

The Sensuous and the Sacred: Chola Bronzes from South India

A Resource for Teachers

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41 East 65th Street
New York, NY 10021

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The exhibition overview, informational texts, and glossary are drawn from the didactic labels for the exhibition and from the essay “Chola Bronzes: How, When, and Why?” in the exhibition catalogue *The Sensuous and the Sacred: Chola Bronzes from South India* (The American Federation of Arts in association with the University of Washington Press, Seattle and London, 2002) written by guest curator Vidya Dehejia, Barbara Stoler Miller Professor of Indian and South Asian Art at Columbia University and formerly Chief Curator at the Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution. The discussion questions and activities were written by Nelly Silagy Benedek, Director of Education, American Federation of Arts.

If you have any questions about this resource for educators please contact:
Nelly Silagy Benedek, Director of Education
American Federation of Arts
41 East 65th Street, New York, NY 10021
Telephone: 212-988-7700 ext. 26
Fax: 212-861-2487
Email: nbenedek@afaweb.org

Exhibition Itinerary

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

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

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

Cover image: *Ganesha*
Chola period, ca. 1070
Bronze
19 3/4 in.
The Cleveland Museum of Art; Gift of Katharine Holden Thayer (1970.62)

About This Resource

Art can be a great source of inspiration for elementary, middle, and high school students. This resource focuses on bronze sculptures created in south India between the ninth and thirteenth centuries, with the aim of teaching students how to approach these works of art using critical thinking skills. Major concepts of Hindu worship are addressed along with the iconography artists used to express these ideas. Teachers may utilize these materials either in conjunction with a class visit to the museum or independently. Suggested activities and discussion questions focus on individual sculptures and offer ways of making them more accessible to students.

Teachers may adapt the writing projects and drawing exercises for different grade levels and use them as points of departure for lesson plans. For the drawing projects, teachers should encourage students to focus more on communicating ideas than on rendering accurate perspective and correct proportions. The discussion questions and classroom activities are the first step in engaging students in looking at and analyzing the works of art. They establish connections between various sculptures and create links with topics students are studying in school. Finally and most important, they are designed to encourage students to experience art and to explore and give expression to their thoughts and ideas.

Exhibition Overview

Temple bronzes produced under the Chola dynasty (ninth–thirteenth centuries) of south India are among the most spectacular works of art ever created in south Asia. During this period bronze-casting reached a level of unparalleled excellence, and sculptures of masterful artistry were created. The works in this historic exhibition, the first to focus on the bronze art of the Chola period, exemplify the graceful forms, delicate modeling, and remarkable technical sophistication of these sculptures and demonstrate the integral role that they played—and continue to play—in the rich tradition of Hindu worship.

Sculptures like those assembled in the exhibition were once, and still are, a prominent feature of Hindu temples. Depicting deities and saints, they combine sensuous form with sacred function. The bronzes were created as objects of worship and were once adorned with silks, precious jewelry, and floral decorations that covered them almost completely when worshipped in processions. When these works of art began to be collected they were displayed in their unadorned state. Bronzes remaining in Hindu temples continue today to be decorated for worship. A photograph of a dressed sculpture of Ganesha included in this resource conveys how these sacred bronzes appear in temple processions. Chola-period bronzes present a paradoxical mingling of the spiritual and the sensual, characteristic of the art of India, and suggest that for both artist and devotee, the inner beauty of these religious figures is inextricably linked to their external splendor.

Hindus believe that when invoked by priests the deity descends from a state of abstraction and enters the immovable stone image enshrined in the sanctum of a temple, where he or she receives the prayers of worshippers. Around the sixth century in south India, Hindus began to regard the deity as assuming an additional role akin to that of a human monarch. Embodied in a portable bronze sculpture and escorted by temple priests, the deity appeared in public to give audience to devotees and to participate in a variety of festivities. Thus arose the magnificent bronzes of Chola India.

The Chola Dynasty

For a period of four hundred years, from the ninth to the thirteenth century, the Chola dynasty was the dominant cultural, artistic, religious, and political force in south India. Its monarchs extended their dominion into Sri Lanka and the nearby Maldiv Islands, maintained regular contact with Java, and sent diplomatic missions to Myanmar (Burma), Malaysia, and China. Enlightened patrons of the arts, Chola rulers commissioned elegant sculptures and dedicated majestic temples to Hindu deities in order to proclaim the power, wealth, and piety of the Chola dynasty. During this golden age, the arts—music and dance, poetry and drama, architecture and sculpture—flourished.

Chola Temples

Chola bronze sculptures were intended for temple ritual. This resource includes a slide of a Chola temple (no. 12) so that students can see the environment in which the sculptures were—and continue to be—housed.

The poems of the Tamil saints reveal that during the sixth and seventh centuries there were two varieties of “temple.” One was the simplest of sacred shrines, often consisting of no more than a *linga* of Shiva (his aniconic emblem) beneath a sacred tree in the village square. The other type, located in a township known as *uru*, was a more formal structure, probably built of mud and brick. At the beginning of the Chola period, brick was abandoned in favor of stone as the medium for temple construction. During the second half of the tenth century, the Chola queen Sembian Mahadevi decided to replace a number of earlier brick temples, translating them into stone and leaving inscriptions recording her actions. Her inscription of the year 979 in the Shiva temple in Tirukodikaval reveals an extraordinary sense of historical awareness. She collected the twenty-six or so inscribed stones from the earlier brick temple and ordered that the old inscriptions be reinscribed, specifically marked as “copies,” on the walls of the newly rebuilt stone temple.¹

When her grandson Arulmoli adopted his title of Rajaraja (King of Kings), he decided to proclaim his power and glory by building a temple several times the size of any

¹ *Madras Epigraphy Report*, 1930–31, inscription no. 36.



12. Rajaraja Chola's temple at Tanjavur.

previous Chola temple and naming it Rajarajeshvara (Lord of Rajaraja) (no. 12). Rajaraja's great temple at Tanjavur, completed in the year 1010, rose to a height of 216 feet and was the skyscraper of its time, taller than anything built before it anywhere in India. This royal temple was gifted a total of sixty bronze images of deities, of which about one-third (twenty-two) were given by the emperor himself, one-third were gifts from his family (four from his sister and thirteen from his queens), and the remaining third (twenty-one) were given by his officials and nobles. Rajaraja also established several permanent endowments to enable the temple to function in grand style. He decreed, too, that all the villages of his empire, including those in newly conquered Sri Lanka, remit a certain portion of their income to support the functioning of his temple.

Gifts to temples was motivated by a variety of incentives. It might occasionally have been prompted by pure religious fervor, but more often the cause lay, as it does even in the twenty-first century, in the donor's desire to receive *mariyatai* or temple honors.² The royal gift to temples and brahmins (people of the highest caste in the Indian caste system) was in a special category, and was basic to the way affairs of state were conducted in south India; gifting helped fulfill kingly duties, earned merit, and brought prosperity to the kingdom. The royal endowment gave the king the ultimate temple honor, which brought him into an active and empowering relationship with the deity, and thereby reinforced his authority. Gifts from merchants and officials served to increase their rank and social standing. The greater the donation, the closer one's proximity to the deity. To this day, an individual takes greater pride in the temple honors to which he or she is entitled than in personal wealth or landed property, both of which are tied to the ability to give munificently and thus contribute to the status in the temple. While religious devotion is indeed a factor that induces generous gifts to a temple, the more compelling factor is that many donors see a direct relationship between their temple activities and their business success or enhancement of a family's prestige, and hence lineage. As the scholar Nicholas Dirks emphasizes, temples were infinitely more than places of worship; they were fundamental social institutions that decided issues of rank, honor, and authority.

