

**International Journal of Multidisciplinary Innovations & Studies
(IJMIS)****Sculpture as a Medium of Cultural Expression in India****Dr Sunil Dutt Gautam,**

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sunildutt22gautam@gmail.com**Abstract**

This article describes the use of sculpture in India for religious and other spiritual purposes and cultural and other contemporary purposes at the national and local levels. Subjects covered in the article include determinants of meaning for sculpture and the movement of sculpture objects between community settings, public spaces, and museums. Examples used in the article to illustrate points include a Chola Nataraja, a Bankura horse, a Dokra Durga, Ranjani Shettar's Aureole, a photo of a sculpture at the National Gallery of Modern Art in New Delhi, and two scrap-metal history sculptures at Shaheedi Park in Delhi. Some information used in the article about the other examples and objects includes information from museum records; other information gleaned from images was limited to

verification of information from other sources. Findings indicate that meaning of sculpture is influenced by representational and other characteristics of sculpture and the settings in which it is displayed and circulated. Limitations of the examples used in the article include underrepresentation of regions of India. Totals for national heritage and digitization projects include many kinds of objects and should not be confused with counts of sculpture. Conclusions from the article include a statement that many types of sculpture and other expressions combining traditional and modern elements are found in India.

Keywords: Indian sculpture; cultural significance; material culture; ritual practices; regional studies; contemporary art; cultural archives

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1. Introduction

Sculptures have religious, ornamental, and political uses in India. Indian sculptures have been displayed in various ways and settings, including in worship settings in temples, in temple processions, at home, for sale and other commercial purposes, and in museums and other public settings. Different display settings affect how people view and use sculptures. Religious images displayed in temples and other settings have rich social lives beyond their visual attributes and are sustained by practices related to transportation and communal viewing (Guy, 2017). Removing religious images from shrines and installing them in museums changes their display and other meanings (Kulshreshtha, 2018).

The concept of “cultural expression” is introduced in this article to describe sculptural practices that communicate or challenge cultural meanings in a variety of ways related to sculpture, including its setting and use. The concept of cultural expression should not be confused with ideas about a monolithic or unchanging national Indian culture. Indian sculptural practices differ among social groups, and many individuals, including patrons, artists, and viewers, play roles in shaping cultural meanings. New perspectives on Indian sculpture acknowledge connections between temple, folk,

and contemporary sculpture without making direct comparisons between them.

Recent museum and exhibition materials highlight artists' work on this theme. Ranjani Shettar's *Seven ponds and a few raindrops* (2017) uses a variety of recycled materials on a large scale, including stainless steel, muslin, tamarind, and natural dyes. Materials information from the Metropolitan Museum of Art indicates that Shettar's use of natural dyes was inspired by craft techniques used in the village of Kinnala (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, n.d.). Exhibition materials from 2023 about LN Tallur's *Chirag-e-AI* exhibition describe sculptures that incorporate themes of ritual and historical practices as well as artificial intelligence and industrialization (Museum of Art & Photography [MAP], 2023). These examples show other ways artists might use various materials in new work beyond traditional craft practices.

The paper describes particular objects and does not attempt to catalog all related objects. Information from other sources is integrated with information from this paper about objects pictured and other related topics, including the institutional setting. The paper does not try to determine facts about the maker and use of objects pictured in other sources when those facts are not available in the other sources.

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2. Objectives

1. To study the religious, cultural, and sociopolitical aspects of Indian sculpture, including materials and site.
2. To provide seven examples from a range of materials and cultural settings and uses.
3. To assess the advantages and disadvantages of institutional collections as sources of information on sculpture documentation and public access.

3. Review of Literature

Recent scholarship on Indian sculpture has encouraged analysis of images in context, including analysis of Indian images in light of their use and context. An article by Guy discusses Indian images of temple sculpture in relation to temple sites and religious practices. Benefits of analyzing images in context include greater attention to relationships among images, temples, religious practices, and viewers than to individual images (Guy, 2017). Benefits of contextual analysis for research on cultural objects include greater understanding of relationships between iconographic content and context of use.

