



Shiva Nataraja, southern India, possibly Tanjore District, Tamil Nadu c. AD 1100

THEMATIC OVERVIEW

Alongside the Western European sculptural tradition, there are equally long traditions of representing the human figure in other cultures. In Buddhist, Jain and Hindu sculpture, the sculpted figures are gods, goddesses and demons shown in visible form. These images illustrate the divine, based on the idea that the gods and truth (whatever that might be) lie behind our ordinary visible world.

The figure shown here was made to sit in splendour in a temple. *Shiva Nataraja* is one of many Chola Hindu bronzes made to be kept deep inside a temple, yet it is now isolated from the world in a case in the British Museum. The Chola period,



Detail

What the examiner says

As you enter the final phase of a unit of work, it is crucial that you continue to make connections between your own work and the work of others. Students often make these connections clear in their final evaluation (see 'How to evaluate your work' in chapter 6, page 236) and you should do the same yourself. It would also be sensible to make references to other artists throughout the construction of your 'final piece'. Try to make it a general rule that there is such a reference on every double page of your sketchbook.

between the ninth and thirteenth centuries in southern India, was a period of considerable wealth.

TECHNIQUES

Hinduism has a complex set of beliefs demonstrated in a vast series of stories; Shiva is one of the three central Hindu gods. In Hindu sculptures, gods and goddesses tend to have bland symmetrical faces, arched eyebrows, clear sharp noses and full lips. This creates an idealised image of a calm figure, one who might be involved in deep thought. Even if we are not Hindu, these sculptures are relevant to us as artists researching images of the human figure because of the way in which (as with any story) key aspects of the narrative affect how the central figure is shown. Showing many arms, for example, makes the figure look superhuman, the exact position of the arms and what the hands contain being crucial.

Shiva is shown in one of his many forms here, as the Nataraja or Lord of the Dance (Nata = dance, Raja = king). There are three elements to this sculpture that might be relevant to your analysis and your own art:

- He is inside a circle of flames, representing not only the whirling activity of the whole cosmos but also the circle of time that has no end.
- Shiva is a destroyer and a creator, the god who controls the start and finish of time cycles. He is a dancer, ending one life cycle and bringing in the next.
- The work demonstrates a different, circular concept of time to the Western linear system, which believes that time only goes forward.

COMPARE AND CONTRAST

When looking at an unfamiliar piece of art, it often helps to compare and contrast it with another work. This sculpture, for example, is made in bronze using the lost wax method. You could compare the lost wax method of moulding (see 'Key terms', page 271) to other sculptures, for example Marc Quinn's *Self*, 1991.

What the art historian says: individualism

We do not know who made this bronze. Hindu art does not value individual talent in the Western manner of following the development of a single person's artistic style. Ever since the High Renaissance (Michelangelo, Raphael, Leonardo), Western art has depended on the notion that what is on display is in some way the genuine outpourings of a uniquely talented individual. Does this sculpture's anonymity affect how you view it?

Self is a moulded frozen head made from blood; in theory, it is a perfectly made, three-dimensional self-portrait. Over a period of 5 months, Quinn had eight pints of blood taken from his own body; the average amount of blood in the human body is eight pints. This blood was poured into a mould Quinn had made of his own head and then frozen (the refrigeration unit serves to keep the sculpture frozen solid). Traditionally, a portrait head would be placed on a plinth (see page 52) and Quinn's presentation of *Self* makes some reference to that tradition. The moulded head sits on a white stack (resembling a plinth and housing the refrigeration unit) and within a glass case. This means that, although *Self* is a work that involves technology and modern artistic techniques, such as shock tactics, it is in fact a traditional presentation.

