Divine on Display: The Śiva Nataraja Bronze in an American Museum

Nina Cavazos
College of William and Mary

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Divine on Display: The Śiva Nataraja Bronze in an American Museum

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Bachelors of Arts in Art History with a minor in Religious Studies from The College of William and Mary

by

Nina Cavazos

Accepted for ____________________________
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______________________________
Dr. Ravi Gupta, Advisor

______________________________
Dr. Grey Gundaker

______________________________
Dr. Charles Palermo

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Feet will dance,
eyes will see,
tongues will sing,
and not find content.
What else, what else
shall I do?

-Basavaṇṇa, 487

For the sculptors of Śiva, who created out of love.
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Śiva Appears on Uncommon Ground

Frozen in the wild ananda tandava that perpetuates the cycle of creation and destruction necessary to maintain our cosmos, the Śiva Nataraja transcends his bronze trappings and emanates a divine presence that compels his audience to remain transfixed in a state of reverence. Śiva, the god who once drank the venom from the primordial waters as the gods and demons looked on in fear,¹ and later offered up his matted ascetic’s hair to catch the falling goddess Gaṅgā,² now displays his fiery power in full; he is caught suspended in air, one leg lifted high as the other stands upon a dwarf, and his four hands fly through the air in their tasks of the almighty. If we listen closely we can hear the drumbeat that keeps time to the god’s dancing feet.

When standing before the Śiva Nataraja, we are meant to imagine Śiva with blue skin, and his body smeared with funerary ash.³ His matted dreadlocks, a sign of ascetic renunciation,⁴ bounce high in the air and in an upper left strand we see a mermaid meant as a personification of the goddess Gaṅgā; once when the goddess agreed to descend upon the earth as restoring waters after years of drought, Śiva caught her in his hair so that she might not destroy anything in her path with her power and instead fall to earth as gentle rain.⁵ Śiva wears a halo-like ornament as a crown upon a head that bears three eyes, and has ears of two different shapes to represent his dual masculine and feminine nature.⁶ He wears clothes of

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¹ Ramesh Menon, Šiva: The Šiva Purana Retold, (New Delhi: Rupa Co, 2006), 78.
² Kirit Mankodi, "Gaṅgā Tripāthaga," Artibus Asiae, 35, no. 1 (1973): 139-144, Mankodi also explains differences in narrative structure found in multiple texts that tell this story.
⁵ Kirit Mankodi, 139.
the brahmin, and snakes slither about his body. He holds a drum in his upper right hand that keeps rhythm to his dance of bliss, or ananda tandava, and this drum beat considered the heartbeat of our universe. His lower left hand is upheld in the abhaya mudra, which is a sign of benediction and the absence of fear, while his lower right hand is held in the gaja hastra mudra, and points to the dwarf mala upon whom Śiva stands with his left foot. The dwarf can represent darkness or ignorance, and has often been considered to be crushed under Śiva’s mighty foot, representing release from this world. Some argue that Śiva only rests his foot on the dwarf, who is assisting the god in his mighty dance. The circle of fire surrounding Śiva represents the entire universe, which Śiva will destroy at the end of time with the fire he holds in his upper left hand. Yet, he will then benevolently recreate the universe when he beats his drum and dances again.

This Śiva Nataraja was once carried through the streets of South India, adorned in rich silks and gold jewelry, bathed in honey and milk while adherents sang him sweet songs of devotion. But here he somehow dances in Norfolk, Virginia, in a dark living room that overlooks the Lafayette River. Even on uncommon ground, the soft green patina of his bronze skin and his elegant limbs catch the eye of countless guests that find themselves at The Hermitage Museum and Gardens. What a long and wondrous journey this god has taken to come so far from the fervent religious festivals in medieval Tamil Nadu all the way to a quiet and secluded home, tucked away in a small American museum. A journey like this begs for our exploration.

Those who are audience to the Śiva Nataraja bronze at The Hermitage Museum probably admire him for his powerful beauty but do not question his place here as one more old, exotic object among so

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7 Ibid, 92.
9 Ibid, 160.
10 Coomaraswamy laid out specific iconographical interpretations of the bronze in the sixth essay of his The Dance of Śiva that remained undisputed until very recently.
11 Padma Kaimal, "Shiva Nataraja: Shifting Meanings of an Icon." The Art Bulletin. 18. no. 3 (1999): 390-419, Kaimal looks at several other images of the Śiva Nataraja and argues Coomaraswamy was using literature from a different time period to make her conclusions which are now widely accepted.
12 Roy Craven, 92.
many others. Museum guests possibly take for granted the legitimacy of the presence of objects like the Śiva Nataraja within the museum setting, and do not question its past -- it is in the museum, it must belong in a museum. Although, those who know more of this god’s story might then be taken off guard, for this Indian god, this Hindu devotional object, now dances on old, American wooden floors. For these individuals, the incongruous setting is uncomfortable, the Śiva Nataraja seemingly out of place among the stiff Dutch tapestries, Tiffany silver sets, and copies of the Italian Renaissance masters. When confronted with the Śiva Nataraja that seems so removed from his original context one might feel overwhelmed by the precarious place made for the object in its present location.

During the summer of 2011, I was given the opportunity to assist and intern for the Curatorial Department at The Hermitage Museum and Gardens. On the first day, I was told to find a pair of gloves in the supply closet and meet my new boss downstairs where I would help him clean and move the Śiva Nataraja. I would not call my first encounter with the Śiva Nataraja a religious experience, but I was acutely aware of the meaning of the bronze which I now held in my hands. I felt privileged to assist the god in his presentation to his public, yet afraid that I had somehow profaned someone else’s scared -- I am not a Śaiva priest, a brahmin, and I have not spent a lifetime in the spiritual service to Śiva. Unsure of what to make of the Śiva Nataraja, I would often walk quietly past him with my hands behind my back as if to pay him some sort of reverential respect, and I tried to take his ever fixed expression of a calm smile as an approval. However, it was clear The Hermitage Museum did not quite know what to do with the bronze either; the Śiva Nataraja was displayed in the living room without a label. But I still felt like my own gnawing doubt and eager questions could be somehow answered, and that maybe the museum needed answers as much as I did.

**What is being done with the Śiva Nataraja? Furthermore, what should the museum do with the Śiva Nataraja?** Through a close study of The Hermitage Museum and its history, it becomes evident there could be improvements in how the museum handles the Śiva Nataraja. The realization that bronzes very similar to this Śiva Nataraja are still being used in Indian religious ceremonies should feel like a
pinprick of truth, almost panic. The Śiva Nataraja might in that moment seem even more out of place, but where should it go if not here on display in The Hermitage Museum? It seems that we can only really know what The Hermitage should do with the Śiva Nataraja until we answer what kind of object the Śiva Nataraja is — what it once was, how it got to be what it is today, and what it could become in the future.

What exactly is the Śiva Nataraja? Perhaps this bronze was once considered a god by a devoted crowd that filled the street corners of Tamil Nadu, but here in a museum, placed on a wooden pedestal without a label, can we speak of it as an ontologically separate and distinct object? Surely, even if The Hermitage provided a brief description of the religious aspects of the Śiva Nataraja, they would not be able to demand each guest to adopt solemn attitudes of worship when in the same room as the object. It seems as though through the progression of time and change of location, the Śiva Nataraja has transformed into something else, too.

Some disturbing events have taken place in the Śiva Nataraja’s past, namely the possibility of it being a stolen artifact. While these facts should and must be acknowledged by the museum, this definitively colors any discussion of the Śiva Nataraja’s place in the museum. These concerns could be seen as an extension of the question of what to do with the Śiva Nataraja, but this particular issue centers primarily around the Śiva Nataraja’s unclear provenance. Should The Hermitage send the Śiva Nataraja back to India? Certainly, repatriation would not be a surprising outcome for the Śiva Nataraja. However, as we shall see, the Śiva Nataraja’s origins do not necessarily dictate its present circumstances, but rather allows for its place within the museum walls.

Considering the religious implications that allow for the Śiva Nataraja to continue his dance at The Hermitage, how then should the museum treat the object? Śiva’s undeniable beauty does not make room for the museum to treat the Śiva Nataraja as merely an object of beauty, an aesthetic embodiment of India’s sculptural history. By becoming better acquainted with the Śiva Nataraja and what
kind of object it is, The Hermitage can ascertain more appropriate ways in which to display the Śiva Nataraja.

How should The Hermitage display the Śiva Nataraja? How can the museum communicate the rich and complicated past of the Śiva Nataraja in a way that allows for a deeper understanding of not only the object itself, but the culture and people it represents as well. The Hermitage Museum itself has a wonderful history, and the museum tries to balance educating its guests on the history of the museum in addition to the collection. The Hermitage has the potential to weave these two narratives together to create a profound impact on the minds of its guests. If an individual has the opportunity to learn both local and global history through one object like the Śiva Nataraja, these individuals can come away with brand new insights and a deeper understanding of this world in which we all live.

That summer when I would hesitantly enter the room in which Śiva Nataraja danced, hoping I was not disturbing the very nature of his existence, these questions felt as unsure as my steps, as if I was grasping at the air and hoping for something, anything to be there to answer them. In this paper, I will explore these five questions, sometimes on their own but sometimes in conjunction with each other, in the hopes to put to rest the uncertainties of the past, present, and future I found not only within myself but within the museum as well. By exploring the ontological and historical facets and ethical implications of the Śiva Nataraja’s presence in the museum, and the separate worlds in which the bronze has participated, it is possible for the museum and museum guests to recognize the various and ever-changing significances of such an object as the Śiva Nataraja. Śiva dances, eternally accepting destruction and creation; should we not do the same?
What Is Being Done With the Śiva Nataraja?

Śiva Nataraja, Unlabeled

Small stained glass windows that show ships sailing frothy blue seas illuminate the room where the Śiva Nataraja dances. Thin streams of sunlight pour in and light up specks of dust that float through the air. The Hermitage Museum is usually very quiet, and an atmosphere of reverence fills the house. When facing the end of the room that looks out over a lavender garden and the Lafayette River, the Śiva Nataraja is displayed almost dead center. Behind the object is a large fireplace with oversized furniture and a wooden Chinese Buddha, and cases of medieval Spanish reliquaries and Japanese statues flank each side of the room. Śiva, in a savvy curatorial move, rightfully leads a parade of three South Indian bronzes; Uma follows sensuously behind her husband, while a bronze group known as a Somaskanda, showing Shiva relaxing with his wife and their oldest son, Skanda, god of war, brings up the rear.

Unfortunately, no labels are provided for guests of the museum to peruse while viewing the god in excellent form. It is true that in order to see the entire collection and have access to the room in which Śiva Nataraja resides, guests must schedule a tour with the Curator of Collections, who then guides them through the individual rooms while giving them a history of both the house and the collection itself. We must in faith trust the curator is giving accurate information on all objects in the museum, not just the Śiva Nataraja.

However, it is concerning that no written information on the Śiva Nataraja is readily provided the guests. The Hermitage states on their blog that because Florence Sloane meant for her home to be more than “the prototypical museum” (it is not stated what this actually means), and along with there being almost too many objects to label -- everything from the objects in the collection right down to the desks at which the museum staff works belonged to Sloane -- educational labels cannot be provided at this time. The blog goes on to explain to readers the museum staff is working on trying to balance Sloane’s vision with expectations of the contemporary American museum, but they do not mention how they will go

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13 All information concerning museum functions, bureaucracy, etc., can be found at the museum’s website.
about doing this.\textsuperscript{14} Because of this somewhat shocking omission on the part of the museum (whoever heard of a museum without labels?), I would like to explore the history of The Hermitage Museum, the identity of its founder, Florence Sloane, and how she turned her home into a museum -- perhaps we can better understand the Śiva Nataraja in its present location this way.

\textit{Florence Sloane’s Museum: A Retrospective}\textsuperscript{15}

The Hermitage Museum is property of The Hermitage Foundation, formed under the direction of Florence K. Sloane in the year 1937. Florence K. Sloane was born Florence Adelia Knapp in New York on February 20, 1873. She married William Sloane in 1893 at the age of twenty years old. William Sloane came from a wealthy family; By the time the young couple was married, he had been junior partner at his uncle Foster Black’s textile company for six years and was serving as manager of the Chesapeake Knitting Mill in Berkley.\textsuperscript{16} In 1905, two years after the birth of Florence and William’s first son, William Sloane Jr., Foster Black passed away, leaving his company and all his knitting mills to William Sloane Sr., who in turn then created William Sloane and Company.

A year later, with their private wealth accumulating and a second son, Edwin “E.K.” Knapp Sloane added to the family, the Sloanes purchased 30 acres of farmland in an area known as Tanners Creek, north of the Atlantic City Bridge.\textsuperscript{17} Together with English architect and highly trained master

\textsuperscript{14} Colin Brady, “Me Answering Your Questions.” \textit{Hermitage Collection} Connection (blog), October 24, 2012, \url{http://hermitagemuseum.wordpress.com/2012/10/24/me-answering-your-questions}, While the blog is informal, it is a wonderful source written by curators that provides first-hand accounts of day to day activities of The Hermitage.

\textsuperscript{15} The biographical information on Sloane and her life is an exhaustive compilation of research material provided by The Hermitage in their Core Intern Manual, notes taken while watching “Florence K. Sloane & Norfolk’s Museum Age,” The Hermitage website, and information written down during the exhibition titled \textit{Her Mini Metropolitan: The Evolution of Florence Sloane’s Hermitage, 1908-Present}, curated by then Curator of Collections Lauren Northup, which is now on permanent display in the museum. I have indicated where I use primary resources from archives in subsequent footnotes.

\textsuperscript{16} I found very little information during my research on William Sloane’s business, which was incredibly unfortunate as it would have been nice to know what sort of money was funding Florence Sloane’s art collecting. Apparently, William Sloane’s textile mill signed a contract with the United States government during World War I in order to supply troops with fleece lined underwear which naturally kept business booming.

\textsuperscript{17} This is now the Hampton Roads Bridge.
craftsman Charles J. Woodsend\textsuperscript{18}, blueprints were drawn up for the Sloane family home. Woodsend designed an arts and crafts home, the style reminiscent of an English country cottage, with elaborate wood carvings decorating both the exterior and interior of the home that would match the furniture Woodsend would design himself in his studio. This was the beginning of The Hermitage.

The Sloanes were able to live in their new home year-round starting in 1912. With the addition of 8 rooms, including a master bedroom and a library, in 1916, and the Gothic Drawing Room 6 years later, their home was finally complete. Mr. Sloane was by this time highly involved in the banking industry, and serving as Vice President of Seaboard National Bank of Norfolk. The Sloanes were climbing even higher among the ranks of the well-to-do and fabulously rich. Yet, even with this Gatsby-like dream as the essence of their reality, the Sloanes were no strangers to the roles of the wealthy benefactors and good Samaritans in the local area.

