

MUSEE ASIATICA

Biarritz

Press dossier of the exhibition

«Miracle of World Archaeology»

The Queen's Stepwell at Patan

Photographs of Xintian Zhu

From 1 July to 31 August 2010

In the context of the year «Namaste France »

Of the relation between archaeology and photography, Mme Xintian Zhu (Conservator of the Museum), and Mr Michel Postel (discoverer of the site) shares with you the discovery of this magnificent Hindu pantheon, shortly to be acknowledged by UNESCO



Summary

- Biography of Xintian Zhu
- Subject of the exhibition
- Presentation of the site by Mr Michel Postel

Biography of Mme Xintian Zhu

Mme Xintian Zhu, conservator of musée Asiatique, artist – painter and photographer, was born in 1951 in China. Since 1970, she has carried out her career of photography in a professional photographic laboratory for 12 years : from 1982 to 1986, as professor of theory and technical photography at Hangzhou University.

She has a doctorate in Art History and Archaeology of the Far East from the University of Paris 4 – Sorbonne. From 1990, she is a teacher at the Indian Cultural Research Centre, and one of the founders of Musée Asiatique.

Since 1997, with the objective of encouraging cultural exchange between the east and the west, she has carried out exhibitions on an international scale. From the time the Museum was established in March 1999, she has organised hundreds of exhibitions outlined below :

- March 1999, « The Historic Monuments of India and China »
- December 2001, « Afghanistan »
- July-December 2003, «Wonderful Tribal Art of Bastar »
- November 2003, «The Festival of Ganesha»
- July-November 2005, «Marriage in India»
- March-May 2008, « Angkor – Wonder of the world»
- June-September 2008, «Atru – New Angkor»
- May-December 2009, «The erotic sculptures on the temples of Khajuraho in India »



One can see here the difficulty of taking the photographs in this well: here, Mme Zhu has kept her tripod on a beam which is not more than 30/40 cm in width. On the column in front of her, this moon face with tiny ears is an interpretation of *Kirtimukha*, le « face of glory » of kind nature.

Subject of the exhibition



« The Queen's Stepwell » at Patan was built in 1064 by Queen Udayamati, wife of King Bhimadeva I of Gujarat (about 1022-1064) who, widowed, built this monumental well in memory of her husband.

This Hindu pantheon is a miracle in the world of archaeology, but few people in the world know about it. It was discovered by Mr. Michel Postel (founder of Musée Asiatique) in the year 1950. It is towards the end of 1970 that the Archaeological Survey of India began its excavation.

Mme Xintian Zhu returned to this site from 1990. She was fascinated by this fabulous universe : after almost thousand years, one can still find 365 large images of indian divinities, 298 *apsaras*, some hundreds of entirely carved columns, and also innumerable small images of nymphs,

divinities, sadhus, animals and decorative motifs!

Mme Zhu has spent almost 20 years to study the iconography of this unique medieval pantheon, which reflects the prosperity of India from the 11th century in the fields of history, archaeology, architecture, science and art. Above all it originates from the customs prevalent during that period. It is not surprising therefore that the UNESCO wishes to classify it in the list of World Archaeological Sites.

Mme Zhu has published a scholarly book «The Art of the Hindu Pantheon – taken from the mystery of the Queen's Stepwell at Patan ». This year is the year of India in France. On the request of the Indian Ambassador in Paris, to participate in this cultural event, Musée Asiatique has decided to open this exhibition to the public from 1st July to 31st August 2010.

This exhibition contains more than 50 selected photos among thousands of photographs of Mme Zhu during her 20 years of research on the Queen's Stepwell at Patan.

Le exposition will be inaugurated by his Excellence Mr Ranjan MATHAI, Ambassador of India in France on the 7 July at 18h 30 at Musée Asiatique, 1 rue Guy Petit, at Biarritz.

Presentation of the site by Mr Michel Postel

View of the complete well towards the east : the well itself is seen behind. One can notice in front the slope towards the well where the stairs are hidden on all sides.



It can be seen that this well is not an ordinary well since it has a large opening towards the east where the sun's rays illuminate the interior of the well.

