

the art of yoga

A peek inside the Smithsonian's groundbreaking new yoga exhibit reveals the common threads between modern yogis and those who came before us.

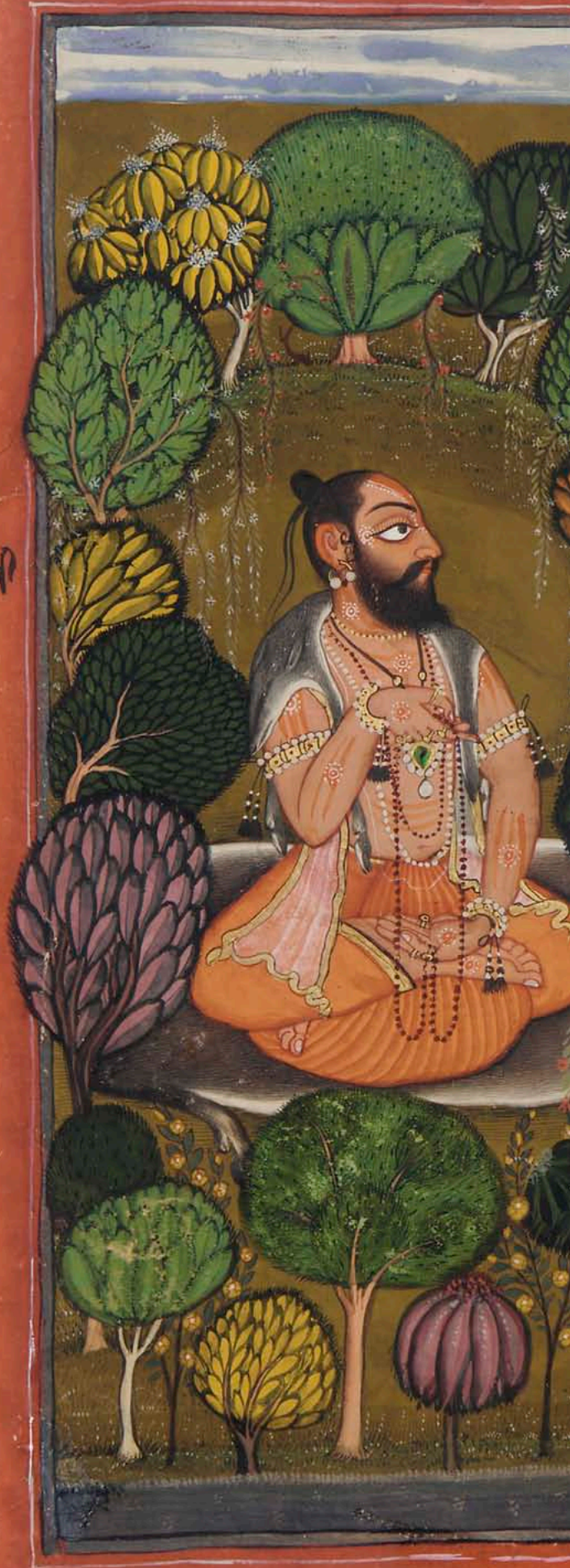
conjurer of consciousness

This painting depicts a sage named Chyavana doing what the painting is supposed to help the viewer do: meditate on and conjure the goddess. The image contains a mantra to repeat while you gaze at the divine being at its center. The goddess may be a Tantric form of Lakshmi, goddess of prosperity (we know it's a Tantric version because her usual lotus has been swapped for a corpse, signifying triumph over death). She's holding implements of Vishnu—a conch shell, a lotus, a chakra, and a mace—to show that she's his consort, making her all the more potent and powerful.

From a Tantric Devi series, Pahari Hills, India, ca. 1660-70. Opaque watercolor and gold on paper, Freer Gallery of Art, Washington, DC

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Yoga: The Art of Transformation runs October 19, 2013, through January 26, 2014, at the Smithsonian Institution's Arthur M. Sackler Gallery in Washington, DC.

by Valerie Reiss

Yoga wasn't

just born, whole, with people suddenly meditating and breathing and doing asanas and practicing the *yamas* and *niyamas*. Like humanity itself, yoga started as a single cell of an idea that grew into clumps of cells, which divided and then split into version after version, with strand after strand of metaphysical DNA threading through South Asian and Western culture. It grew all the way to our current legions of sticky mats and weeklong retreats and rock kirtans—which also can be divvied into many categories, styles, and permutations. Yoga may mean *union*, but as it has unfurled in history, yoga could easily also mean *many things all at once*.

