



## **Kumbharia: The Neminatha Temple**

Photographs from the American Institute of Indian Studies  
Produced by the Shraman Foundation



## About this **book / virtual exhibition**

Kumbharia, a village in the western Indian state of Gujarat, is known for its finely carved marble temples, built between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries. Five of the temples are Jain and a sixth is dedicated to the Hindu god Shiva. Featuring photographs in the collection of the American Institute of Indian Studies, this **book / virtual exhibition** explores the largest of the Jain temples, dedicated to the twenty-second Jina, Neminatha.

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# Kumbharia, Neminatha Temple

Early to mid-twelfth century, plus later additions and renovations



The village of Kumbharia, in the western Indian state of Gujarat, is home to five Jain temples. Standing in close proximity to one another, the temples have become a sacred site of Jain pilgrimage. The earliest among them were built in the eleventh century, but it is the temple to the Jina Neminatha, built in the twelfth century, that many pilgrims consider to be the most important. Rising into the sky at the end of a broad road, it is both the largest and the most centrally located of the temples at Kumbharia. Patrons have continually added to or renovated the building: An upward extension of the outer wall, which gives the second story a decorative roofline, is a later addition, and the temple's tall tower, or *shikhara*, is a modern construction. The continued development of the temple attests to its significance: It is a living building, one that inspires patrons to make a lasting contribution.

# Neminatha Temple, Southeastern Side



Like the other Jain temples at Kumbharia, the Neminatha temple faces north. In this photograph of its southeastern side, we see the most ornate part of the temple's exterior. Sculpted images of divine beings line its walls and the repeated forms of its tower combine to create a visually complex whole. Whereas the walls of the temple date to the twelfth century and are made of a local white marble, the tower is a modern construction, made of bricks coated in plaster.



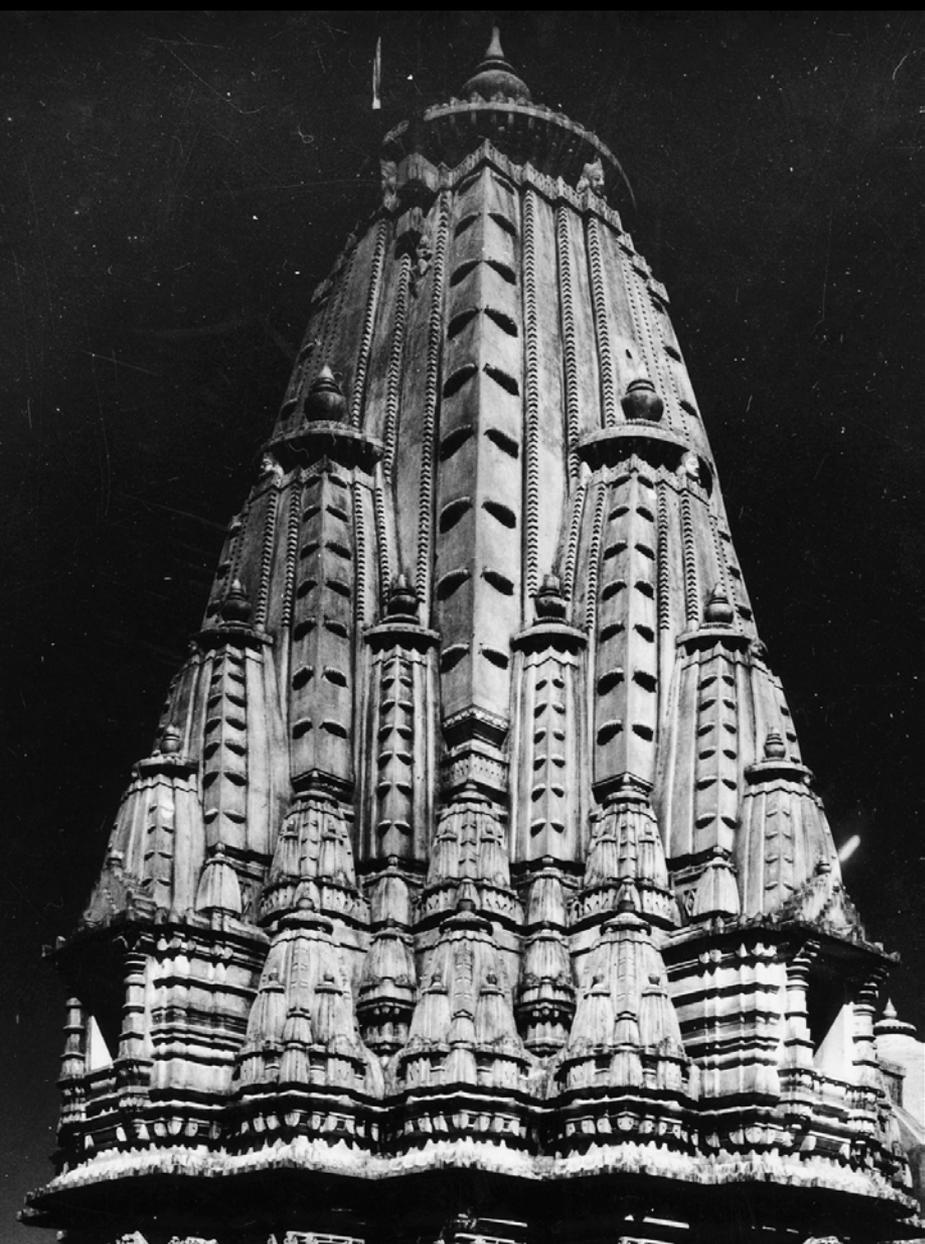
The temple's tower is composed of multiple miniature towers, repeated in various sizes.

