

Exhibiting Chola Bronzes

Asian Art >
South Asia

10 November 2002 –
9 March 2003
Washington D.C., USA

Among the most renowned works of Indian sculptural art are the temple bronzes cast a thousand years ago during the Chola dynasty in the Tamil-speaking region of South India. Today, museum visitors encounter spotlight Chola sculptures within the hushed spaces of galleries. But in Chola times, the bronzes were consecrated as deities, adorned in silks, and encountered, amidst the chants and music of lively temple processions, as gods. Richard Davis, in his seminal work, *The Lives of Indian Images*, first elucidated the dichotomous perceptions and practices surrounding the reception of Chola bronzes by devotional and museum audiences.

By Debra Diamond

A magnificent group of temple bronzes brought together from public and private collections in Europe and the United States forms the core of *The Sensuous and the Sacred: Chola Bronzes from South India*, which seeks to broaden our understanding and appreciation of Chola bronzes by productively contrasting these arenas of perception. This exhibition expands upon traditional museum practice by addressing the ritual adornment and sacred resonance of bronzes and by incorporating historical and contemporary Hindu voices into its curatorial framing.

Most of the bronzes date from the tenth, eleventh, and twelfth centuries CE, the apex of Chola dynastic strength and the height of the sculptural tradition. The Chola aesthetic of fluid movement, supple flesh contrasted with delicately carved ornament, elegant proportion, and serene expression is evident in an astonishing array of divine forms ranging from a seated Narasimha with ferocious but contained power (Cleveland Museum of Art) to an elegantly composed wedding group of Krishna, his wives and attendant Garuda (Los Angeles County Museum of Art). The bronzes are spotlighted, displayed upon pedestals, and accompanied by curatorial labels.

While the exhibition situates many of the bronzes in this aestheticizing fashion, it also seeks to address the meanings that these bronzes have had for historical and contemporary Hindu audiences. In choosing bronzes for the exhibition, curator Dr Vidya Dehejia was guided not only by exogenously derived aesthetic considerations, but also by the character, number, and size of sacred bronzes maintained within Chola shrines to Shiva and Vishnu, the main deities of Chola temples. Two sets of ancient inscriptions, one at the modestly sized Shiva temple at Tiruvaduturai and the other from the great royal temple of Shiva at Tanjavur, form the basis for the Shaiva selection. Although no comparable Chola inscription has been located for a Vaishnava temple, current groupings in Shaiva temples indicate continuity from medieval to present-day practice, and the grouping of Vaishnava bronzes are plausibly based on festival images found in contemporary temples.

A Shiva Nataraja (figure 1) and a standing Vishnu in the introductory gallery introduce visitors to the bipartite organization of the exhibition. The two bronzes are visible from a lobby space decorated with a repeating pattern of the exhibition title written in Tamil script. The script evokes the inscriptions carved into Chola temple walls and situates Tamil language and culture as primary. This strategy also locates English as the language of translation for a Western museum audience. Further on, the bronzes are grouped thematically by divine personality, an ordering that is derived from the requirements of the ritual cycle, and one that also serves to manage the complexities of iconography and myth for the non-Hindu visitor. In the Shaiva section, galleries are devoted to Shiva Nataraja, the Shaiva poet saints who lived between the sixth and the ninth centuries, Shiva in various manifestations as 'divine hero', Shiva as 'family man', and goddesses associated with Shiva. The Vaishnava galleries are distinguished by a monumental doorway that recalls South Indian temple architecture. The doorway frames a Vishnu flanked by his consorts Bhu and Lakshmi. Subsequent sections are devoted to Vishnu's avatars: Varaha, Narasimha, Rama, and Krishna.

In recreating groupings for this exhibition, the repetition of images within Chola temples is evoked through the inclusion of multiple bronzes of popular forms, although other gods important within the Chola ritual cycle, such as Shiva Bhikshatana ('enchanting mendicant'), are absent from the

exhibition because no Chola period bronzes of these manifestations exist outside of India. An ancillary gallery displays a bronze Buddha and two Jinas (literally, victor; enlightened beings of the Jain tradition) that illustrate the extension of Chola patronage and aesthetics to other religious communities within the region.

