

# Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

## Norton Simon Museum

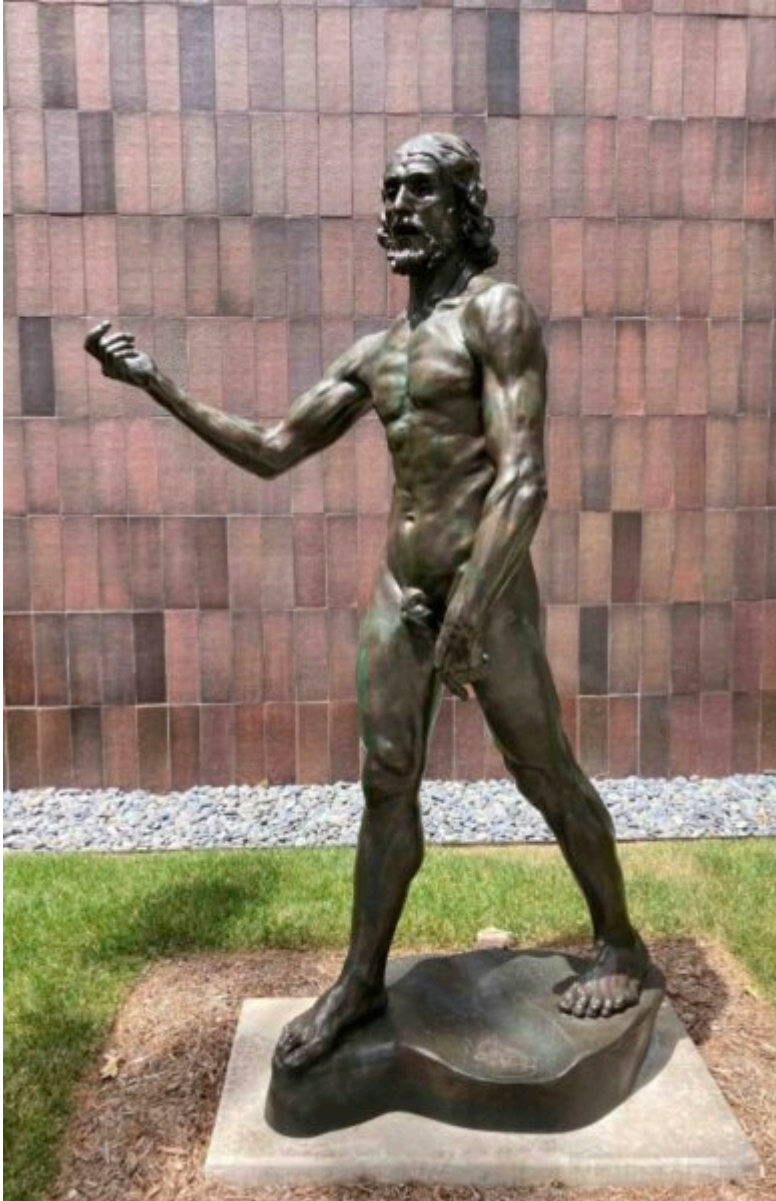
Elisa Leonelli · Tuesday, May 5th, 2026



Mountain 1937 by Aristide Maillol

I had not visited the [Norton Simon Museum](#) in Pasadena in a long time, so I decided to drive there on a Sunday, when a talk about Indian Sculpture was scheduled.

I was fascinated by the temple carvings during my extensive trip to India four decades ago, when I was a young photographer traveling with my Nikon cameras, lenses and equipment. Read about it [here](#). Now in my later years I am content to snap photos with my iPhone.



John the Baptist 1878 by Auguste Rodin

I arrived early to the museum and parked in the ample free lot, I admired the bronze sculptures by [Auguste Rodin](#) in the front lawn.

The model for this [John the Baptist](#) was an Italian peasant who posed on that walking stance.

When we were allowed inside, precisely at 12 noon, I headed to the [sculpture garden](#), that was renovated in 2025 for the Museum's 50th anniversary. The landscaping surrounding the pond was exquisite, a symphony of tall trees and colorful flowers, interspersed with sculptures by [Aristide Maillol](#) and Henry Moore.

I was surprised to see a bronze, [Venus Victorious](#) 1914 by [Pierre-Auguste Renoir](#), my favorite Impressionist ever since I was a teenager, because I did not know he made sculptures in addition to his numerous paintings. Affected by crippling arthritis in his hands, he used an assistant, but created amazing work until the end of his life in 1917 at age 77.



Venus Victorious 1914 by Pierre-Auguste Renoir

I checked the menu of the outdoor cafe, and planned to have the pesto chicken quesadilla for lunch after my visit, which I did.



Buddha Shakyamuni. India 1000

I made my way to the downstairs level to look at the South East Asian sculptures, starting with many versions of the [Buddha](#), which I had also observed at LACMA's David Geffen Galleries. Read my article [here](#).