During the First World War, the Sloanes opened up The Hermitage and held parties for local troops stationed in Norfolk each weekend during the summer months. Mrs. Sloane carried out her patriotic duty by serving as postmaster and sewing for the Red Cross. Mr. Sloane purchased another home on the Lafayette River and donated it the Red Cross in order to serve as a convalescent hospital, a quiet place for soldiers to heal after being wounded in combat. Florence Sloane was becoming a pillar for the community of Norfolk, but it was not until the year 1927 that a Sloane family art collection began to materialize out of her own desire to better the community around her.\textsuperscript{19}

\textit{Collecting Art, Then and Now}

To be sure, throughout history collecting art has largely been the business of the affluent and wealthy. While European collectors in the past have been royalty or those who had the means to buy

\textsuperscript{18} Other architects, Frank Watson and Karl von Rydingsvard, would later work on the home as well but it was Woodsend that designed much of the home – blueprints are on display at the museum and were unique contributions to my research.

\textsuperscript{19} In former Curator Northup’s research, she credited the time Sloane spent during World War I as a civil servant as the catalyst in her activities as an art collector.
objects at the same royal price,\textsuperscript{20} American private art collectors, beginning in the last decade of the nineteenth century, were in large part individuals genuinely curious about art and often made purchases based on their own personal preferences from all over the world. Not much has changed; American private art collectors today write extensively on their expensive hobby,\textsuperscript{21} often feeling as if they need to justify their activities to those around them, especially to those who find fault with the business of art collecting -- what one dealer calls, “cultural property puritans.”\textsuperscript{22} Many feel their collections are not merely reflections of personal tastes, but that their efforts are done under the desire to broaden the cultural and artistic interests of their surrounding community.

Collectors often argue they are taste-makers and educators of society\textsuperscript{23} as many of them aspire to create collections which can eventually be given to, or turned into, a museum. Moreover, many collectors relish the idea of contributing to a public educational system designed to broaden the understanding of human exchange. Shelby White, collector of Neolithic art and antiquities, says, “For my husband [Leon Levy] and me, collecting has meant pushing the cultural, chronological, and aesthetic boundaries wherever they lead... Slowly, over the years, we added to our collection, seeking not only the most beautiful examples of ancient art available but also works that brought aesthetic and historic cohesion to the collection as a whole.”\textsuperscript{24}

The willingness to share their collection with the public at large is truly a distinctive quality of American private collectors, past and present. Many American museums owe a great deal to private

\textsuperscript{20} I find it interesting that several European collections were taken from their royal “owners” by the force of revolution and in the name of equality.
\textsuperscript{21} Many of the essays I read written by art collectors were written in an incredibly defensive tone, which I found to be indicative of the perceived hostility they felt to be facing from other members of the art world. Many of them were also art dealers. As to whether or not this hostility directed towards their behavior is warranted, given the questionable nature of some of their acquisitions, is another matter. What I felt was important here was to use their own words to provide evidence of the multivalent reasons most collectors, like Florence Sloane, provide for their “hobbies.”
\textsuperscript{22} Peter Marks, "Dealers Speak," \textit{Who Owns the Past? Cultural Policy, Cultural Property, and the Law}, ed. Kate Fitz Gibbon (New Brunswick and London: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 193. This part of Marks article was an interview with André Emmerich, collector and dealer of Pre-Columbian art.
\textsuperscript{23} Certainly, C.T. Loo felt he was a “taste maker,” and often wrote about his perceived responsibility to the Western public as one who would educate them on Eastern art.
collectors, seeing as how up until the nineteenth century, American private collectors played the many parts of modern-day archaeologists, conservators, and curators, by funding expeditions and digs, learning about their objects and how to care for them.\(^{25}\) Wealthy Americans like John Paul Getty, William Randolph Hearst, the Rockefellers, J.P. Morgan, Eugene Thaw, and Florence Sloane felt that it was not only their civic duty to provide their communities with examples of world art objects, but their patriotic duty as well, putting together fantastic collections in order to place America on the art map.\(^{26}\) Today, however, art collecting has become more political, and private collectors must abide by strict international laws. Without records that prove a firm provenance of an object, or if a government has sought repatriation of their objects, collectors face serious legal woes and harsh punishments. Michael Ward, collector of Greek and Mycenaean antiquities sums up the complaints of his fellow collectors:

“There’s a class war going on; people don’t like the rich who buy works of art. They think art is nothing more than a status symbol. Museums have contributed to this with the ‘Treasures of X’ blockbuster shows. It gives a masterpiece mentality to the whole field of collecting, which is very different from how collecting was in the past. And the press covers auctions as if they were major sports events, publishing record prices.... Context is important, but to some people, objects have a meaning that transcends context: their humanity, their expression, something that we admire and that puts us in awe of the artist. And that’s what we feel is important. These objects continue to live for that reason, and play a part in our spiritual lives.”\(^{27}\)

\(^{25}\) Dr. Margaret Ellen Mayo, “Collecting Ancient Art: A Historical Perspective,” *Who Owns the Past? Cultural Policy, Cultural Property, and the Law*, ed. Kate Fitz Gibbon (New Brunswick and London: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 133, Dr. Mayo was the former Curator of Ancient Art at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts and his written several books on Greco-Roman art history.

\(^{26}\) This patriotic duty was a common theme felt within all of the personal writings of the collectors I researched, which I found to be an interesting reason for their collecting, as if questioning their activities was to also question their patriotism.

\(^{27}\) Marks, 195.
It is difficult to swallow Ward’s claims of a “class war” against the rich. However, it really has become increasingly difficult to make purchases of art objects that are any older than contemporary. André Emmerich, collector of Pre-Columbian art, states, “The image of the hermit like individual gloating over illicit treasures in his castle is a fantasy.” Most American collectors, with diminishing opportunities to purchase anything, are gradually collecting less and less. James Lally, collector of ancient Chinese art, predicted the future of active dealers and collectors alike when he wrote, “I see myself quietly slowing down to a time when there is no need to have a gallery. I think more and more people are taking this tack.”

It is true that the US tax system allows the offsetting of a percentage of income taxes due through donations to charitable institutions, but some argue that this only encourages the wealthy to move their collection to a museum rather than back on the market or to their family. Many private art collectors have even a disdain for the label of “collecting” because of the negative connotations now associated with the activity of art collecting. Eugene Thaw wrote, “It is not ‘accumulating’.... “it is not ‘investing’.... It is acquiring objects that have some relation to each other and putting those objects into the kind of order that reflects the collector’s response to them. Each true collection achieves a personality beyond and apart from the sum of its objects.” A wealthy American who stops purchasing art and objects when their house is full and completely decorated is not to be seen as a true art collector.

It is easy to criticize private collectors -- they are bounty hunters of beauty, they encourage looting and destruction of cultural property, they fetishize objects like the Śiva Nataraja by sticking it in their living room. These criticisms however seem to be an oversimplification of the process of art

28 Georgina Adam, "A Market Divided." The Art Newspaper. XXI. no. 231 (2012): 1 and 8. Despite severe economic woes, the art market closed the year in 2011 with a record number of sales coming in at 10.7 billion dollars. It is interesting, though, that because of stricter laws being enforced concerning cultural patrimony, the market is flooded with Western contemporary works at incredibly high prices. These works and Impressionist works are almost guaranteed a sale, and Adam conjectures collectors feel these are “safe” buys as they will likely be requested for donation by museums in the future.
30 Marks, 199.
31 White, 175.
collecting and the art market in general. All of this aside, it is evident that these collectors are real people that often have honest intentions concerning the objects they purchase. As Florence Sloane became interested in art collecting, she would write letters to her friends and family members telling them of the wishes she had for the future of the collection as a way to enlighten and educate the people of Norfolk. Sloane, like many other American art collectors, understood her collection could serve as an avenue to worldly knowledge, and hoped that by turning her collection into a museum she could make a positive impact on her community.

It may seem that defending the practices of private collectors as beneficial for the common good is playing devil’s advocate, but one must admit that we cannot view private collections in terms of black and white or evil and good for it is much more complicated than that. Moreover, how should we go about punishing a dead woman for her questionable methods of art collecting? We cannot punish the collection and hide it in storage.

It is true that we must acknowledge the gritty past, even present, of private collections. It is true that many objects, even the Śiva Nataraja, were purchased under suspicious circumstances that would more than likely have a collector today facing time in prison. In no way do I intend through my arguments to defend the unsavory, least of all the unethical, practices of art collectors. I do not mean to merely scold dealers and collectors who willingly buy and sell stolen artifacts with a tsk tsk, chalking it up

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33 Jonathan Benthall, "Ethnographic Museums and the Art Trade." Anthropology Today. 3, no. 3 (1987): 9-13. Benthall describes in detail the relationships between ethnographic object dealers, collectors, academics, and museums. It seems the worlds are intertwined, but in ways that are kept from the public as those in academia and museums do not want to be associated with dealers based on their notorious reputations, thus perpetuating the criticisms of art dealers and collectors among those who are not familiar with the field. Benthall calls for these individuals to work but not behind closed doors, so that the public can become more informed on the art market and its process, a conclusion with which I whole-heartedly agree.

34 Janet Piers to Florence Sloane, 1952, folder: Loose: Letters, Bills, Clippings, The Hermitage Museum and Gardens archives, Piers writes to Sloane in a personal letter, commending her for her public service and asks how things are coming along. Also in this folder are several letters dating to the 1950s, and show Sloane working up until her death, finding proper cases, lighting, and fabrics that would protect the collection but also display it in a way that would match the home’s interior.

35 Dan Duray, "Stealing Beauty." The New York Observer, August 2, 2011. http://observer.com/2011/08/stealing-beauty/. Duray also describes how it is becoming harder and harder to steal objects as they are usually used as collateral for other forms of illicit trade.
to a weak sort of “boys will be boys” argument. I simply want to shed light on the motivations that drive art collectors to do what they do, their *raison d’être* if you will. By reading personal anecdotes of these art collectors above, we can come to some sort of understanding of Florence Sloane, why she would collect objects like the Śiva Nataraja, and why she would feel the need to found a museum from her own, private collection. This surely allows for a more thorough exploration into what The Hermitage is doing with the Śiva Nataraja and why; clearly, the museum and its staff clings to a woman’s goals -- while admittedly noble at first -- of preserving the unique “home-museum” atmosphere for the sake of posterity, yet this is done at the expense of the collection itself.

Because the museum seeks to inform their guests about history of the museum itself, The Hermitage sits in an advantageous position as they could potentially make the ways in which Mrs. Sloane made her purchases part of the narrative they weave for their guests. In doing so, The Hermitage could also serve as an example for American museums everywhere that have obtained much of their collections by donations from private ones. By becoming more transparent about the practices of art collecting, museums like The Hermitage will possibly discover ways in which the future practices of art collecting can become more ethical and ensure the same mistakes are not repeated.

*Creating the Sloane Collection*

In 1927, Florence Sloane traveled through Europe, particularly Spain, with art historian Georgiana Goddard King. King had been teaching at Bryn Mawr since 1911, where she founded and lectured in the Department of Art History on topics ranging from Gothic, Renaissance, Spanish, and Asian art, and was even one of the few American art historians of the time to give attention to on modern movements like Cubism and Fauvism. King was highly regarded for her knowledge of Spanish art, particularly architectural history, and had published a book in 1916, *The Way of St. James*, concerning the pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela. With the help and expertise of King, Florence Sloane

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37 [http://www.dictionaryofarthistorians.org/kingg.htm](http://www.dictionaryofarthistorians.org/kingg.htm)
purchased several Spanish artifacts, intended for the Sloane Collection. While in Spain, Sloane was introduced to Arthur Byne, Spanish art dealer to some of America’s wealthy private art collectors, including William Randolph Hearst. Throughout her life, Byne would write personal letters to Sloane, encouraging her to pay more visits to Spain, offering not only his and his wife’s hospitality and friendship, but the chance to make valuable purchases within the Spanish and European art market as well.

Two years later, Florence Sloane purchased a flat in London, facilitating longer and more frequent trips throughout Europe in order to make more purchases to add to her growing collection. Some of her purchases were intended for the Norfolk Museum of Arts and Sciences, some for The Hermitage. She kept a meticulous travel journal, documenting everything she saw with pen drawings and shorthand writing. While she focused on expanding her collection during trips abroad, at home Florence Sloane began renovating the gardens of The Hermitage and on March 23, 1933 a newspaper article announced The Hermitage Gardens were open to the public “every clear day between 2 and 5 in the afternoon until the blossoms begin to fade.” The admission charged to guests were used to fund the Norfolk Museum of Arts and Sciences. It is clear that by this point, Florence Sloane was on her way to turning the The Hermitage, her home, into a museum as well.

Only three years later, Florence Sloane began adding more rooms to The Hermitage, intending them to be galleries, and reconstructed the floor plan of the home by moving rooms in order to better suit the display of the Sloane Collection. In 1937, William and Florence Sloane established The Hermitage Foundation.

The Certificate of Incorporation of The Hermitage Foundation was written under the direction of Florence Sloane, and it stated both the mission and purpose of establishing the Foundation.

38 http://research.frick.org/directoryweb/browserecord.php?action=browse&recid=7121
40 This is now The Chrysler Museum. The Hermitage Museum claims Sloane was a major force in founding the museum, but is no longer credited with her efforts.
The purpose for which this corporation is organized is to establish, maintain, and operate, or contribute to the establishment, maintenance and operation of, a museum, or museums, for the public exhibition of art and of objects of an historical or antiquarian nature; and in connection therewith, to provide for the promotion of art and for the mental and moral improvement of men and women by furthering their education, enlightenment [sic] and aesthetic taste, and by developing the understanding and appreciation of art by the public; to make proper provision for lectures, publications and other public information of instruction in connection therewith, and for scholarships grants-in-aid and similar contributions in furtherance of such purpose; to acquire by purchase, gift, grant, bequest or otherwise, works of art, including paintings, pictures, engravings, prints, objects of art, books, furniture, and other objects of an historical, antiquarian, or aesthetic nature, and to provide natural history exhibits including the establishment of a bird sanctuary.\[42\]

In 1940, on February 14th, William Sloane passed away at home. Florence was given time to mourn, and The Hermitage closed its doors to visitors. Two years later in January, The Hermitage was open for museum tours, and on December 28, 1946, Florence Sloane signed a deed conveying the entire Sloane Estate to the Hermitage Foundation.

Florence Sloane passed away at home in March of 1953. Over 40,000 objects make up the Sloane Collection, spanning around 5,000 years of human history from over 30 nations.\[43\]

\[42\] Folder: Certificate of Incorporation, The Hermitage Museum and Gardens archives.

\[43\] The museum’s website makes this claim in several places, though some of the original collection was donated to a museum in Texas by E.K. Sloane, and many objects remain in storage.
**The Hermitage Museum in 2013**

Today, The Hermitage Museum and Gardens seeks to provide the people of Norfolk and surrounding areas with a chance not just to view this massive collection on display, but also the opportunity to learn local history and become active participants in the conservation of the museum and its land. The Hermitage Museum offers art classes to both adults and children during the year, running special art camps during the summer months for children to test their creative boundaries. Artists in the area are welcomed to apply for studio space; along with the benefits of being able to display their work from the Hermitage website and sell their work from the museum gift shop, artists are also asked to take part in a group exhibition with other Hermitage studio artists at the end of the year. The Hermitage works with Norfolk public elementary schools to restore and maintain the ecosystem surrounding the house, particularly the wetlands; students are educated about the importance of the local environment and sustainable practices that will protect the future of the wetlands (while fulfilling state mandated curriculum). Students work alongside adult volunteers in restoring some of the marsh area. The Hermitage Foundation offers its members the chance to attend lectures throughout the year given by art historians, curators, and other museum professionals from around the country. During hot summer evenings, The Hermitage hosts events on their lawn where local bands, chefs, breweries, and wineries display their craft, or old movies are projected onto a large outdoor screen. Memberships are sold at every event, and special private tours of the museum are offered to groups that attend camps or exhibition openings. Guests are encouraged to spread blankets and light picnics over the thick grass and watch the sun set over the Lafayette River. While there, one can truly feel the sense of community The Hermitage attempts to instill within its guests.

