A1–12), but more strikingly in the Tumain piece. As the artisan could carve only 11 Ādityas in the limited space to the left side of Viṣṇu (Fig. 22: A1–11), he carved the 12th Āditya under the left arms of Viṣṇu (Fig. 22: A12). This artistic choice reveals his apparent intention to sculpt Ādityas following the original number of 12.

²³ The four-armed figure holding a *cakra* and a *gadā* is an iconographic element inherited by Viṣṇu from the iconography of Kṛṣṇa-Vāsudeva.

3.4 How to use the space: a significant number of group representations

One of the major concerns of the artisans seems to have been filling the blank space on the halo behind Viṣṇu. This also led to the appearance of all kinds of group representations in the final stage of the development of the iconography of Viśvarūpa Viṣṇu. For example, there are 11 Rudras, 12 Ādityas, eight gods of the directions (*aṣṭadīpāla*), ten incarnations of Viṣṇu (*daśāvatāra*) and nine planets (*navagraha*) represented in the eastern Indian pieces (See Śrīvāstava [1994] pp. 206–207, Bautze-Picron [2020] Images 4–6). In the giant statue of Varāha,²⁴ which is exhibited at the Gujri Mahal Archaeological Museum in Gwalior Fort, Madhya Pradesh,²⁵ dating from the 11th to 12th centuries, many small images cover the surface of the large body of the boar (Fig. 23). They include the figures of the ten incarnations of Viṣṇu (*daśāvatāra*), the 11 Rudras, 12 Ādityas, and the nine planets (*navagraha*), among others. It can be seen that artisans often used these and other images from Hindu mythology to fill in the margins of sculptures of a specific size.

3.5 Expanding the realm of Śaiva imagery

As noted above, the area for Śiva and his family was expanded in the Tumain piece (Fig. 15). Although it may be possible to consider that for the artisans it was merely a way to fill in the margins, it may also suggest a religious development behind image-making, where Vaiṣṇavism incorporates elements of Śaivism. The dominance of Vaiṣṇavism is obvious in the Kānyakubja pieces (Figs. 16–18), where the area for Śiva and his family vanished, and instead, the ten incarnations of Viṣṇu (*daśāvatāra*) were represented. This is not surprising since the works are the images of Viśvarūpa Viṣṇu. In this sense, the Kānyakubja pieces can be said to be images that strongly reflect elements of Vaiṣṇavism. The geography of Kānyakubja, the capital of the Gurjara-Pratīhāra dynasty, and Tumain, the frontier territory, may also have influenced the selection of these iconographic elements. However, this does not mean that Śaiva imagery has wholly disappeared from the Kānyakubja pieces. The elephant-headed Gaṇeśa is placed to the left of Viṣṇu, around and behind his arms.

This kind of addition may have started as an abrupt insertion of an iconographic element due to an artisan's error. Nevertheless, seeing that Gaṇeśa

²⁴ These gigantic statues of Varāha are the so-called Yajñavarāha. Many similar examples exist. An early representative example is the colossal statue of Varāha produced during the Gupta period at the Eran Śrī Narasiṃha temple in Madhya Pradesh.

²⁵ According to the curator in 2023, plans were underway to have this statue of Varāha transferred to the Chatrapati Śivājī Mahārāja Vastu Samgrahālaya in Mumbai, Maharashtra, formerly known as the Prince of Wales Museum of Western India, within a few years.

is represented alone on the upper right side of the work found in *Siṃhapānīya* (Fig. 20) as well as in the *Kānyakubja* pieces, it is reasonable to assume some iconographic tradition behind such artistic choices.

3.6 The iconographic traditions and deviations from them: the ingenuity of artisans in the field of sculptural production

As discussed in this section, behind the production of sculptures were the artisans, their actual creators. Some understood the iconographic tradition correctly and could carve and represent the ten incarnations, the 11 Rudras, and other figures with accuracy (Fig. 16). In contrast, others seem to have never understood them properly (Fig. 17). The latter piece appears to have been copied by an artisan with limited knowledge of such works. He carved Rudra on a pedestal where he should have represented Balarāma instead, as Rudra initially did not need a pedestal (Fig. 21: Ba, Fig. 24: R7). As a result, not all ten incarnations were carved out; there are only the nine Rudras, and the place where Buddha should have been on the left side of Viṣṇu is left uselessly blank.

