

Thaṅjāvūr Art Gallery and Cōlā Bronzes An Aesthetic Appraisal*

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The Cōlās were rulers of coastal Tamilnadu from time immemorial to the mid-thirteenth century AD with a break from about AD 250 to AD 850. The great line of rulers, beginning with Vijāyālāya and going through Rājarāja the Great, are called Imperial Cōlās who expanded their kingdom from the littorals of Tamilnadu and held sway over a vast tract of land in the South. Under Rājarāja I and Rājēndra I, the Cōlās proclaimed their hegemony over Śrī Lanka and sent their army as far as upto Bengal in Eastern India and Kaḍāram in the Malay peninsula. The kings, queens and chieftains of this family had left their long lasting contributions to art and architecture. Best known among them are the bronzes, stone sculptures and hundreds of architectural masterpieces which spread over the various parts of peninsular India. The art history of Tamilnaḍu as such had its inception right from the pre-historic times and the best examples are the rock paintings sporadically distributed in the hilly terrains of the land. Artistic refinements started under the Pallavas of Kāñchīpuram who ruled from c. AD 580 to AD 850. The architectural and iconographical monuments, having a distinct style, are mainly found at Māmallapuram and Kāñchīpuram. By and large, the Pallavas excelled in stone. The golden period of Cōlās was known for a prolific production in bronzes, noted for their exquisite perfection and unique style. So, it is opined that bronze casting in South India reached the apex of glory under the Cōlās (Agrawala, 1976: 30). The earliest surviving examples of metal imagery in Tamilnadu are dated from the times of the Great Cōlā Emperor, Rājarāja I (c. AD 985 to AD 1012) (Chintamanikar, 1962: 8). These images are found in a number of temples in the Kāvēri delta and

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many of the museums, both public and private, in India and abroad. It is, indeed, a matter of pride if a museum includes a Cōlā bronze in its catalogue.

The Art Gallery at Thaṅjāvūr is lodged in the Marāṭha Palace of the eighteenth century AD in one of its sections called *Vasanthamaṇḍapa*, about a kilometre from the railway station. About 60 Cōlā bronzes are housed in the gallery, which were collected from the temples of Cōlānāḍu region in Tamilnadu. Noted among the specimens are Naṭarāja (plate 1), Somāskanda (6), Kalyāṇasundaramūrti, Bhikṣātanamūrti (plate 5), Tri-purāntakamūrti (5), Viṅādharadaḱṣināmūrti (2) Ṛṣabhavāhanamūrti (plate 3), Condraśekhara, Bhairava, Kālī, Tiruṅṅānacampantar, Māṅikkavācakar, Sundarara Kaṅṅappaṅ (plate 6), Gaṅapati, Murukaṅ and so on. Many of these images were chance findings and discovered during the renovation in the medieval temples. Thus, the art gallery is a treasure-house, having the artistic specimens of everlasting character which explicitly proclaim the cultural importance of Tamilnadu. By virtue of this collection, the art gallery occupies a significant place among the Indian museums.

I. NAṬARĀJA

The Cōlā bronzes of unblurred and unblemished aesthetic value bespeak the mastermind of the medieval sculptors of sound scholarship. The images of Naṭarāja (plate 1), noted for their distinguishing style, reveal the unparalleled and outstanding skill of the artists who were relentless and untiring in their efforts.

One of the images on the subject is from Tiruviḍaimarudūr. It is noted for its fine finishing and rare iconographical features. The Lord, who is usually decorated with a flowing headgear called *paṅittacaḍai* in the Tamil hymn-books (Kalidosa, 1988: 434-5), is seen in this masterpiece without the *jaṭās* (locks of hair), arranged into a crown and so Śiva is said to wear a *jaṭāmakūṭa*. The decorative element appearing on the head consists of only peacock feathers and the skull (*kapāla*). Dated in the tenth century AD, each and every detail in the image is very delicately worked out. Conceptually a novel theme, it is both iconographically and iconometrically a masterpiece. Studded with a number of ornaments, the Lord poses majestically. He bears the *ardhacandra* 'crescent' on head. A *nāga* (snake) is also fitted. The high relief representation of *nāga* and *kapāla* increase the elegance of the head-dress. The hemlock (*dhatūra*) flower is also seen which adds to the aesthetic value and

thereby makes the image more enchanting and enrapturing.

