

**ASIA SOCIETY PRESENTS RARE ASSEMBLAGE OF SOME OF THE FINEST
EXAMPLES OF INDIAN BRONZE SCULPTURES**

DEVOTION IN SOUTH INDIA: CHOLA BRONZES

October 6, 2009 through February 7, 2010



Asia Society presents *Devotion in South India: Chola Bronzes*, a rare assemblage of exquisite bronze sculptures in the first New York museum exhibition to focus on Chola bronzes in decades. Representing the pinnacle of bronze casting in India, these sculptures became widely prevalent from the ninth through thirteenth century under the imperial rule of the Chola dynasty in the Tamil-speaking region of southern India.

According to Asia Society Museum Director Melissa Chiu, “This exhibition is a rare opportunity to see some of the best examples of Chola bronzes outside of India. While most presentations of bronzes from this era focus on their aesthetic qualities—their graceful poses and refined modeling—this exhibition focuses on the use and adornment of these sculptures in a devotional tradition that continues today.” Adds exhibition cocurator Adriana Proser, “This exhibition is a rare opportunity to appreciate some of the world’s finest Indian bronze sculptures in a devotional and historical context.”

For many, South Indian Chola bronzes represent technical perfection; they also reveal a sophisticated relationship between the spiritual and the sensual. The exhibition examines the Chola bronzes in relation to the Hindu tradition of *bhakti* (devotion), which emphasizes intense and intimate worship of a personal god. While *bhakti* takes different regional forms throughout India, the earliest *bhakti* movements arose in the southern region of the Indian subcontinent. The ruling Chola elites, most of whom were devotees of Shiva, drew upon this popular piety in their patronage of temple bronzes, partly to legitimize their dynastic power and social prestige.

Devotion in South India: Chola Bronzes is cocurated by Adriana Proser, John H. Foster Curator for Traditional Asian Art, Asia Society, and Jacqueline Ganem, Asia Society Museum Getty Fellow.

Exhibition organization

The exhibition is organized around the principle of devotional use. The function of the sacred bronzes in *bhakti* involves a number of important ritual concepts, including, in Sanskrit: *utsavas* (festivals), *puja* (worship), *darshana* (seeing [god]), *abhisheka* (anointment), *alamkara* (embellishment), and *avatara* (divine descent). Exhibition objects are organized by religious concept, rather than chronology or iconography, reflecting the principal ideas and sculptural groupings found at south Indian temple sites. Sculptures are displayed along with photographs of similar bronzes in procession and worship in present-day Tamil Nadu; this interplay of image and processional rites was an important aspect of faith in Chola society, as well as in the lives of Hindus today.



About Chola bronzes devotional use

During the Chola period, entry into sacred spaces of the temple compound was often dependent on social status. During festivals, however, deities were paraded inside and outside the temple complex for the public to see. In rituals that continue to this day, the deities appear as living beings, elaborately dressed in silks, jewels, crowns, and flower garlands, which largely obscure their metal surfaces. In preparation for their public appearances, the deities are ritually undressed, bathed, and then dressed again. The dressing ritual (during which photography is not permitted) is known as *alamkara*, which serves to embellish the deity with grace, beauty, and the necessary decoration to prepare it for *darshana* (the worshiping rite of seeing and being seen by the deity). The selection of photographs, taken between 1987 and 2008, provides a sense of how devotees worship the gods through processional bronzes today.

Like the bronzes themselves, the articles of costume are commissioned as acts of religious devotion. Jewelry and weaponry suggest regal affiliations and often include crowns, bracelets, armbands, necklaces, breastplates, rings, and earrings—typically inlaid with gold, silver, or precious stones. A *prabha*, or aureole, customarily frames the deity and fits over the vertical prongs on the base, evident in numerous Chola bronzes in the exhibition.

During non-festival times, the processional bronzes of a Shaiva temple are typically placed in a *mandapa*, a pillared hall adjacent to the sanctum, where they may be visited by worshippers. They are often displayed with little ornamentation, in contrast to their elaborate appearance during festival events.

Background on the Chola bronzes on view in this exhibition

Long known to specialists and enthusiasts of Asian art throughout the world, the Mr. and Mrs. John D. Rockefeller 3rd Collection forms the basis of the Asia Society's permanent collection of traditional art. The collection is noted for its masterpiece quality works, including its exquisite collection of Chola bronzes. Comprising nearly 30 works, this

exhibition brings together for the first time the Society's full collection of Chola bronzes together with selected sculptures chosen from significant private collections, representing one of the largest and best collections outside of India.

Related programs and credits

In conjunction with the exhibition, art historian and curator Vidya Dehejia, who holds the Barbara Stoler Miller Chair in Indian Art at Columbia University, will give a lecture titled "Beauty and the Body of God: Chola Bronzes in South India," considering the connection between the sensuous and the sacred in Chola bronzes, for Asia Society members, October 5, 2009 at 6:00 p.m.

Exhibitions also on view

Also on view from September 10, 2009 through January 3, 2010 is the exhibition *Hanging Fire: Contemporary Art from Pakistan*. This exhibition of works by an emerging generation of artists in Pakistan highlights the diversity of art practiced in contemporary Pakistani society. Amid economic, political, and social tensions, artists these artists create powerful works across a fascinating range of media and subjects. Acclaimed artist and scholar Salima Hashmi is guest curator of the exhibition, which includes innovative works of installation art, photography, painting, and sculpture. The exhibition is accompanied by a full-color, 160-page publication.

Asia Society Museum

Asia Society Museum presents groundbreaking exhibitions and artworks, many previously unseen in North America. Through exhibitions and related public programs, Asia Society provides a forum for the issues and viewpoints reflected in both traditional and contemporary Asian art. For more information, visit www.AsiaSociety.org.

Asia Society Museum is located at 725 Park Avenue (at 70th Street), New York City. The Museum is open Tuesday through Sunday from 11:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. and Friday from 11:00 a.m. to 9:00 p.m. Closed on Mondays and major holidays. General admission is \$10, seniors \$7, students \$5 and free for members and persons under 16. Free admission Friday evenings, 6:00 to 9:00 p.m.

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Image captions

Page 1 left to right:

-Saint Sambandar. Chola period, 12th century. Copper alloy. Asia Society, New York: Mr. and Mrs. John D. Rockefeller 3rd Collection, 1979.24

-Shiva as Nataraja (Lord of Dance). Chola period, ca. 970. Copper alloy. Asia Society, New York: Mr. and Mrs. John D. Rockefeller 3rd Collection, 1979.20

-Saint Appar. Chola period, 13th century. Copper alloy. Courtesy of Pacific Straits Ventures

Page 2 photo caption:

-Processional image, likely Appar, during the Brahmotsava Festival at the Kapalishvara Temple, Mylapore, Chennai. Photo by Dick Waghorne, March 2008