This is partly why the Smithsonian Institution's new exhibit, *Yoga: The Art of Transformation*, isn't laid out chronologically. This visual history of yoga—the first of its kind—illustrates the many overlapping strands of yoga's first 2,000 years, thereby showing a comprehensive flow of its evolution. The collection includes a broad selection of artifacts, from lush paintings of fanged goddesses to mysterious tiles from ruined temples to nearly six-foot-tall stone yogini sculptures. This has never been done before, says the exhibit's curator, Debra Diamond, associate curator of South and Southeast Asian art, perhaps because the topic is so vast. "There's never been one yoga. It's changed and developed and had innovations," says Diamond. "It first emerged as a means to overcome suffering. Key tradi-

tional goals were heightened consciousness or enlightenment, bodily perfection, and supernatural powers. But after that it's really diverse. It has never been a singular tradition."

The exhibit, which traces yoga's history through 1940, is divided into two realms. One covers yogic concepts and practices. The other tracks the changing image of the yogi throughout different periods of history, from emaciated ascetics to reviled tricksters to respected teachers of asanas and ethics. (The exhibit's rich catalog covers more recent yoga history, including >>>>

powerful protectors



Around the eighth century, Tantric texts describe the practice of secret sexual rituals to reach spiritual attainments. Leaders promised women that the rituals could transform them into goddesses called yoginis.

Around 1000, kings built stone temples devoted to these goddesses so that they could call on their powers of protection. Although the yoginis were benevolent, they also were fierce, often

depicted with wild hair, fangs, and holding skull cups full of liquor or blood. The exhibit includes three of the remaining yogini sculptures from a destroyed temple in Tamil Nadu. "They epitomize the idea that practices allow you to transform from an ordinary human into a divine being," Diamond says.

Kannauj, Uttar Pradesh, India, first half of the 11th century. Sandstone, San Antonio Museum of Art, purchased with the John and Karen McFarlin Fund and the Asian Art Challenge Fund



✻ the
universe
within

This vivid painting illustrates a moment from the Bhagavad Gita, when Krishna reveals himself as the "equivalent to the cosmos and all being and all time," says Diamond. It's Krishna in his "universe form." Arjuna and an unknown woman (possibly the wife of Arjuna or of the king who commissioned the painting) look on. According to Diamond, the image shows that yoga gives even gods the power to manifest themselves in this way. "In the Gita it also says that human yoga practitioners can reach this cosmic equivalent—to transform oneself, to manifest as the ultimate reality."

Bilaspur, Himachal Pradesh, India, ca. 1740. Opaque watercolor and gold on paper, Catherine and Ralph Benkaim Collection



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1938 1938

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➤ fakirs, tricksters, and frauds (previous page)

By the 19th century, yogis had a reputation for being tricksters. This grew from those who practiced until they achieved *siddhis*, or “supernatural powers,” and then showed them off. In the Yoga Sutra, Patanjali says *siddhis* are distractions from the real prize: enlightenment. But some yogis focused on attaining *siddhis* alone. Eventually they were thought of as swindlers or spiritual frauds. This poster features Koringa, a Frenchwoman who performs yogalike tricks, claims to be raised by yogis, and even wore a chic bathing suit in leopard print—a nod to yogis who wear animal skins as wraps. In India, the reaction to these magic acts may have been the catalyst for yoga as we know it today: “Modern postural yoga in part is an attempt to cleanup what people decided was decadent or bad about yoga,” says Diamond.

W. E. Barry Ltd., Bradford, United Kingdom, ca. 1938.
Print, Victoria and Albert Museum, London



⊕ fierce devotion

This wall tile, one of many that once covered a round temple near Kashmir, has a mysterious meaning and origin. It shows what may be some of the first ascetic yogis—possibly from a lost sect that originated in the third century called the Ajivikas—curled up, emaciated, hair in dreadlocks, possibly having fasted into a near-death state. They’re being observed by householders who are noticeably healthier and bejeweled. “Was this a place where these extreme ascetics were fasting unto death? Maybe people came and worshipped them, and people built a temple. We can only speculate,” Diamond says. “It’s so haunting. They’re so extreme. The householders at the top contrast with the renunciates and show the intensity of their path.”