Closer view of the bottom of the well: There are 44 rings. One can see the rings superimposed and protected by some awning. Under the awning, can be found some sculptures of nymphs or standing, divinities rank are seated. The lozenges are the symbol of fertility.



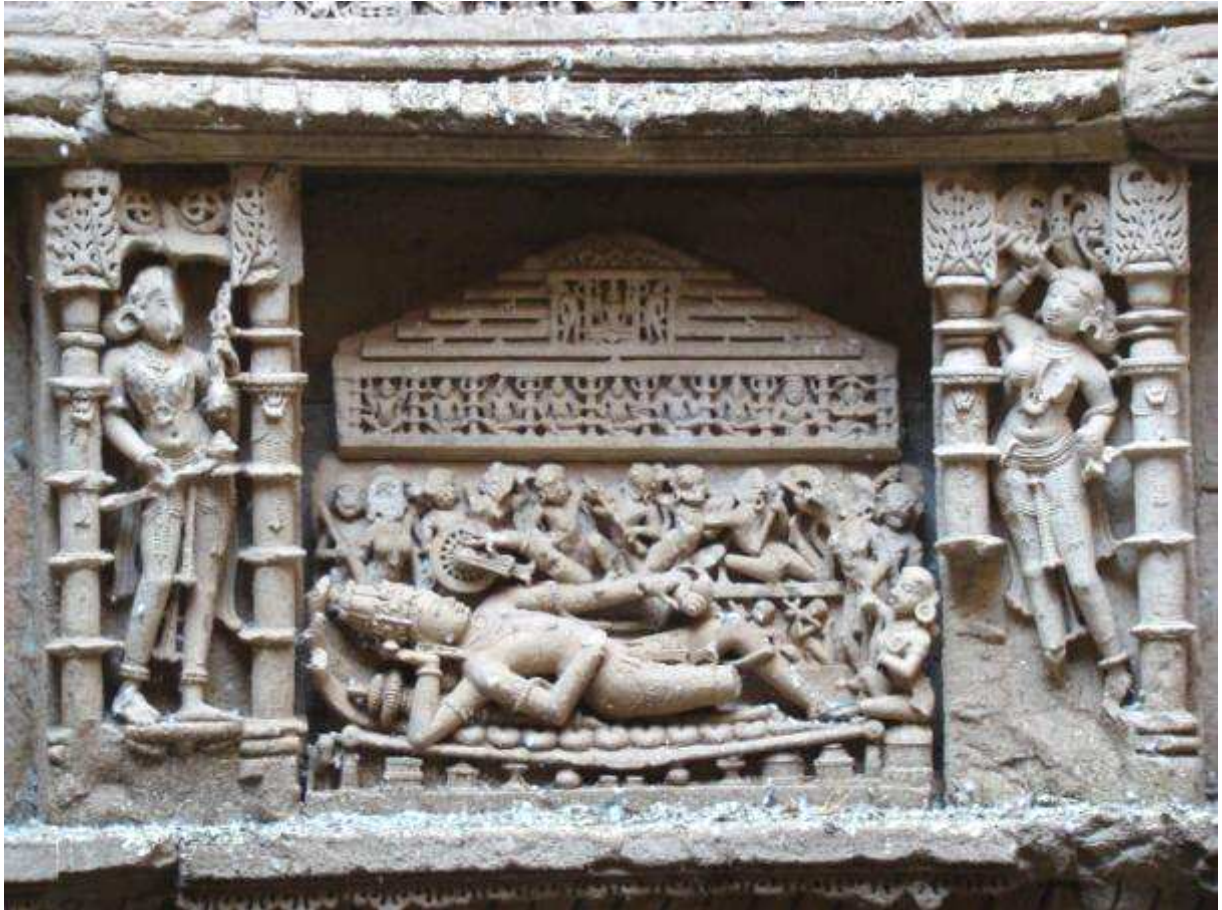


View of a part of the left wall. One can go counting from the height of the entire partition covered with sculptures of divinities except the one where you find Mr. Postel. Behind him, the last stage collapsed and the wall had been reconstructed as a support.