The Hermitage has also reached out to artists outside of Norfolk and offered them solo exhibitions at the museum in order to support the arts everywhere, and to give the people of Norfolk opportunities to view works of art they would not have been able to experience otherwise. While not an accredited museum through the American Alliance of Museums, The Hermitage is in the process of completing their Core Documents Verification, which will prove they are “an institution with an
educational mission [with] policies and procedures in place that reflect standard practices of professional museums. By doing this, The Hermitage is well on its way to becoming a member of a nationally recognized organization dedicated to helping museums like The Hermitage connect with other American museums to improve each other’s research, collections, memberships, and funding.

How The Hermitage functions within and outside the city of Norfolk is crucial to our analysis of how the museum displays their collection. By fostering a relationship with the surrounding community, The Hermitage generates interest in their collection. Based on these events, programs, and the museum’s desire to reach a national audience, it is quite imperative The Hermitage improve their methods of displaying the Śiva Nataraja. How can the museum leave the Śiva Nataraja unlabeled, when they invite people of all ages and educational backgrounds into their museum? Do they expect their guests to come to The Hermitage with an already encyclopedic knowledge of the history of India, its religions, the worship of Śiva, not to mention the bronze itself? These questions seem absurd -- of course the museum should not leave the Śiva Nataraja unlabeled, because no, the museum cannot anticipate the breadth of knowledge and education of each guest. Yet, it seems even more absurd, perhaps even embarrassing, that these questions need to be asked of a museum such as The Hermitage.

What Should Be Done With the Śiva Nataraja?

The official mission statement of The Hermitage Museum and Gardens states,

The mission of the Hermitage Foundation is to preserve and develop the Sloane Family property as a unique house museum and gardens that together enhance natural beauty and promote cultural enrichment through education, exhibitions, and events for the public.

It has been nearly eighty years to date since The Hermitage Foundation was established, and it is quite remarkable how closely the staff of The Hermitage Museum today pursues the wishes of Mrs.

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44 Qualifications listed at http://www.aam-us.org/
Sloane as their own. The operations of the museum are governed and conducted by the twenty members of the Board of Trustees of The Hermitage Foundation. The Hermitage staff is very small and consists of only eleven employees.

The care of the collection and its records at The Hermitage falls mainly under the direction of the Curator of Collections. The first Curator of Collections at The Hermitage was Bertha Fanning-Taylor, an artist from New York City and a personal friend of Florence Sloane. As one might expect from such a small, family institution, it seems positions of authority at The Hermitage during its early days were often filled by those close to the Sloane family, some of whom were not properly equipped to handle a collection of this size and history. This unfortunately lead to several inaccuracies in museum records, lectures, and public information given to guests. For instance, original records dating back to the late 1940s conflate Śiva images with that of the god Viṣṇu, and identify the Uma bronze as the goddess Lakṣmī. In the 1980s, museum records attempt to list all the countries of origin for the entire collection, but do not mention India on their list.

However, within the past few years, The Hermitage staff has worked tirelessly to update their records and transcribe them into an online database that will allow both easier access and editing in the future. Furthermore, changes in staff have now allowed the museum to hire candidates with more experience and better qualifications to fill pivotal roles in The Hermitage. Colin Brady, The Hermitage’s current Curator of Collections, has a background in East Asian art history, bringing much needed attention to the museum’s Asian pieces. Brady is currently laying the groundwork for a future Sloane Asian Collection, consisting of pieces which had tragically been tucked away in storage by Eurocentric curators.

It is strange that while The Hermitage chooses to leave the Śiva Nataraja unlabeled, labels are provided for European and American paintings and sculptures from the Impressionist period onward. It

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45 Taylors personal records and memoirs are available for access at Old Dominion University’s Library.
46 Folder: Notes on Various Arts, The Hermitage Museum and Gardens archives.
47 Ibid.
seems tragic that no context is given to museum guests for an object with such a kaleidoscopic history as the Śiva Nataraja. Left without information, the sounds of Śiva’s feet stomping the ground in ecstatic power, the drum beating faster and faster, fall upon deaf ears.

Yet, what should the museum do with the Śiva Nataraja? Beyond fixing a label to the wall, how should The Hermitage go about treating and displaying this devotional object to their guests? It seems we must come to terms with the fact that words are brittle, and a wall label with a brief biography of the object might not be able to capture the minds of the museum audience. Perhaps the museum really does overlook the Śiva Nataraja and the bright history it carries with it, but before we can know what The Hermitage should do with it, we must know what Śiva Nataraja is -- what it has been in the past, how it came to be what it is now, and the potential of its future.
What Is the Śiva Nataraja?

A Circus of Meanings

Let us step away from The Hermitage Museum; the air was growing tense with confusion. We cannot know what to do with the Śiva Nataraja until we know what the Śiva Nataraja is. Discussing the historical presence of the Śiva Nataraja, however, cannot be limited to the South Indian medieval temple only. In order to gain a full appreciation of the many worlds in which the Śiva Nataraja has existed, the dizzying shifts of scenery -- from the Indian temple to the gallery of an unscrupulous art dealer to the living room of an American socialite to the collection of an American museum -- must be explored as well. By presenting the complex historical narrative of the Śiva Nataraja, I hope to convince readers of the drastic ontological shifts of meanings and values which the Śiva Nataraja undergoes within each new “space” of time and geographical location. I think it would be incredibly useful to think of the dynamic and varied history of meanings of the Śiva Nataraja as a *circus of meanings*.

Why the circus? The circus is immediately familiar to so many people, and though there are different companies, each circus is really the same. We each think of different things when we think of the circus; one might think of the elephants with their sequined headdresses, another might think of the trapeze artists floating through the air, and another thinks of clowns piling into an old jalopy. Surely you wouldn’t say to the next person, “Get out of here with your roaring lions -- It is little dogs jumping through hoops of fire or it is nothing!” In fact, you can arrive on time to the circus or you can arrive fifteen minutes late because you were waiting in line for your cotton candy. You have still arrived at the circus. Furthermore, the circus is a series of disjointed acts, and while they are each centered around similar themes -- fantasy, humor, extravagance -- it has no cohesive or predictable narrative like films or theater offer. The different acts are parts of the circus, but not the whole circus. Each act takes place in separate rings as they overlap in the middle. Here, the ringmaster tips their hat to the audience and
controls the show. The circus travels city to city, its location never settled or permanent. You would never even have had to been to a circus to know what the circus was and the exciting night it offered.

We can utilize this metaphor of a circus of meanings when thinking of the varied historical and ontologically distinct presences of the Šiva Nataraja. It may seem trite at first -- a circus when discussing something as serious as a god, religion or a museum -- but isn’t it perfect when we imagine the Šiva Nataraja as ringmaster, dancing in the middle, since it all centers around him. The Hindu gods love to play, or engage in līlā, and throughout the Šiva Purana, Šiva plays tricks on the other Hindu gods and delights in games and luxury, so I feel like a circus splendid place for such an object. Each “ring” he controls represents separate times and geographical locations, which then implies different “acts” in which he participates. As we shall see, each “act” set in each “ring” is widely different from the others, yet they each are linked by the continuum of the Šiva Nataraja’s participation and presence. The story of how the Šiva Nataraja came from South India to the southeast coast of the United States takes surprising twists and turns, its narrative seems haphazard, almost out of control, and we are not yet clear as to where it is going. The Šiva Nataraja has taken on different meanings and values in the “acts” that take place in the separate “rings,” but each one is valid and important when discussing what the Šiva Nataraja is. Each “act” and each “performance,” or meaning, represents Šiva Nataraja, but not wholly, not totally. Only when these meanings are viewed together and each one is acknowledged can we say what the Šiva Nataraja is.

Let us, an audience, let the circus of meanings begin. The lights dim. Quiet now. Šiva Nataraja dances expertly in the middle, orchestrating the night. We begin in the first ring, medieval South India. Here, the Šiva Nataraja participates in this ring as God, to be adored, loved, and worshipped. He will be valued not necessarily for his aesthetic beauty, but his divine and cosmic power that has graciously presented himself in this bronze form. Remember there are more rings and more acts to come.

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50 Ramesh Menon, Šiva: The Šiva Purana Retold, (New Delhi: Rupa Co., 2006). Throughout the Šiva Purana, the god is spoken of as a prankster by various gods, laughs often, and posits riddles to those around him.
Concerning Theological Principles and Terms

In this next chapter, I will be using terms that are not easily defined -- nor should they be. “Hinduism” is a term that has been historically and academically used to describe the multiple faiths of the people of India, each sect crediting their own salvation to separate deities and distinct practices. “Hinduism” is in no way representative of the diversity of beliefs held within the hearts of all of its practitioners -- they each may call themselves a Hindu, but when asked to explain their faith, they will use the word dharma, which translates into “way of life” and “thought.”\footnote{John B. Noss, and David S. Noss, *Man's Religions, 7th ed.*, (New York City and London: Macmillan Publishing Company and Collier Macmillan Publishers, 1984), 72, While certainly an older source, Noss’ work is respectable and accessible when explaining material that might not be readily understandable to those new to the study of religion.} This term was assigned to the people of India by invading forces, and was typically used by Western scholars as a way to misrepresent these constellations of beliefs. However, Hinduism (we can put away the quotation marks now) may be used through this section as a sort of accepted shorthand term as a way to discuss the issues at hand. In no way does this imply a misunderstanding or deliberate misuse of the religions themselves. I only wish I had more room to address this issue, but this would only serve as a distraction to the arguments I wish to make.\footnote{Nancy Auer Falk, *Living Hinduisms, An Explorer's Guide*. Thomson Wadsworth, 2006, This source comes to mind for one interested in the Hindu religions and their histories.}

Hindus who worship Śiva as the ultimate being of the universe are called Śaivas. The worship of Śiva could possibly date back to about 1700 BCE, and the many theological aspects of this particular faith are incredibly fascinating.\footnote{Vidya Dehejia, *Indian Art*. London and New York City: Phaidon Press Limited, 1997, 32, There is some debate as to whether or not the god called Rudra during this time was a sort of precursor to Śiva, as they both have similar attributes, physical descriptions, and narratives. Figures were also found on seals dating to about this time with similar iconography to Śiva.} The omission of an investigation of the Śaiva religion was intentional on my
part as this would warrant an entirely separate paper. I of course intend to provide clear and thorough explanations of the philosophical principles at hand when discussing Śiva Nataraja’s religious context.54

“The First Ring:” Medieval South India

The rich
will make temples for Śiva.
What shall I,
a poor man,
do?

My legs are pillars,
the body the shine,
the head a cupola
of gold.

Listen, O lord of the meeting rivers,
things standing shall fall,
but the moving ever shall stay.

Basavaṇṇa 82055

During the late seventh and early eighth century the Chola family began their rise to power along the southeast coast of India.56 By forging valuable alliances with neighboring royal families and conquering territories to the north, the Chola reign stretched to Kalahasti on the Andhra Pradesh borders by the middle of the eighth century, eventually governing present day Sri Lanka and other parts of South

54 Mariasusai Dhavamony, Love of God, According to Śaiva Siddhānta: A Study in the Mysticism and Theology of Śaivism, Oxford: At The Clarendon Press, 1971, This source comes to mind for one interested in the exact theological principles present in Śaivism at the time.


Asia as well.\textsuperscript{57} The capital was first in Tanjavur, and the Cholas kept their power fixed to what is now known as Tamil Nadu; this was called the Chola-mandalam.\textsuperscript{58} The feuding and wars among Indian royal families at the time inevitably led to constant shifts in power over particular territories, leaving those with their newfound sovereignty needing to win public favor, and quickly too.\textsuperscript{59} The Cholas sought their kingdom’s approval by undertaking large acts of public benefaction, which included building very large temples and then gifting these temples with immense treasuries of riches.\textsuperscript{60,61}

While new temples anchored the Chola’s claim to power, those residing in the villages wherever temples were being built saw improvements within their lives as well. In exchange for a portion of their land that could be donated to the temple, village authorities and landowners were granted political power within their community as they were then given jurisdiction over the temple’s territory; these individuals were allowed to still farm and cultivate the land, tax free, and were asked to oversee and make decisions regarding the majority of the temple’s activities. Other farmers and merchants saw benefits as well, for nearly all temple rituals called for specialized foodstuffs and goods. This opened up trade and allowed for a more diverse economy within the villages. Those who were able to donate to the construction of the temple had their names inscribed on the inner stone walls of the temple, a reminder to all those who entered of their spiritual obedience.\textsuperscript{62}

While the Chola family encouraged a religiously tolerant kingdom, they continuously showed royal preference to temples of Śiva. The Chola family came to consider Śiva as their tutelary (and

\textsuperscript{57} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{58} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{59} Daud Ali, \textit{Courtly Culture and Political Life in Early Medieval India}. London: Cambridge University Press, 2004, 33, Ali is an incredible historian and always a reliable source. This is an interesting book on how those in power at the time shaped their identity in relationship to the state and their subjects.
\textsuperscript{60} Guy, chap. 1.
\textsuperscript{61} Richard H. Davis, \textit{Ritual in an Oscillating Universe}. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991, 4-6, Davis describes the wealth Rajaraja gives to his temple, and his donations are quite tremendous; several hundred pounds of precious metals and jewels and food and cooking supplies, hundreds to thousands of animals, and hundreds of dancers, musicians, servants, and other temple personnel were all paid for by Rajaraja. This is just a brief vignette into the opulence of medieval South Indian temples.
\textsuperscript{62} James Heitzman, "Temple Urbanism in Medieval South India." \textit{The Journal of Asian Studies}. 46. no. 4 (1987): 791-826, An incredibly great article on the effects of temples within the socio-political landscape of the villages and India at large.
favorite) deity, earliest evidence of their patronage to Śaiva temples dates back to the mid eighth century. Parantaka I (r. 907-947)\textsuperscript{63} paid for the entire chit sabha, or hall, of the temple at Chidambaram that housed a Śiva Nataraja to be gilded; Śiva’s home was made of gold!\textsuperscript{64} Throughout their time in power, the Cholas used Śiva as a signifier of their divine right to rule. Śiva, in his many forms, could be found everywhere in medieval Tamil Nadu. Śiva Nataraja not only resided within the grand temples of the Cholas, but also on the outside as well, dancing upon the walls and within the niches of their facades. The Cholas adopted this aesthetic so often that Śiva Nataraja is associated with the royal family still today. By aligning themselves with Śiva in this way, the Cholas able to project notions of righteousness, spirituality, and power into the minds of their subjects.

