

Shiva Nataraja, Lord of the Dance, 12th Century CE



Artist: Unknown

Country: India

Date: 12th century CE

Period: Chola Period

Height: 85.2 cm height x 75cm width

Medium: Copper alloy cast by lost wax process

Patron: Chola ruler

Original location: Chola territory, Tinnevely District, Tamil Nadu, South India

Current Location: South Asian Sculpture Room, Victoria & Albert Museum,
bequeathed by Rt. Hon. Lord Amptill, Governor of Madras 1900-06

Scope of work: Divine Identity

ART HISTORICAL TERMS AND CONCEPTS

Subject matter

Shiva is one of the major gods in the Hindu religion. Hindus believe Shiva to be the supreme God. Two other major gods, Vishnu and Devi, make up what Hindus believe to be the three most important gods in Hinduism. Shiva as Nataraja (nata = dance, raja = king) is one of the most well-known manifestations of Shiva and hence of sculptures in Indian art and is a famous Hindu icon. Shiva's cosmic dance takes place at the centre of the universe. This dance, called *Anandatandava*, promotes evolution. The dance represents the cosmic cycles of creation and destruction as well as the daily rhythm of life.

Read this description from V&A website: <http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O25011/shiva-nataraja-lord-of-the-bronze-sculpture-unknown/>

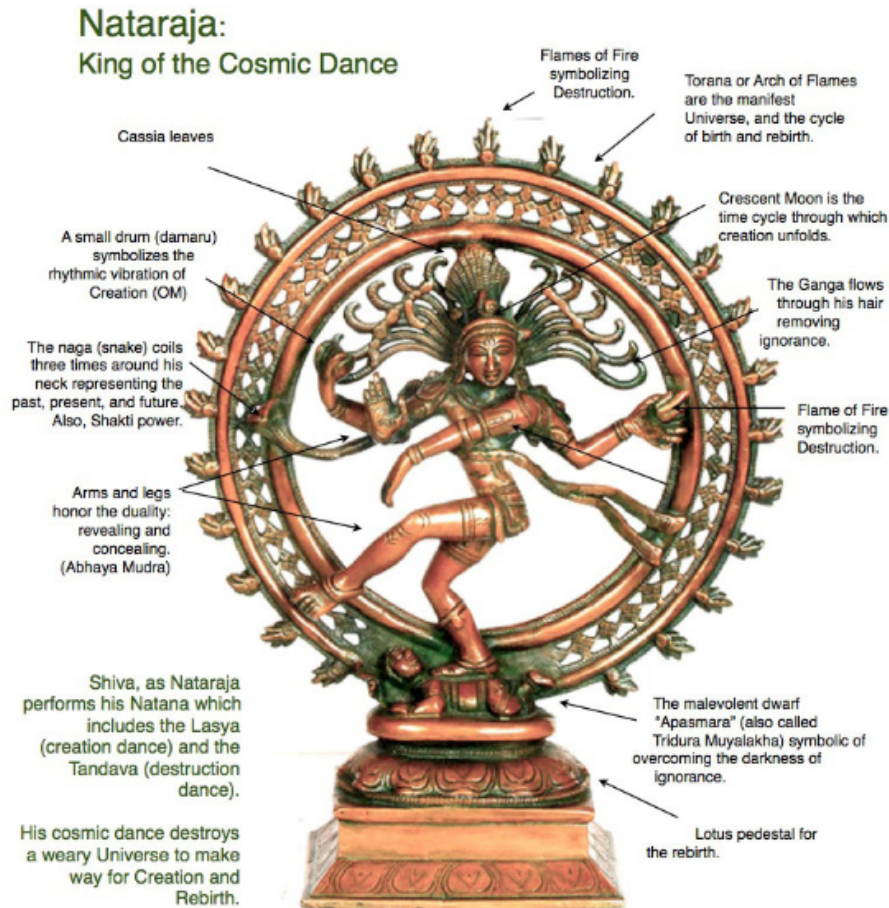
“A four-armed, three-eyed figure dancing with the right foot on a prostrate demon, Apasmara or Muyalaka, signifying ignorance, the destruction of which brings enlightenment. The figure is surrounded by a circular aureole of flames (*jvala mala*), symbolising the life of the universe. The front right hand is in *abhaya mudra* (giving assurance), and a cobra, bestowing protection, is coiled round the forearm; the rear right hand holds the drum (*damaru*: symbol of creation) by means of a cord which binds it to the back of the second finger; the rear left hand holds the flame (*agni*: the element by which the universe will be finally destroyed); the front left arm is stretched across the body in the dancing gesture, *gaja* or *danda hasta*. The hair is dressed close to the crown and surmounted by a fan-shaped headdress of Kondrai leaves (*Cassia fistulal*) bearing a crescent moon, Datura flower, skull and cobra. Behind the head there is a flower-like *siras chakra* (disc for hanging garlands). The braided locks which originally flowed out to the sides are broken off and missing. A thin sash twisted round the waist has its ends flowing to one side. The costume consists of tiger-skin loin cloth worn with a girdle, the latter with beaded festoons. Other details include a multi-threaded sacred cord (one thread of which is divided at the chest); spiral *keyura* armlets; ear-pendants (*makara kundala* on the right, *patra kundala* on the left); *padasaras* on the feet, and a garter with bell above the right ankle. The image is mounted on a lotus pedestal with holes for attachment to a processional carrier. Traces of encrusted carbonate matter in crevices indicate a former period of earth burial.”