An entire column carved in stone: the *Kirtimukha* and the vase are better defined. The ornaments of foliage give a precise effect, a style of the 11th century. In the well, all the columns are entirely carved, and they do not all have the same motif. There were not less than 600 columns at the time of construction. Today, there exists more than 292 in the well.



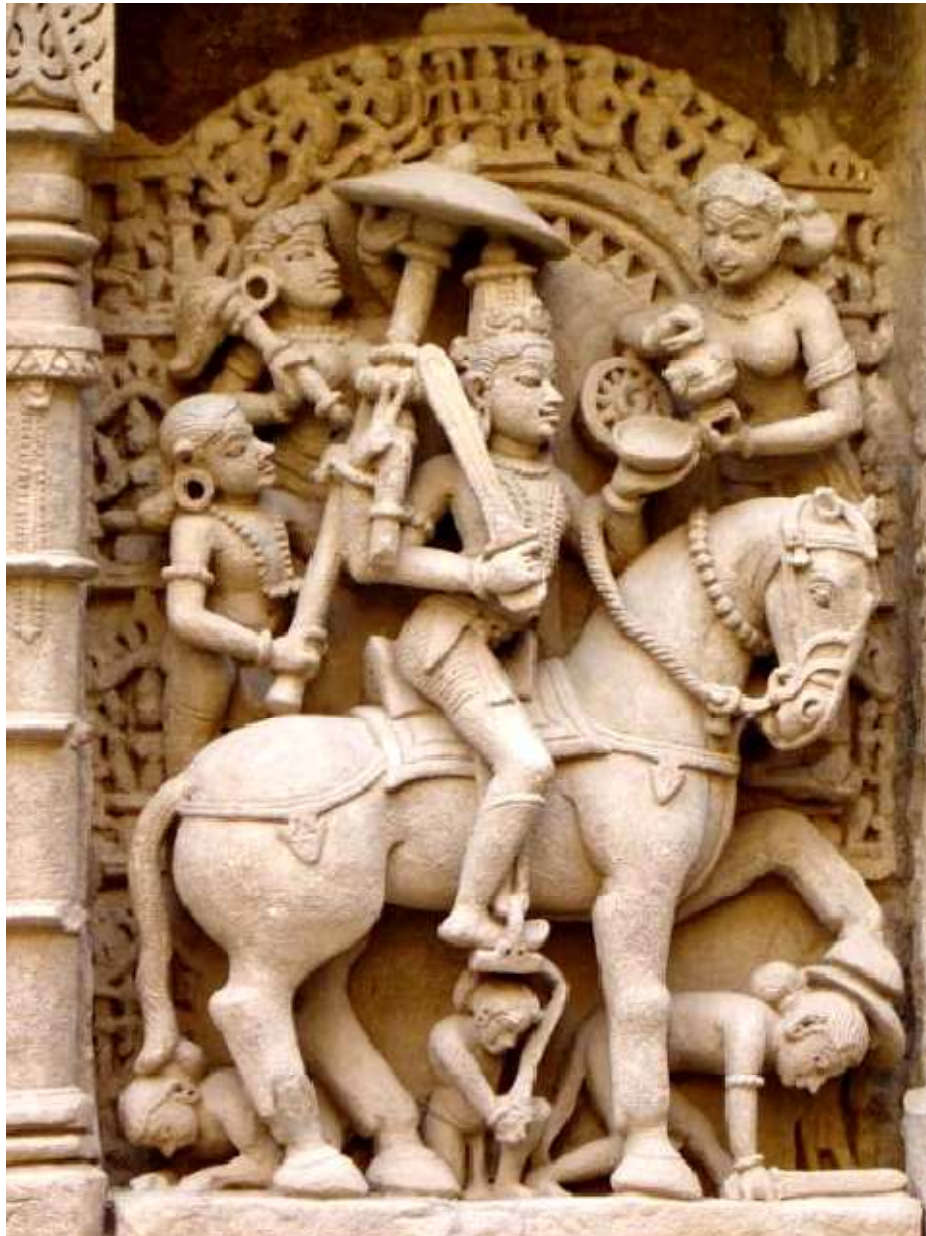
Principal divinity of the Queen's Stepwell : Vishnu



For taking this large photograph of Vishnu which is at the bottom of the well, Mme Zhu had to give good light by using acrobatics and skill.

