

Exhibition Introduction

Sanskrit—Across Asia & Beyond

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Sanskrit is a global phenomenon, a vehicle of cultural exchange, and a pan-Asian language of politics, literature, and the arts. While it has its origins in the ancient world, the story of Sanskrit is not confined to centuries past. Today Sanskrit is a classical language at the center of contemporary debates about nation building, secular liberalism, and the preservation of material heritage. As such, Sanskrit is the ideal subject for an exhibition commemorating Leiden University's *Asia Year* — a time to focus sustained attention on the global role of Asian cultural forms and traditions, with particular attention on Asian Studies in the Netherlands. This exhibition aims to show how Sanskrit has functioned as a common thread, a tie that binds many of these definitive cultural forms from the pre-modern to the contemporary.

For some in the audience today, these descriptions of a socially and politically engaged language might come as a bit of a surprise. Not that I can blame you. The study of Sanskrit is still plagued by some tired old stereotypes. Perhaps this sounds familiar: Sanskrit is a language old and dusty (some have even dared to call it dead). A language of crusty antiquarians and lovers of brittle manuscripts, people happily out of touch with the 20th century world, not to mention the 21st. If you are Sanskritist who has ever tried to explain to the person next to you on an airplane what you do all day, I'm fairly certain you can relate to this picture.

In fact, these narrow visions could not be farther from the truth. While Sanskrit is commonly studied as a literary form, its influence has extended to shape rituals, fables, images, performances, and architectural forms that together inspired a shared world of culture linking diverse regions of Asia across the centuries. The aim of the exhibition, *Sanskrit—Across Asia and Beyond*, is to materialize some of the complexity and cultural dynamism of Sanskrit by featuring materials from the Special Collections of the Leiden University Library and the archives of the Kern Institute, alongside some remarkable sculptures and objects generously loaned from the National Museum of Ethnology in Leiden.

In curating these materials our ambition was to tell the story of Sanskrit in its many manifestations and cultural forms (or at least as many as we could manage in a limited space). Illuminated manuscripts and ritual manuals, bronze sculptures, amulets, paintings, maps, and photographs are organized thematically in seven showcases curated to highlight important facets of the tradition: Sanskrit as a language of sovereignty, a language of devotion, and a language of rich storyworlds and traditions of embodied practice. The exhibition concludes by reflecting upon the current status of Sanskrit in an increasingly globalized world.

In presenting these materials, the exhibition also explores some fundamental historical questions concerning cultural history. By tracing the evolution of the greedy jackal of Sanskrit fable to the cunning fox of European tradition, we consider how narratives transcend cultural and geographic boundaries. Icons of the Goddess Durgā slaying the Buffalo demon placed alongside

an illuminated manuscript of the *Devīmāhātmya* (The ‘Greatness of the Goddess’) narrating this mythic event, prompt a broader reflection on the interactions of text and image. Finally, scenes and themes from the epics *Rāmāyaṇa* and *Mahābhārata* evince the engagement with issues of power, politics, and the justification of violence across South and Southeast Asia.

To conclude, I’d like to circle back to my opening line: the idea of Sanskrit as a ‘global phenomenon.’ I think this is evident not only in the wide range of objects on display, but in the three people who worked for many months to put it all together: Peter Bisschop, hailing from the Dutch countryside, Daniele Cuneo from the eternal city of Rome, and an American woman from the western prairie. It is not often that such different people can come together to tell the story of a language that has occupied so much of their professional and personal lives. Perhaps inevitably, the showcases reflect something of our interests and intellectual commitments as well.

For Peter, the showcase on Sanskrit studies in the Netherlands and the legacy of Dutch Indology has a special place. One shelf is dedicated to the *Skandapūraṇa Project*—a international research consortium initiated by Hans Bakker, and one which a number of us have been involved as his students. Daniele’s interest in aesthetics, performance traditions, and embodied practices has inspired a number of selections, most notably the vividly illustrated Persian translations of the *Kāmasūtra*. My interest in uniting text and the study of material culture prompted the inclusion of sculptures and inscriptions. In addition to the massive 11th c. Cōḷa copperplate inscriptions prominently on display, I am most excited about the inclusion of a 9th century bronze sculpture of Gaṇeśa from Java. This unique image shows the elephant-headed god with a single intact tusk, a reflection of the popular tradition that he broke off his other tusk to use as a stylus to record the text of the entire *Mahābhārata* epic. I think you can see this tusk-pen in his lower right hand.

There were seemingly endless challenges in bringing the Gaṇeśa and other sculptures to the library, but true to his reputation as the ‘Remover of Obstacles’ he didn’t let us down. In addition to a little divine intervention, we benefitted from the guidance and much needed help of a number of Special Collections librarians, conservators, and designers, particularly Doris Jedamski, Karin Schepel, and Liesbeth Ouwehand. Thanks to Devaki Sapkota, the data for all of the manuscripts used in the exhibition is now online and searchable via the Special Collections (i.kern skr) Finally, we owe a special thanks to Jef Schaepe, who has guided us every step of the way, and who worked tirelessly to secure the museum loans. Jef was initially skeptical that an exhibition about Sanskrit could also be visually appealing. While we thought that a large rubbing of a 4th century inscription from Nagarjunakonda would be an eye-catcher, he thought it rather resembled an ancient Indian vuilniszak, which I’ve learned is Dutch for ‘garbage bag’. Despite initial aesthetic differences, in the end, I think we can all agree that it came together beautifully.