



Divine and Abundant. Extravagant, Too.



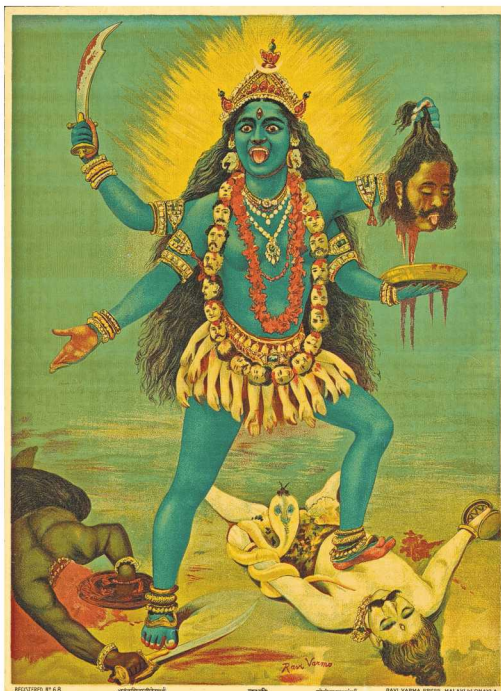
An intersection of technology and culture propels a show of Indian religious works.

YOU DON'T NEED BE a believer to find God at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Of course the museum terms with epiphanies from all over the world. But not one is more colorful or more evocative, none better captures the mystical paradox of unity in variety, than the extravagant chromolithograph prints in "Household Gods: Hindu Devotional Prints, 1860-1930."

Part of an explosion of photography and new printing technologies in the subcontinent, these images were made using a multistone process, developed in Europe by the 1830s, that printed each color separately, and were chiefly destined to enrich altars in private homes. But they read as thrilling aesthetic innovations just as fully as they do as religious artifacts.

Part of the feeling of oversaturation they offer comes simply from their unique intersection of cultures and technologies. India has been exchanging goods and influences with the Western world more or less forever, as the exquisite Greco-Buddhist of ancient Gandhara remind you. But the late 19th century, the peak of the British Raj, quickened the pace. (In keeping with this effect of oversaturation, the museum is showing the prints in four rotations, and some of these may have been replaced by others by the time you visit.)

The South Indian nobleman Raja Ravi Varma, the most famous artist in the show, had some training in European oil painting. When he wanted to make his devotional images of prominent figures from Hindu mythology more widely available, he turned to the recently imported new techniques, founded his own press and didn't hesitate to use every visual technique at hand. Presses in Germany and England, meanwhile, got busy turning out their own divine images



Top, a chromolithograph from the Calcutta Art Studio in West Bengal that depicts, from left, the goddesses Bhuvaneshvari and Bagala. Above, from left: the deities Vishnu and Lakshmi, by the artist M. Abbayi; Kali, the wrathful protector; Subramanian and his consorts Mahavalli and Devasena.

for export.

But if there's something otherworldly about seeing Lord Vishnu, or Yama, the god of death, with exactly the sort of bristling halo of light that Albrecht Dürer would have used in a woodcut of the Madonna, the staggering vast narrative and visual iconography that Varma and other artists had behind them could easily absorb such little additions. It makes sense that a deity like Vishnu, who is believed to preserve the whole cosmos, should take in every form possible. So what those ostensibly incongruous Western notes really do is amplify the richness of the material.

The same goes for the technology. The profusion of images of gods and heroes that lithography suddenly made possible in India feels paradoxically natural — weren't

the gods already everywhere?

All that said, what really makes these prints so fabulous is their sheer aesthetic abundance — their density of color, composition, iconography and ornament, and their extraordinary stylistic range. Reclining on the divine serpent Shesha, in an 1886 print from the Chitraprakash Press in Mumbai (formerly Bombay), Vishnu leans and turns toward his courtier Narada, the subtly sinuous bend of his body echoing the rippling snake beneath him, even as the snake both echoes and evokes the waves.

Around them are Vishnu's consort, Lakshmi, goddess of good fortune, monkey-headed Hanuman, horse-headed Hayagriva, embodiment of knowledge, and his steed Garuda in human form. In one of Vishnu's four hands he holds the stem of the lo-



Household Gods: Hindu Devotional Prints, 1860-1930

Through June 27 the Metropolitan Museum of Art in Manhattan; 212-535-7710, metmuseum.org. The exhibition will rotate, with new works debuting on Oct. 17 and Feb. 27.

tus from which the creator god Brahma is born.

It sounds like too much. But the print's brilliant composition, in combination with its delicate use of color, holds everything neatly in place. The god's angled posture and blue skin keep him to the front, while the understated modeling of the courtiers creates just enough depth for them to fade gently into the background. Red, yellow and green clothing create a rhythmic movement from side to side, while tiny, four-faced Brahma, at the top of the picture, floats in serene solitude.

A World War II-era print, here in an edition from Uttar Pradesh by S.S. Brijbasi & Sons and F.A.O. Works, on the other hand, depicts a simple god, human-scale and accessible. Standing in front of the divine serpent with the waters of the cosmic ocean up to their knees, Vishnu and Lakshmi look like they're on holiday, posing for a family photo.

Lord Vishnu was the exhibit's dominant figure when I first visited, followed closely by Shiva, compelling as "Lord of the Universe in Benares" in a monochrome lithograph from Kolkata (formerly Calcutta). But the most visually arresting figure was probably Shiva's consort, the goddess Kali, an embodiment of life energy whose symbolism tends to the extreme and violent. In a chromolithograph with added watercolor, she wears a necklace of severed heads and a skirt of arms as she sticks out her tongue, brandishes a bloody sword and steps on Shiva's chest. At the same time, the way her blue-black color, with its accents of blood red, stands out against the ghostly background is magnetically beautiful.