

## Chapter 2



*Statue of a Standing  
Vishnu, 16th century  
India, Tanjore District  
Late Vijayanagar Period  
Bronze  
Robert Allerton Collection,  
1969.699*

# *Statue of a Standing Vishnu*

Tanjore, India

## Overview

**V**ishnu is a deity or god in the Indian religion, Hinduism, which has been practiced for over 4,000 years. This statue of Vishnu was made to stand in a Hindu temple. The statue was made toward the end of the Vijayanagar period (1336-1565) in India's history. Based in southern India, the Vijayanagar Empire was the center of Hindu culture for over two hundred years. Vijayanagar, capital of the Empire, means "City of Victory."

The Hindu religion is centered around three main gods: Brahma, the creator; Shiva, the destroyer; and Vishnu, the preserver of universal order. Vishnu is kind and concerned for the happiness of human beings under his care. To help him preserve order in the world, Vishnu has the unique ability to change form. Whenever the forces of evil threaten to overcome the forces of goodness, Vishnu descends from heaven as an avatar — an earthly being who can solve the problem and rescue the world.

There are ten avatars of Vishnu, two of which appear in the great Indian epics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. The stories were written down around 400 A.D., although they are probably much older.

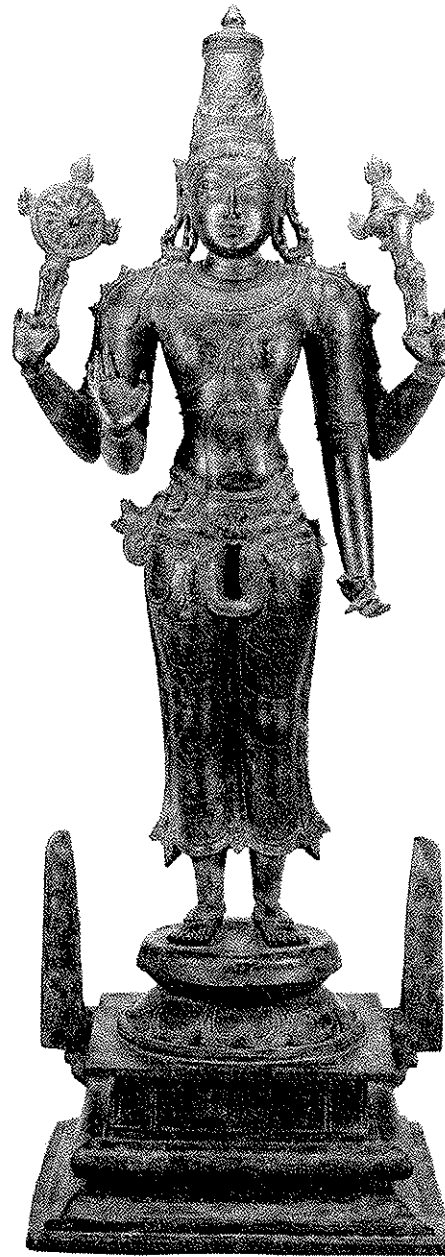
## What's the Story?

**R**eligious concepts and narratives related to *Statue of a Standing Vishnu* appear in ancient Indian epics or puranas, "the stories of the olden days," which originated around 1000 B.C. These early texts are written in Sanskrit, the sacred language of Hinduism, which evolved in the second millennium B.C. The stories celebrate religion, glorify deities, and

teach listeners or readers in order to strengthen their faith. Many puranas are associated with the god Vishnu, the preserver of universal order and one of the three gods at the top of the Hindu pantheon.

Whenever Vishnu is needed on earth to solve a problem or to restore order, he appears as an avatar either in animal form (fish, tortoise, boar, and lion) or in a human form (Krishna, Buddha, and Rama). Vishnu's avatars Rama and Krishna appear in the two great Indian epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, each composed around 400 A.D. Like the other gods at the top of the pantheon — Brahma, the creator, and Shiva, the destroyer and regenerator of the universe — Vishnu has wives, offspring, and favorite animals, and pursues adventures in the world. The only god in the pantheon who has no beginning and no end, Vishnu is the most lovable of the gods. He is kind, considerate, and ever-vigilant for the happiness of human beings under his care.