The work likely produced during the tenth century and believed to have been found in Bhuili, Uttar Pradesh (Bharat Kala Bhavan, Vārāṇasī, Accession Number: T361), also appears to have been created by an artisan ignorant of the iconographic tradition. The iconographic features of the small figures are indistinguishable, and unsurprisingly, the numbers and the combination of the figures are incorrect. The sculpture depicts three serpents in the subterranean realm, whereas what is expected is two serpents at Viṣṇu's feet supporting the earth goddess.

3.7 Possible attempts to make cross-cultural images: the design and composition

Finally, it is worth mentioning the possibility that the artisans sought inspiration for their image-making from a variety of works in a way that transcended sect and religion. For instance, artisans likely worked in the same or similar kinds of workshops, whether making statues of Hindu deities, Jain statues, or Buddhist statues. In such an environment of sculptural production, the borrowing and mixing of iconographic elements would easily occur.

Further, spatial awareness is universal in the sculptures, with the upper part of a sculpture or panel corresponding to heaven and the lower part to the underground world. Another universal design in Indian religious art is the representation of a central image on a central axis, depicted as if supported by serpents of the underground world. An example of this universal design is the

carving in Kārlā Cave 8 in Maharashtra (Fig. 25). Celestial beings fly above the central Buddha and bear a crown over his head. At the same time, snakes in the underworld support the central axis under the Buddha's feet.

Multiple-headed figures were represented by stacking heads on each other in the work at the Changu Narayan temple in Kathmandu, produced during the late Licchavi period (Fig. 19). In western India, specifically in the state of Maharashtra, the 11-headed Avalokiteśvara is similarly represented in Kanheri Cave 41, which dates to the sixth century (Fig. 26).

Finally, I would like to introduce two sculptural works of Śiva, representing him with his emanations. The first is a large sculpture of Śiva found in the Parel area of Mumbai city, which is thought to have been produced in the fifth or sixth century (Fig. 27). In this sculpture, six forms appear to be emanating from a central Śiva. The subject matter of this image is highly controversial. Maxwell defined the figure as Viśvarūpa Śiva,²⁶ while Srinivasan defined it as Śiva Aṣṭamūrti.²⁷ The second work is an equally remarkable sculpture in an ancient town named Hathiya, currently a village located 3 km south of Barsana in Mathurā district near the border of the states of Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh (See Gupta [2013] Fig. 63.9a).²⁸ It has traces of at least eight figures. Five figures appear to emanate from a central figure in the middle. At least two figures, a lower figure on the right and the central figure in the middle, appear to be emanating from another central figure situated below the rest. Gupta assumes that this sculpture represents Śiva (Maheśa) Aṣṭamūrti.²⁹

Interestingly, in the Parel sculpture of Śiva it is the uppermost central figure, not the lowermost one, who has the greatest number of arms (ten). By contrast, in the sculptures of Viśvarūpa Viṣṇu, it is the lowermost figure of Viṣṇu who has the highest number of arms. This is a significant difference between the images of Viśvarūpa Viṣṇu and Viśvarūpa Śiva/Śiva Aṣṭamūrti. Nevertheless, it is possible that the Viśvarūpa Viṣṇu artisans referred to these compositions in these works when making images of Viśvarūpa Viṣṇu, and vice versa for they have in common other iconographic elements, such as deities and other forms emanating from a central figure.

²⁶ Maxwell [1984].

²⁷ Srinivasan [1997] pp. 154ff.

²⁸ Gupta [2013] pp. 201–203. The location of this sculpture is described by Vinay Kumar Gupta, an archaeologist of the Archaeological Survey of India, as follows: “The image is in worship at the Chamar (*Devī*) temple in the town and has been affixed with cement and mortar into the wall of the temple. Many other important sculptures were observed at the temple. Still, most of them were in much-broken condition because that town had to suffer much devastation at the hands of bigoted Muslim attackers in the past. Perhaps this was the reason which forced the town's people to place these sculptures (despite being mutilated) at a temple of *Devī* and thus prevent them from being stolen as is the usual norm in this part of the country.” (Gupta [2013] p. 201)

²⁹ Gupta [2013] p. 203.

4 The Form of the Transcendent God in the *Bhagavadgītā*

This section discusses textual references from the *Bhagavadgītā* (BhG), a famous Hindu religious scripture that is included in Book 6 of the *Mahābhārata*, the Bhīṣmaparvan. In general, many Hindu devotees associate the word *viśvarūpa*- with a scene from Chapter 11 of the BhG (composed probably around the first century A.D.).

