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Ganesha: A Study of Personal Worship to a Personal God



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Abstract

Hindu devotees worship Ganesha when they are beginning a new phase or faces obstacles in their lives. In investigating the personal devotion of Hindu gods in India, we have found that there is a difference between the ways a Hindu worships the god Ganesha at a public shrine than in their own home. The main difference in worship style is that in the home, the worshiper acts as his or her own priest. There is room for greater interpretation in worship style and offerings made to the deity. Since our topic is personal devotion, we were drawn to the private aspect of the Hindu devotee. We wish to highlight the differences between the private and public worship of Ganesha. Although scholars have addressed public shrine worship and private worship separately, there has not been much scholarly comparison of the two. By looking at *Bridegroom's Wedding Crown* (19th Century), *Dancing Ganesha, Lord of obstacles* (11-12th Century), and *Ganesha, Lord of obstacles* (10-11th Century), we hope to demonstrate that although both public and private are forms of personal devotion, home worship is less elaborate than public worship. This suggests that worship is not only for the individual's religious interests but also for their social standing.

Introduction

Ganesha is the Lord of Obstacles. More importantly, he is a god that helps to overcome them. For this reason, the worship of him is innately personal. Although a devotee could pray for another's obstacles, they will most frequently pray for their own. Ganesha is manifested in a deity that has a human body with an elephant head. We define public worship here as any worship done at a public shrine or temple that has a priest. Private worship is done in solitude without the leading of a priest and is composed entirely of what the devotee deems appropriate and necessary to the worship of the deity. This can either manifest itself in a home shrine or in simpler roadside shrines. The deities of these private worship shrines are often smaller and less intricate because the devotee is the patron. Whereas at a public temple, there are many patrons and therefore more money to have a larger, more elaborate deity. There can also be public displays of private worship as seen in the *Bridegroom's Wedding Crown*. This piece highlights the fact that Ganesha, as a deity of new beginnings, is being personally sought after by the groom in his marriage ritual. This would be a representation to the public that he is privately seeking Ganesha's blessing.

Methods

The differences in size, ornate nature, and materials used in the creation of these objects should highlight the differences between public and private devotion. It should also show that there has been, in the case of royalty, public displays of private devotion. It is also seen in common life through pre-marriage rituals and the seeking out of Ganesha's blessing on a marriage. Our exhibition should not only include the deity manifestations of Ganesha but also objects that devotees have used to show their devotion to Ganesha. The visual evidence is organized so that the private objects and the public objects are separate. By displaying *Bridegroom's wedding crown*, *Dancing Ganesha, Lord of Obstacles*, and *Genesha, Lord of Obstacles* in this manner, the differences in size, materials, and ornate quality between the private objects and the public ones should be highlighted.

Figures



Ganesha, Lord of Obstacles,
India, 10th-11th century
Metal, Brass,
3 5/8 x 2 3/16 x 11/16 in.



*Dancing Ganesha, Lord of
Obstacles*
India, 11th-12th century
Stone, Phyllite,
25 3/4 x 13 1/4 x 5 in.



*Bridegroom's Wedding Crown
(umlak) Adorned with Vishnu,
Ganesha, and Shiva*,
19th century
Metalwork, Repoussé silver with
gilding,
6 3/8 x 10 3/8 in.

Exhibition List

Public Worship

Seated Ganesha. India, c. 13th century. Gray stone. Eugene Fuller Memorial Collection, 34.67. Seattle Art Museum.
Ganesha. India, Uttar Pradesh, 8th Century. Sandstone. Asia Society Museum, New York, New York.
Dancing Ganesha, Lord of Obstacles, 11th-12th century. Stone, Phyllite, 25 3/4 x 13 1/4 x 5 in. Los Angeles County Museum of Art

Private Worship

Dancing Ganesha. India, Khajurahoo Region, early 11th Century. Red Sandstone. Cleveland Museum of Art.
Ganesha, Lord of Obstacles, 10th-11th century. Metal, Brass, 3 5/8 x 2 3/16 x 11/16 in. Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

Public Display of Private Devotion

Bridegroom's Wedding Crown (umlak) Adorned with Vishnu, Ganesha, and Shiva, 19th century. Metalwork, Repoussé silver with gilding, 6 3/8 x 10 3/8 in. (16.19 x 26.35 cm). Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

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Conclusion and Discussions

Throughout researching we discovered that there are many complications and complexities that come with comparing public and private worship of Ganesha. This is explicitly shown through the *Bridegroom's Wedding Crown* which blurs the line between the public and private realms. Although we have supporting evidence that there is a notable difference between the two aspects of devotion, there is a general lack of research focused on this topic. In order to better understand this, we would need to be able to experience both ways of worship. This, however, is complicated due to the fact that the public is limited in its access of private activities. If there was funding to research this further it would enable greater research into household tradition and devotion to patronal deities. Although Ganesha is most often a deity that is sought during new beginnings, he is the patron deity of some households. We would need to have direct and concrete visual access to private worship. If we could acquire more information on private worship, we would be able to more accurately conclude and depict the contrasts between the two aspects of personal devotion.

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