

The Antelopes of Shiva

By Vijay Kumar

The study of Indian religious art would remain incomplete if we didn't pay tribute to the role of India's hereditary artists, the *stapathis*, who fashioned a multitude of breathtaking forms. These craftsmen created signature compositions based on their knowledge of ancient methods and distilled the knowledge of this rich lineage in their work. As you observe their fingers flying to transform a lump of wax into a divine being, you witness something miraculous.

Although the written *Agamas* (scriptures) prescribed certain positions for the *bangas* (hands) and *mudras* (gestures), each masterly creation is unique. Despite being governed by a strict set of rules, each artist always left his subtle signature. To illustrate, we need only look at three examples.



Vishapaharana Kilappudanur Nannilam Taluk Tiruwarur District circa 9th century CE

what he has to do because emerging first is a deadly poison that could destroy all creation. He swoops down, takes the poison in the palm of his hand and is about to consume it. The benign smile we usually see in Shiva's numerous forms is missing here, replaced by an expression of supreme tranquillity.

The snake in his left hand is symbolic, signifying the potency of the poison in his right palm, but it is not the snake that draws our attention – it is the antelope. The beauty of this creation lies in how the artist handled something as seemingly insignificant as the antelope, traditionally held in one of Shiva's hands. The artist could have relegated it to being a mere accessory, but instead chose to depict the antelope in a mood of extreme emotion. Not knowing the prowess of the lord, it seems to be pleading with its master not to consume the *Aala Kaala Visham* – the poison. Thus with no additional labels or text, the *stapathi* is able to convey the scene's intensity.

To better illustrate this, one can compare this expression with a second depiction



Vishapaharana - the antelope, bronze, Chennai Museum, Bronze Gallery



Shiva's antelope from Somaskanda group, Bronze, ACM Singapore.

of Shiva, the one from the Somaskanda group currently in the ACM. Here, Shiva's expression and the antelope's playful form are more benign and appropriate to the occasion – a family portrait.

Nor is this expressive artistry limited to metalcraft. To demonstrate this there is no better example than the stone carving of Chandesa Anugraha Murthy in the Gangaikonda Cholapuram temple in Tamil Nadu near the ancient Chola capital founded by King Rajendra I. Here, Shiva is tying a floral garland onto his devotee Chandesa's head (in popular legend this is the Chola King Rajendra himself being anointed by Shiva). Chandesa is,

of course, foremost among the 63 *nayanmars* (devotees) of Shiva; disturbed by his father when he was worshipping Shiva, he threw his staff at him. The staff turned into an axe and cut off his father's legs. Pleased with Chandesa's devotion, Shiva honoured him by making him the custodian of every Shiva temple, with a mini-shrine right next to the sanctum. Every devotee approaches him showing his empty hands, symbolically signifying that he hasn't taken any of the Lord's property. Just look at the antelope showing his pride as his master showers blessings on his devotee.



Chandesa Anugraha Murthy, stone sculpture, Gangai Konda, Cholapuram, India



Chandesa Anugraha Murthy, stone sculpture, Gangai Konda Cholapuram, India

S Vijay Kumar, a shipping professional from India, is currently working in Singapore. His interests are temple art and iconography. His blog on temple architecture aims to help readers understand and appreciate intricate art forms. www.poetryinstone.in

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