

## The Reflected, Substituted and Vanishing Body of Art

One of the most powerful ways of showing the abstract idea of a deity can be found at some of the Bhagavati temples of northern Kerala. There need not be an icon in the sanctum in these temples. Instead, what is enshrined is a mirror. There will be images outside of course, but inside, right in the garbha gr̥ha, the devotee wouldn't get darshan of some image or deity, but would encounter a mirror—a device that urges the devotee to look at or rather within herself or himself. You get darśan of yourself, encouraging meditative interiorisation—a looking within—the depiction manages to communicate that abstract idea of what the god *does*, without making a *body* of a god. [Illustration 1]

Mirrors are frequently employed in Indian iconography in the hands of female deities where they are mistakenly thought of as alluding to the goddess's appreciation of beauty, when, in fact, it is more to do with the deity's perception of herself [Fig. 57]. A mirror in the hand of Pārvaṭī symbolizes Prakṛti, to reflect Puruṣa, Śiva, the Absolute to him. For any absolute cannot, logically, know itself as it is unable to compare or to be aware of itself in relation to anything else. The mirror becomes a widely used metaphor for expressing the Sāṅkhya philosophy of dualism, and the nature of cognition. The mirrored image is thus the only way It can know itself, and the only way the devotee can know It.

“Even as a mirror stained by dust  
Shines brilliantly when it has been cleansed,  
So the embodied one, on seeing the nature of the Self,  
Becomes unitary, his end attained, from sorrow freed.”  
--- Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad, 2.14

In the rituals performed around these mirrors in Kerala we can see that they are very much treated like living icons. They are consecrated, periodically lustrated and worshipped. [Illustration 2] What makes these 'mirrors' all the more interesting is that sometimes these mirrors aren't actually mirrors at all, they simply convey the idea of a mirror—they may be made of metal, but are non reflective. Sometimes, they aren't even made of metal, but are made of stone. Yet they are made to look like a vāl-kaṇṇāti or a type of mirror that would commonly be used by people cosmetically: a round mirror with a narrow handle. Interestingly, the shape of the mirror is like the shape of a person—the rounded head sits atop the vertical leg-like handle. In some examples, the handle area is dressed in a dhoti, and small feet are carved at the base. The so-called mirror, is thus actually, only mimetically communicating the idea of a mirror, the form of that mirror is mimetically echoing the form of a human figure and finally, the idea of a mirror itself is mimetically suggesting the concept that god is a mirror to the self without actually reflecting anything. [Illustration 3]

India is known for an extraordinary love of images – magnificent sculptures proliferate, covering every available surface of towering temples; paintings, photographs and prints of heroes, gods and gurus are subjects of worship. They inform people of their mythology or may be used as talismans to ward off malefic forces. However, there is an equally imperative (and enduring) history of Indian philosophy that abstains from representing and worshipping bodies. Nirguṇa, arūpa and nirākāra are only three of the commonly heard words that are used to describe an absolute: the formless nature of the divine, one that is, in the strictest sense, beyond

the confines of matter, that which is beyond phenomenal properties or even psychological vagaries.

These ideas can be traced back to the vedas, in which great significance is given to actual as well as highly symbolic sacrifices offered to the elemental forces of nature. Ancient India's vedāntic and upaniṣadic philosophical systems have had a persuasive appeal through millennia. The famous phrases 'tat tvam asi' (that thou art), 'neti neti' (not this, not this) and 'ahaṁ brahmāsmi' (I am the universe) indicate the valorization of interiority and that everything in the macrocosmic universe is also contained within the microcosmic interior of the self – ideas that are unchallenged even in icon-worshipping communities.

The metaphysics that draws attention to the depths of sound and vibration (nāda, mantra, aum or om), the pulse of rhythm and the energy of light continue to be convincing meditations that allow individual bodies to experience the universe within. Jainism, Buddhism and Hinduism have had complicated relationships with images, resulting in active debates that highlight three broad approaches to the matter. For many, mindful witnessing of emptiness, the meditative focus via sound and light, is a way to the eternal, intangible body. Others seek aids to worship in images that give physical form to abstract ideas. Yet others have provided a powerful basis for imaging in which the body itself – the living body and inanimate images of it – is seen as a seat of power, with the potential of being a fetish, a thing of magic in which all sensations are harnessed.

