



RUBIN
MUSEUM
OF ART

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Rubin Museum of Art
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BODY LANGUAGE: THE YOGIS OF INDIA AND NEPAL
Photographs by Thomas Kelly at the Rubin Museum of Art

New York—The enigmatic world of sadhus, the vividly decorated or completely nude ascetics of Hinduism, is explored in *Body Language: The Yogis of India and Nepal* at the Rubin Museum of Art. Eighteen striking color photographs by Thomas L. Kelly capture extraordinary-looking male sadhus (as well as a female sadhvi), famously known as the mystics, ascetics, yogis and wandering monks of South Asia. Sadhus renounce worldly life, earthly possessions and social obligations to devote their lives entirely to religious practice and the quest for spiritual enlightenment.

Enlightenment—liberation from the inherent suffering of worldly existence—is the ultimate goal in the Hindu religion. Sadhus embody this search for religious illumination, serving as living representations of the spiritual ideals expressed and the ascetic figures represented in tantric Hindu and Buddhist art. Though an important part of Hindu cultures, sadhus' commitment to attaining non-attachment and transcendence of the physical body leaves them on the fringes of society.

Sadhus, whom Kelly describes as “disturbing, annoying, inspiring, exasperating, irrational, wise and powerful,” increase their spiritual powers and advance on their path to enlightenment by practicing intensive forms of yoga and meditation and even performing magic rituals. They use their body like a canvas on which to tell stories, using colors and symbols to represent esoteric inner visions and higher states of consciousness, while also expressing their religious identities.

Sadhus are unmistakable. Their sparsely dressed or nude weather-worn bodies and matted locks are typically decorated with combinations of gray ash from the cremation grounds, and red, white, and yellow paint. These markings, called *tilakas*, range from a simple daub of color to fantastically complex designs utilizing the entire face and body. Each design identifies the sadhu’s particular denomination and the god to whom the sadhu is devoted: Shiva, Vishnu, or one of his incarnations. *Body Language* focuses on the rich symbolism behind sadhus’ painted bodies, postures and practices.

One featured photograph reflects a sadhu whose face is adorned with bright Sanskrit script. His hair, knotted with red fabric, is streaked with blue and white. His jaw is painted yellow; his beard is covered in gray ash; and a large white rectangle runs from his forehead to the bridge of his nose, with an intense red line running down the middle. What is perhaps most striking about this photograph, however, are the man’s soft but intense eyes, which somehow command the viewer’s gaze and eclipse the elaborate tilakas.

Having lived in Kathmandu, Nepal for decades, Kelly is personally acquainted with most of the sadhus represented in the exhibition, affording him such rare, intimate encounters. Still, Kelly says, the sadhus are an enigma to him. Kelly likens them to “a living question that people have forgotten to ask. Their painted bodies,” he says, “confront us with essential questions at the heart of existence...provoking the questions, ‘Who am I?’ ‘What do I need?’ ‘What is really important?’”

Body Language will be on view January 28 – July 4, 2011.

Thomas Kelly

Thomas L. Kelly made his first trip to Nepal in 1978 as a Peace Corps volunteer, and has since worked as a photo-activist, documenting the struggles of marginalized people and disappearing

cultural traditions all over the world, with a special focus on sex workers and the traditions of prostitution across South Asia. His writing has appeared in publications worldwide, including the New York Times, Time, and National Geographic. Films produced and directed by Kelly have appeared on Discovery, USA, National Geographic, and the BBC.

About the Rubin Museum of Art

The Rubin Museum of Art holds one of the world's most important collections of Himalayan art. The museum's permanent collection of over 2,000 paintings, sculptures and pictorial textiles are drawn from cultures that touch upon the arc of mountains that extends from Afghanistan in the northwest to Myanmar (Burma) in the southeast and includes Tibet, Nepal, Mongolia, and Bhutan. The larger Himalayan cultural sphere, determined by significant cultural exchange over millennia, includes India, China, Iran, Central Asia, and Southeast Asia. This rich cultural legacy, largely unfamiliar to Western viewers, offers an uncommon opportunity for visual adventure and aesthetic discovery.

The museum's ambitious exhibition schedule includes several contemporary or historical photography shows each year. Past photography exhibitions have featured Kenro Izu, Lynn Davis and Matthieu Ricard.

Admission to the Rubin Museum of Art is \$10 for adults; \$5 for seniors; \$5 for students (with ID); free for seniors the first Monday of every month; and free for children under 12 and for museum members. Gallery admission is free to all on Fridays between 6pm and 10pm.

Open Monday 11 am to 5 pm, Wednesday 11 am to 7 pm, Thursday 11 am to 5 pm, Friday 11 am to 10 pm, Saturday and Sunday from 11 am to 6 pm; closed on Tuesday. To reach the museum by subway, visitors may take the A, C or E to 14th Street; the 1 to 18th Street; 1, 2, 3 to 14th Street; F and M to 14th Street; N, R, Q, 4, 5 and 6 to 14th or the L to 6th Avenue. By bus, visitors may take the B20 to the corner of 7th Avenue and 17th Street.