Shiva as Nataraja (Lord of Dance), 11th century
Bronze, height 111.5 cm
The Cleveland Museum of Art, Purchase from the J.H. Wade Fund, 1930.331
BRONZE SCULPTURES of Nataraja, the Hindu deity Shiva dancing in a ring of fire, are well known across the world as iconic images of Indian culture, the “mystic East” and the divine arts of South Asia (1). This is just one example of the many exquisite bronze sculptures produced during the dominance of the Chola Empire across southern India between the 9th and the 13th centuries. The richness and vitality of this era are brought to life in a stunning exhibition at London’s Royal Academy from November 11th, 2006 to February 25th, 2007, Chola: Sacred Bronzes of Southern India.

The last major exhibition of South Asian art at the Royal Academy was in 1947, shortly after the foundations of independent India and Pakistan; several Chola bronzes were displayed on that occasion as examples of the finest Indian sculpture. Nearly sixty years later and following the success in 2002 of the travelling exhibition The Sensuous and the Sacred: Chola Bronzes from South India in the United States, this new exhibition brings nearly forty of these stunning examples of bronze casting back to the Royal Academy from museums and private collections in Europe, the United States and India.

The Imperial Cholas and Tamil temple culture

The Cholas rose to power during the reign of Vijayalaya in the middle of the 9th century AD in central Tamilnadu, the southernmost state in modern India. From their power base in the lush, cultivated delta region of the river Kaveri with their capital at Tanjavur (Tanjore), they gradually attained political pre-eminence over their Tamil neighbours, the Pallavas to the north and the Pandyas to the south. By the 11th century under the great kings Rajaraja (reigned 985–1014) and Rajendra (reigned 1014–1044) the Chola Empire dominated the whole of southern India and even the Maldives, parts of Sri Lanka and Sumatra. The Cholas continued to dominate southern India into the 13th century, until conflict with their neighbours, the southern Pandyas and the Hoysala kingdom of southern Karnataka around modern Mysore, brought about the gradual demise of this once great empire. Throughout the long period of Chola rule in southern India the economy expanded and the process of urbanisation intensified. It was a period of unparalleled cultural efflorescence, a “golden age” in two thousand years of Tamil history, that defined so much of the religious, literary and artistic landscape still encountered in South India to this day.

A central feature of the landscape in the four hundred or more years of the Chola period is the temple, whether a small village shrine or a monumental royal edifice. Temples have been built in stone in southern India from at least the 7th century AD: some of the earliest examples were created during the rule of the Pallava dynasty at their capital at Kanchipuram and their port at Mamallapuram (Mahabalipuram), just south of modern Chennai (Madras). Temples may have been built before this date in perishable materials but little clear evidence survives. Chola inscriptions of the 10th century, for example, mention the reconstruction of brick temples in more durable, costly and prestigious stone. All of these temples were ornamented with sculpture, from the crisp mouldings of the basement, through the vegetal reliefs on the columns to the bold images of deities placed in niches in the exterior walls. The very sculptural quality of south Indian temple architecture is emphasised by the artificial caves or rock-cut shrines sculpted from cliff faces or exposed rock formations in the 6th to 8th centuries AD. Over the course of the Chola period temples multiplied across southern India and grew in size, some becoming great complexes of shrines and columned halls entered through towering pyramidal gateways or gopuras (2). All were richly ornamented with stone sculpture fixed in place and more mobile bronze images. It was in this context of imperial expansion and economic prosperity that the sculptures that feature in the exhibition Chola: Sacred Bronzes of Southern India were produced for use in the many temples built in this era.

Deities of place and the Tamil saints

The majority of bronzes produced in the Chola period in southern India are of Hindu deities, images of the great gods Shiva and Vishnu, the Goddess (Devi), and their many incarnations. A central element of Indian art is the production of images of these deities and sacred spaces, where the grace and power of the Gods may be made more accessible to their human devotees. The very earliest surviving images of deities date to around the first centuries BC/AD, though there is little in the far south of India that predates the 7th century AD.

