



Iconography & Symbolism in Indian Art

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Inception

Imagine the world without the ways of different interpretations or expressions. It is unthinkable. Human's got a super brain, and the basic needs were never just about the food, shelter, and clothes. 'SOMETHING MORE,' which led humans to think, observe, analyse, experiment, and express. An early man dwelled in caves to stay safe away from wild animals and situational dangers. He invented different types of tools and weapons using stone, wood, and animal bones for surviving. He drew his expressions on the cave walls or carved stones crudely. Art is a human nature. Human communication relied 100% on spoken word, memory, and visual symbols (like cave paintings and carvings) before formal writing systems emerged around 3500–3200 BCE. (World History Encyclopedia...+1)

Iconography and symbolism started developing at ancient time.

The word *iconography* comes from the [Greek](#) εἰκών (image) and γράφειν (to write /to draw)

- 'Image that expresses'.

In Indian language, "Iconography" translates to प्रतिमाविद्या (Pratimavidya) or मूर्तिविद्या (Murtividya). (Marathi Vishwashwakosh Prathmavrutti + 4)

Iconography is the branch of art history which studies the identification of the content of images interprets visual images, symbols, motifs and figures to understand their cultural, historical, and contextual meanings.

Though it was a protracted process - from crude cave art to classical art works in different noticeable civilisations that mirrored different cultures and beliefs of different demographics.

Thematic Section

ICONOGRAPHY AND SYMBOLISM IN INDIAN ART



Figure 1. Hindu Iconography. Source : <https://templearchitecture.com/indian->

Iconography in Indian art is the complex visual language meant to communicate deep spiritual, philosophical, and cultural truths rather than mere physical realism. Every *element*, - from the number of arms a deity possesses to the specific animals, mudras (hand gestures), and *colors* used - holds predetermined meaning based on ancient scriptures. [Scribd+4]. Meaning behind Indian art *motifs* - where every symbol tells a story of culture, wisdom, and timeless tradition.

It was practiced through various forms, including drawing, etching, carving, seals, sun- or fire-baked clay tablets, sculpture, temple architecture, pillars, stupas, painting, pottery, and more. It's wild to know how humans have always needed to communicate bigger ideas through images in concise which needs a breakdown of a complicated information to simple, visually small, subjective and also understandable by viewers.

SYMBOLISM IN INDIAN ART

Symbolism in Indian art refers to the use of an object or image to represent a broader, abstract idea or concept. In short, a symbol is a singular unit of meaning, while Iconography is the overarching system or story those symbols create.

Symbolism: Using symbols, imagery, and metaphors to express deeper ideas, emotions, and cultural meanings beyond what is visibly shown.

Core purposes of Iconography & Symbolism in Indian art.

Visual Identification: Attributes, weapons, and mounts (vāhanas) uniquely distinguish individual gods and goddesses in Indian art and sculpture.



Philosophical Expression: Complex cosmic truths and metaphysical ideas are translated into recognizable metaphors, gestures (*mudrās*), and geometric designs (*yantras*). AWGP +3

Aid to Meditation: Sacred images (*mūrtis*) act as focal points to channel devotion (*bhakti*) and inspire inner transformation rather than mere literal representation.

Architectural making : Temple layouts strictly follow texts like the *Shilpa Shastras* to map the universe and locate the divine center (*garbhagriha*).

Shaping Society and Civilisation: In early Indian civilisations, thinkers and skilled intellectual artists played a crucial role in guiding society.

Art was not created in isolation – it was a tool for direction, education, and social order.

There was a deliberate structure of discipline, perceived as "oppression," that was essential to check wrong thinking, unethical actions, and audacity that could harm collective lives. In this context, iconography became a constant and powerful medium. To instil faith, morality, and respect - toward nature and human relations.

The leaders and sages of society wanted to spread messages of religion, good conduct, and healthy interdependence between humans and nature. To communicate these ideas to all sections of society, across literacy levels, they turned to storytelling through 'visual form'.

