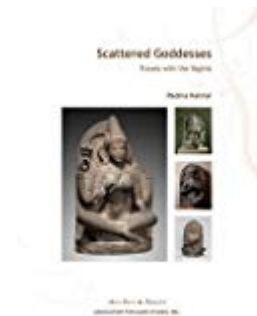




Padma Audrey Kaimal. *Scattered Goddesses: Travels with the Yoginis*. Ann Arbor: Association for Asian Studies, 2012. xxvii + 281 pp. \$35.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-924304-67-5.



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Collapsing the Binary

How can we write a comprehensive historical narrative with seemingly diverse and completely scattered pieces of evidence when the dispersed nature of that evidence makes it nearly impossible to recognize them as belonging to a single puzzle? This is a fundamental challenge that faces many students of ancient and medieval South Asian art and history. Not only the sheer distance of time between present and past but also the colonial experience and its legacy exponentially complicate the process of identifying the basic source material. The ensuing research often focuses on writing a positivistic history of fragments, which rarely engages with the self-reflective discourse of colonial legacy in its scholarship and thus remains an exclusive domain of specialists. On the other hand, ever increasing interest in the colonial and postcolonial history of South Asia during the past three decades has generated nuanced discourses on the legacy of colonialism in art historical studies, but these often remain indifferent to the philological study of the firsthand material implicated in the colonial enterprises. It is difficult to see that the pictures emerging from these

two seemingly disparate intellectual traditions should be in conversation with each other to make a more complete story. It is an extreme balancing act to engage with both sides of the pole and come out at the end with a finely woven orb-web of historical facts, intense analysis of the evidence, and critical interpretations. Padma Kaimal, in her engaging study of nineteen scattered sculptures from tenth-century South India, achieves this balancing act beautifully.

Scattered Goddesses: Travels with the Yoginis is about nineteen sculptures from Kanchi in South Indian state of Tamil Nadu now dispersed in at least twelve separate museums across North America, western Europe, and South India. As Kaimal poignantly puts it in the blurb to her book, this is a book about their “lost home, the new homes, and the journeys in between.” Twelve of the nineteen sculptures that Kaimal identified as belonging to a single set are images of the goddesses not of the popular Puranic Hindu pantheon, but of *yoginīs* (lit., female practitioners of yoga), an intriguing group of female deities that occupy a liminal space between the mythological

world of the divine and the human world bound by time. The liminal, paradoxical nature of the yoginis in the context of tenth-century India perfectly mirrors the balanced and poised approach that Kaimal takes in dealing with what can be a very polarizing and value-laden topic: the issue of control over cultural property. As the female divine embodying “auspicious” and “inauspicious,” they can be terrible and beautiful at the same time just as collecting with benign intentions can be the most thorough form of scattering. By identifying “collecting and scattering” as two sides of one coin, she moves our attention from a normative discussion of ownership to the complex historical processes behind collecting and scattering of the Kanchi sculptures. A tenth-century sculpture of Śiva from South India in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, is an awe-inspiring art to admire along with a fragmented yet voluptuous torso of a *yakshī* (semi-divine female tree spirit of fertility) displayed nearby, and the peaceful and pleasant display in a dimly lit gallery rarely incites a question about how they got there in a viewer’s mind. Instead of approaching the story behind an antiquity’s removal from its original home from a binary perspective of moral judgment, Kaimal makes us see the complexity of the historical situations with sympathy. This is not to say she condones looting in colonial India as a historical accident. Bringing together as many objects as possible in a coherent narrative, Kaimal’s study offers a constructive way to reconcile the past and the present. Following her reading, we appreciate the power of these dispersed objects once more both in their original context and in their new homes.

She has made every effort to make this study accessible to non-specialist readers, with a glossary of Sanskrit and Tamil terms at the beginning of the book, and, at times, a conversational tone. All the Sanskrit and Tamil terms are given without diacritical marks in the text but the glossary at the beginning also provides all the terms spelled with diacritical marks along with clear definitions, serving as a useful reference tool. Another excellent feature of the book is the use of graphic design and tables to chart and trace the history of the dispersal of the sculptures since the time of their initial retrieval from Kanchi in 1920s. As seen in tables 2 and 6 in chapter 1, the images inserted within the tables help readers follow a rather complex presentation of evidence supporting the reconstruction of the nineteen sculptures as a set. By embracing the technological tools of computer graphics in demonstrating the process of her own analysis, Kaimal is able to highlight many intricate details of the formal features that are not easily noticeable in reproduced images.