² Nicholas Dirks, *The Hollow Crown* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), has demonstrated that "no gift was without reason, intention, and interest," p. 129.

Hinduism: Multiplicity as a Worldview

Hinduism and the *Vedas*, its sacred texts, had their origins sometime between 2000 and 1000 B.C. (B.C.E.). The Hindu faith had no single founder, prophet, or disseminator; rather it gradually arose from an Indian way of life emphasizing truth and order. By the start of the Christian Era (Common Era), Hinduism had evolved into the religion that was practiced in the Chola period and continues today.

Hindus believe that God is a single being worshiped in multiple names and forms, in keeping with their view of the Infinite as a diamond of innumerable sparkling facets with one facet appealing to an individual more forcefully than another. The fact then that one Hindu may worship the god Vishnu, for example, does not negate the validity of other facets such as Shiva, Durga, Ganesha, the prophet Muhammad, or even Jesus. To Hindus, multiplicity is as natural as singularity is to monotheists.

Cyclical Time

Hindus believe the process of creation happens in cycles. According to Hindu doctrine, creation “begins to end and ends to begin,” and time is a manifestation of God. Creation begins when God makes his energies active and ends when he withdraws all his energies into a state of inactivity. God is timeless, for time is relative and ceases to exist in the Absolute. The past, the present, and the future coexist in him.

Puja

To honor a Hindu deity, devotees perform ritual worship known as *puja*. Comparable to the hospitality one might offer to royalty or a highly esteemed guest, *puja* includes providing the deity with an elaborate bath, new clothes, jewelry, flowers, incense, lamps, music, food, and water. Hindu worship directs all the senses toward the object of devotion. *Puja* involves admiring the fully adorned deity, smelling the incense and flowers, hearing the chiming of bells and the chants of devotees, and tasting food sanctified by the deity. Dressing bronze images in silks and adorning them lavishly with jewels and flowers prior to their participation in festival processions is a vital part of worship in south India today—just as it was over a thousand years ago. Since at least the sixth century, priests have ritually bathed bronze deities in milk, curds, butter, honey, and sugar, followed by water from the Kaveri river; anointed them with fragrant sandalwood paste; draped them in colorful cloth; and shaded them from the sun with canopies during festival processions.

While the continued vitality of such worship is remarkable, it gradually wears down the surface of the bronzes, smoothing away some of the precise detail of the metalwork. Such wear is considered insignificant by worshipers, except when it affects the sculpture’s eyes, as devotees achieve their most direct experience with a deity through *darshan* (seeing).



13. Bronze image of Ganesha, decorated and adorned for a temple procession, Kapalishvara temple, Mylapur, Chennai.

Darshan

Darshan literally means "seeing." In the Hindu tradition it refers especially to religious seeing, or the visual perception of the sacred. The central act of Hindu worship is to stand in the presence of the deity and to behold the image with one's own eyes, to see and be seen by the deity. Hindus believe that the deity is present in the image when invoked by temple priests. Viewing the image is an act of worship, and through the eyes one gains the blessings of the divine. By presenting themselves to the god for *darshan*, worshipers ready themselves for the grace and blessings the god may bestow on them.

When the eyes of a sculpture become worn due to decades and even centuries of ritual worship, they are no longer considered effective, and thus must be recut. Several of the bronzes in the exhibition have recut eyes, a testament to their use in centuries of ritual worship.

Temple Festivals

South Indian temples generally hold one major festival each month with a corresponding set of bronze images dedicated to the theme and intent of each. For example, sculptures of a god and goddess joining hands are used only once a year in the ceremony celebrating their marriage; an image of the god Krishna as a child is brought out to celebrate his birthday; and a bronze of Shiva as Lord of Dance is carried to a seaside festival. Each monthly festival lasts anywhere from three to ten days. Priests invoke the deity to take temporary residence in the sculptures, which are treated as actual living entities during this time. The richly adorned bronzes are then placed in palanquins or elaborate wooden chariots and taken in procession with great pomp and splendor. (See no. 11 for an example of wooden chariot adorned with painted wooden guardian figures and other sculptures. The bronze image is being carried within.) An ancient poet-saint described one such festival in the town of Naraiyur for Shiva as the Lord Who Drinks the Poison like this:

*The Lord of Citticcaram shrine in Naraiyur,
who has the river in his hair,
the poison in his throat,
and the Veda on his tongue,
goes resplendent in ceremonial dress,
as his devotees and perfected sages
sing, and dance his widespread fame,
and the sound of festival drums
beaten on the streets where the temple-car is pulled
spreads on every side.*

Saint Sambandar

Specific images are also required for less elaborate daily and weekly festivals. For instance, bronzes depicting a god and goddess together are brought out for a daily inspection of the temple premises or are placed on a swing to enjoy the breeze and listen to a weekly concert. As temple festivities multiplied, increasing numbers of sacred bronzes were commissioned, with the result that medium-sized temples often possessed twenty-five such bronzes, large temples even more.



11. Temple chariot for processional bronze images, Kapalishvara Temple, Mylapur, Chennai.

The God Shiva

Shiva is the quintessential deity of the Tamil-speaking region of south India. In his most supreme aspect, Shiva can neither be seen nor worshiped, but he graciously takes various corporeal forms so devotees can comprehend him and pay respect. The sanctum of a temple devoted to Shiva invariably enshrines the pillarlike *linga* (literally “sign”), his nonfigural emblem, originally conceived as a shaft of light and glory. Shiva’s enthralling human manifestations are embodied in a given temple’s many festival bronzes and in the stone sculptures decorating its outer walls.

The god Shiva is always portrayed with a vertical third eye (indicating fiery energy) in the middle of his forehead. His matted locks are knotted together and piled elegantly upon his head and adorned with the crescent moon, a female personification of the Ganges River, a skull, and wild cassia blossoms. Shiva is the lord decorated with serpents, which he uses as belt, hair ornament, scarf, necklace, armlet, and wristband. His attributes include the trident, a deer companion, and the battle-ax, while his vehicle is the bull Nandi (joyous one).

Shiva is often depicted in heroic guises, destroying forces of evil that threaten the world. Other times he is portrayed as the loving husband of the goddess Uma and father of two sons, the elephant-headed god Ganesha, and the warrior-youth god Skanda.

Great Goddess Uma

Uma, the great goddess and consort of Shiva, is invariably portrayed as a slender, sensuous woman of great beauty. Multiple images of Uma form part of the assemblage of bronzes in any sizable temple and are created either to stand alone or to accompany Shiva in one or another of his manifestations. For instance, according to an early Chola inscription in the temple at Tiruvaduturai, six of the temple’s twenty-three bronzes were depictions of Uma. All sculptures of the goddess are similar in iconography and show her standing in a graceful *tribhanga* (triple-bend) posture with one hand raised to hold a lotus blossom and the other resting at her side. Each image is addressed by a distinct name dictated by its placement within the temple’s ceremonial context. Without her constant presence, the ritual cycle is incomplete. In the south Indian belief system, Shiva acting alone may perform acts of cosmic significance and protect the world from evil, but it is only in the company of Uma that he can bestow grace upon an individual soul.