One can see that Vishnu is lying down on the serpent of Eternity and you can see his head behind Vishnu's high crown. He holds his attributes: the conch, the wheel and the earth. Under the serpent, some offerings and his horse for moving towards a new era. At the foot, LAXMI, his wife.

In this well, there are 3 images similar to the Vishnu in couched position, which are situated at the bottom, in the middle and above the well. In dry season, one can see the 3 images at the same time; in rainy season, one can see at least one statue of Vishnu. With the exception of this well, the co-existence of the 3 couched Vishnus does not exist anywhere in India.



At the beginning of a better era, Vishnu appears in the form of a new avatar : **Kalki**. One can imagine him coming in the form of a horse. A servant holds an umbrella above his head as a mark of respect, another a fly swab while a third gives him an offering which he receives in a bowl of alms.

Generally, the last avatar de Vishnu-Kalki comes in the form of a white horse, but here Kalki is like a king, or a triumphant hero.

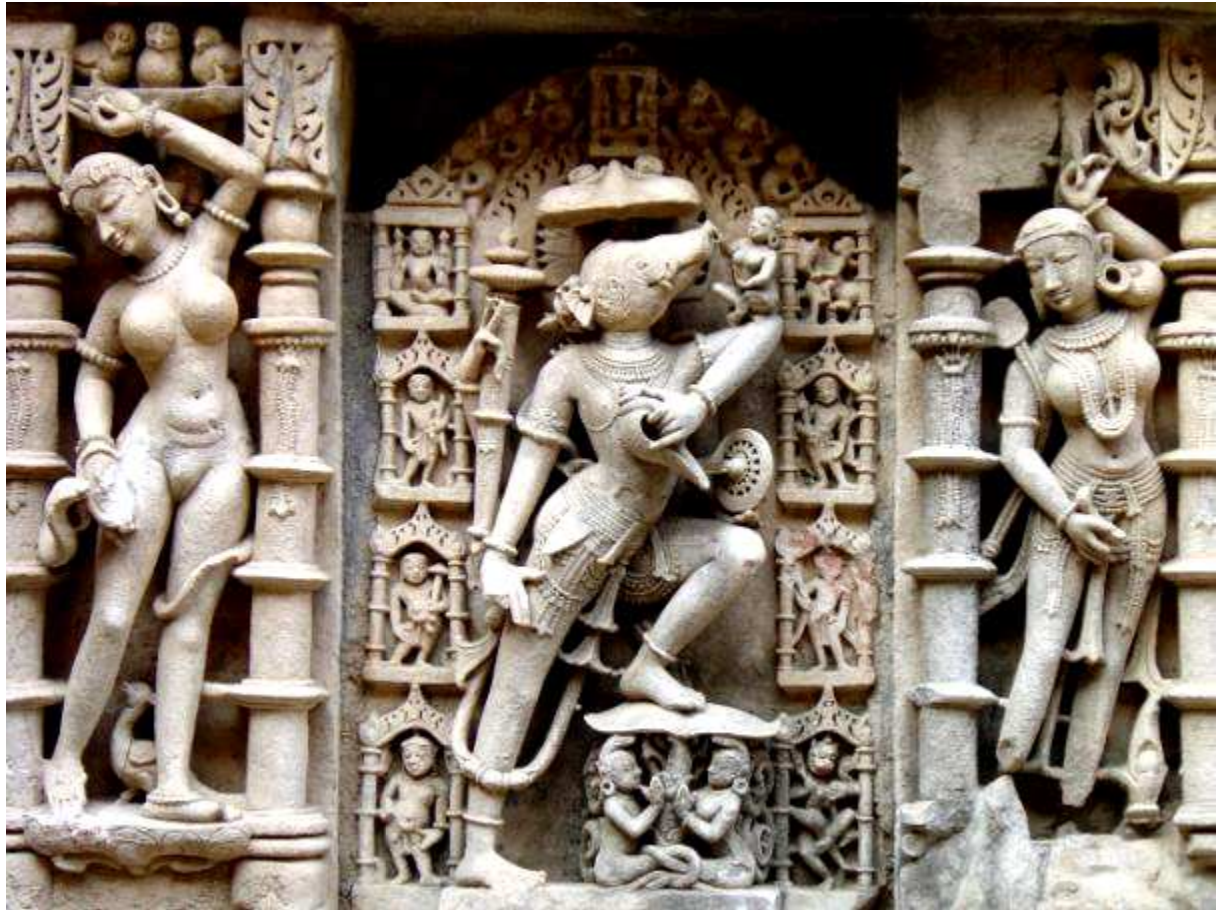
This elaborate sculpture is well preserved although ten centuries have passed and found at the lower part of the well partition, and it has been protected from damages even with the passage of time.