4.1 Descriptions in the BhG

Earlier studies have suggested that the images of Viśvarūpa Viṣṇu introduced in the previous sections depict a famous scene which is described in Chapter 11 of the *Bhagavadgītā* (BhG).³⁰ The BhG takes the form of a dialogue between Kṛṣṇa, who is one of the incarnations of Viṣṇu and who is the charioteer of Arjuna, a prince of the Pāṇḍus who hesitates to go to war with his own kin. In this scene in Chapter 11, Kṛṣṇa reveals his supernatural form to Arjuna, and all those who witness it are frightened.

The following overview of Chapter 10 and Chapter 11 is quoted from a study by van Buitenen [1981].³¹

No one knows God's origin, but he is the origin of all creatures and their virtues. This insight inspires *bhakti*, and in response God dispels one's ignorance (BhG 10.1–10). Arjuna asks about God's divine *yoga* and ubiquities (BhG 10.10–15). Kṛṣṇa describes himself as the first of any group (BhG 10.15–35). He supports the universe with a particle of his being (BhG 10.40).

Arjuna prays for a vision of God as he is. Kṛṣṇa vouchsafes him divine sight and displays his supernatural form. Arjuna tremblingly describes him as sovereign and as fearful—the God also of death (BhG 11.1–30). Kṛṣṇa describes himself as Time and exhorts Arjuna to wage war (BhG 11.30). Arjuna praises Kṛṣṇa (BhG 11.35–45). Kṛṣṇa declares only Arjuna can see him so, then he resumes his familiar appearance (BhG 11.45–50). Kṛṣṇa declares that only *bhakti* enables one to perceive him (BhG 11.50–55).

In conclusion, this chapter is probably the first instance in which *viśvarūpa*- is used in a way that is linked to the form of Kṛṣṇa (Viṣṇu).³²

³⁰ Maxwell [1998] p. 131; Koezuka [2001] p. 416.

³¹ van Buitenen [1981] p. 34.

³² The original text is given below, together with the translation of van Buitenen (van Buitenen [1981] pp. 110ff.). All English translations below are taken from his book.

Arjuna uvāca

(...)

*anekabāhūdaravaktranetraṃ paśyāmi tvāṃ sarvato 'nantarūpam /
nāntaṃ na madhyaṃ na punas tavādiṃ paśyāmi viśveśvara viśvarūpa //*
BhG 11.16 //

Arjuna said:

(...)

Your own infinitude stretching away, many arms, eyes, bellies, and mouths
do I see,
No end do I see, no beginning, no middle, in you, universal in power and
form.

śrībhagavān uvāca

*paśya me pārtha rūpāṇi śataśo 'tha sahasraśaḥ /
nānāvīdhāni divyāni nānāvarṇākṛtīni ca //* BhG 11.5 //
*paśyādityān vasūn rudrān aśvinau marutas tathā /
bahūny adṛṣṭapūrvāṇi paśyāścaryāṇi bhārata //* BhG 11.6 //
*ihaikasthaṃ jagat kṛtsnaṃ paśyādya sacarācaram /
mama dehe guḍākeśa yac cānyad draṣṭum icchasi //* BhG 11.7 //
*na tu mām śakyase draṣṭum anenaiva svacakṣuṣā /
divyaṃ dadāmi te cakṣuḥ paśya me yogam aiśvaram //* BhG 11.8 //

The Lord said:

Pārtha, behold my hundreds and thousands of shapes, of many kinds, divine,
in manifold colors and figures.

Behold the Ādityas, Vasus, Rudras, Aśvins, Maruts; behold, Bhārata, many
marvels that have never been witnessed before.

Behold the entire universe with standing and moving creatures centered here
in this body of mine

and whatever else you desire to see.

But you shall not be able to look upon me with just your ordinary eyes: I
shall give you divine sight: behold my sovereign Yoga!³³

As the above passages show, men initially could not see this form of God.
However, when such a sight is attained by *bhakti*³⁴, when God becomes visually

³³ van Buitenen [1981] p. 31.

³⁴ BhG 11.52–55:

śrībhagavān uvāca
*sudurdarśam idaṃ rūpaṃ dṛṣṭavān asi yaṃ mama /
devā apy asya rūpasya nityaṃ darśanakāṅkṣiṇaḥ //* BhG 11.52 //

perceptible to Arjuna, he appears in a divine form consisting of manifold shapes, colors, and figures. This scene has the form of a dialogue between Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna with the voice of the narrator Saṁjaya inserted in between.

4.2 Kṛṣṇa and witnesses in Chapter 11 of the BhG

Below I give an outline of iconographic descriptions of Kṛṣṇa (Viṣṇu) and other characters according to the speech of Kṛṣṇa, Arjuna, and others who witness Kṛṣṇa's transformation. Table IA lists the features of Kṛṣṇa, and Table IB concentrates on other characters, including Arjuna.

