

The Hand in Art: Hand Gestures in Bharata Natyam

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FIGURE 1: The face of a lion, a single-hand gesture in Bharata Natyam. (Adopted from Wikipedia under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Unported license, available at <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Hasthamudra6.JPG>.)

Bharata Natyam is a classic Indian dance that originated in the temples of Tamil Nadu. Bharata Natyam is known for its grace, purity, tenderness, and sculptural gestures. Lord Shiva is considered the God of this dance. Bharata Natyam is a popular and widely performed dance style and is practiced by female and male dancers around the world.¹ The movements of an expert Bharata Natyam dancer resemble the movements of a dancing flame.¹

A *mudra* is a symbolic mark or ritual gesture in Hinduism and Buddhism.² Some mudras involve the whole body, but many are performed using the hands and fingers² (Fig. 1).

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FIGURE 2: Offering, a double-hand gesture in Bharata Natyam. (Adopted from Wikipedia under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Unported license, available at <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Hasthamudra8.JPG>.)



FIGURE 3: Auspicious sign, a double-hand gesture in Bharata Natyam. (Adopted from Wikipedia under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Unported license, available at <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Hasthamudra.JPG>.)

One of the most prominent features of Bharata Natyam is the use of *hasta mudra* (*hasta* is Sanskrit for “hand”), which is the particular hand gesture.^{2,3} *Mudra* is a distinct code language that tries to practically express the song.² Therefore, *hasta murda* is used not only for the sake of beauty and decorative purposes during the dance but also to convey meanings and expressions.³ All of the dancers’ fingertips are painted red. Although the red fingers look beautiful, their purpose is communicative: to emphasize

the delicate movements and to help the audiences to read the most subtle gestures.

There are 32 single-hand *mudras* and 23 double-hand *mudras* in Bharata Natyam³ (Figs. 2 and 3).

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Origin of Spock’s Vulcan Salute: “Live Long and Prosper”

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Most hand surgeons probably have a memory of the Vulcan salute and perhaps most, being microsurgeons, even can master the Vulcan salute themselves (Fig. 1). Go ahead, try it! Lots of intrinsic muscle control is required. Many normal humans simply do not have the “touch” to do this. Try it with your friends.

However, when we authors were growing up, attending synagogue, we would hear the priestly benediction chanted by the rabbi or cantor at the end of the service. At those times, we did not pay much attention to the way the hands of the person giving the blessing were held. Leonard Simon Nimoy did. The Priestly Benediction.

*The Lord bless you and keep you;
The Lord make His face shine on you and be
gracious to you;
The Lord turn His face toward you and give you
peace.—Numbers 6:24–26*

When the Kohanim, the High Priests of Israel, would say this prayer, going back to the earliest



FIGURE 1: Leonard Nimoy in character as Mr Spock on *Star Trek*, making his unique Vulcan salute. (Image in public record, seen at <http://www.thisdayinquotes.com>.)

biblical times, they would put their 2 hands out in front of them, holding them high over the congregation, with their thumbs touching, and the others fingers spread out in twos to create an image of the Hebrew letter *shin* with each hand (Fig. 2A). The Hebrew letter *shin* represents the word for “almighty God,” *El Shaddai* (Fig. 2B).

When Leonard Nimoy was chosen to play the role of Spock, a character half human and half Vulcan, in *Star Trek*, the television series created by Gene Roddenberry, Nimoy suggested that when Vulcans meet each other they might have a greeting similar to a handshake. He suggested the hand held

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