The ten avatars of Vishnu originated in myths of creators, saviors, heroes, and historical and apocalyptic figures. The stories invoked by the symbolism of *Statue of a Standing Vishnu* incorporate elements of India's cultural history and values.



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## India and the Hindu Religion

**I**ndia, a subcontinent of Asia, has one of the oldest civilizations in the world. One-fifth of the world's population is of Indian descent, and a majority of these people practice the Hindu religion. More than 4,000 years old, Hindu beliefs and practices revolve around three divinities: Brahma, the creator and god of wisdom; Shiva, the destroyer and regenerator; and Vishnu, the preserver of universal order. In addition to temple worship, essential acts of Hindu spirituality include personal devotion in the home, pilgrimages to sacred places, and participation in sacred festivals.

The activities of the gods and the lives of humans are linked together continually in the Hindu concept of the cyclical nature of time. In this cycle, the universe is destroyed by fire and is dissolved into a cosmic ocean out of which a new universe is created and another cosmic era begins. Although unable to picture the entire cycle of time or the entire universe, humans are thought to possess immortal souls that are reincarnated in higher or lower human, animal, and vegetable forms. The type of reincarnation depends on a person's karma, his or her good or bad actions over a lifespan. Every Hindu aspires to moksha (or nirvana), an escape from the endless cycle of rebirth in the present world, whereby the soul achieves transcendence and the end of suffering. Worshipping a deity such as Vishnu is essential to becoming free of this cycle.

## The City of Victory and Its Empire

**S**tatue of a Standing Vishnu was completed in the sixteenth century, during the Vijayanagar period (about 1336–1565) of Indian history. Based in southern India, the Vijayanagar Empire exerted power over the entire country and was the center of Hindu culture. The capital of the Empire was Vijayanagar, “the City of Victory,” an enormous fortified city on the banks of the Tungahbadra River. Almost twenty-four miles around, this garden-city was ringed by seven concentric walls. The city contained marble palaces, colossal elephant stables



made of stone, ladies' pavilions, baths, bazaars, and hundreds of temples. Italian, Persian, Portuguese, and Russian visitors commented with awe on the city's many lakes, waterways, and fruit gardens. Vijayanagar was a center for trade in pearls and coral, elephants and horses, camphor, pepper, sandalwood, and musk. The sophistication and power of Vijayanagar is reflected in other southern cities such as Tanjore, where the *Statue of a Standing Vishnu* was made. Tanjore was the capital of the Chola Empire (907–1336), and many of the magnificent temples built during that time remain today. In addition to its architecture, Tanjore was well-known for its paintings and cast-bronze sculptures.

*Statue of a Standing Vishnu* was created in the last years of the Vijayanagar Empire. The Muslim kingdoms of the Deccan, located in central India, united to defeat the Hindus. In 1565 Vijayanagar was sacked during the Battle of Talikota. In the months following the battle, most of the city's hundreds of temples, sculptures, and gardens were completely destroyed.

# The Stories of Vishnu's Avatars

**I**n describing himself to Arjuna, the hero of the *Mahabharata*, Vishnu remarks, "Whenever Truth decays and untruth flourishes, O noble one, then I create myself. To protect the righteous and destroy the wicked, to establish Truth firmly, I take birth age after age."