There are five principles of this energy, known in sanskrit as: *Shrishti* (creation and evolution), *Sthiti* (preservation and support), *Samhara* (destruction and evolution), *Tirobhava* (illusion) and *Anvgrahn* (release, emancipate and grace) ("Lord of the Dance"). Shiva as Nataraja pulls the viewer in with his active energy and after analysing the figure, the believer is left with tranquillity.

- Label the V & A version of this popular image (use image above to act as guideline)
- Which key element is missing from the V & A version?

“As a symbol, Shiva Nataraja is a brilliant invention. It combines in a single image Shiva’s role as creator, preserver, and destroyer of the universe and conveys the Indian conception of the never-ending cycle of time.

Although it appeared in sculpture as early as the fifth century, its present, world-famous form evolved under the rule of the Cholas.



Nataraja Nataraja Nartana Sundara Nataraja
The Lord of the Cosmic Dance. Beautiful dancer.

Shiva's front left hand, pointing to his raised left foot, signifies refuge for the troubled soul. The energy of his dance makes his hair fly to the sides. The symbols imply that, through belief in Shiva, his devotees can achieve salvation." <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/39328>

Formal Qualities

The sculpture is made to be seen from the front primarily. The composition is circular; the framing ring of flames is not just a visual device, the form expresses the theology. The concept of life as an eternal becoming is represented with the

the cycles of destruction and creation being cyclical so nothing ends. [Compare this with the circle representing heaven in Christian imagery]. The figure as a force for universal energy is dynamic, with the centre of gravity on the vertical, grounded in the figure of the crushed demon of ignorance, and balanced by the repeated triangles of the arms on the horizontal. The left arm and left leg moving across the front of the body into space are balanced by the flowing sash to the right. The figure moves into the negative space taking control of it to suggest both eternal movement and balance.

The representation of the figure differs greatly from European traditions of the same period. There is a much greater sense of movement and energy not least because of the extra dexterity offered by four arms and four hands. The flexibility of the gestures of the arms are very clear cut with 90-degree angles at the elbows and wrists, or completely straight as in the foreground arm, to represent actual movements in Indian dance notation still performed today. [Compare these with European traditions these such as the series of hand gestures developed in Byzantine icons to denote blessing and so forth.] The slim waist and hips, broad shoulders, and voluptuous thighs of Shiva can seem androgynous to viewers raised on the classical tradition of Ancient Greece and Rome. Hindu Divinities can be represented symbolically, and anthropomorphically, with sensuous human form but supra-human attributes.

CULTURAL, SOCIAL, TECHNOLOGICAL AND POLITICAL FACTORS

Shiva was the patron deity of the Chola family. The imperial Chola dynasty ruled the coastal planes of southern India from 880 to 1279 CE where Dravidian languages are spoken, chief among these being Tamil. Chola society flourished and their territories increased thanks to the rich soil, rivers for transport to the coast and hence trade overseas. They subdued the local population through their patronage of the arts, building a series of new stone temples (the tallest in India at the time) and devotional bronze images, textiles, gold jewellery, sandalwood, incense and lamps, and endowed them with funds for sacred rites.