Table IA: Descriptions of Kṛṣṇa in Chapter 11 of the *Bhagavadgītā*

Body: many-faced and many- armed	Countless mouths and eyes (BhG 11.10) His many faces look in every direction (BhG 11.11) Many arms, bellies, mouths, eyes, and infinite figures in every direction (BhG 11.16) Endless-armed (BhG 11.19) Many arms, thighs, bellies, feet, and fangs (BhG 11.23) Mouths have protruding fangs and resemble the fire at the end of the world (BhG 11.25) Four-armed (BhG 11.46) Thousand-armed (BhG 11.46)
Body: interior aspect	The whole world, with everything moving and unmoving, is in one place (BhG 11.7) The whole world remains in the same place while it is divided into various parts (BhG 11.13)

nāhaṁ vedair na tapasā na dānena na cejyayā /
śakya evaṁvidho draṣṭuṁ dṛṣṭavān asi mām yathā // BhG 11.53 //
bhaktiā tv ananyayā śakya ahaṁ evaṁvidho 'rjuna /
jñātum draṣṭuṁ ca tattvena praveṣṭuṁ ca paramtapa // BhG 11.54 //
matkarmakṣṇ matparamo madbhaktaḥ saṅgavarjitaḥ /
nirvairaḥ sarvabhūteṣu yaḥ sa mām eti pāṇḍava // BhG 11.55 //

The Lord said:

You have seen this rarely revealed form that is mine: even the Gods always yearn for a glimpse of this form.

Thus, as I am and as you have seen me, I cannot be seen with the aid of the Vedas, austerities, gifts, and sacrifices.

Only through exclusive *bhakti* can I be seen thus, Arjuna, and known as I really am, and entered into, enemy-tamer.

Only he comes to me, Pāṇḍava, who acts for me, who holds me as the highest, who is devoted to me without self-interest and without any animosity against any creature.

	The gods, including Brahmā on a lotus seat, all creatures, divine sages, and snakes are inside his body (BhG 11.15)
Body: size and facial expression	He occupies the entire space between heaven and earth (BhG 11.20) His eyes are the moon and sun, and his mouth is a blazing fire (BhG 11.19) His body is touching the sky (BhG 11.24) His mouth is wide open, and his eyes are broad and blazing (BhG 11.24) All is strung upon him (BhG 11.36)
Attributes	He raises many divine weapons (BhG 11.10) He has a mace and a wheel (BhG 11.17, 11.46)
Ornaments	He bears many divine ornaments (BhG 11.10) He wears divine garlands and robes (BhG 11.11) He wears a diadem (BhG 11.17, 11.46)
Color	Many colors and figures (BhG 11.5) Many-hued (BhG 11.24)
Radiance	His radiance can be likened to the light of a thousand suns shining in heaven simultaneously (BhG 11.12) His radiance is like a fire and like the sun blazing from all sides (BhG 11.17) He is blazing (BhG 11.24)
Smell	He is anointed with divine perfume (BhG 11.11)
Heat	All these beings are heated with his own splendor (BhG 11.19) His dreadful splendor pervades and heats the entire world (BhG 11.30)
Other descriptions	He cannot be seen by Arjuna's vision (BhG 11.8) Arjuna doesn't see the beginning, middle, and end (BhG 11.16) He has endless valor (BhG 11.19)

Table IB: Descriptions of witnesses in Chapter 11 of the *Bhagavadgītā*

Arjuna	He is filled with astonishment. His hair bristles, his head is bowed down, and he folds his hands (BhG 11.14) He is frightened (BhG 11.23) His internal soul is frightened, and he finds neither firmness nor tranquility (BhG 11.24) He is disoriented and seeks shelter (BhG 11.25)
Worlds: three worlds	The three worlds are quivering (BhG 11.20) The worlds are frightened (BhG 11.23) The worlds (and people) enter his (Kṛṣṇa's) mouths to perish very speedily (BhG 11.29) The worlds are devoured and licked with his (Kṛṣṇa's) burning mouths multiple times (BhG 11.30)