Though the worship of Hindu deities is known across India, the practice of Hinduism varies from region to region and the Tamil country is no exception. From the 6th to the 9th centuries AD, wandering poet-saints celebrated their love and devotion to Shiva and Vishnu across the landscape of Tamilnadu. This was not the worship of an abstract, omnipotent deity by a priestly elite but passionate devotion by people from all social classes to the very real, immanent presence of deities in particular places. They celebrated their love of God in the Tamil vernacular and not Sanskrit, the language of the elite. Many of the universal myths of the great deities were localised in the Tamil country creating a distinct sacred geography defined by deities of place with particular names: Sundareswarar, “the Beautiful Lord”, is not just another name for Shiva but his particular form at the great temple-city of Madurai, for example. Similarly Shiva’s awesome appearance as a monumental column of fire that caused his fellow deities Brahma and Vishnu to bow in subservience did not just happen anywhere, but specifically at Tiruvannamalai. The devotional songs of these Tamil poet-saints, the twelve Vaishnava Avars and the sixty-three Shaiva Nayanamars, are a distinctive feature of Tamil Hinduism to this day. It was in the Chola period that their devotional poetry was codified and collated, and gradually incorporated into temple worship. Images for use in the Tamil temples built in the Chola period included not only those of the well-known deities but also images of these poet-saints.

Presence and the Processions of God

Hindus enter a temple to come into the presence of the deity and to receive the deity’s blessing, a ritual act encompassed by the term darshan. This involves the devotee seeing and being seen by the deity, an exchange of vision
2 Rajarajeshvara temple at Tanjavur, consecrated 1010
Photograph by Crispin Branfoot
between the Lord and the worshipper. This emphasises that Hindu deities are understood to be a living presence in their temples, and the daily ritual and periodic festivals highlight this. The main image of the presiding deity is usually made of stone and fixed in place. But the conception of the deity as a living presence gave rise to the celebration of festivals when the image of the god was taken out on procession to see around their home and even the streets beyond, like a king on parade.

When deities are taken in procession it is not the immobile stone image from the central shrine or “womb-chamber” (garbhagriha) that is carried around but the more portable bronze images. These sculptures are dressed in silk, ornamented with elaborate jewellery, garlanded with flowers and carried in palanquins on the shoulders of several men. This is worth remembering when we view the “naked” images without their flowers and clothes in the careful lighting and display of a museum exhibition. During more important festivals these bronze images are placed on large wooden vehicles (vahanas) in the form of animals or mythic creatures, or even for one day in the year on a huge wheeled temple-chariot (yatha). In this way the deities of southern India go travelling around the sacred landscape of the Tamil country. Details of Chola-period processions of the Gods are known from contemporary literature—including a new literary genre (ula) that describes a royal procession—and from the many inscriptions on the walls of temples. The layout and design of the larger temples and their surrounding streets also emphasise the growing emphasis on the divine procession.

These processions may occur within the temple on a daily basis, such as the movement of a temple’s god and goddess from their separate shrines to a shared bedchamber each evening where they spend the night together, or less often on grander processions to the streets outside the temple walls. The procession of these bronze images may be to travel clockwise around the precincts and corridors of the temple, or up and down a particular processional street before returning home again. But some festival processions involve the deity going off to greet another god or goddess in another temple, or to visit a sacred site such as a holy river or the sea many miles away.

Access to the increasingly sacred layers of space around the main shrine within a Hindu temple was formerly restricted. Only the priests, the king and perhaps a noble elite were allowed in close proximity to a temple’s deity. With the emphasis in Hindu ritual on personal contact, seeing and even touching the deity embodied in its image, this meant that for many members of society the festival procession was one of the few occasions when they could receive darshan. The procession of bronze images in the open urban streets also allowed Hindus to worship in large congregations, in contrast to the more restricted interior spaces of temples.

Who’s who in the Tamil temple

Temples in the Chola period often had numerous bronze images, in a similar manner to the many stone images that adorned the niches of the exterior walls. Tamil temples tend to be dedicated to one of the most important gods, Shiva and Vishnu, or to the Goddess (Devi). But each of these deities has many different names, forms and manifestations, a variety of myths demonstrating their divine authority over all. A temple’s sculpture could therefore reveal the rich character of a single deity and his or her relatives and associates.

