

Shiva as lord of dance



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An item that attracted my attention was the figure of Dancing Shiva. This icon belongs to the Chola period of Indian Art. I liked the way sculpture looked by later I became fascinated by the interesting history and rich symbolism, connected with this figure. Shiva as Lord of Dance is one of the most popular iconographic items of India. It reflects Indian philosophy, art and the way of thinking. There are many variants of dancing Shiva sculptures and despite they have some differences, there are basic features, which unite them all. The figure of Chola period is a brilliant example of Nataraja.

Chola dynasty ruled India from 860 till 1279. This period is marked by the development of fine art and culture. Architecture got new ways of development during this time. During this period one of the rulers of Chola dynasty, Rajaraja, built a famous Trihadeshvara temple, which has become an example for future temple buildings. Architecture became not the only field of progress and innovations. Sculpture art also became extremely popular during this period and till present time different metal sculptures of those times are considered to be the best examples of the world art.

Since in India art was closely connected with different religious sculpture on different topics became the most widespread form of sculpture during that time. Nataraja of Dancing Shiva figures became the most known type of sculptures. Since art and religion are closely interconnected in India, all art objects have some spiritual ideas and religions message. Since Hinduism is the most popular India religion, a lot of art objects express the main ideas of Hinduism. Liberation from the circle of lives and death is the core belief of Hinduism.

According to this religion each person has an immortal soul - Atman, which aims to join Brahman after death. Ahimsa and satya are two other important principles of Hinduism. Satya means truthfulness and ahimsa means non-violence. Following this principles a person approaches his or her true nature and gets more chances to achieve the unity with Brahman. The practice of the main principles of Hinduism is achieved through dharma - a religious path. Following dharma and living according to its principles make it possible for the person to achieve moksha - liberation.

The circle of lives and deaths is conditioned by karma law. Karma is understood in the flow of cause and effect for all deeds and thoughts. All these core beliefs are presented in the art objects of India. Despite all art objects, which have a religions meaning, are dedicated to the higher and ultimate goal - moksha, they may also contain other religions ideas.

Hinduism is not a monotheistic religion. It has many deities and each other them has certain powers and sphere of influence. Brahma, Shiva and Vishnu make the trinity of supreme Hinduism deities.

Despite there are some variations of the supreme deities during different epochs and regions of India, this trinity is generally considered to be the supreme deities of Hinduism. In the sculpture I've chosen Shiva dances in the middle of circus, which consists of flames. His posture, gestures and mimics are full of symbolism. Each item of the sculpture has a deep meaning and all them taken together give an idea about religions and spiritual prophesy of India. Each deity of the Hindu trinity has its function. Brahma is regarded as a Creator. Vishnu is responsible for preserving things in order.

Shiva is a destructive deity. He is responsible for any kind of changes and transformations. Nataraja, the figure of dancing Shiva, presents him as a lord of Dancers. Nataraja is translated from Sanskrit as “ dancing” and raja means a “ king”. The figure of dancing Shiva is a canonical image. Each part of the sculpture has special meaning and Shiva is depicted in this position in the most of the Nataraja sculptures. The figure got its canonical form during the Chola dynasty. Different masters used different materials, such as metal, stone and some other substances.

The figure of Chola Nataraja makes one of the best examples of Hindu art. There is a beautiful legend, which stands behind the figure of Dancing Shiva. Once Shiva appeared in one of the South Indian forests, where a lot of heretical sages lived. Shiva decided to prove the wrongfulness of their teaching. He appeared in the forest accompanied by Vishnu, dressed like a woman. In the beginning the sages started a dispute among themselves but very soon they directed their anger and violence against Shiva. They decided to destroy Shiva.

First of all, they created a tiger but Shiva won this tiger with the tiny gesture of his hand. Shiva took tiger’s skin and wrapped it as clothing. The sages made another attempt and created a terrible serpent. Shiva easily won this serpent and wrapped it around his neck like a garland. Shiva started his dance when the third monster approached him. Shiva broke the monster’s back and continued his dance. The rhythmic dance symbolizes the cyclic nature of the Universe. In the sculpture the monster is depicted like a dwarf with figure. We can see that Shiva dances on the back of the monster.

The monster is called apasmara purusha. It symbolizes ignorance, which makes the people live in illusion and does not let them achieve liberation.

The dance of Shiva has a symbolic meaning. Shiva's dance is a way to experience Divine presence and feel the union with the Universe. Dance is a very popular form of art in India and many mystic and religious schools used it as a means to achieve ecstasy. It has a deep meaning, which can be compared to the experience of meditation. Shiva, being one of the main Deities of Hinduism, possesses the mastership of dance.

Shiva's dance is called anandatandava and is translated as the Dance of Bliss. In this dance Shiva performs his duties of creation and destruction. The figure of Dancing Shiva should be treated not only as an object of art, but also as a pictorial allegory. Chola Nataraja has four arms. Four arms mean four different directions. In his upper right hand Shiva holds a damaru - a drum, which sound created our world. This hand makes an amaru-hasta mudra - a gesture which symbolizes the originating of the sounding of the creation of Universe.

This drum creates a sound, which makes the pulse of the universe. It also accompanies Shiva's dance. In Hinduism sound is a primary element of the Universe. The drum is made in the form of hour-glass. This form also has a symbolic meaning. It symbolizes the union of two vital principles - male and female. They make two triangles, which are connected with each other and penetrate into each other. Being a Deity-destroyer Shiva holds agni - a fire of destruction in his lower left hand. Hindu mythology states that when the end of the world comes, the world will burn in fire.