This led to the creation of diverse idols of gods and goddesses, each embedded with meaning:

- 'Glorification of animals' as *vahanas* and symbols - elephant for wisdom, peacock for grace, cow for nurturing.
- 'Attributes of gods and goddesses' - weapons, postures, and mudras representing different powers and virtues.
- 'Symbolic use of colours and shapes' - saffron for sacrifice, blue for infinity, circle for eternity, triangle for energy.
- 'Icons from nature' - lotus for purity, banyan for shelter, rivers for life.

All of this evolved over millennia. It was a slow, collective process of refining symbols until they became a shared visual language.

The role of leaders, thinkers and artists, in the creation of Iconography & Symbolism in Indian art.

1. Kings and ancient Indian leaders acted as the ultimate engine for iconography and symbolism in Indian art,- using visual art to legitimize their rule, glorify the dynasty, unify diverse empires, and



project divine authority. Rather than being passive donors, monarchs actively shaped the physical appearance, scale, and distribution of religious images across Asia.

2. Thinkers & Skilled Intellectual Artists

They weren't just making art. They were like the "Designers of society".

Through stories, sculptures, paintings, and symbols they decided:

This is right → This is wrong → This is how people in the society should live together

Think of Ashoka's edicts, Buddha's teachings, the epics, temple builders.

They used art to guide public behaviour.

3. Oppression vs. Control

In old systems, there was strictness - dharma, rules, punishments, social codes.

Not always out of cruelty. A lot of it was to control:

Bad thinking → wrong actions → crime → audacity that breaks society

It was society's way of saying "some boundaries are needed for everyone to live peacefully".

Artists reflected that through fearful gods, mythology, karmic stories, do's and don'ts in murals.

4. Iconography as Constant Direction

Iconography became the visual rulebook that everyone could "read", even without words.

And a huge part of it pointed back to nature:

- Flora: Banyan = shelter / life, Lotus = purity, Tulsi = healing

5- Fauna: Cow = nurturing, Elephant = wisdom, Tiger = power with restraint, Snake = energy/protection

So Iconography & Symbolism wasn't just decoration in Indian art.

It was:- 'Faith + Ethics + Ecology + Social Order' all in one image.

Key Historical Stages of Iconography and symbolism in Indian Art.

1)-Before Vedic Period –

Cave paintings (Bhimbetka) -Located in Madhya Pradesh, featuring paintings dating back over 10,000 years.

Faunal motifs: Large wild animals like bison, tigers, elephants, and rhinos rendered in natural pigments.

Geometric and stick figures: Abstract linear symbols, hunting scenes, and ritualistic dancing groups displaying early human symbolism.



Figure 2. Bhimbetka, Parietal Art. Source : <https://www.theartlifegallery.com/blog/bhimbetka-cave-paintings-an-ancient-canvas-of-human-history/> Indus Valley Beginnings –

Indus Valley Civilization (South Asia & Northwestern India) came before the Vedic period. Flourished from roughly 3300 BCE to 1300 BCE.

IVC (Harappan Art)

The ‘Pashupati’ Seal: A seated, cross-legged, horned-headdress figure surrounded by wild animals (elephant, tiger, rhino, buffalo), interpreted as a proto-Shiva icon.

Mother Goddess Terracottas: Small, crude standing female figurines adorned with distinctive fan-like headdresses and heavy jewellery, symbolizing fertility and abundance.

Nature and Animal Motifs: Pipal leaves, the 'unicorn' bull, swastikas, and serpent motifs reflecting an early reverence for sacred ecology and cosmic order.

Aniconic (symbol-based) /Lingam Worship: Conical and cylindrical stone objects recovered from Harappan sites suggesting early uncarved representations of generative power.

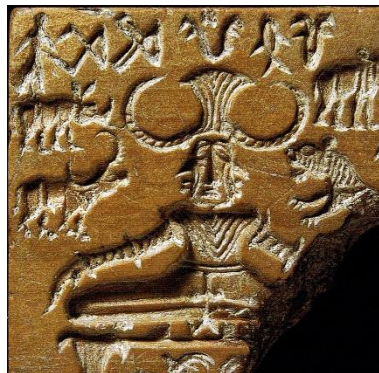


Figure 3. An Indus Seal. Source : <https://smarthistory.org/indus-seal/>



Figure 4. Dancing Girl & Priest Source : <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/art-indus-valley-vision->

2)-Vedic Period (Early Hinduism)- During the Vedic period (circa 1500–500 BCE) :

The Vedic Age began with the arrival of the Aryans or Indo-Aryans in India. Classical Hinduism took shape as a synthesis of Vedic and ascetic traditions.