Uma is the name given to the goddess in her role as wife and mother. In her own right, she is the protective warrior goddess Durga, destroyer of demons, believed in south India to be Vishnu’s sister. She is also Kali, the fierce protector, adorned with snakes and skulls, and holding a noose and skull-cup.

The God Vishnu

The sanctum of a Vishnu temple invariably contains a stone or stucco image of the god in human form in addition to its bronze sculptures. Typically, Vishnu holds his attributes—the discus and conch shell—in two rear hands; one front hand is raised in the gesture of protection, the other rests on his hip in a gesture of ease. He is usually shown wearing a tall crown and abundant jewelry, and is often accompanied by his wife Lakshmi, goddess of wealth and fortune. Since Vishnu is the eternal husband and support of fortune (Shri) and the earth (Bhu), Hindu monarchs have always likened themselves to him. Even the Chola kings did so, though most were devout worshippers of the god Shiva.

Vishnu is associated with a doctrine of ten avatars, one yet to come; he is born on earth in one of the avatar forms whenever evil arises. The sacred text of the *Bhagavad Gita* describes this role as follows:

*Whenever sacred duty decays
and chaos prevails,
then, I create
myself, Arjuna.*

*To protect men of virtue
and destroy men who do evil,
to set the standard of sacred duty
I appear in age after age.*

Vishnu’s most popular avatars are those of Krishna, who is portrayed as an infant, a youthful lover, and a wise monarch, and Rama, prince of Ayodhya.

The Tamil Saints

Between the sixth and ninth centuries, a series of Hindu saints traveled across the Tamil countryside, stopping at temples to sing the glories of the deities enshrined within. The twelve saints devoted to Vishnu are known as the *alvars* (deep divers into the divine), while those holy men and women who dedicated their lives to Shiva were consolidated into a group of sixty-three saints known as *nayanmars* (leaders). These saints came from every level of society—some were humble cowherds and hunters, others were brahmins or monarchs—and

included men, women, and even one child. None of these saints is believed to have died an ordinary death; rather, each *nayanar*, for instance, simply vanished into the radiance of Shiva. Within Hindu temples, the saints are honored in a manner similar to the gods, and their hymns are chanted on a variety of occasions including their birthdays, which are marked on Tamil calendars.

Creating a South Indian Temple Bronze

Every bronze in a south Indian temple is unique. Each is created using the *cire perdue* (lost-wax) process, in which molten metal is poured into a hand-fashioned clay mold that must be broken apart to yield the final work of art. Photographs included in this resource (nos. 14–20) document the process of bronze-casting at the principal south Indian bronze workshop located in Swamimalai, Tamil Nadu, which adjoins the temple town of Kumbakonam. These bronze-casters still employ the following process, which was used by Chola-period artists:

- 1 Sculptors mold images from hard beeswax mixed with a small amount of *dammar* (resin) from the shal tree. The wax is carefully molded into the separate parts that comprise the sculpture and then lowered into a basin of cold water where it hardens instantly.
- 2 In order to join the individual pieces into a whole, they are returned to a malleable state through brief reheating. Simple tubular struts connect the hands of the images to the body providing both stability to the wax model and acting as channels through which molten bronze can be poured. While the wax is still soft, details, down to the individual beads of a sculpted necklace, are added with a sharp wooden chisel.
- 3 The fully assembled wax model is then encased within several layers of clay. The entire piece is held together with metal wire to ensure a strong container that will withstand the heat of fire and molten metal.
- 4 The heavily clay-encased mold is then baked in a fire pit, melting the wax, which runs out through the channels leaving a perfectly detailed hollow clay mold. Specialized metal-workers now take over, heating copper with a small proportion of lead and tin (and in earlier times small amounts of gold and silver). This alloy is carefully poured into the clay mold, which has been heated to the temperature of the molten metal.
- 5 After cooling for several days, the clay mold is broken open to reveal a rough version of the sculpture.
- 6 The sculptors carefully chip away the clay and then smooth and polish the bronze, a process that can take anywhere from a few days to several weeks. During the Chola dynasty, only the barest minimum of finishing work, such as removing the channels of bronze connecting hand to torso, remained to be executed. Today, however, artists resort to an extensive amount of cold chiseling that gives a distinct, sharp finish to the details.



14. Sculptors shaping wax image.



15. Wax image being treated with coal to smooth surface.



16. Wax image being treated with coal to smooth surface.



17. Completed wax model encased in several layers of clay.



18. Lead and tin being poured into hollow clay mold.



19. Breaking of clay mold to reveal bronze sculpture.



20. Bronze sculpture before face is smoothed and polished.

List of Selected Works of Art and Photographs

1. *Shiva as Nataraja, Lord of Dance*

Chola period, ca. 1100

Bronze

Dallas Museum of Art; Gift of Mrs. Eugene McDermott, The Hamon Charitable Foundation, and an anonymous donor in honor of David T. Owsley, with additional funding from the Cecil and Ida Green Foundation and the Cecil and Ida Green Acquisition Fund (2000.377)

2. *Saint Karaikkal Ammaiyar, Mother of Karaikkal*

Chola period, ca. 1050

Bronze

14 3/8 in.

The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, Missouri; Purchase: Nelson Trust (33-533)

3. *Alingana Chandrashekhara, Moon-Crowned Shiva Embracing Uma*

Chola period, ca. 1150

Bronze

15 and 8 in.

The Metropolitan Museum of Art; Samuel Eilenberg Collection, Bequest of Samuel Eilenberg, 1998 (2000.284.2)

4. *Somaskanda, Shiva with Uma and Skanda*

Chola period, ca. 1100

Bronze

18 5/8 in.

Collection Doris Wiener, New York

5. *Ganesha*

Chola period, ca. 1070

Bronze

19 3/4 in.

The Cleveland Museum of Art; Gift of Katharine Holden Thayer (1970.62)

6. *Brahma*

Chola period, 11th century

Bronze

15 5/8 in.

Asia Society, New York; The Mr. and Mrs. John D. Rockefeller 3rd Collection (1979.25)

7. *Durga*

Chola period, ca. 970

Bronze

22 1/2 in.

The Brooklyn Museum of Art; Anonymous gift in honor of William H. Wolff (1992.142)

8. *Nandi, Shiva's Bull Mount*

Chola period, ca. 1200; Kongu-Karnataka region

Bronze

20 1/4 in.

Asia Society, New York; The Mr. and Mrs. John D. Rockefeller 3rd Collection (1979.30)

9. *Vishnu*

Chola period, ca. 925; Kongu-nadu

Bronze

13 3/4 in.

Trustees of The British Museum; Brooke Sewell Permanent Fund (1967.12-15.1)

10. *Bhu-Varaha, Vishnu's Avatar as Gigantic Boar, Embracing Goddess Earth*

Chola period, ca. 13th century

Bronze

17 7/8 in.