This underlined the central position of religion, and elevated bronze sculpture to new heights. The form of Shiva Nataraja became “established as a kind of royal emblem”¹ and demonstrated their economic power and authority too. These small portable bronzes were for use in processions and “treated as physical manifestations of the gods themselves and were ritually bathed, dressed and

¹ Locke, Adrian K *An Introduction to Chola Sacred Bronze of Southern India for Teachers and Students* RA 2007 p.7

decorated with jewels and garlands of flowers inside the inner sanctum of the temple, a place of restricted access. When processed in elaborate temple carriages, these images became accessible to those individuals who were not allowed into these restricted areas.”² These gods appeared like royalty, and hence celebrations had both a spiritual and political and social function.



Rajaraja Chola (r. 985–1014) supervised the construction of the largest temple, the Rajarajeshvara at Tanjavur. A parade of processional bronzes of Shiva as Nataraja (Lord of Dance) is of special importance in this context as enshrined at his home in the golden hall at Chidambaram, he had assumed the status of tutelary deity (*kula-nayakam*) to the Chola royal household.

This association may have been established as early as the reign of Parantaka I, who, as a devout follower of Shiva, first undertook the gilding of Shiva Nataraja's dwelling, the *chit Sabha*, and thereafter acquired the title of 'the one who covered with gold'. Vikrama Chola (r. 1118–35), recorded in inscriptions that he devoted a year's state revenue to the enhancement of Chidambaram temple, he 'covered with pure gold and adorned with numerous strings of large pearls the sacred temple car... in order that the miraculous dancer [Nataraja] who occupies the golden hall may be drawn in procession at the great festival'.

This display of unlimited riches was a genuine expression of religious devotion and meritorious patronage on the part of the king. It helped to impress the populace

² *ibid*

with this ruler's magnificence and remind them of the divine grace their ruler received from Shiva.



Pleasing the gods was an overwhelming concern of priests and devotees alike. To this end, the commissioning of portable metal images became a major act of religious piety on the part of the Chola elite. Religious merit (*punya*) could be achieved through donations for the public good (*dana*). The presentation of processional bronze images to temples became an immensely popular means of expressing *dana*, as both sculptures and inscriptions bear witness. While only a king, marshalling the resources of the state and the spoils of war, could afford to build a major temple, others – lesser royalty and members of the nobility, ministers, priests, merchants, guild organisations – could all undertake, along with the king, the commissioning of processional icons. And, of course, this encouraged public devotional celebration through wider opportunities for *darshan*.

A review of the Chola sculptures exhibition at the Royal Academy written by Laura Cummings states:

“These exquisitely suave and sophisticated statues go right back to the ninth and tenth centuries. They are gods on parade: portable icons made to be carried aloft from their temples and out among the people in order to see and be seen. For these figures are regarded, and treated, as if they are animate”.³

Dance is an important art form in India, and Shiva is believed to be the master of it. The rhythm of dance is a metaphor for the balance in the universe which Shiva is believed to hold so masterfully. His most important dance is the Tandav. This is the cosmic dance of death, which he performs at the end of an age, to destroy the universe.

³ <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2006/nov/26/art> Laura Cumming

For a contemporary performance of traditional Hindu dances watch <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PiGI0Ee-ABU> ArdhaNareeshwara by Parshwanath Upadhye.

DEVELOPMENTS IN MATERIALS, TECHNIQUES AND PROCESSES

Chola bronzes use the lost-wax method of casting. Beeswax was mixed with *dammar* (resin of the *shal* tree, the sacred tree under which Buddha lay down to die) is softened and used to model the form before working with a wooden chisel. Then the final wax model is hardened in cold water and encased in three layers of finely ground clay. The mould is fired melting the wax which drains away allowing the alloy of copper and tin to fill the empty mould. Each piece is unique as the clay mould is destroyed to release the solid bronze sculpture. They are cast quite roughly, and surface detail would have been emphasised through later chasing; they would have been very highly polished but probably not patinated initially. The ritual bathing and so forth over the centuries have pitted the surface of the statue. The *sthapati* (master craftsman) was responsible for incising the pupils of the eyes, thereby giving life to the icon. Often this ritual is re-enacted at the temple as part of the consecration and installation ceremonies. The sculpture is then ready to be put into service as a processional image.

