



*Flushed with love, the moon puts forth his hand
upon the closed breasts of the night whose dark robe he has opened*

READING LOVE IMAGERY ON THE INDIAN TEMPLE

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Standing in the midst of scrub forests, with the fragrant blossoms of the *mahua* tree adding crimson splashes of color to the otherwise tan and brown scene, are a group of some twenty-five temples at the site of Khajuraho, ancient capital of the Chandella rulers (ca. 831–1308). Today the sandstone temples are deserted and in partial ruins, but originally they stood in their grandeur along the borders of an ornamental lake of irregular outline. The congregation of so large a number of temples at a single site (the ruins of several more exist), most of them erected within a century and a half, from 950 to 1100, is suggestive of a special goal. The fact that they are dedicated to a range of Hindu deities—Shiva, Vishnu, solar god Surya, and the Goddess—as well as to the saviors of the Jain faith, suggest the possibility that the Chandella monarchs intended their capital to be a major sacred center.

In the last twenty-five years, since tourism has become a priority in India, Khajuraho has acquired fame, one might almost say infamy, as the erotic temple capital of India, and coffee table books highlighting the sensational aspect of this art have proliferated. Khajuraho's entwined figures are carved with remarkable mastery over the flexibility of the human figure, both male and female; they seem to offer a plea to viewers to join the sculptors in their appreciation of the joy of love and sex. But there is much else to admire at Khajuraho, not the least being the exquisite architectural conception of the temples; a series of halls with pyramidal roofs, each taller than the preceding, finally sweep up in a crescendo of curves to the tall tower that crowns the sanctum. Equally exquisite are the sinuously elegant forms of the world of humans and immortals who people the walls of these temples. While the deities are presented frontally and in a somewhat formal mode, the human male and female figures twist and turn with abandon. Figures of both

Detail of embracing couple from the south "joining" wall of the Lakshmana temple

men and women are long-limbed, slender, and sensuous; eyes are elongated, limbs are smooth and pliant; long hair is styled in a great variety of ways; and jewelry is elaborate and abundant. The sculptor's art had clearly reached a stage of great fluency and perfection. Yet we know next to nothing about the sculptors who worked on the temples. All we may assume is that, like elsewhere in ancient and medieval India, a workshop system was in effect and an entire guild worked jointly on each temple to produce its finest work; in such a scenario, individual names were considered somewhat irrelevant.

The joyful experience of love is revealed in distinctive forms of expression found in every culture. Unique to India is the celebration of love in the form of graphic three-dimensional imagery carved in stone on the walls of Hindu temples. Such images were not reserved for the viewing pleasure of a select audience of temple patrons and their immediate coterie; rather, being displayed on the outer walls of temples in a public arena, these erotic images met a much wider gaze. The viewing audience may also have been extremely diverse since temples generally served as a unifying center for different sectarian groups. Irrespective of whether viewer reactions were similar or consistent, the temples continued to function as cohesive institutions that could, and did, encompass a rich variety of attitudes.

Although love imagery was created across the length and breadth of India from the first century B.C. to the nineteenth century, this essay concentrates on the tenth- and eleventh-century temples at Khajuraho in central India, not only because these are renowned for erotic images but also because their sacred iconographic programs have recently been studied. Clearly any assessment of erotic temple imagery must take into account the sacred programs and religious functions of the shrines as well as the cultural milieu.

"Medieval" (ca. 600–1300) India was a culture with attitudes toward sexuality very different from those we encounter today. A consideration of the titles given to a Hindu monarch indicate, for instance, that after heroism, physical distinction was the trait most admired. While the eighth-century Pallava ruler Rajasimha was praised as a great warrior and fearless conqueror, inscriptions on his personal chapel at his capital of Kanchipuram mention also that he was handsome (*abhirama*), possessed of the grace of the god of love (*kamavilasa*), and sported the attraction of musk (*gandhahasti*). When the ruler Vijayalaya established the Chola dynasty (ca. 862–1310) by capturing the southern town of Tanjavur in the year 862, the terminology used in the official declaration alludes to this event as love-sport:

He, the light of the Solar race, took possession of Tanchapuri — which was picturesque to the sight, was as beautiful as Alaka [mountain], had reached the sky by its high turrets, and the whitewash on whose mansions appeared like the scented cosmetic applied to the body — just as he would seize by the hand his own wife who has beautiful eyes, graceful curls, a cloth covering her body, and the sandal paste as white as lime, in order to sport with her.¹

When Krishna III of the Rashtrakuta dynasty (ca. 753–973) was crowned king in 939 and prepared to collect revenue from the tax-paying provinces of his Deccan kingdom, the official account described the relationship between the monarch and the provinces, called

quarters, in terms of love-sport. It speaks of "the quarters, which began to tremble and be submissive on account of this preparation to exact tribute — as girls would have manifested tremor and affection at his preparation to take their hand — became pleasing to him in consequence of their observing the proper time for paying it of their own accord — as the others [girls] would have been dear to him in consequence of their keeping to the auspicious juncture for giving themselves away."²

Sexuality and love were not treated as private and personal matters; rather, sexuality was a valued attribute of a leader or monarch, to be celebrated in official charters and inscriptions. It is intriguing to note that in ancient Mesopotamia sexuality was similarly linked to potency, male vigor, authority, and hence dominance.³ In India, it was the hallmark of a ruler that he strike a balance between sexual vitality, which implied regal power, and control of the senses, which spoke of yogic power. It is in this context that the Khajuraho temples and their erotic imagery must be examined.