FOLLOW UP

After comparing and contrasting *Shiva Nataraja* and *Self*, what points of contact can you find between the two works? Ask yourself the following questions:

- 1 How are both works presented to the viewer?
- 2 How was each work made, and did that making affect the form, texture and composition of the final object?
- 3 How does each work approach its own cultural or artistic traditions? Shiva, as Bhairava, one of his manifestations, offered his own head as the ultimate gesture of surrendering the self. Self-decapitation has a long history as a Hindu image. How does this compare to Marc Quinn's *Self*?
- 4 Can you use any of this knowledge in making your own art, whether three or two dimensional?



Detail

COMPOSITION

CONTRASTS

Shiva is often worshipped as a single standing pillar, known as a *linga* or *lingam*. This is a male symbol, sometimes displayed in temples next to a female symbol, the yoni. The union of opposites, male (*purusha*) and female (*yakshis*), is represented on earth by Shiva and his bride Parvati. Shiva is a god who brings together

What is an ascetic?

An ascetic denies himself or herself luxuries, food, shelter and possessions in the search for a higher spiritual life. Dancing is often part of this search, the ascetic dancing until he or she reaches a mystic state. Matted hair is associated with holiness and penitence, showing that the ascetic concentrates on more than mere appearance. Rastafarians in Jamaica adopted

dreadlocks for the same reason. Asceticism is an important part of many faiths. In Christianity, Christ lived in the wilderness without food for 40 days and many Christians have copied him. Mary Magdalene is supposed to have lived alone in a cave in the French Alps after the crucifixion and images of her sometimes show long matted hair.

contrasts: day and night, life and death. This notion of contrast is clear throughout this work — the god is wearing male and female earrings.

The composition shows Shiva, as Supreme God and Lord of the Dance, in the Anandatandava position. Starting from the statue's top right, the viewer can see that:

- His hand holds a double-sided drum, a *damaru*. The beat of the drum starts the cycle of creation. The drum is made from the top part of two human skulls joined together with skin stretched over them. A stone or pellet attached by a string sounds the drum when it is spun.
- In his upper left hand, Shiva holds the opposite of creation, the flame of destruction. The god is shown overcoming the opposite sides of his nature, destroying one time cycle to create the next.
- His lower left hand points to his instep, where the worshipper might be safe, and to the dwarf of ignorance, Apasmara, on whom he treads with his right foot. By treading on one of his small followers, in this instance the personification of

ignorance, the sculpture reminds us that, beyond these clashing opposites, there is a higher unified reality.

- Shiva's lower right hand is posed with its palm toward us in a position called *abbayamudra*, which indicates that those who worship him should not be frightened of him.
- Within his wild flowing hair (*jatamukuta*), usually shown in a form of dreadlocks to symbolise that he is an ascetic, is the goddess of the river Ganges, who symbolises fertility.

FOLLOW UP: HAIR

Try finding contrasting representations of hair in art and advertising media. Then make your own visual researches of different hair types and arrangements under a series of contrasting titles: young/old, deep thought/frivolity, ascetic/rich.

CONTEXT

SOCIAL/CULTURAL

Indian figure sculptures have a series of distinct typical features. Some of their relevant characteristics are listed here:

- The underlying belief was that the more beautiful the figure, the more likely the gods would come down to earth and inhabit these earthly representations.
- The figures are usually standing, making meaningful gestures, particularly with the hands, which display divine beauty.
- The gods have broad shoulders, wide chests and slim waists, with the stomach slightly overhanging the belt.
- The goddesses have elaborate headdresses and jewellery, large round breasts, slim waists and wide hips.
- There is little attempt to show musculature or 'naturalistic' representation since these are images of perfect beauty.
- The stance of the figures is important. They appear to be holding their breath, because breath (*prana*) is the essence of life, and the control of breath is central to religious discipline.
- To further emphasise their superhuman nature, the standing figures bend at three points (the '*tribhanga*' pose): neck, shoulders and hips. The figures have many heads and/or arms, their multiple positions often being derived from dance, so as to make the poses even more graceful.
- Facial features are stereotyped, inward looking. Rarely do the gods leave their supernatural plane to directly engage the viewer. The faces are unnaturally calm, although some of the more bloodthirsty gods, such as Kali, have protruding eyes, long fangs and tongues dripping with blood.