Kulshreshtha (2018) examines the movement of Uma-Mahesvara statues between religious sites and museums in the Middle Ganga Valley. She writes in the article about how statue use helps

establish religious identity and claims to historical and institutional power. Museum recordkeeping and other practices affect access to and knowledge about statues.

The edited book *20th Century Indian Art: Modern, Post-Independence, Contemporary* highlights the complexity and diversity of Indian art history and multiple modernities rather than a linear development of art forms through time (Mitter et al., 2022). The edited book is related to the contemporary sculpture topic in that it indicates that contemporary sculptors incorporate traditional art forms and media into their sculpture and may be influenced by global and political art trends.

Institutional documents provide other primary source information. Materials from the Metropolitan Museum of Art include information about Shettar's studio and exhibition practices. An interview with Shettar discusses his interactions with other environments (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2018, n.d.). Materials from the Art and Museum Policy Initiative include information on selected artists and artworks and exhibition spaces, such as *Earthworks* and *Chirag-e-AI* (MAP, 2023; Arambam, 2022). Institutional documents are useful primary sources, though they may not include information on public or community reactions to artworks.

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Official government data can be used to assess the level of documentation and other forms of support for certain activities but have other drawbacks. The Ministry of Culture reported 11,406 monuments and 1,247,668 antiquities documented under the National Mission on Monuments and Antiquities as of February 2026. Antiquities other than sculptures are included in the count (Press Information Bureau [PIB], 2026). Other PIB reports from February 2026 mention that seven Zonal Cultural Centres received government funding for cultural activities and that folk and tribal artists participating in those activities were paid. Official data on these subjects do not include information on the number or income of sculptors or the representativeness of the documented antiquities.

UNESCO documents about intangible cultural heritage mention knowledge and skills related to traditional craft-making. Discussion at the UNESCO World Crafts Forum included topics about crafts and livelihoods (UNESCO, 2024a, 2024b, 2025). These UNESCO documents imply a broader context for understanding crafts. Documentation about objects in institutional collections is available, but documentation about other aspects of crafts and other aspects of long-term livelihoods among craftspeople in their communities is limited. This article documents

and explores examples of crafts and identifies gaps in the documentation.

4. Research Methodology**4.1 Research design**

This is a qualitative interpretive study with a historical component and image analysis of seven reproductions. No sampling or other strategies were employed to ensure representativeness. Scholarly sources were used to inform the historical and theoretical discussion. Records of museums and other cultural heritage institutions were consulted for information about objects. Government records were consulted for information about institutions. Wikimedia Commons was consulted for information about the titles and licensing of reproductions, but this information was not used to draw conclusions about public understanding and meaning of artworks.

4.2 Selection of cases and level of analysis

The unit of analysis is a photograph of a sculpture or other three-dimensional artwork and related materials. Seven cases were selected intentionally to offer variety in materials and contexts represented: a Chola-period bronze sculpture; Bankura clay sculptures; Dokra metal sculptures; Ranjani Shettar's contemporary sculptural installation; a 2026 photograph of an outdoor

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sculpture at the National Gallery of Modern Art; and two community history installations using recycled materials located in Shaheedi Park. Other contexts represented include religious and community contexts. This is a sample of sites from the region, not an exhaustive survey.

4.3 Source collection and verification

For each figure, we checked information on the title, location, photographer, and other details about images on the page. Other information about works of art, such as physical attributes and exhibition history, was collected from museum and gallery sources. Information about the site and program was collected from government and other cultural heritage sources. Information from sources was recorded as fact, and other visual observations, such as body positions and composition, were recorded as observations to prevent making assumptions about the accuracy of photographs of works of art.

