

## Hindu Art and Architecture

As we saw in Chapter 7, Hindu religion and art are infused with a deep respect for sexuality, evident even in the architecture. The Kandarya [KAHN-dahr-yah] Mahadeva temple (Fig. 11.8) at Khajuraho, the capital of the Chandella [chan-deh-lah] dynasty, represents the epitome of northern Indian Hindu architecture. Its rising towers are meant to suggest the peaks of the Himalayas, home of the Hindu gods, and this analogy would have been even clearer when the temple was painted in its original white gesso. The plan (Fig. 11.9) is a double cross, with arms extending north and south from the east-west axis. At the first crossing is the *mandapa* [MAHN-dah-pah], the columned assembly hall. At the second crossing is the *garbhagriha* [GAR-bah-gree-hah], or "womb chamber," the symbolic sacred cavern at the heart of the sacred mountain/temple. Here rests the cult image of the Brahman, in this case the *lingam*, or symbol of male sexuality, of Shiva, the first, or formless emanation of the Brahman. (Recall from Chapter 7 that the Brahman is the creator and the universal soul.) Although it is actually almost completely dark, the *garbhagriha* is considered by Hindu worshippers to be filled with the pure light of the Brahman. The towers of the temple rise from east to west, as if gathering around the central tower, known as the *shikara* [SHEE-kah-rah], that rises to a height of over 100 feet above the *garbhagriha*. As the height increases, the temple seems to gather the energy of the Hindu religion to a single rising point, soaring with the spirit of the worshipper.

By the twelfth century, Hinduism had spread from India southeast into present-day Cambodia, where Hindu art achieved a monumental imperial grandeur. In Cambodia, the Khmer monarchy established its capital at Angkor, about 150 miles northwest of present-day Phnom Penh. Covering about 70 square miles, the city was crossed by broad avenues and canals and filled with royal palaces and temples. The largest of these temples, Angkor Wat (Fig. 11.10), was created by Suryavarman [suh-rah-yah-vahr-mahn] II (r. 1113–ca. 1150). Five central towers, representing the five peaks of Mount Meru, the center of the Hindu cosmos, rise above a moat surrounding the complex. The approach to the galleries at the towers' base is from the west, crossing a long bridge