Core Texts: The four Vedas (*Rigveda*, *Samaveda*, *Yajurveda*, *Atharvaveda*) and later the Upanishads.

Key Characteristics: Focused on ritual fire sacrifices (*yajna*), chanting hymns to nature deities (like Indra, Agni, and Varuna), and maintaining a *varna* system.

During the Vedic period, Iconography and symbolism shifted from abstract nature worship to personalized divine attributes, sacred sounds, and early ritualistic idols. Fire acted as the primary visible symbol and messenger bridging humans and gods. Spoken hymns and mantras were considered sacred vibrations rather than visual drawings.

1. Sacred Objects (Weaponry & Tools)

Deities hold specific armaments to showcase their cosmic roles and powers.

Shiva's Trident (*Trishula*): Represents the destruction of ego and control over past, present, and future.

Vishnu's Discus (*Sudarshana Chakra*): Represents the wheel of sacred time and the ultimate weapon against cosmic ignorance.

Ganesha's Axe (*Parashu*): Symbolizes cutting away worldly attachments and illusions that bind human souls.

2. Hand Gestures (*Mudras*)

Hand positions act as a silent, universal language in Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain statues.

Fearlessness (*Abhaya Mudra*): An open right hand facing outward, meaning protection, peace, and reassurance.

Meditation (*Dhyana Mudra*): Hands overlapping flat in the lap, signifying deep focus and inner stillness.

Teaching (*Dharmachakra Mudra*): Fingers forming circles near the chest, symbolizing the turning of the wheel of cosmic law.

3. Animal Vehicles (*Vahanas*)

Every deity rides a specific creature that reflects either a force they have mastered or an energy they embody.

The Lion (*Durga's Vehicle*): Symbolizes raw animal passion and power, which the Goddess fully tames and controls.

The Mouse (*Ganesha's Vehicle*): Represents wandering desire and ego, kept completely in check by wisdom.

The Peacock (*Kartikeya's Vehicle*): Shows the destruction of poisonous habits, as peacocks are believed to eat harmful snakes.

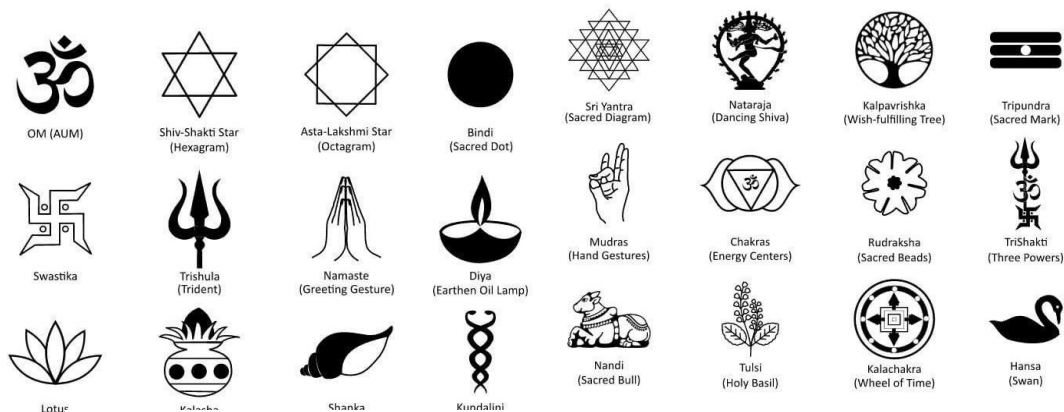


Figure 5. Hindu Symbols. Source : <https://in.pinterest.com/pin/14496030044594023/>

3)-Later/ Post Vedic Growth Period (Symbols and Early Idols)

Buddhism and Jainism arose during the end of the Vedic period.