## 1. *Vishnu as the Fish*

One day Manu (man-oo), "Father of Man," was washing himself by a river. He found a tiny fish, Matsya (mat-see-ah), in the hollow of his palm. Matsya was the god Vishnu in disguise, and he asked Manu to save him. The small fish grew quickly, and soon he was so big Manu could no longer keep him. Manu said good-bye and returned the fish to the ocean. Upon his release, the fish told Manu that in one year a great flood would submerge the world, and he urged Manu to build a ship in preparation. The flood came in precisely one year, as Matsya had said. Matsya returned during the flood to guide Manu's ship through the waters to safe ground. After the flood, Manu created new plants, animals, and people for the earth.

## 2. *Vishnu as the Tortoise*

Long ago, many floods destroyed the world. Precious things were lost, including the heavenly nectar amrita, or cream of the milk ocean, which the gods ate so that they would live forever. Without the cream of the milk ocean, the world and the gods would die.

The gods and demons came together to make the cream of the milk ocean. Mount Mandara was turned upside down so that it could be used as a churning stick to stir up the water. The snake Vasuki (va-soo-kee) was employed as a rope to turn the mountain. The mountain was so heavy it began to burrow into the earth as it turned, making the earth tremble and fall apart. The gods and demons called out for the help of Vishnu.

Vishnu became Kurma, the tortoise, and then used his curved back as a pivot on which the mountain could rest. Gods and demons worked very hard together to churn the ocean. Soon, they were able to make the cream of the milk ocean. Then all of the lost, precious objects rose up out of the milky water.

### 3. *Vishnu as the Boar*

Near the dawn of time, the Earth was born. The newborn Earth, in the form of a lovely young woman, was floating on the Cosmic Sea when she was suddenly attacked. The Serpent of the Abyss, which is a very deep hole, dragged Earth beneath the waters. Earth cried out to Vishnu to save her. Vishnu, hearing her desperate cries, became Varaha, a boar. Boars are fierce creatures of the land that also delight in water. Varaha plunged into the Cosmic Sea, lifted Earth up on his large tusks, and returned Earth to her home above the waters.

### 4. *Vishnu as the Man-Lion*

There was once a demon king called Hiranyakashipu (hih-ranya-kash-yapoo), who was so powerful that he could not be killed “by day or night, by man or beast, by no man-made weapon, either inside or outside his palace, nor on the earth or in the skies.” Thus protected, he terrorized the three worlds. The demon king was so powerful he scared everyone, even his young son.

The demon king’s only worry was that his son worshipped Vishnu. This worry made the king so unhappy that the son was afraid his father would kill him. Vishnu decided to save the boy and bring peace to the people who feared the king.

Vishnu became Narasimha, a creature who is half-man/half-lion who is “neither man nor beast.” He hid inside a pillar on the porch of the demon’s palace which is “neither inside nor outside.” At twilight which is “neither day nor night,” Narasimha burst forth from the pillar, seized the demon king in the palace doorway, stretched him across his lap, which is “neither on earth nor in the skies” and killed him with his claws.

## 5. *Vishnu as the Dwarf*

At one time, Bali the demon king controlled the earth. Vishnu decided to fool the demon king. Vishnu became Vamana (vah-man-ah), the dwarf. Vamana asked Bali if he could have as much space as he could cover in three steps. Believing that the dwarf could cover only a small space, Bali agreed. Then Vamana turned himself into a great giant. His first step covered the entire earth. His second and third steps covered the heavens. Nothing was left for the demon king to rule but the world of the afterlife.

## 6. *Vishnu as Parasurama*

One day a powerful warrior king named Kshatriya (kshat-ree-ah) visited the home of Jamadagni (jah-mah-dahg-nee), a strict Brahman hermit of the priestly class. Jamadagni and his family lived a very simple life. When the warrior king saw Jamadagni's wonderful cow, he decided to take it for himself. Jamadagni and his family tried to get the cow back. By accident, Jamadagni was killed by the warrior king's sons.

Vishnu decided to help Jamadagni's family and, at the same time, to restore on earth the power of the priestly class over the warrior class. Vishnu became Parasurama (para-shoo-rama), the youngest and most obedient son in Jamadagni's family. In revenge for his father's death, Parasurama killed the warrior king's entire family, thus restoring order.

