

Indian tree goddess

वृक्ष
vriksh
tree

मूर्ति
moorti
sculpture

औरत
aurat
woman

This sculpture was made in Karnataka state in south-west India in the first half of the twelfth century, during the period when the Hoysala dynasty ruled the area. It once formed part of the decorative scheme of a temple complex. The Hoysala rulers undertook a substantial program of temple building in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, and many temples built in the Hoysala style may still be seen in southern India. Hoysala temples have star shaped shrines with high, domed towers. There may be several shrines in a temple complex, which is entered through tall gateways, and includes a large raised platform on which the shrines are grouped as well as an assembly hall. In addition to religious worship, Hoysala temples housed courts of justice and treasure houses, and were centres for education, music and dance.

The outside surface of the temples and their massive gates are completely covered with horizontal friezes of sculptures in the same style as the tree goddess. The lower friezes are decorated with animals and plants, then scenes from the great Indian epics, the Mahabharata, Ramayana and the Upanishads appear, interspersed with bands of scrolling vines. Further up the walls are figures of gods and goddesses. This multitude of figures are carved from a type of stone called chloritic schist, a greenish grey soapstone which has a fine, even texture that can be highly polished, but is soft and strong enough to allow delicate, precise carving with multiple piercings. In this example, smooth volumes and polished surfaces balance intricate foliage, jewellery and costume. Many of the figures carved during the Hoysala dynasty are inscribed with the name of the sculptor and the village where he lived. Unfortunately, the NGV tree goddess sculpture is unsigned.

The tree goddess depicted in this sculpture represents the auspicious power of the bounties of nature in an idealised Indian female form. The name *salabhanjika* is a combination of *sala*, referring to the sala tree (*Shorea Robusta*), which is a symbol of the Hindu god Vishnu, and *bhanjika*, meaning beautiful maiden. The image of woman and tree is found in Buddhist, Jain and Hindu art and was one of the motifs of nature worship adapted by these religions as they became established in India. Existing representations of nature in general, including that of female nature spirits (*yakshi*), became semi-divine beings in Hindu, Jain and Buddhist pantheons, and their images were positioned in the temple at points of transition from worldly to sacred spaces. In the role of auspicious guardians they blessed the worshipper's journey to the central shrine of the temple. Thus sculptures of tree goddesses such as this example were installed leaning out from the exterior of the temple under the eaves, or the tops of pillars that held up the high central hall of the Hindu temple, where devotees gathered before entering the shrine and greeting the presiding deity of the temple.

Although not intended as an object of worship, the power of the tree goddess was frequently invoked due to her association with fertility. The richly jewelled goddess stands beneath a leafy bower in the triple bend pose (*tribhanga*) associated with Indian dance. In this pose the body bends in three places, the neck, waist and knee. In fact other similar figures in Hoysala temples often represent dancers and musicians, and are identified by the musical instruments in their hands, or the attendant musicians beside them. In this example, the heel of the tree goddess touches the trunk of the tree, which, according to legend, causes it to burst into bloom.

