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YOGA: THE ART OF TRANSFORMATION

San Francisco's Asian Art Museum welcomes the world's first major exhibition exploring yoga, revealing the practice's 2,500-year history

SAN FRANCISCO, Jan. 24, 2014—On Feb. 21, 2014, the Asian Art Museum presents ***Yoga: The Art of Transformation***, the first major art exhibition to explore yoga and its historical transformation over the past 2,500 years through more than 130 rare and compelling artworks.

All over the world, millions of people practice yoga to find spiritual insight and improved health. Many people are aware of yoga's origins in India, but few outside of advanced practitioner circles recognize yoga's profound philosophical underpinnings, its presence within Jain, Buddhist, Hindu and Sufi religious traditions, or the surprisingly various social roles played by yogic practitioners over centuries. This exhibition shows yoga's rich diversity and rising appeal from its early days to its emergence on the global stage.

Borrowing from 25 museums and private collections in India, Europe and the U.S., the artworks on view date from the 2nd to the 20th centuries, with a majority from the 8th to 18th centuries. Throughout the exhibition, stunning examples of sculpture and painting illuminate yoga's key concepts as well as its obscured histories. Early photographs, books and films show yogis not only as peaceful practitioners, but also satirized as sly imposters. Artworks and audio guides also reveal yoga's transformation in 20th-century India and the U.S. as an inclusive practice open to all. The exhibition's highlights include an installation that reunites three stone yoginis from a 10th century South Indian temple; 10 pages from the first illustrated book of yogic postures (asanas) from around 1600; and a film by Thomas Edison, *Hindoo Fakir* (1902), the first American movie ever produced about India.

Curated originally for the Smithsonian's Arthur M. Sackler Gallery by the associate curator of South and Southeast Asian Art, Debra Diamond, the Asian Art Museum's presentation is organized by the museum's associate curator of South Asian Art, Qamar Adamjee, and assistant curator of Himalayan Art, Jeff Durham.

Vishnu Vishvarupa, approx. 1800–1820. India; Rajasthan state, former kingdom of Jaipur. Opaque watercolor and gold on paper. *Courtesy of the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, Given by Mrs. Gerald Clark, IS.33–2006.*

MORE

“We are honored to serve as the only West Coast venue in presenting this historic exhibition, one of the most remarkable surveys of Indian art,” said Asian Art Museum director Jay Xu. “We hope that by illuminating aspects of yoga and its hidden histories to Bay Area audiences, visitors can take new perspectives to their present and future yoga practices.”

The exhibition surveys the centrality of yoga in Indian culture and focuses on core elements of yoga practice; the role of teachers; the importance of place in yoga practice; the associations between yoga and power; ways in which yogis have been understood and imagined in Indian and Western popular cultures; and the transformation of yoga into today’s contemporary practice. Visitors are encouraged to start their journey in Osher Gallery, followed by Hambrecht Gallery and then Lee Gallery.

Osher Gallery: The Path of Yoga

The exhibition begins by introducing visitors to yoga’s origins. Between 500 and 200 BCE, wandering ascetics of the Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain religions developed practices for controlling the body and breath as a means of stilling the mind. These practices introduced concepts that laid the groundwork for much of what later came to constitute yoga. By the 7th century, many of yoga’s key concepts, vocabulary and practices were established.

This gallery reveals how artists translated yogic identities, beliefs and practices into meaningful, eloquent visual forms. In yoga, the body is both what must be transcended as well as the necessary tool for attaining enlightenment. This is portrayed in the 19th century painting **Three aspects of the Absolute, page 1 from a manuscript of the Nath Charit** (cat. no. 4a), where the artist used shimmering gold pigment to depict the origins of existence as a shimmering field of gold and its successive emanations—into consciousness (center) and form (right)—are represented as a perfected yogi.

