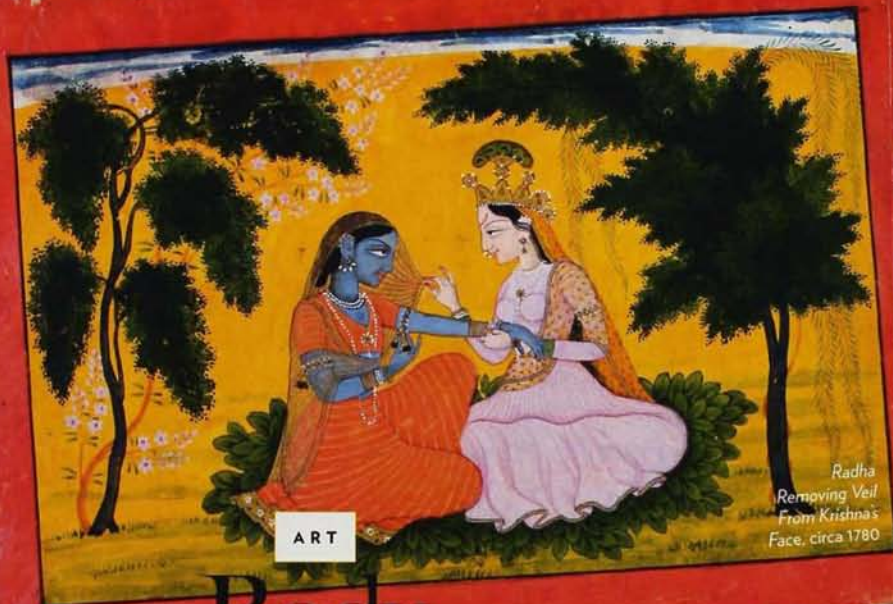


S.R. WA



ART

Radha
Removing Veil
From Krishna's
Face, circa 1780

Body of work

The largest exhibition of classical Indian art staged in the past 25 years, this show at the National Museum is an experience of a lifetime, says ANINDITA GHOSE

At the ongoing exhibition at the National Museum in Delhi, an 18th-century painting shows Radha and Krishna dressed in each other's clothes. "Love can make a person lose themselves completely to the other, such that one's body is no longer one's own," says the accompanying text.

It is one amongst the many unique paintings, video installations and terracotta works on display as part of *Roop Pratirop: The Body In Indian Art*—the monumental exhibition that has come to India after gathering much praise at the Europalia festival in Belgium. In the *Guardian*, writer and historian William Dalrymple even calls it the "most astonishing assemblage of Indian art objects ever brought together in a single space."

Curated by Dr Naman P Ahuja, associate professor of ancient Indian art and architecture at Delhi's Jawaharlal Nehru University, the exhibition brings together over 250 artworks from 36 museums, archaeological institutions and private collections—many



"I had a small, enthusiastic team and we were able to travel all over India to find these works"

—NAMAN P AHUJA



Veersati in
black basalt,
Andhra
Pradesh, circa
13th century



Chamunda
in sandstone,
Madhya Pradesh,
circa 10th century

of which have never been exhibited before—in an exploration of one of the most celebrated ideas in Indian art, the 'Body'.

Ranging from stone sculptures sourced from Indian small towns to manuscripts about magic painted for the Mughal emperor Akbar, the exhibition addresses how Indian civilisation, over 4,000 years, has contemplated death, birth, divine bodies, and the body possessed by art or nature. After Ahuja's pitch for the exhibition was selected for Europalia, he had about 18 months to do specific research. "I had a small, enthusiastic team and we were able to travel all over India to find these works," he says.

The India edition, made possible by the foresight of the National Museum's present director general, Dr Venu V, is essentially the same exhibition that was mounted in Belgium. But in addition, Indian visitors will be privy to a number of sculptures that were deemed too fragile to travel abroad. A particularly striking piece? "Nagadev, a reptile man from Bhopal. The piece is made of a material that looks like it has formed scales all over the body. I cannot recall seeing anything quite like it," says Ahuja. "We also have a beautiful Mughal manuscript, *Akitoosha-i-ukba* ('Provision For The Next World'), with Aurangzeb's name in it."

Spread across 18,000sqft with eight thematic divisions, the exhibition design is part of the experience, too. An audio track accompanies it: five ragas have been recorded in the way they may have been performed in the 17th and 18th centuries. Much like the divine lovers, it is a museum experience you can lose yourself in. ■

Roop Pratirop: The Body In Indian Art is on at the National Museum, Delhi, till June 7, 2014. Nationalmuseumindia.gov.in