

# The Dance of Shiva : Art and Metaphors in South Asia

---

JANE DURAN

The Dance of Shiva- the cosmic dance of life and death – is a focal point of much of the bronzework of the South India, and also a crux of much of the mythology of the region, particularly as that mythology has been translated and packaged for the Western world.<sup>1</sup> Heinrich Zimmer, Joseph Campbell and others have focused on this icon of Hindu worship as a point of intersection for influences that we associate with life, death, and rebirth. The bronzework of South India was impressive enough to the British colonizers that it attracted immediate notice, and it has traditionally received the interest of art historians, even those historians who might be inclined to be dismissive of some other Asian work. Part of what has proven to be particularly attractive about the Dancing Shiva image is the fluidity of the movement as captured in bronze, in concert with the mythography behind the work. Rowland notes:

The most famous and dramatic of the images of the South Indian school are those of Nataraja, or Siva as Lord of the Dance. To the Dravidian imagination, Siva's dance, the *Nadanta*, is the personification of all the forces and powers of the cosmic system in operation, the movement of energy within the universe. In him they have their dayspring and in him their death.... Siva's dance personifies his universe in action and destruction. This is his dance in the last night of the world when the stars fall from their courses and all is reduced to ashes, to be ever rekindled, ever renewed by the boundless power of the lord.<sup>2</sup>

In our attempt to apply European concepts pertaining to the aesthetic to the art of non-European cultures, we frequently find ourselves essaying to work with notions such as form and expression, and then making the relevant Procrustean moves in an effort to place the objects in the requisite categories. But the complex symbolic background of many of the pieces Europeans have encountered in Asian, African and Native American cultures virtually demands that some note be taken of their associations and overall cultural provenance. This is perhaps scarcely more true than in Hindu India, where the everyday life of the inhabitants is a navigation of the symbolic in action. In this paper I plan to

examine the use of certain European concepts with respect, in particular, to the South Indian Shiva bronzes, and I will argue also for a view of these objects that is underwritten more straightforwardly by mythological and symbolic associations.

## I

Many of those who have attempted to apply aesthetic concepts to non-European art have been entranced by theories of form similar to those originally espoused by Roger Fry and Clive Bell. Indeed, even Fry seemed to be inclined to admit that African art, for example, displayed a noteworthy use of form, and the Harlem Renaissance commentator Alain Locke was intrigued enough by Fry's assertions on this score that he attempted to apply them in the development of an African American aesthetic.<sup>3</sup> Such has also been the case with the art of India: accounts of it in terms of Western aesthetic theories almost invariably deal with the notion of form and its relationship to the plasticity of Indian sculpture and iconography. Interestingly, some of the commentary on Indian rock carving, in particular, seems to mirror this excision from Bell's original work:

As a rule, primitive art is good—and here again my hypothesis is helpful—for, as a rule, it is also free from descriptive qualities.... [Y]ou will only find significant form.... Primitives produce art because they must; they have no other motive than a passionate desire to express their sense of form.<sup>4</sup>

The rock carvings at Mahabalipuram, then, were noteworthy to the original British commentators not because they had any pronounced interest in the tale of the descent of the Ganges (the theme of the relief carvings), but because the plasticity in the carvings—the details in the serpent's tail, or the sinewy cast of the elephant's trunk—revealed, as Rowland notes, an "...unrestrained [flow] over the entire available surface of the boulder."<sup>5</sup>

Now the remarks of most of those familiar with the Dance of Shiva bronzes from the Chola culture of South India are similar in nature. We are told that the "arrangement" and "torsion" of the figures achieve an effect somewhat akin to that of Mannerist work;<sup>6</sup> again Rowland goes so far as to say that "In their canon of absolute...beauty...[these images achieve] almost mathematical purity and clarity of form..."<sup>7</sup> But there is a great deal more to be said about these images and the conceptual background that informs them than can be hinted at in a comparison with European Mannerism. To be fair, this aspect is certainly not ignored in most of the literature. Commentators such as Coomaraswamy, who possess a greater degree of personal familiarity with the relevant background, feel free to expand at length on the symbolism involved.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, the attempt to intrude European notions of form into this essentially Asian space demands still further clarification and exemplification.