Jainism and Buddhism grew and became prominent in the 6th century BCE, immediately following the later Vedic period. They emerged as a reaction against the rigid caste system, complex and expensive sacrificial rituals. And Brahmanical traditions

Sacred syllables: The sound Om (Aum) emerged as the core symbol representing ultimate reality and the universe.

Cosmic motifs: Symbols like the lotus (purity) and the sun gained deep spiritual meaning.

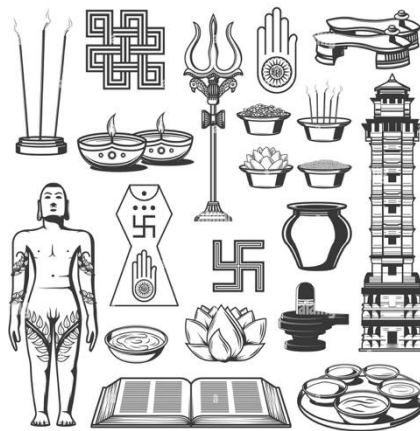


Figure 6. Symbols of Jainism. Source : <https://www.alamy.com/jainism-religion-jain-dharma-icons-and-symbols-image417640857.html>

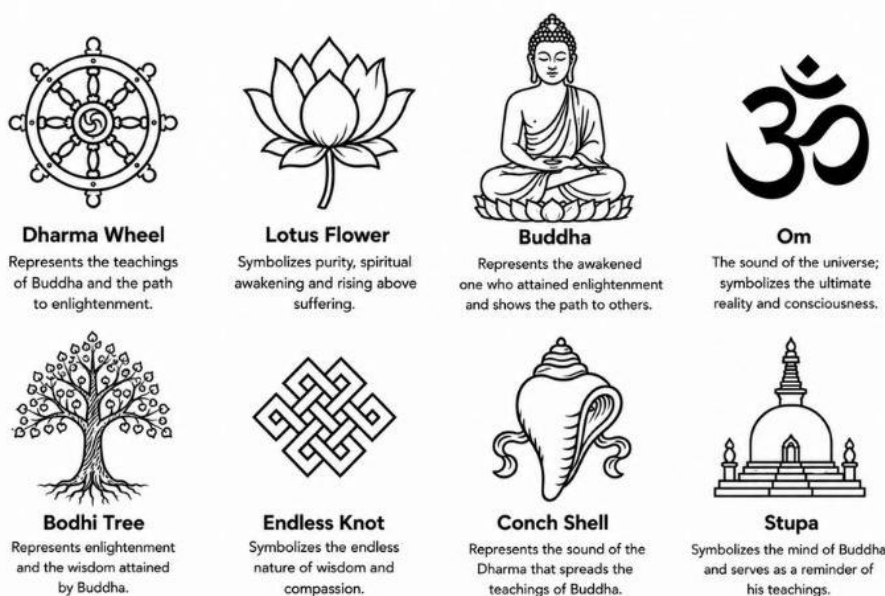


Figure 7. Symbols of Buddhism. Source : <https://efvsymbol.com/buddhist-symbols/>

Different dynasties contributed to the refinement of these traditions:

Rashtrakuta and Yadava Dynesty (6th century CE to the 10th century CE) :

Ellora Caves belong to the early and high medieval periods of ancient India. .

The post-vedic period. Ajanta and Ellora feature some of the world's finest ancient rock-cut iconography, spanning Buddhist, Hindu, and Jain traditions. Ajanta excels in mural paintings and soft-sculpted bodhisattvas, while Ellora showcases dramatic, high-relief monolithic stone sculptures . The rock-cut architecture and sculptures of Ellora were carved more than a millennium. (Google Arts & Culture+2)