## 7. *Vishnu as Rama*

Vishnu had many adventures as the brave and daring Prince Rama, "destroyer of the wicked." Prince Rama, his wife Sita, and his brother Lakshmana were banished to the forest for fourteen years upon the demand of Rama's stepmother. Rama and his family constantly defended themselves against the demons who also lived in the forest.

One day, Sita was kidnapped by Ravana, demon king of Sri Lanka. Rama went to Hanuman, king of the monkeys, to ask



for help in finding his wife. The monkeys searched for Sita east and west, north and south. Finally, Hanuman spied Rama's wife hidden in a grove of trees in the demon king's palace garden. Rama and the monkeys attacked the demons, killing Ravana and his mighty warriors in order to free Sita. After a long time, Rama and his family were able to come home to rule over his kingdom Ayodhya (ah-yod-hee-a). This was a time of justice, peace, and happiness.

### 8. *Vishnu as Krishna*

Vishnu had many adventures as the loving, playful, and wise god Krishna. One day the young Krishna was playing ball near the Yamuna River, and the ball bounced into the water. It landed near the many-headed, giant cobra Kaliya, who lived in the Yamuna River. The snake was so poisonous that no trees or birds could live near the river.

In order to retrieve the ball, Krishna climbed up a tree and dived into the river. The cobra immediately began to fight with Krishna. Krishna stomped so hard on Kaliya with his feet, Krishna's footprint was marked forever on the cobra's head. Soon Kaliya became faint from the many blows. Krishna told Kaliya he had to leave the pool and go live in the ocean. After the poisonous snake had gone, the water and the land again became safe for trees and birds.

### 9. VISHNU *as Buddha*

At the beginning of the present age, many people were talking about Vishnu in strange ways. He decided to come to earth as Buddha.

Buddha was born as Prince Siddhartha into the rich and noble Gautama family. He grew up in luxury and pleasure, and he was married for many years to the beautiful Yasodhara (yah-show-dah-rah), with whom he had a son. One day, Buddha slipped out of the palace and saw that others lived with sickness, old age, and death. In order to find the meaning of these

“three sorrows,” Buddha decided to leave his home and family and pursue the life of a religious man.

Buddha began a pilgrimage lasting seven years that involved learning, thinking, and preaching. He realized that in order to be free of the cycle of rebirth, he had to meditate and lead a simple life.

### 10. *Vishnu as Kalki*

Vishnu will appear as Kalki sometime in the future. When he comes, Kalki will ride a white horse through the world. He will raise his arm high with a sword in his hand. The sword will blaze like a comet, and Kalki will destroy the world. Then Kalki will sleep on the Cosmic Sea for a long, long time. When he wakes up, Kalki will stir the milky waters. The god Brahma the Creator will be reborn. The earthly world will begin to grow and play again, and this future time will be a new Golden Age.

## How Is Vishnu Presented in This Sculpture?



**S**tatue of a Standing Vishnu presents Vishnu in human form rather than as one of his avatars. Though the statue was painted to look lifelike, it has four arms to symbolize Vishnu’s supernatural powers. In his upper hands, Vishnu carries attributes that identify him. In his upper left hand, he holds a conch shell, a war horn that symbolizes the origins of existence, sky, and sound. In his upper right hand, he holds a chakra or discus, a flaming weapon that symbolizes the wheel of time, the cycles of

*Detail*  
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life, the universe, and world order. Another wheel appears on the back of Vishnu's head. A third attribute of Vishnu, the mace, is not shown on this sculpture.

Vishnu's two lower hands make gestures, called mudras, found in Indian dance. Vishnu's lower right hand makes the gesture of granting blessing, protection, and reassurance. On the right side of Vishnu's chest is a small, triangular-shaped mole called a shrivatsu, which shows that he is the favorite of the goddess *Shri-Lakshmi*, one of his wives. Vishnu wears a kirita-mukuta, a tall crown that symbolizes his status as the absolute, universal monarch. A typical component of male dress, his belt, or katibandha, is here decorated with a lion's head. His necklaces, bracelets, waistbands and hip girdles are pieces of jewelry worn by all the gods.



