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Apsaras - The Dancing Damsels of Indra's Court

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The interesting and entertaining tales of Indian mythology talk about not only Gods and Goddesses, but also about celestial beings of all kinds; especially those working in tandem with the Devas and Devis; loyally serving them; many times, actually being the catalysts of change, bringing about transformation for the good of all beings in all the three worlds. Such is the tale of the enchanting Apsaras of the court of Indra, the God of the Devas.

Apsaras

Apsaras are celestial nymphs, who dance in the court of Indra, the King of the Devas. Quite a few in number; they are considered to be extremely beautiful, charming, seductive and greatly talented in both music and dance.



Apsara - Temple Sculpture from Belur, Karnataka, India

(Photo Print)

Etymology

The word "Apsara" originates from the Sanskrit "Apsaras". It could loosely be defined as "the one going in the waters or between the waters of the clouds".

There are two types of Apsaras, namely, *laukika* (wordly) and *daivika* (divine). Thirty-four nymphs are specified of the first type and ten of the second type. These celestial beings are also known as *vidyadhari* or *tep apsar* in Khmer, *acchara* in Pali, *bo sa la tu* in Vietnam, *bidadari* in Indonesia and Malaysia, *widadari* in Java and *aapson* in Thailand.

The most famous Apsaras in Indian mythology are *Rambha*, *Menaka*, *Urvashi*, *Tilottama* and *Ghrithachi*. The Puranas also mention other minor nymphs such as *Mishrakesi*, *Vapu*, *Viprachitti*, *Purvachitti*, *Sahajanya*, *Karnika*, *Punjikasthala*, *Viswachi*, *Rithisthala*, *Umlocha*, *Pramlocha*, *Swayamprabha*, *Janapadi*, and *Adrika*. The main Apsaras are believed to have sprung forth from the Ocean of Milk, during the *Samudra Manthana* episode, wherein the ocean was churned in a tug of war between the *Devas* and the *Daityas* (Asuras or Demons).

The Apsaras are often associated with the *Gandharvas*, who are the celestial musicians. Some Apsaras are actually paired with *Gandharvas*. Famous pairings include *Tumburu* and *Rambha*, *Menaka* and *Vishvvasu* and so on. But their relationship is usually temporary and does not culminate in marriage.

Besides entertaining *Indra* in his court, these celestial charmers are often sent by *Indra* himself to disrupt the penance of sages, Kings and Princes. *Indra* is always portrayed as being in perpetual fear of losing his throne to highly spiritual and evolved sages. Hence, he often sends these beautiful creatures to distract those devout people and deter them from their spiritual pursuit, thus stopping them on their spiritual journey.

Oft times, Apsaras who succeeded in seducing powerful sages and achieve their mission would earn the wrath of the latter and would also be cursed by them. In such cases, the children born of them (usually female) would be abandoned by both the sage and the nymph and would end up being brought up by foster parents. One such tale is that of *Shakuntala*, born of *Menaka* and *Rishi Vishwamitra*.

Those who failed in their mission would usually be cursed by some sage and be turned into a stone or an animal for a certain period of time, after which they would regain their original form and return back to heaven.

Interestingly, these nymphs are believed to be eternal virgins and no matter whom they seduced or lived with on earth, they would always retain their purity, beauty and youth. Sometimes, a sage would spy one of these scantily clad women would ejaculate spontaneously. From this fluid would spring forth a child, mostly a male child. *Dronacharya*, *Kripacharya*, *Kripa*, *Shuka* and *Rishyashringa* were born this way. *Kripa* was the only female child born in this manner.

These nymphs are said to be able to change their shape at will and govern the fortunes of gambling and gaming. They are sometimes compared to the muses of ancient Greece.

Apsaras and Bharata's Natyashastra

Bharata's Natyashastra, the most comprehensive treatise on the origin of nrithya (dance) and natya (drama), describes the vital role of theater and dance in Indian culture, also giving detailed instructions on each form of art (be it folk or classical), the costumes, abhinaya (expression), mudras (hand gestures) associated with them and much, much more.

At the very outset, the Natyashastra states that Natya (including dance and theater) was originally the work of Lord Brahma himself. He was asked to create a fifth Veda, which would be completely set apart from the existing four and which could easily be understood by everybody; even those who did not know Sanskrit. Brahma thought about it for some time and decided to create the Natya Veda, with the help of all the other Devas.



