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Miniature Temple Diorama Inspired by Angkor Wat and Early North Indian Temple Traditions c.a. 2024.

Figure 1: The diorama showing two stone temple structures, driftwood encirclement, and carved macaques in the background.

Conceived and commissioned in 2024 by collector Ritesh Jaggi, this miniature temple diorama is a contemporary work within a collection otherwise composed of historic artefacts spanning several centuries. It is the only contemporary inclusion. The work was created by the collector's own initiative rather than acquired. As he has stated, he always wanted something like this, and so he created one. The piece measures approximately 51 inches in length, 24.5 inches in height, and 17.5 inches in width.

The composition draws its primary visual language from the temple complexes of Angkor Wat in Cambodia, the 12th century Khmer capital built under Suryavarman II. The stone structures of Angkor are characterised by axial planning, lotus bud *prasat* towers, horizontal banded cornices, and narrative reliefs. The gradual encroachment of tree roots and forest growth over temple ruins, visible in sites such as Ta Prohm, informs the present work's most defined feature, which is the interplay between carved stone architecture and enveloping organic forms. Two temple structures emerge from within a landscape. Their surfaces, articulated through carved relief panels and architectural detailing, are partially obscured and embraced by driftwood elements shaped to evoke the aerial roots and expansive canopies of banyan trees (*Ficus benghalensis*).

This juxtaposition of stone carving with organic material creates a visual contrast between permanence and transience, between the built and the grown. Carved macaques (*Macaca* spp.) positioned in the background reinforce this atmosphere and recall the *Ramayana* friezes of Angkor, in which monkey armies serve as auxiliaries to Rama.

Then you look closer. The outer architecture references Cambodia, but the inner sanctum belongs to North India. The *garbhagriha* is a shallow recess carved into the larger stone mass. It contains a miniature rendering of the Sheshayi Vishnu (Vishnu reclining upon the serpent Shesha, or *Sheshanaga*, in the ocean of milk) from the Dashavatara Temple at Deogarh in Uttar Pradesh, dated to approximately 500 CE. In the canonical Gupta representation, Vishnu lies in *yoga nidra* (the yogic sleep of cosmic interval) atop the coils of the thousand headed serpent Ananta, who also forms a hooded canopy above the god's head. From Vishnu's navel emerges a lotus bearing Brahma, the agent of the forthcoming creation.

The iconography signifies the state of *pralaya*, the suspension of manifested existence between the dissolution of one cosmic cycle and the inception of the next. At Deogarh, this panel is carved in high relief on the western wall of the temple, measuring approximately 1.5 metres across. In Jaggi's commission, the same composition has been reduced to a fraction of that size while preserving the essential attributes: the serpent's multiple hoods radiating behind the reclining figure, the supporting left hand beneath the head, the right arm resting along the serpent's body, the eyes half closed in *yoga nidra*, and the attenuated emergence of Brahma. The precision of the carving at this reduced scale speaks to the artisans' skill.



Figure 2: South side outer wall sculpture panel, Dashavatara Temple, Deogarh. Photograph by Joseph David Beglar, 31 December 1875. Source: British Library Online Gallery.

Moving outward from the sanctum, one encounters the temple entrance. Two *dvārapālas* (door guardians) flank the entrance. In Vaishnavite tradition, the doorkeepers of Vishnu's abode Vaikuntha are named Jaya and Vijaya. According to the *Bhagavata Purana* (III.15-16), these two attendants once refused entry to the four *kumaras*, the mind born sons of Brahma, who were wandering the universe in the guise of young children. Insulted by the denial of access, the *kumaras* cursed Jaya and Vijaya to be separated from Vishnu and born three times as mortals on earth, living as formidable adversaries of the god before finally being redeemed and returning to their celestial posts. The first birth was as the brothers Hiranyaksha and Hiranyakashipu; the second as Ravana and Kumbhakarna; the third as Shishupala and Dantavakra. Jaya and Vijaya thus embody the tension between devotion and enmity, reminding the devotee that even opposition to the divine can be a form of service. Their presence here at the threshold marks the transition from the outer world into the sacred interior.



Figure 3: The miniature Sheshayi Vishnu carving inside the garbhagriha, and the two dvārapālas, Jaya and Viļaya flanking the entrance.

Now take a step back and look around the outside walls. The surrounding façades are populated with additional references to Vishnu's manifold incarnations and to the celestial court he commands. The surrounding façades are populated with additional references to Vishnu's manifold incarnations and to the celestial court he commands. On one side, a low relief sequence depicts the *Dashavatara*, the ten avatars of Vishnu as codified in Puranic literature. The order follows the *Smarta* convention: *Matsya* (fish), *Kurma* (tortoise), *Varaha* (boar), *Narasimha* (man lion), *Vamana* (dwarf), *Parashurama* (axe wielding brahmin), *Rama*, *Krishna*, *Buddha* (or alternatively Balarama), and *Kalki* (the future horseman). On the opposite wall, apsaras appear in varied postures, some playing the *veena*, others the *mridangam* or cymbals. Their *tribhanga* postures align with North Indian classical temple traditions rather than the frontally posed *devatas* of Khmer art, indicating a syncretic approach.



Figure 4-5: The exterior walls carry low relief panels: on one side, the ten avatars of Vishnu (Dashavatara); on the other, apsaras dancing and playing musical instruments.

The work is executed in red stone, likely comparable to the sandstone and masonry of Deogarh. The integration of stone with driftwood and applied foliage brings together different artisanal practices. No moulds, casts, or digital models were used. It is not a reproduction but an interpretation, which means, as the collector is fond of noting, that there is no second example. The work engages with historical traditions, drawing from South East Asian temple architecture at Angkor Wat and early North Indian forms at Deogarh, while remaining a contemporary object. Within Mr. Jaggi's collection, this piece is the only artwork made in this century. The monkeys will keep watching. And Jaya and Vijaya will stand guard for as long as anyone cares to look.

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