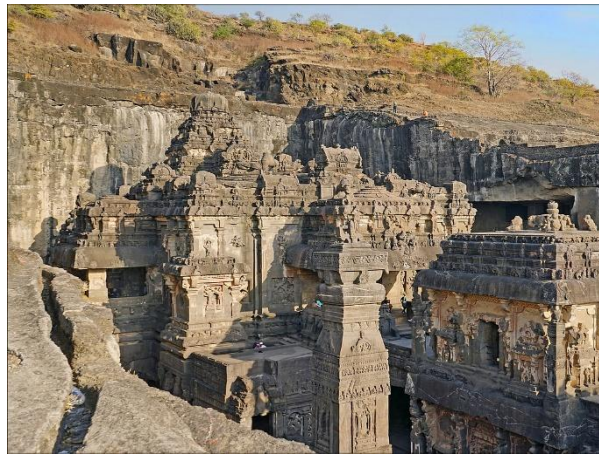


Figure 8. Ellora Caves. Source : <https://www.worldhistory.org/article/874/ellora-caves/>

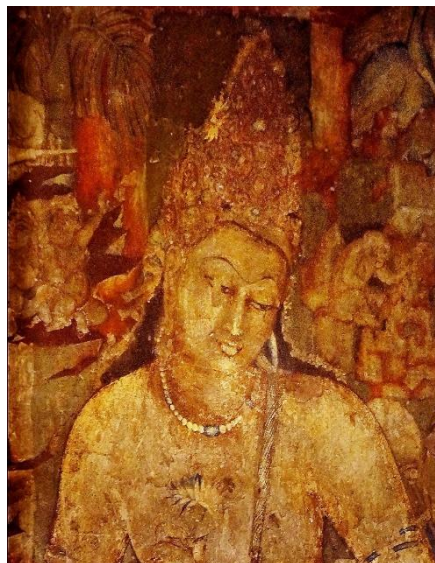


Figure 9. Ajanta Cave Art – Padmapani. Source : https://www.tallengestore.com/products/ajanta-cave-art-padmapani-art-by-unknown-artist-large-art-prints?srltid=AfmBOopQbwTxWtqnIbtij_xr_x1TBY6eHTPH24fuitEEenthQBkPvvQph

Maurya Empire (4th–2nd century BCE) : The great Ashoka who established the dynasty. In ancient Asia, Ashoka promoted the spread of Buddhism.

Iconography allowed Buddhism to cross language barriers and spread across the Asia through stupas, monasteries, inscriptions and Ashoka's Edicts, as seen in the Sanchi Stupa and Lumbini Pillar and the Lion Capital of Sarnath.



Figure. 10 Sanchi Stupa (a) and Lion Capital Pillar (b).

Source : <https://smarthistory.org/lion-capital-ashokan-pillar-asarnath/>

Gupta Empire (4th–6th century CE) Bihar UP. : Referred to as the golden period of Indian art, as it introduced delicate human figures and proportional figures like Sarnath Seated Buddha, the Varaha Cave sculpture at Udayagiri, the Sultanganj Bronze Buddha, the Iron Pillar of Delhi, and the murals of the Ajanta Caves. Influence of Greco-Buddhist and Hellenistic art influence is seen.



Figure 11. Sultanganj Bronze Buddha. Source :
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sultanganj_Buddha

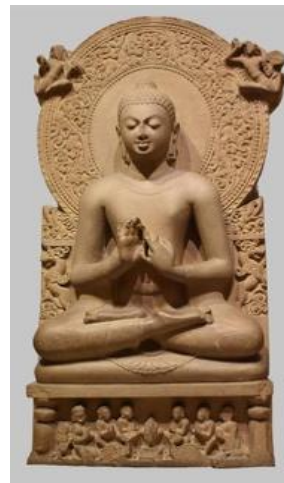


Figure 12. Sarnath sitting Buddha. Source :
<https://imp-art.org/articles/sculpture-at-sarnath/>

Pallava and Chalukya Dynasties (6th to 12th century CE) Kanchipuram , South India : Advanced the development of rock-cut caves and structural temples with increasingly sophisticated carvings like Mahabalipuram or Badami caves.