Lord Brahma
(Temple Mural Poster)

Lord Brahma then taught this Natya to sage Bharata, who recorded his teachings in the Natyashastra. So, though the origins of this book are mythical and mythological, the existence of the book itself is a fact and is followed to date by all dancers, musicians and dramatists in India. It still remains the most complete manual on dance and drama and verily forms the foundation of the said forms.

The Natyashastra became an established source of information around the second century AD, although tradition relates that it was much older. Most probably, it records information that had been practiced for generations before and had originally been transmitted orally. The treatise has 36 chapters, giving detailed instructions on almost all aspects of dance and drama,

including building a theater, the stage, the art of poetry, voice culture techniques, makeup, costume, acting methodology, dance techniques and even rules of theater criticism.

After recording this information, Bharata trained his hundred sons in the art and science of Dance, Music and Drama. He assigned different roles to each son and created the three dynamic styles of dance, namely, Bharati (verbal), Sattbitti (subtle) and Arabhatti (energetic). On the advice of Brahma, Bharata Muni took inspiration from the graceful movements of Shiva, the Lord of Dance.

The next challenge that Brahma faced was to reach these arts to the human beings living on earth. So the Lord then created the Apsaras, who would help propagate them among the earthlings. It is believed that Brahma created these cosmic beings from the clouds and water. The Lord also gave Apsaras the power to change their form at will and the ability to change the course of history, thus transforming the world for the better.



The Apsara
(Painting on Silk)

The Natyashastra particularly mentions the work and dedication of the following Apsaras: Manjukesi, Sukesi, Misrakesi, Sulochana, Saudamini, Devadatta, Devasena, Manorama, Sudati, Sundari, Vigagdha, Vividha, Budha, Sumala, Santati, Sunanda, Sumukhi, Magadhi, Arjuni, Sarala, Kerala, Dhriti, Nanda, Supuskala, Supuspamala and Kalabha.

Let us now go into the story of each of the main Apsaras of Indian mythology.

Rambha

Rambha is the Queen of the Apsaras. The most beautiful of them all, she is also unrivaled in her accomplishments and her expertise in music and dance.

She once tried to disturb the penance of Rishi Vishwamitra, who was trying to attain the status of a Brahmarishi. Knowing her true mission, he cursed her to turn into a rock for the next 10,000 years, after which a certain Brahmin would deliver her from the curse.

Ravana is Cursed by Nalakuvara

Rambha was married to Nalakuvara, the son of Kubera, the step-brother of Ravana. At this time, Kubera was the ruler of Lanka. Once, Rambha was on her way to meet her husband. Seeing her go by, Ravana was struck by her beauty and decided that he would have her for himself. He went up to her and introduced himself. To this, Rambha replied that she already knew him and said that, since he was her father-in-law's brother, he too was like a father-in-law to her.

This enraged Ravana. He was upset that she did not appreciate his overtures towards her. Angrily, he told her that she could never be a good wife to anyone, as she was a mere Apsara; a courtesan of Indra. Her main job was to seduce poor sages and ruin their meditation and so, she was not worthy of any honour or respect, he stated.



Hand Painted Ravana

(Perforated Leather Hanging Puppet from Andhra Pradesh)

Realizing Ravana's intentions, Rambha tried to get away. But he easily overpowered her and finally raped her. After that, he left her there and returned to Lanka. As she lay there, she realized that her husband may never accept her if he knew this. So she continued to lie there, hoping for death.

In the meantime, a concerned Nalakuvara was desperately searching for her. They were to meet over six hours ago, but she was nowhere to be found. Suddenly, he heard heart-wrenching sobs, coming from the bushes. Recognizing his wife's voice, he rushed to her. She was bloody and her clothes were torn and crushed. He gathered her in his arms and held her as

she spilled out the whole sordid episode. Nalakuvara immediately took her home, laid her gently on the bed and immediately went to meet Ravana.

Having never met Nalakuvara before, Ravana did not recognize his nephew. When the former introduced himself and accused him of raping his wife, Ravana casually told him that it was Rambha who had seduced him and told him that he should never have married such a vile Apsara. The prince, however, was too shrewd to believe Ravana's words. Enraged by the latter's cowardly attack on his wife, he cursed Ravana that, if he ever touched a woman without her permission, his heads would explode at once. He then stormed out of the Asura's court and rushed back to tend to his grieving wife.