4.4 Analytical procedure

The cases were compared using a form with information about the object's subject matter and images; authenticated material and techniques; previous and current locations; other relevant cultural and historical information from the documentation; and other unverifiable information. Individual written reports about each

case were created, and the cases were compared using material, location, and display information. This separation of report writing from other activities and conclusions helps prevent unfounded conclusions about the object.

4.5 Data quality and limitations

The numerical data are accompanied by information on data sources. National statistics were not used to estimate production of sculptures. The seven photographs included in the article illustrate but do not substitute for other research methods, including in-person interviews. Data that would likely be gathered in an interview, such as information about inscriptions and uses of sculptures and knowledge held by community members, are not available from the photographs. The two photographs of Shaheedi Park depict the sculptures and show their visible scrap construction. Other data about the creators of the sculptures and visitors' interpretations of them are not available from these photographs. Statements in the article about the subjects of the study are based on institutional records, photographs or the author's comparisons. Further data collection methods, such as field observation and interviews with artists, other artisans, worshippers, curators, and other local organization members, could be useful for testing these readings.

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5. Sculpture as Cultural Practice

5.1 Religious images and physical actions in religious rituals

The Nataraja image and others mix human and celestial imagery. Other symbols in the image, such as a raised foot and halo of flames, and hand gestures, suggest religious meanings related to the human figure. Information about the Nataraja image from the Smithsonian's National Museum of Asian Art suggests that it symbolizes dance and other ritual actions and cosmic work. This information can help you analyze the Nataraja image iconographically but should not be generalized to other Nataraja images and religious uses (Smithsonian National Museum of Asian Art, n.d.).

Temple sculpture in other media and styles includes social and narrative imagery. Musician and dancer sculptures combine temple art and architecture at the Konark temple site, which is decorated with images of musicians and dancers integrated into the chariot imagery for the sun god Surya. As noted by UNESCO, Konark temple art and sculpture are integrated into the temple and surrounding landscape (UNESCO, 2024a). Konark is mentioned elsewhere in the text but not among the seven images being compared..



Figure 1. Chola-period bronze Nataraja, photographed at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Photo: Rosemania, Wikimedia Commons, CC BY 2.0. Iconographic context cited from the Smithsonian National Museum of Asian Art.

5.2 Material, craft knowledge and regional identity

Materials can serve symbolic as well as functional roles. Attributes of stone building techniques include weight and other physical properties. Melting and molding techniques used with bronze are reflected in physical properties of bronze objects. Designs on ceramic objects can indicate the origins of the clay used to create them and other potting techniques. Repeated heating and molding of metal objects help transmit information. Symbols associated with objects are not fixed. Social and cultural factors, including religious and

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economic influences, play a role in assigning symbols to particular objects.

The Bankura horse sculpture is one type of object with multiple non-religious and nonfunctional uses. Physical characteristics of the Bankura horse sculpture, such as its long neck and upright ears, reflect regional traditions of Bankura horse sculpture. The terra-cotta material of the Bankura horse sculpture reflects the region's clay and

ceramics industries and craftspeople. Uses of the Bankura horse sculpture include use as a votive object, sale, and display as a sign of regional identity. Multiple uses of the Bankura horse sculpture can be seen in different cultural contexts. Photographs of Bankura horse sculptures are a poor substitute for knowledge about the people who use Bankura horse sculptures in religious rituals..



Figure 2. Bankura terracotta horses from West Bengal.

Photo: Footlooseinme, Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA 4.0.

Dokra metal casting is an occupation practiced by artisans in eastern and central India. This

illustrates the link between making and learning. The National Crafts Museum describes Dhokra casting as a form of nonferrous metal casting using the lost-wax process (National Crafts Museum & Hastkala Academy, n.d.). Openwork and other details visible in the photo indicate that the object was made by casting. We cannot determine the

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artist or cultural meaning of this object in its country of origin from the photo. The paper's authors do not assume that all Dhokra casters share the same artistic and cultural traditions..



Figure 3. A Durga figure made with Dokra metal-casting craft.