The workmanship of the face is par excellence. The sharpness of the nose adds to the beauty of the face. The incised lines mark the eyes and the eye brows. A *patrakunḍala* adorns the left ear and a *makara kunḍala* the right one. Thus, studded with classical norms of iconic presentation, the facial expression of the 'king of dancers' (*naṭarāja*) is suggestive of the transcendental bliss. The neck is moulded in a manner, suggesting strength and vigour. The neck wears a *kañṭhi* (necklace) and *hāra* (garland). The sacred thread *yajñopavīta* is wavy and presents a charming outlook.

The lower left arm in *gajahasta* posture is set elegantly and suggests the tossing movements of an elephant's proboscis. The tapering arms with the tender fingers enhance the charm. An exceptionally remarkable workmanship is visible in the depiction of the torso which is finely moulded and rhythmically carved. The upper cloth spreads out gracefully. The three other arms of the Lord are carelessly thrown out with ease and confidence. The upper right hand holds the *damaru* (Skt.) or *Uḍukkai* (Tamil) which is symbolic of the creative function. The right lower hand is in *abhaya mudrā* (protection affording posture), and entwined by a *nāga*. It is interesting to note that even a venomous reptile poses to be artistically superior when it is fitted into the hand of Śiva, who animates all cosmic activities.

The legs are arranged dramatically and their balanced position is a positive proof of the sculptor's skill at all levels of iconic composition. In all, the Naṭaraja image under review is evidence of deep-rooted tradition in respect of bronze casting. The Lord dances to the tune of cosmic integration and disintegration with the right leg firmly rooted on earth and the left one is gracefully lifted in *kuñcita* posture. Thus, one may see the unseeable foot and so the Tamil hymner says 'I have seen the Lord's feet and I have learnt the unknown secrets' (Kalidos, 1983: 20-1). Decorated with *īrakkalal* and *pādasarams*, ornaments fitted below the knee, the *eduttapōrpādam* lifted golden leg is symbolic of cosmic function to use the phraseology of Tamil Nāyaṁmārs.¹

Apsasmāra, the evil-incarnate, lies trampled. He looks at the Lord with an awful face. The flames which enircle the *prabhāmaṇḍala* are myriad and proclaim the cosmic character and presence of Śiva-Naṭarāja. Verily the Cōlā bronzes on the theme are the best known and stand proof of the great line of rulers who broadcasted India's cultural hegemony over South Asia.

II. ŚIVAKĀMASUNDARĪ

Śivakāmasundarī (plate 2) is one of the beloveds of the cosmic dancer, who performs the *ānandatāṇḍavam* 'dance of bliss'. Devī stands on a *padmaṭīṭha* in *divbhaṅga* posture. She wears a *kaṇḍamakūṭa*. She has two arms, arranged in *kaṭaka* and *ḍola hastas*. She also wears *makarakuṇḍalas*, *bahulamālās* and other ornaments. The breasts are full and make the figure young and energetic. On the waist, a girdle fitted with the rows of pearls appears. All such ornamental details add to the mystery of the figure who is the beloved of Śiva, called Śivakāmī.

III. RṢABHAVĀHANAMŪRTI

Rṣabhavāhanamūrti (plate 3) is one who appears in the company of his vehicle (*vāhana*) and the bull (*rṣabha*). There is an epigraphical record mentioning the gift of this image (*ARE* no. 456, 1918). Basing on this evidence the image is dated AD 1011 or 1012 (Sreenivasan, 1963: 102, Nagaswamy 1960: 115). Śiva who usually wears a *jaṭā makuṭa* is found wearing a turban in the present bronze which adds a new dimension to the work. It looks fine to see the Lord wearing a layman's head-dress. This type of dress we do not find in any other work. The image is bent to lean against the Nandi Bull who is actually missing. The Lord stands with the right leg crossed over the left. The stance is *tribhaṅga*. Unusually the Lord is *dvibhuja*. He wears the crescent and *datūrā* flower on head. The face is round in shape. The ornamental details enhance qualities of iconomic refinement. The Lord is accompanied by his spouse. This image is unique for the rare qualities it includes. Feminine tenderness, the graceful form and flexional beauty make it rather unparalleled. Added with decorative exuberance and displaying a graceful and charming physique, the image lends enduring delight to the Sahridaya world that beholds Devi and the Lord together (Ramachandran, 1956, 1957). So, this pair is a marvel and can stand in comparison with the best works of bronzes of the world. According to C. Śivaramamurti (1965, p. 211), this is the best among Cōlā bronzes.