Shiva and the chariot, part 1:

Remember that Shiva is both a creator and a destroyer. In the Mahabharata, in which many of the great Hindu myths are collected, the gods order a chariot for Shiva to destroy the triple cities, or worlds, of the universe — earth, sky and heaven. To make the chariot the gods bring together all the elements that had been dispersed at the first creation:

'The world-protectors, the rulers of the gods, water, the dead, and wealth, were made into the horses, and the snakes and others became bands to bind the manes of the horses. The day proceeding the new moon, the day after the full moon, the day of the new moon and the day of the full moon — these auspicious days they made the traces of the horses and the riders and the leather neck strap. Action, truth, asceticisms and profit were made the reins; mind was the base, and speech the chariot's path. Banners of various hues and patterns fluttered in the wind, and the chariot shone forth brilliantly, as it was girded with lightning and rainbows.'

Hindu Myths, translated by W. Doniger, 1975, page 132

FOLLOW UP: FACES

Try comparing the characteristic facial features of Indian sculptures with Western representations. Analyse those methods that represent thought, contemplation and spirituality. Try contrasting these quiet emotions with wilder expressions of feeling.

CONTEXT**OTHER IMAGES OF SHIVA**

These are some of the other forms in which Shiva appears:

- In abstract form, as a single, plain standing pillar, called a *linga* or *lingam*, usually put inside the temple.
- Shiva can also be seen in several human forms, sometimes as Bhairava, a wild man in a landscape accompanied by his dog. Bhairava was known for the worst of crimes, that of cutting off one of the five heads of the god Brahma; the fifth head was stuck to Bhairava's palm as he wandered the earth.
- Shiva may also be seen as Dakshinamurti, the wise, peaceful teacher or guru. Dakshinamurti is shown as a young ascetic, often seated, with matted hair and sometimes with four arms. He is usually near a tree, which in Buddhist theology is where the guru sits to give out wisdom.
- Shiva is often shown with his consort, or female partner, Parvati. Sometimes images of Shiva physically combine him with Parvati, for example *Painting of Ardhanarishvara*, late eighteenth/early nineteenth centuries, in which we can see both male and female sides combined. Shiva makes up one half of the figure (on the right, or male side). The male side is largely white and the river Ganges flows from his dreadlocks. On the left (female) side, Parvati is mainly red in colour and carries a lasso. Together they sit on a lion skin and in front of them is a bull, another of Shiva's symbols.

- In what are sometimes called 'holy family' images, Shiva, the male figure, is wrapped in snakes, while the female figure sits on a tiger skin holding an elephant-headed child (her son Ganesha). Their son the six-headed Skanda stands next to them with a peacock. Try comparing these holy family images, in which all Hindus know the meaning of each complex component, with Western images of Joseph, Mary and the infant Jesus.

FOLLOW UP

Shiva is a god of many contrasts, not least in his combination of male and female qualities. You could make a series of investigations yourself, based on the theme of combining male and female attributes in one coherent whole. Remember also to pay attention to the left and right sides of that whole.

WHERE TO GO NEXT...

POSES: EAST AND WEST

Looking at figures and their poses would be a logical route to pursue after this analysis. When setting up poses for figure drawing, compare the traditional contrapposto stance (derived from classical Greece) of the European figure tradition (i.e. one foot in front of the other, weight on one leg, head slightly turned) with the classical Indian '*tribhanga*' or three bends position. If you can, use a model.

