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# Introduction

## Chola Bronzes and the Thief Who Stole My Heart

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*He wears a woman's earring on one ear;  
riding on his bull,  
crowned with the pure white crescent moon,  
his body smeared with ashes from the burning-ground,  
**He is the thief who stole my heart.***

SAMBANDAR, HYMN 1, VERSE 1<sup>1</sup>

An unnamed Master, equal in stature to Donatello of early Renaissance Florence, created the original wax model for this impressive four-piece bronze group (fig. o.1a). His work captured my imagination, lured me into finding out more about him, and as you will see in chapter 5, has not yet released me. Living in Chola-ruled south India, this Master was attached to a foundry where he oversaw the translation of his original wax model into the finished bronzes, of solid metal, that you see here. The centerpiece of the group represents the supreme god Shiva taking the hand of his bride Uma in marriage. To the right is god Vishnu, the other major god of the Tamil-speaking region of south India, who in south India alone is regarded as Uma's brother, while Vishnu's consort, goddess Lakshmi, is portrayed here in the role of the bride's friend and confidante. The Master has captured a fleeting tender moment, giving us a confident and eager bridegroom with a shy and hesitant bride. This poised bridegroom is none other than the paradoxical Hindu god Shiva, ascetic of ascetics, whose normal garb is tiger skin, serpents, and skulls, while the crescent moon adorns his hair arranged in dreadlocks. Myth speaks of him being interrupted from intense yogic meditation, and opening his eyes only to fall in love with Uma.

In this bronze composition, four-armed Shiva stands relaxed as the handsome bridegroom, with a diadem holding back his matted locks piled high on his head in an elegant arrangement. He wears pendant earrings shaped like the mythical aquatic *makara*, a series of necklaces, a brahmanical sacred thread that diagonally crosses his chest, and a high waistband above his short, tight dhoti; large armlets, an elbow band, bracelets, anklets, and rings on eight toes and fingers further adorn him. With his front right hand, he reaches out confidently and takes his bride's right hand in marriage. Note the way in which the master artist has positioned a very young, timid Uma to stand hesitantly, a few steps behind the powerful bridegroom, with her shoulders curving inward just a trifle as if to shield her vulnerable body. Notice too how well the master artist has captured the hidden understanding of a sensitive moment by the bride's confidante, who uses both hands to gently urge the innocent and exceedingly bashful bride to move toward Shiva (fig. o.1b). How extraordinary that he should have bothered to capture this delicate moment, this sensitive communication that is all but invisible in full frontal view! None but us fortunate few who can see the image from this angle a millennium after it was created may appreciate the empathy displayed by the sculptor in his perceptive portrayal. In the Western world, we speak of God having made man in his own image; in the Tamil-speaking region of south India we may speak, without the slightest suggestion of disrespect, of artists and poets making the gods in their own image.

The bronzes are evocative, sensitive, and exceedingly sensuous in their portrayal of a smooth idealized body that has none of the emphasis on muscularity that we see in sculptures of the Greek and Roman classical period or in those of Renaissance Europe. Chola bronzes signal a direct and appealing path to the divine through an appreciation of the beauty of the body of god, and propose a rapturous engagement with that beauty that is intended to capture your heart and soul. The poet-saints of south India, whom we will encounter frequently in the chapters that follow, presented that beauty to their devotees in ecstatic verses that describe the glory of god's body. They address Shiva in



Figure 0.1. (a) Marriage of Shiva and Uma (*Kalyanasundarar*), Tiruvenkadu temple, Nagapattinam district ca. 1012, Art Gallery, Thanjavur. (b) Rear view of Marriage of Shiva and Uma (*Kalyanasundarar*) (fig. 0.1a), detail.



their hymns as “god with the golden form” and “you who take for your color the sunset’s brilliant hue.” He is

“My pearl, my precious gem,  
glittering branch of coral, bright flame.”<sup>2</sup>

Saint Appar applauds the radiance of Shiva:

“Youth who shines as a ruby,  
as a cluster of emeralds!  
Being who enters my heart,  
stirring memory!”<sup>3</sup>

Equally mesmerizing are phrases describing Shiva’s consort Uma. “She moves in beauty like the swan,” “her flawless gait mocks the peacock’s grace,” she has “feet soft as cotton down,” a “waist small like gathered lightning,” breasts “fresh as new-born lotus buds.”<sup>4</sup>



Artists creating bronzes during the Chola period translated this poetic ecstasy into the exquisite images that we will examine throughout this book. In the context of Indian devotional worship, the sacred and the sensuous are to be viewed as a continuum, and not as two concepts that are divorced from one another. Sheer physical perfection of form was viewed as a reflection of spiritual beauty and inseparable from transcendence and divine supremacy. A well-formed and attractive body was both a sign and a result of moral perfection.<sup>5</sup> In the context of the religions born in India, whether Hindu, Buddhist, or Jain, spiritual beauty and bodily splendor went hand in hand.