Victoria & Albert Museum (IM6-1924)

11. Temple chariot for processional bronze images, Kapalishvara Temple, Mylapur, Chennai. Photo Neil Greentree, 1988
12. Rajaraja Chola's temple at Tanjavur. Photo Vidya Dehejia
13. Bronze image of Ganesha, decorated and adorned for a temple procession, Kapalishvara temple, Mylapur, Chennai. Photo Neil Greentree, 2000
14. Sculptors shaping wax image. Photo Neil Greentree, 2000
15. Wax image being treated with coal to smooth surface. Photo Neil Greentree, 2000
16. Wax image being treated with coal to smooth surface. Photo Neil Greentree, 2000
17. Completed wax model encased in several layers of clay. Photo Neil Greentree, 2000
18. Lead and tin being poured into hollow clay mold. Photo Neil Greentree, 2000
19. Breaking of clay mold to reveal bronze sculpture. Photo Neil Greentree, 2000
20. Bronze sculpture before face is smoothed and polished. Photo Neil Greentree, 2000

Information on Selected Works of Art, Discussion Questions, and Activities

1. *Shiva as Nataraja, Lord of Dance*

Chola period, ca. 1100

Bronze

Dallas Museum of Art; Gift of Mrs. Eugene McDermott, The Hamon Charitable Foundation, and an anonymous donor in honor of David T. Owsley, with additional funding from the Cecil and Ida Green Foundation and the Cecil and Ida Green Acquisition Fund (2000.377)

*He dances, a whirl
of motion,
the great lord
bearing fire, crowned
with the crescent and with Ganga,
as his golden anklets chime
and his serpents dance, too.*

Saint Sundarar

First and foremost, Shiva is Nataraja (Lord of Dance), a manifestation of deep cosmic significance that gained prominence during the tenth century and rapidly became an icon for the Chola dynasty. In accordance with India's cyclical concept of time, he destroys the world through his dance of bliss in order to recreate it.

Framed by a flaming *prabha* (aureole), Shiva as Nataraja (Lord of Dance) stands in dramatic splendor on his bent right leg with his left foot raised high across his body. The four-armed divine dancer holds fire signifying cosmic destruction and a *damaru* drum indicating the rhythm of creation in two rear hands, and raises his right front hand in the gesture of protection. He smiles benevolently at his devotees as his right foot rests lightly upon the dwarflike form of Mushalagan (representing darkness), who raises his head to look up at Shiva. The goddess Ganga (personifying the Ganges River), her lower half shown as flowing water, is positioned in Shiva's matted locks, which sway with the movement of his dance.

While Shiva as Nataraja is associated with events of major philosophical importance, he also is visualized as enjoying the pleasures shared by his devotees, such as a festive celebration on the seafront. In the temple at Chidambaram, which was built under Chola rule, an inscription of the minister Naralokaviran (from around the year 1100) describes the Nataraja festival in the month of Maci (February–March). For this celebration the minister built a garden and pavilion along the beach, a fresh water tank for devotees' ritual bathing, and a road down which the procession traveled from the temple to the ocean. This festival, which includes a dip in the ocean for both devotees and the bronze sculpture of Shiva, is still celebrated today in the state of Tamil Nadu.

Discussion Questions

- Have students describe what they see in the sculpture of Shiva as Nataraja.
- Make a list of their observations and compare them.
- Ask students if they have questions about the sculpture. What aspects of it are surprising or unfamiliar?

- What shapes do your students see?
- Discuss the idea of symbols. Ask students to think of examples of symbols in other cultures with which they may be familiar. For example, what are some of the symbols they associate with power? What are some of the symbols they think are included in this sculpture?
- Note Shiva's gestures and posture with your students. Explain what they signify. Ask students why they think artists developed specific gestures and poses that are used over and over again in Indian art.

Activity: Writing a Description

Aim: To articulate observations about a sculpture in writing

Grade Level: Elementary, middle, and high school

Materials: Paper and pencil

Procedure:

- Read Saint Sundarar's poem (reprinted on page 25) to your class.
- Ask students to write either a description in prose or a poem about the rhythm and movement that they see in the sculpture of Shiva as Nataraja.

Activity: Discovering Forms

Aim: To reduce a sculpture to its most basic shapes

Grade Level: Middle and high school

Materials: Paper and pencil

Procedure:

- Project the slide of Shiva as Nataraja.
- Ask your students to sketch the sculpture using only simple geometric shapes.
- Encourage them to use the entire page when drawing and to focus on the primary shapes they see.
- Compare students' drawings and see what they have in common.



1. *Shiva as Nataraja, Lord of Dance*

2. *Saint Karaikkal Ammaiyar, Mother of Karaikkal*

Chola period, ca. 1050

Bronze

The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, Missouri; Purchase: Nelson Trust (33-533)

Punitavati was married to Paramadatta, a trader in the coastal town of Karaikkal, and the couple lived a life of harmony, worshipping Shiva with devotion. One day, Paramadatta sent home two mangoes, requesting that they be served with his lunch; his wife, however, gave one away to a sage who appeared on her doorstep asking for food. At lunchtime, Paramadatta ate the first mango, found it delicious, and asked for the second. Instinctively, Punitavati thought of Shiva and a mango appeared in her hand. Paramadatta realized it was not the one he had sent home and asked her where she got it. Incredulous, he reached out for the mango, but it disappeared. Much perturbed by this demonstration of his wife's powers, Paramadatta left home. When he returned several years later, he fell at Punitavati's feet and proclaimed that all should worship her. Punitavati appealed to Shiva to release her from the burden of her flesh and asked only that she be able to worship his dancing feet forever. A miracle occurred and Punitavati's prayers were answered. In place of the beautiful young Punitavati, there now stood an emaciated ghoul who became known as the Tamil saint, Mother of Karaikkal.

Karaikkal Ammaiyar sang about dancing Shiva, but she invariably visualized him dancing in fearsome surroundings inhabited by jackals, vultures, owls, and gaunt female ghouls much like herself.

*Is the corpse really dead?
A ghoul creeps up
pointing with her finger
she shouts, she wails
she throws at it a burning ember-
In the grip of a terrible fright
she taps loudly her hollow stomach
Several other ghouls
disperse in fear-
There, in the garb of a madman
he dances, our Lord of dance.¹*

Perhaps the bizarre nature of her poetry, revealing her fascination with the incongruous, fearsome, and grotesque, influenced the artist of this bronze portrayal of the emaciated saint. He has given her knobby shoulders, a prominent chin, sharp elbows, fangs in the mouth, fearsomely curved eyebrows, wide open eyes, and prominent vertebrae and ribs. It is almost as if he knew the signature verse of the song quoted above and set out to reproduce the image she conjures up of herself as:

