

INDIAN SCHOOL MUSCAT
SENIOR SECTION - FINE ARTS DEPT
HISTORY OF INDIAN ART – INDIAN BRONZE SCUPTURES

CLASS XI – WORKSHEET No. 9

NATARAJ: THE DANCING SHIVA

Nataraja or nataraj, the dancing form of Lord Shiva, is a symbolic synthesis of the most important aspects of Hinduism, and the summery (cheerful) of the central tenets (belief) of this Vedic religion. The term ‘Nataraj’ means ‘King of Dancers’ (Sanskrit nata=dance; raja=king). In the words of Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, Nataraj are the “clearest image of the activity of God which any art or religion can boast of... A more fluid and energetic representation of a moving figure than the dancing figure of Shiva can scarcely be found anywhere.

The Origin of the Nataraj Form

An extraordinary iconographic representation of the rich and diverse cultural heritage of India, it was developed in southern India by the 9th and 10th century artists during the Chola period (880-1279) in a series of beautiful bronze sculptures. By the 19th century AD, it achieved canonical (established) stature and soon the Chola Nataraja became the supreme statement of Hindu Art.

The Vital Form and Symbolism:

In a marvelously unified and dynamic composition expressing the rhythm and harmony of life, Nataraj is shown with four hands representing the cardinal directions (four directions). He is dancing with his left foot elegantly raised and the right foot on a prostrate figure- “Apasmara Purusha”, the personification of illusion and ignorance over whom Shiva triumphs. The upper left hand holds a flame, the lower left points down to the dwarf who is shown holding a cobra. The upper right hand holds an hourglass drum or ‘dumroo’ that stands for the male-female vital principle, the lower shows the gesture of assertion (declaration): “Be without fear”. Snakes that stand for egotism are seen uncoiling from his arms, legs and hair which are braided and bejeweled. His matted locks are whirling as he dances with an arch of flames representing the endless cycle of birth and death. Goddess Ganga, the epitome of the holy river gangs also sits on his hairdo. His third eye is symbolic of his omniscience (unlimited knowledge), insight and enlightenment. The whole idol rests on a lotus pedestal, the symbol of the creative forces of the universe.

NATARAJ

