



American Federation of Arts

For Immediate Release

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**UNPRECEDENTED EXHIBITION OF SACRED SOUTH INDIAN BRONZES TO OPEN AT
THE SACKLER GALLERY, THEN TRAVEL TO DALLAS & CLEVELAND
*The Sensuous and the Sacred: Chola Bronzes from South India***

(August 9, 2002)—*The Sensuous and the Sacred: Chola Bronzes from South India*, an exhibition of ninth- to thirteenth-century temple bronzes drawn from important public and private collections in the United States and Europe, premieres at the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., in November 2002. It then travels to the Dallas Museum of Art and the Cleveland Museum of Art (see page 3 for itinerary). This historic exhibition is the first to focus on Chola bronzes—among the most spectacular works of art ever created in south Asia—and includes fifty-nine bronzes exemplifying the graceful forms, delicate modeling, and remarkable technical sophistication of these sculptures. The exhibition is organized by the American Federation of Arts and the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution. Support is provided by the National Endowment for the Humanities and The Rockefeller Foundation. Additional exhibition support is provided by Gilbert and Ann Kinney, and the Benefactors Circle of the AFA. The catalogue is supported by the E. Rhodes and Leona B. Carpenter Foundation.

“Chola bronzes are a testament to the extraordinary vitality of the south Indian religious tradition, powerful and much-beloved objects to be appreciated for their beauty and technical innovation, as well as their cultural significance. We are delighted to be collaborating with the Sackler Gallery to present this wonderful exhibition,” said Julia Brown, director of the American Federation of Arts.

The Chola period was a time of uncommon artistic creativity and religious tolerance in south India. For four hundred years, the Chola dynasty was the dominant political, cultural, religious, and artistic force in the region. During Chola rule, the arts—music and dance, poetry and drama, sculpture, bronze-casting, jewelry-making, painting, and architecture—as well as philosophy and religious thought, reached new heights. The temple was the centerpiece of activity, and Chola rulers commissioned some of the most impressive temples in southern India and the elegant art that decorated them.

Around the sixth century, Hindu temple deities, previously represented by immovable stone icons known as *achala*, assumed new duties comparable to those of earthly monarchs, presiding over daily rituals and periodic ceremonial processions. As the *achala* were unsuitable for such rituals, Chola artists created portable bronzes, which were worshiped as living entities, draped with silk, adorned with jewels and flower garlands, and given offerings of food, incense, and other gifts. Although Chola-period bronzes remaining in Hindu temples today continue to be decorated for worship, those in museums and private collections are typically displayed in an unadorned state, highlighting their sensuous nature.

Shiva as Nataraja (Lord of Dance) was an icon of deep cosmic significance for the Cholas. Contained within a circular flame-tipped aureole, with his matted hair splayed out in the ecstatic movement of his dance, he embodies perfect balance and continual movement. The remarkable achievement of Chola artists was their successful visualization of Shiva’s dance as the continual destruction and recreation of the universe.

Artists of the Chola period perfected the *cire perdue* (lost-wax) technique of bronze casting, which enabled them to create extraordinary works of art. Sensuous curves and graceful elegance characterize the primarily religious bronze sculpture of the period, expressing the sacred, intangible beauty of gods, goddesses, and saints. The *cire perdue* process—a technical innovation still used in contemporary bronze casting—involves sculpting the object in wax as a fully realized figure, then encasing the wax in clay, and firing the entire work in a kiln until the wax melts. After filling the resulting cavity with molten bronze, metalworkers produce a statue that is richly detailed and needs no cold chiseling.

By the end of the tenth century, Chola temples possessed as many as forty bronzes each, all donated by individuals in the hope of receiving temple honors. Even today, an individual's standing in Tamil society depends more on temple honors than on personal wealth. Members of the Chola royalty often established endowments for the ritual care of the images, thus ensuring the continuation of royal authority.

Guest curator Dr. Vidya Dehejia, the Barbara Stoler Miller Professor of Indian Art at Columbia University, has organized the exhibition in two thematic sections focusing on Shiva and Vishnu, the primary Hindu deities. Although Hinduism was the dominant religion during the period, Chola rulers also supported Jain and Buddhist monasteries, and several of these temple bronzes are also included in the exhibition. Ancient temple inscriptions detailing the character, number, and size of sacred bronzes in Chola-period shrines inform the organization of the installation. The exhibition includes photomurals of south Indian temples and ritual processions; videos of bronze-casting and of the ritual that transforms metal objects into divine beings; and passages of sacred music, which help reflect the original temple context of the sculptures. The bronzes are complemented in the exhibition by a selection of jewelry and a fully draped and ornamented later Shiva Nataraja.

Both the exhibition and catalogue draw from the disciplines of art history, religious studies, poetry, and cultural history to explore the aesthetic qualities of the bronzes, as well as the society in which they were created and used. Indian cultural currents nourish the daily life of Americans of every origin—through food, music, films, and literature. *The Sensuous and the Sacred* opens at a time when Americans of Indian descent are one of the fastest growing population groups in the United States, with a growth rate seven times the national average.

TOUR ITINERARY

Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution
Washington, D.C.

November 10, 2002–March 9, 2003

Dallas Museum of Art
Dallas, Texas

April 4–June 15, 2003

The Cleveland Museum of Art
Cleveland, Ohio

July 6–September 14, 2003

PUBLICATION: A fully illustrated catalogue—incorporating new research from American and south Indian authors—will be published by the AFA in association with University of Washington Press. Guest curator Vidya Dehejia chronicles the rise of the medieval Hindu temple, analyzes the regional and stylistic variations among the bronzes, and provides commentaries on all of the objects.

Additional catalogue essays include "The Bronzes of Emperor Kulottunga and His Successors," in which R. Nagaswamy dates a group of previously undated later Chola bronzes; "Chola Bronzes in Procession," Richard H. Davis's vivid description of the sensory-rich rituals in which the bronzes were created to be used; and Karen Pechilis Prentiss's "Joyous Encounters: Tamil Bhakti Poets and Images of the Divine," a translation and interpretation of the devotional poetry written by Hindu saints in praise of the deities. The catalogue also will be distributed in India, where it will be published by the AFA in association with Mapin Publishing, Ahmedabad. 256 pages, 9 7/8 x 12 in., 152 colorplates; 25 black-and-white comparative illustrations; softcover \$35.00, clothbound \$49.95.

AMERICAN FEDERATION OF ARTS: Over the course of its ninety-three-year history, the American Federation of Arts (AFA) has earned a reputation for initiating and developing art exhibitions of exceptional quality and scholarship that are presented in museums across the country and around the world. The AFA also provides educational and professional programs that serve the needs of the museum community. Through these programs, the AFA is able to fulfill its mission to bring great works of art to an extended audience, and strengthen the ability of museums to enrich the public's experience and understanding of the visual arts. Please visit the AFA's website at www.afaweb.org.