On the right partition, in the direction of the sun, an important and most beautiful sculpture : the dwarf **Vamana**, an avatar of Vishnu who is recognized by his umbrella. The following is the legend associated with him.

The dwarf Vamana presents himself in front of the great cruel king Bali who had conquered the world. Bali, of the warrior caste was obliged to pay homage to the brahmin Vamana, who was recognised by his cord *upavita*. He asked the great conqueror: « Do you wish to give me a third of your kingdom?», which Bali granted him. Then Vamana grew taller, more taller upto the sky. From this step he crossed the world, then another world and the third time rested on the head of Bali who repented and promised that from now on he would act according to the wishes of this spiritual vaisnava.

To the left this *yogini* holds two fingers towards a serpent surrounded around her leg. From the other side, a beautiful *apsara* seems tired of the advances of a little bearded man whom she pushes back with her feet.



This sculpture represents the **boar Varaha**, an avatar of Vishnu, who has plunged in the cosmic flood in order to save the Earth goddess. He carries her proudly on his elbow. She caresses him on the mouth. You can notice the emblems of Vishnu, the wheel, the earth and the conch. Under his feet notice under a sheet of lotus, two water divinities, half-human, half-serpents. Around him the other small avatars.

The yogini from left is naked in the night, represented by three owls above her head. She holds a cup containing a fish towards which a serpent draws out his tongue. It is difficult to decipher the meaning of this esoteric pose. And still more for the second yogini.



Mahishasuramardini (the Great Goddess killing the buffalo – demon)

This is an unusual image in a sanctuary dedicated to Vishnu, for the Great Goddess is a destructive form of Shiva. The sculpture has been well preserved although it is found at a lower level recovered by the alluvium deposited by the river Sarasvatî. One can see the details of the arms and the other attributes of her sixteen hands.

Under her foot, the buffalo is attacked by the lion, and he is pierced from his trident while she catches by the hair the demon who comes out and who still threatens with his sword.

Apsara



In the ancient indian language, *yogini* signifies the woman who practices yoga.

Here, the tall *yogini* dances while looking at the head of the dead which she holds at the end of a spade while a man strikes the drum at her feet. Without doubt an esoteric iconography.

This *yogini* gives a doubtful smile in the darkness, represented by the owls perched above her head. A serpent surrounds her leg, but she offers him a fish in a cup from her right hand. Symbol of fertility?





A young *apsara* comes out from bath with a towel around her hips and long smooth hair while a bird comes to drink the drops of water running from the divinity.

This is exceptional and she has a confused expression on her face. Why does she keep one of her hands on her heart?

This apsara keeps the hand on the head of a young domestic while she applies cosmetic. In the well, there are thousands of apsaras, who represent the daily life of women: the scene of seduction, the warmth for their young children, music and dance, application of cosmetic, wearing jewellery...





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Preview of Photos



From left to right: Ambassador of India in France Mr Ranjan MATHAI, Mme Xintian Zhu, Mr Michel Postel

