

NEW DARSHANS REPORT

ACSAA Biennial Symposium and New Darshans Conference

The American Council of Southern Asian Art's fourteenth biennial symposium was held this year in conjunction with a multidisciplinary conference on "New Darshans: Seeing Southern Asian Religiosity and Visuality Across Disciplines." The joint conference took place over three days on October 16-19 at The Denison Museum at Denison University and was co-sponsored by Denison and Ohio State University. Natalie Marsh who directs the Denison Museum, John Cort, from religious studies at Denison University and Greg Urban, from comparative studies at Ohio State University were the organizers. Philip Lutgendorf, newly-elected President of AIAS, gave the keynote talk, titled "Old Darshans Renewed: Remixing the Ramayana in Hindi Filmsong." The conference coincided with the opening of an exhibition of Burmese arts and artifacts, "Baptists in Burma" at the Museum at Denison.

The two conferences' shared format explored the importance of the role of visual contact between viewer and objects to study of South and South East Asian arts. The conference attracted a strong core of scholars from art history, but also included scholars from religious studies, history, anthropology, folklore, media studies, and architecture. Presentations ranged from studies of sculpture and architecture, to textiles, photographs, posters, cinema, newspaper cartoons, and the internet. In this breadth of material, the conference succeeded in opening up discussions about the many ways that darshan resonates in complex cultural worlds and social networks.

Darshan is a centerpiece for those studying Hindu arts and religion, and the conference explored the ways that this tradition, based in devotional practice, is open to diverse interpretations and play for engaging the viewers in complex and changing ways. For example, Media Studies scholar Ronie Pareciack's study of Hindi cinema explored the philosophical implications of the camera giving the audience a god's view of darshan. Nicole Karapanagiotis, PhD candidate in religious studies at Indiana University, analyzed the possibilities for embodied divinity in internet puja websites. And Alka Hingorani, independent art historian, offered an anthropological approach and considered the social politics of image-makers in Kulu and how the process of creating the divine image recalibrated caste relations within the village while the image was under construction.

This conference also provided a new prompt for a number of Buddhist, Jain, and Islamic arts to expand the discussion to include visualization and image making in other religious and visual environments. Many panels brought together studies of Buddhist, Jain, Hindu, and Islamic religious practice. Some papers made direct connection to Hindu practice. Art Historian Robert DeCaroli explored the downcast eyes of early Buddha sculptures as a development in contradistinction to Hindu images created for darshan. Some papers were completely separate from religious experience, such as Venugopal Maddipati, a Ph.D. candidate in Art History at University of Minnesota, who examined the politics of the colonial administrator's gaze by a study of a description of a town square in Bulandshahr. Other panels focused on particular art historical fields, from modern and contemporary South Asian painting to the arts of South East Asia and demonstrated both the rich landscape of arts in which any study of the practice of darshan necessarily sits and the work of art historians on which the cross disciplinary field of visual culture studies builds.

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