AIIS 29941, detail

AIIS 29941

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# Neminatha Temple, *Shikhara*



The soaring tower of the Neminatha temple, though built in recent years, exemplifies an architectural type that is centuries old. Known as a *shikhara*, the tower is a defining feature of the Nagara mode of temple architecture, which prevails in northern India. In Sanskrit and other Indian languages, *shikhara* also means mountain peak. Indeed, one important association of a temple is that of Mount Meru, the cosmic mountain at the center of the universe. Jain, Hindu, and Buddhist traditions alike describe Mount Meru as an axis mundi (the central pillar of the cosmos), which both anchors the world that surrounds it and connects the heavens, earth, and netherworld.



Although the *shikhara* is dominated by its multiple tower forms, its uppermost levels also feature images of faces. They look out over the four directions, guarding the temple below.

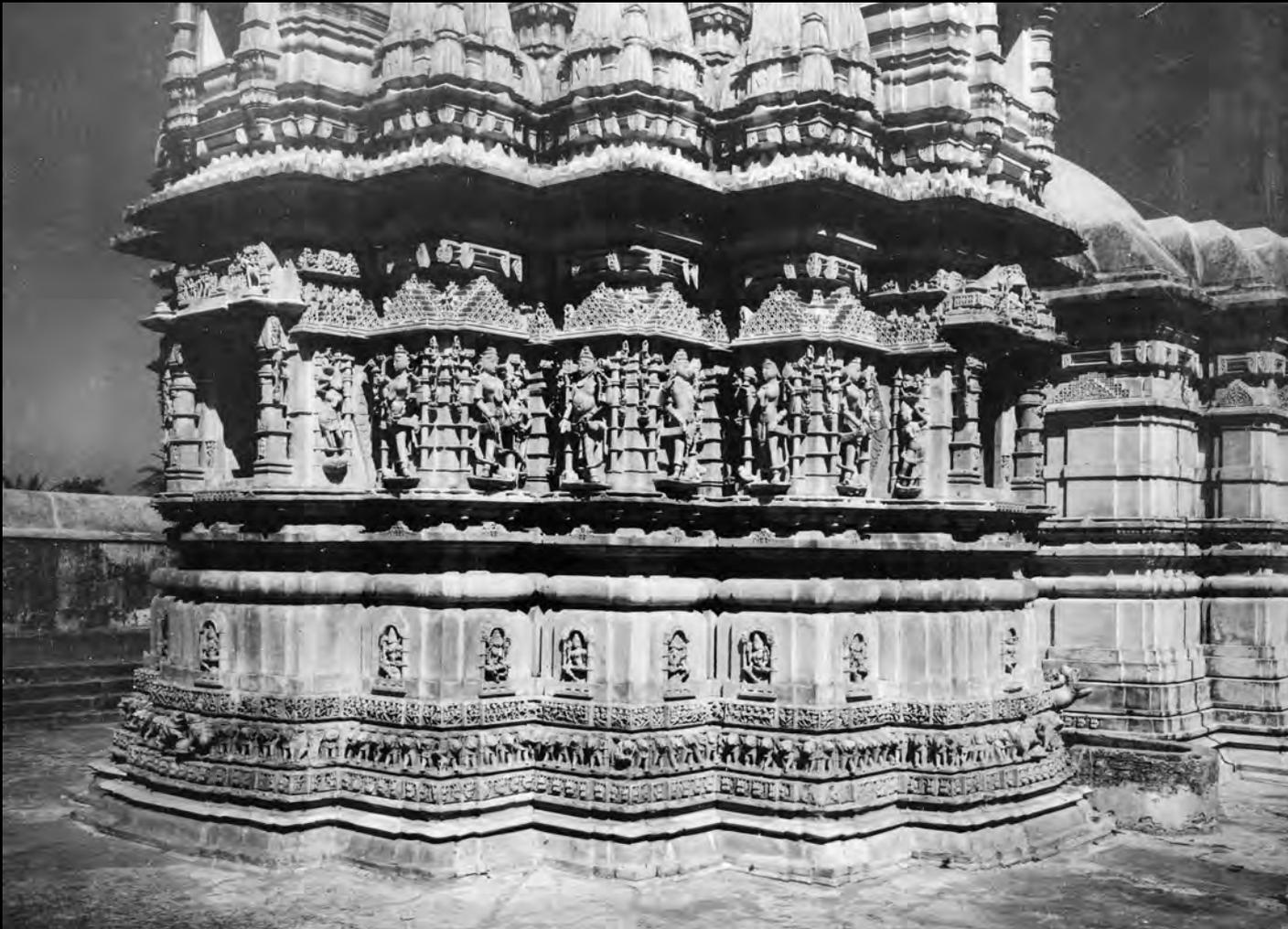
AIIS 29941, detail

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# Neminatha Temple, Sculpted Exterior Wall (southeastern side)