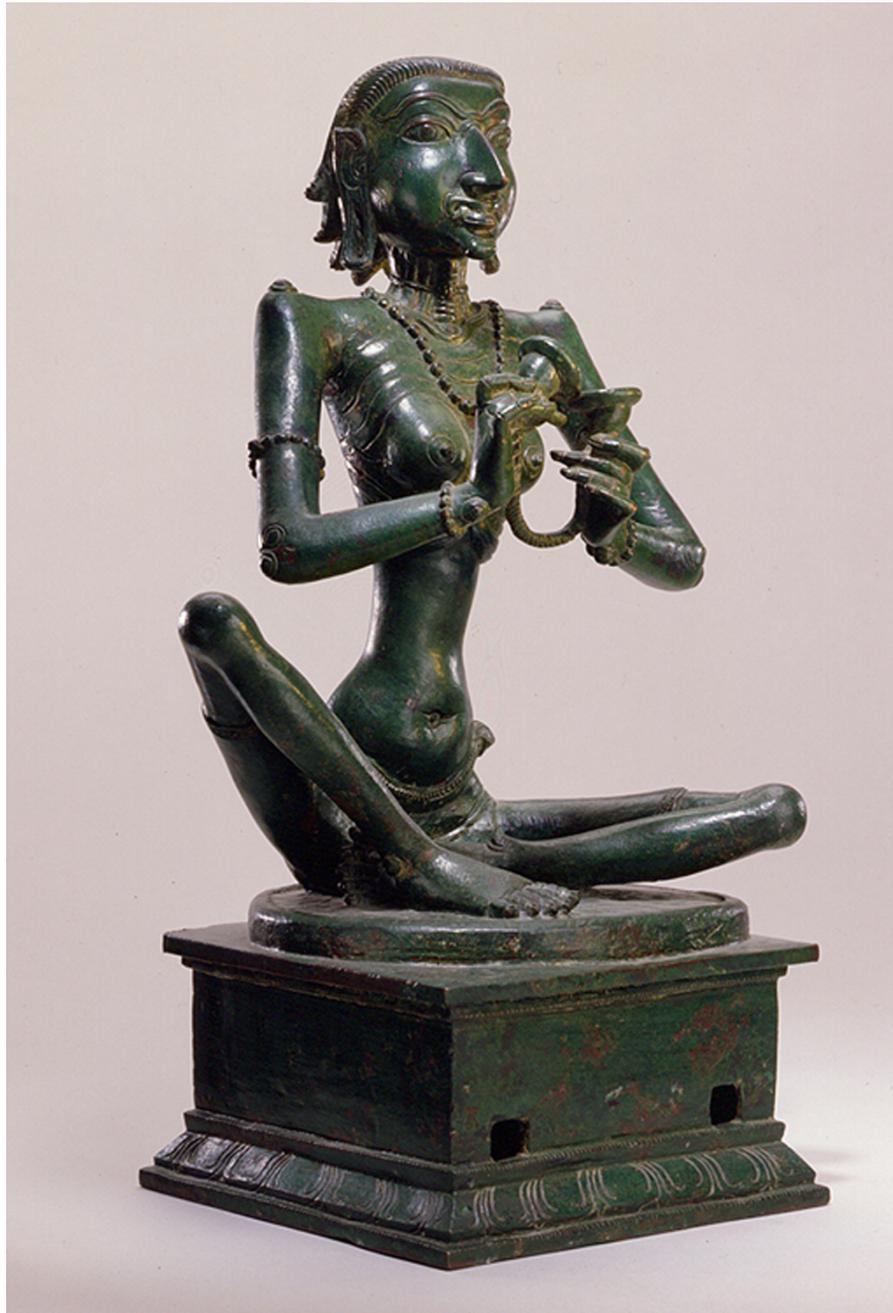
*the ghoul of Karaikkal
who wanders in the forest
with incandescent teeth and mouth²*

Discussion Questions

- Ask each student to think of one word that best describes this figure. Make a list of the words and discuss them with your class.
- Have students to explain why they chose particular words.
- Use these words as a starting point for a deeper discussion of the significance of the sculpture.
- Tell the story of Mother of Karaikkal. Discuss why Punitavati wanted to be transformed from a beautiful woman into a ghoulish figure.

¹ Vidya Dehejia, *Slaves of the Lord, The Path of the Tamil Saints* (Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1988), p. 131; Karaikkal Ammaiyar, "Tiruvallankadu Tirupadikam," v. 4.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 131–32; v. 11.



2. *Saint Karaikkal Ammaiyar, Mother of Karaikkal*

3. *Alingana Chandrashekhara, Moon-Crowned Shiva Embracing Uma*

Chola period, ca. 1150

Bronze

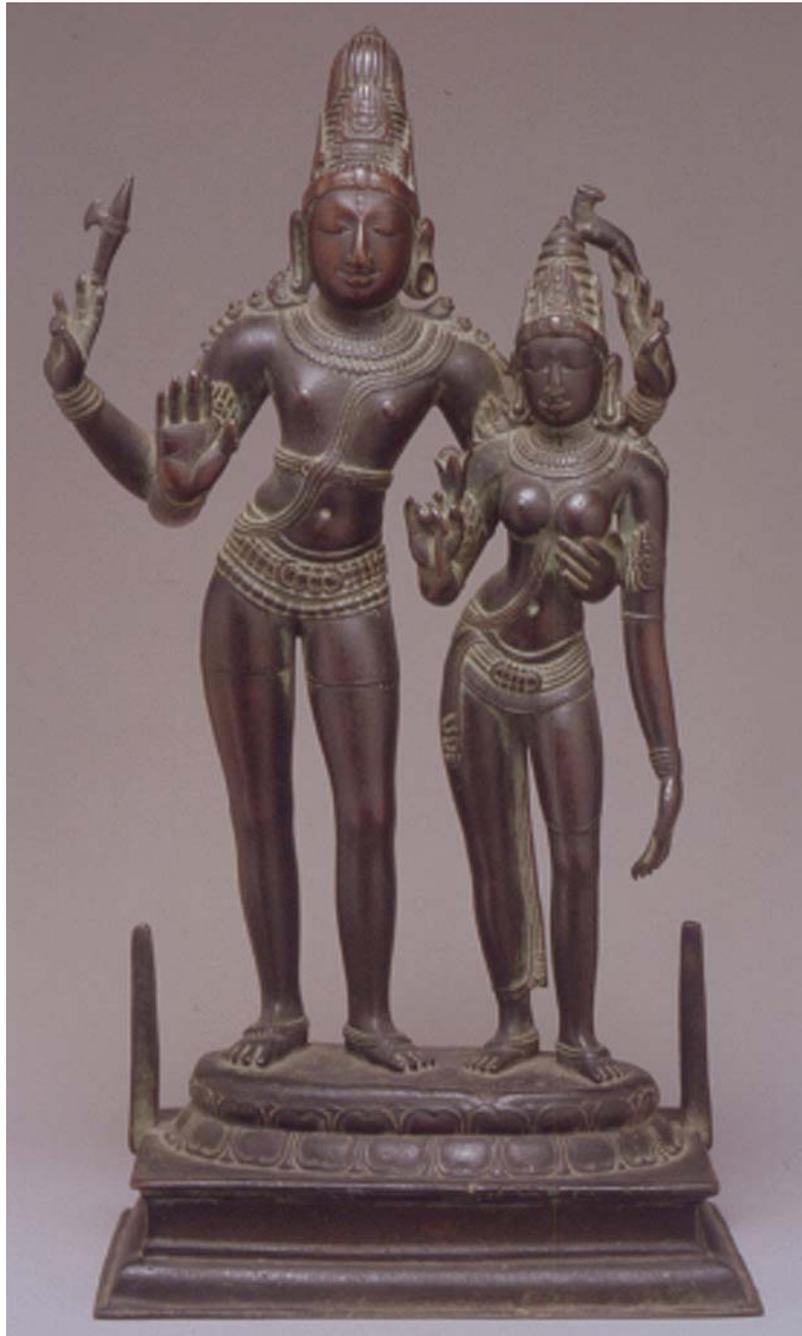
The Metropolitan Museum of Art; Samuel Eilenberg Collection, Bequest of Samuel Eilenberg, 1998 (2000.284.2)

Chandrashekhara, the Lord Crowned with the Moon, is Shiva in his most benign form. He may be portrayed on his own, or accompanied by his consort whom he gently embraces, in which case he is known as *alingana* (embracing) Chandrashekhara.