From the eighth century onward, northern India was divided into series of regional kingdoms of varying size in which local loyalties, rather than a central authority, played a major role. These regional dynastic houses operated on the Indian feudal system in which kings granted land to vassals in return for a portion of the revenue from that land. For the privilege of ruling their mini-kingdoms, feudatories had to provide military support whenever their overlord went to war, to proclaim his name in any inscriptions they issued, and to attend his court on a variety of ceremonial and formal occasions.

In the early tenth century, local Chandella chieftains with somewhat dubious tribal backgrounds had, for a period of a hundred years, ruled a small area of northern India as feudatories of the powerful Pratihara dynasty whose kingdom lay to their north and east. In a bold move, Yashovarman Chandella (reigned 925–50) appropriated from his Pratihara overlord an important statue of Vishnu and built a sandstone temple to enshrine it at his capital of Khajuraho. This temple, known today as the Lakshmana, and completed by his son Dhanga in 954, was Yashovarman's defiant gesture to establish the sovereignty of his new dynasty. The early part of Dhanga's reign was devoted to extensive military activity to consolidate the new kingdom. His own temple known as the Vishvanatha, completed in 999, was dedicated to Shiva and enshrined both a stone and an emerald linga. Since the use of emerald in images of worship traditionally signifies the fulfillment of desires, the consecration of the emerald linga may have been Dhanga's act of thanksgiving both for his military successes and for his lifespan of close to a century. One of the most important of Chandella rulers was Vidyadhara (reigned 1004–35), during whose reign the Chandellas were recognized as the dominant power in northern India; Vidyadhara twice organized successful resistance against the early Muslim invaders of India. It is probable that he was the builder of the Kandariya Mahadeo temple that marks the climax of building activity at Khajuraho.

Hindu temples, simple in plan, consist of a square sanctum fronted by a square hall; larger temples may have a second hall as well as a porch. Among the twenty or so still standing at Khajuraho are three large *sandhara* temples in which an inner circumambulatory passage encircles the shrine; these three temples are the focus of this essay. The earliest of these *sandhara* temples is the Lakshmana, the creation of the first Chandella ruler Yashovarman, completed in 954 and dedicated to Vishnu. It was followed by two Shiva

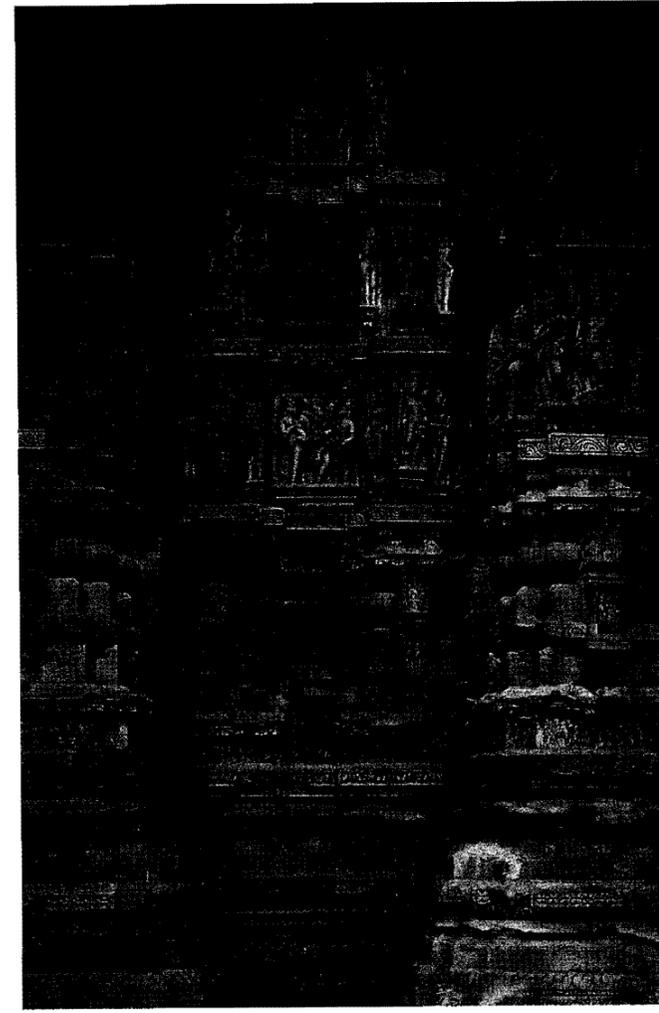
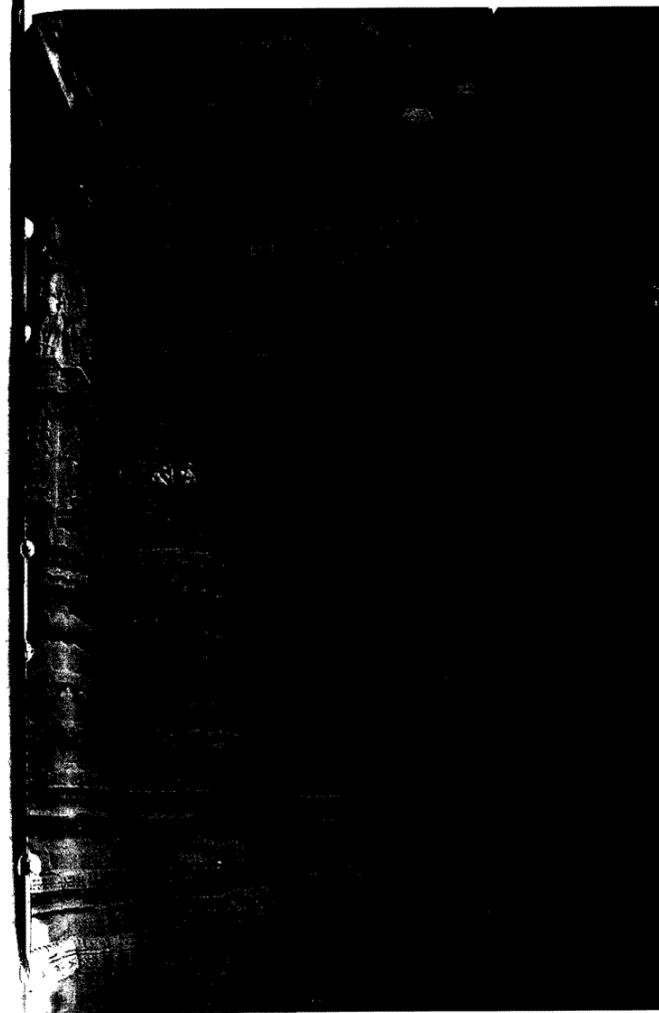
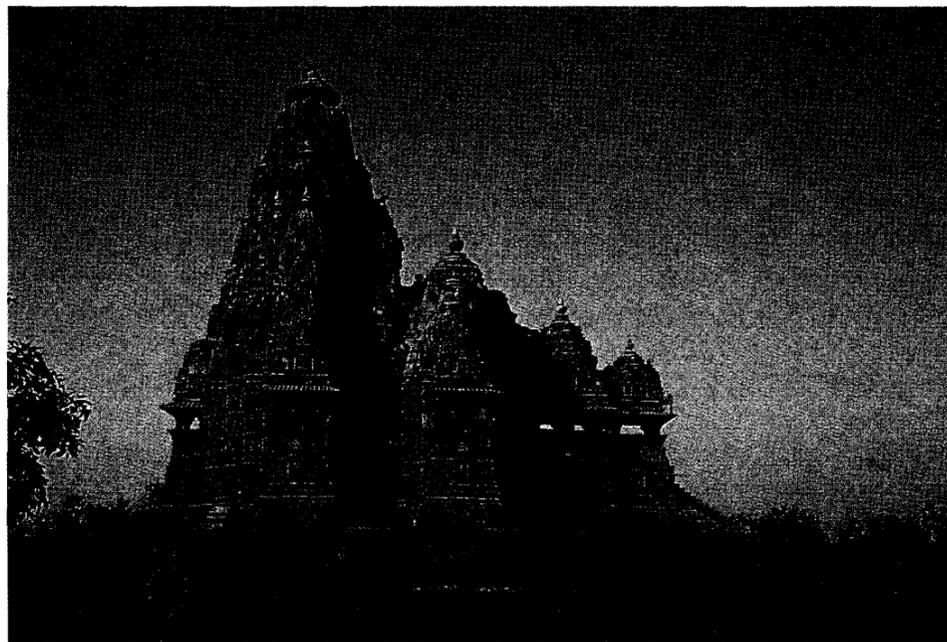
temples, the Vishvanatha temple of King Dhanga, completed in 999, and the Kandariya Mahadeo temple created almost certainly by King Vidyadhara (fig. 1). All three temples display a graceful grouping of the superstructures of their four units, with the lowest pyramidal roof over the entrance porch and the successively taller pyramids above the two halls, sweeping up to the elegant tower above the shrine. All three exhibit prominently placed erotic imagery and are royal commissions of the Chandella monarchs.

