

Doordarshan Presents

Darshan of the Divine

*On Chola Bronzes, from the series of 26 films on
'The Sculpture of India'*

By Benoy K Behl



Parvati.

***Collection: Saraswati Mahal Art
Gallery, Thanjavur.***

***The smooth planes and graceful,
curving lines of this figure of
Parvati, make it one of the most
elegant bronzes. Pic. Benoy K Behl***

According to ancient texts, the deity in the sanctum of the temple is depicted closest to its all-pervasive nature. It is a manifestation of the ultimate truth. There also developed a great tradition of *Utsava murtis* or 'festival images'. The deity, in many manifestations of human form, comes out to the streets of the town. Sometimes, he performs a journey to a place of pilgrimage. He may be taken for a ritual bath or even to the sea-shore to enjoy the breeze.

In all these *Utsavas*, the deity leaves the sanctum and becomes approachable to all. The abstract, all-encompassing reality is given a form which we can relate to: a human form with emotions we can understand, even as a family man with a wife and child. It is the human form, luminous with the beauty of divinity. By about the 8th century, the *utsava murtis* in the temples of Tamil Nadu began to be made in bronze. This tradition of bronzes, which reached its height in the rule of the Cholas, resulted in some of the finest works of Indian art.

In the skilled hands of devoted artists, the metal images communicated the majesty and dignity of the deities, as well as the suppleness and dynamic movement of their bodily form. These are remarkably expressive and graceful. They convey the spiritual fervour of the artists who made them. These works of art are part of a divine architecture, where the deity manifests himself in forms which awaken the bliss and the peace within the viewer.

These fluid and subtle images are a means of expressing the beauty of the divine which is in all that we see.

The most magnificent image in the bronzes is the Nataraja, Shiva in his cosmic dance. In this dance, he creates and destroys the world. The richness of symbolic meaning in the Nataraja image makes it one of the greatest icons created by man.

The circle in which he dances is Samsara, the cycle of life and death in this illusory world. In one hand, he holds a drum, whose heartbeat sound represents the creation of the world. Complimenting the moment of creation, is the simultaneous destruction of the cosmos. In his other hand, he holds the fire with which he destroys the world.

The lower right hand offers solace to the devotee, granting fearlessness with the *Abhaya mudra*. The lower left hand points to the raised foot. This foot springs up from the back of the dwarf of ignorance, of forgetfulness of the truth. The dwarf Apasmara is crushed under the right foot of Shiva. Under the raised foot, the devotee is promised refuge from the turmoil and confusion of the world of illusion.

The dance is wild, as we see from the coils of Shiva's hair which fly in all directions. Yet, the expression of the lord is serene and the many limbs are in perfect balance. At the centre of all the dynamic movement is the stillness of peace.

The Chola artists imaged deities as graceful, languid beings. There is always a sense of repose. Minute details such as the gentle swelling of bellies bring these bronzes alive before us. These bronzes also mark great technical achievement in the arts, where metal was flawlessly moulded to give form to the intangible. The material never dominates the image which moves the viewer through the perfection of its beauty.



**Bhikshatanamurti, (11th century)
Collection: Saraswati Mahal Art
Gallery, Thanjavur.**

**This image presents Shiva as the
renunciator. These divine
bronzes are fine works of
technical excellence, as well as
subtle expression. Pic. Benoy K
Behl**



***Nataraja, (c. 11th century)
Collection: Government Museum,
Chennai.***

***At the divine centre of the
constant flux and movement of the
world is enshrined in the face of
Shiva. This is the peace towards
which we all strive. Here is grace
and sublime joy. Pic. Benoy K Behl***

While the bronzes were made, Vedic hymns were chanted and sacred rites were performed at appropriate stages. There were elaborate rituals of establishment, similar to those of the main temple icon, whereby the divine presence was infused in the images. The Utsava murtis would then reside in the sanctum or close to it. They would receive daily worship and at the time of the festivals, they would truly come into their own.

Besides daily and weekly festivals, most annual festivals last for eleven to fifteen days. They are grand and colourful occasions in which the deities are carried through the city streets on palanquins and on vast chariots. The chariots or rathas have tall superstructures which resemble temple towers. Such festivals continue till today as expressions of religious fervour and personalised devotion to the deities.

The deity is treated as an honoured guest and beloved Lord. He receives Puja or ritual adoration everyday and in some temples, even up to eight times a day. Priests wash his feet, bathe and anoint him, rub sandalwood paste on him and dress and ornament him. His is entertained with song and dance and hymns of the saints are sung before him.

Inscriptions speak of a dazzling array of jewellery which was gifted to the deities. These were given by a wide range of persons, from royalty to merchants, musicians and dancers and palace maids. Inscriptions also inform us of 400 dancing girls who were brought to live in Thanjavur to dance before the deities.

The technique used to make south Indian bronzes is called the lost-wax process. First, the image is carefully made out of hard beeswax, complete in all its details. Then, the wax is covered with layers of clay. The clay-covered model is then heated so that all the wax melts and comes out. What is left is a cavity which exactly replicates the wax image. Next the molten bronze is poured in through channels in the original design. Once it has cooled, the clay is broken away and the stems of the channel are filed off. During Chola times, the moulds were made so perfectly that no further details needed to be carved. However, these days, the fine details are cut after the casting process is over.

As the wax model is lost each time, every bronze is a unique work of art. The early images were made of copper, as is recorded in Chola inscriptions. In later times, images of *pancha-loha* or five metals became popular. The constituents, gold, silver, copper, lead and tin represent the five basic elements of which the world is made.

The Utsava-murtis in festivals provide that wonderful occasion when the people may experience the joy of being overwhelmed with devotional feeling.

About the film-maker

Benoy K Behl is a film-maker, art-historian and photographer who is known for his tireless and prolific output of work over the past 34 years. He has taken over 40,000 photographs of Asian monuments and art heritage, made a hundred documentaries on art history and his exhibitions have been warmly received in 32 countries around the world. These have been inaugurated by ministers of the governments of various countries, ambassadors, archbishops and others dignitaries. He holds the Limca Book Record for being the most travelled photographer.

In January, 2008, National Geographic magazine carried an 18-page story about ancient Indian art revealed through Behl's photography to the world. BBC World News have also carried 3 major stories about Behl's pioneering work in India and Vietnam.

His films, including 26 documentaries on 'The Paintings of India' and 26 documentaries on 'The Sculpture of India' have been nationally telecast on prime time in India, as well as repeat telecasts. These have also been screened at scores of universities and museums in several countries around the world.

The vastness of Behl's documentation presents a wide and new perspective in understanding the art of India and Asia. His photography of ancient murals in remote places has clearly established the continuous tradition of painting in India, from ancient times through the medieval period. This is significant, as earlier, the Indian tradition of painting was believed to begin in medieval times.

He has been invited to lecture by most of the important universities and museums around the world, who have departments of Asian art. His book on 'The Ajanta Caves' is published by Thames & Hudson, London and Harry N. Abrams, New York. His book on 'The History of Indian Art: Sculpture and Mural Paintings' is expected to be released in the second half of 2013. Two more books by him are expected to be out in the end of 2013 and the beginning of 2014. The first on 'Northern Frontiers of Buddhism' covering Buddhist heritage in Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, Kalmykia and Siberia in Russia, Mongolia, China and Tibet. The second book is on 'The Buddhist Heritage of Andhra Pradesh'.