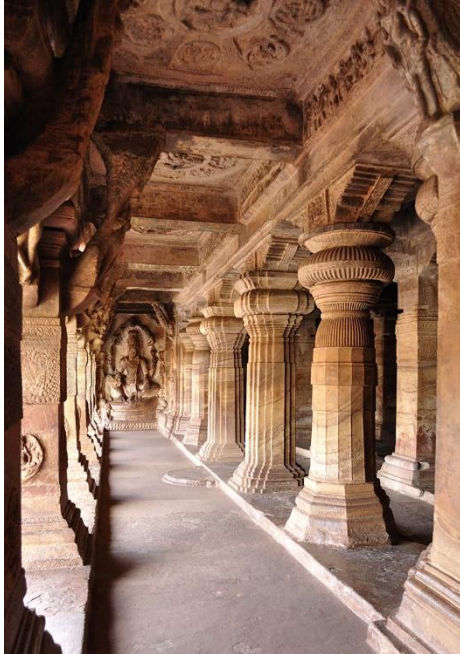


Figure 13. Badami caves. Source : <https://imp-art.org/articles/badami-cave-temples/>.



Figure 14. Mahabalipuram. Source: <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=994537489343394&set=a.794294619367683>

Chola Dynasty (9th to 13 century CE) Southern India: Produced world-renowned masterpieces in bronze casting, stone architecture, and mural painting, Produced the iconic Bronze Nataraja (Lord of Dance), the towering Brihadeeswarar Temple in Thanjavur, and the 1,000-year-old Chola frescoes.



Figure 15. Brihadeeswarar Temple. Source : <https://www.britannica.com/place/Brihadishvara-temple>



Figure 16. Nataraja - Dancing Shiva. Source : <https://www.wsj.com/articles/a-dance-filled-with-mystery1461965006>

Hoysala Dynasty (11th to 14 century CE) Karnataka: Built extremely elaborate soapstone temples decorated with floral designs and mythical themes. Masterpieces are primarily housed in temples like the Chennakeshava Temple in Belur, the Hoysaleswara Temple in Halebidu, and the Keshava Temple in Somanathapura.



Figure 17. Chennakeshava Temple. Source : <https://collectingmoments.in/chennakeshavatemplebelur/>



Figure 18. Hoysaleswara Temple. Source : <https://www.gudlu.in/blog/halebidu-temple-great-significance-of-the-ancient-indian-architecture/>

Eastern Ganga dynasty (12th to 13th century CE) Odhisha: Konark Sun Temple was built by King Narasimhadeva-I of the around 1250 CE.

The physical temple structure is a medieval monument.

Shaped like a giant stone chariot with 24 wheels and 7 horses.(Instagram.Ghum India...

4)-Foreign Invaders

India has faced repeated foreign invasions, driven by its wealth, fertile lands, and strategic trade. These encounters also created cultural exchange, blending Perso-Greek, Greco-Roman, and Perso-Arabic elements into Indian art and architecture.

Ancient Era: Persian and Greek Influences on Iconography and Symbolism in Indian Art. Achaemenid (Persian) Motifs: Introduced bell-shaped lotus capitals, highly polished pillar finishes, and royal edict formatting seen in Mauryan art and architecture via Vajiram and Ravi.

Greco-Buddhist (Gandhara) Art: Merged Greek sculptural realism (such as Apollo-like facial features and heavy drapery) with Buddhist philosophy.

Numismatic Symbolism: Indo-Greek and Shaka rulers issued bilingual coins featuring Greek deities alongside stamped Indian symbols like Shiva, Nandi, or Lakshmi.

Medieval Era: Islamic & Central Asian Symbolism

Geometric & Calligraphic Art: Floral patterns, geometric designs, and Quranic calligraphy replaced human and deity figures in public architecture.



Figure 19. Konark Sun Temple (a & b). Sources: <https://anantamias.com/konark-sun-temple/>;
<https://constrofacilitator.com/drilling-into-history-konarks-hidden-structure-revealed/>

Structural Motifs: Domes, pointed arches, and minarets blended with local styles, creating Indo-Islamic architecture.

The physical and textual mediums of iconology and iconography in ancient Indian art



Stone: Used for monumental rock-cut cave architecture (such as Ajanta, Ellora, and Elephanta) and structural temple reliefs. Sandstone, schist, and granite were standard depending on the region (e.g., Mathura sandstone or South Indian granite).