Gods: Rudras Ādityas Vasus Sādhyas All-Gods Aśvins Maruts	The gods are entering him (Kṛṣṇa) (BhG 11.21) They are beholding him (Kṛṣṇa) in an amazed manner (BhG 11.22)
Sages	Saying “Hail!”, they praise him (Kṛṣṇa) with many praises (BhG 11.21)
Siddhas	Saying “Hail!”, they praise him (Kṛṣṇa) with many praises (BhG 11.21) They are beholding him (Kṛṣṇa) in an amazed manner (BhG 11.22) The throngs of Siddhas are proffering their homage (BhG 11.36)
Some	Some are afraid of him and putting their hands together to praise him (BhG 11.21)
The fathers	They are beholding him (Kṛṣṇa) in an amazed manner (BhG 11.22)
Gandharvas	They are beholding him (Kṛṣṇa) in an amazed manner (BhG 11.22)
Human heroes: All sons of Dhṛtarāṣṭra The hosts of the kings of the earth Bhīṣma, Droṇa, and the son of a charioteer (Karna) Our chief warriors	They hasten to enter his (Kṛṣṇa’s) mouths which have protruding fangs, causing terror (BhG 11.27) They are grasped in between his (Kṛṣṇa’s) teeth, the highest parts of their bodies (their heads) being smashed (BhG 11.27) They are entering his (Kṛṣṇa’s) flaming mouths (BhG 11.28)
Rakṣas	They are terrified and fleeing in all directions (BhG 11.36)

With these characteristics, such a divine form of Kṛṣṇa is inherently invisible to the naked eye. It is said that even the gods long to see this divine form (BhG 11.52).³⁵ In this scene, Arjuna was given celestial eyes by Kṛṣṇa and was

³⁵ BhG 11.52:

sudurdarśam idaṃ rūpaṃ dṛṣṭvān asi yan mama /

devā apy asya rūpasya nityaṃ darśanakāṅkṣiṇaḥ // BhG 11.52 //

You have seen this rarely revealed form that is mine: even the Gods always yearn for a glimpse of this form.

able to witness the form for the first time (BhG 11.8).³⁶ He trembles joyfully at witnessing the divine form he has longed to see while simultaneously shuddering with awe. He then begs Kṛṣṇa to return to the usual form he has known for a long time.

arjuna uvāca

(...)

*adṛṣṭapūrvam hṛṣito 'smi dṛṣṭvā bhayena ca pravyathitam mano me /
tad eva me darśaya deva rūpaṁ prasīda deveśa jagannivāsa // BhG 11.45 //
kirīṭinaṁ gadinam cakrahastam icchāmi tvāṁ draṣṭum ahaṁ tathaiva /
tenaiva rūpeṇa caturbhujena sahasrabāho bhava viśvamūrte // BhG 11.46 //*

(...)

*dṛṣṭvedaṁ mānuṣaṁ rūpaṁ tava saumyaṁ janārdana /
idānīm asmi saṁvṛttaḥ sacetāḥ prakṛtiṁ gataḥ // BhG 11.51 //*

Arjuna said:

(...)

At the sight of this unwitnessed marvel I thrill while a sense of dread unsettles my mind:

Please show me, O God, the body I've known, Have mercy, Lord God, repose of the world!

I wish now to see you again as before, with your diadem, mace and discus in hand.

Assume once again your four-armed form, O thousand-armed One, embodied in all!

(...)

Now that I see your gentle human shape, Janārdana, I have come to my senses and my normal tenor is restored!

The other divine form of Kṛṣṇa, with which Arjuna had initially been familiar, is mentioned as a gentle (*saumya-*) and a “human” figure (*mānuṣaṁ rūpaṁ*) with four arms (BhG 11.46, 11.51cd). He is described as having four arms, but only a mace (*gadā*) and a wheel (*cakra*) are mentioned among his attributes, and he is said to wear a diadem (*kirīṭa*). A detailed discussion comparing the descriptions with the iconography will be presented in the conclusion.

³⁶ BhG 11.8:

*na tu mām śakyase draṣṭum anenaiva svacakṣuṣā /
divyaṁ dadāmi te cakṣuḥ paśya me yogam aiśvaram // BhG 11.8 //*

But you shall not be able to look upon me with just your ordinary eyes: I shall give you divine sight: behold my sovereign Yoga!

Conclusion

The focus of this paper was on sculptures that employ the iconography of Viśvarūpa Viṣṇu (Viṣṇu the omniform) produced during the ancient and medieval periods. My analysis focused on sculptural examples, mainly from India, including the surviving fragments of some sculptures. The production dates range from the fourth to the tenth 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 in 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 hypothesized that the iconography of Viśvarūpa Viṣṇu consists of a complex image of Viṣṇu, encircled by the heads of animals and an array of small figures, and that this image 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. However, due to space constraints, the details of the second type will be dealt with in a separate article, so I will only present a summary here.

Type I: (1) Forms of animals flank the central Viṣṇu, and (2) more small figures, who are not just attendants or a part of the decoration, are presented behind or beside him. The small figures include the gods of the directions, manifestations of Viṣṇu, various deities such as the 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 halo behind Viṣṇu. (4) In some works, 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 an 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*.