If the mimetic mirrors of Kerala were one extraordinary example, the Jain Siddha-pratimā-yantra is another. [Illustration 4] Brass images of the cut-out silhouette of the body reveal that body is a part of everything that is around it – it is a form that is filled with the sky / ether or ākāśa, or one that is imbued with light. Further, these qualities are even more subtle, for the light that fills it is a changing light. Equally the body can be filled with the transformative nature of fragrance that fills the space in which it lies. The silhouetted image represents the ideal liberated being, taking the body itself beyond corporeal form. Popularly, these images are called the 'akash-purusha' and are thought to be no older than the eighteenth century. However, an extraordinary example in the Smithsonian Museum's Freer and Sackler Galleries, bears a silver inlaid inscription on its reverse that informs us that the shrine was commissioned in AD 1333 by the merchant Muladeva of a renowned Gurjara family of western India. The word siddha-pratimā-yantra itself is interesting: this is a yantra or device, for a pratimā, or image of a siddha, or holy man. A device which communicates his essentially changing subtle body of light, ether, nothingness—or, perhaps, everything.

The resistance to making images has not been limited to any one period. The persistence of these ideas in folk art, and abstract symbolism in the art of cults influenced by the tantras is well known. Nineteenth-century Hindu reform movements, such as the Arya Samāj of Dayanand Sarasvati and the Brahmo Samāj of Rammohun Roy, were also disinclined towards image worship. Older ascetical traditions, including those influenced by bhakti and sufi movements, such as the Kabir-panthīs, have a similar reluctance to image; and the same is true of Sikhism where the teachings of the holy book, the Guru Granth Sahib, are the subject of focus, and the book itself treated as if it were a living God. The three approaches are not always contradictory, nor necessarily marked by iconoclastic divides.

The multitude of gods and goddesses in India exist alongside significant traditions that emphasize abstract imagery and bring attention to light, fire, fragrance, sound and nothingness. Meditation or interiorization is as valid a focus of reverence as the external image. What substitutes for the body in traditions that resist the depiction of bodily forms? Objects used in ritual, traces of the body or people's possessions become relics that signify physical presence. Many believe that bodily forms must only be made by gods. Naturally occurring (svayambhu or self-born) forms can thus become the focus of veneration. Palm prints and footprints recall the presence of a deity or person in many religions; and even the written word can become a talismanic protector or transformative force. Several substitutes for depicting actual images, thus survive. Importantly, then it prompts one to think about what is the status of the image that it is trying to substitute, and what then, is the thinking behind nature or power of the body if it can be so consistently substituted?

Aesthetic discourse on the idea of images employs Sanskrit terms such as pratimā or arcā, but the words we come across more frequently are pratīka, pratibimba or bimba, which directly refer to the image as being a reflection.<sup>1</sup> One of the earliest accounts of the importance of the mirror as a tool to a self-portrait, which is but a tool to self-awareness, is found in the Chāndogya Upaniṣad. In it, Prajāpati instructs Indra on how to distinguish his witness self (the real detached self which, according to the Nāṭyaśāstra, is capable of aesthetic experience) from his bodily self, which is reflected in the eyes of others, in a mirror or in a bowl of water. On the one hand, a distinction is made that what is reflected is not the same as the reflection, and the perception of a reflection as the reflecting object is an error. Yet, on another level, in discussions of the nature of image-making and the nature of God's body, the reflected body is considered to be the purest body conceivable. Indeed some poetic passages on the reflected self suggest that it is only in reflection that the true, non-corporeal self may be captured.

