



ARTH 4824 Gods in the Museum

Shiva Nataraja and Uma, Uma Maheshwar temple, Konerirajapuram; Shiva Nataraja, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; photos by Lisa N. Owen

Department of Art History, CVAD, UNT; Fall 2026 TR 9:35am-10:55am, ART 288

Dr. Lisa N. Owen; email: through Canvas; office hours: TR 11am-11:30am, ART 230

Course content & objectives: This course examines the ways that Indian sculpture is often exhibited, identified, and interpreted in the art museum context. We will focus on prominent artworks housed in the Dallas Museum of Art, the Kimbell Art Museum, and the Crow Museum of Asian Art of UTD. The selected artworks are diverse in terms of medium, date, and religious attribution and are assessed through three lenses: iconography, context, and new paradigms. This allows us to recognize and investigate what is prioritized in the museum's educational materials regarding these objects. Two overarching objectives of the course are: 1) to establish an in-depth understanding of these artworks in terms of their socio-religious and historical contexts at the time of their creation; and 2) to acknowledge their new identifications and interpretive frameworks as museum objects. Importantly, we will recognize that interpretations of these artworks remain fluid rather than being fixed in an historical/devotional vs. aesthetic/fine art binary. These objectives will be met and demonstrated through class discussions and a variety of written assignments.

Goals of the course: (1) to identify and interpret artworks as objects that shape (and are shaped by) their larger socio-historical contexts – both at the time of their creation and beyond (2) to further develop critical thinking and writing skills about art

Course materials and structure: There is no assigned textbook for this course. Students will have access to assigned readings and other materials on Canvas. Students are expected to have thoroughly read, and digested, the assigned materials *prior* to each session. It is the student-based discussions of these readings that make up much of our time together. The course meets twice a week for an hour and twenty minutes. I encourage students to come and see me during

office hour if they are having difficulty with the material or if they feel they are not expressing themselves adequately in class.

Course requirements and grading criteria:

Response essay (2 at 15%)	30%
Museum description (2 at 20%)	40%
Rumination paper	20%
Attendance	10%

All written work is to be submitted/uploaded on Canvas in Microsoft word (.docx).

Scheduled deadlines are on Sundays at 11:59pm CDT (except for the Rumination paper which is due during the designated final exam period for this class). Please work well ahead of deadlines to avoid complications with uploading. You are responsible for making sure that you have uploaded the correct assignment and acceptable file type. Late work (up to 5 days) is accepted but penalized one full letter grade (10 points) per day.

Response essay: Two response essays will be assigned at specific times during the semester (see schedule). These assignments will focus on key themes that are addressed in class lectures, discussions, and/or assigned readings. Specific format and content guidelines will be provided and discussed at the appropriate time. These assignments will be graded on both content and the mechanics of writing. See the Grading Criteria on page 3.

Museum description: Twice during the semester (see schedule), students will be asked to write a new museum description that accompanies a selected artwork. Specific format and content guidelines will be provided and discussed at the appropriate time. These assignments will be graded on both content and the mechanics of writing. See the Grading Criteria on page 3.

Rumination paper: This final assignment will provide students with the opportunity to reflect upon and articulate what they have learned in the class. Specific format and content guidelines will be provided and discussed at the appropriate time. The assignment will be graded on both content and the mechanics of writing. See the Grading Criteria on page 3.

Attendance policy: Attendance will be taken via a sign-up sheet that is passed around during each class. It is up to you to make sure that you have signed the roster. You are allowed two absences without penalty. After that, your attendance grade (which is initially recorded as 100% A) will be lowered by half a letter grade (5 points) for each absence over the allotted two. It is also important for you to attend class as required content and information to complete assignments is disseminated in lectures and class discussions. It is also imperative that you come to class and participate fully if you wish to do well.

If you have a military deployment or emergency/health situation that requires hospitalization or treatment that does not allow you to attend class for an extended period (5+ days), contact the Dean of Students (DOS) office (deanofstudents@unt.edu). Once you provide documentation to the DOS demonstrating your inability to attend class and/or perform work (not just for a deadline date), that office will contact me to request extension(s). Your documentation (and the letter from DOS) must include *the specific dates you were unable to attend and/or do work on a computer*. Unspecific requests for “flexibility” without specific dates will not receive extensions on class work/assignments.