The marble walls of the Neminatha temple feature a stunning array of sculpture. Large figures of *vidyadevis* (goddesses of knowledge) and *dikpalas* (divine guardians of the directions) line the central part of the wall, accompanied by celestial attendants. They stand between small shrines that would have once held images of Jinas, the enlightened beings revered by Jains, or other venerated figures. Wrapped around the base of the wall are bands of imagery, or friezes, featuring (from bottom to top) lion-like faces known as *kirtimukhas*, elephants in mid-stride, and human figures engaging in a variety of activities, including music and dance. The space above these friezes is punctuated by images of enshrined goddesses.



The zig-zagging contours of the wall enhance the overall sculptural effect: In addition to maximizing the amount of surface area that can accommodate the temple's carved imagery, the angled facets of the wall give the architecture itself a sculptural quality.

# Neminatha Temple, Base of Wall



Enshrined  
goddess

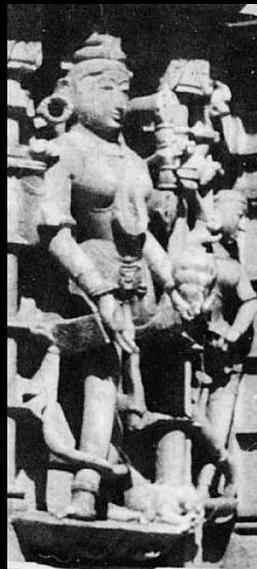
Friezes along base:  
figures, elephants, and  
*kirtimukhas*



# Neminatha Temple, Divinities on Southeastern Wall



Vidyadevis (goddesses of knowledge) and Dikpalas (guardians of the directions) prominently line the central part of the wall. Smaller female attendant figures stand in the recessed spaces between them. The relative size and prominence of the figures signal their status within the celestial hierarchy: All are divine, but the Vidyadevis and Dikpalas are more important.



Vidyadevi with attendant.



Kubera, god of wealth and guardian of the north.



Celestial attendant. Above her, two figures engage in discussion.

## Neminatha Temple, Exterior Wall with Shrine (western side)



The central projection of each exterior wall contains a shrine, built to accommodate a separately carved devotional image. None of the devotional images remain, but their centrality to each wall and their enshrinement within such prominent niches indicate that they were considered even more important than the divinities that occupy the spaces between them. It is most likely that the shrines held images of Jinas, the liberated beings whose teachings form the core ideals of the Jain religion. On the southern and eastern sides of the temple, images of Jinas carved above the niches support the idea that Jinas were also enshrined in the respective spaces below. However, the western side of the temple, seen in this photograph, features the image of a goddess above its shrine. While it remains possible that a sculpted Jina occupied this shrine, the imagery above the niche calls this theory into question, raising the possibility that the western shrine was built for a highly revered goddess.

## Shrine with Goddess Imagery at Center of Western Wall



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Goddess image above shrine in western wall

## Shrine with Jina Imagery at Center of Southern Wall

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Jina image above shrine in southern wall