## II

In a piece called “ ‘Primitive Fakes’, ‘Tourist Art’, and the Ideology of Authenticity” , Larry Shiner has recently delineated an interesting conundrum for those concerned with the art of the Third World. It appears that what is deemed to be “authentic” Third World art is, in many cases, not something done with free intention and with the motivation of expression; on the contrary, what is often deemed authentic in such a context is something done under conditions more reminiscent of Collingwood’s notion of the production of craft.<sup>9</sup> Yet however closely pieces of, for example, African art resemble works that might in the West be dubbed instances of craft, the fact that they were composed for a specific act or ritual almost seems to count in their favor for purposes of aesthetic categorization of artwork when their provenance is taken into consideration. Here is Shiner on this problem:

What dealers, collectors, and art historians call ‘authentic’ Primitive or Traditional Art is a piece 1) made by a member of a small-scale society, 2) in the society’s traditional style, and 3) intended for a traditional social or religious function. In African Art galleries in the U.S., for example, one sometimes finds penciled onto the price tag of a mask not only a designation of tribe and function but also the phrase, ‘has been danced’. The pieces deemed ‘inauthentic’ Primitive Art and therefore demoted to the status of fakes or tourist art are those made in a traditional style but intended to be sold on the world art market.<sup>10</sup>

Much of Shiner’s commentary is intended to apply ~~either to African or Native American art~~, but the focus of the commentary can be taken as applicable to the art of India as well. In other words, the art of India has the following in common with, again, the art of Africa: much of what was originally done had some sort of purpose not necessarily ritualistic, but perhaps to manifest a religious spirit, pay homage to a particular deity or demiurge, act in spirit with aspects of the atman, and so forth. This does not necessarily mean that the art cannot be categorized in any other way, but what it does mean is that to fail to take into account some of these purposes or goals is to miss the point of what was originally undertaken. In this respect, Shiner’s note that many pieces of “authentic” African art possess the tag “has been danced” (although Shiner will later find this somewhat paradox-producing) is revelatory: perhaps we should think of pieces of the art of India as bearing the inscription “has been meditated.”

## III

The tendency of commentators to try to categorize the Dancing Shiva, or Shiva Nataraja bronzes along the lines of European or even Renaissance rubrics is pronounced and remarkable. This is not to say, as I indicated at an earlier point, that such categorization

is senseless: rather, however accurate it may be in its details, it begs the question with regard to the original purpose of the work and the larger issue of what that purpose says about cultural determinants as a whole. Whereas commentators such as Zimmer, whose goals are mythographical rather than art historical, understandably see the works of art as a part of a larger whole (a whole which Zimmer, for one, is well able to articulate) art historians such as Rowland frequently cast the Dancing Shivas in terms that refer to concepts of European art. Rowland notes, for example, that "The sense of violent and yet effortless movement is conveyed by the *contrapposto* of the figure and by the coordinated rhythm of the left leg and arm."<sup>11</sup> With regard to another such figure, he asserts that it has something of "the effect of the figura *serpentinata*" of the late Italian Renaissance.<sup>12</sup> Although Coomaraswamy says of the Shiva Nataraja ;

No doubt the root idea behind all of these dances is more or less one and the same, the manifestation of primal rhythmic energy.<sup>13</sup>

Rowland wants to speak of "torsion". It is not, of course, that there is no merit to what Rowland says about these images: some elements of European theory, such as the formalist theories of the earlier part of this century, may find rich and fruitful sources of exemplification in the art of South Asia. Rather, the point is that there is much more to the image of the Dancing Shiva, and it requires an elucidation of the symbolic and mythological background in order for a solid case about the worth of these pieces to be made.