Academic integrity policy, AI, and violation penalties: This course follows the UNT policy on Academic Integrity. According to UNT Policy 06.003, Student Academic Integrity, academic dishonesty occurs when students engage in behaviors including, but not limited to cheating, fabrication, facilitating academic dishonesty, forgery, plagiarism, sabotage, and unauthorized use of Artificial Intelligence (AI). A finding of academic dishonesty may result in a range of academic penalties or sanctions from admonition to expulsion from the University. First violations of academic integrity policies in this course result in a zero on the assignment. Second violations in the same course result in failing the class. All academic integrity violations are reported to the university and further penalties may incur.

Use of generative AI is prohibited in this class. All work submitted or presented for a grade in this class must be written in your own words and original to this term. *You may not use generative AI to assist in the content of your written assignments.* Assignments that appear to rely on content generated by AI will receive a failing grade and/or other sanctions in alignment with the university's academic integrity policy. You may not plagiarize anyone else's material, including but not limited to websites, museum publications, books, or articles. Please consult UNT Policy 06.003, Student Academic Integrity.

Grading criteria for written work:

A = Such a grade indicates that the student was able to execute written work with rigor and clarity of thought. An 'A' grade means that there were little to no errors in grammar/spelling, format, and development of text. An 'A' grade also indicates that the student demonstrated knowledge and reflection on relevant assigned readings/class discussions and provided an exceptional response to the question(s) and/or issues outlined in the assignment instructions.

B = Such a grade indicates that the student was able to execute written work with diligence and forethought, though some main issues of the assignment were either not developed or addressed fully by the student. This grade also indicates that a greater in-depth engagement with the assigned readings and/or class discussion topics is needed. A grade of 'B' also usually indicates that there were limited structural, spelling, or grammatical problems.

C = This is similar to the 'B' description, but the number of problems is more extensive. These may include significant grammatical or structural problems, too many generalities, and/or not fully addressing the main question(s) and/or issues outlined in the assignment instructions. 'C' essays often contain too many quoted passages from relevant materials which underscore a lack of reflection and/or in-depth analysis.

D = A grade of 'D' indicates that the student did a poor job in following assignment instructions and/or did not demonstrate an engagement with the materials to satisfactorily complete the assignment. Further, grammatical/structural problems make a 'D' essay quite difficult to follow. There are usually far too many generalities, a lack of analysis, and/or lack of reflection on the materials.

F = This either indicates that the assignment was not done or what was done was simply unacceptable for any number of reasons. This includes any indication of plagiarism and/or use of generative AI, which may entail further academic penalty.

ADA accommodation statement: UNT makes reasonable academic accommodation for students with disabilities. Students seeking accommodation must first register with the Office of Disability Access (ODA) to verify their eligibility. If a disability is verified, the ODA will

provide a student with an accommodation letter to be delivered to faculty to begin a private discussion regarding one's specific course needs. Students may request accommodations at any time; however, ODA notices of accommodation should be provided as early as possible in the semester to avoid delay in implementation. *Note that students must communicate with faculty throughout this process.*

Student Support Services: UNT provides resources to students to help ensure there are numerous outlets to turn to that wholeheartedly care for and are there for students in need, regardless of the nature of an issue or its severity. Listed below are several resources on campus that can support your academic success and mental well-being:

- Dean of Students: <https://studentaffairs.unt.edu/dean-of-students/>
- Student Health and Wellness Center: <https://studentaffairs.unt.edu/student-health-and-wellness-center/index.html>
- Counseling and Testing Services: <https://studentaffairs.unt.edu/counseling-and-testing-services/>
- UNT Care Team: <https://studentaffairs.unt.edu/dean-of-students/programs-and-services/care-team/>
- Eagle Engagement Center: <https://studentaffairs.unt.edu/eagle-engagement-center/index.html>

Survivor Advocacy: UNT is committed to providing a safe learning environment free of all forms of sexual misconduct, including sexual harassment sexual assault, domestic violence, dating violence, and stalking. Federal laws (Title IX and the Violence Against Women Act) and UNT policies prohibit discrimination on the basis of sex and therefore prohibit sexual misconduct. If you or someone you know is experiencing sexual harassment, relationship violence, stalking, and/or sexual assault, there are campus resources available to provide support and assistance. UNT's Survivor Advocates can assist a student who has been impacted by violence by filing protective orders, completing crime victim's compensation applications, contacting professors for absences related to an assault, working with housing to facilitate a room change where appropriate, and connecting students to other resources available both on and off campus. The Survivor Advocates can be reached at SurvivorAdvocate@unt.edu or by calling the Dean of Students Office at 940-565-2648. Additionally, alleged sexual misconduct can be non-confidentially reported to Equal Opportunity & Title IX at oeotix@unt.edu, <https://titleixeo.unt.edu/index.html>, or 940-565-2759.