POSES: HANDS AND GESTURES (*MUDRAS*)

It may be easier to concentrate on the language of hand gesture, known as '*mudras*'. This is a vast area both in Indian and other non-Western cultures. Examining the role of gesture in Western narrative paintings could be equally fruitful, for example the positions of the Madonna's hand as she makes a blessing in Leonardo's *Virgin of the Rocks*, 1508. It would be sensible to make drawings comparing hand movements from various cultures, but aim to move beyond those

Shiva and the chariot, part 2

'They made the body of the chariot out of the goddess Earth, garlanded with spacious cities, the supporter of all creatures, with her mountains, forests and islands. Mount Mandara was its axle; the great rivers were made its shanks; the regions of the sky and the intermediary directions were its cover. The dynasty of constellations became its shaft; the Krta Age became its yoke. The supreme snake Vasuki became the pole to which the yoke is fixed.'

Hindu Myths, translated by W. Doniger, 1975, page 131



PABLO PICASSO
The Three Dancers, 1925

first drawings to consider the results of those gestures. For example, what mark making materials could you hold in your hand as you make a particular gesture and on what medium could you work? Fine inks on cream paper for *abbayamudra*, perhaps, blue paint on canvas for the gestures of the Madonna, and so on.

DANCE: EAST AND WEST

There is a European tradition of gaining inspiration from dance (see the works of Degas), which could be compared with the long history of Indian sculpture and dancing gods. Are the positions the same? Could you draw Shiva in pastels in a Degas-like manner or a ballerina in the '*tribhanga*' position?

Alternatively, analyse a Western artist like Picasso and his aggressive imagery of dancers. Look at *The Three Dancers*, 1925. This is a painting full of the knowledge of the suicide of Picasso's friend Cassegmas, who had been rejected by a dancer; the dancing figure on the left looks especially horrific.

Step 1: Try examining *The Three Dancers* by looking at the arrangement of limbs, the violent angles they make and the way in which Picasso has emphasised his theme through the use of paint and texture.

Step 2: Now compare Picasso's work with the limbs and circle of Shiva Nataraja. You might do this by making an outline diagram of one image and superimposing it onto the other.

Step 3: Take another copy of the superimposed diagram and block out parts of one diagram to emphasise Picasso's aggression and the wildness of the dance. On the other diagram, bring out the Chola sculptor's elegant combination of limbs and gesture.

Step 4: By making further drawings, bring out Shiva's characteristic combination of male and female as opposed to Picasso's violent clash of the sexes.

Step 5: Can you use these two new images as the basis for work of your own that continues this sort of analysis?

POSES: CONTEMPORARY IMAGES OF SHIVA

It is worth searching out popular Hindu prints of the various manifestations of Shiva. They use powerfully strong colours and a rather cloying range of images, but it is worth comparing them with Western figurative imagery.

Step 1: Analyse how these prints work and what systems the artists have used to represent form.

Step 2: What is the characteristic range of colours, the palette, that is used in these prints?

Step 3: Try applying that visual language to your own figurative images taken from direct observation of the figure or suitable symbols.

Step 4: If possible, find work of the Singh sisters, British Sikh twins. The sisters work in the Indian miniature tradition but take images of celebrities like Beckham or Madonna and paint them as though they were Hindu gods, with many arms and all the right attributes.

POSES: CLOTH

Shiva Nataraja has a long scarf flowing from his waist and a fold of cloth over his right shoulder. You could relate this depiction of cloth to three Western examples:

1 Folds of cloth in Byzantine art are schematic. Look at the mosaics of San Vitale in Ravenna, Italy, such as *Emperor Justinian with his Retinue* (sixth to seventh century AD). In this early Christian mosaic, the long folds of clothing hang in parallel vertical lines, making a rhythmic geometric pattern and giving little sense of the figures underneath.



BERNINI *The Ecstasy of St Theresa*, 1645–52

2 The ultimate sculpture featuring moving drapery is Bernini's Baroque work *The Ecstasy of St Theresa*, in which an angel in wet-look billowing drapes is holding an arrow that has pierced the heart of the saint. Theresa is surrounded by huge quivering folds of heavy marble cloth that lead the viewer's eye to her heart.

As part of your study of Shiva, make comparisons between images of cloth in art in your sketchbook, then analyse pieces of actual cloth to replicate the emotions and techniques you have seen in the art.