



EMORY

MICHAEL C. CARLOS MUSEUM

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Avatars of the Hindu Deity, Vishnu, examined in the new exhibition at the Michael C. Carlos Museum of Emory University

ATLANTA, GA (April 23, 2021)—The Michael C. Carlos Museum presents *The Avatars of Vishnu*, from April 24 through June 20, 2021. This student-curated exhibition examines Vishnu, one of the most popular Hindu deities, who manifests in various forms known by the Sanskrit term *avatāra*, which means descent.

The exhibition, presented in the John Howett Works on Paper Gallery of the Michael C. Carlos Museum, was curated by Emory students in the Spring semester 2021 course, *Depicting God in Hinduism: The Avatars of Vishnu*, taught by Dr. Ellen Gough, assistant professor in Emory's Department of Religion.



Photo Caption information on page 3.

Dr. Gough, was quoted as saying, “I have been so impressed with the students' creativity and engagement with the project, they threw themselves into researching each of their assigned pieces for the exhibition – from a 10th-century statue of the boar incarnation of Vishnu to a 19th-century watercolor of Krishna as the cosmos – and they paid attention to all the details necessary for curating an engaging, meaningful exhibition. A particularly fun moment in class occurred when we were looking at the 18th-century painting of Vishnu's fish avatar, and a student found the exact type of fish depicted in the painting: the Golden Mahseer, an endangered species found in the Himalayan region.”

Gough went on to explain that “these students spent hours and hours carefully looking at these paintings and sculptures, drawing our attention to all sorts of distinctive details that shed light on the communities who made these objects and how they defined God.”

Emory Student Sojourner Hunt mentioned her experience in the course and curating her first exhibition, “This has been my favorite class at Emory! Reading religious texts, learning the history of South Asian painting, and examining these works of art in person has all been very exciting. But the best part of the class is that we get to immediately apply this knowledge to our exhibition. I have learned so much from my peers in this class and fallen in love with my assigned painting.”

Throughout repeating cycles of time, called yugas, Vishnu descends to earth in times of need to restore cosmic order and balance. His avatars are the embodiment of dharma, a central concept in Hindu traditions that can be understood as order, righteousness, and duty.

Vishnu is most easily identified by his blue skin and the four objects he frequently holds: the conch, mace, discus, and lotus, even in his many forms. While the exact number of avatars is contested, this exhibition focuses on the 10 most common. These different incarnations evolve from animals to humans as the cycles of time progress. The most beloved avatars, Rama and Krishna, appear in the two great Indian epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. Although Buddhism developed separately from Hinduism for many centuries, the Buddha has been incorporated into the list of avatars. Many Hindus await the arrival of Vishnu's final manifestation, Kalki, who will descend to Earth and restore dharma.

The avatars' stories are told in sacred texts, oral narratives, images, dance, music, and other performance traditions throughout South Asia and beyond. This exhibition displays paintings, sculptures, and objects of popular culture dated between the 10th and 19th centuries. The bronze, black stone, and sandstone sculptures come from North, South, and East India. The watercolor paintings were for the most part created by master painters in the courts of the Rajput kingdoms of Northwest India.

For more information, please visit the [exhibition page here](#).

The exhibition is made possible through the generous financial support of the Christian Humann Foundation and the E. Rhodes and Leona B. Carpenter Foundation.

Special thanks to Jayantilal K. and Geeta J. Patel & Family, Harshna and Pyush Patel, the Nathan Rubin Ida Ladd Foundation, and Dr. William Torres for helping the museum enhance its collection of South Asian art through gifts and loans.

Related Programs:

This course has benefited from virtual visits from distinguished art historians from the Brooklyn Museum, Middlebury College, and Haverford College to discuss the many forms in which Vishnu descends to earth to restore cosmic order and balance. All of these lectures have been recorded and can be [viewed here](#).

About the Michael C. Carlos Museum

Since its formal establishment on Emory's Atlanta campus in 1919, the Michael C. Carlos Museum has become one of the premier museums in the Southeast. The museum holds one of the most comprehensive collections in the region with artwork from ancient Egypt, Nubia, and the Near East; Greece and Rome; the Americas; Africa; and Asia as well as a collection of works on paper from the Renaissance to the present.

Through world-class permanent collections and special exhibitions, innovative programming, and one-of-a-kind opportunities to engage with art firsthand, the Carlos Museum serves Emory University and the Atlanta community as a dynamic interdisciplinary center that cultivates literacy in the arts and fosters understanding of diverse religions and civilizations.

Images:

[In-gallery image 1: Vishnu Reclining on the Cosmic Ocean](#) Northern India, 11th Century. Sandstone. The Ester R. Portnow Collection of Asian Art, a gift of the Nathan Rubin-Ida Ladd Family Foundation. 2001.1.14

[In gallery image 2:](#) Emory Student Sojourner Hunt examines a scene from the Ramayana, the most celebrated epic poem in South and Southeast Asia, depicting Rama's Coronation. In the foreground, stands the Dancing Krishna.

[In-gallery Image 3: Eighteen-Armed Vishnu](#) Northern India, 11th Century. Sandstone. The Ester R. Portnow Collection of Asian Art, a gift of the Nathan Rubin-Ida Ladd Family Foundation. 2001.1.4

[Class Image:](#) The Emory students and faculty from the Spring semester 2021 course, *Depicting God in Hinduism: The Avatars of Vishnu*, gather in-person and over zoom, to celebrate the installation of the exhibition, The Avatars of Vishnu, on view at the Michael C. Carlos Museum from April 24 through June 20, 2021.

[Vishnu Rests on the Cosmic Ocean](#) Punjab Hills, Guler, ca. 1800. Opaque watercolor on paper. Courtesy of Harshna and Pyush Patel. L2020.11.2

[Kurma The Tortoise And The Churning Of The Ocean](#) Punjab Hills, mid 19th Century. Opaque watercolor on paper. Courtesy of Harshna and Pyush Patel. L2016.12.1

[Folio Of The Avatars Of Vishnu](#) From an illustrated copy of the Bhagavata Purana Kashmir, August 17, 1819. Manuscript on paper. Courtesy of Harshna and Pyush Patel. L2020.9.1