Photo: Contact Base, Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA 4.0.

5.3 Sculpture, memory and contested histories

Sculpture plays a role in shared historical memory. Public sculptures help establish and celebrate historical memory of individuals and events. Images of temples play a role in disputes over the history and ownership of religious sites. Museum displays affect viewers' understandings of museum collections. Kulshreshtha's work documents changes in social standing associated with moving objects from temples to museums in addition to other changes (2018). Although the sculptural object itself remains the same, different audiences' access to and understandings of the sculptural object may change.

Modern sculptures include references to social and cultural history. Artist Bharti Kher's 2022-2023 Public Art Fund commission, *Ancestor*, a nearly 18-foot-tall bronze sculpture installed in New York, was inspired by an assemblage of broken clay figurines. The Public Art Fund describes *Ancestor* as drawing on Indian material culture and Kher's own international experiences. *Ancestor* is an example of a modern sculpture inspired by, but not a direct copy of, an earlier sculpture. *Ancestor* offers new perspectives on issues of gender and immigration and family history.

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6. New Technologies and Materials

6.1 Construction methods used in current installation practices

Ranjani Shettar's sculpture works examine how materials can influence the viewer's experience of

space. This photograph, *Aureole* (2010), shows repeated bronze shapes arranged across a threshold. Shettar's sculptures include the viewer's movement through the space in their design, influencing the viewer's perception of the wall and doorway (Talwar Gallery, 2011).



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Figure 4. Ranjani Shettar, *Aureole* (2010), installation view.

Photo: Julian Stallabrass, Wikimedia Commons, CC BY 2.0. The Met record describes a separate Shettar installation.

Figure 4 shows *Aureole*, not *Seven Ponds* and *Some Rain*. The Metropolitan Museum's records for the 2017 work say that it consists of salvaged stainless-steel forms with muslin dyed with tamarind. This image is provided in this lesson for comparison with Shettar's spatial arrangements using other media. (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, n.d.)

6.2 Contemporary sculpture in museums and other public locations

A photograph by J. R. Shetty shows an abstract sculpture displayed at the National Gallery of Modern Art in New Delhi. Inferences drawn from the photograph about the sculpture include that it

Figure 5. Sculpture by Neeraj Gupta installed at the National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi (May 2026).

Photo: J. R. Shetty, Wikimedia Commons, CC0 1.0.

is a freestanding sculpture composed of interlocking parts located on the grounds of the National Gallery of Modern Art. Other facts about the title, materials, and symbolic meaning of the sculpture cannot be determined from the photograph (Shetty, 2026.).



6.3 Technology, public space and changing audiences

MAP's *Chirag-e-AI* by LN Tallur at a show in Bengaluru in February-April 2023 draws connections between religious practices of the past and current issues, including industrialization and capitalism. Information about the show from MAP suggests that the *Chirag-e-AI* work by LN Tallur

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rediscovers and reinterprets sculptural practices and material assumptions. Chirag-e-AI is an example of current curatorial practice. It does not suggest that all visitors to Chirag-e-AI saw the show the same way.

Cobra 1/1 by Tarik Currimbhoy has different cultural connections. Cobra 1/1 of 2022 is a six-foot sculpture of a female cobra made from 316L stainless steel displayed in a public space in the MAP front lobby. As described by MAP, the artist was inspired by seeing a living cobra on the streets of Mumbai and created Cobra 1/1 for audience engagement (MAP, n.d.). Cultural connections in this work include the artist's representation of a living creature associated with local experience using industrial materials and a public venue.

The final two images are in Shaheedi Park in Delhi. Descriptions of the images on Wikimedia Commons say the images show sculptures related to the Ahom Rebellion and the Jallianwala Bagh massacre. The descriptions state that both sculptures are made of waste material (Pur 0 0, 2024a, 2024b). The sculptures in these images represent historical events from colonial times in this area of India. Viewers comparing the images may make inferences about differences in representations of historical events using figures and relief. These are inferences about the images, not inferences about viewer responses to them. A

news article about Shaheedi Park says the park is made of recycled materials (Hindustan Times, 2023). This information supports the conclusion that recycled materials were a major design feature of these sculptures but does not address community participation or other environmental advantages of the sculptures.