The novel type of *tiara* (an ornament fixed on the forehead) appearing on the image is a matter for enquiry. In Tamil tradition the turban is mostly attributed to the agriculturists. So, the Lord's association with the peasants is implicitly pointed out. Again images of the type are usually taken in procession to the river on ceremonial or festival occasions for showering rains. This association of the cosmic Lord with

ordinary human beings would point out the subtle elements known to the Indian artistic tradition. Art is not only for the elite, it is created for the folk as well. The back view is also an enchanting one (plate 4).

IV. KALYĀNASUNDARAMŪRTI

Among the group of bronzes of the 'Golden Age of Cōlā Art' which crystallised under Rājarāja I, Kalyānasundaramūrti (bridegroom) is one. Śiva as Sundara (bridegroom), the handsome one, at the time of marriage with Umā is called Kalyānasundaramūrti. Both their hands are united in this form. Umā is given in marriage to Śiva by Viṣṇu, the former's brother, accompanied by Lakṣmi. All constitute a group of four.

Kalyānasundara stands in *abhaṅga*, straight posture. With the lower right hand, he holds the right hand of Umā. Lakṣmī is seen taking the bride with her as the bride's maid. Viṣṇu poses the hands as though to pour the sanctified water. This is part of the wedding ritual by which the gift of the girl, *kannikādāna* (Tamil) or *kannyādāna* (Skt.), is performed in Hindu society. Among the four figures, Śiva is the most important person. He is iconometrically taller than others. Śiva's right leg is bent and the left one is erect. The two back hands hold the *ṭaṅka* (axe) and *mṛga* (deer). The *jaṭāmakūṭa* (matted locks) adorns the head. The third eye (*trīṭīyanetra*) is prominently shown. Usual emblems like the crescent, *datūrā* flower and skull also appear. The countenance is round. The nose, eyebrows, lips and chin are carved with classical intricacy and remind us of the *bhakti* text, *kunitta puruvamum* (eyebrows), *kovvaiccevvāy* (*kovvai* fruit like reddish lips) (cf. Kalidos, 1988: 434). The Lord wears all kinds of ornaments, the sacred thread and so on. The shoulders are broad. The matted locks are gracefully spread over Śiva's shoulders. The gestures are natural and add to the qualities of aesthetic delicacy. The loin cloth is arranged in a wave-like fashion. The broad girdle is intricately carved with floral designs. The *śirasakra* is petalled and elaborately ornamented.

Umā in the company of Kalyānasundara stands truly like an Indian bride. The bodily flexion, the delicate treatment of ornamentation are so effective that this piece is considered to be the gem of its kind. The figure shows the bloom of youthful qualities. Devī is shy and has the head slightly bent to point out the bridal coyness. The arms and legs are elongated. The lowered right hand is held tightly by Śiva with all masculine aggressiveness. How long had the Mahāyogi (Śiva) waited for

such an occasion? And now the dream has been transformed into reality. Devī's left hand is in *kaṭaka mudrā* as though to hold a flower. The *karāṇḍa makūṭa* has three tiers with a knob at the top. A thick fillet of excellent workmanship, added with a cluster of petals, adorns the body. The body, the breasts (*mulai*-Tamil), (*stanam*-Skt.) and all other details are wrought so affectively that the image appears one of the best.

Viṣṇu stands in *abhaṅga* posture. The *krīṭamakūṭa* (royal head dress) that the Lord wears is majestically ornamented. Being the bridegroom's aide, Viṣṇu is richly decorated and his face expresses divine happiness. He wears a circular necklace (*kaṇṭhi*), an archaic type of *yajñopavīta* and a broad *udarabariḍha*. The locks are curly and roll over the right shoulder. The *śrīvatsa* mark is seen on the chest of Viṣṇu denoting Lakṣmī's presence. Viṣṇu bears his usual emblems, *śaṅkha* (conch) and *cakara* (wheel), in the two back hands. The Lord also wears a *śirasakra* (wheel behind the head).