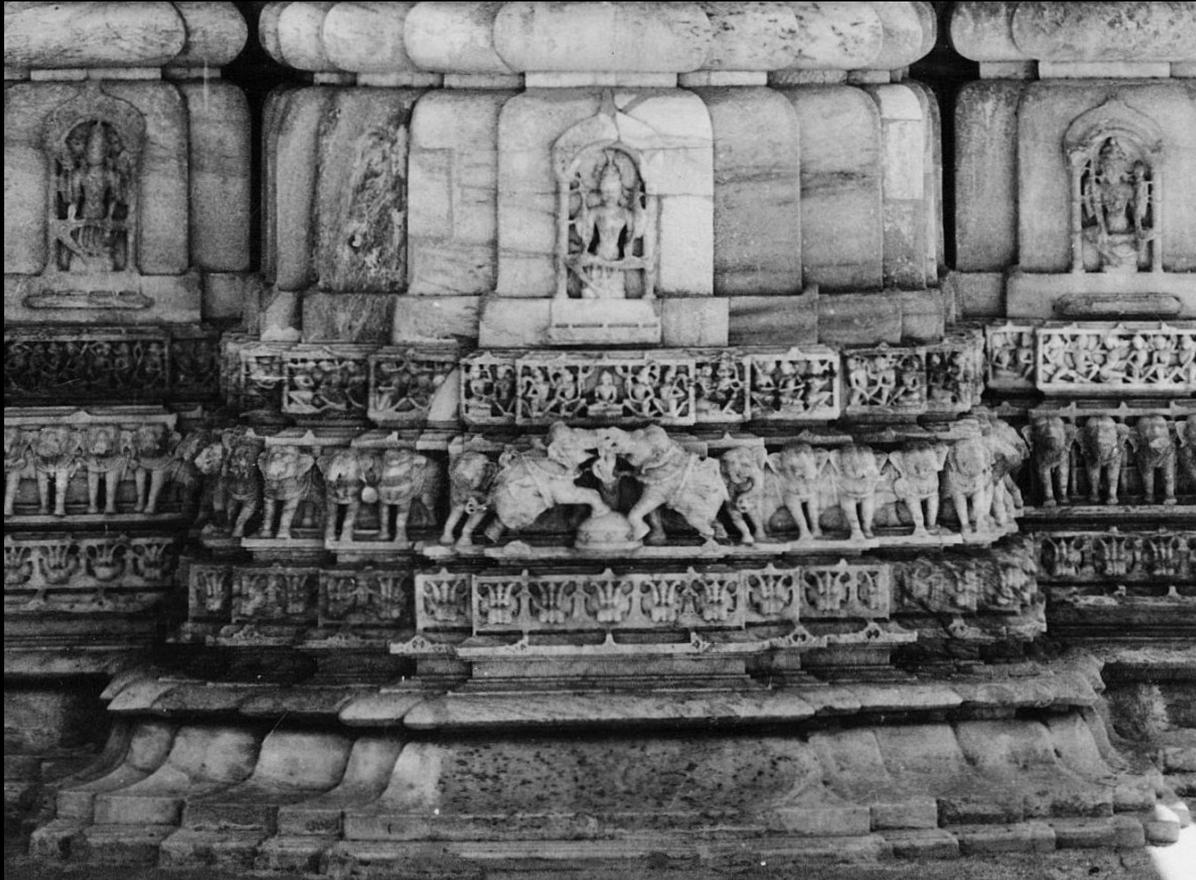


# Base of Western Wall with Seated Jina and Confronting Elephants

The importance of the projection at the center of each exterior wall, most prominently marked by the shrine each contains, is visually reinforced by the imagery carved into the temple's base. Most of the elephants sculpted into the second frieze of the base face outward, but here they turn to confront one another. Locking tusks in a vigorous tussle, they draw attention to the section of the temple they adorn, interrupting the repeated forms of the frieze with a sense of dramatic movement. Directly above them, a Jina seated in a posture of meditation counterbalances the frenzy of the elephants. Perfectly symmetrical, he centers the activity taking place around him with a tranquil presence.

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Seated Jina flanked by figures bearing garlands and flywhisks (center of the wall's projection)



Confronting elephants at center of the wall's projection

# Section of Pillared Hall in Neminatha Temple



Within the Neminatha temple, sculptural imagery embellishes nearly every structural element. Dancers, musicians, and multi-armed deities enliven the pillars seen in this photograph, bursting out of the mass of stone from which they were carved. Smaller goddesses sit below them, punctuating each side of each pillar's base. Two rows of deities carved on an even smaller scale adorn the central section of each pillar. The sculptors who created these tiny divinities and the miniature pillars interspersed between them were exceptionally skilled, their chisels reaching behind the outer surface of the stone to free the space surrounding each figure and to carve every side of the delicate pillars that frame them.

Near the top of each pillar are garlands, diamonds, and lion-like *kirtimukha* motifs. Believed to protect the spaces they adorn, *kirtimukhas* also appear in the bracketed capitals that form the uppermost portion of each pillar.