Bronze and Metal: It is strong, can be made into detailed figures, and is generally more resilient than any other metal; used extensively in temples throughout southern India. Chola bronzes represent some of the most famous examples.

Panchaloha or Panchdhatu is composed of five elements of the universe and is usually made from gold, silver, copper, zinc, and iron; it is believed to represent the five elements.

Terracotta and Clay: Used extensively for popular devotional figurines, minor deities, and decorative brick-temple plaques in early historic and Gupta periods.

Stucco and Wood: Frequently applied for surface details on walls or temporary/regional shrine icons, though fewer ancient wooden examples survive.

Granite has been one of the most important building materials for centuries, especially in southern India, due to its unique strength and resistance to weather damage.

Sandstone was preferred in several parts of North and Central India due to its softer texture and ease of carving. The fine-grained sandstone allowed sculptors to produce detailed work.

Marble became particularly popular in western India, especially in Jain temple architecture. Its smooth surface and luminous appearance added elegance and serenity to sacred spaces.

<https://bhartisanskriti.com/art-craft/shilpa-shastra-the-science-behind-indian-sculpture/>

Textual and Conceptual Mediums

Shilpa Shastras and Agamas: Iconography and Shilpa Shastras (Rigveda) and are deeply and directly connected. It defines how sacred iconography must be planned, proportioned, and sculpted.

Sacred architectural and sculptural manuals (such as the Manasara, Mayamata and *Vishnu Dharmottara Purana*) that dictated precision

Principles behind Indian sculpture making which created effective Iconography in Indian art.

Sacred Geometry: Squares, circles, triangles, and mandalas represented cosmic order and harmony.

Mathematical Proportions: Gods and goddesses followed fixed body proportions to create balance and harmony.



Traditional Measurements: Units like Angula, Tala, Hasta, and Yava helped maintain accurate proportions.

Precision Without Modern Technology: Ancient Indian sculptors achieved remarkable mathematical accuracy using traditional methods.

Iconography and Symbolism left strong evidences for the modern world.

1. Historical Evidence

Ancient art is our biggest record of the past because texts get lost, but stone and paintings survive.

- **Ashoka Pillars & Lion Capital:** The 4 lions + Dharma Chakra became the National Emblem of India today.

- **Temple Sculptures:** Khajuraho, Ellora, Konark tell us about society, fashion, dance, music of those times.

Without iconography, we wouldn't know what gods were worshipped, or what rituals existed.

2. Religious & Spiritual Evidence

Every god's form is a "code" written in symbols.

- **Multiple arms** = power to do many things
- **Trishul** = Power to destroy evil
- **Colours:** Saffron=Sacrifice, Green=Life, Blue=Infinity
- **Third eye** = wisdom + destruction of ignorance
- **Lotus** = purity rising from mud = spiritual growth
- **Chakra/Disc** = time, dharma, protection

These symbols are still used in temples, tattoos, logos, and daily worship.

3. Cultural Identity Evidence

Symbols became part of Indian identity and are used even now:

- **Swastika** = auspiciousness, used in homes and festivals
- **Peacock** = National Bird, also Krishna's crown
- **Om, Trishul, Kalash** = used in brands, jewellery, UI design
- **Warli, Madhubani, Patta Chitra motifs** = used in modern fashion, product design, animation

4. Design & Art Evidence for Modern World



For multimedia / visual art students , these are a huge resource:

- 1. Logo Design:** Brands use chakra, lotus, elephant for "trust, purity, wisdom"
- 2. UI/UX & Motion:** Mudras and gestures are used in animation timing and storytelling
- 3. Pattern & Textiles:** Mandalas, paisleys, temple motifs are copied in fashion and graphics
- 4. Film + Games:** Gods, weapons, vehicles are directly used as character design references

Conclusion

The birth and evolution of iconography and symbolism in Indian art have been a vibrant journey of art, culture, and philosophy.

India owes a great debt to its master artisans, whose rich Iconographic traditions are a priceless cultural treasure. Indian art guides values, strengthens communities, and connects humanity with nature and the divine. Depth of Iconography and Symbolism in Indian art is truly unparalleled and makes Indian art unique and unmatched in the world.

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