- Watch this 6 minute video from Smithsonian site showing contemporary bronze casting following traditional methods. <http://archive.asia.si.edu/explore/indianart/videoCasting.asp>

“Sacred metals in South and Southeast Asia” in the RA catalogue written by John Guy says: *‘Metallurgy has always been highly revered in the South Asian mind as a form of alchemy: the transformations of mundane materials into things precious. The keepers of these secrets were invested with ability to create icons of transcendent and transformative power. More than makers of images in other media, those working in metal were understood to possess special gifts, bearing a responsibility to create, in partnership with attendant priests, icons of such refinement and grace that the gods themselves would be attracted to them.’*

‘Ritual purity was of the highest concern in the making of such devotional images and purification rules had to be strictly observed. The master craftsman was required to undertake abstinence rites before commencing work and to make offerings to the god whose image he was to create. Metals were seen as potentially powerful agents, to be treated with great respect, and auspicious

alloys were prescribed in technical and iconographic manuals (silpasastras).’⁴

The high tensile strength of the bronze allows for the protruding limbs, and flying sash seen in the open extended form, and for the whole body to rest on one foot, as well as the tiny details of fingernails and headdress. The curves of the limbs reveal the initial modelling stage, and the patination and high polish of the final statue reflects light to add to the sense of movement.

WAYS IN HAS BEEN USED AND INTERPRETED IN PAST AND PRESENT SOCIETIES

The exact iconography of the Chola period sculpture of Shiva Nataraja is still in use and still made in all manner of media. The *Bronze* exhibition at the Royal Academy in 2012 had a Shiva Nataraja (Catalogue 138) from the early twentieth century:

“The work corresponds not only in all the various details of its iconography, but also in terms of its stylistic vocabulary, with Chola pieces dating from the eleventh and twelfth centuries, but does not appear to be an exact replica of any specific sculpture. Instead it underlines the timelessness of the artistic tradition to which it belongs, which sees no reason - as had long been second nature in the European context - to effect a radical break” (Curator, David Ekserdjian)

“In the twenty-first century, the image of Shiva Nataraja has become popularized and repurposed across the globe. There is a natural tension when such a powerful deity in Hindu belief is brought into new secular contexts. People worldwide are seeing Nataraja through a multitude of lenses—commercial, personal, scientific, and artistic—and finding deep but differing meanings. One striking example has its roots in twentieth-century physics. After physicist Fritjof Capra’s book *The Tao of Physics* was published in 1975, Shiva Nataraja became a symbol of the movement of matter in the pattern of creation and destruction. A large sculpture of Nataraja stands outside the European Center for Research in Particle Physics (CERN) in Geneva, Switzerland, underlining the link between cosmic forces and subatomic matter. In this context, Nataraja is also a political symbol for India’s contribution to the sciences.

⁴ Parading the Gods: John Guy, “Bronze Devotional Images of Chola South India” *Chola Sacred Bronzes of Southern India* (2006) London: Royal Academy

Links and Further Reading

Farisa Khalid, "*Shiva as Lord of the Dance (Nataraja)*," in *Smarthistory*, August 9, 2015, accessed January 16, 2019, <https://smarthistory.org/shiva-as-lord-of-the-dance-nataraja/>.

V&A: <http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O25011/shiva-nataraja-lord-of-the-bronze-sculpture-unknown/>

Hinduism and Hindu Art on The Metropolitan Museum of Art's Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History

<https://www.freersackler.si.edu/learn/india-shiva-nataraja-lord-of-the-dance/bronze-casting/video/>

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/ahistoryoftheworld/objects/cn3fuuQCRC2k27batpa0dg>

Chola Sacred Bronzes of Southern India, Royal Academy Catalogue, 2006



Revision exercise on divine identity: match the meaning to the object -

Drum, hand gesture, raised foot, demon, open palm front hand gesture, hand pointing down, fire, ring of fire

	Symbol of creation
	Blessing, protection, reassurance
	Gesture of liberation
	Eternal movement of the universe
	Purest energy
	Cyclical cosmic concept of time
	Ignorance
	Submission

1. Explore the role of the divine in one 3D work. (6 marks)
2. Explore the significance of location for one non-European 3D work (6 marks)
3. Explore the significance of the patron for one non-European 3D work (6 marks)
4. Explore the use of materials for one non-European 3D work (6 marks)