Various textual and presentation strategies are employed to evoke the meaning and reception of festival bronzes within a Hindu context. A video documents the 'lives' of sacred bronzes from creation in wax and casting in bronze to ritual enlivenment by temple priests in a procession through the streets of a South Indian city during a temple festival. Temple chants and South Indian classical music playing throughout the exhibition evoke the aural environment of the temple. Spotlighted and unadorned 'masterpieces' paired with contemporary photographs of similar sacred bronzes in procession or worship allow visitors to compare the aesthetics of the museum with the aesthetics of Hindu worship – and to ponder the cultural contexts that alternately expose or adorn bronze sculptures. An eighteenth-century bronze Nataraja from the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, ritually garbed by a Hindu priest for the exhibition, is the centre of an installation designed to suggest the colourful excitement of a temple festival (fig. 2). The bronze, flanked by donor-portrait lamps, stands upon a tall pedestal strewn with flowers in front of a long banner of mango-coloured silk. Displays of bejewelled gold ornaments, similar to those given to temples by devotees, provide further insights into the visual opulence of sacred bronzes in procession.

Curatorial labels address aesthetics, morphology, and chronology, but also relate the myths that underlie divine forms. The gallery devoted to Shaiva saints invites viewers to appreciate their sculpted forms and also to apprehend their importance within devotional practice. Dr Dehejia has noted that in South India, from around the sixth century and perhaps earlier, Hindu deities began to assume public personae similar to those of human monarchs. Deities were required to appear in person in public and preside over a number of festivities that became part of a temple's ritual cycle. Since the stone icons in the inner sancta of temples

[2] Shiva as Nataraja, Lord of Dance. Eighteenth century. Bronze, 103 cm.



Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Marianne Brimmer Fund

if you could see...

[1] Shiva as Nataraja, Lord of Dance. Chola Period, ca. 990. Bronze, 71.12 cm.



Scheduled acquisition by the Freer Gallery of Art

could not be easily carried, portable images of gods were produced that were able to leave temple premises, thus becoming accessible to even the most lowly of worshipers. In the same period (in a phenomenon that is surely connected but in ways not yet fully understood) the Tamil Vaishnava and Shaiva poet-saints sought to imbue sacred images with their distinctive theology of embodiment. In this theology, personal communion with the Lord – typically through sight – was paramount. Saint Appar wrote that beholding the visible beauty of God made even life on earth worthwhile*:

*if you could see
the arch of his brow,
the budding smile
on lips red as the kovvai fruit,
cool matted hair,
the milk-white ash on coral skin,
and the sweet golden foot
raised up in dance,
then even human birth on this wide earth
would become a thing worth having.*

Other poets, both Vaishnava and Shaiva, described the dazzling forms of deities in verses that led devotees towards an awareness of cosmic power or even the paradox of an accessible but transcendent divinity. To augment the curatorial voice, verses from the Tamil saints' poems, situated near appropriate bronzes throughout the galleries, allow contemporary viewers to appreciate how Chola audiences would have understood the consecrated and adorned bronzes. Finally, excerpts from interviews with contemporary Hindus, conducted by teenagers from the Sri Shiva Visnu Temple in Maryland (USA), suggest some of the meanings that the deities hold for worshipers today. The contemporary voices open up a refreshing variety of perceptions, memories, and experiences, from condemnation of the museum display of sacred art to recollections of favourite festivals and descriptions of beloved deities. <

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Exhibition itinerary

Arthur M. Sackler Gallery
Smithsonian Institution,
Washington D.C., USA
10 November 2002 – 9 March 2003

Dallas Museum of Art
Dallas, Texas, USA
4 April – 15 June 2003

The Cleveland Museum of Art
Cleveland, Ohio, USA
6 July – 14 September 2003

Note >

* Dehejia, Vidya, Richard Davis, R. Nagaswamy, and Karen Pechilis Prentiss, *The Sensuous and the Sacred: Chola Bronzes from South India*, New York: American Federation of Arts in association with University of Washington Press (2002), p.66.