

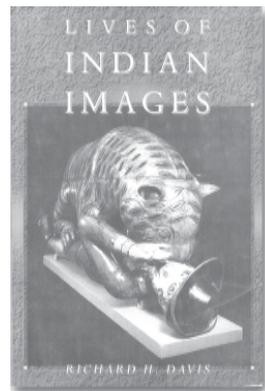
LIVES OF INDIAN IMAGES

by Richard H. Davis. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Private Limited, 1999, (First published in 1997, Princeton University Press.) 331pp, Price not mentioned

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Scholars of art are familiar with Walter Benjamin's well-known classification of art objects into those that have 'cult value' and those with 'exhibition value'. Richard H. Davis's *Lives of Indian Images* is a postmodernist attempt to go beyond these two poles and offers a case for the multiplicity of ways in which a visual object can be interpreted and made meaningful. The third century Mauryan Yakshi of Didarganj discovered by a local villager in 1917 along the banks of the Ganges in Patna is a case in point. The Introductory chapter reveals the diverse and conflicting impressions the image has made on those who have seen it. Davis traces its journey from when it was first found in the sand, to the shade of a bamboo canopy where it was enshrined for local worship in Didarganj, and finally, to its modern haven at the Patna museum from where in the 1980's it travelled to London, Washington, Paris and Moscow as part of the various Festivals of India abroad. For the villagers the Yakshi was a manifestation of the mother goddess, but for British curator Spooner the image was a 'specimen' of India's ancient art, to be viewed in historical sequence against the aesthetic standard of any other Indian art object. In its contemporary *avatāra*, the Yakshi is a 'travelling emissary of ancient Indian art and culture' an ambassador of goodwill who promotes cultural exchange between nations.

For Davis, focusing on iconography, style, technique, date and provenance, is important and indeed, the concern of conventional art history. In this book however, he prefers to go beyond such concerns to present individual biographies of select art and religious objects and sites which he then subjects to analysis within a culture specific framework in the fashion of Igor Kopytoff's 'cultural biographical' approach. What is interesting for Davis is the fact that an object's identity is reinvented or fabricated afresh with each new context of inquiry.



In his words, 'Even as images hang on to their distinctive insignia, they may find themselves carried off to new places, where they encounter new audiences, who may not know or appreciate their significances. Or, even staying in their original locations, the images may take on new roles and new meanings in response to the changing world around them' (p.261).

Davis's book is rich in description and historical information, taken from both official and non-official sources, including literary texts and temple documents and records. It illustrates his notion of multiple interpretations with the aid of biographical narratives of seven 'case studies', which have been selected 'for the interest of their stories' (p.13). The first deals with the Chola bronze sculpture of Śiva Vṛṣabhavāhana from Thanjavur, juxtaposing the bronze icon's origins as an object of worship, enlivened through rituals performed in the temple at Tiruvengadu, with its new and temporary setting at the National Gallery of Washington D.C. during the Festival of India in 1985 under the admiring critical, though certainly not devoted gaze of American museum goers. In doing so Davis attempts to go beyond the traditional approach of viewing Indian religious icons essentially as living beings and shows that these subsequent lives are as real and pertinent as the earlier ones. In the second case of the stone image of a Chalukyan Door Guardian, Davis shows how the image when relocated as a result of wartime looting, became a symbol of political victory/defeat. The next two chapters deal with Islamic iconoclasm in the context of the loss and retrieval of identity of two Hindu temples in India—the Somanatha temple in Gujarat destroyed by Mahmud of Ghaznavi and the Sri Rangam temple in Tamil Nadu ransacked by the Delhi Sultanate. The fate of Tipu Sultan's Tiger after the British siege of Sri Rangapattanam is the subject of the fifth chapter, while the last two deal with the image of Śiva at Somnātha after its Islamic conquest and a twelfth century bronze Naṣarāja in the current art market in the West.

Employing the principles of anthropology to both art and history is indeed refreshing but the author's use of the notion of 'interpretive communities' from reader-response literary theory which he renames 'communities of response' is somewhat redundant. The study of multiplicity of perceptions is itself a legitimate one and surely needs no further labels. What is significant, and deserves to be highlighted, is that Davis's approach does not privilege the moment of original creation alone, focusing equally upon subsequent interpretations and reinterpretations in the constitution of the objects, meaning and identity. Such a paradigm pointedly avoids the application of universal principles of aesthetics and psychology to the study of art of the non-western world by employing, instead, categories that have been culturally constituted.