Type II: “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 an embodied form of the Supreme God, an emanation rather than the Supreme God himself.

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 Narayan temple in Kathmandu, Nepal (Fig.19). The central Viṣṇu has at least nine heads, arranged in what appear to be 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, who is herself supported by two *nāgas*. Below, Saṃkarṣaṇa-Balarāma (a brother of Vāsudeva-Kṛṣṇa) is depicted in a manner that evokes Viṣṇu *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 the two flying celestial beings. The four gods of the directions are also clearly visible: Indra, Yama, Varuṇa, and Kubera. In addition, many *īśis* surround Brahmā, who is seated on a lotus at the top. Small figures are depicted as being exhaled from the mouth of Viṣṇu in the second and third tiers. Arjuna is seen with his hands together, praying to the central Viṣṇu, and there is also a circular outline representing the moon or sun at the top (BhG 11.19, see Table IA).

However, there is a notable iconographic element that is not seen in the Changu Narayan icon, nor mentioned in the BhG, but that is found in most examples of Type I: Viṣṇu's manifestations (*avatāras*). 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 (Figs. 1, 7, 8, 9, etc.). Matsya and Kūrma were gradually added (Figs. 14, 15, 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.³⁷ The earliest manifestations of a boar and a man-lion appear in the list around the second or third century. The ten incarnations appear around the eighth century or possibly earlier. 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

³⁷ See Oki [2022]. Regarding the lists of Viṣṇu's manifestations, the author plans to publish a more detailed paper soon.

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.

Abbreviations

BhG: Bhagavad-gītā

PW: See BÖHTLINGK / ROTH.

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Figures

Fig. 1, 3: 42–43.2989: Government Museum, Mathurā, Uttar Pradesh, India. H. 46 cm, stone. Bhāṅkarī, in a suburb of Aligarh, Uttar Pradesh, India. c. 5th century, Gupta period. Photograph by the author.

Fig. 2: Contemporary, the fourth quarter of the 20th century. “Calendar Print” on Paper. Photograph by the author.

Fig. 4: 54. 3837: Government Museum, Mathurā, Uttar Pradesh. H. 44 cm, red sandstone. Katra, Uttar Pradesh, India. c. 5–6th centuries, Gupta period. Photograph by the author.

Figs. 5–8: B.223a: State Museum, Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh. W. 135 cm, H. 26 cm; W.81 cm, H. 27 cm, sandstone. Gaḍhwā (Gaṛhwā), in a suburb of Allahabad, Uttar Pradesh, India. c. 6th century, Gupta period. Photograph by the author.

Fig. 9: Nīlakaṇṭha Mahādeva temple, Devnī Morī, Gujarat. H. 101.6 cm, blue-grey schist. Śāmalājī, Gujarat, India. c. 6th century. Photograph by the author.

Fig. 10: 2.550: Museum and Picture Gallery, Baroda, Gujarat. H. 90.2 cm, W. 68.6 cm, blue-grey schist. Śāmalājī, Gujarat, India. c. 6th century. Photograph by the author.

Fig. 11: 2.372: Museum and Picture Gallery, Baroda, Gujarat. H. 20.3 cm, W. 15.2 cm, blue-grey schist. Devnī Morī, Gujarat, India. c. 6th century. Photograph by Schastok [1985] Fig. 40.

Figs. 12, 22: 79.475: National Museum, New Delhi. H. 142 cm, blue-grey schist. Śāmalājī, Gujarat, India. c. 6–7th centuries. Photograph by the author.

Fig. 13: Maxwell’s Diagram of Fig. 9: Maxwell [1983] p. 214.

Fig. 14: SA01582: Linden Museum, Stuttgart, Germany. H. 47.7 cm, W. 45.7 cm, D. 6.7 cm, red sandstone. Guna, Madhya Pradesh, India. c. 8th century. Photograph by the author.

Fig. 15: 78.998: National Museum, New Delhi. H. 58 cm, W. 61 cm, D. 14 cm, stone. Tumain, Guna, Madhya Pradesh, India. c. 8th century. Photograph by the author.

Figs. 16, 21: Śrī Rāma Lakṣmaṇa (Virāt Viṣṇu) Mandir, near Kannauj, Uttar Pradesh. H.169 cm, W.75.6 cm, stone. Kannauj, Uttar Pradesh, India: it is said to be from the *Citra* River near the temple, which had dried up about 500 years ago. c. 9th century, Gurjara-Pratīhāra period. Photograph by the author.