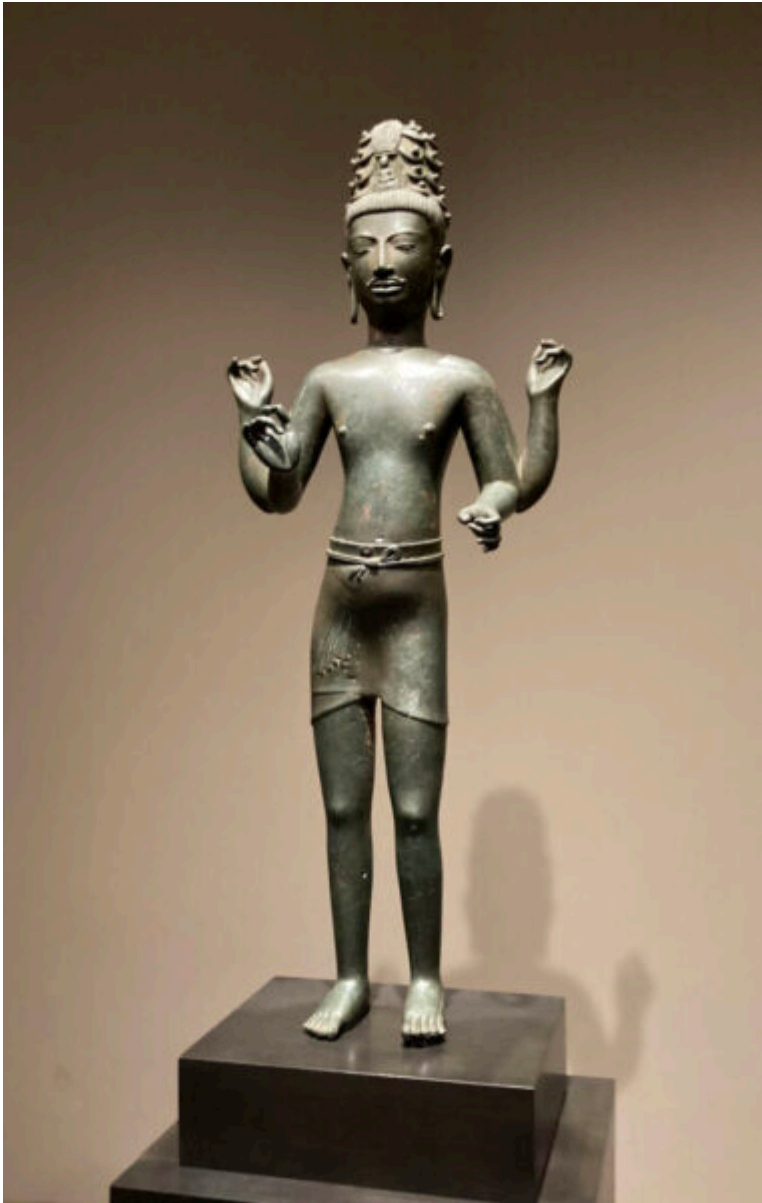
Bodhisattva Maitreya. Pakistan, 4th c

As a hippie in Italy in the late 60s, I had, of course, read *Siddhartha*, the 1922 novel by Hermann Hesse.



Siddhatha Meditating. Pakistan, 3rd c

This week I found the 1972 movie *Siddhartha* on YouTube and watched it. The enchanting landscapes were filmed by cinematographer Sven Nykvist. The music was composed and sung by Hemant Kumar.



Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara, Thailand 8th c

In 1994, as film editor of *Venice magazine*, I interviewed Bernardo Bertolucci about *Little Buddha* with Keanu Reeves as Siddhartha. He said: “Buddhist compassion is the highest form of intelligence, you’re good because you understand the suffering of others.”



Tara. India, 9th c

While doing research for this article, I learnt more about [Tara](#), the female Buddhist deity. In Tibet she is known as “Venerable Savior.” She hears the cries of beings in saṁsāra (the cycle of life, death, and rebirth) and rescues them from worldly and spiritual danger.



Vishnu, India, Kerala 1550

I also learnt about the Hindu trinity (Trimurti): Brahma the creator, Vishnu the preserver, and Shiva the destroyer.



Paneling for Temple. India, Kerala, 18th c

At the end of the stairs to the lower gallery stands a polychrome wood paneling, with a niche where a statue of Vishnu was placed.



Cosmic Vishnu with Spouses. India 1100

Above a stele of *Cosmic Vishnu with Spouses*. Vishnu's main consort was [Lakshmi](#), the goddess who provides wealth to support life.

At 1 pm, about 20 of us “students” sat down in a semicircle to listen to our educator, Gorman Bentley. He taught us how to appreciate a work of art in a museum. First look, then think, then feel, and only after that read the caption.

He told us that [Norton Simon](#) traveled to India in 1971 with his second wife, actress Jennifer Jones, and became so enamored with those ancient Buddhist and Hindu sculptures that he sold 200 Picassos to buy as many as he could find and assemble this large collection. This is an amusing anecdote, but unlikely to be true. Read the actual history [here](#).