In this book, we will indeed acknowledge and delight in the sheer physical beauty of Chola bronzes, created to evoke the verbal picture conjured up by child saint Sambandar, who called Shiva “the thief who stole my heart” in the first verse of his first hymn that opens the entire Tamil “canon.” We will move, however, beyond the sensuous to ask questions of this material that have not been asked before. I propose to treat the bronzes not merely as exquisite masterpieces created by talented wax modelers and accomplished metal casters but also as material objects that interacted in meaningful ways with human activities, and with socioeconomic and religious practices. Chola bronzes are sacred images commissioned by temples for festival worship; curiously, few scholars have shown any interest in ascertaining the number of bronzes that were created for such rituals during the Chola period, or to establish the number of temples built to house these images. T. V. Mahalingam’s set of volumes of inscriptions, arranged district-wise within Chola territory, and then town-wise within each *taluka* subdivision of a district, provides us with the raw material to enable such a count.<sup>6</sup> For instance, a total of 311 temples were built in the three districts of Tiruchirappalli (henceforth, Trichy), Thanjavur, and Nagapattinam that form the heart of Chola territory along the lower reaches of the Kaveri river.<sup>7</sup> On average, each temple would have housed twelve or so bronzes to fulfill its ritual cycle, resulting in a total of around 3,700 sacred bronzes in just the three districts that will be our focus. What were the circumstances that permitted the creation of so many temples and such large numbers of exquisite bronzes in spite of the constant warfare that the Chola monarchs undertook to retain and expand their empire? Inscriptions indicate the prime position held in Chola times by rice paddy; rice was the measure by which wages were paid to temple employees, and rice was the measure by which goods were bought in the town markets. What made possible the rich agricultural wealth that enabled donors to commission large numbers of bronze images and to further adorn them with lavish jewelry? What was the source of the precious and semiprecious materials used to create the lavish gold jewelry, embedded with pearls and coral, rubies and diamonds, that was gifted to adorn every temple’s sacred bronzes? Could the quest for pearls have instigated Chola wars with their southern neighbors, the Pandya kings of Madurai, and with the rulers of island Sri Lanka? In the context of Chola financing of temples and their bronzes, it is also important to note that south India, and Sri Lanka, are located halfway along the lucrative ocean trade route from Aden to China. The ports along the Chola coastline, and those in Sri Lanka, collected valuable taxes, levies, and customs duties from the merchant ships that docked at their ports, thereby enhancing the wealth of their treasury.<sup>8</sup> To what extent was female patronage a force to be reckoned with, not just of the

wealthy elite and of early Chola queens, but also of the *anukki* or “intimate” of more than one Chola king?

Another major issue relates to the source of copper used to create Chola bronzes that laboratory testing affirms to be anywhere from 90 to 98 percent copper.<sup>9</sup> A fact that we have all ignored thus far is that there is no copper at all that may be profitably mined in the granitic region of Chola territory, the state known today as Tamil Nadu. My quick calculations reveal that temples in just the heart of Chola territory, in the same three districts of Trichy, Thanjavur, and Nagapattinam mentioned earlier, would, on the basis of twelve sacred bronzes per temple, require 153 tons of copper for their sacred images.<sup>10</sup> Where did the bronze casters and their patrons suddenly procure the large quantities of copper required to create their sacred images? Why do so many Chola bronzes display the green patina that forms when copper is subjected to high humidity, while others have a darkened hue?

Food offerings made to the sacred bronzes are an unexplored aspect that has been bypassed thus far but opens up an entire area within the field of sensory studies.<sup>11</sup> Temple inscriptions frequently list the exact quantities of the various ingredients required for daily food offerings, and specify the additional delicacies needed for important festivals, giving us a fascinating picture of the nature of contemporary taste. The fact that food offerings are referred to by the term *tiru amudu*, or “sacred nectar,” is relevant, and equally important is the fact that these same inscriptions often specify that once the food has been ritually offered to the bronzes, it should be distributed to temple employees and devotees. Accompanying such ritual worship of the bronzes were the sacred hymns chanted by specialized hymn-singers to the accompaniment of an array of musical instruments that included the reverberation of the blown conch shell and the pounding beat of drums, all of which worked together to create a pulsating surround-sound vibration that aroused an emotional response from temple devotees.<sup>12</sup> We will touch on some of these areas of inquiry as we embark on a journey of discovery through four centuries of Chola art and culture. While I will not be able to do justice to all the issues I am raising about the sacred bronzes created during Chola rule, my intent is to open up the field and encourage further productive exploration.