- Figs. 17, 24: Śrī Rāma Lakṣmaṇa (Virāṭ Viṣṇu) Mandir, near Kannauj, Uttar Pradesh. H.169 cm, W.75.6 cm, stone. Kannauj, Uttar Pradesh, India: it is said to be from the *Citra* River near the temple, which had dried up about 500 years ago. c. 9th century, Gurjara-Pratīhāra period. Photograph by the author.
- Fig. 18: Private Collection in Kannauj, Uttar Pradesh. Stone. Kannauj, Uttar Pradesh, India. c. 9th century, Gurjara-Pratīhāra period. Photograph by Sivaramamurti [1961] fig. 33
- Fig. 19: Changu Narayan (Cāgu/Canḡu Nārāyaṇa) temple, Kathmandu, Nepal. H. 67 cm, stone. Changu Narayan temple, Kathmandu, Nepal. c. 7–9th centuries. Photograph by the author.
- Fig. 20: 26/12 (?): Formerly Gujri Mahal Archaeological Museum in Gwalior Fort, Madhya Pradesh. Currently unknown. H. 87 cm, W. 57 cm, D. 16 cm, grey stone. Suhanīa (Sihoniyāṃ/Siṃhapānīya), Morena, Madhya Pradesh, India. c. 10th century. Photograph by Desai [1973] Fig. 44.
- Fig. 23: Gujri Mahal Archaeological Museum in Gwalior Fort, Madhya Pradesh, India. c. 11–12th centuries. Photograph by the author.
- Fig. 25: Kārlā Cave 8, Maharashtra, India. c. late 6th century. Photograph by Koezuka [1999] Plate 216.
- Fig. 26: Kanheri Cave 41, Maharashtra, India. c. 6th century. Photograph courtesy of the late professor Takashi Koezuka.
- Fig. 27: Parel, Mumbai, Maharashtra, India. c. 5–6th centuries. Photograph by the author.