Ancient *shilpa*, or art, texts written for practicing architects and sculptors, speak of the sanctum as the bridegroom and the main hall as the bride and refer to the juncture wall between them as the *milana-sthala*, or meeting-place. The texts further specify, "That place in front where the bridegroom meets the bride becomes the *sandhiksetra*, or place of juncture" (also trysting place).⁴ It is on the exterior of these juncture walls of the Lakshmana, Vishvanatha, and Kandariya Mahadeo temples that we find the erotic imagery for which Khajuraho is renowned. The ground plan of the *sandhara* temples (and only of these) reveals that the square of the sanctum and the square of the hall actually overlap to create this juncture wall. The occasional small erotic figure appears on various parts of the temple; however, it is at the very center of this joining wall, this meeting-place, that the temple builders carved a panel of entwined or "joining" couples, positioned on two or three levels according to the scale of the temple (figs. 2, 3).

The idea of thus creating a visual and architectural pun need not seem strange or far-fetched since it was a commonplace in the literary vocabulary. For instance, the lengthy dedicatory inscription on the Vishvanatha temple contains a passage that plays with the

Figure 1. The Kandariya Mahadeo temple at Khajuraho, dedicated to god Shiva and built during the reign of Chandella monarch Vidyadhara (1004–35)

dual meanings of the word *digambara*, meaning "sky-clad," a word largely used to designate the Jain sect of naked monks. One verse of the inscription is in the form of a joking dialogue between god Shiva and his consort Parvati; she inquires



who is at the door and intentionally pretends to misunderstand Shiva when he answers "Digambara" (Shiva often went around clad only in a loincloth with snakes and other ornaments to cover him). Parvati counters that she will not open the door to a Jain monk.⁵ With puns a common form of literary expression, it should be no great surprise to come across puns in the visual arts and to find images of *sandhi* (union) at points of *sandhi* (juncture or combination).