Much Indian sculpture takes the human form as the basis for a divine ideal, images of the different gods and goddesses being identified by their posture, hand-gestures and attributes. What is so striking about Chola bronze im-
ages is the elegance and grace of their very human postures. Many Indian sculptures were viewed from the front alone and were made with this in mind, being cast or carved against a stele or with their back left plain. Chola bronzes were modelled fully in the round, and even if not viewed from all sides in a ritual setting, they are superb examples of freestanding sculpture.

Chola artists normally chose to depict their divine subjects in a state of calm and serenity offering reassurance to their devotees, despite all the triumphant energy of their battles with fierce demons celebrated in myth. Devi in her form as Durga, for example, is the victor over the buffalo-demon Mahishata who threatened cosmic order. Rather than depicting the climax of the battle between goddess and demon when Durga plunges her trident into Mahisha or severs his buffalo head, as many artists have chosen to do in other regions and periods of Indian art, some Chola artists created a calm image of the standing goddess after the battle, standing on the head of the defeated buffalo-demon. Images of Vishnu’s incarnations or avatars as the boar Varaha or the terrifying man-lion Narasimha are similarly shown in serene seated postures, perhaps with their consort, rather than in the midst of killing a troublesome demon foe (4). These more relaxed images were certainly easier to cast in bronze, but single-piece castings of the dancing Shiva or Krishna emphasise that Chola artists did not shy away from complex artistic production.
The ritually most important and fixed image in a Shiva temple is a smooth cylindrical shaft with a rounded top, a sign or mark (linga) of the God mounted in a pedestal or pitha. These are always made in stone and one rarely encounters these as aesthetic examples of sculpture in museum or gallery. The simplicity of Shiva’s most powerful form contrasts with his multiple anthropomorphic forms that illustrate his complex character as energetic dancer, defeater of demons, devoted husband and father, or saviour. Chola artists created superb bronzes of Shiva both seated and standing with the body’s weight naturalistically shifted off one hip to the side. He has a third eye in his forehead and his matted hair is piled up on his head in which a crescent moon, skull and a snake are often seen. Shiva is often depicted with four arms to denote his divine power, in which he holds his characteristic small axe, snake or deer, and offers the palm-out gesture of reassurance. He appears in Chola bronzes both seated and standing, as Chandrashekhara, the “Lord Crowned with the Moon”; as Srikantha or Nilakantha, the “Lord with the Auspicious Neck” or “Blue-throated One”, an allusion to his saving the universe from destruction at the moment of creation by swallowing some poison; or as Tripuravigaya, the “Victor of the Three Cities” holding a bow and arrow, or as Vinadharamurti with a musical instrument (vina) in both hands (5).

The best-known image of Shiva, indeed the quintessential deity of Tamil South India is that of Nataraja, the “Lord of the Dance” (1). Dancing in a ring of fire, his hair flying from each side of his head, he holds in two hands some fire and a small hour-glass drum, and offers protection and reassurance with two more. Images of a dancing Shiva are known from other parts of India, but Shiva in the pose of ananda tandava or Dance of Bliss is a specifically Tamil creation from around the early Chola period of the 8th or 9th centuries. By the 10th century Nataraja became a central icon of the Chola dynasty and one of the most exquisite products of the bronze-caster’s art.²

Both Shiva and Vishnu have female consorts and the bronze images of the gods were seen alongside their goddess. Shiva appears seated with his consort and their son between them in a processional image called Somaskanda, “[Shiva] With Uma and Skanda” (6). Though such an image was sculpted in relief on the rear sanctum wall of
many Pallava period temples of the 7th and 8th centuries, Somaskanda images were made in the Chola period only as processional images. In a Shaiva temple procession several bronzes are often taken out together: the elephant-headed Ganesha always leads (7) and may be followed by forms of Shiva and the Goddess alone, the pair together as Somaskanda, and trailed at the rear by Chandesha, a Shaiva saint who acquired a new role as a protector of temples in the Chola period. A small Chandesha shrine was built alongside the main shrine to Shiva on its north side from the 11th century onwards.

