

***Flames of Devotion: Oil Lamps from South and Southeast Asia and the Himalayas.* Sean Anderson. Los Angeles: UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History, 2006. 110 pp.¹**

Reviewed by Michael W. Meister

These copper-bronze and brass lamps for home and temple ritual are the gift of Pratapaditya Pal, the emeritus curator who built the exceptional South Asian collections of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, and his wife, Chitralekha Pal. Pratapaditya Pal refers to this as a “modest collection of lamps” (p. 13); the Director and Curator at the Fowler Museum to “a unique and extensive collection” (p. 11); and the catalogue’s author to “an extraordinary collection of oil lamps and incense burners (p. 18). Perhaps they are all correct—modest in scale, unique in an American museum, and extraordinary in its presentation in this volume. Each object is beautifully photographed and illustrated and the introductory essay benefits from the exceptional field photographs of Stephen P. Huyler, whose own work has documented devotional and village arts in India.

Coming from widely spread regions within India and with fine examples from Nepal, Indonesia, Vietnam, and Cambodia, this is an extraordinary study collection for a university museum to have acquired. No distinction between “fine” and “folk” need be applied to these instruments of devotion. I think Pal’s sensitive collector’s essay gives a true sense of how these instruments were integrated into their experiences of daily life in eastern India: “As early as I can remember, lamps were a daily part of my life” (p. 13). He beautifully evokes how their light permeated life and literature in Bengal.

Pal’s student, Sean Anderson, has done yeoman’s work in tracing early historical and archaeological evidence for lamps, describing their making, types, and motifs, and evoking the effect of their use in festivals and rituals on a Western observer. His evocation, however, does lack some of the poignancy of the collector’s sense of a distanced but experienced world. Written in Rome, his essay misses the immediacy and grit of fieldwork, but provides a knowledgeable and passionate frame.

Ananda Coomaraswamy’s *Arts and Crafts of India and Ceylon* (Foulis, 1913), Stella Kramrisch’s *Unknown India: Ritual Art in Tribe and Village* (Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1968), and Stephen P. Huyler’s multiple works provide further reference for this subject. Carol Bolon’s recent work on the large inscribed temple lamps of Kerala could have been cited as could the Newark Museum’s catalog *Cooking for the Gods: The Art of Home Ritual in Bengal* (1999) (authored by Pika Ghosh, Edward C Dimock, and Michael W. Meister), with its ethnographic emphasis.

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¹ Posted to Museum Anthropology Review July 27, 2007. See: <http://museumanthropology.wordpress.com/2007/07/27/mar-2007-2-3/>. © 2007 Michael Meister.

other aspects of the art of the Indian sub-continent. Among his many works is the multivolume Encyclopedia of Indian Temple Architecture (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983, 1986, 1988, 1991).