“The First Act:” Śiva Nataraja as Devotional Object

The Śaiva Temple

By the time the Cholas had established their power within South India, the temple had been the political, cultural, and religious center of the new capital cities for at least two centuries.\textsuperscript{65} Temples were nestled within the hearts of the villages, the streets, homes, farms, and markets radiating out from their spiritual centers. This centrality given to the temple within the city’s landscape only shows how religion played a vital role in daily village life in medieval South India.\textsuperscript{66} Hindus entering the temple in medieval South India and today would certainly view the Śiva Nataraja quite differently from those encountering the bronze within the museum setting.\textsuperscript{67} Here in the temple, the Śiva Nataraja begins to undertake his “first act” as a devotional object. In this context, we will explore the religious implications of his presence

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{63} Vidya Dehejia, Indian Art. London and New York City: Phaidon Press Limited, 1997, 209. I use Dehejia’s dates here, although they conflict with other scholars, as I trust her historical accuracy.
\item \textsuperscript{64} Guy, chap 1.
\item \textsuperscript{65} Heitzman dates the beginnings of temple expansion and urbanism to around the sixth to seventh century.
\item \textsuperscript{66} Heitzman provides detailed maps of these villages throughout his article.
\item \textsuperscript{67} Davis, Ritual..., chap. 1.
\end{itemize}
within the temple and how he is treated by those who approach him with a spiritual mindset. In this “act,” Śiva is God.

While the Śiva Nataraja is unquestioningly viewed as sacred, brahmin and worshippers devote their primary attention to the Śiva liṅga, a stone cylindrical shaft set on top of an hourglass-shaped pedestal in the center of the temple.68 According to the Śiva Purana, this is the more accurate representation of Śiva’s universal form and should be offered worship first, before anthropomorphic images of the god.69 The Śiva liṅga is seen as the mūlamūrti, or “root manifestation,” of all divinity and creation, and is the emanating source of Śiva’s power felt within all the temple.70 Not surprisingly, early Western travelers who found themselves in India were often offended when confronted with the Śiva liṅga. Many of them condemned it as an erotic symbol of a sexual cult because they perceived the Śiva liṅga to be in a similar shape to that of the human phallus.71 Perhaps this is one reason why the Śiva liṅga is so rarely displayed or mentioned within the museum setting; the vestiges of puritanical Christendom is felt even within an increasingly secular society.

In the temple, the Śiva liṅga is surrounded by anthropomorphic images of the god in his many forms, including the Śiva Nataraja. The god is accompanied by his wife, children, and other Hindu gods as well, but they are seen as subservient to Śiva as they are guests in his temple.72 These images of the divine that are housed within the temple are called mūrtis. While not necessarily a direct manifestation of Śiva, these mūrtis are infused with the gods presence from the moment of their creation. Even though they are manmade, these objects were “brought to life” through a series of religious rituals that invoked Śiva’s presence who then imbued the mūrti with his power.73 The mūrti is considered an access point to

70 Davis, Lives..., 19.
72 Davis, Lives..., 19.
73 Ibid, 26-50.
the divine and a living presence of the god. The mūrti, when meditated upon correctly, could be considered almost translucent, simply a window into apprehending Śiva’s total and universal form.

All of the theological principles wrapped up in the presence of Śiva within the temple is incredibly difficult to comprehend. Perhaps it is best to think of Śiva and his presence as a set of concentric circles. Śiva in his pure state of existence is the smallest circle; how wonderful to think of Śiva here as the size of an atom, the building blocks of life! The Śiva liṅgaṃ is a bigger circle that encompasses the smallest circle. The mūrti is bigger than the previous two. Finally, the temple itself could be considered an even bigger circle that surrounds all three. We could imagine a devotee explaining, “Śiva is here,” indicating to the temple around them, “because Śiva is here;” as they point to the mūrti.

How tremendous it must feel for the devotee to consider themselves standing in front of the divine, and temple rituals certainly reflect these attitudes of veneration to the living image of Śiva. During temple worship, or pūjā, the worshipper must fix their minds and hearts upon the mūrti and find themselves completely centered upon him. By doing this, the worshipper can expect to enter a loving and intimate relationship with the almighty Śiva. Along with the focus of their devotional energies, appropriate body language, and reverential approaches to the mūrtis, worshippers can participate in liturgical cycles during pūjā as well. In the morning, the brahmin will awaken Śiva and the other deities, bathe them, dress them, and offer them breakfast before presenting them to the worshippers waiting for them in the great hall. Throughout the day, the brahmin will again bathe the Śiva liṅgaṃ and mūrtis in rich liquids like milk, honey, yogurt, water, and sugar. Offerings of incense and sandalwood paste are made as well. Devotees can offer the gods gifts of their affection, like flowers, sumptuous meals, gold, jewelry, or money. The gods are entertained with music, and the singing of songs and prayers. At the end

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74 Ibid, 26-50. I would highly recommend Davis’ first chapter in this book as it provides needed information in an accessible language. Also, he is discussing other Chola bronzes that are displayed not that far from The Hermitage, and I felt the discussion of his arguments was relevant for this purpose.

75 Eck, 44-50.


77 Davis, *Ritual...*, chaps 2-4, Davis provides specific examples of devotee behavior during worship and provides diagrams of the body to make clear the detailed rituals of worship.
of the day, the temple is closed and the brahmin, like mothers might do for small children, help the gods fall asleep.\(^78\) As one would celebrate the life of a lover or family member, \textit{pūjā} is meant to increase devotion and intimacy between the adherent and Śiva. Śiva peers through the eyes of the living \textit{mūrti} and watches these events unfold around him and in this way, makes it possible for the worshipper to look into the eyes of the divine as well.

When a Hindu prepares to go to the temple, they will not say, “I am going to worship,” but instead, “I am going for \textit{darśan}.”\(^79\) \textit{Darśan} is loosely translated into English as “auspicious sight,” and the possible intimate relationship one could feel with the divine completely hinges upon this moment -- the exchange of eye contact. Because the living \textit{mūrti} is a revelation of god’s presence, and thus the god himself, he can look at and see the worshipper just as they can look at and see him. In this sense, seeing is a kind of touching the god,\(^80\) a sort of ocular circumambulation. It is during this exchange of \textit{darśan} that the devotee can come to ask for blessings of the god and remain in awe of his true, living presence. It is almost like how we speak of falling in love at first sight, when time stops and you can taste your heartbeat in your mouth. When the devotee exchanges \textit{darśan} with the \textit{mūrti}, they are able to recognize the image as the total and universal presence of their creator; in fact, eye contact is said to be so powerful that if the eyes are sculpted onto the \textit{mūrti} without the proper invocation of the deity, those standing before him risk instant death!\(^81\) Enlightenment, or \textit{mōkśa}, can happen this way, the devotee released from the fear and ignorance that pervades this world.\(^82\) Without \textit{darśan}, the devotee cannot truly know the god, worship is limited, and the chance for salvation seems impossible. It is this moment of joyous and overflowing emotion that is so characteristic of the \textit{bhakti} movements that were beginning to take place within and outside the medieval South Indian temple.

\(^{78}\) Novetsky outlines these rituals in great detail.  
\(^{79}\) Eck, 3. Eck uses this almost word for word, and it is a perfect description of the theology.  
\(^{80}\) Ibid, 9.  
\(^{81}\) Ibid, 7.  
“The Second Half of the First Act:” The Devotional Object in Procession

When standing in front of the Śiva Nataraja in its present location, The Hermitage Museum, it is quite remarkable to reflect upon its past and the tremendous journey it has taken in order to arrive in Norfolk, Virginia. What’s more is that at one time the Śiva Nataraja played the role of a sort of political revolutionary, a symbol of the radical changes occurring within modes of medieval Hindu worship. As we explore the social and religious environments by which Śiva Nataraja was called forth from the temple, it is important to remember the meanings and values of the Śiva Nataraja have not changed; he is still a form into which Śiva revealed himself and his presence so that a more meaningful relationship can be accomplished with his worshippers. If nothing more than a change of scenery, the Śiva Nataraja meeting his followers in the street was their proof of a loving and devoted god. Though we still remain in the first ring, the act in which Śiva is participating has changed -- we have now entered the second half of the first act.

Evidence of bhakti traditions first appear in South India in the sixth century, most notably within Tamil religious poetry. These poets wrote of the passion they felt for God, of an intimate longing for his presence. Bhakti is often translated into English as “devotion,” and finds its roots in the Sanskrit word bhaj, which means “to share.” These poems were really love songs for the divine, calls from the hearts of men for the god to share a loving relationship with the worshippers that seek him. The god is no longer an abstract idea that can only be reached through close study of religious texts, but like the relationship one can have with a lover, parent, child, or friend, the devotee can expect to have their feelings of love returned by the almighty. Here, the poet Mahādēviyakka speaks of the yearning for Śiva’s presence:

Four parts of the day
I grieve for you.

Four parts of the night
I’m mad for you.

I lie lost
sick for you, night and day,

O lord white as jasmine.

Since your love
was planted,

I’ve forgotten hunger,
thirst, and sleep....

He battered my heart,
looted my flesh,
claimed as tribute
my pleasure,
took over
all of me.

I’m the woman of love

for my lord, white as jasmine.85

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85 Ramanujan, 124-125.
Here, the love felt for Śiva is overwhelming; how could it not burst out from the temple and onto the streets of South India?

Bhakti movements have sometimes carried social and political undertones with them, and in doing so, they often call for social reforms in Indian society. Even though the temple had become the center of village life, medieval temple rituals were still entrenched in prejudices that excluded certain members of society based on social class. Access to the mūrti, even the temple, was limited to these members of society, thus inhibiting worship and an individual’s possibility of liberation. In Chola Bronzes in Procession, Richard H. Davis describes the social restrictions placed on the South Indian temple, saying,

“In [the] temple, God in his highest form dwelt in the sequestered center... Only highly qualified persons could enter and minister directly to this innermost iconic deity. Among Śaivas, only males... [after completing initiation practices] were eligible to perform worship in the sanctum. Enjoying this privilege of access, they became mediators for the entire community by carrying out “worship on behalf of others” (pararthapūjā). Members of other social groups were limited in their access. Some could enter as far as the fore-pavilion just in front of the sanctum, others could come only into the main pavilion, while still others could come no further than the door of the entry tower.... Those at the lowest rungs of medieval south Indian society were excluded completely from entering the temple.”

Darśan was thus kept from these people; though there were popular stories of the time told of extreme faith and devotion found in the poorest members of society, they also seemed more like fairy tales, moral

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86 Novetsky describes how this is not always the case, and sometimes these bhakti movements have proclaimed very conservative ideals. However, during this point in Indian history, it seems there was a general movement towards more inclusive worship outside the temple.

reminders of one’s religious duties. These discriminations were in direct contradiction to the bhakti movements of the time, and it was at this moment in South Indian history that we see temple rituals moving outside the temple walls and into the streets.

Because worship was now taking place in the street, smaller and portable images of the divine were needed. These images of the god were still revered just as the mūrtis were in the temple, and were considered another revelation of the god’s power; think of this as another larger, concentric circle in relation to the god’s presence. Increasing numbers of religious texts and bhakti poetry describe temples beginning to have two separate images of the god during the Chola period -- the mūlamūrti, or “root body”, was the fixed image that was housed permanently within the inner sanctum of the temple, and the utsavamūrti, or the “processional body,” was the smaller image which would be carried outside the temple in procession along with other forms of the god during daily or larger, periodic religious rituals.

While the production of smaller images of the god could be dated back to as early as the sixth century, this seems to be associated with changing ideas concerning the roles of the god in society; now that larger territories were being consolidated into singular kingdoms with a singular ruler, the god was expected to adopt similar royal attributes and preside over public events just as the king would. However, it was not until the Chola period that there was an explosion in the production of smaller devotional objects that were then used in these new modes of worship.

Śiva Nataraja, Sculpted

The process in which the object was created is always an interesting topic and is often discussed in the museum setting. Guests are usually intrigued as to how the objects before them were made, and

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88 Davis argues in this chapter these attitudes of reverence were not achievable nor were they practical, and the bhakti movements at the time were certainly reacting to this.
89 Ibid, 54.
90 Davis, Lives....
91 Sharada Srinivasan, "Shiva as 'Cosmic Dancer': On Pallava Origins for the Nataraja Bronze." World Archaeology. 36. no. 3 (2004): 432-450, Scientific evidence has dated some of these images to the Pallava period, where they were used for similar purposes.
when the museum provides this information, this usually allows for a deeper understanding of the object and the original meanings or intentions behind them. What is so fascinating about the artisanal techniques being developed in medieval South India is that they are still used in Indian devotional object fabrication today. The Uma bronze at The Hermitage was created nearly three to four centuries after the Śiva Nataraja, yet they bear remarkable resemblances in their craftsmanship.

Medieval South Indian processional images were often made of bronze through a combined effort between groups of skilled artisans; while these bronzes were meant to be seen as aesthetically beautiful, this was not their primary function. The artisans closely followed texts -- called śilpa śāstras -- that provided guidelines on iconography and iconometry, and informed them on exactly how to create these bronzes. These texts were even considered sacred as they were the written ways in which the god was able to reveal themselves through the creation of the devotional bronzes. The śilpa śāstras also outlined the series of rituals in which the divine was asked to inhabit the images, and included the involvement of the brahmins as well.

Because the process by which these bronzes are created remain similar today, we are fortunate enough to know exactly how these images came into being. In her book *The Sensuous and the Sacred, Chola Bronzes from South India*, Vidya Dehejia offers a compelling first-hand account of the creation of a processional bronze:

“...the cire perdue or lost-wax technique remains the standard method to this day. Images are molded from a “prepared wax”... Sculptors heat the wax, deftly mold it into a torso, hand, leg, or flower, and lower it into a basin of cold water, where it instantly hardens.... Details, down to the individual beads of a necklace or the patterned fabric of a garment, are

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93 Ibid, 11. Dehejia discusses how these techniques were passed down through families who would also trade with merchants from all over the world. There is evidence of Jewish merchants from Anatolia interested in the bronzes and the process in which they were made, but they had wanted the bronzes for decorative techniques instead.
94 Museum records date her to about the sixteenth century.
95 Davis, *Lives..., 35.*
96 Ibid, 35-37.
worked with a sharp wooden chisel.... Once the wax image is complete in every detail, it is encased within several layers of clay.... The heavily clay encased image is then baked, and the wax melts and runs out through sprues provided for this purpose, resulting in a hollow clay mold. Specialized metal workers now take over, heating copper with a small proportion of lead and tin.... This is poured into the clay mold to fill every millimeter.... Once the metal has completely cooled, the clay mold is broken to reveal the bronze image; since the mold cannot be reused, every bronze in unique. In Chola times, only the barest minimum of finishing work... remained to be executed; the product of a well-encased wax model needed only to be polished.”

The bronzes are then mounted onto bases with holes that punch through to both sides. Wooden poles or rope can be inserted through these holes, placed on the shoulders of temple servants, and carried into the streets for worship. The god is dressed in his finest, silks and gold jewelry, and is surrounded by offerings of flowers and food. As Śiva Nataraja steps outside the temple, his worshippers meet him in the streets of South India.