Hanging over Vishnu's shoulder is the three-part sacrificial cord called the yajnopavita. This cord consists of three intertwined strands of fabric or antelope hide, and it may be decorated with jewels or flowers. The three strands symbolize reality, passion, and inertia. The cord, which is as long as an adult man, is given to every boy in the three highest castes during a ceremony that takes place when he becomes an adolescent. Following this ceremony, the boy is considered to be reborn as a man. All of the gods, male and female, wear this three-strand cord.

Vishnu stands on a lotus flower. The lotus, which grows from the muddy depths of the water, is a heliotropic flower that opens with the sun and closes in the darkness. The stem of the lotus symbolizes the idea that all of life comes from water. The leaf symbolizes the fertile earth, and the flower represents a mother's lap. When the bud is open, it symbolizes the sun. Together, all parts of the lotus flower symbolize beauty, happiness, eternal renewal, and, more specifically, the Hindu belief in moksha, the liberation of the spirit from the cycle of reincarnation. Brahma, the god of creation, is believed to have been created from the lotus in Vishnu's navel. Vishnu is believed to live in his own heaven, Vaikuntha, whose buildings are built of gold studded with jewels and whose pools contain lotus flowers of all hues, which perfume the air for miles around

## Where Was This Statue Originally Seen?

**S**tatue of a Standing Vishnu would have been located in a temple built according to directions given in the *Agamas* or *Shastras*, sacred texts that govern the proportions of buildings and images. Every temple has a principal sculpture, an immovable image generally made of stone or occasionally of wood, stucco, or other materials. As part of temple worship, images of the deities are carried in procession outside the temple's walls. Smaller, portable metal images such as *Statue of a Standing Vishnu* are created for this purpose. These portable statues are placed directly in front of the principal image that remains in the temple until they are needed for a procession. Like the principal statue, *Statue of a Standing Vishnu* would have been blessed by a priest and worshipped in temple ceremonies. Vishnu himself is thought to live in all of his images.

The *Agamas* texts specify three essential forms of worship: daily worship, daily festivals, and annual or great festivals. Worshippers to the temples containing statues follow the custom of puja, which involves offering incense, camphor, coconuts, and garlands to a deity. The worshipper walks around the outside of the shrine in a clockwise direction, then enters and travels through a sequence of small, low rooms. When the sanctum with the god is reached, offerings, lighted lamps, and money are given to a priest, who presents them to the god. Most of these offerings are then reverentially returned to the worshipper, and coconut water is sometimes spooned out to him or her. Bells sound and conch-shell trumpets blow at the moment the worshipper makes eye contact with the deity. With this act, the ceremony concludes.

For holy processions and festivals, statues such as *Statue of a Standing Vishnu* are bedecked in jewels and wrapped in clothes, which often obscure the deity's face. A rod is passed through holes in the base of the sculpture so that the image can be carried out of the temple.

Dance is an important part of worship associated with works such as *Statue of a Standing Vishnu*, both within and outside the temple. Many Hindu statues look graceful and agile like dancers, because almost all body gestures in Hindu sculpture come from the art of Indian dance. Some of the great Hindu temples include sacred dancing halls to worship the gods. Dance and music accompany the procession of the statue outside the temple during festivals. The act of carrying an image is choreographed so that the movements are suited to the deity and to the occasion. Through processions and festivals, the sacred temple, the immediate community, and the cosmos are symbolically linked together.

## How Was Statue of a Standing Vishnu Made?

**S** *tatue of a Standing Vishnu* is assumed to have been made by an artist who worked in a guild. This person probably specialized in bronze sculpture and belonged to one of the lower castes. Artists were not necessarily religious, and they often used courtesans and other celebrities of their time as models. Artists were usually paid in money and sometimes with land.