Figure 6. Sculpture representing the Ahom Rebellion at Shaheedi Park, Delhi.

Photo: Pur 0 0, Wikimedia Commons, CC0 1.0.

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Figure 7. Sculpture commemorating the Jallianwala Bagh massacre at Shaheedi Park, Delhi.

Photo: Pur 0 0, Wikimedia Commons, CC0 1.0.

7. Documentary Data and Comparative Analysis

Table 1 compares the seven illustrated cases using information documented in museum, gallery, heritage and image records. It is a purposive case matrix, not an inventory of Indian sculpture. Material or date is included only where a cited record provides it; the photographs are not treated as evidence of makers' intentions or audience response.

Case	Documented material / scale	Setting	Analytical focus	Source basis
Chola Nataraja	Bronze Nataraja; exact dating and dimensions not established in the sources used here	Ritual image; museum collection	Gesture, attributes and the relation between image and worship	Smithsonian National Museum of Asian Art; Guy (2017)
Bankura terracotta horse	Terracotta; dimensions not established here	Craft and domestic display contexts in West Bengal	Regional form and the limits of reading use from a photograph	Footlooseinme, Wikimedia Commons image record

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Case	Documented material / scale	Setting	Analytical focus	Source basis
Dokra Durga figure	Non-ferrous metal; lost-wax casting documented for the craft	Craft object; image context	Surface, casting process and transmission of craft knowledge	National Crafts Museum; Contact Base photograph
Aureole, Ranjani Shettar	2010; multi-part cast bronze work	Gallery installation	Repetition, threshold and the relation between form and space	Talwar Gallery (2011); Stallabrass photograph
NGMA sculpture by Neeraj Gupta	Material and dimensions not stated in the image record	Outdoor display at NGMA, New Delhi	What a photograph can show about form and placement	Shetty (2026), Wikimedia Commons
Ahom Rebellion sculpture	Scrap / waste material; dimensions not stated	Shaheedi Park, Delhi	Regional history represented in a public waste-to-art setting	Pur 0 0 (2024a); Hindustan Times (2023)
Jallianwala Bagh memorial sculpture	Scrap / waste material; dimensions not stated	Shaheedi Park, Delhi	Public memory of colonial violence and commemorative display	Pur 0 0 (2024b); Hindustan Times (2023)

7.1 Institutional indicators and what they measure

The February 2026 parliamentary reply provides a useful but limited picture of heritage infrastructure. The National Mission on Monuments and Antiquities has documented

11,406 monuments and other structures and 1,247,668 antiquities. The National Mission on Monuments and Antiquities has documented eight national museums and two museums run by the Archaeological Survey of India that have other digital documentation through JATAN, a database of collections, including terracotta and

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archaeological artifacts and other objects. (PIB, 2026) The data indicate increased documentation and online availability of information about monuments and museums. Data are not available about the number of documented sculptures, information about the origins of community members associated with the documented items, or community use of online documentation.

The same answer states that seven Zonal Cultural Centres received grants totaling ₹6,572.06 lakh in 2022-23, ₹11,967.57 lakh in 2023-24, and ₹11,121.66 lakh in 2024-25. According to the Ministry, the Zonal Cultural Centres organize cultural activities and invite folk and tribal artists to participate, providing them with travel and other allowances (PIB, 2026). Information about these grants is useful background on institutions involved in traditional craft and performing arts. Note that the figures cited here refer to grants to Zonal Cultural Centres, not income earned by sculptors or other measures of support for sculpture.