Perhaps the most influential paradigm on idealized Indian images was first set up by Ananda Coomaraswamy.<sup>2</sup> He explains that the concept of ābhāsa ('shining back', 'reflection', 'semblance' or 'resplendence') is built on the relationship of the individual self (jīva) with the universal Brahman. He further draws attention to the Vedānta Sūtra (ii, 3, 50) where Śaṅkarācārya explains ābhāsa as a counter image or reflection. The true self 'counter-sees' itself, reflected in the possibilities of being the world picture (jagac-citra) painted by the self on the canvas of the self.<sup>3</sup> The self, it is acknowledged, is a constantly changing entity, mirror-like, reflecting different realities. In very broad terms, two complementary histories inform modern Indian artistic imaginations of the divine body: one that celebrates the making of ritually charged, consecrated images; another that strives to show that the divine force cannot be shown embodied in the image of man. The two views although seemingly contrary, are in fact, complementary.

Importantly, in acknowledging this illusory nature of life and of the world, the

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<sup>1</sup> The references to these terms are too diverse to list. For a handy summary, see Kalātattvakośa, ed. R.C. Sharma, New Delhi 2002, vol. 5 (chapter 5, pp. 145–80, deals with arca; chapter 6, pp. 181–236, covers mūrti; chapter 7, pp. 237–94, is about pratimā and pratikṛti). For references to Bimba-Pratibimba, see Kalātattvakośa, eds S. Chattopadhyay and N.C. Panda, New Delhi 2008, vol. 6, pp. 161–92.

<sup>2</sup> A.K. Coomaraswamy, 'Abhāsa' in *Transformation of Nature in Art*, New York 1934.

<sup>3</sup> Pañcaviṃṣa Brāhmaṇa, vii, 8, 1.

distinction between life and art is diminished, leaving us struggling to differentiate the real from the seemingly real. The words *bhoga*, *līlā* and *māyā* are three of several widely used terms, metonyms for the affectual and stereotypical view of how life can be experienced or lived within this world that is illusion. Much has been written in Indian philosophy on the matter of the illusory nature of the manifest world, with the concepts of *māyā* and *līlā* being central to an understanding of the nature of existence and embodiment.

The Advaita concept of *māyāvāda* rejects the duality between the real and unreal. The world of forms is seen as a manifestation and not an obscuration of eternal brahman. *Māyāvāda* rejects the distinction between a dreamlike state of imagining something to be true and the wakeful state that purports to recognize the falsity of a dream. The multiplicity of forms of the world is a manifestation of brahman and is not separate from it. Several philosophical schools pick up on the idea of non-duality: Kashmir Śaivism, for instance, propounds that Śiva dwells in every being and form in the world, in all individuals as well as in the universe as a whole. *Līlā* may be described as endless play, the eternal sport of the gods who manifest themselves in the world. The cosmic relationship between the brahman and manifest actions in the world is understood as *līlā*. In mythology, the narratives of heroic figures such as Kṛṣṇa and Rāma are seen as *līlā*; their manifestation as beings in this world, their relationships and activities in it are *līlā*. In non-dualistic philosophy, *līlā* refers to the entire cosmos which comes into being as a result of the playful activities of eternal brahman. Art and experience form a *bhoga*, or the partaking of the *līlā*.

Perhaps this would be a good place to look at another category of art: performance. However, since this is a discussion about the blurry difference between reality and illusion let us examine the most powerful kinds of performance: ones in which the performer is transported, possessed even perhaps, and where the audience too, is similarly transported. The process by which the performer is transformed into the deity in *teyyam*, for instance, is complex. The performer approaches the open shrine and accepts sandalwood paste and a ritual vessel with water from priests who have been praying to the deity. The sandalwood paste is a part of the deity and in smearing it over prescribed parts of his body (which correlate to specific nodes and portals according to physiological concepts of tantra), the performer's body is purified and 'transubstantiated' into the god's body, possessing divine energy.<sup>4</sup> Further rituals are performed, and through them the performer is believed to sacrifice his 'self', and absorb the divine energy of the god who will perform. This is done by drawing in the energy of fire from a lamp (symbolising the *prāṇa*, life-breath), consuming the food that is consecrated for the divinity, by receiving blood sacrifice, and by consuming liquor. The dancer then approaches the shrine and sings the *torram* ("to seem" or "to appear") songs of the deity, which describe the god's deeds, locate the myth of the deity in a geographic space, and describe in great detail the appearance and essence of the god, thus ritually indexing these as he becomes possessed. The song culminates with the dancer, who is now the divine body of the deity, accepting and looking into a mirror which is the final act in the realization of possession. As the first performance ends, the *teyyam* blesses worshippers, accepts offerings and also settles disputes. The dance may move beyond the shrine area into the village and neighbouring areas.

