



DEPICTING THE BODY OF THE MODERN JAIN SAINT:
REALISM, INNOVATION, AND TRADITION IN THE IMAGES OF
ŚRĪMAD RĀJACANDRA

Lecture by

STEVEN M. VOSE

June 24, Monday || 18:15-19:45

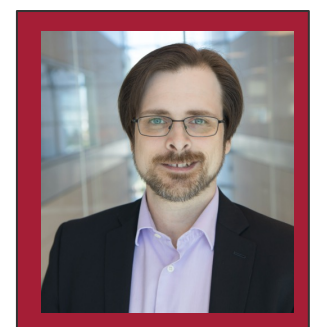
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Steven M. Vose, Bh. Suparshvanatha Endowed Professor of
Jain Studies, Department of History, University of
Colorado-Denver.



Asien-Orient-Institut | Abteilung für Indologie



Abstract:

Founded in 2001, the Shrimad Rajchandra Mission of Dharampur (SRMD) has risen to widespread popularity among Gujarati Jains in India and the global diaspora thanks in part to the creation and worship of realistic sculpted icons of the extremely emaciated body of the Jain layman, reformer, and mystic, Śrīmad Rājacandra (1867-1901). The icons, installed throughout the ashram and in devotee's homes, are based on two photographs taken of him months before his death of a wasting disorder at age 34. The icons became such a popular part of the SRMD's program that a 34-foot (10.36m) colossus was installed on the ashram grounds in 2017 to celebrate the sesquicentennial of Rājacandra's birth. Although Rājacandra himself was deeply skeptical of image worship and rituals, preferring the study of philosophy, meditation, and the performance of harsh austerities to lead one to the direct apprehension of the soul, the SRMD has developed a number of innovative rituals to these icons that also tap into traditional and popular forms of ritual performance and religious patronage familiar to many Jains. This presentation will examine the role of realism in the development of the material form of the images of Śrīmad Rājacandra. It argues that, while using traditional iconographic forms of Jain images, these images portray a new visual aesthetic of heroic asceticism that defies traditional iconography and subverts premodern literary depictions of the Jain ascetic body.