Figures 2 and 3. The south and north "joining" wall, connecting the shrine and hall of the Kandariya Mahadeo temple and adorned with sculpted images of "joining" couples

Imagery as Auspicious and Celebratory

In exploring the erotic imagery, the obvious is often overlooked: one reason for the profusion of such imagery on temple walls is surely to celebrate the joy and pleasure of life, of love and of sex. This important fact is often relegated to oblivion in the desire to seek explanations for what has today become an embarrassment to many Indians, whose earlier

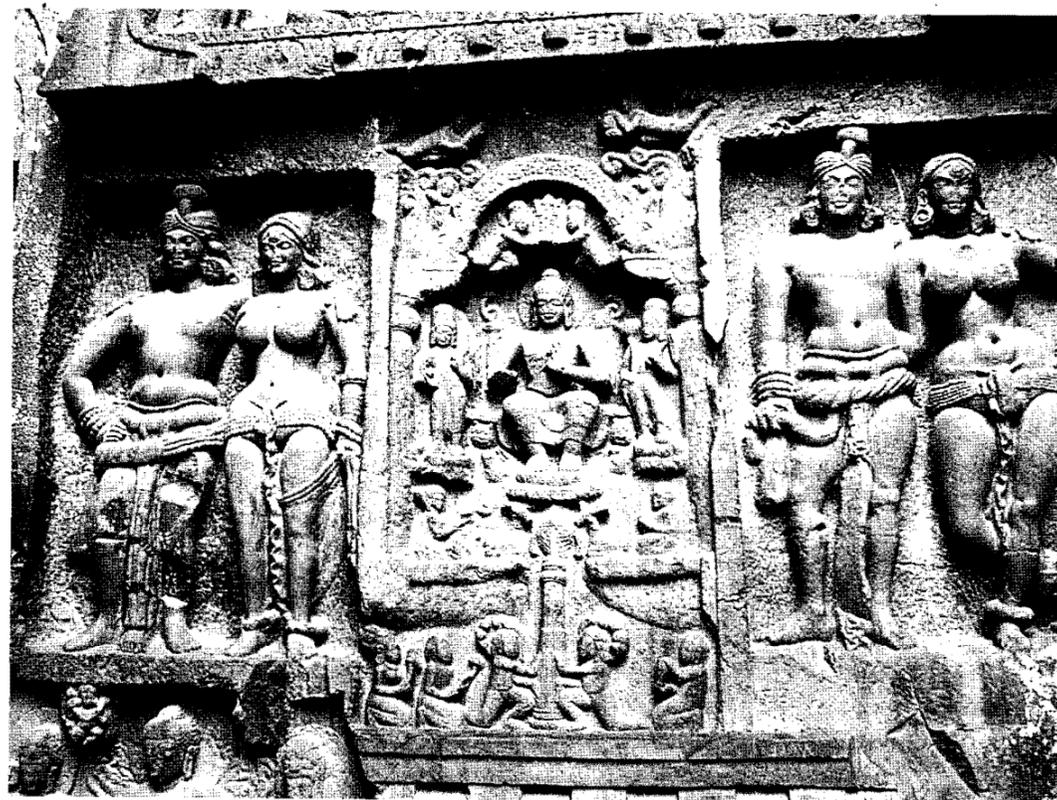


Figure 4. *Mithunas* (loving couples) in the veranda of the Buddhist rock-cut chapel at Karle, 1st century A.D.

heritage has been superseded by centuries of Islamic thought, British Victorian values, and nationalistic ideals. The loving couple, or *mithuna*, is a stock theme of Indian art, being seen as early as the first century B.C. in the decoration of Buddhist stupas. The significance of the theme is demonstrated by the prominence given to *mithunas* in the veranda of the rock-cut Buddhist monastic chapel at Karle, created in the first century A.D. along the west coast of India, where we find eight life-sized loving couples with sensuously modeled bodies (fig. 4). Each male fondly places his arm around the shoulder of his partner, and inscriptions, speaking of them as *mithunas*, inform us that some were gifted by monks. For voluptuous couples to be thus displayed in a sacred Buddhist monastic setting at Karle, the *mithuna* theme must have won early widespread acceptance. The couple, like the individual woman, was an obvious and indisputable emblem of fertility, and thereby of growth, abundance, and prosperity. From this, it was a short step to considering the couple an auspicious emblem, equally appropriate for adorning the walls of a palace, a temple, or a Buddhist chapel. When sculptors of the third century A.D. created friezes portraying the main events from the Buddha's life as decoration for monuments at the Buddhist monasteries of Nagarjunkonda, they considered it wholly appropriate to separate each life scene with loving couples flanked by pilasters.

To state that love was a prominent theme in art, whether sacred or secular, might seem curious to those less familiar with the tenor of life in ancient India. Ancient Indian sages propounded that the goals of life were fourfold, and each individual was exhorted to

pursue all four and not neglect any in favor of the other three. *Dharma* implied ethical living; *artha* was the acquisition of wealth through the rightful pursuit of one's profession; *kama* was love (familial and sexual); and *moksha* was spiritual liberation. While a Hindu temple was constructed to aid the pursuit of spiritual liberation through meditation, symbolized by the worship of the deity enshrined within its sanctum, it was appropriate that the temple reveal the wholeness and totality of life by carrying on its walls imagery relating to the other three goals. In addition to portraying stories from the myths relating to the deities, the temple walls frequently show preaching sages, scenes of hunting, festival processions, as well as images of women, couples, and lovemaking. It is in this context that one may seek to understand much of the love imagery on temple walls.

Equally significant is the auspicious-cum-apotropaic role played by images of couples in protecting a temple. Cultures across the world—for instance Pompeii during the second and first centuries B.C.—have believed in the power of images, particularly of those that depict inappropriate attitudes, sexual or otherwise.⁶ Warding off the evil eye by the use of apotropaism is not a rare phenomenon. Places of juncture, in particular, are considered to be especially vulnerable points, liminal areas that require additional protection. And it is precisely where the sanctum of the Khajuraho temples meets the hall that such apotropaic images are seen in greatest profusion. In fact, as one examines the temples more closely, one may discern erotic figures placed along the juncture of the roofs as well.