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<sup>4</sup> See, for instance accounts in Richard Davis, *Worshipping Siva in Medieval India: Ritual in an Oscillating Universe*, Motilal Banarasidass, Delhi 2008. Gavin Flood, "The Purification of the Body" in *Tantra in Practice*, ed. D. White, Princeton, 2002; and Michael W. Meister, 'Giving up and Taking on: The Body in Ritual' in *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, No. 41 (Spring, 2002), pp. 92-103.

This is similar to the movement of *utsava murtis*, processional icons charged with divine presence, that move out of temple compounds into villages and towns, granting *darśan* to worshippers. Once the performances are over, after a one-day ritual or after a week, the divine energy is transferred from the body of the performer back into the shrine. Possessions are rituals but they are also aesthetic experiences. The animate or inanimate body is transformed into and propitiated as a divine body through the senses of smell, taste, touch, sight and sound. The body is visually transformed through adornment, costumes, masks and make-up.

What does this possession mean? The Sanskrit term *āveśa* (and *praveśa*) refers to the idea of possession. However there are several words for transportation, transformation, immersion, *vyuha* i.e. emanation and divine descent (*avataran*) into bodily form. What happens to the ‘self’ of someone possessed? Does his ātman leave the body when another one enters it, do they co-exist, or does the ‘self’ transform into someone else? Further, it is not only people that are capable of coming into an altered state or becoming possessed, but inanimate sculptures are made to come alive in a similar way.

A deity is invited into a new image in an elaborate ceremony of consecration or *prāṇa-pratiṣṭhā*, literally the emplacement, or stationing of living breath. Deities, as we know, embody objects other than images, such as pots, trees, footprints or, as we saw above, mirrors, for instance. Rituals of consecration include the appropriate making of the object or image that is to be possessed with divine energy, its purification, making sacred *yantras* demarcating sacred space into which the divine energy is invited (*āvāhana*), the filling of a pot with the energy, apart, of course, from the principles of *nyāsa*, wherein every part of the body is prepared as a worthy receiver of the energy, and finally leading to *cakṣu-dāna*, the gift of the eyes. While the *prāṇa-pratiṣṭhā* gives it life, the *cakṣu-dāna*, gives it visual perception. Once consecrated, the image (rather like the possessed body) is worthy of worship; and, equally important, after the period of worship, the spirit is asked to depart from the image, and it is surrendered back to nature through *visarjan*.

Both consecration and possession rely on elaborate rituals that culminate in the opening of the eyes of the image. This is done in different ways, the most elaborate being a process performed by a priest who looks at the reflection of the deity in a mirror while he paints or chisels the eyes with his other hand. The mirror is used to make the deity aware of him/herself. The possessed man or woman in sacred performances has also to become alive to his/ her altered state, which in some possession rituals happens when the performer witnesses him/ herself in a mirror.

[Illustration 5]

The act of witnessing ones reflection at the moment of transformation breaks down the binaries between illusion/dream/image, and that which is real. From that moment the two states of being are united and the possessed body becomes capable of predicting and affecting cosmological change.

**Images:**



Illustration 1. Sacred mirror, Northern Kerala, Aranamul region type, 18th-20th centuries; Bronze  
Collection of Ranvir Shah, Chennai



Illustration 2. 'Stone mirror', Northern Kerala, circa 18<sup>th</sup> century,  
Collection of Ranvir Shah, Chennai



Illustration 3. The metal mirror for Bhagavati before the ritual immersion Annur Pumalakkavu, Payyanur, Kerala; Photograph by Balan Nambiar



Illustration 4. Jain shrine, Siddhapratimāyantra  
Western India, 1333 AD Bronze, copper alloy, traces of gilding, silver, 21.9 x 13.1 x 8.9 cm  
Freer and Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC (Purchase F1997.33)



Illustration 5. Looking in a mirror: The final stage in embodying the deity in a Theyyam performance, Kerala, 2011; Photograph by Antony Kurtz