Since bronze sculptures are an integral part of the temples in which they are housed, they are made with a particular temple's architecture in mind. Hence, a sculpture made for one temple cannot be used for another. Sculptures are rarely inscribed, and when they are, donors' names rather than the artist's are given.

*Statue of a Standing Vishnu* was made by the lost-wax method of casting. The artist sculpts the figure in clay and covers it with a thin layer of wax and another of semiliquid clay. Vent pipes are then inserted at various points through the clay and wax layers. When the clay figure and the wax and clay layers are heated, the wax between the clay surfaces melts and runs out through the vent pipes. Molten bronze is then poured into

the gap left by the melted wax. When the metal is cool, the clay cover and inner core are removed, leaving the bronze statue.

The bronze used for *Statue of a Standing Vishnu* is an alloy of gold, silver, copper, lead, and tin. According to some versions of the *Agamas* sacred texts, gold is for enjoyment in this world and the next, silver is for wealth, and copper is for prosperity. In other texts, gold is for victory, health, and knowledge; silver is for wealth; and copper is for well-being.

## India and Chicago

**T**he peoples and culture of India were little known in Chicago until the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition. During the Exposition, India had its own building in which visitors could sample Indian tea served in hand-painted dishes by attendants from India. Carpets, brass and copper objects, and antique armor inlaid with gems were included in the Exposition collection, which was then valued at hundreds of thousands of dollars.

Of greater long-term impact was the arrival in the United States of Swami Vivekananda, the first Hindu monk from India to teach Vedanta, a branch of Indian philosophy, in this country. Swami Vivekananda gave a speech on September 11, 1893, the opening day of the World's Parliament of Religions, held in conjunction with the Exposition. The Parliament met in the Art Institute's 1893 building fronting on Michigan Avenue. Vivekananda stayed in the United States for about four years, contributing substantially to the new dialogue between Eastern and Western religions. Today, there are twelve Vedanta Societies in America, including one in Hyde Park in south Chicago. A wall plaque outside Fullerton Auditorium at the Art Institute commemorates Swami Vivekananda's famous speech, and the block of Michigan Avenue in front of the Art Institute was given the honorary name of Swami Vivekananda Way in 1995.

People from India only began arriving in Chicago in great numbers in the 1960s. Between 1800 and 1965, 16,000 Indians emigrated to the United States. In 1965, the United States' immigration policy changed, giving priority to people with special skills, and to close relatives of United States residents. According to the 1990 census, between 1965 and 1990, the number of Indians in Chicago and its six surrounding counties grew to 58,000, out of a total of 469,000 Indian émigrés to the United States. This Indian community, comprising not only Hindus but also Muslims, Parsis, Jains, Sikhs, Christian denominations, and Jews, reflects the many cultures and traditions of India. The first Indian immigrants settled on the North Side of Chicago in Rogers Park, and in the western suburb of Oak Park; their descendants today are spread throughout most of the city and its suburbs.

## Glossary

**Alloy:** A substance composed of two or more metals that have been combined.

**Attribute:** An object or symbol that identifies a deity and that is often held in the hand. Vishnu's attributes are the conch shell, discus, mace, and lotus.

**Avatar:** A form or incarnation in which Vishnu appears in the earthly world to combat evil and restore order. Vishnu appears as ten avatars, including types of animals (fish, tortoise, boar), mythical creatures (man-lion, dwarf-giant), warrior heroes (Parasurama), other religious figures (Krishna, Buddha, and Rama), and as Kalki (symbol of the end of the world).

**Brahma:** The god of creation, who is believed to have been created from the lotus in Vishnu's navel. He is one of the three main gods of Hinduism.

**Brahman:** A priest. The highest of the four main classes of Hindu society.

**Camphor:** A kind of wood whose sap is crystallized and used for many things, including insect repellent, expectorants, and stimulants.