Metaphor

Images of loving couples may also be understood on a metaphorical level. Several decades ago the eloquent writer Mulk Raj Anand coined the phrase "union of cosmic principles" to suggest that entwined couples represent the union of the individual human soul with the divine (fig. 5). Ancient philosophical texts known as Upanishads, composed beginning in the fourth century B.C., put forward a philosophy termed "monism" that opposed any kind of dualism and proposed that the individual soul and the universal soul were not two distinct entities. Rather, the individual soul emerged from the universal principle, lived its life on earth, and when it reached an advanced spiritual state, it merged back into the universal soul, realizing the bliss of salvation. To explain this profound philosophy of the essential unity of an apparent duality, the sages of the Upanishads used sexual terminology. They compared the bliss of salvation that arises when the individual soul merges with the universal soul to the blissful state that arises when lovers merge and lose themselves in each other. If sexual terminology could be used freely and explicitly in sacred literature to explain the concept of monism and the bliss of salvation, then surely it could be used in the visual arts, as three-dimensional sculpture, to explain the same concept.

Can the metaphorical explanation be extended to the scenes on the juncture walls of the three *sandhara* temples at Khajuraho? These joining scenes invariably portray an erotic couple flanked by two other figures, one male and one female, though occasionally both female, who actively assist the couple in achieving their union. For instance, both the Kandariya Mahadeo and Vishvanatha temples feature a couple united in a yogic-coital



posture with one partner in the headstand pose and the other supported by helpers. Is it too radical to suggest that spiritual union needs the intervention of gurus and guides to lead to that state of liberation? When the Vishvanatha wall depicts unconventional postures, is it going too far to say that they, too, may be interpreted on a metaphorical level? It may be difficult for us to conceive of such a concept since, as twentieth-century viewers, we are accustomed to regarding sex as an intimate private matter.

What about the viewers and their responses to the erotic imagery on the temple walls? In India's ancient theory of aesthetics, a viewer response theory called *rasa-shringara*, or love, is the first of the nine aesthetic emotions, or *rasas*; in fact, love is described as the king of *rasas* (*rasaraja*). To what extent can we suggest that a response of arousal may have been intended to resonate with

Figure 5. Left: Intertwined couple on wall of the Devi Jagadamba temple at Khajuraho, 11th century

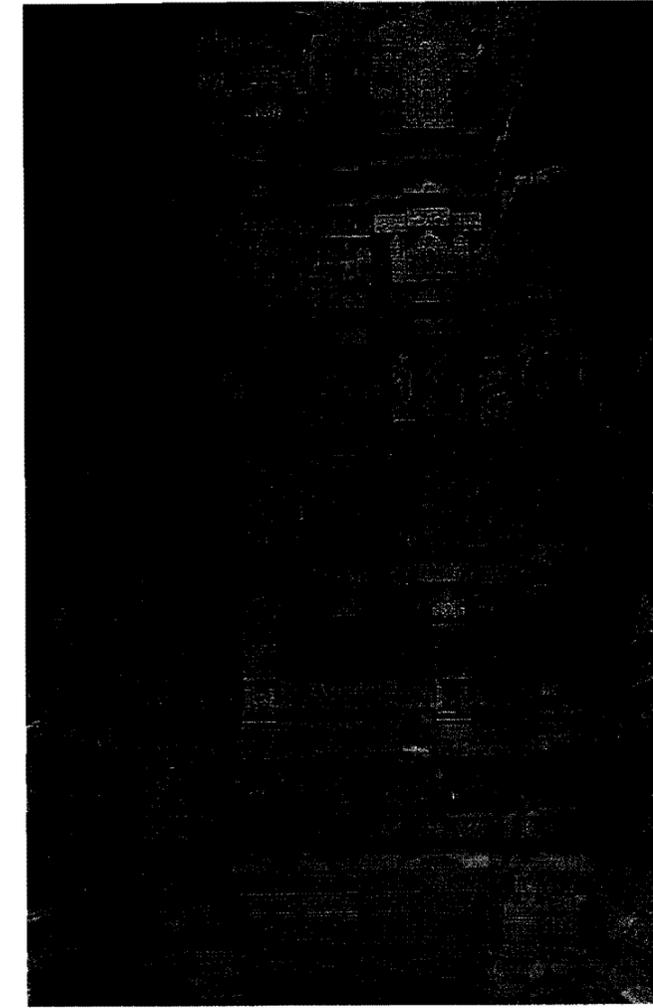
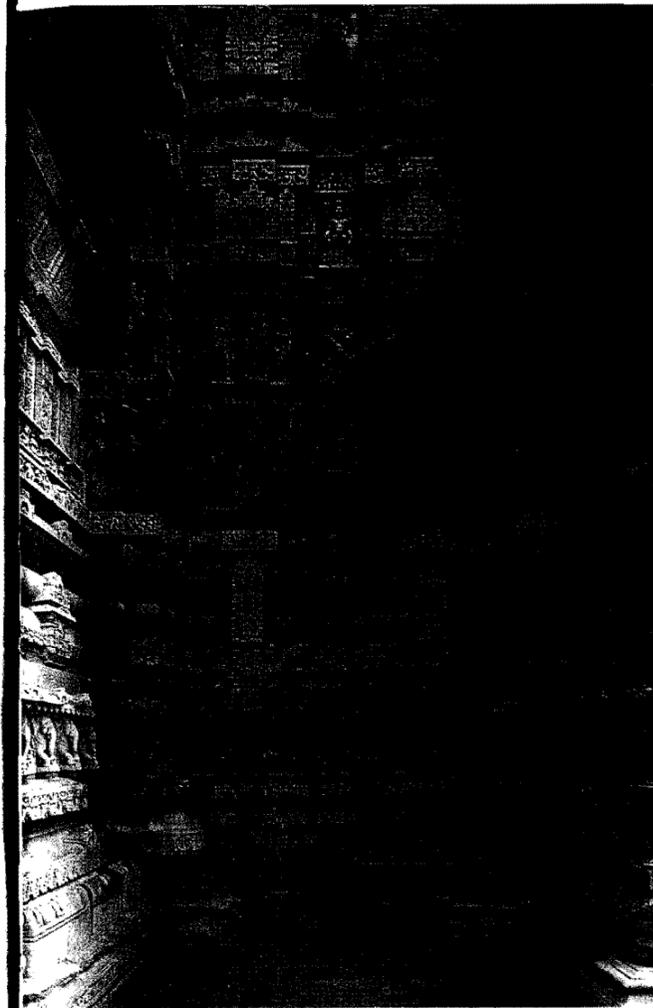
Figures 6 and 7. Below: The south and north "joining" walls, connecting the shrine and hall of the Vishvanatha temple, adorned with sculpted images of "joining" couples. This Shiva temple was sponsored by Chandella ruler Dhanga and completed in the year 999.



