

### ***Shiva Nataraja (Lord of the Dance)***

India, Tamil Nadu, late 10<sup>th</sup> century

Bronze

29.2

### **Shiva Nataraja (Lord of the Dance)**

Shiva is a Hindu deity. When Shiva is dancing he is known as Shiva Nataraja (Nah-tah-rahj-ah), Lord of the Dance. Shiva's dance represents the cyclic forces of destruction and creation. This bronze figure of Shiva comes from India and was used in Hindu festival procession.

### **Shiva's Attributes**

Shiva, as other Hindu deities, is easily recognized by those of Hindu faith by his specific ATTRIBUTES. Shiva, although depicted in human form, is distinguished from mortals by his divine attributes. Most notable are Shiva's multiple arms. Here, Shiva has four arms, symbolic of the four directions. Shiva is idealized. He is the personification of eternal youth with broad shoulders, narrow waist, and smooth, elegant limbs. His scant clothing reveals the beauty of his perfected form. His tranquil face reflects his spiritual nature with large almond shaped eyes, elegantly arched brows, full lips and voluminous face. A small, vertical third eye on his forehead is his principal weapon of destruction and reinforces the presence of Shiva's divine power. Now missing, this bronze image of Shiva Nataraja would have originally been depicted dancing within a ring of flames, an attribute connected with destruction and creation.

### **Mudras**

Other attributes that identify Shiva as a Hindu deity include the objects he holds and the gestures he makes. His right front arm displays the gesture, or MUDRA, of reassurance. This mudra, with palm facing the viewer, means "have no fear." The front left hand, in downward position, gestures the promise of spiritual liberation. This hand points to the deity's left foot, a source of grace and refuge. In his posterior left hand, Shiva holds the flame of destruction. His right posterior hand holds a double-sided kettle drum whose beat summons up creation. Together, the drum and the flame illustrate the cycle of creation and destruction.

### **Aspasmara**

Aspasmara (phonetic spelling), the dwarf demon, is the personification of ignorance. As Shiva dances, he crushes ignorance under his right foot. Aspasmara shows little concern, despite his situation, as he looks up to Shiva as if to indicate the source of his salvation.

### **Shiva's Dance**

Shiva Nataraja dances the cyclic cosmic dance of destruction and creation. In a paradox typical of Shiva's nature, he appears simultaneously still and active: in perfect balance. The dynamic gestures of his graceful limbs express effortless perpetual motion whereas his torso and head appear held in complete repose. As Shiva performs, matted cords of hair fly out from either side of his head in the frenzied destructive force of the cosmic

process. The remainder of his elaborate hairstyle is held in perfect form upon his bejeweled head. His earrings, male on right and female on left, emphasize the duality of his nature. Shiva is able to reconcile these opposing actions and reminds the Hindu devotee of the transcendence of his being.

### **Shiva in Celebration**

This bronze figure of Shiva Nataraja, modeled in the round, was meant to be seen from all sides as it was carried in daily processions in the temple courtyard, for special ceremonies and festive celebrations. Each temple, dedicated to a particular deity, traditionally has a fixed image which always remains in the sanctum, and its smaller replica, the processional image.

Communal processions play an important part in Hindu festivals. In times past, low-caste members of the community would have been forbidden to enter the temple sanctum whereas public processions allowed everyone to make offerings of devotion. As part of the festival ritual, the image may be bathed, anointed with milk, clarified butter, honey and sugar, perfumed with sandalwood paste, and attired with silks, garlands and jewels. Statues, such as Shiva, would have either been carried on wooden poles high above the crowds or on a colorfully festooned wooden chariot. These chariots served as a type of mobile temple for the duration of the festival.

Hindu sculptures are devotional, encouraging the devotee to acknowledge the presence of the deity. The image itself is not the deity, but rather a temporary channel into which divine energy can flow. The spiritual connection between the image and the deity is established during a purification ceremony, called *prana pratishtha*. During this ritual, the deity's eyes, the last detail to be added, are chiseled or sculpted to symbolically open them.

### **Chola Dynasty Bronzes**

This sculpture of Shiva Nataraja is from the Chola Dynasty of South India. The Cholas were a dominant political and cultural force from the 9<sup>th</sup> to 13<sup>th</sup> centuries. It was during the Chola period when bronze casting reached its most brilliant achievement in India. In particular, the sculptors from the city of Tamil Nadu produced bronzes of exceptional beauty and the highest technical skill. The image of Shiva as Lord of Dance was highly popular during this period and was adopted by the Cholas as their patron deity.

### **Lost-wax Technique**

Created through the process of LOST-WAX casting, this sculpture was likely cast in a single piece. The flying hair is the exception which would have been cast separately and soldered onto the back. To cast this object in one piece requires astonishing technical mastery. This is best appreciated when considering the complicated extensions of the limbs and intricate detailing. The fine details seen in the jewelry, hair and facial features would have all been molded into the original wax model from which the bronze image was cast. As mentioned earlier the eyes and eyebrows were likely chiseled in later as part of the purification ceremony, *prana pratishtha*.

### **Artistic Traditions in Hinduism**

For the Hindu artist, tradition often determines the basic form of an image. With the exception of regional variations, written guidelines of proportions and iconography are implicitly followed. As understood by the creator of this image, gestures, attributes, and costume were all laid down in the manuals. Many of the postures found in Indian sculpture are also derived from traditional dance, an integral part of Hindu ritual ceremony. These prescribed principles did not stop the artist from imparting the image with its own distinct, aesthetic character. Faces in particular reveal the regional characteristics and the individual's hand.

*The Arts of South and Southeast Asia, The Metropolitan Museum of Art*

*Forms of the Formless, The Hindu Vision*, Alistair Shearer

*Hindu Art*, T. Richard Blurton

*Indian Sculpture*, Volume 2, Pal.

*The Materials of Sculpture*, Nicolas Penny, Yale University Press, 1993

*Almakara*, "The Enduring Image": <http://www.artsmuseum.com/alamkara/image.html>