This is the reason why Ravana was never able to lay his hands on Sita, Lord Rama's wife. Due to Nalakuvara's terrible curse, she did not have to suffer the fate that Rambha went through.

Menaka

Menaka is considered to be one of the most beautiful Apsaras of Indra's court. She was extremely intelligent and well-versed in the arts. However, she always felt lonely and desired a family.

Vishwamitra was one of the most spiritual and revered sages. He was so powerful that he even tried to create his own exclusive heaven. This made Indra insecure about his position as the Lord of the Devas. So he decided to send Menaka to earth to lure the sage and break his meditation. As the lissome Apsara descended on earth and stood before him, Vishwamitra was filled with lust and passion for her. She succeeded in breaking his meditation, but also ended up falling in love with him.

A baby was born out of their union. This baby grew up in sage Kanva's ashram and came to be known as Shakuntala, the central character of poet Kalidasa's work, Abhigyan Shakuntalam. When she came of age, she fell in love with King Dushyanta and gave birth to a child called Bharata, after whom India was named.

Menaka and Vishwamitra spent a good deal of time being happy with each other. However, when he realized that he had been tricked by Indra, he was enraged and cursed Menaka that she would be separated from him forever. This broke her heart, for she was genuinely in love with him. He too was aware of her feelings and, knowingly, cast the curse, in order to give her the maximum possible punishment. Broken and grief-stricken, Menaka returned back to Indra's court, never to come back again.



Birth of Shakunthala
(Ravi Varma Reprint Poster)

Sadly enough, though Menaka was so devastated, Vishwamitra did not seem to have reciprocated the love. After she left for Devaloka, he simply got back to his previous life and resumed his penance with renewed vigour. He did not care for his child and remained focused on his asceticism and meditation.

Urvashi

Urvashi is one of the major Apsaras in Indian mythology. Her name is derived from the Sanskrit words, "Ur", which means "heart" and "Vash", which means "to control". Some sources suggest that in the earliest Vedic texts, it was the name for the dawn goddess.

Urvashi is the mother of Rishyashringa, the great saint of the Ramayana, who played a crucial role in the birth of Rama. He was married to Shanta, the only daughter of King Dasaratha. Urvashi was married to King Pururavas, an ancient chief of the Chandravansha, the Lunar Race. She prominently features in Kalidasa's work, Vikramorvasiyam.

Birth

One can find several legends relating to the birth of Urvashi. According to the most famous one, the sage Nara-Narayana was once meditating in the sacred Badrinatha Temple, located in the Himalayas. Not wanting him to attain what they wished, Indra decided to distract him, by sending two of his Apsaras.

Knowing what Indra was planning, the sage struck his thigh and out sprung a woman so beautiful, that both of Indra's Apsaras were put to shame. This woman was Urvashi. After successfully completing his penance, the sage gifted Urvashi to Indra and she went on to occupy the pride of place in Indra's court.

The Tragic Love Story of Urvashi and Pururavas

Soma or the Moon had a son named Buddha. He, in turn, had a son named Pururavas. He was the first Chandravanshi, the Lunar King. From Pururavas came the Pandavas and the Kauravas. He was a mighty and valiant warrior, who constantly accompanied Indra on his battles against the Asuras. Pururavas also performed a hundred Ashwamedha Yagnas to become one of the greatest rulers ever. The Rig Veda, Matsya Purana and the Mahabharata narrate his tragic love story with Urvashi. He is also the central character of Kalidasa's play, Vikramorvasiyam.

Tired of life in Devaloka, Urvashi and some other Apsaras came down to earth to stay among the humans for some time. On her way back, she was accosted by an Asura named Keshi. He was deeply in love with her and wanted to marry her. He took her in his arms and she desperately tried to free herself from his grasp.

Hearing her cries for help, Pururavas, who was passing by, stopped and challenged the Asura for a fight. He successfully fought Keshi and rescued the Apsara. During the course of the fight, though, Pururavas accidentally touched Urvashi. It was the first time that Urvashi experienced the warmth of a mortal and felt his emotion. On his side, he too had never seen such a captivating beauty and was immediately smitten by her.