What is true is that, after the renovation of the building by architect Frank Gehry in the late 1990s, the South Asia collection of sculptures and paintings from India, Pakistan, Nepal, Tibet, Cambodia and Thailand, was moved from the upper to the lower level.

You may explore it virtually at [this link](#).



Parvati + Shiva. India, Tamil Nadu 1000

Guided by the enthusiastic Gorman, we studied two bronzes from Tamil Nadu during the [Chola period](#): *Vishnu the Bull Rider*, embodying strength and divine authority. positioned by Norton Simon next to Parvati, his consort.



Shiva, Parvati and Skanda. India, Tamil Nadu 975

I also noticed one sculpture of Shiva and Parvati with their son [Skanda](#) as a child.



Parvati 1000 + Parvati 975. India, Tamil Nadu

I saw two sculptures of Parvati positioned next to each other, one slender on the right, the other with a more womanly body.

**Parvati** was called Uma in Tamil Nadu. That's who actress Uma Thurman was named after by her father Richard, a professor of Indo-Tibetan Buddhist Studies. She was the goddess of power, energy, nourishment, harmony, love, beauty, devotion, and motherhood.



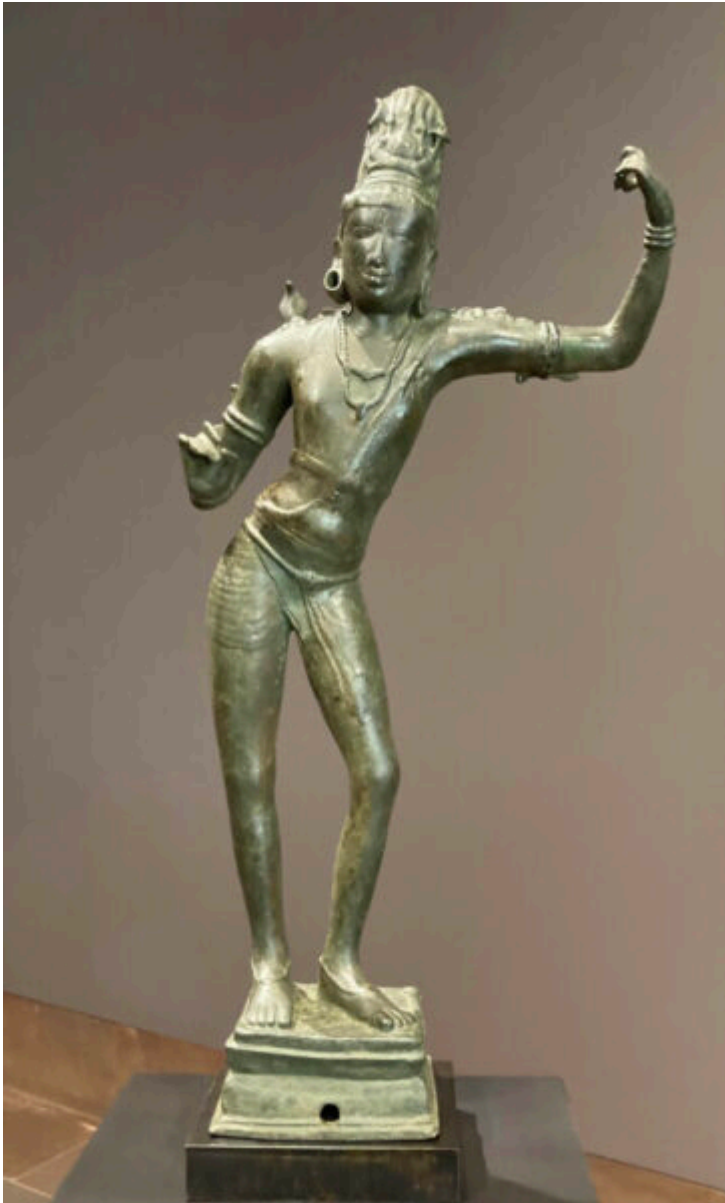
Shiva as Lord of Dance. India, Tamil Nadu 1000

I was surprised to see a sculpture of *Shiva as Lord of the Dance*, that was identical to the one I noticed in the Geffen Galleries. Gorman explained that several of these sculptures existed because they were carried on a pole during ritual processions.

During the careful examinations of every element of this iconic Shiva that our educator encouraged us to do, someone thought that he was stomping on a child, but it's actually a demon shown as a dwarf who symbolizes spiritual ignorance.

As a former catholic, this reminded me of [depictions of the Virgin Mary](#) crushing under her foot a serpent representing the devil.

[Read here](#) about further symbolism of this portrayal of Shiva as Nataraja, lord of dance and dramatic arts.



Shiva as Destroyer of Three Cities. India 975

Another bronze of Shiva shows him as Destroyer of the Three Cities. Read about it [here](#).

I could not leave this amazing museum without walking quickly through other collections.



Madonna and Child 1502 by Raphael

I stopped to admire *Madonna and Child with Book* by [Raphael](#). I remembered when I first visited the Uffizi in Florence in 1969 and was enraptured by the many paintings by Raffaello Sanzio on this subject.

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