Harwan, Jammu and Kashmir, India, ca. fifth century. Terracotta, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City, Gift of Cynthia Hazen Polsky, 1987

»»» information about the Beatles, Marilyn Monroe, and the fathers of the yoga you practice at your local studio).

Diamond’s affair with Indian art started during visits to India in her twenties and crystallized in the late 1980s, when a curator at the Brooklyn Museum let her look through a box of Indian paintings. One in particular, from a series of Tantric goddesses, knocked her out. “The goddesses’ jewelry was made of beetle wings, so when I picked it up it flickered; it was so alive,” Diamond says. She’s been amassing a database of yoga-related art since.

In 2009, Diamond got the go-ahead and funding to create the exhibit of her dreams. She started by gathering experts in yoga, religion, history, anthropology, and art history. They refined, defined, interpreted, and reimagined hundreds of paintings, sculptures, illustrated manuscripts, tiles, and more, boiling it down to about 135 treasured objects, which they borrowed from 25 museums and private collections from around the world.

In the process, Diamond found many surprises. One was the scant early visual record of any physical postures outside of Padmasana (Lotus Pose) and Tadasana (Mountain Pose), which were likely used to illustrate spiritual attainment. Further poses such as inversions first appear in the 15th and 16th centuries, illustrated in a treatise of postures and instructional manuscripts.

No one really knows why there are so few records of a range of asanas. It may be that they became ritualized later on or that they were practiced privately. Another surprising discovery was the existence of militant ascetics in the 18th and 19th centuries who traveled in armed bands (perhaps protecting other yogis and monasteries or, at times, acting

as mercenaries for Hindu kings, Indo-Islamic sultans, or other European or Indian conquerors). Diamond says she was particularly amazed at how some eras seemed to flash and vanish. “Sometimes I feel like I have one of those old-time stereoscope viewers. You click it—*Look, it’s so beautiful, it’s so real*—then you click it again, and it’s gone,” she says. “There’s no continuous history.” For example, a lot of archaeological material on yoginis from around the year 1000 has been found. For a while, a potent feminine presence permeated yoga. But by 1300, the temples were in ruins and the art stopped—and no one knows why. It’s enough to make you yearn for a time machine.

continued on page 113

the art of yoga

continued from page 40

There is one constant, though, that began with the first yogis (who didn't call themselves that): the notion that humans have the power to transform themselves through spiritual practice. Yoga began around the fifth century BCE in northern India with a mysterious shift in ideology. "They somehow developed this groundbreaking notion that you can transcend suffering through the power inherent in your own mind and body," says Diamond, "which is a big change." This was around the Buddha's lifetime, when people traditionally relied on Vedic priests to make sacrifices on their behalf to appease the divine. Yoga developed as a way for individuals to transcend suffering and reach a state of eternal bliss—something the priests weren't preaching.

This ultimate state, yogis believed, was achieved through renunciation and austerity, plus meditation. The former practices were believed to create *tapas*, or inner heat, a "spiritual energy reserve." If you combined this with meditation,

yogis believed you'd be able to correctly perceive reality. "If you understood what was real and what was not real, what was transient and what was permanent," says Diamond, "you could choose to opt out of the negative life cycle and experience nirvana or bliss or enlightenment."

Sound familiar? It's really not all that different from how many of us apply yoga in our modern lives. We aim to become stronger, healthier, and happier, and yoga helps. A lot. And although we may have some teachers we love, we don't wholly rely on an intermediary to bring us to that place of peace. On the mat it's just the body and the breath and movement and the silences between them. Diamond says knowing the multilayered history of yoga "helps us move beyond the notion of What is authentic yoga? versus What are modern variations? It's always been really fluid." ❖

Valerie Reiss is a writer, editor, and speaker living in Brooklyn, New York. Learn more at valeriereiss.com.

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