Emergency notification and procedures: UNT uses a system called Eagle Alert to quickly notify students with critical information in the event of an emergency (e.g., severe weather, campus closing, and health and public safety emergencies like chemical spills, fires, or violence). Please make sure your information is current with this system.

Course disclaimer: Content in the arts can sometimes include works, situations, actions, and language that can be personally challenging or offensive to some students on the grounds, for example, of sexual explicitness, violence, or blasphemy. As the College of Visual Arts and Design is devoted to the principle of freedom of expression, artistic and otherwise, it is not the college's practice to censor these works or ideas on any of these grounds. Students who might feel unduly distressed or made uncomfortable by such expressions should withdraw at the start of the term and seek another course.

Schedule

Please complete the assigned readings before the scheduled class session. The professor reserves the right to alter this syllabus and schedule if necessary. © 2026 Lisa N. Owen

Week 1 (Aug 18 and 20): Welcome to the Course

Aug 18: Introduction to course content, themes, organization, and expectations

Aug 20: Jinah Kim and Todd Lewis, "Understanding South Asia's Religious Art," *Education about Asia* 25, no. 3 (2020): 24-31:

<https://www.asianstudies.org/publications/ea/archives/understanding-south-asias-religious-art/>

Weeks 2-4 (Aug 25 through Sept 10) – *Seated Buddha with Two Attendants, ca. AD 131* – Kimbell Art Museum

Week 2: iconography

Aug 25: 1) Kimbell Art Museum online description and accompanying audio narratives:

<https://kimbellart.org/collection/ap-198606>; and **2)** Arathi Menon, "A Buddha from Mathura," *Smarthistory*, May 5, 2020: <https://smarthistory.org/buddha-mathura/>

Aug 27: The 32 signs of a great man:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Physical_characteristics_of_the_Buddha

Week 3: context

Sept 01: Gregory Schopen, "On Monks, Nuns and 'Vulgar' Practices: The Introduction of the Image Cult into Indian Buddhism," *Artibus Asiae* 49 (1989): 153-68.

Sept 03: Vishakha N. Desai, "Reflections on the History and Historiography of Male Sexuality in Early Indian Art," in Vidya Dehejia ed., *Representing the Body: Gender Issues in Indian Art*. New Delhi: Kali for Women in Association with the Book Review Literary Trust, 1997, 42-55.

Week 4: new paradigms

Sept 08: 1) Melissa Kerin, "The Fetishistic Fiction of Museums' 'Tibetan' Shrines," *Hyperallergic*, Sept 01, 2025 <https://hyperallergic.com/the-fetishistic-fiction-of-museum-tibetan-shrines/>; and **2)** Ken Johnson, "'Collecting Paradise' at the Rubin: A Curious Case of Divergence," *The New York Times*, July 3, 2015.

Sept 10: (return) Kavita Singh, "Repatriation without Patria: Repatriating for Tibet," *Journal of Material Culture* 15 (2) (2010): 131-155.

Museum description #1 due Sunday, Sept 13, 11:59pm CDT

Weeks 5-7 (Sept 15 through Oct 01) – Celestial Female – Dallas Museum of Art

Week 5: iconography

Sept 15: 1) Anne Bromberg, ed., *The Arts of India, Southeast Asia, and the Himalayas*. New Haven and London: Dallas Museum of Art and Yale University Press, 2013, 62-3; and **2)** Kimberly Masteller, “A Celestial Nymph, or *Apsara* and *Pillar Fragment of a Devata*,” in *Masterworks from India and Southeast Asia, The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art*, University of Washington Press, 2017, 58-61.

Sept 17: Cristin McKnight Sethi, “Sacred Space and Symbolic form at Lakshmana Temple, Khajuraho (India),” *Smarthistory*, May 15, 2016:

<https://smarthistory.org/lakshmana-temple/?tl=lakshmana-temple&sidebar=asia-1-1000-c-e>

Week 6: context

Sept 22: Vidya Dehejia, “Reading Love Imagery on the Indian Temple,” in Rebecca M. Brown and Deborah S. Hutton, eds., *Asian Art*. Malden, MA; Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2006, 71-82.

Sept 24: 1) Devangana Desai, “The Goddess Hinghalaja of the Yogini Shrine at Khajuraho,” in Istvan Keul, ed., *Yogini in South Asia*, Routledge, 2013; and **2)** Padma Kaimal, “Where They Lived: Reimagining the Lost Yogini Temple in Kanchi,” in *Scattered Goddesses: Travels with the Yoginis*, Association for Asian Studies, 2012, 109-132.