The image of Lakṣmī, attending on Umā, is a novel idiom. Usually in Kalyāṇasundaramūrti panels we do not come across Lakṣmī. The classical stone images are found in the cave temples of Elephanta, Ellora (Caves, XXI, XXIV) and at other places but normally Lakṣmī fails to appear. So, the bronze under study introduces a new element and thus adds to the iconographical exuberance of the subject. Devī wears the *kuccabandha* (breast ornament), *patrakuṇḍalas* (leaf ornament), *cannavīra* (crossed belt), usually attributed to warrior deities, the *māṅgalyasūtra* (symbolic of married lady), *valayas* (wrist ornament), *keyūras* (shoulder ornament) and so on. The *māṅgalyasūtra*, sacred thread tied to the neck at the time of marriages in Hindu families (equal to the ring), fails to appear in the image of Umā which means the marriage ritual is not yet complete. That is to say the *māṅgalyasūtra* is tied only after gifting away the girl in marriage ceremony (*kannikādāna*). Thus the ornamentation in respect of Umā and Lakṣmī carry some sociological values. Lakṣmī is also happy and the facial expression to this effect makes the image typical of the Cōlā style.

The four images which illustrate the Kalyāṇasundara theme represent a micro view of the social life of the Tamils. Usually the *kannikādāna* ceremony is conducted by the father of the bride. So, in north Indian representations mostly Himāvan, father of Umā, appears in the panel. But in the Tamil tradition, usually Viṣṇu appears. This happens only when the father is not available. Due to this reason, Viṣṇu

is present. Even now this is a living tradition in Tamilnadu. The marriage of Śiva and Mīnākṣī in the famous temple at Madurai is conducted by Viṣṇu during the annual marriage festival. Thus the Cōlā bronzes represent the society and social practices very intricately.

V. BHIKṢĀṬANAMŪRTI

The date of the image has been determined with reference to an epigraph which notes an image of Piccadēvar of AD 1048. According to Douglas Barrett (1965: 85), this is an excellent specimen of Cōlā style of the ninth century AD. The head of the image is intricately carved (plate 5).

Bhikṣāṭanamūrti or begging form of Śiva is one in which he roams about the cosmos as mendicant holding a *kapāla* (skull) in his hand. This represents the skull of Brahmā whose fifth head the Lord had torn due to a provocation. It resulted in *brahamahatti* 'sin of killing a *brāhmaṇa*'.² So the Lord wandered about like a mendicant and finally got rid of the sin at Varāṇasī after receiving a handful of food through the hands of Lakṣmī. The image under study is noted for its rhythm and life. The Cōlā artists had given real life to the subject through this wonderful piece. The Lord wears a *jaṭāmakuṭa*, fitted with a skull. The locks are arraged in *keśabandha* style and tied with a *nāga* and the *ardhacandra* (half-moon). The fillet is decorated with tassels. The left ear is fitted with a *patrakuṇḍala* (leave-ring). The face is square in form and adds another dimension to the Cōlā skill in making bronzes elegant by the different types of facial forms. The eyes are voluptuous and make one fall in love with him at the first sight. The ornaments such as *yajñopavīta*, *mālās*, etc., are odd indeed. It is really Śiva who could wear ornaments on his person and yet beg for food.

Added to the other classical qualities of iconography is the nudity. Usually the mendicant appears nude. According to another myth of Bhikṣāṭana he is said to have visited the forest of sages and hermits in order to teach them a lesson who were proud of their occult powers (Kalidos, 1986: 184-86). Once the spouses of ascetics (*ṛṣīpatnīs*) saw the beautiful mendicant Śiva and they ran after him. So, normally, Bhikṣāṭanamūrti images appear nude. The effect in bronzes is highly tempting and make spectators fall in love with the Lord. So, the expression of nudity in bronzes is appealing if not appalling when cast in bronze medium.

VI. BHAIRAVA

Bhairava is a terrific form of Śiva. He also appears nude but the hallmark of Bhairava is that he appears with a dog. The locks are braided and arranged in a beautiful form and it serves the purpose of a *bhamaṇḍala*. On the head is seen a projected knob. A serpent is seen on one side and both the crescent and the *dhatūra* flower are seen on the other side. Six tassels are shown, three on each side of the *jaṭāmaṇḍala*. The fillet consists of flower designs. The *yajñopavīta* is twisted like a rope and is made of two strands. The Lord also wears a *muṇḍamālā* (garland of skull) which is the special feature of this figure. Two serpents are seen with their bodies twisted and going round the waist. The hoods of the snakes adorn the thighs and serve as decorative elements. The armllets consist of *nāga-valayas*. The upper right hand holds a *ḍamarū*. The upper left hand holds a *ghaṇṭa*, (bell). The lower most left hand holds a skull. The remaining hands are in the *kaṭaka mudrā*.

