

## The Iconography of Sri Laksmi

Sri Laksmi is a multi-faceted goddess with many different depictions. Her iconography is complex, as she is associated with many different symbols. Her illustrations come in many forms, from the glorious and transcendent goddess of prosperity and fertility, to the more traditional image of a good and loyal wife. She is a goddess associated with many concepts; beauty, wealth, good luck, fertility, agriculture. This accounts for the complexities and range of her portrayal in sculpture, carving and illustration. All the concepts that she represents are illustrated in symbols presented in her iconography.

The iconography of the Hindu goddess Sri Laksmi is rich and intricate. A deity Identified most frequently as a goddess of fortune, wealth and fertility, the symbols of these concepts in Hinduism often appear in depictions of her (Pauwels 955). Although there are many different depictions of Sri Laksmi, the most common illustration of this deity has her clothed in a pink or red robe (*sari*), wearing many fine jewels and seated atop a blooming lotus flower. In this depiction known as the Gaja Laksmi, or Wealth of Animals, Laksmi is showered with water from the trunks of two elephants (Pauwels 957). This image is overflowing with symbols that describe the ideas she is associated with.

The symbol most commonly associated with Laksmi, and most other Hindu and Buddhist deities, is the lotus flower. This flower is a very important symbol to the iconography of both religions, and many deities and Buddhists who have reached *nirvana* (*bodhisattvas*) are depicted sitting or standing on top of a lotus flower (Maliackal 262). In nature, this beautiful and intricate flower grows out of the mud and mire of swamps and ditches (in Hindu depictions, it symbolizes transcendence from the spiritually ordinary). The marsh that it appears to be blooming out of represents the material plain, an imperfect place which one must rise above in order to gain

spiritual enlightenment (Maliackal 263). In most portrayals of Sri Lakshmi, she is often sitting or standing atop the lotus flower. To be seated serenely on the lotus flower implies her spiritual authority and her existence above the material plain (Maliackal 263).

Sri Lakshmi is a young woman in most depictions, wearing large amounts of extravagant jewelry and ornaments. Illustrations of the goddess also sometimes include arches of fresh flowers other than the lotus, such as the rose. This portrayal of her as a beautiful young woman illustrates her association with beauty and fortune (Pauwels 556). Indeed she is known as a goddess of beauty. She is also associated with royalty, and her ornate appearance, her jewels and hair pieces, symbolizes this association.

She commonly is shown with milky white skin and a look of contented stillness. Typically, Sri Lakshmi is shown as having four arms, but there are depictions of her with two or six arms. In the Gaja Lakshmi illustrations, she has two pairs of arms (Pauwels 558). Two hands are shown holding the lotus flower, again alluding to the spiritually transcendent nature of the goddess. The other two hands pour coins forth before her (Dhal 112). These coins of course represent wealth, as do her large amounts of jewelry and ornaments. The water showered on her by the elephants depicts her association with similar rituals in which holy water is poured over the heads of royalty (Pauwels 957). Other portrayals of Sri Lakshmi also show her holding a gold jar or pot. This jar is brimming with water, and contains leaves and a coconut. This image depicts the goddess's association with fertility and abundance (Pauwels 957). The contents of the jar overflow, symbolizing abundance and, once again, wealth.

These symbols of wealth and abundance, along with the lotus flower rising from the earth, illustrate the association of Sri Lakshmi with agriculture and more specifically, agricultural prosperity. Her connection to the material world, the symbolic prosperity flowing from her hand

and her position atop the lotus blossom rising from the marsh illustrates her existence as a goddess of the earth (Pauwels 957). In Gaja Laksmi illustrations, prosperity flows from her hands onto the earth below, creating rich and fertile land for agricultural uses.

Sri Laksmi is the consort of Visnu, and is usually depicted sitting or standing alongside him, dressed as royalty (Dhal 78). The position of the two deities in this depiction illustrates the balance of power, the importance of both the masculine and feminine energies, and the importance of the Sakti power as she stands in equal extravagance to her male partner. There are other depictions however which show a different relationship between the two deities. In one, she is shown attending Visnu, and massaging his feet along with his other consort, Bhu Devi (Dhal 79). This depiction emphasizes the traditional relationship between a woman and her lord husband (*patideva*), or lord husband. This is the ideal relationship between husband and wife in Orthodox Hinduism, wherein a wife serves her husband and treats him as superior to herself (Dhal 79). This portrayal does not depict Laksmi in all her glory as a goddess atop the lotus, but as a proper wife to her husband. This illustrates her association as a passive Sakti. Her philosophical associations with Sakti power, however, are not always the same as depicted in iconography, and varies in interpretation (Dhal 146).

Sri Laksmi is closely associated with the festival of Divali, or Row of Lights. This is considered a New Year for some Hindus, and a time of warding off bad luck and misfortune, while attracting good luck and prosperity (Shomer 11). Laksmi being the goddess of luck and wealth, she is more heavily worshipped around this time of year, in hopes that she will grant prosperity in the year to come. Some Hindu families keep small clay statues of Sri Laksmi in their houses. These are kept for one year, and then replaced with new ones during the festival of

Divali (Shomer 16). Since she is associated with wealth, these statues are meant to bring prosperity and fortune into the house.

### **References and Further Reading**

Dhal, Upendra Nath (1995) *Goddess Laksmi: origin and development* 2nd ed. Delhi: Eastern Book Linkers.

Hawley, John S, (1996) *Devi: Goddesses of India*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Kinsely, David (1998) *Hindu Goddesses*. Berkeley: California Press Ltd.

Malieckal, Louis *Symbolism in Hindu worship*, Journal of Dharma, 9 July-Sept 1984, p 261-273.

Pauwels, Heidi *The goddess Laksmi: the divine consort in South Indian Vaisnava tradition*. Journal of the American Academy of Religion, 66 Winter 1998, p 955-958.

Schomer, K. (1999). *Divali: study of a Hindu festival*. Journal of Vaisnava Studies, 7(2), 5-36.

### **Related Topics for Further Investigation**

Divali

Visnu

Bhu Devi

The Lotus Flower

Bodhisattva

Eight Types of Wealth

Brahma-vidya

Sakti

Patideva

Sari

Gaja Laksmi

### **Noteworthy Websites Related to the Topic**

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Laksmi#Iconography>

[http://www.courses.rochester.edu/muller-ortega/rel249/lakshmi/Laksmi\\_Vishnu.html](http://www.courses.rochester.edu/muller-ortega/rel249/lakshmi/Laksmi_Vishnu.html)

<http://www.vishvarupa.com/shakti-lakshmi.html>

<http://www.msu.edu/user/murphy16/>

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