the importance given to fertility? A point that needs consideration here is the bashful attitude of the "helpers" in two of the scenes on the Vishvanatha temple's joining walls; in one, both women flanking a coital couple cover their faces with one hand in apparent embarrassment, while in another, a woman uses both hands to cover her eyes (figs. 6, 7). On the Lakshmana temple, the woman next to an entwined couple turns away from them with a degree of hesitance and uncertainty. On the Kandariya Mahadeo walls, by contrast, none of the figures display any misgivings but appear quite matter-of-fact regarding the activities of the central couple. It would seem that the temples embody the two apparently contradictory attitudes of acceptance and embarrassment toward sexuality. Such images do not seem to be metaphors for spiritual bliss; if they were thus intended, surely flanking figures would not display misgivings but would rather reinforce the underlying metaphor.

Esoteric Tantric Sects

One explanation of the activities portrayed on these juncture walls is that they represent the practices of esoteric tantric sects. The Kaula sect of Shaivism, for instance, which was prominent during the tenth and eleventh centuries when the Khajuraho temples were built, believed that the path to salvation lay through the five Ms, so-called because each of the five items start with the Sanskrit letter *M*. These five ingredients are *matsya*, or fish; *mamsa*, or meat; *mudra*, or grain; *mada*, or wine; and *maithuna*, or sex. Kaulas defined the ultimate state, to which they gave the name Kula, as one in which sight and mind are united, the sense organs lose their individuality, and sight merges into the object to be visualized.⁷ They advocated the path of *bhoga*, or enjoyment, rather than yoga, or discipline. Contemporaneous literature speaks disparagingly of their lavish banquets that culminated in orgiastic rituals. While the sculptures have indeed been read as portraying the rites of such tantric sects, the explanation presents problems that need to be resolved. Since all three temples are royal dedications, the implication would be that the monarchs themselves were followers of tantric practices; inscriptions, however, suggest that the monarchs followed the Vedic path. The Lakshmana temple inscription, for instance, concludes with the wish "May the law of the three Vedas prosper!" The Vishvanatha temple record speaks of religious services administered according to the *Shastras*, or orthodox sacred texts, by chief priest Yashodhara, and performed by Brahmans of pure lineage. A second problem pertains to the secret hidden nature of tantric practices that, according to their texts, must never be divulged or revealed to a non-initiate. Why then would their practices be displayed so prominently on temple walls? The only way to counter this objection would be to postulate that portrayals of Kaula tantric practices were permitted by their Vedic opponents in order to hold them up to public ridicule. This explanation is, however, exceedingly unlikely, for ridicule hardly thrives via emphatic portrayal of the ridiculed on the walls of such magnificent temples. Similarly suspect is the suggestion that the naked figures of "monks" seen in certain panels represent monks of the *digambara* sect of heterodox Jains who are thus held up to public contempt.⁸ This issue is unresolved.



It should be noted that tantra visualizes a set of seven *chakras*, or centers of spiritual energy, that exist at various points within the body. The lowest is visualized at the base of the spine, the next in the genitalia, and the topmost at the apex of the skull. Tantric practitioners strive to arouse awareness within the *chakras*, directing sexual energy upward toward the top of the skull. When such energy reaches the topmost *chakra*, known as *sahasrara*, or thousand-petaled lotus, a state of meditative bliss is achieved. Throughout such tantric practice, arousal is to be maintained to achieve a state of meditative perception; seed is never to be spilled. It is this aspect of ascetic and yogic arousal that is behind the concept of the *linga* of Shiva; the phallic emblem represents Shiva's yogic and meditative control and not his sexuality, as might mistakenly be thought.

Figures 8 and 9. The south and north "joining" walls, connecting the shrine and hall of the Lakshmana temple, adorned with sculpted images of "joining" couples. This temple, dedicated to god Vishnu, was constructed by Yashovarman Chandella and dedicated by his son Dhanga in 954.