Part of the conceptual difficulty with the type of rubric employed by Rowland above is that it carries the implication, as indicated earlier in the set of paradoxes unraveled by Shiner, that the artist or craftsman had something like a Eurocentric concept of art and art activity in mind when he or she (almost certainly "he") set out originally to create the piece. But all of our experience indicates that this is not the case. Just as a Dogon mask or Yoruba image is almost certainly constructed (particularly in the pre-European contact culture) with ritual in mind—and not, as we might want to have it, with expression in mind—the Shaivite or Shiva devotee cannot primarily have been moved by such expressionist considerations in the creation of a Chola bronze. To suggest that fluidity, balance, and the achievement of *contrapposto* figured in the creation of the piece is almost certainly to err, however helpful such notions may be in our attempts to be specific about what it is that renders the pieces visually compelling. But this is precisely what Rowland conveys with his use of the phrase "...afforded the craftsman greater freedom to express".<sup>14</sup> Nor is Rowland the only critic to indulge in such language; similar wording is found in Bussagli and Sivaramamurti and in Kramrisch.<sup>15</sup>

I have written in another place of the tendency to see stylistic differences where few or none may exist<sup>16</sup>—this tendency is paralleled by our intuitive desire to see something like European artistic motive where little or none may exist. But the conundrum uncovered by attempting to look at the Shiva Nataraja's in this fashion is catalytic, I claim, with respect to our greater understanding of such pieces.

#### IV

That the import of the Shiva's is largely one of iconographic stylization is more obvious when one compares the standard regalia of the Shiva, its strength in the Hindu mythological system, and the types of signals that allow one to distinguish Shaivite sculpture from, say, Vaishnavite or other sculpture.

It is not only that the point of the energy contained in the Shiva Nataraja is to produce the notion of the cosmic dance, but most of the other paraphernalia of the Shiva must be present in the average figure in order for us to be able to ascertain that it is indeed Shiva: the trident, the crescent moon, and, in some instances, the half of the goddess Parvati (where Shiva is depicted as a two-halved figure). If the concept is devotion, the craftsman or artist can invoke this devout attitude almost immediately with the use of one or more of the above accoutrements. Rowland is, in fact, on firmer ground here when he writes (of the Descent of the Ganges relief at Mahabalipuram):

The greatest achievement of the Pallava sculptors was the carving of an enormous granite boulder on the seashore with a representation of the Descent of the Ganges [from the head of Shiva] from the Himalayas... We have here a perfect illustration of the dualism persistent in Indian art between an intensive naturalism and the conception of divine forms according to the principles of an appropriately abstract canon of proportions.<sup>17</sup>

Here we can assert that Rowland is implicitly admitting that the driving motive is something more along the lines of religious attitude, and that use of principle of "an appropriately abstract canon of proportions" is in fact secondary. The odd thing about so many of the images of gods and goddesses in Indian art is that they remind us, in some ways, of the concept of the *mandala*. This abstract design triggers the concept of the cosmos because it mirrors the cosmos in a vague sense of representation and also, presumably, because of its ubiquitousness in religious contexts.<sup>18</sup> The same is true of the Shiva figures. Iconicity and mythology are paramount here, and are the conceptual apparatus around which everything else revolves.

One can hypothesize, then, that there are multiple contexts in the greater Hindu society in which bare recognition of a Shiva figure affords the possibility of devotion for

the Shaivite, and that this conventionalization can be taken to an extreme—one can imagine, for example, mass-produced figures distinguishable only because of one or more “signs” (as indicated above) that distinguish one devotional figure from another. (Brahma, for example, is not a popular figure of worship, but is conventionally portrayed with four faces—thus any four-faced figure is Brahma.). With respect to the Dancing Shiva figures, there is, to be sure, a larger aspect at work here, one upon which we have already touched. But the greater point is that conventionality, iconicity and mythology merge to provide a take on Shiva-as-divinity that allows the craftsman comparatively little room in which to maneuver. This line of argument, while underscoring again the importance of the religious element in the construction of such a figure, also militates against the use of European notions of Renaissance workmanship as being appropriate modes of analysis for the Chola figures.