Śiva Nataraja Exits “Ring One”

These religious festivals were meant to be inclusive, providing a spiritual outlet for those who crowded the streets to catch a glimpse, to receive darśan, of Śiva Nataraja. Tamil poets recount the overwhelming love felt within the crowds of devotees as Śiva skillfully dances through the streets of the village.

97 Dehejia, “Chola Bronzes....” 12.
99 Novetsky claims this seems to be a paradox – one can have an intimate relationship with the divine in such a public place surrounded by throngs of people. Yet, I feel this is the whole point of bhakti; the creator of the universe is so magnificent, it is entirely possible to believe the god will make himself available to each worshipper.
It is glorious with unceasing
singing and dancing about the Lord’s glory,
as devotees worship and sing the praise of the god who stood revealed
in the cosmic flood that engulfed the earth.
Such is the splendor of Arur, which place
every town in the world praises in song.100

Yet, as Śiva makes his exit from the first ring and the lights dim, one has to wonder how the excitement felt in the streets of South India and the calls for Śiva’s love were lost on his way to America. True, “[these] images have made a still longer procession to appear before us, in North American museums, some ten centuries later”,101 but it seems when playing audience to Śiva Nataraja at The Hermitage Museum, this part of his past has been forgotten.

“The Second Ring:” A Suspicious Dealer and His Gallery

In 1947, the same year India won its independence from the British, Florence Sloane purchased the Śiva Nataraja in New York City from C. T. Loo, a prominent art dealer of the time, for 4,000 dollars, along with several other objects, including the bronze Uma for 1,700 dollars.102 Adjusted for inflation, the purchase of the Śiva Nataraja would come to just over 41,000 dollars in the year 2013 -- not nearly enough for an object like this one.103

Śiva’s presence in the “second ring” is perhaps the most troubling because it is here that Śiva Nataraja plays the part of a stolen object stripped of his historical and religious significances and sold by an unscrupulous dealer. The second ring is disturbing to us an audience, and museums like The Hermitage would rather not acknowledge the problematic details of their collection’s past. Perhaps museums should

100 Davis, “Chola Bronzes…,” 60.
101 Ibid, 61. This statement certainly shows how Davis would like to redefine these Chola bronzes for its new audience – this sentence makes it seem as if the bronzes were willfully paraded straight to the American museum, which we cannot say is true.
102 Folder: Hermitage Acquisitions, The Hermitage Museum and Gardens archives.
103 Usinflationcalculator.com
incorporate this part of the story in the weaving of the object’s history for the museum guest, for how the object came to the museum is just as complex as the object itself. If we can understand and (most importantly) acknowledge how the Śiva Nataraja became to be what it is in the museum, we will then be able to understand what to do with the Śiva Nataraja -- no matter how uncomfortable its past makes us feel.

C.T. Loo and His Louvre

C.T. Loo was a Chinese art dealer working during the first half of the twentieth century through his two influential galleries in Paris and New York. Throughout his career, Loo catered to an extremely rich and famous clientele; the Rockefellers, the Morgans, Charles Lang Freer, and several important American museums made many purchases from Loo’s gallery.¹⁰⁴ Dr. Yiyou Wang in her dissertation “The Louvre from China: A Critical Study of C. T. Loo and the Framing of Chinese Art in the United States, 1915-1950,” credits Loo with some, if not a large portion, of the presence of Chinese antiquities in the American art market during the years of his activity. However, many of C.T. Loo’s dealings on the international art market have recently come under public scrutiny for their troubling implications.

During a period of increased interest in national history in the early 1900s, the Chinese government began to fund archeological digs at historical sites, but because of civil unrest and war both within China’s borders and abroad, many of these digs went unsupervised, and several of the artifacts became lost or stolen.¹⁰⁵ C.T. Loo remains a controversial figure in China as it is speculated he would use his Chinese citizenship to gain access to these sites, steal objects -- it is unclear if he acted alone or hired help -- and then would sell them to international, particularly European and American, buyers at

¹⁰⁴ Letter from C.T. Loo to Florence Sloane, Folder: C. T. Loo, The Hermitage Museum and Gardens archives, In this letter, Loo expresses wishes for Sloane’s ailing health. Then, very slyly, he offers her to a chance to purchase a few Chinese frescos from his gallery, dated to about the thirteenth century. Loo tries to woo Sloane by saying they look just like Michelangelo’s work in the Sistine Chapel and he feels they would make a perfect addition to her collection. These frescos are not at the museum.

extremely low costs. C.T. Loo, along with his friends and clients, repeatedly defended his actions, claiming the objects had been bought from “foreign” buyers and Loo, oblivious to their troublesome past, would resell them to other buyers. C.T. Loo attempted to justify his actions by citing the Chinese government’s inability to protect these cultural treasures and claimed he only had China’s best interest at heart as these objects would be better preserved by those actually equipped to do so, like American art collectors and museums.¹⁰⁶

What Wang fails to address is Loo’s repeated sale of items that were not Chinese objects; all three of the Chola bronzes in the Sloane collection were purchased from the Loo gallery. Wang does mention Loo’s interest in India but only in passing -- Loo would often tell his European buyers how they were able to see Grecian influences on Chinese objects by way of ancient Chinese routes through India, who at one time had been conquered by the Macedonians and their Hellenistic influences.¹⁰⁷ Wang claims Loo researched the objects in his gallery before selling them, yet the Uma bronze was incorrectly identified as Lakṣmī on the receipt of sale in Sloane’s records.¹⁰⁸ Wang also asserts Loo kept meticulous records of each object in his gallery -- from whom it was purchased, to whom it was sold, for how much, and under what conditions -- but she also recounts several instances when collectors complained of Loo’s manipulation of objects prior to their purchase. It seems Loo cannot be trusted and practiced dishonest tactics when it came to the purchase and sale of objects from his gallery.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁶ Apparently Loo was publicly attacked even during his lifetime for his suspicious methods, and would often defend himself in art or museum journals.
¹⁰⁷ This is now considered to be suspect by the art history community as it seems to “Westernize” objects from Asia.
¹⁰⁸ Folder: Hermitage Acquisitions, The Hermitage Museum and Gardens archives.
¹⁰⁹ To be clear, Wang defends Loo throughout her dissertation, despite overwhelming evidence of his unethical practices. She feels as though she cannot condemn a man with all that he has done for American art museums. Though I wish I could find fault in her arguments, I am sure one could say the same of myself and the way in which I have tried to present Sloane as a benefactor for the community rather than a hoarder. However, it seems Loo’s actions might have been done intentionally, which I feel condemns him in a way.
I firmly believe the Śiva Nataraja at The Hermitage was used for temple and festival worship. This Śiva Nataraja is mounted onto a bronze base with four holes in the bottom which, as stated previously, would have been used to expedite the processional movement. Though I can say this with certainty, I can only make rough guesses as to how Loo came across the Śiva Nataraja. As one could imagine, mūrtis and Hindu devotional objects that are used for religious purposes are never for sale; Loo would never have had the opportunity to make a legal purchase of the Śiva Nataraja from a temple. Though Wang tries to argue that no conclusions can be made concerning Loo’s character or his suspicious behavior, the possibility of the Śiva Nataraja coming into Loo’s possession as a stolen object is very likely.

The Śiva Nataraja could have been stolen from a Chola temple by another invading Indian family, removed from its original context long before Loo could have done so. The looting of temples and palaces was common in India, and these objects were brought back by victorious kings as trophies of war; Rajardhiraja (1018-1054) once brought back a religious stone sculpture from Calukya as a sign of his conquests over the Rastrakutas. However, though they were appropriated images, looters took considerable efforts to erect new temples to house the images in the manner to which they were accustomed. The Śiva Nataraja would still have had to be removed from a temple in order to fall into Loo’s hands.

The Śiva Nataraja could have also been buried outside the temple by brahmins in order to hide the image from invading forces. By the sixteenth century, much of India was under Mughal rule and Hindu temples and the objects they housed were sometimes destroyed as punishment for heresy. In this case, the brahmins would have held a ritual called a navakalevara ceremony where they would have

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110 Davis, Lives..., 53.
111 Ibid, 65.
112 Dehejia, Indian Art, chap. 13.
asked Śiva to leave the image, and thus, the Śiva Nataraja would have returned to an inanimate object.\textsuperscript{114} These images have often been uncovered by unsuspecting farmers or archaeologists, and sometimes are stolen from the excavation sites.\textsuperscript{115} Loo was often hailed as an “archaeologist” by American newspapers\textsuperscript{116}, so it seems possible Loo encountered the Śiva Nataraja in this way as well.

I would like to hope Loo did not enter an Indian temple and steal the Śiva Nataraja, but this also seems possible, though the thought of this occurring is incredibly disturbing. However, this continues to happen in India today, and INTERPOL cites temples as a main target for thieves.\textsuperscript{117} The Indian government has often sought repatriation for stolen religious objects, but to my knowledge, no such efforts have been made regarding the Śiva Nataraja at The Hermitage Museum.

\textit{Śiva Exits “Ring Two”}

Perhaps C. T. Loo really did make purchases from other “foreign” dealers, unknowingly coming into contact with stolen artifacts. However, based on the evidence provided in Wang’s dissertation, I do not feel Loo’s attempts at providing excuses for his behavior are believable nor should he be exonerated from his questionable practices as an art dealer. His records are kept at his New York City gallery, which has since been closed. Nonetheless, I would not hesitate to doubt the credibility of any written documents by Loo. Given his reputation and the fact that he deliberately would manipulate objects in order to sell them tells me Loo would have had no moral qualms with stealing the Śiva Nataraja. Instead of valuing Śiva Nataraja for his rich past or religious significances, I fear the Śiva Nataraja was merely a price tag in the eyes of C.T. Loo. History is sometimes unkind to those who have lived in the past; we should not make exceptions for C.T. Loo. Nor should The Hermitage Museum.

\textit{“The Third Ring:” Florence Sloanes Home; “The Third Act:” Śiva Nataraja as an Object of Art}

\textsuperscript{114} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{115} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{116} Wang, 151.
\textsuperscript{117} www.interpol.int
Unfortunately, absolutely no known information is available on Florence Sloane’s thoughts or feelings in regards to her purchase of the Śiva Nataraja. Sloane seemed unaware of, maybe indifferent to, the circumstances under which Loo came into possession of the Śiva Nataraja as there are absolutely no mentions of concern in museum records. The Hermitage houses quite remarkable Asian objects, and in fact, the first piece in the collection was a Japanese Satsuma bowl given to Sloane by her sister in 1901. Yet it seems these objects were purchased as a part of her private collection that would one day be turned into a museum; if anything, these objects satiated Sloane’s own curiosities and were sometimes used as decorative objects within the home. One day while working at The Hermitage, a staff member told me how Florence Sloane would serve guests tea biscuits and cookies from the beautiful Chinese cinnabar lacquer box that was now nestled in white silk in a glass case. We exchanged stifled chuckles, amused at the uninformed habits of an American socialite despite her good intentions; it is now well known cinnabar contains mercury. It would not be out of the realm of possibility that Sloane used the Śiva Nataraja as a decorative art object as well.

We must spend little time in the third ring. How wonderful it would be to find a picture of Sloane with the Śiva Nataraja, or a letter expressing interest in its origins. It seems we must allow Śiva Nataraja exit the third ring so that he may enter the fourth.

“*The Fourth Ring:*” The Hermitage Museum; “*The Fourth Act:*” Śiva Nataraja (Remains) as an Object of Art

We need not spend too much time in the fourth ring as we are already acquainted with The Hermitage and its display of the Śiva Nataraja. I hope readers now understand the depth and richness of the Śiva Nataraja’s history, and almost feels tired as if they journeyed along with the bronze from the streets of South India to a museum gallery in America. After realizing the expansive journey Śiva Nataraja has made, it seems even more concerning it is left unlabeled by The Hermitage. In doing this, I feel the Śiva Nataraja is still presented and viewed as an object of art, an aesthetic example of Indian sculpture; this implies the task of museum visitors is nothing more than pleasure, and is conceptualized as
a perceptual-emotional experience, not a cognitive educational one. Ģiva Nataraja is certainly beautiful, but his original purposes were not aesthetic ones. This has gone ignored by The Hermitage Museum and this must be changed.

Without an educational label, it seems as if The Hermitage is telling their guests that the historical meanings and values previously assigned to the Śiva Nataraja are irrelevant, that perhaps they can even decide for themselves what the Śiva Nataraja means. Even though the Śiva Nataraja is placed in the company of the other Chola bronzes, their spiritual and historical aspects are left completely ignored. Obviously, the Śiva Nataraja left in an old and dusty living room without any contextual information is a misrepresentation of the object. In this ring, the Śiva Nataraja is devoid of meaning, its value implicit in the fact that it simply exists in a museum but beyond that, nothing more. There is no longer anything extraordinary about the Śiva Nataraja.

**So What Is The Śiva Nataraja?**

Now that we know what the Śiva Nataraja was and how it came to be what it is, we can understand a little about what the Śiva Nataraja is. After watching the circus of meanings, where the Śiva Nataraja entered ring after ring and performed different acts that imbued him with distinct and separate sets of meanings and values, we can come to the conclusion that the Śiva Nataraja is ontologically different from the Śiva Nataraja in its original objecthood. But how? It cannot be denied that as the Śiva Nataraja entered each new ring, differing interpretations of the Śiva Nataraja were created by the company of actors that also took a small part in the ring as well. In the “first ring,” worshippers in the temple were the actors. In the second ring, C.T. Loo (and perhaps the art market of the time) could be the called the actor. In the third ring, Florence Sloane was the actor. In the fourth ring, The Hermitage Museum and their visitors are the actors. The actors in these rings were the ones who assigned meanings and values to the Śiva Nataraja and played an active role in shaping the history of the object as well.

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The philosopher Stanley Fish would call these actors “interpretive communities.” In his essay *What Makes an Interpretation Acceptable?*, Fish argues that “interpretation is the only game in town” by claiming that when considering literature (or in our case, the Śiva Nataraja, since it certainly provides a “text” to its “readers”) critically, one cannot accept one interpretation as valid and another invalid. A singular, correct interpretation cannot be seen as inherent within the text (or object) because text, context, and interpretation all merge together, as a consequence of a gesture (the declaration of belief) that is irreducibly interpretive. It follows, then, that when one interpretation wins out over another, it is not because the first has been shown to be in accordance with the facts but because it is from the perspective of its assumptions that the facts are now being specified. It is these assumptions, and not the facts they make possible, that are at stake in any critical dispute.

Fish goes on to say that one cannot ignore the impact of an interpretation felt within a particular interpretive community, for a text (or object) is *what it does* within that community. Fish’s only requirements for an acceptable interpretation is that the interpretation must claim to both tell the truth about the work as well as enhance other’s appreciation of the work.