Because yoga, at its core, is a practice rooted in the mind and body, artworks in this gallery illuminate elements of yoga practice, including meditation, postures (asanas) and austerities—rejections of material attachment. Classic forms of austerities are fasting, celibacy and immobilizing the body in difficult positions. Examples of these artworks include the ivory sculpture **Fasting Buddha** (cat. no. 6b) and the striking bronze sculpture of **Narasimha** (cat. no. 8a), the man-lion incarnation of the Hindu deity Vishnu, meditating with a yoga strap.

The gallery also presents early developments in conceptions of the yogic body. **The chakras of the subtle body, page 4 from a manuscript of the Siddha Siddhanta Paddhati** (cat. no. 11b) is a colorful 19th-century painting that maps out the energy centers of the body (chakras). Vishnu is depicted in a small but powerful painting, **Vishnu Vishvarupa** (cat. no. 10b), in his infinite cosmic form. **Three yogini sculptures** (cat. no. 3a-c), rare stone works from the 10th and 11th centuries from a South Indian temple, are displayed, each designed to have four arms to signify their divine status.

Hambrecht Gallery: Yogis in the Indian Imagination and the Western Imagination

Hambrecht Gallery primarily explores the theme of yoga in the Indian and Western imaginations, while also looking at the importance of place in yoga practice and the associations between yoga and power.

The paintings in this gallery show that not all yogis were peaceful; tales of wise and violent yogis instructed, amused and horrified many Indian listeners since at least as early as the Hindu epic *Mahabharata* (200 BCE–400 CE). Continuously retold in folktales, poetic verses, sacred texts and literary narratives, these stories established both sage and sinister yogis firmly in the Indian imagination. The popular understanding and representation of female yoga practitioners (yogini) changed over time from region to region and within religious traditions. For example, a 17th century painting, **Yogini with mynah** (cat. no. 3f), depicts a yogini in a surreal landscape with surging hills and large flowers. This artwork was created at the Islamic court of the Indian city of Bijapur, where yoginis were considered agents of supernatural power capable of helping rulers win battles. Another group of paintings, illustrating modes of classical Indian music (ragas), visualize specific emotions evoked by each musical mode as yogis and yoginis, suggesting an experience that transcends the individual senses of seeing and hearing.

The gallery also depicts yogis in the Western imagination in the 17th through the 20th centuries. Images of yogis created for Western viewers spread rapidly, sensationalizing and dramatizing yoga culture. Photographs of near-naked yogis with long matted locks and mysterious body markings, engaging in spectacular rituals, flooded the market, like the **Group of Yogis** (cat. no. 21s), an image from the late 19th century. Additionally, Europeans were fascinated with documenting yogis in seemingly painful practices like lying on a “bed of nails” or posing in “fantastic” postures as seen in Bernard Picart’s print, **Various Temples and Penances of the Fakirs** (cat. no. 22a).

Film and photography continued to spread stereotypes of yogis to Western audiences. Thomas Edison’s film **Hindoo Fakir** (cat. no. 23d) featured an Indian magician’s stage act, helping to introduce so-called “Eastern mysticism” into the realm of cinema. By 1941, when **The Yogi Who Lost His Willpower** (cat. no. 23e) was filmed, mainstream American culture knew the wonder-working yogi as a cultural motif.

Lee Gallery: Modern Transformations

This gallery focuses on the yoga renaissance of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, tracing the basics of modern yoga—seen by many as a non-sectarian health practice and posture sequences. Modern yoga first took tangible form with the publication of *Raja Yoga* in 1896 by Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902), whose teachings reformulated yoga as an empirical and scientific spiritual system inclusive of all. This gallery features photographs of **Vivekananda** (cat. no. 24) bringing these teaching to the U.S. in 1893 at the World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago.

Lee Gallery also looks at the rising popularity and the ascendance of yoga postures (asanas), pointing out that there is scant evidence that postures were the principal feature of any pre-modern tradition of yoga. The rise of postural yoga emerged with Indian teachers in the early 20th century. Its prominence is inconceivable without visual culture to spread knowledge of the postures and sequences. Featured in Lee Gallery is a

book containing one of the earliest illustrated compilations of yoga postures, ***Fakirs and their Practices in Ancient and Modern India*** (cat. no. 26a), as well as a video, ***T. Krishnamarchya Asanas*** (cat. no. 26i), which may be the earliest film of renowned yoga teacher T. Krishnamarchya (1888–1989) demonstrating posture sequences.

