

[The Pleasures of Profundity](#)

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SCULPTURE

The Pleasures of Profundity

The Arthur M. Sackler Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., hosts a pantheon of ancient South Indian bronzes from around the world

HELEN FAZIO, NEW JERSEY, AND JULIE RAJAN, NEW YORK

The long, slender limbs of Lord Nataraja arch gracefully through the air with purpose, reflecting His deep, inner strength. In the alluring curve of Her body, divine Durga exudes a stalwart radiance of eternal love and cosmic peace. And a glimmer of boyish naughtiness, tempered by dharma, comes alive on the curved lips of the ever-playful baby Krishna. Indeed, the exhibit, "The Sensuous and the Sacred: Chola Bronze Deities from South India," displayed at the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., through early March is aptly named, as the deeply sensuous facets of the handcrafted bronze figures serve to heighten their divine nature, uniting otherwise disparate human and divine experiences of love and spirituality into one plane of consciousness.

The first collection devoted exclusively to Chola bronzes and, thus, the largest to date in the United States, the Sackler's display of 70 Deities comprise a wide range of both Saivite and

Vaishnavite pieces, reflecting the glory of the highly-artistic Chola dynasty, which ruled South India between the ninth and thirteen centuries. The bronze statues were created during that renaissance period as mobile forms to represent the installed stone statues in temples for use in elaborate festival processions. In such ceremonies, as during the enactment of marriage rites for Deities, the bronzes were adorned with silks, flowers and jewelry, echoing the highly divine status they temporarily assumed from the temple's main image. Holes and loops in the bases held poles by which the Deities were carried in elaborate processions. As the pieces are not displayed in their formal state in the Sackler, they remain unadorned to reveal the manner in which their undulating movement, their measured proportions, and the precise details they display connote the central positions they served in sacred festivities.

Creating the exhibit proved a difficult labor of love, a journey into spirituality itself. For several years, Vidya Dehejia, currently the Barbara Stoler Miller Chair in Indian Art at Columbia University, traveled all over the world to secure and barter for pieces from a variety of private collections, such as the Rockefeller Collection, and prominent galleries, including the Stuttgart Museum of Art.

The Collection

In the Sackler's exhibition galleries, these classical bronzes can be experienced in a manner unavailable to most people living in the period of Chola reign. As visitors, we can approach them without an intermediary, and from a close perspective, we see them completely unadorned by the arts of alankara, in a dim and quiet room, spotlighted as the treasures they are.

Some feeling of the energy and color of the original processional experience comes from the eighteenth-century Siva Nataraja, which was lent by the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston and which has been magnificently dressed, bejeweled, garlanded and flower strewn. Signaling the entrance to the exhibit, Nataraja stands like a brilliant jewel in the lotus bowl of one of the small galleries. But it would be inappropriate to clothe and decorate the Chola sculptures; any handling of the pieces could damage their accrued patinas that have protected them so well for so long. Thus, in the unadorned murti we are privileged to see the magnificent aesthetic of the Chola artists.

Three Chola period Natarajas grace the exhibit. Dating from 990 to 1150, they were lent by a private collector, the Dallas Museum of Art and the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam. The Dallas Nataraja is particularly splendid. A dark bronze with minimal patina, the sculpture itself is massive but subtle. The great torque of the torso, as

Siva's left foremost arm pulls across the body, is balanced by the oppositional force of the right foremost arm advancing in a gesture of blessing, also the dancer's motion that stops the turn. Lord Siva's stance captures His movement as if for an instant, as His spin brings Him facing frontward; our eyes are drawn to His gaze as he stands in a pose He has held in freshness and beauty for 900 years.

One of the most unforgettable sculptures is Uma ("Mother") as Queen Sembiyan Mahadevi, a late tenth-century sculpture which is arguably the most exemplary realization of high Chola bronze expression and the most masterfully finished bronze in the collection. Making the shortest journey to join the Sackler exhibit, Uma as Queen Sembiyan Mahadevi is lent by the Freer Gallery of Art, just across the shared courtyard from the Sackler. The historical Queen Sembiyan Mahadevi, grandmother of Rajaraja I of the Chola dynasty, was a consummate temple builder and art patron. Curator Vidya Dehejia believes the great art patroness' features and posture, her serious and regal expression and the elegant slope of her shoulders have been incorporated by her artisans into the sculpture of Uma, God Siva's female consort, making the piece both divine and human.