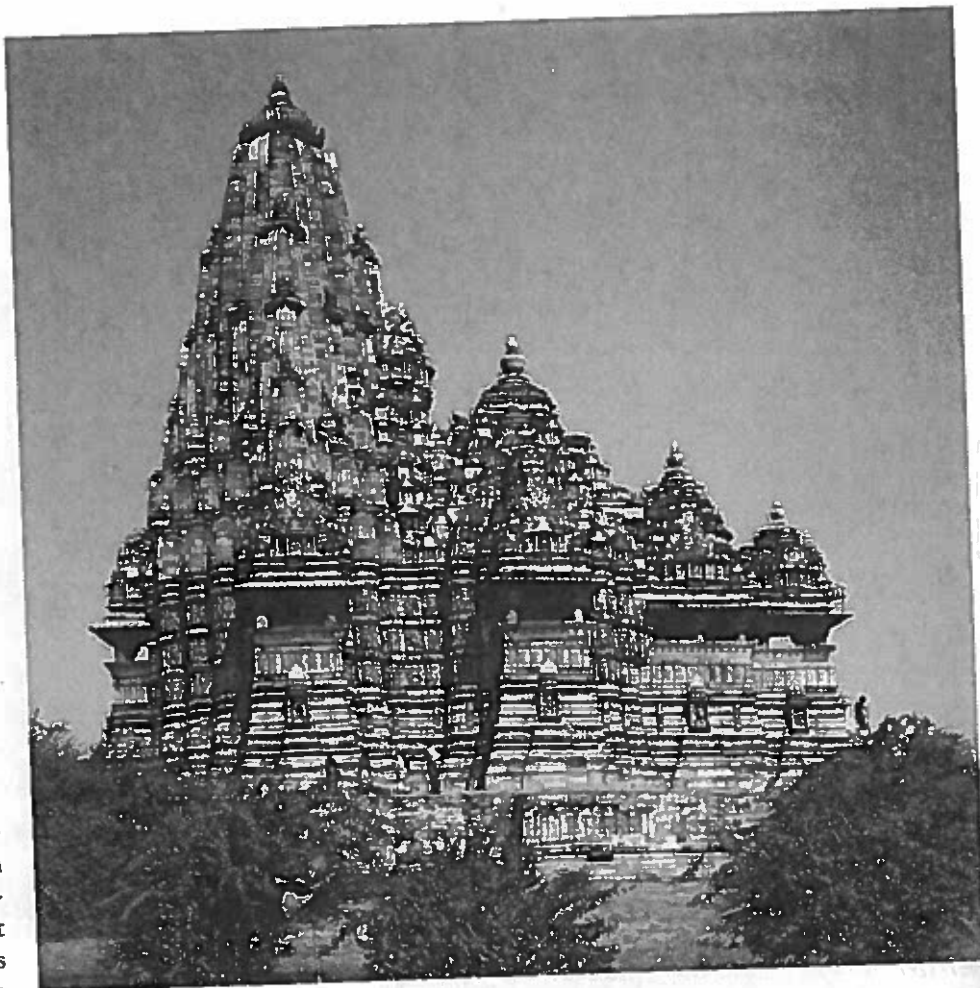


Fig. 11.8 Kandarya Mahadeva temple, Khajuraho, Madhya Pradesh, India. Chandella dynasty, ca. 1025–50. The temple's formal design, like that of all Hindu temples, was prescribed in the *shastras*, a body of ancient Hindu writing that sets out the principles of poetry, music, dance, and the other arts. By the second millennium, most temples followed the *shastras* only loosely, freely elaborating on the basic plan.

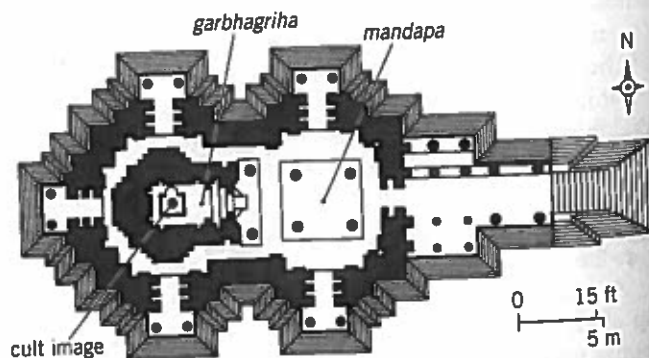


Fig. 11.9 Plan of Kandarya Mahadeva temple, Khajuraho, India, ca. 1025–50. The temple's main features are the *garbhagriha*, the cult image, and the *mandapa*.



**Fig. 11.10 Angkor Wat, Cambodia. Early twelfth century.** The entire complex was constructed in the short span of about 30 years.

over the moat, which symbolizes the oceans surrounding the known world. On June 21, the summer solstice and the beginning of the Cambodian solar year, a visitor to the temple arriving through the western gate would see the sun rise directly over the central tower. In this way, the symbolic evocation of the cosmos, so fundamental to Hindu temple architecture, is further elaborated in astronomical terms.

There are literally miles of relief sculptures decorating the walls of Angkor Wat, including images of the *apsaras*, mythological goddesses whose dances were used by the gods to seduce mortals, and *devatas*, guardian spirits who stand individually or in groups with an air of refined elegance (Fig. 11.11). They are uniformly bare-breasted and wear both a crown and a pleated *sampot* (a wrapped skirt), rolled at the top below the belly to open like a flower. The ubiquity of such figures underscores the important role of goddess worship in Hindu culture (see Chapter 7).

Hindu artists also mastered the art of bronze-casting. In the Tamil Nadu [TA-mul NAH-doo] region of southern India, artists began making large bronze editions of Shiva in his manifestation as Shiva Nataraja [nah-tuh-RAH-juh], Lord of the Dance, as early as the tenth and eleventh centuries. Such images were commissioned as icons for the region's many temples. Since Shiva embodies the rhythms of the universe, he is also a great dancer. All the gods were present when Shiva first danced, and they begged him to dance again. Shiva promised to do so in the hearts of his devotees as well as in a sacred grove in Tamil Nadu itself.



**Fig. 11.11 Devata, Angkor Wat, Cambodia. Early twelfth century.** There are over 2,000 devatas at Angkor Wat.