

THE RISE OF A GLOBAL ICON



How did Nataraja become an icon representing the Indian genius for sculpture? It all began in a small village near Madras just over a century ago.

With a leg up, arms across and framed within an aureole of flame, the iconography of Nataraja, cast in bronze, is possibly the ubiquitous example of Indian art. It has gone beyond the secluded portals of temples and museums to

reach living rooms, corporate lobbies and up-market lounges the world over. To the many admirers, this form of the dancing Siva, with its “sleek grace and calm agility”, is the “summation of Indian genius”.

Though Nataraja has existed in this form for more than a thousand years, its ascent to ubiquity and fame is a relatively recent phenomenon.

Interestingly, Binfield Havell, an art historian (who was a columnist for *The Hindu*), who was the first to spotlight it. A 114.5-cm bronze icon of Nataraja, discovered 106 years ago, that was in the Madras (now Chennai) Government Museum, was at the centre of it all.

Quiet beginnings

The story had a quiet beginning. In July 1905, K.V. Subramania Ayyar, a Tamil Assistant in Madras with the Archaeological Survey, visited Tiruvalangadu, further west, to recover two ancient copper plates from a temple. His abilities of persuasion got him not two, but 31 copper plates. He also managed to get a number of metal images, which the temple officials had found in an underground chamber. Not realising their importance, the Archaeological Survey, in its annual report to the government, recommended a routine acquisition of the images. Thus, in 1907, the Tiruvalangadu Nataraja and the other metal images reached the Madras Museum.

While the copper plates captured immediate attention and caused a sensation among archaeologists, the metal images got a less significant level of recognition in the Museum. Little did the authorities then know that events developing in

the Western art world would soon centre stage that bronze icon.

In the early part of the 20th century, influential orientalists hardly reckoned Indian sculpture to be art. In the words of Vincent Smith, "the figures both of men and animals [in Indian sculptures] become stiff and formal, and the idea of power is clumsily expressed by the multiplication of members." Even the official handbook to the Indian section of the Victoria and Albert Museum derided them. Indian sculptures, to the prejudiced eye, were 'puerile and detestable'.

But a group of people, including Havell, Ananda Coomaraswamy and William Rothenstein, took it upon themselves to challenge these opinions.

Havell, who worked in the Madras and Calcutta colleges of art for many years, was one of the earliest to argue for the artistic merits of Indian art. He denounced critics who reluctantly accepted Buddhist sculptures as poor versions of Greek and Roman art, and presented excellent examples of Indian art. In 1908, he put together his arguments and illustrated them in one of his important books, **Indian Sculpture and Painting**. The bronze sculpture of Nataraja, acquired by the Madras Museum in 1872 from Velankanni, found a prominent place in it.

However, Havell recalibrated his assessment when photos of the Tiruvalangadu bronze reached him. Though both the Nataraja icons were identical, he was clear about which one was preferred. "There is a great difference in the feeling which animates the two," he wrote in favour of the Tiruvalangadu Nataraja. He declared that the 'gaiety' of this

'delightful bronze' was 'the perfect art' and that it was superior to the 'trivial' sculpture of Gandhara, which was held in high esteem then. Havell published the photographs of the Tiruvalangadu bronze for the first time in 1911 in his book, **The Ideals of Indian Art**.

Around that time, Coomaraswamy, the art theorist, also took on critics who dubbed Indian sculptures with many arms and heads as 'hideous'. In an important essay published in 1913, he demonstrated that multiple limbs helped stage a 'sculpture drama', and exhibited 'the wonderful creative energy of the Indian genius'. He made this point first by using the 'profoundly expressive' figure of Durga, and followed it up with the 'perfectly balanced' Tiruvalangadu bronze. When Coomaraswamy reworked this essay in 1918, the Tiruvalangadu Nataraja moved up the list of examples.

Crucial role

Coomaraswamy's seminal work, titled **The Dance of Siva**, played an important role in popularising Nataraja. This much-cited essay 'decoded' the art and made the meaning accessible to many. However, it did not receive much notice when first published in 1912, in a Saiva Siddantha journal without any illustration. But its reprint in 1918, as part of a book under the same name by a New York publisher, reached audiences across the world. Coomaraswamy used the photograph of the Tiruvalangadu bronze as the frontispiece.

Havell and others pointed to the merits of Indian art, but their reputation as 'friends of Indian art' came in the way of some critics accepting their assessment. However, finally,

doubts about the significance of Indian sculptures came to rest in 1921.

Auguste Rodin, considered the 'father of modern sculpture', was widely respected for his works such as 'Thinker' (1904). When the photographs of the Tiruvalangadu and Velankanni bronzes reached him, probably given by Rothenstein or Victor Goloubew, a French art enthusiast and photographer who had lived in Pondicherry for a short time, the plastic quality of the sculptures captivated Rodin. In the elegance of these bronzes, he found 'grace' and 'above the grace' he admired their 'modeling'. Nataraja sculptures were the 'perfect expression of rhythmic movement in the world', he waxed eloquent. These comments, coming as they did from a revered sculptor, created a stir and led to the instant popularity of the Nataraja form.

Rodin wrote his essay on the dancing Siva (in French) a couple of years before he died in 1917, but it was posthumously published in 1921. The same year, the English translation of the article appeared in the Indian art journal *Rupam*. Though images of the Velankanni and Tiruvalangadu bronzes accompanied Rodin's essay, there was little doubt about which among the two had created an impact.

Opinions on Indian art, as Havell himself remarked, changed in the later part of 1920s. Images of the Tiruvalangadu Nataraja began to appear regularly in essays and books. For example, Stella Kramrisch, an authority on Indian art, in 1922 used the sculpture as an illustration with her article on space in Indian sculpture. Havell, too, in 1928, when he rewrote his book, **Indian Sculpture and Painting**, chose to print the Tiruvalangadu bronze instead of the Velankanni

one. Almost at the same time, Rabindranath Tagore, who was friends with Havell, Coomaraswamy and Rothenstien, composed a play titled Nataraja: Ritu-rangashala (Nataraja : A Theatre of Seasons). It was more than a coincidence that the practice of displaying Nataraja sculpture in the stage during Bharatanatyam dance performances as studies show commenced only after 1930.

Enduring spell

The spell of Nataraja was well cast and the process of 'grooming' the image was complete. Museums across the world could not help but compare their own bronzes with the "famous example in the Madras Museum". Cleveland museum, for instance, in 1930, took pride that its own Nataraja "fails by only three and a half centimetres" when compared with the Madras icon. Newspapers, as *The Hindu* did in 1941, featured the Tiruvalangadu bronze as one of the world's most delightful bronzes. The Indian postal department was not far behind. When it decided to publish a definitive series of 16 stamps focusing on Indian heritage in 1949, the Tiruvalangadu icon was a natural choice.

In many ways, the exhaustive account given in 1974 of Nataraja in art and literature by C. Sivaramamurti, the reputed art historian, firmed up the significance of this sculptural form and summed up its renown. In Sivaramamurti's list, too, the Tiruvalangadu bronze found a special place. After analysing hundreds of sculptures, he concluded that it was "the best known image of its kind in any public museum". The journey came a full circle in 1992 when the Madras museum published a brief catalogue of its select bronzes. The Velankanni bronze was left out, but

Tiruvalangadu Nataraja adorned the cover, and prominently included in the catalogue.

The sculpture of Nataraja continues to be reinvented. Its cosmic symbolism now has a new-age interpretation, and this has helped it circulate further. In 2004, the icon of the dancing Siva reached the lawns of the CERN building in Geneva, where the search for the 'God particle' is now under way.

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