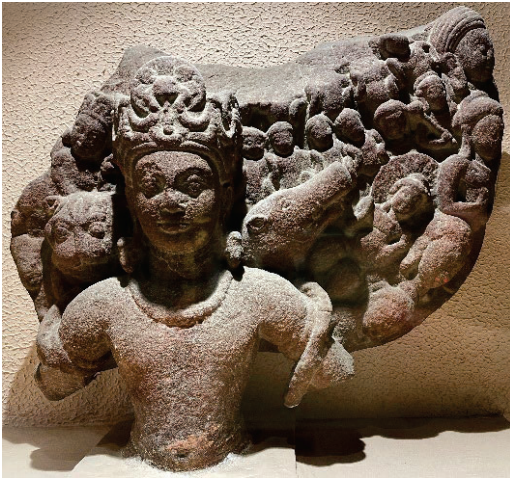


Fig. 1



Fig. 2



Fig. 3

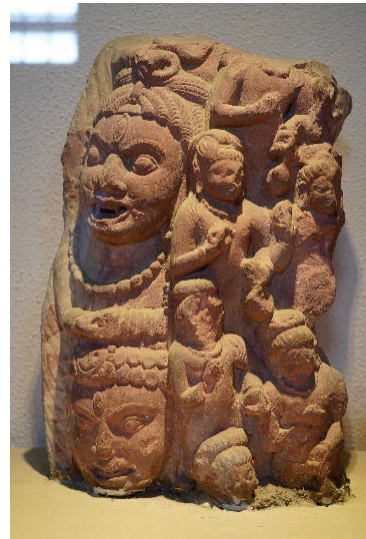


Fig. 4



Fig. 5



Fig. 6



Fig. 7

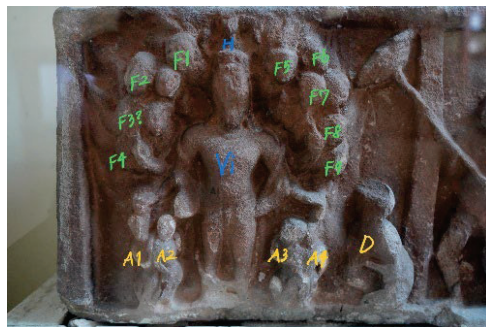


Fig. 8

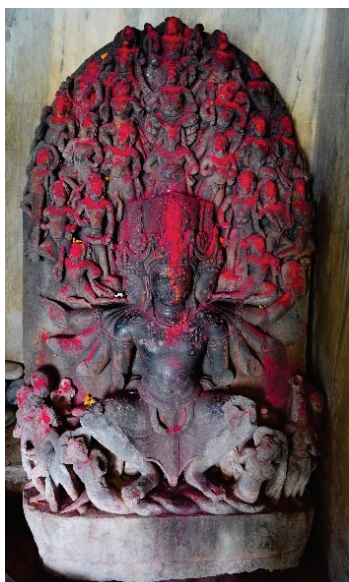


Fig. 9

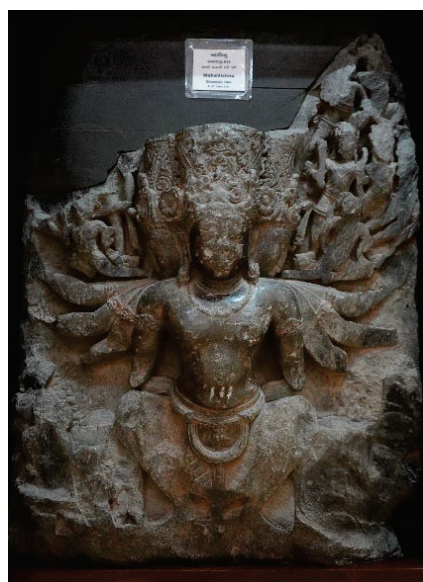


Fig. 10



Fig. 11



Fig. 12



ŚAMALĀJĪ NIMBUS

KEY

A - Hayagrīva	H - Śaṅkha
B - Brahmā	I - ppi
C - Śiva	J - Brāhminas
AR - Nṛsiṃha	K - Brāhminas
AL - Varāha	L - Bhikṣu
BR - Śōrya	M - Arjuna
BL - Candar	N - Lakṣmī
D - Dharma / Śaṅkarapa	O - Rāma
E - Kṛṣṇa	P - Varuṇa
F - Pradyumna	Q - Agni
G - Aniruddha	

Fig. 13

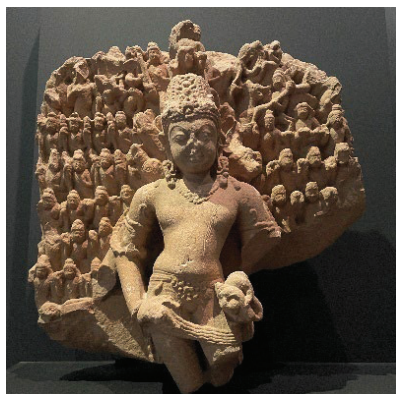


Fig. 14



Fig. 15



Fig. 16



Fig. 17



Fig. 18



Fig. 19

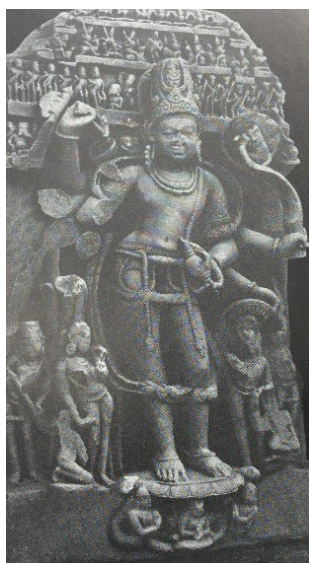


Fig. 20



Fig. 21

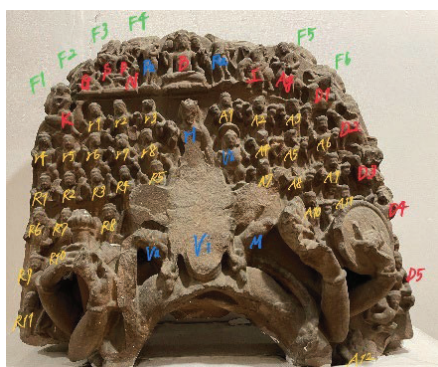


Fig. 22



Fig. 23



Fig. 24

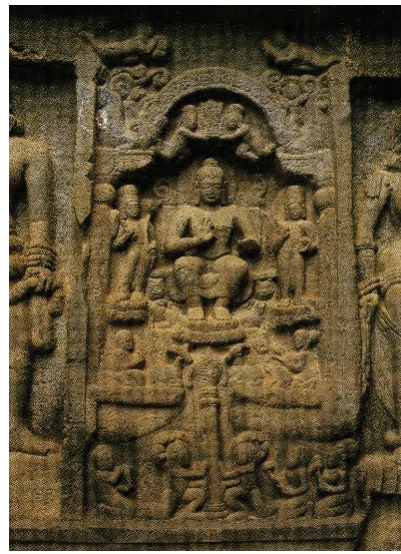


Fig. 25



Fig. 26



Fig. 27

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