Musician on pillar on left in photo

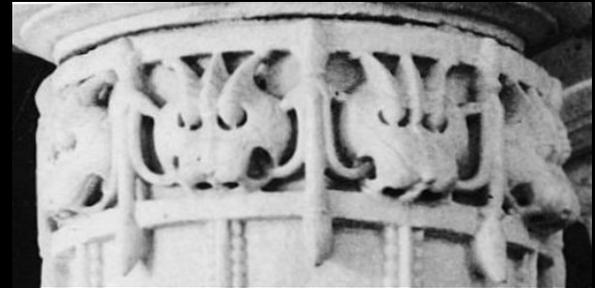


Dancer on pillar at back in photo

# Sculpted Pillar and Details with *Kirtimukhas*

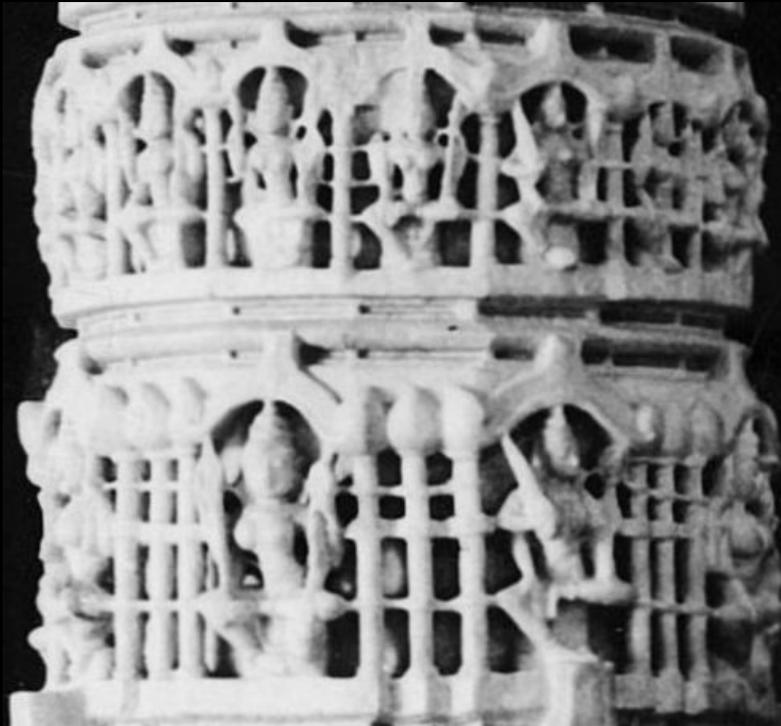


*Kirtimukha* on  
bracket of pillar



Row of *kirtimukhas* adorning  
upper portion of the pillar

**Detail from Sculpted Pillar:  
Central section with deities framed by miniature pillars**



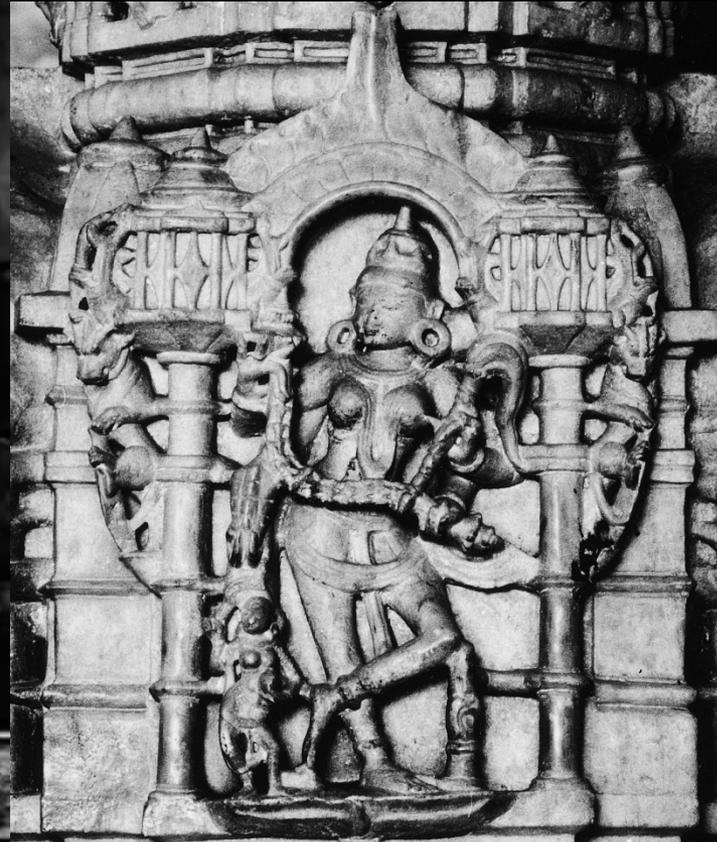
Seated goddesses in the central section of the pillar. The tiny pillars seen between these deities are carved on every side; sculptors even chiseled away a space behind them.

# Detail of a Pillar: Goddesses carved into base

AIIS 77464

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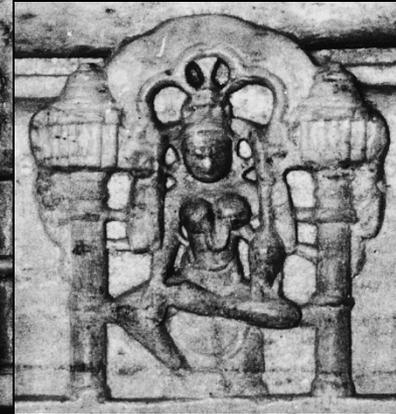
The divine figures carved into the base of each pillar are visually emphasized by the arched frames that surround them. Represented as miniature shrines, these frames also express the status of the figures as revered beings. While the smaller goddess seated at the base of this pillar faces the viewer like a devotional image, the larger goddess that stands above her holds a garland and a fly-whisk, objects used in rituals to honor the Jinas. She is therefore represented as a devotee, but she is also an object of devotion: With four arms, she is unmistakably divine, and the small attendant figure that accompanies her signals her prestige. Her shrine-like frame is especially elaborate, with mythical animals known as *vyalas* (also called *yalis*) carved like bracket-figures on either side. Facing outward with a fierce demeanor, they protect the goddess and the space she occupies.