Allegorical Play

Among the most intriguing and ingenious attempts to explain the Khajuraho images is the suggestion that the erotic panels arranged in two levels on the Lakshmana temple represent the characters of an allegorical play.⁹ On both juncture walls of the Lakshmana, the upper erotic group is a dignified standing *mithuna* couple while, by contrast, the lower couple is entwined and accompanied by a "monk"-like figure (figs. 8, 9). Allegorical plays were a known feature of the Indian literary scene, and one such, the *Prabodhacandrodaya*, or "Moonrise of Awakening," was written for the Chandella monarch Kirtivarman, who ruled an entire century after the construction of the Lakshmana temple. This later play presents the battle between the camps of two rival monarchs. On the one side is King Viveka or Discrimination (a term used to indicate the power to discriminate between right and wrong, real and illusory), his wife Upanishad (a Vedic philosophic text), their son Awakening, and their allies such as Reason, Faith, and Peace. In the opposite camp is King Mahamoha, or Delusion, his paramour Mithyadrishti (Error), and their allies, the Kapalikas (an extreme Shaiva cult), the Carvaka materialists, the Buddhists, the Jains, as well as Deceit, Greed, and Egoism. On the allegorical level the play may be viewed as the defeat of delusion by discernment, resulting in the rise of awakening and knowledge. It may also be seen in the framework of battle between the Vedic order and various heretical sects. And finally, as the play's prologue suggests, it represents the combat between the Chandella King Kirtivarman, who is likened to Discrimination, and his rival, the Chedi monarch, likened to Delusion. For the dignified *mithuna* on the upper level of the Lakshmana temple's joining wall to be read as King Viveka and Queen Upanishad, and for the lower entwined couple to be seen as Mahamoha and his paramour, it would first be necessary to postulate the existence of an earlier version of the play in the reign of King Yashovarman, patron of the Lakshmana temple. It would also be necessary to suggest a reason such a play held so special a significance for the monarch that he thought it worthy of depiction on the walls of his temple. The attempt to identify specific characters from the play in the many flanking figures seen on the Lakshmana walls seems somewhat forced. There is no known precedent for such a representation. Finally, even if such an explanation is proposed for the Lakshmana temple, it cannot apply to the other two *sandhara* temples. Of the three tiers on the Vishvanatha temple's joining wall, the lowest portrays a deity while the upper two tiers both show active erotic scenes and not contrasting groups. In the Kandariya Mahadeo temple, all three tiers depict intense erotic poses. The gestures of the figures sculpted on the temple walls are indeed dramatic, serving to remind us that dance and drama played an important role in shaping the repertoire of visual artists in ancient India. Artistic vocabulary drew heavily upon dramatic vocabulary, and the Khajuraho temple walls strongly suggest a public display and viewers; they seem to be concerned with communicating with an audience rather than with encoding esoteric ideas (fig. 10).

Even within the field of erotic images, the Khajuraho temples carry a hierarchy of representation. Upon the juncture walls of the temples themselves are aristocratic and divine figures; along the platform upon which each of the temples stand are a range of figures of lesser status variously engaged, but including also baser forms of eroticism such as bestiality. These depictions seem to defy explanation.



Figure 10. Villagers performing puja at Khajuraho

Sacred Program

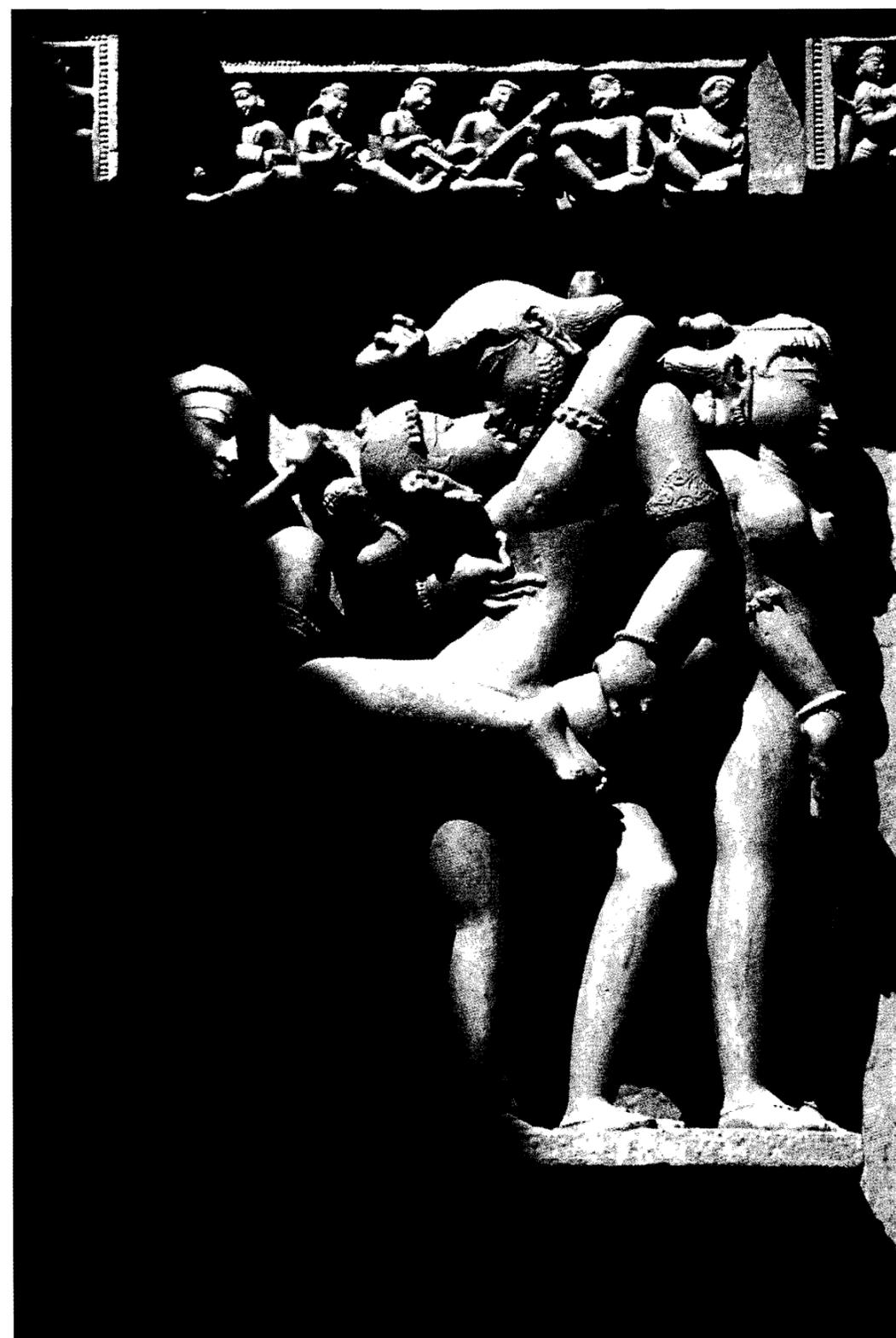
It would be appropriate now to turn to the sacred programs of the temples, of which the Lakshmana is dedicated to Vishnu, and the Vishvanatha and Kandariya Mahadeo to Shiva. Recent scholarly research on the iconographical programs of these temples indicates that their imagery is based on the concept of a hierarchical and pyramidal emanation of deities or cosmic elements.¹⁰ Starting from the inner sanctum and moving outward, such emanation results in the evolution of the universe; in reverse, commencing from the exterior and moving inward, the emanation culminates in its involution or dissolution.

