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ART REVIEW

Eons Before the Yoga Mat Became Trendy

By Holland Cotter

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WASHINGTON — Pain is a problem. So is pleasure, which causes pain — discontent, confusion, depression — when it ends, as it always does. Escape from this cycle has been a goal of spiritual disciplines universally. And one of those disciplines is the subject of an immensely pleasurable exhibition called "Yoga: The Art of Transformation" at the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery here.

Yoga, in this instance, is not a matter of meditation mats and Whole Foods Wellness Clubs. It's a shattering personal revolution. It's about leaving home, going naked, fasting for years, freezing in winter, roasting in summer, being shunned by the living and lying down with the dead. It's about perfecting your body in order to lose it, loosening your mind till the cosmos floods in. Whether, in the end, you glow like a god or blow away like an ash, pain and pleasure will be a thousand yesterdays in the past.

The origins of the ideas and actions we call yoga are obscure, and the visual history all but unstudied. The Sackler show is the first major art survey in the United States to tackle the subject. There is evidence that religious ascetics were wandering North India as early as the fifth century B.C., practicing meditation and breath control in pursuit of mind-over-matter transcendence. By the second century A.D. their methods had long since been absorbed into Buddhism, Hinduism and Jainism, and were codified in the Yoga Sutras, a philosophical treatise that doubled as a user's manual and is attributed to a sage named Patanjali.

Patanjali was a pragmatist, not a mystic. He gives step-by-step instructions — sit still, keep clean, stay celibate, study scripture — on how to free the soul from the aching and twitchy body. He also implied that yoga could have other attractive benefits. If you got good at it, you might be able to read people's minds, revisit the past, learn how to fly.

Superhuman power is always a great lure, and the form of yoga based on a spiritual system called tantra, promised even more of it. It said you could attain immortality, become divine, though this took hard work. It required mastery of concentration-sharpening tools — visual ones called mandalas and aural ones called mantras — and living a life that many people, including other yogis, considered uncouth.

You had to camp out on cremation grounds, picking at bones, drinking blood, eating flesh. There you kept rough company with deities like Bhairava (literally “horrid”), a ferocious form of Shiva, and packs of dangerous goddesses called yoginis. Your outré and antisocial lifestyle had a purpose. By charging into it full-tilt, you broke through human normality and its taboos and came out on the other side, beyond restrictions of caste and religion, beyond caring what the world thought. Being beyond care made you free.

The Sackler show, organized by Debra Diamond, associate curator of South and Southeast Asian Art, provides visual equivalents for yoga’s complex, often perverse and paradoxical ideas. How can the great savior god Shiva be at once ethereal and frightful? A 13th-century stone Bhairava from Karnataka, in southern India, gives an answer. His gently swaying body is the last word in sculptural delicacy, dripping with ornamentation like a rose bush laden with flowers. His face is equally fine-cut, though with one peculiarity: small sharp fangs protrude from his lips.

A life-size 10th-century stone image of a yogini from a temple in Tamil Nadu has comparable surprises. Youthful and full-figured, she’s a beauty. But she too has fangs and holds a sliced-off top of a skull demurely in one hand. There’s nothing demure at all about a second, sandstone yogini from Uttar Pradesh. Fabulously carved and furiously scowling, she rides, spread-legged on the back of an owl, straight toward us, raising a sword and shield in two of her four hands while using the others to deliver a two-fingered warning whistle.

Much early yogic art feels aggressive and unruly, though there are tranquil interludes in images associated with Jainism. Jain scripture includes some of the first known references to yoga. But as befits a faith uncompromisingly committed to nonviolence and anti-materialism, the Jain visual ideal of a yogi is spectacularly calm and plain: a smooth-skinned nude figure, usually of a Jain saint, carved from white marble, seated in meditation. They’re like miniature mountains, snowy and unperturbable, letting the wild world spin around them.

And wild that world could be as yogis strove to be godlike and gods advertised themselves as transcendent yogic adepts. In a devotional painting from Rajasthan, dated around 1800, a smoky-blue Vishnu has Master of the Universe written all over him: The sun appears in one eye, the moon in the other; heaven spreads across his chest, hell spills down his legs. And in a slightly earlier painting, depicting a scene from the Bhagavad Gita, Krishna reveals himself as the Lord of Yoga, turning himself into a kind of giant, purple-and-gold machine of fate, his dozens of spinning arms slicing the air like blades. It’s an awesome sight, but scary. You can’t tell whether his energy is benign or threatening, whether you should move in close or stay out of his way. Over the centuries, human yogis provoked similarly ambivalent reactions.

Medieval Indian texts suggest that many people found mendicant yogis alien and off-putting, even menacing. To the Mughal emperors who ruled India from the early 16th to early 18th centuries, they were objects of fascination. Although formally Muslim, some of the rulers were wide-ranging spiritual seekers who surrounded themselves with holy men: Sufi sages, Jesuit missionaries, yogis.

Figures of yogis recur in manuscript paintings produced by the Mughal court. Some of these images are pure escapist fantasy, with handsome yogi princes devoutly tracking down sweethearts in Sufi romances. Other pictures have the specificity of photo-documents, as in the case of an extraordinary double-leaf 16th-century painting of a mortal fight between rival yogic sects. The skirmish, waged over bathing rights in a sacred river, was witnessed by the Mughal emperor Akbar, who described it to an artist, who in turn spares us none of the bloody details of yogi-on-yogi stabbings, spearings and decapitations.

The British, who succeeded the Mughals, lived in fear of yogic militancy and used art, among other means, to reduce their power. British photographic studios in 19th-century India turned out endless images of yogis as disheveled, half-clothed, ash-smeared freaks. On the one hand such pictures were given an ethnological spin, as a tool of science, or rather science as a form of surveillance. On the other, they fed the Western appetite for exoticism, presenting yogis as primitive poseurs and yoga itself as a primitive form of theater.

Such images, or versions of them, persisted well into the 20th century in Hollywood and in the popular press. At the same, India, in the buildup to independence, began to take yoga back, to reclaim it for modern, global use. This entailed making fundamental changes, scrubbing yoga clean of mysticism, and repositioning it in a secular, rational context: first in medicine, and then in a burgeoning culture of physical fitness and self-help therapy, where it rests today.

The fact is, yoga was always rational, and more so in its old, extremist forms than in its present domesticated version. How else would you characterize a spiritual discipline that directly and boldly addressed life's most intractable problem, the persistence of suffering, and took practical, but radical steps to do something about it? To alter the rules of the existential game, it redefined the possible. What's great about the Sackler show, apart from the pleasures of its images, is that it not only lets us see the history of that practice in action, but understand how radical it was — and is — and take that seriously.

Correction: *January 4, 2014*
A picture caption on Friday with an art review of "Yoga: The Art of Transformation" at the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery in Washington, using information from the gallery, carried an erroneous credit. The photograph depicted, of a group of yogis, is from the collection of Gloria Katz and Willard Huyck, not from the Mehrangarh Museum Trust.

Correction: *January 10, 2014*
A previous version of a picture caption with this review carried an erroneous credit. The photograph, of a yogini from 11th-century India, was taken by Neil Greentree on behalf of the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian; the work is on loan from the San Antonio Museum of Art. It is not from the Mehrangarh Museum Trust.

“Yoga: The Art of Transformation” runs through Jan. 26 at the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, 1050 Independence Avenue SW, Washington; asia.si.edu. It travels to the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco, Feb. 21 to May 25, and the Cleveland Museum of Art, June 22 to Sept. 7.

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