

**Essays for Docents Project, 2007-2009**  
**On the Occasion of UMMA's Expansion and Renovation**



**Artist Unknown, Chandella Workshop**

***Vishnu as Varaha, The Cosmic Boar***

sandstone

ca. 10<sup>th</sup> century

2002/1.167

Museum purchase made possible by the Margaret Watson Parker Art Collection

**Background**

In Hinduism there are many gods. Three of the most important for us are Vishnu, Shiva and the great goddess, Devi. Vishnu “descends” in many forms. These are avatars, or incarnations of Vishnu, as he manifests himself to humans in times of great need. There is great variety to these forms of which there are ten important, canonical forms. For example the third is Varaha the boar and the ninth is the historical Buddha. UMMA’s *Vishnu as Varaha* shows Vishnu during the third of his ten incarnations. This sandstone sculpture is from the Madhya Pradesh region of central India.

The Chandella dynasty ruled the Madhya Pradesh region from the 9<sup>th</sup> to the 11<sup>th</sup> centuries, the time in which this piece was made. Along with the capital, Khajuraho, this area of India was witness to great cultural achievements especially in architecture and sculpture.

**Object Information**

In the story of *Varaha*, a creation story, *Vishnu* takes on the form of the Cosmic Boar to battle a demon who carried the earth to the bottom of the cosmic ocean. This battle lasted one thousand years and ended when *Varaha* carried the goddess Earth between his tusks from the cosmic ocean and returned her to her proper place in the universe

*The body of Vishnu’s boar-headed incarnation Varaha forges a diagonal bolt through this sculpture. His right foot is planted decisively at the corner of its projecting base; his left is flexed for leverage on a lotus pedestal. Against these rooting forces his body surges upward, culminating in an acutely raised snout. The magnitude of Varaha’s gesture and*

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*his relative scale suggest a superhuman strength. And certainly, his feet are splayed apart in a position that defies human physiology. In Hindu image making, the remarkable form of a god's body reveals his or her boundless capacities. In this case, Varaha's distinct posture depicts a well-known Hindu episode, in which Vishnu took the form of a great boar to rescue the world from a demon who had imprisoned the earth beneath the cosmic ocean. –label copy by Anna Sloan*

#### **Technique**

Widely acclaimed sandstone sculptures like UMMA's *Vishnu as Varaha* were prevalent in temples at Khajuraho, and throughout Madhya Pradesh. The sculptures were carved in the round and in relief (both high and low relief). Clues left behind on these sculptures tell us a little about the sculptural technique. Designs were first outlined on the stone with a sharp, pointed tool. A scene carved into the temple at Khajuraho show sculptors preparing preliminary drawings and another shows four stone workers. Three of them stand with a chisel and hammer while the fourth is sitting on a large stone block cutting it with a chisel and hammer.

#### **Bibliography**

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