No complete inventory of Chola inscriptions exists, although a digitization project, limited to records relating to Buddhism, was initiated some years back.<sup>13</sup> A prime resource for Chola epigraphs remains T. V. Mahalingam’s eight volumes of inscriptions that contain a tantalizingly brief English summary of each record.<sup>14</sup> Using his volumes as a basis, and looking only at areas and periods controlled by the Cholas, we find no fewer than 1,083 temple sites; in actuality, the number of temples is greater, since the entries under some towns list records in both a Shiva and a Vishnu temple. Adding up the inscriptions listed in these volumes, we come up with somewhere between eleven thousand and twelve thousand inscriptions, written largely in the Tamil script and language. Like a richly textured yet clinging mantle, these inscribed records cover the stone walls of the several hundred temples that dot the deltaic plains of the Kaveri river, running seamlessly across the light projections and recesses of temple walls. Only the inscriptions on Rajaraja Chola’s Great Temple at Thanjavur have been published fully in English translation, while the greater number of the remaining records are available

only in the form of a brief English synopsis, mostly in T. V. Mahalingam's volumes. Thanks to the impetus provided by the invitation to deliver the Mellon lectures, I have been able to delve into carefully selected examples of such material, located in the offices of the Epigraphical Survey of India in Mysuru either as rubbings from the temple walls or as hand-written copies of such rubbings. A careful scrutiny of these Tamil inscriptions enabled me to unearth valuable information that animates and informs my present study. What I have uncovered is just the proverbial tip of the iceberg. With the majority of inscriptions on Chola temples untranslated, and over half unpublished, this trove of documents presents a largely neglected corpus for future research. The most frustrating issue for an art historian writing after three decades in the field is that this inscriptional material is in full view and plain sight for anyone walking around a Chola temple. The nature of such documentation is quite amazing. For instance, at the Neyttanam temple along the Kaveri river, some 7 miles north of the Chola capital of Thanjavur, an inscription cut into the south wall of the main *mandapa* tells us exactly where to look to find detailed instructions regarding the performance of a particular festival.<sup>15</sup> It specifies that these stipulations are inscribed along certain precise sections of base molding, and along specific areas beneath the temple eaves; the inscription serves almost as a footnote system, or perhaps one might better describe it as a card catalogue and a library all in one. While this rich archive of inscriptions plays an important role in this book, there is much to be done before we reach the point where the inscriptions truly illuminate our understanding of Chola art.

Thus, my prime source material for this study are the Chola bronze images themselves, which I have examined in person over the years, using photographs for later comparative study to reinforce conclusions regarding their creation. Today, after having been eclipsed for some years, the self-evident centrality of the art object is back in play, and connoisseurship is acknowledged as an essential tool that no art historian can afford to ignore.<sup>16</sup> Art historians must and do pay attention to fine visual distinctions, to rhythm, to the recurrence of stylistic details, to regularity or lack of regularity of motifs, to a distinctive way of depicting, say, drapery folds, or a lion-head clasp on a jeweled belt. The defining words on connoisseurship are still those of nineteenth-century scholar Giovanni Morelli: "As most men who speak or write have verbal habits and use their favorite words and phrases involuntarily and sometimes even inappropriately, so almost any painter [substitute sculptor] has his own peculiarities which escape from him without him being aware of them."<sup>17</sup> The intuitive judgment that is part of connoisseurship is not some nonrational process; as Sydney Freedberg wrote while explaining critic Bernard Berenson's procedure, such intuition is merely the process by which a connoisseur enters data into her mental bank of remembered comparables, analyzes it, and arrives at a solution.<sup>18</sup> More recently, David Freedberg, with his interest in the relationship between art and neurosciences, speaks of "thin-slicing" as the new term for that "critical part of rapid cognition . . . whereby you instantly select out a particularly indicative detail as characteristic."<sup>19</sup> The interdisciplinary nature of connoisseurship is today a recognized reality, as is the fact that a vital layer of solid archival material underlies good connoisseurship. The quintessential part of the process remains close looking over an extended period of time. It is only close looking, such as my collaborator and I engaged



in during our years of fieldwork on *The Unfinished: Indian Stone Carvers at Work*, that enabled us, for instance, to recognize the hand of a specific “Animal Master” at the Pal-lava site of Mamallapuram.<sup>20</sup>

Before we turn our focus to Chola bronzes, let us take a quick look at what was happening in the rest of the world when these sacred bronzes were created in south India. In 850, as the Cholas came into power, the Abbasids of Baghdad controlled Central Asia, North Africa, and Spain, while the Tang dynasty ruled China; Europe, by contrast, was at a low point in its cultural history. By 985, when Chola ruler Rajaraja ascended the throne, the Fatimids of Egypt had replaced the Abbasids, and the Sung dynasty was in power in China. When Rajaraja completed his great temple, 210 feet high, at the capital of Thanjavur in the year 1010, the Romanesque churches of Europe were not yet built; work on the Cathedral at Pisa, for instance, would start in another fifty years, and continue for almost three centuries. As Chola power came to an end in the thirteenth century, the Gothic cathedral in Europe was reaching perfection with the completion of Notre Dame in Paris. The period of 425 years that intervened between the start of the Chola dynasty in 855 and its demise in the year 1280 was truly a momentous one for global art and architecture. So onward to south India and the Kaveri river.

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