Chapter 1 is the longest chapter, with sixty-three accompanying illustrations where the author identifies the nineteen sculptures to this set based on close examination of primary documents. These primary sources include the sculptures as well as the archival photographs from the time when they were retrieved by a French archaeologist, Jouveau-Dubreuil, and sent to an avid collector, C. T. Loo, in Paris. All the visual and archival evidence is subject to a meticulous formal analysis to bring the scattered nineteen sculptures to the time when they were together. Kaimal adds five more sculptures to the known set of fourteen sculptures from Kanchi. Even with the help of computer-graphic images that highlight the formal details that support her arguments, it is not easy to follow the intricacy of the discussion of formal evidence, making this chapter the most challenging one to read, not because Kaimal’s visual analysis is lacking—her observation and interpretation of the formal features could not be sharper—but partly because the evidence for the case is overwhelming. After a careful examination of formal features and stylistic analysis, she convincingly assigns the date of these sculptures to the tenth century, before the Chola kings from further south made their presence felt in Kanchi. Kaimal dispels previously proposed associations with a royal patronage for this most southerly set of yoginis, while acknowledging the limits of stylistic analysis in understanding the patronage pattern without any other corroborative data.

Chapter 2 explores the meaning and function of these images in the tenth century through iconographic analysis. Out of nineteen sculptures, the two standing male figures are door guardians and the other two male figures represent Śiva and Subramaṇya (Skanda). All the female figures from this set were known as *matṛkās* (lit., motherly ones) throughout the twentieth century, as the initial founder-taker Jouveau-Dubreuil reported them to be two sets of *matṛkās*, one with Śiva and the other with Kartikkeya (another name for Subramaṇya). Kaimal observes that only three of the fifteen female figures, including a headless, badly broken image seen in a photograph by Jouveau-Dubreuil in the Musée Guimet’s photo archive, represent three *matṛkās* in a gentle and muted manner. The twelve yoginīs are the main focus of the group, and Kaimal approaches them with insightful understanding of the historical development of the goddess cult in India and its relation to the tantric traditions, but without resorting to look for an ur-text of a single tantra to explain their unique function and meaning in tenth-century South India. She rightly cautions us to see how words and images “are separate forms of eloquence...

Even when they have common inspirations, neither can simply translate the other” (p. 99). Simultaneously signifying auspiciousness and inauspiciousness, the yoginī sculptures can invoke the fear that led to their destruction, but they can also instruct a frame of mind that sees how all the polar opposites of life and death, nurture and violence, or even male and female, are so perfectly intertwined and interdependent, just as a yoginī figure can be at once beautiful and frightening.

Chapter 3 locates the nineteen sculptures in their original tenth-century home. Reimagining the lost yoginī temple in Kanchi is perhaps the most difficult task posed to the author. Some of the sculptures were reportedly found in rumbles filled with what might have been shattered pieces of the temple, and seven of the more impressive goddess figures were installed for worship in an “insignificant modern temple” by the villagers “somewhere” in Kanchi (p. 110) before being sent away to Paris. Yet, Kaimal creates such a lively vision of an open-sky yoginī temple in tenth-century Kanchi that a reader is led to see the sculptures in their full life when not even a single trace of the actual temple survives. Her reimagination of the Kanchi’s yoginī temple builds on the previous scholarship on other known yoginī temples at Hirapur (Orissa), Ranipur-Jhariyal (Orissa), Khajuraho (M.P.) and Bheraghat (M.P.), but it is also largely informed by her close analysis of the surviving visual material, including the size and the shape of each sculpture, and her understanding of religious practices of the time. Kaimal’s suggestion that circular yoginī temples may be a later historical development than rectangular ones is worth noting for future research. One of the most exciting moments in the book comes when Kaimal engages the reader to see the ritual activities of the past through the archaeological and architectural remains. Whether rectangular or circular, a unique open courtyard and open-sky temple would have permitted much flexibility in people’s movement, even in the choice of direction of the circumambulation. Yet the commanding sculptures gazing towards the empty space from multiple directions must have encouraged controlled behavior. Kaimal’s brief ethnographic account of today’s ritual practice at the Hirapur yoginī temple tantalizingly evokes an image of a living temple in the Kanchi’s lost temple so that a reader is left wanting to learn more about the ritual practices of the past and present. Whether in the past or in the present, as Kaimal demonstrates, the design of a yoginī temple inverts hierarchically organized schemes of most Hindu temples and can take a devotee outside time, where linear time collapses. In her reimagining, a yoginī temple becomes

a dynamic space for more inwardly practices under the stars rather than a secretive site of tantric sexual rites, as previously proposed.