Back in heaven, Urvashi could not stop thinking about him. While acting in a play directed by Rishi Bharata, she accidentally said the name, 'Pururavas', instead of 'Purushottama' (Vishnu's name). This angered the Rishi, who cursed her to become mortal and beget children on earth. This gladdened Urvashi in a way, since she always felt that she identified more with humankind than with her own race.



Urvashi - Apsara in the Court of Indra
(Ravi Varma Reprint Poster)

In the meantime, Pururavas was already married, but his wife could not have children. Though he had met Urvashi briefly, he could not get her out of his mind. When she came down to earth and told him about the curse, the two decided to run away together and live in the Gandhamadana gardens.

Though an earthling, Urvashi was still bound by the rules of the Devaloka. Hence, she lay down three conditions upon Pururavas and told him that, if he broke any of them, she would have to leave him immediately and return to Heaven.

1. Her first condition was that she would bring with her two sheep, whose safety would be his responsibility.
2. Secondly, she said she would live only on ghee and nothing else.
3. As the final condition, she stipulated that they would never see each other as naked unless they were making love.

Though a little confused about the conditions, Pururavas agreed to them all and the two lived together happily for a period of 64 years.

Meanwhile, Indra and the other Devas were sorely missing Urvashi and wished she would come back to where she truly belonged. They decided to steal her sheep, so that she would be forced to return to them. One night, they proceeded to steal the sheep. However, as they were just about to decamp with them, Pururavas rushed to stop them. The noise had awoken him from his slumber.

He, however, made just one mistake. He was sleeping naked and, in his rush to stop the Devas, he forgot to put on some clothes. He gave them a chase, but the Devas managed to get the better of him and took the sheep with them.

Urvashi was aggrieved to know that two of her conditions were violated. She now had to leave to Devaloka. With a heavy heart, she left him behind. However, she was now with Pururavas' child, Ayu. So she asked him to meet her at Kurukshetra in nine more months, when she would be able to give him the son he always wanted. She came down to earth many times after that and had five other sons with Pururavas. Though they met each other every now and then, they never reunited in the true sense.

In the Mahabharata

Urvashi is mentioned in Mahabharata as well. When Arjuna visited Devaloka to obtain celestial weapons from his father, Indra, he met Urvashi, who was the court dancer there. Indra sent Chitrasena to ask Urvashi to wait upon Arjuna. Having heard much about Arjuna's good looks and great might, Urvashi was filled with desire.

At twilight, she reached Arjuna's quarters. As soon as Arjuna saw her, he respectfully saluted her. She then told him about her desire for him. But he refused, as he considered her his elder. Angry and disappointed at being rejected, she cursed Arjuna that he would turn a eunuch for a year. This curse turned out to become a blessing in disguise, as Arjuna took the form of the eunuch, Brihannala, during the Pandavas' agyatavasa (living in incognito), while staying in the court of King Virata, as mentioned in the Virata Parva of the Mahabharata.

Tilottama

Tilottama was yet another famed celestial nymph in the court of Indra. Her name is derived from the Sanskrit words, "Tila", which means "sesame seed" or "a bit" and "Uttama", which means "better or higher". Hence, her name means the one whose smallest particle is the finest one or the one who is made up of the best and finest qualities.

The Mahabharata describes Tilottama as being created by the Divine Architect, Vishwakarma, at Brahma's request. He gathered the best quality of everything going into her making, thus creating the finest ever creature. So beautiful and flawless was she that even the Devas and Brahma himself were enamoured of her. She later brought about the destruction of the Asuras Sunda and Upasunda.

Birth

Some accounts of her birth relate that, in the previous birth, she was an ugly widow. Yet others relate how she was cursed by Rishi Durvasa to be born as a Daitya (demon) princess, Usha.

Destroying Sunda and Upasunda

The Adi Parva of the Mahabharata narrates that Narada once told the Pandavas about the demons Sunda and Upasunda. He was trying to draw a parallel to prove how one woman could drive a wedge between the closest of brothers; warning them that Draupadi, who they commonly shared as a wife, could well end up causing a rift between them. These demons were the sons of Asura Nikumbha. They were inseparable siblings, who shared everything including their bed, food, home and so on. Once, the brothers decided to undertake penance in the Vindhya Mountains, in order to invoke Brahma and grant them the boon of great power and immortality.

Pleased with their severe austerities, Brahma appeared before them and granted the boon of great might. He, however, refused to grant them immortality. Instead, he told them that nothing could hurt them, except each other. Filled with arrogance, the demons attacked heaven and drove the Devas out of there. They then conquered the entire universe and also started to harass the sages, generally creating havoc everywhere they went.