The philosophic system known as Pancharatra is seen as the basis for the Lakshmana Vishnu temple. Pancharatra visualizes the unmanifest supreme without form, who then enters the stage of being-becoming and finally manifests in a variety of forms that include the incarnations of Vishnu. In meditative practice, the devotee starts with the manifest and moves gradually toward the supreme being. The existence of such a complex metaphysical ideology makes it problematic to sustain the theory that an allegorical play was portrayed on the temple's walls. The ideology underlying the Shiva temple of Kandariya Mahadeo is

Figure 11. Priest beside the colossal linga or aniconic form of Shiva, of polished sandstone and more than two and one-half meters tall, from the Matangeshvara temple, 11th century



Figure 12. Far right: Detail of embracing couple from the south "joining" wall of the Lakshmana temple



the Shaiva Siddhanta system; its emanation principle commences with formless Shiva in the sanctum's aniconic linga (fig. 11) and moves through the manifest-unmanifest Sadashiva, to the various manifest forms of Shiva.

Both the Vaishnava Pancharatra system and the Shaiva Siddhanta philosophy assert that the supreme being, who is unmanifest and formless, takes on form to help the devotee in worship and meditation. Both are esoteric paths that belong to the right-handed (*dakshina*) tantra as opposed to the left-handed (*vama*). The distinction between right- and left-handed tantra lies in the concepts of literality and symbolic substitution; thus if a tantric text demands an offering of blood, left-handed tantrics follow it literally while the right-handed system would substitute a blood-red hibiscus flower. So, although the inscriptions of the monarchs responsible for these temples speak of them as upholding the Vedic path, they appear, in fact, to be followers of right-handed tantric philosophies that were apparently not considered to be heterodox paths but accepted as belonging within the scope of the Vedic fold.

Returning to a reading of the love imagery on these temple walls, we find ourselves

faced with a curious situation. Since all three temples belong to philosophical systems of right-handed tantra, and since such systems, whether Shaiva or Vaishnava, believe in substitution, one might ask why the temple walls portray actual sexual rites in place of using a substitute for the element of *maithuna*, or sex. Perhaps the answer is implicit in the very question. Perhaps the stone imagery on the temple walls stood as a substitute for the physical performance of sexual rites (fig. 12). Possibly this last hypothesis is one that most adequately takes into account the various apparently conflicting facts and provides a manner of coming to terms with the erotic imagery and a means to partially reconcile apparent contradictions.

Love Imagery

One thing is certain: no single explanation accounts for the many categories of love images on the temple walls, which may be read on a number of levels, depending perhaps on the level of cultural and spiritual sophistication of the viewer. *Mithunas*, or loving couples, stood for growth, abundance, and prosperity and were an auspicious and accepted decoration on temple walls; they made reference also to *kama*, one of the four goals of life in ancient India. Erotically entwined "joining" images were placed on the walls that connect the sanctum likened to the bridegroom, with the hall likened to the bride, to create a visual and architectural pun. Love imagery also served an auspicious-cum-apotropaic function, placed specially at those vulnerable points where a juncture occurred in order to protect a temple from danger. Love images may also be read on a metaphorical level, with the bliss of sexual union understood to suggest the bliss of salvation that arises upon the union of individual soul with the infinite. Finally, we must take into account the fact that the sacred programs of the temples belong to right-handed tantric paths that reject the extreme and literal practices of left-handed tantrics and use symbolic substitution for various rites including the five *Ms*. The sculpted love imagery on the joining walls of the temples may be interpreted as the substitute for the physical performance of sexual rituals by the right-handed tantrics, whether followers of the Pancharatra or Shaiva Siddhanta systems. ☉

Notes

The epigraph is from "The Moon," *Sanskrit Poetry from Vidyakara's Treasury*, trans. Daniel H. H. Ingalls (Cambridge, Mass., and London: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1979), no. 944, p. 205.

1. Inscription no. 205, verse 45, in *South Indian Inscriptions* (Madras: Archaeological Survey of India, 1920), 3:418.

2. Quoted in R. G. Bhandarkar, "Karhad Plates of Krishna III: Saka-Samvat 793," *Epigraphia Indica* 4 (1896-97): 278-90.

3. Irene J. Winter, "Sex, Rhetoric, and the Public Monument: The Alluring Body of Naram-Sin of Agade," in *Sexuality in Ancient Art*, ed. Natalie Boymel Kampen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 11-26.

4. Ramacandra Kaulacara, *Silpa Prakasa*, trans. Alice Boner and Adasiva Rath Sarma (Leiden: Brill, 1966), pt. 2, p. 111.

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