Another recent example of institutional support for sculpture comes from a MAP report on a 2021 relief program for artists in collaboration with 1Shanthiroad Studio. There were over 1,000 applications for a relief program, and 20 artists were selected by a juried process. MAP exhibited the work of recipients Bhimanshu Pandel and

Kanchan Karjee (Arambam, 2022). This local program is one example of how other cultural institutions can help support sculpture artists outside of commercial galleries.

8. Discussion

The seven images show other visual communication possibilities for sculpture. Images of Nataraja demonstrate other symbolic and iconic meanings associated with religious themes. Sculpture images of a Bankura horse and Dokra artifact show traditional craft practices in regional contexts. The Aureole image shows how Shettar employed other sculptural techniques, including repetition and a contrast between light and dark bronze forms, to create a sculptural gateway to a gallery space. The NGMA image shows another type of setting for free-standing contemporary sculpture. Sculptures at Shaheedi Park honoring events including the Ahom Rebellion and Jallianwala Bagh massacre use found objects and an outdoor setting. The Konark temple image offers another comparison, as sculpture and temple architecture are combined in that location. Other factors influence public interpretation of free-standing sculpture in outdoor settings.

The relationship challenges other theories about traditional and contemporary art. Contemporary artists use techniques and other aspects of traditional art and new materials in their work,

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rather than imitating traditional art. Examples of Shettar's art include Aureole, which features bronze cutouts in a gallery entrance, and Seven ponds and a few raindrops, which features natural dyeing and steel techniques. The MAP exhibition by Tallur features traditional and other historical objects as well as industrial-era art (MAP, 2023).

Social factors are as important as artistic factors to consider when interpreting sculpture. Photos of temple sculptures, decorative items, and memorials serve various audiences for different purposes. Displaying works from one geographic area in public spaces in other areas can raise public awareness of those works, but raising public awareness of the works does not always benefit the communities that produced them by increasing their fame or earnings. In addition to conventional cataloging information about an object, such as its name and date of creation, catalogers should provide information about the people and communities connected to an object. Other helpful cataloging information includes data on the object's connection to religious practices and whether it was a manufactured item or a modern work of art displayed publicly.

Institutional reports indicate growing documentation and digitization of cultural collections, but the counts reported in these studies do not specifically include sculptures. Counts

reported by the NMMA in reports about 2026 include cultural sites and artifacts in addition to sculptures. JATAN reports about digitization projects at multiple museums related to documenting different kinds of collections. The NMMA and JATAN reports would not be useful for evaluating the diversity of collections of sculpture. Other useful sources of information about collections of sculpture might include data about sculpture collections classified by use, geographic region, origin and current location of cultural affiliation, and originator or community, with safeguards for proprietary and sacred information.

The study considers only a few examples and cannot be generalized to all Indian sculpture. Adivasi, North-East Indian, Dalit, and artisan sculpture and works by contemporary female sculptors are not represented here. The availability of institutional records about sculpture in the study influences which sculptures are included and discussed in greater detail in the paper than others whose meanings are transmitted locally. Lack of documentation is a weakness of this study and related records, not evidence of the relative value of undocumented traditions.

9. Conclusion

Sculpture in India is a form of cultural expression that connects relationships between the arts and

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other cultural elements, including religion, location, history, and technology. Sculptures have many other uses and functions. Examples include the need for traditional and religious knowledge to understand and appreciate Chola bronzes, the role of temple carvings in understanding temples, regional technical knowledge used in creating terracotta and metal sculptures, and contemporary and community public art addressing environmental and gender and memory issues.

Documentary resources can help document differences between individual objects. Available information about national collections and digitization projects provides limited insight into national sculpture collections. Documentary resources about national collections are a helpful starting point but can be combined with other information obtained from community members and others with appropriate permissions and other information about provenance of sculptures. Conclusions from this research apply only to the individual objects studied and are not generalizable to all national collections. Recommendations for future research include in-person visits and interviews with artists and other underrepresented community members to better understand the uses and meanings of sculptures in various settings and the value of publicly displaying sculptures.

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