

Lot 243

A RARE, LARGE AND VERY HEAVY BRONZE FIGURE OF VISHNU

South India

Chola to Vijayanagar Period

Bronze

Height: 42.5 cm

The current lot likely represents a hitherto unknown type of temple bronze dating to as early as the 11th century during the reign of the Chola. The iconography and casting techniques are suggestive of this South Indian origin, with influences also present from Southeast Asia.

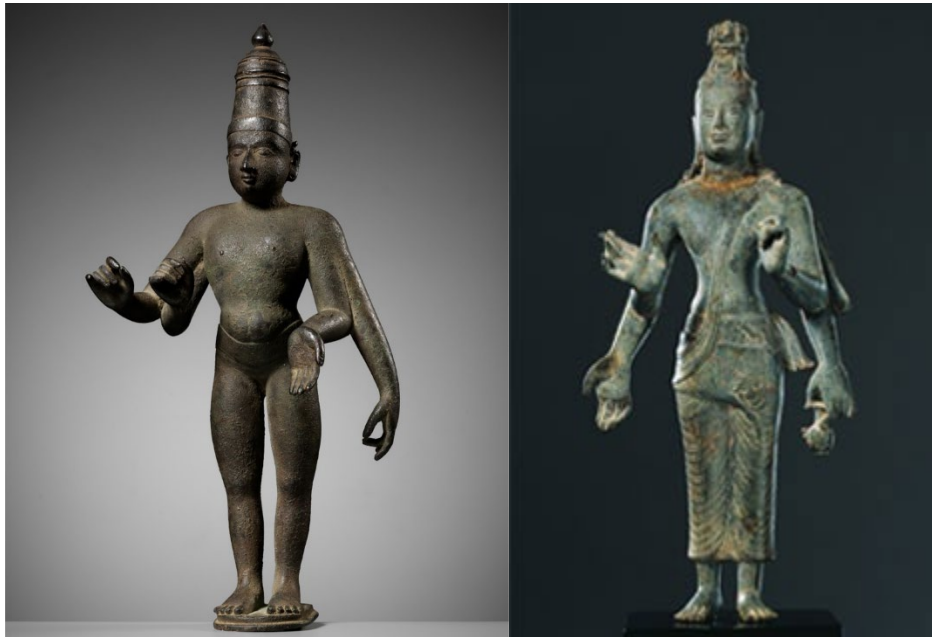


Fig 1. Lot 243 next to No. 1979.041 of the Asian Art Society, gift of John D. Rockefeller.

Figure 1 shows lot 243 next to a bronze figure of Vishnu from the collection of John D. Rockefeller. The Rockefeller bronze, dated from the 7th to 8th century, was unearthed on the Island of Sulawesi and is believed to have traveled all the way from Sri Lanka. Both examples follow an archetype that is seen throughout Southeast Asia in various representations of Avalokiteshvara. These representations give us stylistic comparisons for historical and geographical placement within the trade routes of the Bay of Bengal during the Chola and Vijayanagar Empires. Early Indian influence from the Tamil region is clear in the casting techniques and simplified iconography of lot 243, in addition to foreign influences from a subordinate kingdom elsewhere in the Bay of Bengal.

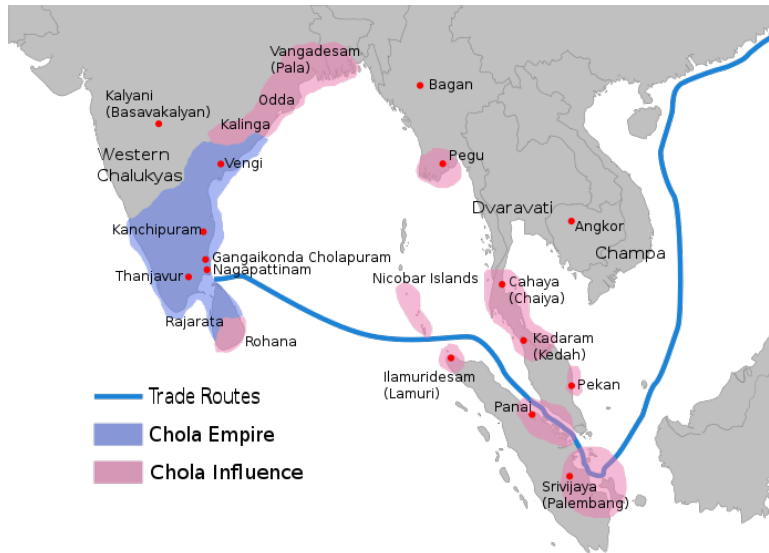


Fig 2. Extent of the Chola Empire circa 1030 AD

Once Indian empires like the Chola expanded and settled throughout Southeast Asia, it is certain that they would've commissioned local artisans to assist with building new temples and casting new bronzes. These artisans would've been required to adapt their style and techniques to an unfamiliar set of Hindu iconographies, resulting in a new body of work with particularly unique nuances serving as an artistic bridge between two cultural styles.



Fig 3. An assemblage of Southeast Asian bronze from the collections of Avery Brundage and John D. Rockefeller

It's likely that lot 243 was a commission for such a temple in a newly dominated area outside of India, utilizing the techniques and iconography already in use by local craftsmen to make the introduction of new religious beliefs and deities more palatable to the local population. Figure 3 shows a grouping of closely related bronzes depicting various incarnations of Vishnu in a manner that is closely related to the current lot. It is believed that the current lot is an image of Rama, the seventh incarnation of Vishnu.

Depiction in this form would have maintained a relatable quality to the bronze that is so often not seen in other more elaborate castings of the Chola and Vijayanagar periods, reminding the faithful of this new territory that they are looking at a god very similar to what they are already familiar with.



Fig 4. Lot 243 positioned between bronzes from Tamil Nadu and Thailand

Figure 4 shows the current lot positioned as an intermediary force between two well-defined styles present from at least the 8th century on, allowing one to see the extent of cross-cultural influence. The unfamiliar dress and implements have been discarded for the simple attire of the ascetic deities worshipped in Southeast Asia. In addition to these changes, we see an enhanced physical appearance. The purposeful integrity and strength of the bronze have been maintained while appealing to the foreign audience.



Fig 5. Comparison of the current lot with the base of a Chola bronze

Despite the variation from the traditional Chola and Vijayanagar style, lot 243 retains subtle characteristics consistent with the manufacture of bronzes made in the Tamil region during these periods. The base of the statue, for example, is a small circular disc and would've been fitted into a separately cast hollow pedestal with apertures for either carrying or attaching to a wooden chariot. Figure 5 shows how the upper lip of the separately cast pedestal would've been pounded down around the feet of the statue while the bronze was still hot. This is not a technique found in the Southeast Asian depictions of Vishnu or Avalokiteshvara.



Fig 6. Ritually dressed and adorned processional bronze

The ascetic characteristics of the Southeast Asian bronze and their dress would've married well to use as a processional bronze, with the body almost completely bare and the ears having piercings, suggestive of ritual adornment with clothing and jewelry. Figure 6 shows the traditional dress and jewelry attended to statues for processions in South India.

While these features all provide significant clues to the bronze's origin, they are also executed with a unique flavor that places lot 243 parallel to known Chola and Vijayanagar bronzes. We must conclude that the variations in iconography are a result of necessary Southeast Asian influence during a time of expanding territories and that the current lot may even date to a period several centuries earlier than previously believed.

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