With chapter 3 as a pivot, the study turns about a thousand years forward to the twentieth century when the sculptures left Kanchi, and the following two chapters chart their lives and the lives of the people and the institutions involved in their scattering and collecting. In chapter 4, we learn about the three men who were responsible for finding and dispersing the Kanchi sculptures, Monsieur Thangavelu, Gabriel Jouveau-Dubreuil, and C. T. Loo. Archival photos kept in the Musée Guimet and in the files of C. T. Loo and company along with communication records between Jouveau-Dubreuil and Loo are carefully scrutinized to bring M. Thangavelu to light, a little-known local agent of Jouveau-Dubreuil who Kaimal identifies as a fit young man in some of Jouveau-Dubreuil’s photos. The two main actors involved in the dispersal of Kanchi sculptures make a unique case in the history of collecting in colonial South Asia, as they were not part of British imperialism and were more or less independent agents of rather hybrid identities that benefited from the flourishing art market for “oriental” objects during the early twentieth century. The delicate situation that Jouveau-Dubreuil had to navigate as an independent French archaeologist/agent for a collector/buyer in France, C. T. Loo, during 1920s and 1930s in British India are hinted at by the two objects left behind in Chennai in the then Madras Government Museum under F. H. Gravely, as “Madras’s share of a division of the spoils” (p. 139). C. T. Loo’s intention of selling the sculptures may have been packaged with a noble intention of sending the best examples of Asian art to Western friends as ambassadors of culture, but he was surely a shrewd businessman with good eyes who sold them quickly one by one across thousands of miles and five countries for profit. Kaimal’s focus on their persons reveals how both men were hybrids, occupying liminal spaces in their personal identities, further shaking the binary opposition of the colonizer and the colonized typically encountered in the history of collecting in colonial India.

Chapter 5 explores the stories of the people and the institutions that bought and collected these Kanchi sculptures, considering their intentions and reasons. Starting with the British Museum in London and the Musée Guimet in Paris, Kaimal locates the collecting of the Kanchi sculptures in the context of the history of collecting Asian art in general. In the colonial context, the Asian art objects were collected and displayed as trophies of dominion, and as Kaimal observes, the two European

public institutions' choices of more ferocious yoginī images among the Kanchi group reinforced "stereotypes of a colonized Other as primitive" (p. 157). Kaimal explores the motivations of the three private collectors, Baron Edward von der Heydt, Avery Brundage, and Count Christian Humann, by taking a biographical approach to understand their personalities. Most North American public institutions came to the market later than the illustrious European museums, and many with an intention to emulate their European predecessors. Kaimal succinctly characterizes their motivations behind purchasing Kanchi sculptures as aligned with their mission for encyclopedic collecting fueled by Europhile sentiments. To this end, the choice of Kanchi yoginis "conveniently served up visions of the Other as primitive, chaotic, and lethal" in their encyclopedic museums, which were fitting symbols of culture and status for the booming cities with new riches (p. 167).

In chapter 6, we follow Kaimal through various museum spaces, looking at the current display conditions of the Kanchi sculptures. Kaimal's strength in formal analysis shines again as she zooms in and out of the space with ease, analyzing the experience of each space and the sculptures while considering the curators', directors', and patrons' wills and intentions and their impact on the viewer and the object. Instead of a myopic view of the display of each of the Kanchi sculptures, Kaimal approaches their current settings more holistically and considers the display of Asian art in general in each museum's layout and context. She observes how, following economic, cultural, and social changes such as strong economic developments in Asia and the growth of Asian diasporic communities in North America, many muse-

ums now accidentally, or intentionally, have the Asian art galleries in their central spaces rather than in the peripheries. Asian art is not just about things from the past, and many museums where Kanchi sculptures reside actively engage in collecting modern and contemporary Asian art. Kaimal is optimistic that this new trend will help each community to appreciate Asian art and culture in a whole new way, countering the triumphalism of the twentieth century. What is curiously absent in this narrative about display and museum practices is the discussion of these practices in India. One cannot but wonder how this counter-narrative against the vestiges of colonialism and imperialism would read in the museum settings of former colonies. Are there any critical insights we can gain from considering the display of Shanmuga in the Chennai Government Museum? How can we locate the museum practices in South Asia in the postcolonial discourse?

Kaimal briefly addresses these last questions in the epilogue, where she suggests constructive ways to bring together the dispersed sculptures once again without insisting on their repatriation as the only option. One of the most workable solutions Kaimal suggests is to construct a virtual space for the pieces to appear as a set, and encourage each institution to display the Kanchi sculptures surrounded by the information about their peers and their original context that Kaimal's study has so painstakingly brought together. In a way, Kaimal's book itself achieves what she suggests as an ideal solution for reuniting the Kanchi yoginis and their attendants. They are already together, reflecting multiple stories that collapse our binary tendencies.

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