Also highlighting the exhibit are two rare depictions of Somaskanda, depicting a precious dancing baby Skanda in the midst of His parents. In addition, a unique eleventh-century image of four-faced Brahma seated as acharya for the wedding of Siva and Uma comes from the Asia Society Gallery in New York. Although the Cholas included Brahma among the fixed stone sculptures within their temples, processional statues of Brahma in bronze were unusual and provided the opportunity actually to sculpt the fourth face.

The Cleveland Museum of Art and a private collector have each contributed standing Ganesha statues. The Cleveland Ganesha is a refined high Chola piece of the late eleventh century, beautifully svelte and urbane of expression with grace and art in every gesture. The companion Ganesha of a century later has considerably heavier patina and less grace. What the latter Ganesha lacks in refinement is compensated by the suggestion of a sagacious glance and massive capability as the Obstacle Remover.

Also of interest are the individual child bronzes of Sambandar and Krishna. Docent Helen Sirkin pointed out a frequent error people make when viewing the image of a dancing child in Indian art. This is evidenced from some confusion concerning the thirteenth-century bronze of the Dancing Child-Saint Sambandar from the Linden-Museum in Stuttgart. Although iconographically it almost exactly resembles the Dancing Child Krishna from a private collection, this Sambandar gestures upward with his right hand, telling his father that Siva and Uma gave him his cup of milk. This is a crucial and often overlooked factor distinguishing him from the child Krishna, who uses His right hand to make the sign of blessing.

Most exciting of all, the exhibition unites two sculptures originally from the Sembiyan workshop in the Kaveri Delta region, which previously fate and time seem to have taken in separate directions. From the Philadelphia Museum of Art, Rama now resides with his natural companion Sita, who was originally housed in the Linden-Museum in Stuttgart. Although Sita is more ornate, not only is it clear that the bronze amalgam for each is similar, but also that the

conditions of their preservation have had similar effects. Products by the same workshop, and possibly by the same group of artisans, Rama and Sita are temporarily reunited at the Sackler.

Immediate Hindu community

The sacred dimensions of the collection are enhanced by their contextualization. The Deities are respectfully displayed on tall pedestals, often encased in glass, and unadorned to highlight their ceremonially inactive state. Throughout the setting, the pieces are both intermingled with impressive, informative photos demonstrating their use in modern-day worship ceremonies and set against full-color, panoramic images of South Indian temples. Furthermore, the exhibit frames the aesthetic aspects of the Deities in a wealth of practical, historical, and religious information. For example, visitors who are curious about traditional methods by which bronze statues are still created in India can view a short video detailing the process, and those who are simply curious about Hinduism can peruse a modest collection of books set aside in a separate sitting

area.

In addition, the exhibit provides informative placards in Tamil and English detailing critical aspects of the Chola dynasty and of the Hindu Deities. Well-trained docents, such as Sirkin, who spent much of her time in Chennai, display an impressive and thorough knowledge with regard to each piece, the Chola era and modern-day Hindu approaches to puja. Thus, the resultant experience is highly engaging and accessible to all visitors, from the staunch Hindu devotee to the mildly interested passerby.

Refreshingly, community outreach is central to this exhibit. Visitors are privy to the personal comments of Hindu devotees in the Washington, D.C., area discussing their views of the exhibit, puja and Hinduism today, displayed in plaques throughout the gallery. In addition, the Sackler has made efforts to train Hindu youths as docents for tours during the weekend, thereby actively engaging future generations of Hindus in the presentation and interpretation of their heritage to the American diaspora.

The Sackler's melding of conservative tradition and modern interpretation, as well as multi-generational participation, underscores the fact that although the Chola bronzes hearken to a bygone era, their sacred Hindu representation is very much alive and respected today.

Youth's Voice

Being a dancer, I really adore Siva because He represents dance in the form of Nataraja. Going to Him soothes me before doing a program, and it calms me to think of Him when I'm dancing during a program. When I see these sculptures, I want to be that sculpture, standing in the exact same spot. Even though I don't have all the arms, I just really want to stand like that."

Samatha Reddy, age 17, Sallston, MD