



Figural forms in raw, unfired clay (terracruda), from Ganesh murti in the Deccan, to Durga pratima in Bengal and Buddhist jim ku in Bhutan, have been a presence across southern Asia for millennia, yet unfired clay sculpture has attracted little notice in the literature on the region's art. In this presentation senior curator and scholar Susan S Bean takes a long view of raw clay sculpture in the Deccan, focusing on the particular materiality of clay to open fresh thinking about the role of clay in art practice. Moving away from what clay is, to considering what it does, foregrounds raw clay's penchant to transform between plasticity, solidity, fragmentation and liquidity, and its ability to support life.

In the Deccan archaeological evidence from the second millennium BCE indicates that clay's ready plasticity enabled unskilled hands to make figurines for domestic rituals. In the historical period, legendary histories of the Deccan, and practices attributed to Shivaji's reign, center on the generative power of clay/earth. In the seventeenth century, clay's plasticity was crucial to Maratha rulers as they redeployed the annual Ganapati Chaturthi from family observance to state occasion. Towards the end of the eighteenth century, sculptors again turned to clay for its plasticity to adapt western naturalistic realism, and at the turn of the twentieth century they contributed new iconographies for Ganesh suited to nationalist aspirations. In the Deccan raw clay's transformational capabilities have established an important place for clay figural form among the region's art practices and given clay sculpture a significant role in the region's cultural history.