In this way upper right and lower left hand make a union of opposite forces, such as creation and destruction. The sound of damaru drum, which creates the pulse of the Universe, is contrasted to the destructive flame agni. His other right hand forms a abhaya mudra. Abhaya mudra is a gesture of protection and blessing. Abhaya is translated from Sanskrit like fearless and means the absence of fear on the way to achieve a ultimate knowledge and protection Shiva gives to all people on this way. Shiva's upper left hand shows to the raised right leg.

This leg symbolizes ability to leave ignorance and reach salvation and leave the circle of lives and deaths. This hand also symbolizes the trunk of Ganesha, elephant-like deity and son of Shiva. His trunk is a symbol of courage and ability to overcome any obstacles. Shiva dances on the dwarf anandatandava. This dance is a symbol of his ability to overcome the power of ignorance. Shiva won dark forces of the Universe and these give all the living creatures a hope that they can follow his path and do the same. The ring of fire, which circles Shiva, symbolizes the Universe.

This flame circle called prabhamandala, also establishes the limits of the Cosmos. The Nataraja figure is also used as a metaphor of Eternity and time. This figure reminds us about the conditional nature of time and its changeable nature. Motion, which is reflected in every part of Shiva's figure, is opposed to his calm and motionless face. There is an Indian term, Kala, which means time. There is another term, Maha Kala, which means the absence of time or eternity. In Shiva these both terms are connected, he managed to united Kala and Maha Kala.

The sculptor managed to pass the very notion of motion in Shiva's figure. His posture, legs and arms create an image of graceful and wild motion. Mask-like face which shows no feelings and emotions becomes the incarnation of calmness. So, the metal figure managed to pass different stages of movement and its cyclic rhythm. Shiva's pedestal is made in the form of lotus. We can see small petals, which form this pedestal. The image of lotus is very popular in Oriental philosophy in general and in Hinduism in particular. The natural beauty of the flower isn't the only reason of its popularity.

It creates a very interesting analogy in the minds of people, as lotus is the only flower which does not get wet during the rain. This must become the true goal of all spiritual people - to live in the society and to stay away from it at the same time. True understanding of the spiritual message of Hindu art gives the way to fulfill life with stability, sense and peace. " Being freed from attachment, fear and anger, being fully absorbed in Me and taking refuge in Me, many, many persons in the past became purified by knowledge of Me - and thus they all attained transcendental love for Me" (Bhagavad Gita, Yoga of Knowledge).

To escape from sufferings and get peace and harmony one must reject all false and artificial things that surround us and to reach the internal liberty and light which are the parts of inner Self hidden inside each of us and composing everything that exists in the Universe at the same time. It is by understanding the hidden Self in us we will ultimately discover the Supreme Self, that exists in all of us and in Whom we all exist. " A true yogi observes Me in all beings and also sees every being in Me. Indeed, the self-realized

person sees Me, the same Supreme Lord, everywhere” (Bhagavad Gita, Yoga of Self-Restraint).

There is another symbol connected with lotus. Since it growth from dirt but blossoms like a beautiful flower, it should remind all people about their ability to overcome earthy existence and achieve their transcendental nature. This symbol repeats the main message of the Nataraja figure. Same as Shiva is able to overcome the demon of ignorance and rise above it, dancing on its back, the lotus flower can get through dirt and mud and blossom as a beautiful flower. Like all the other parts of the figure, Shiva’s hair is also a symbolic object.

Long and wavy hair of the deity has several levels of symbolic meaning. On the one hand, hair resembles two wings, which remind about the Shiva’s divine nature. On the other hand Shiva’s hair reminds about the legend of Ganga River. According to this language this river descended from the heaven. In order to descend from the heaven Ganga needed the assistance of a deity and Shiva agreed to give his head for the river to flow. His hair reminds of Gang’s waters, which flow from his head. His hair becomes a manifestation of his extreme vital energy and eagerness to live.

From the other side hair becomes a female aspect which symbolizes sensuality. By this manifestation Shiva’s statue manifest acceptance of everything sensual, earthy and natural. Hinduism does not reject the manifestation of humanness. It only wants people not to forget about their Divine nature and Nataraja’s figure aims to bring this message to people. “ Thus by donning long, luxurious hair, Shiva dispels the notion of the

conventional ascetic and reiterates that the image of Nataraja assimilates and harmonizes within itself apparently contradictory and conflicting aspects “ (Jansen 41).

Shiva's dancing figure becomes a unique combination of two religions archetypes. It is a combination of ascetic archetype and dancing saint man archetype. It is a combination of spontaneous mystic and religious ascetic. Shiva's absolute calmness and tranquillity are combined with spontaneous movement and freedom of the dance. The Nataraja sculpture is not a simple statue dedicated to Shiva. It does not speak about one single event or person. It is rather an incarnation of Indian cosmogony. This figure illustrates basic Hindu beliefs and concepts.

Its allegoric form hides many signs and symbols and even people, who do not know their sacred meaning, can feel power and tranquillity, created by the image of dancing Shiva. The Chola figure is especially precious type of Nataraja statue because it manifests the peak of Indian sculptural art. This Nataraja figure became canonical and established the further looks of the Nataraja figure and its main elements. The combination of grace, motion and tranquillity created a unique impression on everybody, who observes this figure.