

Shiva Nataraja Iconography

Shiva Nataraja depicts the Hindu god Shiva as “Lord of the Dance,” engaged in the dynamic, victorious “dance of bliss” (*ananda tandava*) he performed after defeating arrogant sages in the Chidambaram forest. In representations of the deity, such as this tenth-century bronze sculpture in the Freer’s collection, every feature reveals important details.

“Ta-dum, ta-dum, ta-dum...” beats the drum in Nataraja’s hand, as he shakes it, giving rhythm to his dancing feet and sound to his image. Shiva, the auspicious one, is manifest here as the lord of the dance, a form he has taken not to entertain but perform cosmic work. Shiva Nataraja is crushing ignorance, presented by the sculptor as a demon under his feet who looks up benevolently at the god, even as his own ruin is in progress.

Nataraja is one of the most important, visually thrilling forms of the Hindu god Shiva. Artists in the Tamil region of southern India began to make this form of Shiva in the early tenth century, with the patronage of kings, inspired by poetry written by ardent devotees and using skills in metal craft developed over hundreds of years. Once made and brought to life through ritual, Nataraja lived in the temple, moving out daily and during festivals, gracing his devotees within the temple and in the streets, as he processed through the town with song and ritual.

Appearing more than a thousand years ago, Nataraja’s importance has endured as a god and a popular icon. Today he is worshipped in major temples and circulates in public life. Nataraja represents Indian tradition, cosmic principles, Tamil identity, and classical dance. Artists use his image to sell products, critique society, and present philosophical concepts. Nataraja is truly a god for all time.

Shiva Nataraja

CA. 990, India

Bronze

H: 70.8 W: 53.3 D: 24.6 cm



RING OF COSMIC FIRE

The oval ring around the figure of Shiva Nataraja represents the cosmic fire he uses to destroy the universe as part of the cycle of destruction and creation. Each flame has three points. In the eleventh and twelfth centuries, a round circle of fire with flames of five points became typical for the Shiva Nataraja image.



THIRD EYE

Shiva’s third eye represents his cosmic knowledge. In one of the saint Sundarar’s hymns to Shiva, he sings of Parvati (Uma), covering Shiva’s two eyes in a flirtatious

game, with the universe plunging into darkness as a result. To bring light back to the universe, Shiva created his third eye.

MULTIPLE ARMS

In art of the Hindu tradition, deities are depicted with multiple arms to illustrate divine power. Shiva Nataraja’s four arms each take a different position or hold symbolic objects, showing his strength and constellation of skills.

CLOTHING

Shiva wears an article of clothing around his waist called a *veshti* in south India. This garment is also worn by Hindu priests. Across his torso is the sacred thread of the Brahmin priestly class.

EARRINGS

On Shiva’s right ear is an earring depicting a *makara*, a mythical water creature. His left ear is adorned with a circular earring



worn by women. The pair represents Shiva’s male and female aspects. He is sometimes depicted with his consort Parvati (Uma) as a half-male, half-female form, illustrating the cosmic balance of male and female energies.

LEFT HAND

The left hand points downward to indicate sanctuary for the soul of the devotee.

RIGHT HAND

The open palm of Shiva’s right hand forms the *abhaya* mudra, or hand gesture, signifying that the worshipper need have no fear.

DRUM

It is with this hourglass-shaped *damaru* drum that Shiva beats a rhythm that brings the universe



into creation. As both the creator and destroyer, Shiva and his drumming

play an essential role in the cycle of the universe.

SNAKE

The story of Shiva's triumph in the forest near Chidambaram recounts the snake as one of the malicious forces hurled at the



deity by the enraged sages of the forest. Shiva takes the snake and coils it around himself, thereby neutralizing it as a weapon.

FLAME OF DESTRUCTION

Poised in one of Shiva's hands is a flame of the cosmic fire he uses



to end the universe in its cycle of creation and destruction.

MATTED LOCKS (JATAS)

Matted locks or *jatas* are worn by religious ascetics. These locks reflect Shiva's role as a yogi who sometimes meditates for hundreds of years high in the Himalayan mountains. The lower half of Shiva's *jatas* fly out toward the halo of fire as he performs his dynamic dance.

CRESCENT MOON

Shiva is associated with the moon in a number of different narratives and wears the crescent moon in his locks.



GANGA

The tiny figure perched in Shiva's hair is the River Ganga (Ganges) in the form of a goddess. In response



to devastating drought, Ganga agreed to descend to Earth, where Shiva received

her in his matted locks to soften the impact of her landing.

LEFT FOOT

Shiva's left foot is lifted as part of the "dance of bliss," raised in elegant strength across his body. Like a member of royalty, his ankles, arms, chest, and ears are adorned with jewelry.

DEMON OF IGNORANCE

The demon of ignorance is shown here pinned down tightly by Shiva's right foot. He looks blissfully up at the conquering Lord Shiva,



despite his defeat. In the story of the Chidambaram forest, this demon was one of the weapons the sages launched against Shiva, who handily crushes the demon, thereby declaring his triumph over ignorance.

LOTUS BASE

The lotus flower, indigenous to South and Southeast Asia, represents purity in the Hindu, Jain, and Buddhist traditions. The flower grows from the depths of muddy water to emerge above its surface, pristinely beautiful. This pedestal is a double lotus, with petals pointing upward and downward.

HEAD-WHEEL (BACK)

This small halo-like ornament was created to cover the knot that secures a headband.



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