Certainly, Richard H. Davis wishes to use the same line of reasoning in his book *Lives of Indian Images* when exploring the implications of the Chola bronzes found at the Freer Gallery in Washington D.C., only a few short hours away from The Hermitage Museum. Davis argues that because these objects have traveled such a long way in order to arrive at their present location, it would be practically useless to impose their historical interpretations on a present-day, American audience. Davis uses Fish’s

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120 Ibid, 355.
121 Ibid, 340.
122 Ibid, 349.
123 Ibid, 351.
“interpretive communities” (he uses the term “communities of response,” 124 although it is unclear why he feels the need to use different terminology here) to argue that it is impractical for a museum to expect their guests to understand the spiritual aspects of the Chola bronzes, thus the museum should not privilege the meanings assigned to the bronze at the time of fabrication. Davis has no qualms with displaying the Chola bronzes as art objects, as mere sculptures of a curious nature -- this is the only way in which the museum visitors understand these objects. How precarious Davis’ assertions seem, how dangerous; it exonerates those who have misused the Śiva Nataraja for unethical purposes, it excuses the museum’s negligent behavior, and completely allows for gross misunderstandings by the contemporary readers with whom Davis is so concerned.

Imagine if Davis’ arguments were practically applied to some of the objects found at The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. Several of the artifacts on display were not intended for museum exhibition. Some of the objects use religious imagery to communicate ideas of the meanings and values inherent within both the object itself and the environment in which the object was produced. A beaded Star of David, its red and white plastic beads held together by thick industrial wire was important to the woman who made it as she was held prisoner at a factory camp in Germany -- it no doubt signified the solace found in the very thing for which she was persecuted. How incredibly inappropriate it would be for the museum to then display this piece of jewelry without proper context because it did not wish to privilege the meanings assigned at the moment of fabrication. The museum would then say that there was no way for them to communicate the complexity of the Jewish religion to their visitors for Judaism is just too foreign, too “Other” to even bother and we must allow for contemporary interpretive audiences to recreate the meaning of the object altogether, however they saw fit to understand it. This would be utterly horrifying as it seems to perpetuate the very willful lack of understanding of the Jewish people and their religion the museum rightly tries to condemn.

124 Davis, Lives..., 9.
I would hope that by pointing out the flaws in how Davis uses Fish’s “interpretive communities”\textsuperscript{125} in the context of the museum, one would be able to recognize that in no way do I believe this sort of approach would be appropriate to the discussion of the Śiva Nataraja I wish to see take place at The Hermitage Museum. We should understand that while the actors supported the sprawling historical narrative of the Śiva Nataraja, it would be unwise to allow their interpretations -- their performances -- to take center stage. The Hermitage Museum cannot play ringmaster and ignore particular aspects of the object’s history out of the museum’s own will or shame of the past.

If we can see how the actors -- or “interpretive communities” -- interacted with the Śiva Nataraja in their own rings of time and place, we can see how the Śiva Nataraja was an ontologically different object in each act it performed. We cannot speak of the Śiva Nataraja in the same way as those in the Hindu temple spoke of it, nor can we speak of the Śiva Nataraja in the same way as C. T. Loo or Florence Sloane spoke of it; the object is what it does. However, we cannot stop there when considering the Śiva Nataraja within its present context of The Hermitage Museum. If we know too well the dangers that go along with deliberate misrepresentations or lack of understanding of an object and its culture, we must demand the museum move past the simple notion that perhaps the Śiva Nataraja is somehow different when it sits atop a wooden pedestal in a museum gallery than when it parades through the excited streets of India; of course it is! But this does not exactly tell us what the Śiva Nataraja is.

While we cannot hold one interpretation of the Śiva Nataraja supreme over another, we can acknowledge them. We can never experience the dark corners of the others around us\textsuperscript{126}, but we can say that they exist. An object is what it does, but the object is also immensely talented and has done many things. Each interpretation of the Śiva Nataraja, despite some of them being fairly unpleasant to swallow, has affected the outcome of the Śiva Nataraja’s present in some way. Yes, the Śiva Nataraja at The Hermitage today is an ontologically unique object, but in accepting this we do not have to forsake its past.

\textsuperscript{125} Besides, Fish was using literary works of fiction as his example for texts. Though it does not make his theories of interpretation any less valid, I think they cannot be applied so dogmatically to an object of this historical magnitude.

\textsuperscript{126} Friedrich Nietzsche, in his \textit{Twilight of the Idols}, speaks of the dark corners of our minds in a similar way, which I think is incredibly fitting here.
Let the museum instead acknowledge all acts of the Śiva Nataraja, so that we may truly see what is before us. *The Śiva Nataraja is a thirteenth century Chola bronze originally meant for worship in a South Indian Hindu temple, but because it was taken from the temple and sold to an American art collector it is now presented before us in a museum so that perhaps we may become better acquainted with India’s religion and people.* How easy it would be for The Hermitage Museum (or for that matter, any museum that houses a Śiva Nataraja) concern themselves with the Śiva Nataraja in this fashion. By doing this, I believe guests will come to a deeper understanding of the Śiva Nataraja -- what it was, how it came to be where it is, and what it is. By acknowledging these connections, the museum will be able to foster an environment where guests can learn about India’s culture, its culture and religion, and its people. When a guest can learn about global history in terms of their very own local history and is able to see the ways in which a radically different world has collided with theirs, The Hermitage Museum has the opportunity to shape positive, if not more informed, opinions of India among their guests. We must allow for the Śiva Nataraja to remain ringmaster and acknowledge each and every ring that has centered around the object -- it is after all the Śiva Nataraja’s circus.
Should The Hermitage Send the Śiva Nataraja Back to India?

*The Consequences of a Stolen Artifact*

It seems to go without saying, but the stealing of artifacts is wrong. C.T. Loo’s actions, if he did in fact steal the Śiva Nataraja,\textsuperscript{127} were morally reprehensible. When someone abducts an object like the Śiva Nataraja from its original context like the Hindu temple, they violate the object and its culture in a variety of ways. Most importantly, the object is denied the meanings and values with which it was first created as it no longer exists with the intended environment or audience; without the temple or its worshippers, the Śiva Nataraja is no longer the same Śiva Nataraja.\textsuperscript{128} The Śiva Nataraja was site-specific to the Hindu temple, and the center to the cultural and religious life of the people within the village -- it at one time belonged to them and to them alone.\textsuperscript{129} Because it was stolen, we no longer know what happened to the Śiva Nataraja in between the time it was worshipped in South India to the point at which it was sold to Florence Sloane, and any knowledge of its origins is lost, perhaps for good. By then placing the bronze in a living room or museum without proper contextual information, the Śiva Nataraja is forced to exist as a representative of an anonymous people; the conditions under which the Śiva Nataraja was created becomes irrelevant as it is perhaps considered an exotic example of tribal,

\textsuperscript{127} I understand accusations of this magnitude are not appropriate when I have not been granted access to Loo’s archives. I made the point in the previous chapter that even if one could look in Loo’s archives, one would still have to be cautious in what they believed. Wang mentions at several points in her thesis how several collectors became dissatisfied with Loo’s practices, as some of them proved to be incredibly dishonest. This I feel undermines Loo’s credibility, making it difficult to trust anything even in his archives. I understand I am making an accusation based on the evidence I have found, but that there are also pieces to the picture I may not know. However, I am working under the assumption that Loo stole the object at some point so that I may address the issues at hand.

\textsuperscript{128} Katherine Conley, "Is Reconciliation Possible? Non-Western Objects at the Menil Collection and the Quai Branly Museum." *South Central Review*. 27. no. 3 (2010): 34-53.

“cultish” practices.\textsuperscript{130} The American museum, including The Hermitage, tends to display the Śiva Nataraja as an art object, rather than a religious icon or ethnographic object,\textsuperscript{131} and is thus considered as part of the early stages of human artistic evolution, a primitive forefather to the contemporary endeavors of the enlightened European and American man.\textsuperscript{132} How admirable The Hermitage Museum is for including such a curious object as the (unlabeled) Śiva Nataraja in their collection, while the American bronze sculptures upstairs receive their own room, fantastic lighting, and educational labels that take up nearly a third of the wall!

The consequences of stealing artifacts are tragic and undeniable. However, this practice continues into the twenty first century. Proper and authentic paperwork regarding the provenance of objects is still not required by international law in order to sell or purchase them.\textsuperscript{133} It could be argued that museums encourage the looting and destruction of cultural property, particularly that of developing nations, as the museums are often willing to pay high prices for objects like the

\textsuperscript{130} Price, chap. 4. A great chapter explaining how Western collectors and museums often do not attempt to learn more about the artists of ethnographic objects, thus clumping “everyone else” inside very large geographical boundaries and vague time periods. For example, the Śiva Nataraja could be labeled as “Indian,” which will lead the uninformed guest to make assumptions about the object, perhaps even the Hindu religion, based on what they have peripherally learned about Indian religion from the Western (ethnocentric) culture. They may even conflate other concepts of religions they take to be pantheistic, and assign those concepts to the Śiva.

\textsuperscript{131} Ibid, chap. 6.

\textsuperscript{132} Carolyn Dean, "The Trouble with (The Term) Art." Art Journal. 65. no. 2 (2006): 24-32, Although I agree with Dean’s application of Foucauldian normalization principles to objects in regards to people calling them “art” when they were not at all art in the first place – this term has often tried to remake images in the Western way, thus highlighting notions of “otherness” with other peoples and their material culture – I am not sure Dean accomplishes anything other than dishing out guilt complexes left and right. She does not offer a solution as to what exactly to call these objects, and instead makes it seem as those using a sort of shorthand term, like “art,” are doing so intentionally as a means to further culture appropriation. To be sure, as the educator, it is the museum’s duty to perhaps use familiar terms or principles as a way to guide others in making more informed conclusions. As long as the museum goes past this simile, in showing how this term does not work for the ethnographic object, I see no harm in using this linguistic tool in the first place.

\textsuperscript{133} INTERPOL’s website highly suggests one should procure proper paperwork when purchasing the object, with a proof of provenance dating back to the past five owners, but also states this is still not required by law – how frustrating.
Śiva Nataraja. So high in fact that sometimes staff members of the museums in these developing nations are willing to risk their jobs and imprisonment in order to sell an object from the collection to another museum or collector abroad. It is my firm belief that museums like The Hermitage should be more transparent in the methods used to acquire their collections; international art market and cultural property laws are still vague and confusing, and museums are in the position to better inform lawmakers and shape more effective laws if they allowed for a more open and frank discussion of their collection’s history. Furthermore, American museums like The Hermitage should work with organizations like UNESCO and UNICEF in order to ensure those museums in developing nations are receiving international aid, monetary relief, and support in technological development so they may better protect their collections that we all admire.

However, our primary concerns are with the Śiva Nataraja and its place in The Hermitage Museum. Before we can discuss specific ways in which The Hermitage should treat and display the Śiva Nataraja, we must first explore how the object came into the museum’s collection and address the ethical complications caused by the object’s history. Because it was more than likely stolen -- from where and by whom, exactly, we don’t know -- we must decide whether it belongs

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135 Appiah, 124, Appiah explains this has happened in several developing nations, and uses Nigeria as a particular nation in which this has unfortunately taken place.

136 *Who Owns the Past? Cultural Policy, Cultural Property, and the Law*, ed. Kate Fitz Gibbon (New Brunswick and London: Rutgers University Press, 2005), There are several chapters within this book that deal with cultural patrimony law and international art market trade agreements, and is recommended to those interested in learning the tedious details of it all, but with caution as I felt some of the authors arguments smacked of ethnocentrism; the book is written on behalf of the American Council for Cultural Policy.

137 Appiah, 124, Appiah makes the claim that to attack the removal of objects from developing nations is to ignore the larger issue of the extreme poverty found in these regions, and suggests museums try to solve the issue by providing relief to the people instead of insisting they keep their material culture.

in The Hermitage at all. I am sure we could all agree stolen artifacts should be returned, and quickly, too, but as we shall see, the Śiva Nataraja presents more complicated issues of ownership. Should The Hermitage Museum return the Śiva Nataraja to India?

Who Owns the Śiva Nataraja?

Let us first ignore what the receipt of sale found in The Hermitage’s archives says. The Śiva Nataraja is Indian in origin, so does India own the Śiva Nataraja? If a similar Śiva Nataraja was to be found in India today, I do not think anyone would be so foolish as to argue that its proper place would be to stay on Indian soil. In the summer of 2011, as I tread nervously through the same gallery of the Śiva Nataraja at The Hermitage, the Indian Supreme Court ruled the twenty two billion dollars of treasure found in crypts beneath a South Indian Hindu temple were under the care of the state, and were to be carefully catalogued and inventoried so that a future museum could be built. There are no arguments to be had with the Indian government’s decision. While it would be incredibly gracious of them to allow these remarkable objects to embark on a worldwide museum tour, these objects rightfully belong in India, and if an object were to be stolen and displayed in a museum like The Hermitage, I would hope the Indian government would seek the repatriation of the object.

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139 Based on the literature, I have come to realize each object has its own set of complicated issues when it comes to its origins and ownership. However, I feel that judgments made concerning objects and their fate should be made on a case by case basis and am suspicious of scholars who make blanket statements concerning the issue.

140 Appiah, 122, I find Appiah’s arguments on the matter far more convincing and practical, but most of all respectful.

141 André Emmerich, “Improving the Odds: Preservation through Distribution,” Who Owns the Past? Cultural Policy, Cultural Property, and the Law, ed. Kate Fitz Gibbon (New Brunswick and London: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 252-253, Emmerich makes the infuriating argument that Americans possibly have the right to some of the “buried treasure” found in other countries because of our foreign ancestors.

Of course, I would agree that the Śiva Nataraja is a representative of India and its culture, which provides the religious and historical significances to the object before us; because I would like for us to take “culture” in this sense to be any intellectual or creative endeavors (be it material objects, food, music, or fashions) that have been undertaken by members of “a culture”, the Śiva Nataraja could be considered one of the many cultural icons of India. Yet I do not feel this necessarily require for the Śiva Nataraja to be returned to India.

The Śiva Nataraja at The Hermitage has an unclear provenance, which might make us feel uneasy about its current place in the museum, but without this information, to whom in India should The Hermitage return the object? The Śiva Nataraja was not broken from its clay mold with the intentions of being “The Cultural Icon of India,” but was made specifically for the activities of a religious community that happened to reside within India at the time -- the Śiva Nataraja was not an image meant to represent a nationalistic pride nor was it made for India. India, whose own modern geographical boundaries have only just come into being within the last century, cannot be considered the sole owner to the Śiva Nataraja only because the people who currently reside they are (considered) the biological descendents of those that made the bronze.

What is more, this sort of reasoning -- it belongs strictly in India because it is Indian -- seems to betray its own set of discriminations. If the Śiva Nataraja belongs to India just because it is an Indian object, then we would also be forced to accept that you would only be able to truly appreciate the Śiva Nataraja if you were an Indian living in India, because otherwise it would not

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143 Appiah, 118.
144 Vidya Dehejia, "Devotion in South India: Chola Bronzes." Recorded October 5, 2009. Asia Society. http://asiasociety.org/video/arts/vidya-dehejia-chola-bronzes-complete, Dehejia did not use these words exactly, but instead called it the “preeminent object of all of India.”
145 Appiah, 119, Appiah uses Nigeria and Nok sculpture as an example.
146 Ibid, 120.
be yours to appreciate. Sarcasm might not be the best response to these sorts of arguments, but the implications are somewhat comical. We know countless tourists stand in line for hours in the Tuscan humidity so that they may climb The Duomo in Florence, yet they are not Italian nor are they Catholic. I do think it is unfair that nations like India have been forced to watch in silence as their culture has been stolen by Western, colonial forces and then not returned with the poor excuse of “universal appreciation,” yet objects like The Mona Lisa unquestioningly remain in Paris. I do not, however, feel it would be a fitting solution for the Śiva Nataraja to be returned to India just because it so happens to be an Indian object in origin.