VII. SOMĀSKANDAMŪRTI

Images of Somāskanda consist of Śiva, Umā and the baby Skanda. Normally Śiva and his consort are seated in *sukhāsana* and *lalitāsana* postures respectively. Skanda appears on Umā's lap in a dancing posture. He may also be sitting at times. Śiva in the art gallery piece is four armed (*caturbhujā*) and holds the *paraśu* and *mṛga* in back hands. The *mṛga* (antelope) is found mirthfully jumping. Wearing the usual emblems and crests, the Lord poses majestically. The combination of Śiva, Umā and Skanda unite concepts of love, beauty and wisdom (Kalidos, 1988a). The Pallavas created the best of Somāskanda images in their rock cut and structural temples of which the best examples may be found at Māmallapuram and Kāñchīpuram. The Cōlās produced the classical impressions in bronze. These art forms of bronze, typical of Tamilnadu, are to this day used during annual festivals for processional purposes.

VIII. CANDRAŚEKHARA

The Lord who wears the moon crest on his *tiara* is called Candraśekhara. He holds the *paraśu* (axe) and *mṛga* in back hands. This is the normal pattern. But in a particular specimen in the art gallery these two are reversed.

IX TRIPURĀNTAKAMŪRTI

Tripurāntaka is one who subdued the demons, called Tripurāri. Normally he stands holding a bow. The image in the Art Gallery is poised with dignity and cast in elegant proportion. The face is full of mirth and suggests the ease with which he destroyed the triple cities. Śiva's face is oval and thubby. Eyebrows are ridge-like and the eye-lids moulded in a classical manner. The lips are sensitive. The Lord's counterpart, Tripurasundari, is also represented in bronzes. She is iconometrically shorter than the Lord. The image is slightly *dvibhaṅga*. The face is oval. Devi is expected to stand by the side of Śiva as an eye witness to the *tour de force* performed by the latter.

X. KAṆṆAPPAN

Kaṇṇappaṇ (plate 6) was an ardent devotee of Śiva who did not hesitate to offer his own eyes (*kaṇ-sTamil*) to the Lord during a ritual *pūjā*. So, he is celebrated in the Tamil tradition and his story incorporated in *Periya Purāṇam*, a Tamil work which recounts the greatness of Śiva and his devotees.³ The images of Kaṇṇappaṇ appear in art since the Cōlā period. The bronze found in the Thaṅjāvūr Art Gallery is one of the best on the subject.

Kaṇṇappaṇ is two-handed. He holds a bow and bears the plucked out eye in the other hand. The price is indeed heavy because for love of the Lord he is ready to sacrifice his eyes. He is decorated with a *keśa-bandha*, fitted with peacock feathers. The garment is made of hide. Being a member of the hunters' family, he wears a *cannavīra*. He wears rings in ears. Scholars opine that this is an image noted for its tenderness and intensity (Nagaswamy, 1983:11).

Apart from Kaṇṇappaṇ, other sages like Paṭṭinattār, Appar, Sundarar, Māṅikkavācakar and Sambandhar also appear in bronzes. These constitute the most outstanding among the Cōlā works.

XI. CONCLUSION

The Cōlās who excelled in the art of war were also masters in the art of peace. Their temples are found scattered all over South India and few of them in Śrī Lanka. The Kāvēri basin, however, is the homeland of Cōlā art and in most temples here one may come across the handwork of Cōlā art in the form of bronzes, stone sculptures and several other

architectural masterpieces. It is in bronze the Cōlās stand unparalleled in the art history of South and South-East Asia. The Nepali bronzes of the Tāntric Buddhist Order and the Pāla bronzes of the Bengal are there but the style and workmanship in Cōlā bronzes is unexcelled. Several images of Śīva, as exemplified in the paper, broadcast the greatness of Cōlā artists whose descendants still live and foster the bronze casting technique in places like Swāmimalai and Kum̄bhakōṇam in Tamilnadu, both in the Thaṅjāvūr district. Images of Naṭarāja, Kalyāṇasundara, Bhikṣāṭana and so on are but few of the samples, housed in the Thaṅjāvūr Art Gallery, but to obtain a full picture of Cōlā bronzes one may have to visit the villages in the nooks and corners of the Kāvēri basin. The river valley is noted for its fertility and the ever-green paddy fields which spread over the entire landmass in the far south of peninsular India. Added to this gift of nature, the Cōlās made the arts of the region also fertile by their immortal contributions which remain perpetually green in the mind of a connoisseur of art. The facets of this artistic glory still remain totally unexplored and more work is needed to add one more dimension to the perspective of South-East Asian art.