The dismayed Devas then went to Brahma, asking him for protection. The Lord then asked Vishwakarma to create the most beautiful creature ever seen in the universe. The architect collected all the finest ingredients from the three worlds; also the finest gems in the world and then began to create the most alluring woman, with unrivalled beauty.

Once the process of her creation was complete, Brahma named her Tilottama and sent her to seduce the Asura brothers. He directed her to create such a rift between them that they would eventually start hating and hurting each other over her.

As planned, Tilottama appeared along the river bank of the Vindhya Mountains and made her way towards the brothers. Totally drunk and out of their senses, Sunda and Upasunda were bewitched by this voluptuous woman approaching them. Each one took one of her hands and asked her to marry them. Both the brothers then got into a heated argument as to who was more worthy of wedding her.

Neither wanted to let go of her and they finally started attacking each other with their clubs. Finally, things came to a head and the brothers ended up killing each other. The Devas were relieved and expressed their gratitude to Brahma and Tilottama. Brahma also announced that no one would be able to keep looking at her too long, due to her glowing luster.

Tilottama - The Enchantress

The Adi Parva goes on to narrate that though Shiva was unaffected by Tilottama's beauty, all the other Gods were swayed by her presence. Even Brahma, who tried his best to remain unperturbed, developed heads on both sides and at the back of his head, so that he could constantly keep track of her. Indra, however, was the most affected by her. He developed hundred red eyes on his body, so that he could always see her.

According to another tale in the Mahabharata, Tilottama wanted to tempt Shiva. She approached him and circumambulated him. Tremendously attracted to her, Shiva developed four visible faces. Yet another legend relates that Shiva revealed himself to Tilottama as the five Brahmins, with his Panchamukha (five faces - four visible and one invisible). The east face implied his sovereignty over the universe; the north face was to engage with Parvati; the west face to ensure the well-being of all creatures; and the south face to destroy the universe. The fifth face was beyond the Apsara's comprehension.



Panchamukhi Shiva

(Photo Print)

According to another interesting legend from the Puranas, Brahma was aroused by Tilottama and felt guilty at feeling like this about his own daughter, who he created. He sent her to Mount Kailash, to meet Shiva. Shiva glanced at her, but avoided her, because Parvati was seated right next to him. As the Apsara circumambulated him, he developed a head in each of the four directions. Enraged by this, Parvati covered his eyes, thus plunging the entire universe into darkness. Shiva then developed a third eye in order to bring back light to the universe.

Tilottama Curses Sahasranika

According to the Kathasaritsagara, the 11th century translation of the Paishachi text Brihatkatha, King Sahasranika was once cursed by Tilottama. As he was preparing to return to his kingdom from Indraloka, Tilottama asked him to wait, so that she could tell him an interesting fact. But he was so engrossed in thoughts of his sweetheart, Apsara Alambusa, that he ignored what she said.

Enraged by his conduct, Tilottama cursed him that he would suffer separation from the one he was thinking about, for a period of fourteen years.

Usha - Tilottama in Her Previous Birth

The Padma Purana relates that Tilottama was an ugly widow, named Kubja, in her previous birth. She underwent several austerities and rituals for eight years, so as to ensure that she would be reborn as the strikingly good looking Tilottama.

According to the Brahma Vaivarta Purana, Sahasika, the grandson of Bali, was once indulging in a dalliance with Tilottama. Unknowingly, he ended up disturbing sage Durvasa's penance. In a rage, the sage turned him into a donkey and cursed Tilottama to be born as Asura Banasura's daughter, Usha. Usha later became the wife of Aniruddha, the grandson of Krishna.

Ghritachi

The fifth of the major Apsaras, Ghritachi was a very beautiful and seductive celestial nymph, who was primarily responsible for giving a few sages great, illustrious sons. The sages included Vyasa, Kushanabha and Bharadwaja

As the legend goes, Vyasa was longing for a son for a long time. On the instruction of sage Narada, he underwent penance to appease Shiva and Parvati. For this, he chanted the Ekakshara mantra for a year. During this time, his spiritual energy became so high that it enveloped the entire universe. This made Indra insecure about his own position in Devaloka.