**Caste:** One of four hereditary classes into which Hindu society is divided. Each caste is separated from the others by guidelines about occupation and marriage.

**Chakra:** A flaming discus or wheel that is an attribute of Vishnu. This weapon symbolizes the wheel of time, the cycles of life, the universe, and world order.

**Chola:** A dynasty in southern India (907–1336). The bronze art from this dynasty influenced the style of *Statue of a Standing Vishnu*.



**Conch shell:** A spiral-shaped sea shell symbolizing the origins of existence because of its form and connection to water and sound. Since it expands in a clockwise direction, the shell also symbolizes infinite space. The sound made by blowing through the shell is believed to keep demons away, and the shell was often used as a war horn.

**Epic:** An extended narrative poem celebrating heroic episodes of a people's history.

**Guild:** A society of artisans who train and work together, and who establish professional standards. Bronze casters worked in organized guilds in India at the time that *Statue of a Standing Vishnu* was made.

**Heliotropic:** Turning toward or away from the sun.

**Hindu:** Originally, the Persian word for people who lived on the subcontinent of India. Since the nineteenth century, the term has been used to refer to believers in Hinduism.

**Hinduism:** The English term for the religious tradition practiced by many people of India. This tradition involves the worshipping of several divinities and the reading of the Vedas, sacred texts deriving from the Indo-Aryan oral tradition (about 1500–1000 B.C.).

**Inertia:** Resistance to motion, action, or change.

**Karma:** The good or bad actions of a human being in one lifespan, which directly affects how his or her soul is reborn.

**Katibandha:** A belt worn by men.

**Kirita-mukuta:** A tall crown symbolizing Vishnu's status as the universal, absolute monarch.

**Lost-wax:** A method of casting metal. The artist sculpts the figure in clay and then covers it with a thin layer of wax and another of clay. Vent pipes are inserted at various points through the wax and clay layers. When the clay figure and the wax and clay layers are heated, the wax melts between the clay surfaces and runs out through the vent pipes. Molten liquid bronze is then poured into the gap left by the melted wax. When the metal is cool, the clay cover and inner core are removed, leaving the statue.

**Lotus:** A heliotropic flower growing from the muddy depths of the water that opens with the sun and closes in the darkness. The lotus symbolizes the Hindu belief in moksha.

**Mace (gada):** A heavy club or ceremonial staff that is an attribute of Vishnu. It symbolizes authority and the power of knowledge as the essence of life.

**Mahabharata:** One of the two great Hindu epics, which was composed circa 400–200 B.C. The Bhagavad Gita, “Song of the Lord,” is one of the sections. Krishna, the eighth avatar of Vishnu, is the hero.

**Moksha (nirvana):** An escape from the endless cycle of rebirth in the present world, whereby a soul achieves transcendence and the end of suffering.

**Mudra:** Position of the hands and fingers in Indian dance.

**Myth:** A traditional story that features supernatural beings, ancestors, or heroes. Myths may embody cultural ideals, ideology, or explanations of aspects of the world.

**Purana:** An ancient Indian epic, or “story of the olden days.”

**Pantheon:** All of the gods of a people.

**Puja:** Religious rituals held in temples involving the offering of incense, camphor, coconuts, and garlands to a deity. The rituals are meant to promote the well-being of the deity, and may be accompanied by the reading of sacred texts and the reciting of prayers.

**Ramayana:** One of the two great Hindu epics, composed circa 400–200 B.C. Prince Rama, the seventh avatar of Vishnu, is the hero.

**Sanctum:** The most holy room of a temple or place of worship.

**Sanskrit:** The classical language of India.

**Shiva:** The god who is the destroyer and regenerator. He is one of the three main gods in the Hindu religion.

**Shrivatsu:** A small, triangular mole showing that Vishnu is the favorite of the goddess *Shri-Lakshmi*, one of his wives.