Art in South-East Asia is not for art's sake. The symbols frozen into the several masterpieces carry eternal values of spiritual nature and animate human souls. Several nationals visit the Thaṅjāvūr Art Gallery and practically dance to the tune of the Lord of dancers sounds the musical instrument, *ḍamarū*. The curator told us that once an European lady wanted to hug the image of Tiruṅṇācampantar, a prodigious hymner and Tamil *bhakti* savant. She is said to have felt the flow of milk in her breasts. Such is the impact that the Cōlā bronzes have on the living world today. Several of the Art Gallery pieces have travelled the world over and participated in international exhibitions in London, New York, Moscow and other places. What was once in a dark corner of the South Indian temple in a slumbering village is now on a world map and enjoys international appreciation and approbation. Credit should go to the Cōlās who fostered the immortal arts nearly 1000 years ago.

NOTES

1. Tamil mystics who are sixty three in number and have contributed tens of thousands of hymns which made the *bhakti* (devotional) cult strong in South India. The Nāyanmārs were Śaivas.

2. For a detailed study see Kalidos (1989: 24-9).
3. Also called *Tiruttonḍar Purāṇam* (Mythology of the Holy Servants [of God]); the book was written in the twelfth century AD by Cēkkiḷār.

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Plate I



Plate 2



Plate 3

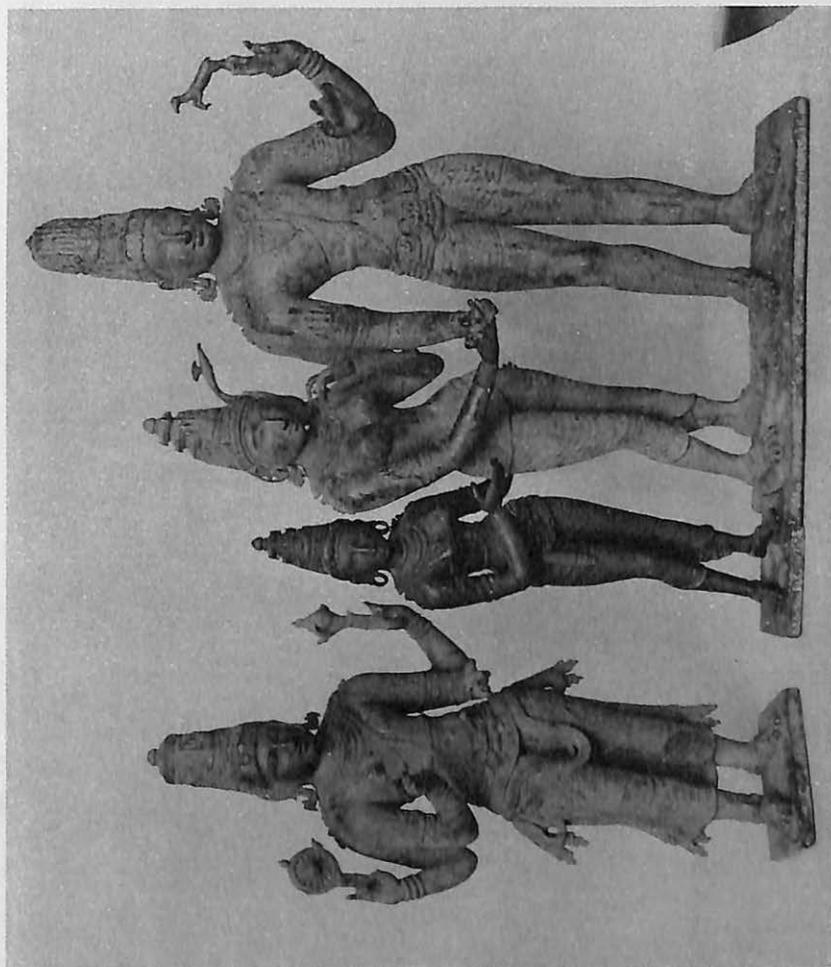


Plate 4



Plate 5



Plate 6