Ghritachi Gives Birth to Many Offspring

Shiva appeared before Vyasa and blessed him that he would beget a son who was wise and famous. Vyasa then realized that, in order to get a son, he would first have to get a wife. Ghritachi appeared before him that very minute. But Vyasa did not respond to her. Fearing that he may curse her, she took the form of a parrot and flew away.

Vyasa, however, changed his mind about her and began thinking lustful thoughts about her. He spontaneously ejaculated and the fluid fell on a few of the sticks he had gathered to make a fire. Without realizing that, he kept rubbing the fire sticks. From it emerged a son, who came to be known as Shuka.

Once, when Bharadwaja was offering prayers in the Ganga, Ghritachi happened to be bathing nearby. Seeing her, Bharadwaja ejaculated and collected the fluid in a vessel. After a few months, a child emerged from the vessel. This child came to be known as Dronacharya, in the Mahabharata. The Mahabharata narrates that one more child, Shrutavati, was born in a similar fashion.

Kusha's son Kushanabha was a Rajarishi. He met and fell in love with Ghritachi. They got married and had a hundred daughters. The Apsara once seduced King Pramati and then gave birth to Ruru, who was a great sage and received mention in the Mahabharata. Again, as per the Mahabharata, she once pleased Ashtavakra, who got her a place in Kubera's court. She also danced at Arjuna's birth festival. Vishwakarma had a daughter with her, named Chitrangada. Besides, Ghritachi also had a daughter named Devavati.

Apsaras in India and South East Asia

Apsaras feature prominently in several Hindu mythological stories. Almost all major Indian temples feature images and sculptures of these divine nymphs. Apart from India, their presence is also found in Indonesia, China, Cambodia, Vietnam, Belure and various other cultures.



Apsara

(Poster)

- The earliest Chinese paintings of Apsaras can be traced back to the Sixteen States Period, between 304 and 439 BC. They are often portrayed as flying figures in the murals and sculptures of Buddhist cave sites, such as the Mogao Caves, Yulin Caves and the Longmen and Yungang Grottoes. In China, they are referred to as feitian.
- In Cambodia, their motifs can be found in the stone bas-reliefs of the Angkorian temples. However, not all of them are considered to be Apsaras. Only the Khmer female figures that are in a graceful pose or are dancing are believed to be those of Apsaras. These figures went on to become an inspiration of the Khmer classical dance. A ballet-like performance, which is commonly known as "Apsara dance", was created by the Royal Ballet of Cambodia in the mid-10th century. Here, the Apsara is played by a woman, who is dressed in traditional costume and jewelry and moves sinuously to the music, narrating classical myths.
- In Indonesia and Malaysia, they are termed as 'bidadari', which means, 'possessed of science or spells'. They are supernatural, fairy type of beings. In these cultures too, they live in the celestial palace of Indra, as described in the Balinese dedari dance. It is to be noted that the 'vidyadharis' of India are another class of celestial beings, not associated with the above.
- This theme occurs often in Javanese traditions, especially in the Kakawin Arjunawiwaha, written by Mpu Kanwa in 1030 AD. Later, Apsaras were also known as Hapsari and Widodari. Dances such as Sanghyang Dedari and Legong depicted divine maidens, dancing in the celestial court of Indra. This tradition of dance is still alive and continues to be performed in several parts of Indonesia.
- One can find several images of Apsaras in temples of ancient Java. They feature as decorative motifs and even form an integral part of a story in bas-relief. These images can be found in Borobudur, Mendut, Prambanan, Plaosan and Penataran.
- After the adoption of Islam, however, bidadari is considered equivalent to the houri, the heavenly maiden mentioned in the Quran. Here, they are the 'forbidden pearls' of

heaven, who are for men who successfully resisted temptation and bore life's trials. The bidadari was offered to a man, considering his worthiness, devout nature and level of spirituality.

- Apsaras also featured as central motifs in the art of Champa, medieval Angkor's neighbour, which is now central Vietnam. The depiction of these celestial maidens in the Tra Kieu Style of Cham art, which was popular in the 10th and 11th centuries AD, deserve special mention.

Priya Viswanathan, a teacher/performer of Bharata Natyam, Classical Music and Classical Instrumental Veena. A recipient of several awards for both music and dance, Priya is also a freelance writer online. She currently writes for About.com, a subsidiary of the New York Times Company (<http://mobiledevices.about.com>)

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