If, then, Śiva Nataraja is not entirely a cultural icon but a religious one, we must decide whether or not the Śiva Nataraja should be returned in this way. The Śiva Nataraja first opened its eyes in a temple, so is it owned by a temple? I would love nothing more than to discover the temple in which the Śiva Nataraja was first kept and to walk through the village where it once met with devoted crowds of worshippers. Except, out of the multitude of temples one will find in South India, to which one should The Hermitage send the Śiva Nataraja? Without proper archeological records, we may never have a way of knowing which temple originally worshipped Śiva.

In 1991, the Indian government was able to successfully repatriate a Śiva Nataraja from a London museum; through meticulous research, scientists and historians were able to identify the Śiva Nataraja and return it to its rightful place in India. After the repatriation, the Tamil Nadu chief minister, Jayalalitha, said that by winning this case, the Indian government had ended an era in which, “our priceless treasures have been plundered by foreign counties and we have been forced, through circumstances, to bear all this in silence.”

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147 Ibid, 121.
148 Davis, Lives..., 256. After the repatriation of the Pathur Nataraja, the Tamil Nadu chief minister, Jayalalitha, said that by winning this case, the Indian government had ended an era in which, “our priceless treasures have been plundered by foreign counties and we have been forced, through circumstances, to bear all this in silence.”
temple to which the Śiva Nataraja originally belonged and prove that it had been discovered by a farmer then smuggled out of India onto the art market. As he recounts the return of the bronze to its temple in Pathur in what he quite dramatically calls “The Aftermath,” Davis laments how the temple now keeps the bronze in a center with other repatriated objects, where only a priest can see it to perform a weekly pūjā. He calls this “a death trap for idols” and reveals many of the images are in danger of metal diseases as they are subject to extreme heat and overcrowding. I can understand the worry Davis feels for these bronzes, for I too feel so passionately connected to them in such an indescribable way that their demise would surely cause my own cries of injustice.

However, it is not our place to contest the outcome of this particular incident as there was a specific temple that could prove in court their ownership of the Śiva Nataraja in question -- if it belonged to them, the temple could legally do whatever it wanted with the Śiva Nataraja. Furthermore, I do not believe it would have been appropriate for the temple to continue their worship of this particular Śiva Nataraja as if nothing had happened. There are specific rituals in which Śiva was asked to leave the image, wherein the bronze returned to an inanimate object so that it could be buried alongside the temple so that the temple could create a new image to worship. Though this form is always indicative of the god’s presence, his power no longer resided in this bronze. The brahmin described seeing the Pathur Nataraja for the first time was

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149 Davis, Lives..., Chapter 7, I did not set out to refute every single one of Davis’ arguments; in fact, when I first read Lives of Indian Images, I felt glad this sort of work was being accomplished. Because both Davis and I have similar approaches to the same objects, the bronzes are located in museums only hours apart, and the founders of the museums both worked with C.T. Loo, I feel like Davis is the best scholar to use as a springboard for the sort of questions and answers I am looking for. That said, I do not think Davis digs deep enough for more ethically sound solutions to display, and I often feel as if his focus on the shifts in interpretation are excuses to be satisfied with scratching the surface.

150 Ibid, 258-259.

151 Preston, 19.

152 Ibid, 19.
like seeing his own mother for the first time,\textsuperscript{153} so I feel that this seclusion of the object was also done out of loving protection, born out of the kind of fierce emotions one might feel when they are reunited with a loved one who has suddenly reappeared in their lives. India’s fight for the Pathur Nataraja’s return was a symbolic demand for respect of its religion and its people, and we should celebrate this victory by respecting the temple and its treatment of their Śiva Nataraja.

\textit{The Śiva Nataraja Remains}

However, the Śiva Nataraja at The Hermitage has no desperate pleas for return to a specific temple, its brahmins and members aching for the return of their god. If there were such requests, my conclusions would no doubt be different. However, as there are no groups of people with the legitimacy or enough force to make this demand of The Hermitage Museum, perhaps the Śiva Nataraja should stay where it is. Afterall, if Śiva’s presence can be thought of in concentric circles, can we not think of The Hermitage as a larger circle of Śiva’s manifestation within this world? The ubiquitousness of Śiva’s image is only proof of his unending power.\textsuperscript{154} Truly, both the temple and the museum provide hushed atmospheres of reflection and poised beauty, where the Śiva Nataraja is elevated on a pedestal and surrounded by other like-objects on their own pedestals.\textsuperscript{155} \textit{Darśan} is certainly reminiscent of how one might engage with objects in a museum; the object grasps my sight and attention, and I cannot help but engage in a

\textsuperscript{153} Davis, \textit{Lives...}, 242.
\textsuperscript{154} Kajri Jain, \textit{Gods in the Bazaar: The Economies of Indian Calendar Art}. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007. This is an excellent book on the proliferation of Indian religious imagery throughout the country and thoroughly explains how the mass-production of commercialized religious images, in the forms of calendars or other “low-art” forms, fit in with the broader Hindu religious theologies.
\textsuperscript{155} Davis, \textit{Lives...}, 17.
relationship of meditative devotion with the object I find so mesmerizing. The Śiva Nataraja can teach us all of unimaginable worlds, both in the temple and museum, if we only approach him with respect and an open mind.

The most appropriate place for the Śiva Nataraja seems to be The Hermitage Museum. Though the Pathur Śiva Nataraja must be kept away from the public eye and, as a consequence, in danger of destruction, we can be comforted by the fact “our” Śiva Nataraja will be kept at The Hermitage Museum, where it can be “preserved by its dispersion” on seemingly uncommon ground. In 1994, John G. Ford, President of the International Chinese Snuff Bottle Society, wrote a letter to The Hermitage expressing pleasure in the Śiva Nataraja’s place within the collection. However, Ford had noticed there were traces of bronze disease on the object and was able to recommend a professional who would be able help the museum restore the Śiva Nataraja.

Beyond the practical and ethical concerns raised when arguing for the Śiva Nataraja’s continued presence at The Hermitage Museum, are there not also humanistic concerns as well? The Śiva Nataraja could surely prove to be an exciting piece of cultural and religious history for just about any guest that walked through the galleries at the museum, whether they are Indian or Hindu or not – “One connection [we all have with one another through art] is the connection not through identity but despite difference.” If the collection defines the museum, then The Hermitage is an excellent museum; the breadth of their collection is astounding and provides a very real opportunity for museum visitors to study objects from countless civilizations so that

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156 Emmerich, 247-253. Although Emmerich uses extreme examples of objects lost in the destruction of war, I cannot help but like this idea of preservation through dispersion. Appiah has a similar thought, on page 131, when he discusses how one culture can respect another by displaying their objects in a museum, thus allowing everyone to experience each other’s art.


158 Appiah, 135.
they may come to understand the object, the cultures they represent, and ultimately come away with a better understanding of this world and maybe themselves as well.\footnote{Philippe de Montebello, “’And What Do You Propose Should Be Done with Those Objects?’” \textit{Whose Culture? The Promise of Museums and the Debate Over Antiquities}. Edited by James Cuno. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2009, 57.} Not just a contribution to Indian history, the Śiva Nataraja is a contribution to the history of mankind.\footnote{Appiah, 130. Appiah also suggests that if museums are to become repositories of world heritage, they are obligated to make these collections widely available in other locations through travelling exhibitions and the internet.} We cannot say The Hermitage “owns” the Śiva Nataraja, but they may have the privilege to display the bronze if they do so respectfully, so that their guests may learn more about the culture and history of India. So, let us ask Śiva Nataraja to linger upon the old, American wooden floorboards, for he seems to belong here.
**How Should The Hermitage Treat the Śiva Nataraja?**

**Time for a Change**

Although certain justifications can be made for the Śiva Nataraja’s place at The Hermitage Museum, the museum cannot be afforded the same rights of ownership over the bronze in the same way a temple would. While a temple can do whatever it wishes with its own repatriated objects, the museum is obligated treat the bronze in a certain, ethical manner if they truly wish to remain the most appropriate dwelling for the Śiva Nataraja; The Hermitage does not really own the Śiva Nataraja, but should instead act as trustees of the Śiva Nataraja.¹⁶¹ Unfortunately, the current treatment of the Śiva Nataraja by The Hermitage does not make a strong case for their continued care of the object. While I do not think this is being done maliciously or with ill-willed intentions, The Hermitage continues to mistreat the Śiva Nataraja in several harmful ways that undermine the object’s integrity and the goals of the museum itself.¹⁶² It is not my intention to expressly attack the museum, but I do wish to call attention to some of the faults I find in the way The Hermitage treats the Śiva Nataraja. It is only my sincere hope that an already fine museum can improve upon some of its habits in order to become an even better one.

**How Does The Hermitage Treat the Śiva Nataraja Now?**

Though a wonderful story and remarkable piece of local history, The Hermitage focuses the narrative of the museum too tightly on the life of Florence Sloane. Guests walk through the house and are told anecdotes of the woman’s time spent in the house and her impact on the community. The experience

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¹⁶¹ Appiah, chap. 8, Throughout the chapter, Appiah explains how nations should act as trustees to their produced culture, rather than owners. Perhaps we can extend this title to museums as well.

¹⁶² This is not to say that I would like for there to be some sort of museum police that would revoke privileges from museums that do not treat and display their ethnographic objects in an ethically sound manner. I only wish to say that a museum that does not do so should be confronted on this matter and their legitimacy as an institution of education should be questioned. We have spent so much time tracing the objects past and attempting to ethically justify its place in the museum, but if the museum continues their unethical habits, this completely undoes all of the work accomplished so that the preceding questions could be answered.
currently being offered to guests is almost hallucinatory\(^{163}\) as it feels like Mrs. Sloane has stepped out to run an errand and she will be back at any moment; especially eerie is the tour of her dressing room and closet, as drawers of silk petticoats and gloves are left ajar, and hair combs on the armoire look as if they might have wisps of hair still attached to them. Frankly, the story of Mrs. Sloane’s life can quickly become stale -- once you have been on one tour of The Hermitage, you have sadly been on them all. The museum’s collection is mere decoration in this sense, as the collection in this suspension of time is still “Mrs. Sloane’s private collection.” The Śiva Nataraja dances near an old couch and armchairs casually, as if he was there all along; a purely aesthetic accent meant to exude attitudes of the particular style of the homeowner, but nothing more. No other experience of the museum is offered,\(^{164}\) and more is learned about Florence Sloane than any one of the objects in the museum’s collection.\(^{165}\)

The current place of the Śiva Nataraja is certainly comfortable and intimate -- for what could be more comfortable and intimate than the living room of a kind old woman letting us explore her beautiful home -- but this immediately negates all that is extraordinary about the Śiva Nataraja. The Śiva Nataraja is assimilated into the background of an American living room, where it runs the risk of going unnoticed, of becoming white noise amid the all other objects that fill the gallery.\(^{166}\)\(^{167}\) The living room is dark, and Śiva’s bronze skin blends into the wooden panels of the walls around him. Rather than making apparent its own differences from all of the other objects in the room, the Śiva Nataraja is just another odd curiosity, an art object brought back from afar.

\(^{163}\) David Carrier, "Remembering the Past: Art Museums as Memory Theaters." *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*. 61. no. 1 (2003): 61. Though Carrier uses hallucinatory in another sense, when describing how one in a museum can go from incongruous gallery to the next, I felt this was incredibly useful when describing The Hermitage. Though most of the objects are not really separated into categories based on nation of origin, as other museums are, the fact that they are all together without any other context than an American home certainly feels disjointed.

\(^{164}\) Ibid, 63, Carrier suggests that multiple narratives provided by museums are useful and allow the guest more agency in what they experience.


\(^{166}\) Ibid, 12, Karp discusses how museums try to assimilate out of good intentions but possibly end up doing more harm as these sort of exhibitions are “harder to read” because you can no longer tell the difference between separate culture’s objects, which is something that definitely occurs at The Hermitage.

\(^{167}\) Price, 83, calls this “dog-collar text,” which I find appropriate but somewhat aggressive and have chosen to use Karp’s terminology instead.
In doing this, The Hermitage is treating the Śiva Nataraja essentially as a decorative art object, it’s value implicit in its aesthetic qualities and perceived attractiveness.\(^{168}\) This completely dehistoricizes the Śiva Nataraja and strips it of all its religious meanings and values,\(^{169}\) and recreates it in the image of other, Western decorative art objects.\(^{170}\) Decorative art objects need no labels for we are only meant to enjoy their company, not learn anything from them. Though we can appreciate the graceful pose of the Śiva Nataraja and the beauty of his movement, the primary functions of the Śiva Nataraja were not aesthetic ones, and to treat it as such is a serious misrepresentation of the object. Because The Hermitage treats the Śiva Nataraja as a decorative art object, even I find it difficult to understand why the museum has never come under scrutiny for their brutal misrepresentations of the Indian culture and religion. It is offensive, culturally appropriative, and unethical to treat the Śiva Nataraja in any other way than with total respect for its religious and historical significances, and it is astounding how The Hermitage has not amended this issue sooner. It is concerning (if anything embarrassing) that a museum who explicitly asserts educational goals within their mission statement would then deny their guests the opportunity to become more knowledgeable of the Śiva Nataraja.

**The Hermitage Museum as Public Educator**

It seems The Hermitage Museum earnestly seeks to enrich their surrounding community through educational programs open to the public; by offering lectures, art classes and camps, and working with local schools to shape their curriculum, The Hermitage is attempting to realize their potential role as a public educator.\(^{171}\) However, their potential remains unfulfilled as The Hermitage produces knowledge

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\(^{168}\) de Montebello, 65-67, de Montebello asks somewhat rhetorically what is so wrong with museums assigning value to objects based on their aesthetic merits alone, claiming all objects have aesthetic context, and the museum should center their collection around this principle of beauty. However, this is problematic in this case as the Śiva Nataraja was never meant to be evaluated on its aesthetic content and it would also be more than likely to be evaluated based on a Western-centric aesthetic value judgment.

\(^{169}\) Conley, *Is Reconciliation...*, 37.

\(^{170}\) Dean, 26.

concerning their collection only through the specific narrative of Florence Sloane’s life – the collection remains hers, and visitors only learn about the collection in how it came to be the collection rather than the histories of the individual objects themselves.¹⁷² This sort of narrative privileges those who abused objects like the Śiva Nataraja and treated them in a highly unethical manner, because guests are forced to view the objects in the same way. Now because The Hermitage treats the Śiva Nataraja as a decorative art object, guests are subject to cultural manipulation, passively accepting the views of Sloane and Loo of the Śiva Nataraja.¹⁷³ Currently, there is no learning or discovering taking place at The Hermitage Museum.