Bronzes of Vishnu were also made together with his two consorts, Bhu and Sri. The most common Chola bronzes of Vishnu show the universal monarch standing majestically with his feet together, holding the characteristic conch and discus in his upper hands. His other hands may offer reassurance or hold his other weapon, the mace or club. Vishnu’s avatars were also made in bronze but only four of the canonical ten are common: the boar-headed Varaha, the man-lion Narasimha (8), Rama and Krishna. Rama usually appears standing holding a bow and is the centrepiece of a set of four images that include his wife Sita, brother Laksmana and his faithful companion, the monkey-general Hanuman. Bronze images of Krishna may also appear with his two South India consorts Rukmini and Satyabhamma, or alone dancing on the head of the naga (serpent) Kaliya, for example (cover).
The prevalence of Hindu images from the Chola period and the many Hindu temples across the Tamil country often suggest that both Buddhism and Jainism, present in the far south of India from the early centuries AD, had largely disappeared. But bronze images of the historical Buddha, bodhisattvas and Jain “ford-makers” (tirthankaras) were also made by the same Chola artists who were casting images of Hindu deities. The main Buddhist centre in South India during the 10th to 12th centuries was the port of Nagapattinam, from where a great board of over 350 Buddhist bronzes has been found over the last century and a half. Its proximity to Sri Lanka means that many South Indian bronzes may at first appear to be from the Buddhist culture of the island: the flattened flame-shaped ushnisha on the top of the head is common to both regions, for example. Jain images of the Chola period are very simple and graceful, often depicting a Jina (“conqueror”), such as Mahavira, as a naked, smooth-bodied standing ascetic with arms held just away from the body.

Unity and multiplicity: collections of bronze sculpture

In temples in Tamilnadu today there are often large collections of bronze sculptures. In a Shaiva temple, they are usually stored in one of the enclosed halls near the main sanctum; in a Vaishnava temple they are often placed directly in front of the much larger stone mulamurti of the reclining, sitting or standing Vishnu. Over the years new images are made or donated for use in a temple. In the centuries following the Chola period, from the 14th to the 17th century, the rituals celebrated in many Tamil temples expanded in number and scale. Processions became more frequent and the numbers of bronze images required increased. The temples themselves also expanded in size to accommodate and celebrate the festival cycles of these “heavens on earth”. A recent discussion of two Chola inscriptions demonstrates that on a temple’s foundation large numbers of bronzes may be donated to the temple, often of multiple forms of the same deity together with images of his consort, attendants and devotees. The great Rajarajeshvara temple at Tanjavur consecrated in 1010 by the Chola monarch Rajaraja contained at least sixty different metal images, including more than one of particularly popular images such as the dancing Shiva (9). Many were, and still are used in festival processions but the great number of accumulated bronze images in temples suggest that many were installed within minor shrines inside the temple. Jain temples across southern India often have large collections of images of Jinas on a low platform before the monumental main stone image,
that testify to the sustained patronage by lay devotees to the religious institution.

The distinctively Tamil Hindu presence of the groups of poet-saints, the twelve Vaishnava Alvars and the sixty-three Shaiva Nayansar, meant that as their poetry was incorporated into temple ritual from around the 12th century many Tamil temples had images of these figures installed. They were most commonly made in bronze and less often sculpted in stone: several Shaiva poet-saints are seen in the Royal Academy exhibition. Three of the sixty-three devotees of Shiva are particularly celebrated by Tamil Hindus, Sambandar, Appar and Sundarar, and are collectively known as the Mvuar, “the Three Revered Ones”; their hymns were collated as the Tevaram. Together with Cekkilar’s 12th century composition of their official hagiography, the Periya Puranam, this great corpus forms the canon of Tamil Shaiva devotion. Another slightly later Shaiva devotee, Manikkavacakar, was added to these three great devotees; images of this poet-saint are identified by the palm-leaf manuscript that he holds in his left hand on which the words om namah Shivasya (praise be to Shiva) may be written. Temples may include sets of all the Nayansar and additional larger figures of the three or four most important poet-saints; the practice of installing complete groups of these figures is most common in the period following the decline of the Chola dynasty.6

When cool the mould is broken open to reveal the cast image. The nature of the process thus ensures that every image is subtly different, even if to the casual eye many of these images may appear exactly the same. A certain degree of finishing is required after the mould is broken with files and chisels, to remove the spurs left by the drainage channels, touch up details and polish the figure. In the Chola period, artists seem to have done very little post-cast finishing leaving more finely modelled images that closely relate to the wax model, compared with the sharper, chiselled features of bronzes produced in later periods. In the first centuries of bronze casting in southern India up until the 10th century, bronze and stone images are very similar suggesting that the same artists and craftsmen were producing all the figures. But a gradual divergence of style in the 11th century and later suggests a growing craft specialisation.

