



The fantastical image of Shiva from Tala in Chhattisgarh, dated to the sixth century AD, is larger than life-size, and has multiple faces and creatures represented on different parts of his body. His ears are peacocks, his moustache, two conjoined fish, his chin, a crab, his eyelids are the opened mouths of some monstrous creature, his hair is a coiled serpent. Each pectoral is a mask-like wrathful face, and the rest of his body is similarly populated by extraordinary creatures. The sculpture has tantalized scholars, but perhaps the association is with zodiacal cosmic imagery.



The show begins with representations of death — memorial stones for heroes and sati, sculptures of Yama, the god of death, Pahan paintings of the dead or dying and one very interesting folio of Bharat and Shatrughna at Dasarath's cremation from the Ramayana series that Akbar had made for his mother, Hamida Bai.

Photos: Manik Balmiki/dna



Beyond anatomy

With over 300 artefacts on display, the exhibition 'Rupa-Pratirupa: The Body in Indian Art' brings together a broad complex of ideas that touch upon every aspect of life and after-life, finds **Gargi Gupta**

here are only two groups of people that you generally see at the National Museum in Delhi — tourists and students on educational trips. Few residents of the city visit the cream-and red-sandstone structure conveniently located on Janpath, just off India Gate. But that's changed of late and visitors, a large number of them locals, are starting to trickle in.

What's drawing them is the exhibition "Rupa-Pratirupa: The Body in Indian Art", which opened a month ago and will be on show until June 7. Curated by Naman Ahuja, a professor of art history at JNU, this is possibly the most ambitious show that the National Museum has ever put together in its 65-year existence.

Its theme, "the human body", brings together a broad complex of ideas that touch upon every aspect of life and after-life — death, birth, sex, renunciation, war, destiny, religion, philosophy. The exhibition takes up most of the galleries on the first floor of the museum and brings together more than 300 artefacts — sculptures, paintings, jewellery, textiles, prints, photographs, music and videos — ranging across three millennia, from 2,500 BC to contemporary times, taken from Gandhara (modern-day Pakistan) in the west to Manipur in the east.

Many of the works have been taken from the National Museum's own horde of over 200,000 art objects, but Ahuja has also ferreted seldom-seen, little-known treasures from state museums, and got important pieces of Indian, Buddhist and Islamic art from international museums such as the Ashmolean in Oxford, Reitberg in Zurich and the al-Sabah Collection at the Kuwait National Museum. There are works here from private collectors in India and abroad, too, such as Priya Paul, Suresh Neotia and Anthony d'Offay, to name a few.

"The Body in Indian Art" comes to Delhi from Brussels where it was up for four months from October last year to January, as part of Europalia, a major international arts festival where India was the focus country.

In many ways, this exhibition presents a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to see the very finest of artistic enterprise from the Indian subcontinent over the millennia and the range of expressions it was capable of. Nearly every artefact is exquisite and important, both in the development of art-history, iconography and the development of religious thought, either exemplifying a tradition or marking an exception to it, that hints at the many accidents of cultural encounters.

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Naga Deva, a 9th century sculpture from Rajpur, Madhya Pradesh, that formed part of a door jamb pillar. What's remarkable about it is that it was made of a porous stone that flakes in such a way that it gives the appearance of snakeskin.