

The Saivaite Child-Saint Sambandar

By Dinesh Sathisan

While on a business trip to Washington DC last year, I was able to find some time to stop by the Freer Gallery of Art. It was there that I stood awed by a 12th century Chola bronze statue of the dancing Saivaite child-saint Sambandar. After a good 15 minutes of examining the sculptor's attention to detail and taking several photographs from various angles, I recalled that the Asian Civilisations Museum (ACM) has a similar piece in its collection – a 13th century Chola bronze that is equally striking. So why is it that I never stopped to highlight Sambandar during my guiding sessions when he was such a joy to look at? The answer was simple: I knew very little about him. It was time to read up.

Sambandar lived in the 7th century and was born in the town of Sirkali, south of Chidambaram in Tamil Nadu. He was one of 63 saints (collectively known as the *Nayanmars*) who adored Shiva. Legend has it that during one of his visits to the temple with his father, Sambandar began to cry when his father left him alone to take a ritual bath. When his father returned, he noticed that three-year-old Sambandar was playing with a golden cup and had milk trickling down his chin. When asked who had provided the milk, Sambandar raised his hand and pointed towards the temple and the image of the goddess Parvati. Parvati, Shiva's consort, had given the child a cup of her own divine milk (*gnana pal* or milk of knowledge). Having consumed the milk, Sambandar burst into song, praising the beauty and glory of Shiva and Parvati.

So the question arises – why is Sambandar depicted in a dancing pose, similar to the existing iconography of Krishna as the dancing child-god? It has been said that Sambandar was responsible for the revival of Tamil musical poetry and had sung over 4,000 verses set to music. Like Krishna, who indulges in song and dance, Sambandar's love of music and his worship of Shiva and Parvati with song and dance could have led artists to portray him as a dancing child. Moreover, just as little Krishna dances happily with his butterball, Sambandar dances joyously with Parvati's milk. The conceptual similarities between the two infants – Krishna divine and Sambandar blessed – must have made it natural for artists to make an iconographic transfer. While iconographically close to the dancing Krishna, Sambandar is always seen with the index finger of his right hand pointing upward, while Krishna's hand is in the *abhaya* gesture of protection.

The Sambandar in the ACM stands with his left foot firmly on a lotus and his bent right leg raised, with toes pointing down. (This is similar to the Sambandar in the Freer, though the Sambandar in the Norton Simon Museum, Pasadena, USA, has his right foot on the lotus and his left raised.) His



Sambandar, 13th century, late Chola, Tamil Nadu, south India

left hand is fully stretched horizontally in the elephant trunk (*gajahasta*) gesture. His hairstyle is similar to the matted crown-like shape found in the dancing Krishna. His pointed right finger could suggest the *kevala gnana*, which refers to knowledge of the Supreme Being, which Sambandar received from Shiva and Parvati through their divine grace. Other sources say that the index finger refers to the episode earlier mentioned, when Sambandar pointed to Parvati as the source of the milk he drank. Represented as a naked child, Sambandar is seen wearing a child's protective waist girdle, heavy necklace, earrings and a sacred thread that descends from a neck-band that encircles his body.

Dinesh Sathisan will now make it a point to talk to museum guests about Sambandar during his future guiding sessions. A weekend volunteer guide at the ACM since 2005, Dinesh also guides at the Peranakan Museum.

Photo courtesy of the Asian Civilisations Museum