The exhibition concludes with the emergence of modern yoga—the regimens of health, fitness and spiritual well-being that are familiar today. An interactive historical timeline of yoga in California is also on display in the museum’s North Court.

The Asian Art Museum’s presentation of *Yoga: The Art of Transformation* will be on view Feb. 21–May 25, 2014. Artworks related to yoga are also on view in the South Asia galleries (third floor) in a show titled *European Encounters with Yogis and India’s Religions*. Following the Asian Art Museum’s presentation of *Yoga: The Art of Transformation*, the exhibition will travel to the Cleveland Museum of Art (June 22–Sept. 7, 2014). The exhibition premiered at the Smithsonian’s Arthur M. Sackler Gallery on Oct. 19, 2013 and was on view through Jan. 26, 2014.

MEDIA PREVIEW

A media preview for *Yoga: The Art of Transformation* will be held on Wednesday, Feb. 19, 2013. Doors open at 10 a.m. and remarks begin at 10:30 a.m. Please RSVP by Friday, Feb. 14, to mediarelations@asianart.org or 415. 581. 3713.

PUBLICATION

A catalogue accompanies the exhibition *Yoga: The Art of Transformation*, published by the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution (cloth edition distributed by Smithsonian Books/Random House; available in paperback, \$40, and cloth, \$55; 328 pages). Available at the Asian Art Museum store: 415.591.3600 or shop@asianart.org.

EXHIBITION ORGANIZATION

Yoga: The Art of Transformation was organized by the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution with support from the Friends of the Freer and Sackler Galleries, the Art Mentor Foundation Lucerne and the Ebrahimi Family Foundation. Presentation at the Asian Art Museum is made possible with the generous support of The Bernard Osher Foundation, Helen and Rajnikant Desai, E. Rhodes and Leona B. Carpenter Foundation, Kumar and Vijaya Malavalli, Society for Asian Art and Walter & Elise Haas Fund.

ABOUT THE ASIAN ART MUSEUM

The Asian Art Museum—Chong-Moon Lee Center for Asian Art and Culture is one of San Francisco’s premier arts institutions and home to a world-renowned collection of more than 18,000 Asian art treasures spanning 6,000 years of history. Through rich art experiences centered on historic and contemporary artworks, the Asian Art Museum unlocks the past for visitors, bringing it to life while serving as a catalyst for new art, new creativity and new thinking.

Information: 415.581.3500 or www.asianart.org

Location: 200 Larkin Street, San Francisco, CA 94102

Hours: The museum is open Tuesdays through Sundays from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. From Feb. 6 through Sept. 18, hours are extended on Thursdays until 9 p.m. Closed Mondays, as well as New Year's Day, Thanksgiving Day and Christmas Day.

Admission for *Yoga: The Art of Transformation*: adults \$17; seniors, college students with ID, youth (13-17) \$13. Asian Art Museum members and children 12 and under are FREE. Thursday evenings after 5 p.m. is \$10. These prices include general admission. General admission is free the first Sunday of every month, thanks to Target Stores (\$5 surcharge for *Yoga* applies. Tickets are available on a first come, first served basis.)

General Admission: FREE for museum members, \$12 for adults, \$8 for seniors (65+), college students with ID, and youths (13–17). FREE for children under 12 and SFUSD students with ID. Admission on Thursdays after 5 p.m. is \$5 for all visitors (except those under 12, SFUSD students, and museum members, who are always admitted FREE). Admission is FREE to all on Target First Free Sundays (the first Sunday of every month). A surcharge may apply for admission into special exhibitions.

Access: The Asian Art Museum is wheelchair accessible. For more information regarding access: 415.581.3598; TDD: 415.861.2035.

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