As I have argued in another place,<sup>19</sup> one might be inclined to think that the philosophical problem of representationality in artworks would be most apparent for mythological figures, since there is no genuine referent against which the alleged representation can be measured. But paradoxically, the problem of representation is not nearly as difficult for a symbolized figure such as Shiva as it is, for example, for an historical figure such as Akhenaton about whom we know comparatively little, and where stylization—at least originally—counts almost for nothing.

So the story with regard to the Chola bronzes is primarily one of iconicity and devotion, and only secondarily one of craftsmanship. And even if we may conclude that it is indeed craftsmanship that can be given an account of in terms of the European constructs adduced by some of the commentators, the fact that we can guess that “expression” counted for comparatively little in the making of these bronzes ought indeed to make us wary of employing this terminology on a regular basis.

The Shiva figures do indeed, in one sense, represent the height of a certain sort of craftsmanship, and we can speak of that craftsmanship in terms of *contrapposto* if we so choose. But if we do make that choice, we have lost touch with what drove the artist or craftsman to create the bronzes in the first place. We can hypothesize this motivation as based on a worldview significantly different from ours, a view in which the metaphorical import of the bronzes is more striking than anything that might be said about their proportion.

Perhaps, in fact, all of these notions—Eurocentric art historical concepts and mythographical ones—are related in ways that have not yet been fully articulated. When Rowland calls the boulders of Mahabalipuram “the greatest achievement of the Pallava sculptors”<sup>20</sup> may be he is really trying to get at something close to what I assert here—the

force of the work is the fusion of the symbolic and the craft. Just as the boulders tell us about an “intensive naturalism” and “the conception of divine forms”<sup>21</sup>, the bronzes tell us something about energy. That they do so in a way that is striking both to viewers from South Asia and viewers from Europe attests to their power, even if that power does not derive from the concept of artistic expression in a way that would make us feel either familiar or comfortable.

### Notes and References

1. Zimmer, Heinrich. *Myths and Symbols in Indian Art and Civilization*, New York: Pantheon, 1963.
2. Rowland, Benjamin. *The Art and Architecture of India*, Baltimore, MD: Penguin Books, 1967, p. 199.
3. Locke, Alain. “The Legacy of the Ancestral Arts”, *The New Negro*, New York: Macmillan, 1992.
4. Bell, Clive. *Art*, New York: Frederick Stokes & Co., 1913, pp. 22-23, 39.
5. Rowland. in *op. cit.*, pp. 183-184.
6. Rowland. in *op. cit.*, p. 199.
7. *Ibid.*
8. Coomaraswamy, Ananda K.. *The Dance of Shiva*, New York: Noonday Press, 1957.
9. Collingwood, R.G.. *The Principles of Art*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972.
10. Shiner, Larry. “ ‘Primitive Fakes’ , ‘Tourist Art’ and the Ideology of Authenticity”, in *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 52, No. 2, Spring 1994, p. 226.
11. Rowland. in *op. cit.*, p. 192.
12. *Ibid.* p. 199.
13. Coomaraswamy, in *op. cit.*, p. 66.
14. Rowland. in *op. Cit.*, p. 192.
15. See Bussagli, Mario and Shivaramamurti, Calembus, *5000 Years of the Art of India*, New York: Harry Abrams, 1972. Although Stella Kramrisch Makes similar comments in her *The Art of India*, see also Kramrisch, *The Presence of Shiva*, Princeton: Princeton University press, 1982.
16. See “Aesthetic Discrimination”, in *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, Spring 1992.
17. Rowland. in *op. cit.*, pp. 183-184.
18. For an interesting discussion of the importance of the mandala in the culture of India, see Khanna, Madhu, *Yantra*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1979.

19. See "The Art of Amarna and the Art of India: a Study in Representation", in the *Journal of Comparative Literature and Aesthetics*, Orissa, India, 1992.
20. Rowland. in *op. cit.*, pp. 183-184.
21. *Ibid*

University of California  
Santa Barbara  
California  
U.S.A.