Standing goddess with attendant



*Vyala* in  
shrine-like  
frame of  
standing  
goddess



Seated goddess

## Central Ceiling of Pillared Hall

The pillared hall of the Neminatha temple is covered by numerous ceiling panels sculpted in exquisite detail. The domed ceiling at the center of the hall is the largest among them, spanning twenty feet, six inches in diameter. Its concentric rings of sculpture have been enhanced by paint, seen in the darker details of this photograph. It is possible that most of the temple's sculpted surfaces were once similarly painted, or were intended to be, but the colors of the central ceiling have been refreshed in recent years and are still vibrant today.



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# Details of Central Ceiling

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This cross-section of the central ceiling shows each layer of imagery within the dome's concentric rings. The lowest, outermost layers are a series of floral and geometric motifs, along with lion-like *kirtimukha* faces positioned just below the brackets adorned by sculpted figures. The bracket figures depict celestial beings, many of whom play musical instruments in honor of the Jinas. The spaces between them feature goddesses; at each of the cardinal directions is an image of Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth, being ritually bathed by two elephants. Above this level, beyond the bands of lotus petals and geometric motifs, lively figures engage in various activities. Some of them illustrate narratives from the life of the twenty-fourth Jina, Mahavira. This level also features symbols important to the Jain religion. Moving upward and inward, beyond a series of painted geometric motifs, the remaining courses of the ceiling are filled with multi-lobed lotus designs. Combining and overlapping in a complex geometry of their own, they culminate in a splendid lotus in full bloom.



Celestial musician playing the vina (a stringed instrument). The bird on the side of the bracket is a painted detail.



Celestial musician with cymbals

## Detail of Central Ceiling: Acharya (Religious Teacher) Speaking to a Group of Followers



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In this detail from the narrative band of the central ceiling, a religious teacher, or *acharya* (seen on the left), addresses the group gathered before him. Seated at a book stand that holds a long, thin manuscript, perhaps he expounds on a particular religious text. The acharya's gesture indicates that he is speaking, while his listeners' similarly upraised hands show that they are actively engaged in the discussion.

Clues about the status of the figures are provided by their seats and their position within the composition of the scene: Only the acharya, the most important figure, sits on a chair with a back; it is even provided with a cushion so that he may lean back in comfort. The bookstand creates a spatial hierarchy that further emphasizes the acharya's importance: Separated from the other figures, he occupies his own space. While the acharya looks out onto the group, every other figure faces him with rapt attention – yet another indication of the acharya's high status. The next most important figure is the monk seated on the opposite side of the bookstand. His monastic identity is indicated by his simple white robe and the appearance of his ears, which like the acharya's are especially long – a mark of heightened wisdom. Occupying the position closest to the revered teacher, his seat is also higher than those of the figures behind him, raising him to a level above them. The remaining seated figures, placed on lower chairs, are lay-followers who wear more elaborate clothing with sashes and sleeves; within the hierarchy of the group, they are less important than the acharya and the monk. Behind them, a procession of figures approaches on foot and on horseback. They have not yet reached the place of assembly, but the direction of their movement indicates that they too are focused on the acharya and his teachings.

## Detail of Central Ceiling Veneration of a Jina



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This detail from the central ceiling portrays the veneration of a Jina, one of the twenty-four liberated beings whose exemplary lives of restraint provide a model of ideal behavior, and whose teachings on nonviolence and other values form the core principles of the Jain religion. Seated in a meditative posture at the center of the composition, the Jina looks outward at the viewer while all other figures turn attention toward him. Elephants lustrate the revered being, pouring water or other sacred substances from pots held in their trunks. Behind them, human devotees approach with similar vessels that surely also contain ablutions for the Jina. A few of these devotees, seen to the left in this detail, hold flowers or other offerings rather than ritual vessels. By honoring the Jina and his image, they venerate the ideals he embodies.

## Detail of Central Ceiling Eight Auspicious Symbols



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Between narrative scenes filled with lively figures, the images in this detail from the central ceiling suspend activity to present the eight auspicious symbols – that is, the eight symbols that bring luck and foretell good fortune – of the Shvetambara branch of Jainism. (Digambara Jains identify a different set of eight auspicious symbols.) On the far right is the *nandyavarta*, a diagram that elaborates the *svastika*, an ancient symbol of luck and wellbeing that features importantly in Jain, Buddhist, and Hindu traditions. The *svastika* itself appears next to the *nandyavarta*; in Jainism, it symbolizes the wheel of life, and its four clockwise-pointing arms symbolize the four realms of existence within which one can be reborn: celestial beings, human beings, hell-beings, and animals. Next come the water-filled pot, two fish, and the diamond-shaped *shrivatsa* symbol that appears on the chests of Jina images within the Shvetambara tradition. The final three symbols are the powder flask, the throne, and the mirror. In addition to the *svastika*, many of these symbols are also auspicious within Buddhist and Hindu traditions. For instance, the filled water pot, or *kalasha*, symbolizes fertility and abundance, and is used in all three religions to ritually honor revered beings.