The Hermitage refuses to push itself into the future, and remains a dusty bank of memories, its incredible collection the forgotten memorabilia of a dead woman. How tightly The Hermitage clings to Sloane’s vision of her museum, how unaware they seem of the dangers that lie ahead. If The Hermitage Museum wants to be taken seriously as a site for culture and learning, the museum must abide by higher standards and more ethical treatments of their collection.¹⁷⁴ A surprising number of American adults trust museums like The Hermitage as respected centers of knowledge and learning, and believe the collections found in museums are significant connections to the past, second only to their own family history.¹⁷⁵ If The Hermitage does not adopt more ethical practices in the way it treats the Śiva Nataraja (and with the other objects found in the collection as well) I fear The Hermitage will lose the trust it holds within the community of Norfolk. If it can be proven that The Hermitage misrepresents objects in their collection,

¹⁷² Ibid, 236-237, Hooper-Greenhill also mentions Stanley Fish’s issues of interpretation, but sees this as a disadvantage to museums as guests will interpret objects incorrectly if not given enough information about the object.
¹⁷⁴ Karp, 13, Karp suggests that if we hold our public universities and book publishers to high standards, we should do the same for museums that strive to educate their community.
¹⁷⁵ Jeffre H. Patchen, “Defining Our Museum Audience: An Extraordinary Opportunity,” Museum Philosophy for the Twenty-first Century. Edited by Hugh H. Genoways. Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2006, 249, Patchen’s article does a wonderful job in explaining the types of learning that happen in a museum that makeup an overall educative experience, something which I mention throughout the paper but have chosen not include as this would require a discussion in learning theory and psychology.
their role as a public educator will surely be regarded with suspicion along with a lack of faith and ultimately, a lack of interest.\textsuperscript{176}

The Hermitage Museum has enormous potential to become a true institution of education and knowledge. Considering the breadth of their collection, imagine if the museum spent time curating more thoughtful exhibitions and developed ethical and respectful ways of treating the objects that fill their galleries. The Hermitage Museum does not have to become a temple to the Śiva Nataraja, but it should acknowledge all of its historical and religious significances in order to treat the bronze in an ethically sound way. Remember, to esteem Śiva Nataraja as the ringmaster of his own circus of meanings, the museum must allow their visitors to see all the rings in which the Śiva Nataraja has performed. How exciting this would be for The Hermitage because this way, the Śiva Nataraja could enter the “fifth ring.” This ring is not yet a reality, but here I would like to imagine the Śiva Nataraja is treated with respect, instilling museum visitors with knowledge of India, its religion, and its culture, thus transforming The Hermitage into an incredible place for learning.

\textbf{So How Should The Hermitage Treat the Śiva Nataraja?}

The Śiva Nataraja will look more complete once The Hermitage treats it differently. We can recognize how throughout its past, the Śiva Nataraja has transformed into an ontologically unique object that is given new meanings, values, and significances by the “interpretive communities” that find themselves at The Hermitage Museum. However, as we have seen, to ignore the historical and religious significances of the Śiva Nataraja is no way to treat such a powerful image; the Śiva Nataraja may no longer be considered a revelation of Śiva’s presence, but there are ways in which the museum must treat the object if they wish to remain a educational fixture in the city of Norfolk.

The Hermitage does not need to treat the Śiva Nataraja as a devotional object, for that act is over and we cannot expect the guests at The Hermitage to revere him as their god. The Hermitage should not treat the Śiva Nataraja as an art object, for the Śiva Nataraja is very different from the American bronze sculptures upstairs, that show tense and muscular bodied dancers diving into invisible waters; these are celebrations of human form, expression, and beauty, not reverential depictions of a worshipper’s universal truth.

To treat the Śiva Nataraja as an ethnographic object, or artifact, would prove to be complicated as well. The Śiva Nataraja would finally be labeled, and the text would be able to make the bronze accessible to museum viewers through descriptions of its place of origin, and its role in the life of the South Indian Hindu temple and village religious festivals. However, there are dangers in eroticizing the Śiva Nataraja, too, by emphasizing the spiritual aspects and religious rituals associated with the bronze that might seem strange or foreign to American museum visitors. Often when Western museums have treated objects like the Śiva Nataraja as ethnographic objects, the culture and religions the objects represent tend to be romanticized; the cultures or individuals that created the objects and those who used them are sometimes depicted as simple humans who operated only on their raw emotions and strict observance of their traditions in an archaic time. However, this seems to be the proper and ethical way in which to treat the Śiva Nataraja.

By treating the Śiva Nataraja as an ethnographic artifact, The Hermitage will provide their guests with proper contextual information of the Śiva Nataraja’s history. Then both the museum and guests will be able to respect the Śiva Nataraja and the culture, people, and religion the bronze represents. The Hermitage would no longer misrepresent the Śiva Nataraja as something that it is not, and in doing so, would acknowledge the religious significances of the bronze. Even the aesthetic features of the bronze could be pointed out to guests, as long as they were recognized through their anthropological importance.

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177 Price, chap. 6.
178 Karp, 11.
179 Ibid.
180 Price, 90.
as signifiers of theological principles and specified iconography. If the Śiva Nataraja was treated as an ethnographic object, The Hermitage would provide their guests with an amazing opportunity to come face to face with an object that would teach them about another way of life or maybe a people, culture, or religion of which they were previously unaware. Most importantly, by treating the Śiva Nataraja as an ethnographic artifact, The Hermitage will need to acknowledge why this artifact is now without its temple and worshippers; The Hermitage should tell their guests of the Śiva Nataraja’s journey to the museum, however embarrassing, since this is part of why this Śiva Nataraja is so unique from all the other Śiva Natarajas in the world. Once The Hermitage begins to treat the Śiva Nataraja with the ethical appreciation it deserves, the museum can finally become a place of genuine learning.

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181 Price, chap 6, Price wants a marriage between the two modes of display, and so do I.
How Should The Hermitage Display the Śiva Nataraja?

The Śiva Nataraja could mean so much more to guests who visit The Hermitage Museum than a beautiful Indian bronze; we have learned this much. In fact, I think The Hermitage too deserves to be appreciated for far more than its old interior and quiet gardens. No one would need you to point out the serene landscape of the museum, nor comment on the allure of such an incredible collection. I see such a promising future for The Hermitage Museum, but some of this potential has gone unrealized. By creating new and relevant ways in which to educate their visitors, The Hermitage Museum can create an engaging environment that will make room for a more thought provoking display of the Śiva Nataraja.

Suggestions for The Hermitage Museum

The narrative currently being told at the museum has grown tired, and as we have seen, presents complications in the ways the museum treats and displays their collection. While the small tour groups that are guided through each room by a curator is a function the museum should keep, I do not think this should be the only way to explore the collection. The Hermitage feels still too much like a home, and rearranging the collection within the galleries would be one way to not place so much emphasis on the life of Florence Sloane. Currently, the Great Hall is nearly empty, its large bay windows allowing the natural light in on little more than the tile floors and an enormous painting of Sloane herself. I think moving the majority of the objects from the living room, where the Śiva Nataraja is, into the Great Hall would be a wonderful idea as this would allow more room to label the objects. Furthermore, by moving them out of the living room space, they will not have those tinges of collectable decorations as they do now. I would very much like to see the Śiva Nataraja and the other Chola bronzes in procession through the Great Hall, as their view of the Lafayette River would be reminiscent of the bronzes exiting the temple into the world outside.

An upstairs gallery is devoted almost entirely to the blueprints of the house along with other archival pieces of family history and Sloane’s process of creating the museum, all of which is fascinating,
but I do not see why this warrants its own gallery. This could definitely be moved into the living room, where the records of the family will feel more alive, the stories more real when you can read them in their living room among their books and fireplace. The three upstairs galleries are quite spacious, and two of them are used now to exhibit visiting artist’s works. However, I think The Hermitage should use these rooms for their own collection. So many objects are in storage, and these galleries would provide the space they need to display them. The paintings in the upstairs hall could be moved to the Master Bedroom and Grand Staircase, and the visiting artists could then be shown in the upstairs hall instead.

By applying these suggestions, The Hermitage will feel less like a home and more like a museum. With more room for the collection to breathe, The Hermitage can begin to label the collection and provide more contextual knowledge for each object. This way, there are still rooms in the house dedicated to the memory of Florence Sloane, and will provide places in the museum in which local history can thrive. The collection will be given respect, too, as some of the objects, like the Śiva Nataraja, will no longer be set against the backdrop of a living room or forgotten in storage, accumulating dust.

**Suggestions for the Śiva Nataraja**

The Śiva Nataraja, with all of its purposes, contexts, religious iconography, and history,\(^{182}\) could never be summed up in a label. Though we would all breathe a sigh of relief once there is one, I do not feel a label would sufficiently capture the attention of visitors. Nor could it explain and acknowledge the objects circus of meanings (now that it is expected of the museum to do so). Perhaps the museum should not stop at labeling the Śiva Nataraja, but instead develop useful, pedagogical tools that will enable them to connect with their guests on a personal level but still convey facts and knowledge concerning the Śiva Nataraja.

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\(^{182}\) Karp, 12.
Museums in America are experiencing drops in attendance, and The Hermitage is no exception.\textsuperscript{183} Museum visitors of the twenty-first century have different, more sophisticated ways in which they gather their knowledge outside the museum; it cannot be denied that the internet itself almost seems like a virtual museum.\textsuperscript{184} The model of the museum is outdated, and is in no way relevant to the demands and capabilities of the contemporary museum guest.\textsuperscript{185} Quietly tiptoeing through gallery after gallery, approaching object after object reading label after label -- I imagine this would be a boring afternoon for most, when they could just as easily go home and look at the objects themselves from their computer. If museums like The Hermitage want to propel themselves into the future and remain the guardians of the culture of the past, the museum must develop new ways in which to display objects like the Śiva Nataraja that will engage their guests in an educational way.

The Hermitage invites artists to use their studio space, but I think they should specifically seek out artists that use the same mediums and artistic processes that were used in the creation of some of the objects in the collection. Imagine the knowledge gained and how one might look at the Śiva Nataraja differently once they feel the heat on their face while watching a bronze pour. Instead of a wide range of topics, the lectures the museum hosts should be a piece by piece tour of the collection. This way, museum academics from all over the country could contribute to The Hermitage’s catalogue.

Because The Hermitage is a small museum, I think it would be a great idea to allow guests to guide themselves through the collection with an iPad or other tablet device. While the use of headphones with recorded curatorial lectures resonates with the same ideas of guests discovering the collection at their own pace, I do not feel this technology is entirely conducive to a complete museum experience; without a doubt, some of my favorite and most memorable museum experiences were the times I was able to talk


\textsuperscript{184} Paris, 256.

\textsuperscript{185} Rather than seeing this as the death of the traditional museum, I think museums should face the challenge head on and develop pedagogical tools that rival cutting edge schools and universities. The museum doesn’t have to give up scholarship or prestige, but the museum should evolve.
about the objects on display with the people around me, which would have not been able to be accomplished if I had had on headphones. The tablet would let the museum guests work their way through the collection but also enable them to share the tablet with others around them, which would facilitate conversation and a shared experience of the collection among them. This sort of technology could be used to educate guests of all ages, and would prove useful to grabbing the interests and attention of some of the younger guests at The Hermitage.

The tablet would also be able to communicate in more effectual and precise ways some of the more complicated aspects of the Śiva Nataraja. Guests could watch videos of Indian religious festivals or listen to recordings of Hindu temple music. They could look at interactive maps of India and see just how far the Śiva Nataraja has travelled in order to dance before them. Guests could watch how these bronzes were made and worshiped in India, and discover how images like the Śiva Nataraja are still being used in Hindu worship today. Guests could zoom in on the Śiva, turn him upside down, look behind him, and perhaps see what other objects The Hermitage has that are similar, too. The Hermitage could provide images of the sale of receipt for the Śiva Nataraja and guests could look through digital archives so they may come to their own conclusions about C.T. Loo – perhaps links could be provided so guests could visit Loo’s gallery’s website -- and the obsessive art collecting of Florence Sloane. The Hermitage guests could watch interviews of Śaiva worshippers found in the community of Norfolk, so guests may understand how the ripples of Śiva’s presence affect the lives of his worshippers. By interacting with the Śiva Nataraja on such a personal level, the bronze could possibly come alive for his new audience; in coming to truly know the Śiva Nataraja, museum visitors will truly see the Śiva Nataraja.

Of course, the tablet device could be used for any object on display at The Hermitage, even for the house and gardens too. In this way, guests would be given the opportunity to learn exciting ideas about the rich histories of The Hermitage and the objects in its collection in a brand new way. Guests will

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186 Conley, 46, Conley puts forth a very nice suggestion that representatives of the cultures who produced the works on display visit the museum and help write the labels for the objects. I think this would be a fantastic multicultural event The Hermitage could host, not only for the Śiva Nataraja, but the other objects within the collection as well.
leave The Hermitage with an unforgettable museum experience, one that will show them things they did not think possible.
Creation from Destruction: A Conclusion

Looking for your light,
I went out:

it was like the sudden dawn
of a million million suns,

a ganglion of lightnings
for my wonder.

O Lord of Caves,
if you are light,
there can be no metaphor.

-Allama Prabhu, 972\textsuperscript{187}

Perhaps all journeys in search of meaning are personal, something that can only be explored by the individual. Yet I feel that my own journey in search of Śiva and the answers I have found can provide some sort of truth for The Hermitage Museum as well. Śiva, dancing through the streets of India, told those there to see, but also to share; I feel as though I have experienced 

\textit{darśan}, in a way, after coming to truly know the Śiva Nataraja and its past, and I would very much like to share, \textit{bhaj}, this sort of sight with the others around me. Even though the world Śiva created in medieval South India seems to be closed to us, as if it was its own universe that had collapsed in on itself and is gone forever, does not mean the Śiva Nataraja was swept up in the destruction. Rather, the Śiva Nataraja remained. Śiva Nataraja is the ringmaster, the Creator, and the Destroyer, and he not only accepts but he controls the chaos swirling around him.

The Hermitage has kept the Śiva Nataraja’s significances veiled, the object hidden in plain sight within a cool dark room. But the Śiva Nataraja needs to burst forth from this kind of captivity in order to meet his new audience, so that they may come to know one another. The Śiva Nataraja can still be window into the inner workings of our world, but only if The Hermitage acknowledges each and every facet of Śiva’s presence in their museum. The ontological transformation of the object through its history

\textsuperscript{187} Ramanujan, 168.
has profound ethical implications concerning the treatment and display of the Śiva Nataraja, and while it seems overwhelmingly complex, it is the museum’s duty to fit the pieces together, to bridge the gap between all the worlds in which Śiva has danced though, and talk about it with their guests in a way that creates newer, better worlds of knowledge and understanding.

It seems as though this journey, no matter how sprawling, has been cyclical as it has brought us back to where we started -- the museum, the quiet gallery where the Śiva Nataraja calmly dances his ananda tandava. Perhaps, we finally know how to enter his presence now. The worlds of the Śiva Nataraja and The Hermitage Museum have collided in surprisingly intricate yet wondrous ways; maybe at first there was apprehensive confusion amidst unfortunate consequences, but from the collision, there is a remarkable story to be told. Let us listen, for it all began with a soft drum beat.
The following works proved to be sources of both knowledge and comfort while challenging me to think and write about the Siva Nataraja. All errors and limitations found within this exploration are mine alone.

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Selected Bibliography