Cast together to stand upon a single lotus pedestal, with tangs to support a *prabha* (aureole), are the smiling, joyous images of Shiva and Uma as a loving couple, with one of Shiva's hands gently caressing Uma's form. Shiva holds the typical attributes of Chandrashekhara, and Uma holds a lotus in one hand as she stands close to her lord; the interaction between the figures is sensitively and delicately rendered. This juxtaposition of the divine couple is addressed in the temples as Pradoshamurti or Twilight Image. Every evening, prior to the final *pūja* of the day, this twosome group is placed on a litter that is carried on the shoulders of priests and taken in procession, followed by devotees, so that Shiva and his consort may inspect the inner premises of the temple.

Discussion Questions

- Ask students what they think the relationship is between the two figures.
- How has the artist conveyed their closeness as a couple? Discuss how Shiva embraces Uma, how the figures seem to sway in the same direction, and how they both lift their right arms.



3. *Alingana Chandrashekhara, Moon-Crowned Shiva Embracing Uma*

4. *Somaskanda, Shiva with Uma and Skanda*

Chola period, ca. 1100

Bronze

Collection Doris Wiener, New York

According to south Indian philosophy, Shiva bestows grace upon a devotee's soul only when he is in the company of his consort Uma. A sculpture of the god together with Uma and their son Skanda is regarded as the principal vehicle of such individual grace, and every temple possesses such an image. Today the chief festival of a Shiva temple is referred to as the *brahmotsava* (brahma festival). It is believed that Brahma conducts this rite and five sets of images, known as the *panchamurti*, participate. The prime image is that of Somaskanda (Shiva with Uma and Skanda); the other four are Uma, Skanda with his two wives Valli and Devayani, Ganesha, and Saint Chandesha, who is considered the guardian of all Shiva temples. Large numbers of Somaskanda bronzes also exist because many sacred texts state that if a temple does not possess the exact image required for a specific ritual procession, a Somaskanda may be used in its place.

In this bronze, the infant Skanda dances on the seat between his parents, holding lotus buds in both hands. Shiva sits in stately dignity facing the devotee, while gentle Uma watches over Skanda. Shiva holds the battle-ax and deer in two rear hands, while his right front hand makes the gesture of protection, and the left is held gracefully. A serpent peers out from Shiva's tall matted locks, and he is richly adorned with multiple ornaments that include one *makara* (a mythical sea creature representing abundance) and one round earring, several necklaces, a triple-strand sacred thread, armlets, and anklets. Uma is equally richly adorned and while Shiva sits in the posture of ease known as *lalitasana*, with one leg folded and placed on the seat and the other pendant, Uma sits in a variation of this pose with her folded leg raised up at an angle. Little Skanda dances with lotus buds in both hands.

Discussion Questions

- Ask your students to look at the figures and try to describe the relationships between them.
- After discussing who each figure represents, ask your students what they think the artist is trying to communicate about them.
- Compare the *Somaskanda* sculpture with *Alingana Chandrashekhara, Moon-Crowned Shiva Embracing Uma*. What is similar or different about the two works? Note the placement of the figures in relation to one another. Discuss the figures' attributes, poses, and gestures.



4. Somaskanda, Shiva with Uma and Skanda

5. *Ganesha*

Chola period, ca. 1070

Bronze

The Cleveland Museum of Art; Gift of Katharine Holden Thayer (1970.62)

Perhaps the most universally beloved of Hindu gods is Ganesha, elder son of Shiva and Uma, addressed in Tamil Nadu simply as Pillaiyar (revered son [of the divine couple]). The most popular story of Ganesha relates how Uma, lonely in Shiva's absence, created a human son and asked him to guard her door while she bathed. When Shiva returned unexpectedly and demanded entry, the boy refused, unaware of Shiva's identity. Shiva proceeded to cut off his head. When Uma, in despair, explained what had happened, Shiva agreed to replace her son's head with the head of the first living creature that crossed his path. The first creature to appear before him turned out to be an elephant.

The god of new beginnings, Ganesha is worshiped at the start of any undertaking. To this day in India, he is invoked, for example, by students commencing an exam, women starting to make a new batch of sweets, and accountants opening the books for a new year. Ganesha is carried at the head of all festival processions, even before the chief deity of that particular festival; thus every temple possesses at least one Ganesha figure.

This sculpture displays powerful modeling and depicts Ganesha with his characteristic gentle paunch. He holds his typical attributes—the two rear hands hold a battle-ax and a noose or rosary, and the two front hands hold his own tusk (broken in a victorious battle against a mighty demon) and *modaka* (sweets). Ganesha's love of sweets is proverbial, and sculptors frequently indicate this by having his trunk touching the sweets.

Discussion Questions

- Ask students to describe the sculpture.
- Discuss their responses to the composite figure of a human and an elephant.
- Draw attention to Ganesha's particular attributes and discuss what they signify.



5. *Ganesha*

6. *Brahma*

Chola period, 11th century

Bronze

Asia Society, New York; The Mr. and Mrs. John D. Rockefeller 3rd Collection (1979.25)

Impressive in its grounded stability, this sculpture depicts the god Brahma, in typical fashion, with four heads that look in all directions symbolizing the four *Vedas* (the Hindu sacred texts). In his two left hands he holds a manuscript and his signature attribute, the *kamandalu* (water jug). The two right hands hold a ladle and the damaged remnant of a bundle of sacred grass, both objects used in priestly ritual. Together with the fact that sculptures of Brahma were rarely cast on their own, these objects suggest that Brahma, the creator of the universe, is shown here in his role as the divine priest who, according to Hindu mythology, conducted the celebrated marriage of Shiva and Uma.

Brahma's hair is piled elegantly upon his head and adorned with a tiara. He wears elaborate necklaces, a sacred thread composed of pearls, armlets, and a long waist cloth. The eyebrows and eyes on all four faces were much worn through generations of ritual worship; they have been subject to recutting to return the image to its potency as an object of *darshan*.

Brahma is a deity who is featured regularly in one of the three central niches on the exterior sanctum walls of the earliest Chola temples, but who disappears from prominence soon thereafter. Aditya Chola's twin temples at Kilaiyur and his shrine at Srinivasanallur, and his successor Parantaka's temple at Pullamangai, feature standing images of Brahma in this location. When carved in stone to occupy a temple niche, the god is shown with three heads, with the fourth understood to be facing the rear; when cast in bronze, it was possible to depict the fourth head. Bronze images of Brahma are relatively rare and were created primarily to be part of the marriage group of Shiva and Uma. According to one version of the legend of the divine wedding, Brahma served as the officiating priest who performed the actual ceremony; the ritual ladle seen in Brahma's hand in this bronze is appropriate for this function. A fine example of eleventh century bronze-casting, the size of this sculpture suggests a marriage group of substantial proportions.