Most images of deities are solid cast, despite the greater cost and weight of the final image; hollow cast images are not considered appropriate for a ritual image. They may be more portable than a stone image but a solid bronze figure up to a metre in height is still a substantial weight when carried in procession. The majority of Chola bronzes were also cast in a single piece. This is important to consider when looking at a very complex image, such as Nataraja dancing in a ring of fire. Casting in a single piece necessarily limits the size of an individual sculpture, but Chola sculptors in the 11th and 12th century created some of the largest bronze images in India. A separate arched aureole (prabhavali) was often placed to frame the image; spurs on the sides of the base are for its attachment, though most are now missing. Also invariably missing are the bow and arrow held by a few images, such as Shiva as Tripuravijaya.

Making meaning

All these images were made from bronze, a copper alloy with small quantities of tin and zinc, using the “lost-wax process”. The finest bronzes should be made from a five-fold alloy (panchakaloha) that also includes gold and silver. These five metals are sometimes said to represent the five elements in India: earth, air, fire, water and ether. Inscriptions very occasionally mention the production of a gold or silver image. Bronze casters in South India still use the same technique; at Sivamalai near Kumbakonam in central Tamilnadu, bronze images are still made by traditional craftsmen who claim lineal descent from the families who worked for the Chola king Rajaraja at nearby Tanjavur. These images are for new temples both in India and abroad, and for the handicrafts market: a high polish is required for the ritual icons, whilst the “art pieces” are given a dull patina to suggest the antiquity of a long-buried image.7

The craftsman first makes a detailed wax model of the desired figure, which is then coated in several layers of clay, the first being very fine. When the figure is encased, it is fired to bake the clay mould and melt the wax, which drains out through narrow channels or “branches”. The molten alloy is then carefully poured into the mould so that every part is filled and no air bubbles are trapped.

4The Tamil temples of the 16th and 17th centuries are discussed in Grispin Branfoot, Gods on the Move: architecture and ritual in the south Indian temple, London: British Academy/Society for South Asian Studies, 2006.


6Few images of the Alvars seem to have survived from the Chola period; those that do are still under worship and rarely featured in museum collections.


The memory of the Cholas

The Chola period is a defining era in the history of Tamil and South Indian culture, and the temples and sculpture from the centuries of their rule are rightly regarded as some of the finest creations of the Indian artistic tradition. Many bronzes made in the 10th or 11th century remain in use and under worship in temples across southern India. Hindu ritual is very sensual and often involves the lustration or anointing of images with water, yoghurt, honey or other substances. After being exposed to the pollution of the world beyond the temple during a festival procession, images are thoroughly scrubbed. This repeated treatment results, over the course of several centuries, in some deeply venerated images having rather smooth facial features. Occasionally the eyes may be recut to facilitate effective darshan or exchange of vision between deity and devotee: the Cleveland Museum of Art’s image of Shiva as Tripuravijaya has such recut eyes (10).

Other images in temples or museums seem almost new in the crispness of their detail. In part this is a consequence of their burial in times of conflict and crisis: a temple’s images were carefully placed in prepared underground chambers in readiness for the return of peace and
prosperity, and their reconsecration for worship. The decades from the end of the 13th century through the early 14th century was a period of instability throughout southern India. The Chola Empire disintegrated following the death of Rajendra III in 1279, the Hoysalas and Pandyas fought for control over the Tamil country, and a series of raids from 1310 by the Muslim armies of the Delhi Sultanate in northern India reached the temples in the far south. A longer term Islamic presence by the Madura Sultanate through the middle of the 14th century may also have disrupted temple worship at a few major temples, such as Madurai, Srirangam and Chidambaram, until the armies of the Karnataka-based Vijayanagara Empire established their dominance over most of southern India in the late 14th century. Many temples also buried their images in the 16th century when the Portuguese raided some Hindu temples in coastal areas. As time past people forgot about these buried images, and made new ones for use in temples, until their fortuitous rediscovery by farmers and archaeologists in the past century. The images displayed at the Royal Academy in London this winter are just some amongst the great number of superb examples of bronze casting created during one of the most artistically creative periods in India’s long history.