# Detail of Central Ceiling

## Fourteen Auspicious Dreams Preceding the Birth of Mahavira



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The imagery seen in this section of the central ceiling represents the fourteen auspicious dreams that precede the birth of a great being. In the specific event depicted here, Queen Trishala, the mother of the twenty-fourth Jina, Mahavira, sees the fourteen images in her dreams before the birth of her son. The scene is framed by two images of Queen Trishala: On the left, she lies alone in her bed, while on the right, she lies in bed holding her infant son. The fourteen dreams that transpired between the two moments represented by her repeated image are: an elephant, a bull, a lion, the goddess Lakshmi being lustrated by elephants, a garland (or two garlands, seen here), the moon, the sun, a banner, a vase, a lotus pond, the ocean (here represented more like a river, long and thin), a heavenly realm (indicated by the image of a pavilion), a pile of jewels, and a fire.



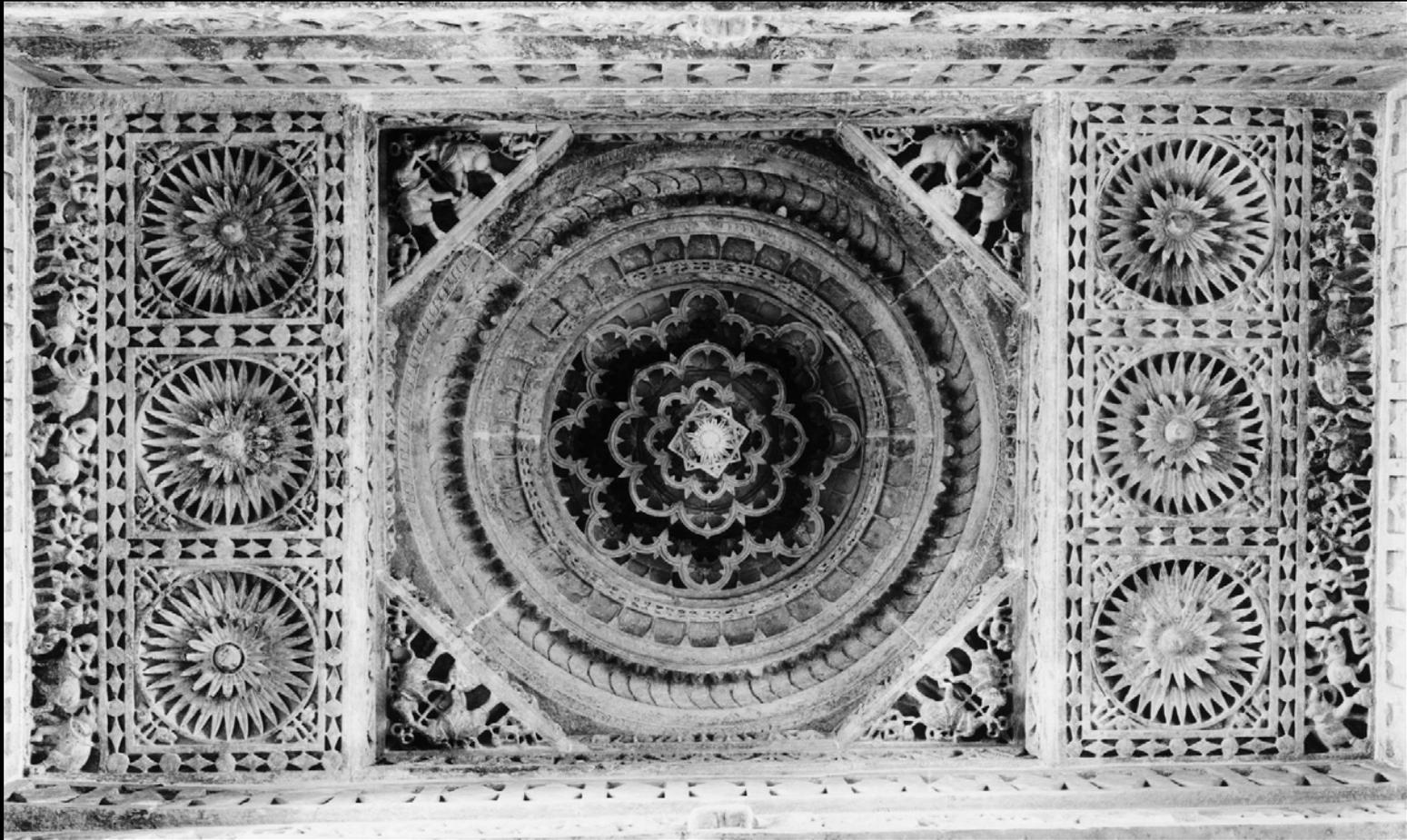
Queen Trishala alone, elephant, bull, lion, goddess Lakshmi lustrated by elephants, garlands