Discussion Questions

- Ask students to describe this figure. Discuss his pose, gestures, facial expression, and attributes.
- How is this figure adorned?
- Explain that the figure has four heads (evident when seeing the original sculpture, but not in the slide). Why would a figure be depicted this way? Discuss how Brahma sees in all directions.
- Discuss the difference between a naturalistic depiction of a figure and a symbolic one.



6. *Brahma*

7. Durga

Chola period, ca. 970

Bronze

The Brooklyn Museum of Art; Anonymous gift in honor of William H. Wolff (1992.142)

*You once stood on the back of a lion
With red, angry eyes, holding
The conch shell and wheel in your lotus hand.
Now you stand praised by the Vedas...¹*

Great Goddess Uma, the gracious wife and mother, is also Durga (Impassable One), the powerful warrior goddess and destroyer of demons. Durga is invoked as protector, and depictions of her are often placed at the entrance to forts, palaces, and temples. In Tamil Nadu she is also widely perceived as the sister of Vishnu, whose attributes of discus and conch shell she frequently holds, leading to her popular name of Vishnu-Durgai. While images of Durga and shrines dedicated to her are found more often in the context of a Shiva temple, inscriptions on bronzes and temple walls suggest that she is also at home in a Vaishnava (relating to Vishnu) setting.

This exquisite early image of Durga presents a lithe, youthful goddess, whose bodily form is almost adolescent, particularly in rear view. One front hand is raised in the *abhaya* (gesture of protection) while the other rests gracefully against her thigh in *katyavalambita* (a gesture of ease). Her short, patterned lower garment is knotted with bow-like ties on both sides and held in place with a jeweled girdle, while a band of the garment forms a loop below the girdle clasp. Her breasts are softly modeled and naturalistic in profile, with a sacred thread that snakes between them; rich necklaces, armlets, bangles, and anklets complete her adornment. Beneath a tall conical crown, her face is gentle and introspective. She stands on a lotus base placed on a rectangular pedestal with vertical tangs to support a *prabha* (aureole).

Discussion Questions

- Compare this figure of Durga with the following sculptural groups that include depictions of the goddess as Uma: *Somaskanda* and *Alingana Chandrashekhara, Moon-Crowned Shiva Embracing Uma*.
- Ask students to compare the poses of the figures. What do they convey about the goddess? Note Durga's defiant, solid stance.

Activity: Portraying Durga and Uma

Aim: To draw two figures of the goddess as Durga and Uma respectively

Grade Level: Middle and high school

Materials: Paper and pencil

Procedure:

- Have your students compare the figure of Durga, the powerful warrior, with one of the sculptures of Uma, the gracious wife and mother.

- Ask your students to draw two pictures—one of the goddess as Durga and the other of her as Uma. Have them focus on communicating ideas rather than on rendering accurate proportions. Ask your students to focus on the figures' poses, gestures, and facial expressions.



7. Durga

¹ Quote from *Shilappadikaram*, an ancient text from around 450. See Vidya Dehejia, *The Sensuous and the Sacred: Chola Bronzes from South India* (The American Federation of Arts in association with the University of Washington Press, Seattle and London, 2002), p. 134.

8. *Nandi, Shiva's Bull Mount*

Chola period, ca. 1200; Kongu-Karnataka region

Bronze

Asia Society, New York; The Mr. and Mrs. John D. Rockefeller 3rd Collection (1979.30)

Shiva is also known as Vrishabhavana (Rider of the Bull). Every Shiva temple contains a shrine for a stone image of his bull Nandi (joyous one) directly in front of the sanctum, so that the bull may face his master. In this portable sculpture, Nandi licks the tip of his nose, has the distinctive hump of an Indian bull, and is lavishly adorned with jewelry befitting his stature.

Bronze images of Nandi are not common and seem, in general, to have been placed beside the stone bull in the temple sanctum rather than taken out for festival processions. However, the holes in the rectangular base of this image indicate that it was indeed a processional image that accompanied a festival image of Shiva.

Discussion Questions

- Ask your students how the artist has depicted the bull Nandi.
- Ask your students to describe how he is adorned.
- Have them find other images of animals in Chola bronzes and discuss their significance.



8. *Nandi, Shiva's Bull Mount*

9. *Vishnu*

Chola period, ca. 925; Kongu-nadu

Bronze

Trustees of The British Museum; Brooke Sewell Permanent Fund (1967.12-15.1)

This impressive, dignified, and rare seated image of Vishnu from Kongu-nadu has exaggeratedly wide shoulders and the exceedingly narrow torso characteristic of sculptures from the western region of Tamil Nadu. Vishnu sits in the position of royal ease, one front hand lowered in the gesture of wish-granting, the other resting upon his folded knee. The manner in which the drapery of his lower garment is arranged to hang over the throne is quite unusual; the fabric is normally tucked away rather than displayed.

Discussion Questions

- Ask students to discuss Vishnu's pose.
- Have students find lines and shapes that are repeated in the sculpture.
- Ask them to notice which parts of the figure's anatomy are exaggerated.
- What does this figure communicate to the viewer?



9. *Vishnu*

10. *Bhu-Varaha, Vishnu's Avatar as Gigantic Boar, Embracing Goddess Earth*

Chola period, ca. 13th century

Bronze

Victoria & Albert Museum (IM6–1924)

*Like a blue mountain that clutches
And lifts up two crescent moons,
My father, you, as a resplendent boar,
Raised your tusks, carrying Earth.
O you who churned the deep blue sea!
I have obtained you,
Would I now let you go?
Saint Nammalvar*

Bronzes of Bhu-Varaha, in which Vishnu takes form as the gigantic boar who dived into the depths of the cosmic ocean to rescue the earth from drowning, became popular in rituals during the late Chola period.

This image of the late thirteenth century portrays the giant boar seated on a lotus seat in the *lalitasana* posture of royal ease, with one leg folded and the other pendant to rest upon the hood of a five-headed cobra. Bhu devi—a personification of the earth—wearing a breastband, sits somewhat formally on his folded knee with her palms joined in adoration. Varaha holds the discus and conch in two rear hands, while his two front arms gently enfold the seated goddess. Crowned Varaha's *shrivatsa* attribute is rendered as a triangle against his upper right shoulder, and he wears a triple-strand sacred thread. Noteworthy is the elaborate treatment of the hair above the ears and along the shoulders. The garments of both figures are decorated with a series of dots suggestive of the tie-and-dye *shungudi* fabric typical of the Madurai region. The bronze composition carries hints of the sharpness and precision that were to become standard in images of the post-Chola period.

Discussion Questions

- Ask students to describe this sculpture. What animals do they see?
- Draw their attention to the personification of the earth as Bhu devi. Discuss the definition of a personification and why an artist would choose to personify a concept or object.
- Find other Chola sculptures in this resource or in other sources that include depictions of animals. What do animals signify in these works?
- Compare Bhu-Varaha with the sculpture of Vishnu. Discuss the differences in how Vishnu is portrayed as himself and as his avatar as Gigantic Boar.



