



# Flames of Devotion: Oil Lamps from South and Southeast Asia and the Himalayas

*Sean Anderson*

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Fire and light have long symbolized the relationship of human beings to the universe and its creators. In South and Southeast Asia and the Himalayas, the lamp, as a bearer of light, came to be perceived as a vehicle through which the divine could be accessed. The design, construction, and use of the lamp in these regions have been synonymous with the faith of the devotee since ancient times. Today the lamp continues to play a pivotal role in Hindu and Buddhist religious contexts, allowing the faithful to concentrate on the image or nature of the deity.

The 76 remarkable metal lamps and incense burners illustrated in *Flames of Devotion* form the heart of a collection assembled by the preeminent scholar of Indian and Himalayan art Pratapaditya Pal and his wife, Chitralekha. They are noteworthy for their ingenious design and diverse crafting, as well as their iconographic richness. They represent fourteen states in India, a majority coming from Rajasthan and Gujarat in the west, the tribal areas in central Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh, and the southern states of Kerala and Tamil Nadu. In addition, stunning examples of lamps from Nepal and Tibet showcase the skill with which precious metals were employed during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and a small selection of early incense burners and lamps from Cambodia, Indonesia, and Vietnam show the role these objects played in the ancient imagination.

In an engaging and highly informative text, architect and art historian Sean Anderson investigates why lamps have endured and remain omnipresent in Hindu and Buddhist practice. While examining the historical importance of the lamp, Anderson emphasizes that as altar and tool, icon and fine sculpture, it is an evocative reminder of an undying devotion forged with the most common yet enigmatic of materials: metal and fire. He considers as well the liminal space the lamp occupies between the secular and the sacred in societies where it is often used to mark every event of significance from birth to death.

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