Moon, sun, banner, vase, lotus pond, ocean, heavenly realm, jewels, fire, Queen Trishala with baby Mahavira

## Ceiling with Lotuses, Elephants, and Procession Scenes

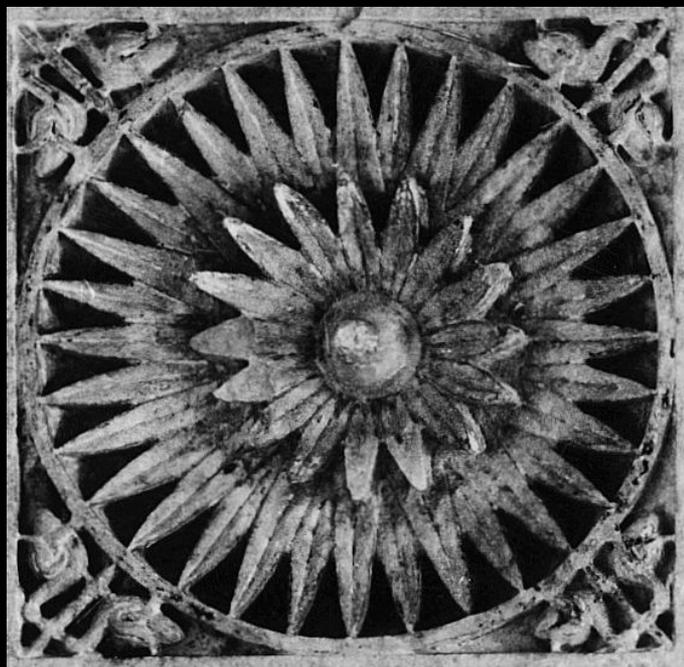
This rectangular ceiling panel from the pillared hall of the Neminatha temple is divided into a series of squares that frame spectacularly blooming lotuses. The largest, in the center, features a lotus hanging from the middle of a dome, similar to but smaller than the central ceiling of the pillared hall. Pairs of elephants occupy the corners of this central square; holding pots in their trunks, they pour water onto the lotus plants that grow between them. On each side of this central square, rectangular spaces are divided into three smaller squares containing lotuses that burst open to display double-layers of pointed petals. The corners of these smaller squares are filled with pairs of geese, echoing the larger elephants nearby. The outermost bands of the rectangular ceiling panel are filled with delicately carved figures in procession. They present a lively scene, with elephants, horses, dancers, and musicians moving toward a destination that is left up to the viewer's imagination.



# Details from Ceiling with Lotuses, Elephants, and Procession Scenes



Procession scenes with musicians, dancers, horses, and elephants



Lotus with geese at corners



Detail from corner of central square: Elephants pouring water on a lotus plant, with celestial beings in the lower corners of the triangle. The celestial beings bend their legs upward, visual signaling the act of flying.

## Doorway to a Shrine within the Neminatha Temple



As points of access into the space of a revered being such as a Jina or a deity, shrine doorways are highly significant. Elaborate ornamentation signals their importance and details in their imagery provide clues to identify the being enshrined within. The seated Jina at the top of this doorway indicates that this shrine contains the image of a Jina. Though not the main sanctum of the temple, it is possible that the Jina within is Neminatha, for his attendant deities – the yakshi Ambika and the yaksha Gomedha – are seen at the base of the doorway, on either side of the tall threshold stone. In the Jain traditions, yakshas and yakshis are considered guardians of the Jinas' teachings, and their place at the entrance to a Jina's shrine resonates with this protective function. Directly above the yakshi and yaksha are two four-armed goddesses, powerfully standing as door-guardians to further protect the Jina inside and the ideals his image embodies.

# Deities at Base of Shrine Doorway

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Goddess with  
attendants on  
left side of  
doorway



Goddess with  
attendants on  
right side of  
doorway



Yaksha on left side of  
doorway. Though his details  
are difficult to discern, he is  
most likely Gomedha, the  
yaksha of Jina Neminatha.



Gomedha's appearance is  
often conflated with that of  
Kubera, the god of wealth. In  
this form, he has a pot belly –  
like the yaksha seen here –  
and holds a bag of money.

Yakshi Ambika on  
right side of  
doorway. The name  
Ambika means  
“mother”, and she  
is always seen with  
a child on her  
knee. Ambika is  
the yakshi of the  
Jina Neminatha.



# Seated Jina at Top of Shrine Doorway



The seated Jina at the top of the doorway resonates with the image of the Jina within the shrine. He gazes outward, displaying the tranquility and control of mind and body that every Jina exemplifies.

AIIS 29970, detail  
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