**Vaikuntha:** Vishnu's own heaven, whose buildings are built of gold studded with jewels, and whose pools contain lotus flowers of all hues, which perfume the air for miles around.

**Vedanta:** A system of Hindu philosophy emanating from the idea that all of reality is centered around a single principle, Brahman. Vedanta teaches that the believer should strive to transcend the limitations of self-identity and to realize his or her unity with Brahman.

**Vijayanagar period (about 1336–1565):** Based in southern India, the Vijayanagar Empire exerted power over the entire country and was the center of Hindu culture. The capital of the Empire was Vijayanagar, “the City of Victory,” an enormous fortified city on the banks of the Tungahbadra River. The city was destroyed in 1565.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

### *Statue of a Standing Vishnu*

Read these stories out loud and ask the following questions.

#### **Vishnu as the Boar, (p.43)**

- Who attacked the newborn Earth?
- What animal did Vishnu become to save the Earth?
- How did Varaha lift the Earth out of the Cosmic Sea?

#### **Vishnu as the Dwarf, (p.44)**

- What is the name of the demon king that ruled the earth?
- Describe how Vamana tricked the demon king.
- What was the only thing left for the demon king to rule?

#### **Vishnu as Krishna, (p.45)**

- What poisonous animal lived in the Yamuna River?
- How did Krishna defeat Kaliya?
- What returned to the water and lands after the death of Kaliya?

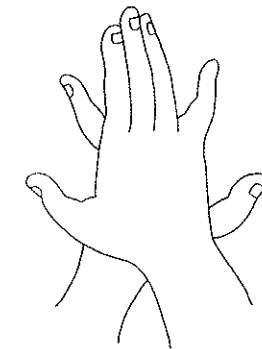
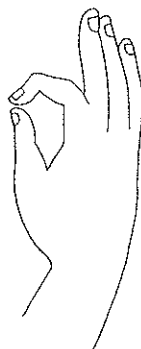
56

Mudras are hand gestures which play an important role in Hindu art and dance in India. Each mudra has a special meaning. *Try these mudra positions.*



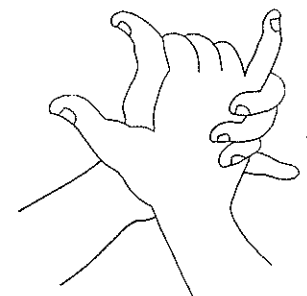
*This mudra means blessing, protection, and reassurance.*

*This mudra means wisdom.*



*This mudra represents the first avatar of Vishnu, Matsya, (the fish). The outstretched thumbs are fins of the fish.*

*This mudra represents the second avatar of Vishnu, Kurma, (the tortoise.) The thumbs and two fingers are the tortoise's legs.*



## CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

Vishnu appears as an avatar every time he is needed to solve a problem. Many of the stories about Vishnu tell of the steps he took to solve the problem and restore order in the world.

### ART ACTIVITY: *Comic Book*

Choose a story of one of the avatars of Vishnu and illustrate it in comic-book form.

- ❖ Design the look of the avatar of Vishnu and the other characters in the story you have chosen.
- ❖ Include speech bubbles with character dialogue.
- ❖ Use the comic-book panel format to tell the story from beginning to end.

### WRITING ACTIVITY: *Another Avatar*

- ❖ Write a story about a problem on the earth.
- ❖ Create another avatar for Vishnu who can solve the problem, and finish the story with the new avatar's solution to the problem.

### COLLABORATIVE ACTIVITY: *Dance*

Vishnu's body gestures are inspired by the art of Indian dance. With music and gestures, make Vishnu and his avatars "come to life."

- ❖ Gather together recorders, tambourines, and other musical instruments.
- ❖ Think about the personality and physical appearance of some of the avatars. What musical instrument and type of movement would best represent Vishnu as Matsya, Varaha, etc.? What would best represent *Statue of a Standing Vishnu*?

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