

# JAIN SHRINE

## CONCEPT

The most direct and secure way to create visual balance is through the use of symmetry. Many forms in nature, including our bodies, are arranged in a symmetrical order. In art, especially architecture and the decorative arts, the creator utilizes symmetry to make an experience that commands respect, formality, assurance, and predictability.



detail: *Jain Shrine*, India (Gujarat, Patan), early 17th century, The William T and Louise Taft Semple Collection, 1962.459

## BACKGROUND

The Museum's *Jain Shrine* is an elaborate display of symmetry and repetition. It is an intricate structure made of a carved canopy supported by two pillars. The central niche originally held an image of a sacred "spiritual victor," known as a Tirthankaras. The most important deities are placed closest to the vertical axis of the shrine; therefore they are arranged in a hierarchical manner. As in Buddhism and Hinduism, Jainism recognizes more than one god and goddess; Jainism has twenty-four. On the shrine an

elaborate sculptural program includes two standing female attendants swatting flywhisks above the heads of the deities, the eight auspicious symbols, flying figures with floral garlands, and Sri Laksmi, the goddess of wealth, with her four arms holding elephants and flowers. Many of these symbols are also found in Hindu and Buddhist iconography. Other related deities, musicians, symbols, and garlands are carved in the lintel of the canopy as well as on the back wall of the shrine. Additional depictions on

## CRITICAL THINKING

Why is symmetry so prolific in some forms of art? Why in Western painting is symmetry rarely used as a compositional device?

What is the Asian aesthetic towards symmetry? How does Asian painting shun symmetry? Why?



## VOCABULARY

Symmetrical balance

Formal balance

Jainism

Tirthankaras

the shrine include a bowl of jewels, a sailing ship, deer, and the sun and the moon. Over the water pot are two kneeling elephants. In the Jain ritual, the bell hanging from the canopy of the shrine would have been rung for the deities' attention, and the participants would have anointed themselves with holy water from the water pot.

The *Jain Shrine* was probably commissioned by an affluent Jain family in Patan to be used for worship in their home. The Jain religion is one of the oldest indigenous religions in India,

although it never became as dominant as Hinduism or Buddhism. Jainism follows an extreme code of nonviolence known as *ahimsa*. So strictly adhering to nonviolence, devotees wear nose and mouth masks at night so insects may not inadvertently be killed through breathing them in. Jains also worship the twenty-four Tirthankaras, who achieved deification through their complete freedom of desire. Many of the Jain Tirthankaras are similar to Hindu and Buddhist deities.

# CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

## LANGUAGE ARTS

Collect images of architecture from countries of study that display symmetrical balance. Look for ads and posters that utilize symmetrical balance in their composition. Find examples of royal and religious images that are symmetrical.

## SOCIAL STUDIES

Examine Oceanic, African, and Pre-Columbian art and the symmetry that is often found in works by those cultures. Discuss the reasons that may be behind the use of symmetry in those cultures.

## SCIENCE

**Biology/Physiology:** Do the studio activity but use images of animals and animal parts to create the central column. This could be done in collage form. Skeleton parts could create beautiful filigree-like images.

**Physics:** Examine the symmetrical uses in architectural structures, bridges, and towers. How does symmetry assure strength and support?

**Chemistry:** Examine molecular structure and the many examples of symmetry contained in these molecular models.

## MATH

On a coordinate plane, trace a symmetrical image that is centered on the x and y axis. Create linear functions for both positive and negative number functions. For more advanced students incorporate curves with piecewise functions.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

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detail: *Jain Shrine*, India (Gujarat, Patan), early 17th century,  
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