Week 7: new paradigms

Sept 29: Tapati Guha-Thakurta, “Art History and the Nude: On Art, Obscenity, and Sexuality in Contemporary India,” in *Monuments, Objects, Histories: Institutions of Art in Colonial and Postcolonial India*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2004, 237-267.

Oct 01: Guest speaker (in person): Aayush Triguni, alumnus of the MA program in Art History, UNT.

Response essay #1 due Sunday, Oct 4, 11:59pm CDT

Weeks 8-10 (Oct 06 through Oct 22) – Jain *tirthankara* – Crow Museum of Asian Art of UTD

Week 8: iconography

Oct 06: 1) Robert R. Belanger, ed., “Jain *tirthankara*,” catalog entry from *The Trammell & Margaret Crow Collection of Asian Art*, 2008, 134-5; **2)** John E. Cort, *Framing the Jina: Narratives of Icons and Idols in Jain History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010, 54-60.

Oct 08: Lisa N. Owen, “Sculpture,” *Encyclopedia of Jainism*, Leiden: Brill, 2019, 667-696.

Week 9: context

Oct 13: John E. Cort, "Following the Jina, Worshipping the Jina: An Essay on Jain Rituals," in *The Peaceful Liberators: Jain Art from India*, LACMA, 1995, 38-54.

Oct 15: John E. Cort, "Installing absence? The consecration of a Jina image," in Robert Maniura and Rupert Shepherd, eds., *Presence: The Inherence of the Prototype within Images and Other Objects*, Aldershot, Eng.: Ashgate, 2006, 71-86.

Week 10: new paradigms

Oct 20: John E. Cort, "Art, Religion, and Material Culture: Some Reflections on Method," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 64, no. 3 (1996): 613-32.

Oct 22: Visit 2025 online exhibition titled *Collecting Devotion: Temples to Jinās – A Virtual Experience*: <https://www.artworkarchive.com/profile/asu-asian-art-history/exhibition/collecting-devotion-temples-to-jinas-an-online-experience> Make sure to also click link to 3D exhibition. Come to class with an assessment (3 positive critiques; 3 negative critiques) of this virtual exhibition in connection with user experience, content of educational materials, and digital display.

Museum description #2 due Sunday, Oct 25, 11:59pm CDT

Weeks 11-13 (Oct 27 through Nov 12) – Shiva Nataraja – Dallas Museum of Art

Week 11: iconography

Oct 27: 1) Anne Bromberg, "The Cult of Shiva in South India," in Anne Bromberg, ed., *The Arts of India, Southeast Asia, and the Himalayas*. New Haven and London: Dallas Museum of Art and Yale University Press, 2013, 74-77.

Oct 29: No class – read Farisa Khalid, "Shiva as Lord of the Dance (Nataraja)," in *Smarthistory*, August 9, 2015: <https://smarthistory.org/shiva-as-lord-of-the-dance-nataraja/>

Week 12: context

Nov 03: Padma Kaimal, "Shiva Nataraja: Multiple Meanings of an Icon," in Rebecca M. Brown and Deborah S. Hutton, eds., *A Companion to Asian Art and Architecture*. Wiley-Blackwell Publishing, 2015, 471-85.

Nov 05: Emma Natalya Stein and Beth Harris, "Queen Sembiyan Mahadevi as the Goddess Parvati," *Smarthistory*, December 18, 2019: <https://smarthistory.org/queen-or-goddess/>

Week 13: new paradigms

Nov 10: Richard H. Davis, "Loss and Recovery of Ritual Self," in *Lives of Indian Images*, Princeton University Press, 1997, 222-259.

Nov 12: Richard H. Davis, "New Lives for Returned Images: The Family of Icons from Sripuranthan," *Marg* 69 (2018): 64-77.

Response essay #2 due Sunday, Nov 15, 11:59pm CDT

Week 14: Nov 17 and Nov 19 – Current Engagements

Nov 17: Guest speaker (via Zoom): Padma Kaimal, Batza Family Chair and Professor Emerita, Department of Art & Art History, Colgate University. For Professor Kaimal's lecture and class discussion please read Chapter 4 and the Epilogue to her book *Scattered Goddesses: Travels with the Yoginis*, Association for Asian Studies, 2012.

Nov 19: No class – begin work on rumination paper

Thanksgiving Holiday Break (Nov 23-27)

Week 15: Dec 01-03 – Course Conclusion

Dec 01: Addressing Repatriation in Today's Museum Spaces

Dec 03: Course wrap up

Rumination Paper due at the conclusion of the designated final exam period for this class:

Thursday, Dec 10, 8-10am