10. *Bhu-Varaha, Vishnu's Avatar as Gigantic Boar, Embracing Goddess Earth*

Additional Activities

Introductory Activity: Describing a Sculpture

Aim: To articulate responses to a sculpture in writing and through drawing

Grade Level: Middle and high school

Materials: Paper and pencils

Procedure:

- Divide students into two groups.
- Pair students up so that each student in Group A has a partner in Group B.
- Have the students in group B turn their backs to the screen.
- Project the slide of one of the sculptures so that only Group A sees it.
- Ask students in Group A to describe the sculpture to their partners.
- Have each partner in Group B draw the sculpture based on that description.
- Encourage students to describe shapes and patterns rather than identify the objects depicted.
- Repeat the activity with another slide, asking students in Group B to describe the sculpture.
- At the end of the activity compare students' drawings to see what each has emphasized.

Introductory Activity: Discovering Form

Aim: To discover shapes and lines in sculptures

Grade Level: Elementary, middle, and high school

Materials: Paper and pencil

Procedure:

- Show students a slide of one of the sculptures.
- Ask them to fold a sheet of paper into four sections.
- Ask them to find and then draw in the first box ten lines and four shapes that they think are the most important in the compositional structure of the sculpture.
- In the second box, have them reduce the number of lines to six and the shapes to three. In the third box, ask them to draw four of the lines and two of the shapes, and in the last box to reduce the drawing to two lines and one shape.
- Repeat the entire process with a second sculpture.
- Compare the drawings students made of the first sculpture with those they completed of the second.
- Discuss how the two sets of drawings are similar or different.
- Ask students to describe the composition of each sculpture based on what they observed while drawing.

Concluding Activity: Gestures and Poses

Aim: To identify gestures and understand what they signify

Grade Level: Elementary, middle, and high school

Materials: Paper and pencil

Procedure:

- Ask students to make a list of the various gestures and poses of the sculptures in this resource.

- Ask them if they can discern the significance of each gesture or pose just by looking.
- Discuss students' observations and then explain the meaning of the individual gestures.

Concluding Activity: Understanding the Theme of Power

Aim: To explain the meaning of power and to understand how Chola sculptors convey power in their works of art

Grade Level: Middle and high school

Materials: Pencil and paper

Procedure:

- After looking at and discussing the Chola bronze sculptures included in this resource, ask students to make a list of the various ways artists communicated the power of the deities.
- As they view each slide, ask students to jot down the gestures, attributes, poses, and decorations that indicate each figure's power.

Glossary of Terms

abhaya mudra: hand gesture of protection

alingana: embracing

alvar: the twelve saints devoted to Vishnu are known as the *alvars* (deep divers into the divine)

avatar: descent; incarnation of a deity on earth, especially of Vishnu

Bhagavad Gita: Hindu religious text that emphasizes selfless service and devotion

Brahma: Hindu god of creation who is included in the Hindu triad with Shiva and Vishnu. He is typically depicted with four heads, one to look in each direction.

Brahmin: people of the highest caste in the Indian caste system

darshan: ritual seeing of the enshrined temple deity that involves a dynamic act of awareness

damaru: small double drum shaped like an hourglass

Devi: A widely used name for the multiple forms of the Hindu goddess who, with Shiva and Vishnu, is one of the three most widely worshipped deities in south Asia

Durga: meaning "Impassable One"; the great goddess

Ganesha: elephant-headed god; elder son of Shiva and Uma; remover of obstacles

Ganga: the Ganga River (Ganges) personified as a goddess

Kali: the fierce protector; the black one; name of the great goddess in her fearsome aspect

kamandalu: ritual water jug

katyavalambita: elegant gesture in which hand rests against hip

Krishna: one of Vishnu's avatars in his life on earth

kusha: sacred grass

Lakshmi: goddess of wealth and good fortune who is the consort of Vishnu

lalitasana: seated position of royal ease with one leg pendant and other bent at knee

linga: meaning "sign;" an iconic, pillarlike form of Shiva

makara: mythical crocodile-like creature representing abundance

mantra: a prayer or verbal chant, the sound of which is more important than its meaning

modaka: rounded sweet adored by Ganesha

Nandi: bull ridden by Shiva

Nataraja: Lord of Dance

palanquin: a covered litter or chair carried on poles

prabha: aureole

puja: ritual worship of a deity

sacred thread: a long thread worn by the upper castes and deities as a sign of learning

shrivatsa: a triangular or rhomboid mark worn by Vishnu on the right side of his chest

Tamil Nadu: Nestled in the southeastern part of the Indian peninsula on the shores of the Bay of Bengal and the Indian Ocean, the state of Tamil Nadu is the southern-most state of India. Although it was declared a state about forty-five years ago, the history of Tamil Nadu dates back to the Paleolithic Age. The capital of Tamil Nadu is Chennai, a cosmopolitan port city.

tribhanga: meaning "three bends;" an exaggerated contrapposto

Further Resources

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Museum Resources

The following resources contain information on Indian art and culture, lesson plans, and bibliographies for teachers and students, and are available to teachers from each museum's education department.

Recommended Resources for Teaching about India. New York: The Asia Society.

Benskin, Elizabeth and Carson Herrington. *The Art of Buddhism: A Teacher's Guide*. Washington, D.C.: Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, 2001.

Kane, Karen. *Meeting God: Elements of Hindu Devotion*. New York: American Museum of Natural History, 2001. Also available online at http://www.amnh.org/exhibitions/meeting_god/index.html.

Kossak, Steven M. and Edith W. Watts. *The Art of South and Southeast Asia*. The Metropolitan Museum of Art. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2001. Also available online at <http://www.metmuseum.org/explore/publications/asia.htm>.

Recommended Web Resources

<http://www.asia.si.edu/devi/index.htm>

An online component developed in conjunction with the exhibition *Devi: The Great Goddess* held at the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery.

<http://www.asia.si.edu/pujaonline/puja/start.htm>

An online component developed in conjunction with the exhibition *Puja: Expressions of Hindu Devotion* held at the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery.

<http://www.si.edu/resource/faq/freersac/indiaart.htm>

Smithsonian Institution's recommended reading list.

<http://www.metmuseum.org/explore/publications/asia.htm>

The Metropolitan Museum of Art's teacher packet on the art of south and southeast Asia.

<http://www.askasia.org/teachers/index.htm>

AskAsia is part of the Asia Society and Museum's Asian Education Resource Center.

http://www.amnh.org/exhibitions/meeting_god/index.html

The American Museum of Natural History's on-line exploration of the exhibition *Meeting God: Elements of Hindu Devotion*.

<http://www.asianart.org/programs.htm#resource>

Resources for teachers developed by the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco.

Additional Web Resources

<http://www.encyclopedia.com/html/C/Chola.asp>

<http://carlos.emory.edu/COLLECTION/ASIA/asia06.html>

<http://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/southasia/Culture/Archit/SIArch.html>

<http://www.culturopedia.com/Architecture/cholabronzes.html>

<http://www.history.upenn.edu/hist085/CholaArt.html>

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