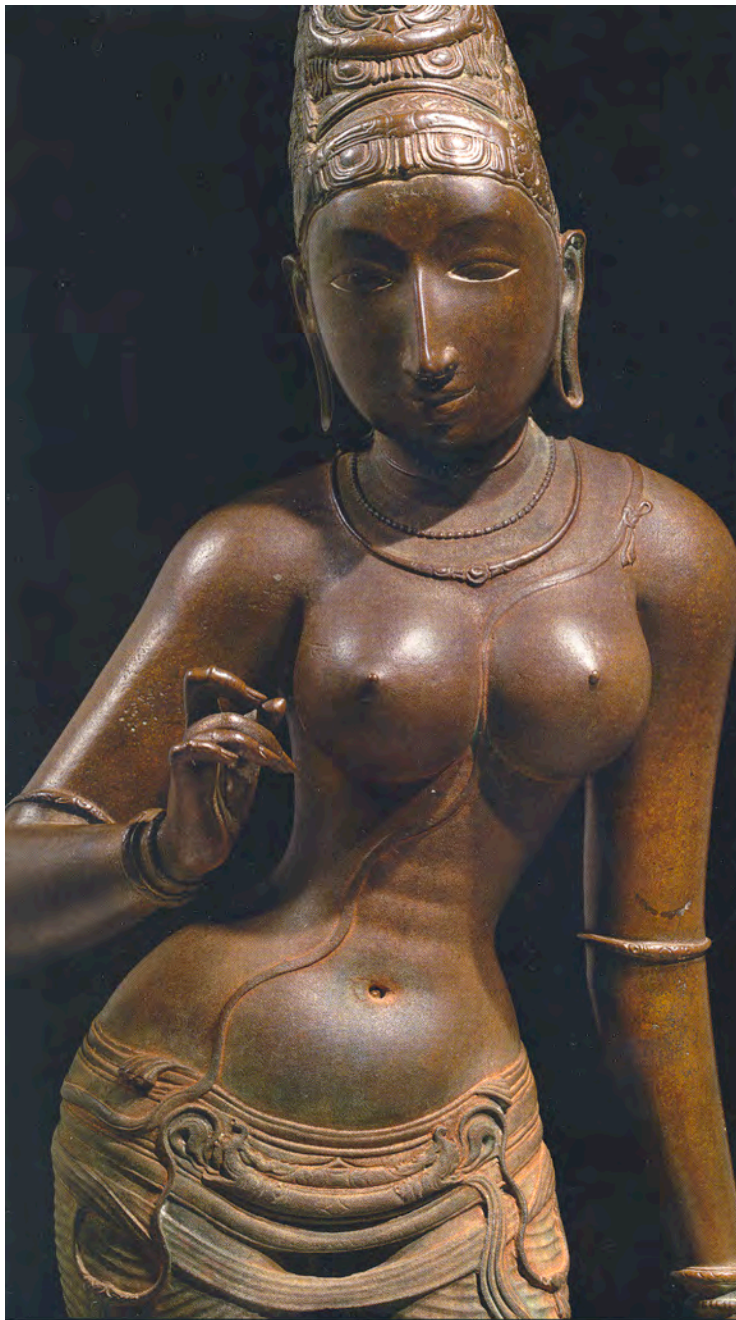


**Report on a Metal Sculpture of Uma Parameshvari from South India in the  
Speelman Collection**  
Copper Alloy, H. 84.5 cm.



**Fig. 1. Detail of Speelman Uma.**

*Introduction*

The metal sculpture of the goddess, the subject of this report and now in the Speelman collection in London, first appeared in the New York art market in the early 1980s. It was acquired by the distinguished collector and connoisseur Thomas J. Solley of Bloomington, Indiana, where I saw it on several occasions over the years both in his home and subsequently in the local University museum.

The sculpture was included in the exhibition India, held at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1984, and published in the catalogue by Stuart Cary Welch.<sup>1</sup> Welch dated the bronze to the 14<sup>th</sup> century but did not provide any evidence for his conclusion. Presumably he was following the date provided to the collector by the dealer. We quote here a relevant passage from the entry:

No one could deny the immense artistic and human appeal of this masterfully cast, crisply modeled and chased sculpture, with its sweetly compelling expression, superbly lissome yet ample figure, luxuriantly sinuous jewelry and coiffure, and costume vibrant with form-hugging folds. Late as it may be within South India's tradition of bronze casting, this is a powerful and movingly feminine envisionment of Shiva's consort Parvati, who represents generic woman—shakti, the tangible and noblest form of cosmic divine power—and is the benign aspect of Kali. Although as a tool for meditation (dhyana) the goddess could have been represented in other worshipful forms, she is embodied here as a stunning figurative image, a pratima. A devotee who is sufficiently pure in heart and able to take power from within can through the image's suprasensual beauty

achieve the goal of worship: samadhi, or the merging of the perceiver with the perceived. At a yet higher spiritual level, this union of the divided divine can be affected without the image, by envisioning it in the mind's (or soul's) eye.

A few years later in 1991 Welch wrote about the piece a second time when the sculpture was included in the strange Circa 1492 exhibition celebrating Columbus' "discovery" of the "New World".<sup>2</sup> He was even more eloquent about the object's beauty even though he got the function of the object completely wrong. Once again he dated it to c. 1450, without providing any reason whatsoever. His effusive but misinformed write-up is included here in extenso:

Spirituality and sensuality meet in this image of Pārvatī, the śakti or female counterpart of Lord Śiva. The tangible and noblest form of cosmic divine power, she is also the benign aspect of Kālī, the destroyer. Although the image's stimulating womanliness might surprise those of us accustomed to unapproachably elevated statues and paintings of the Virgin Mary and other Christian saints, this blending of the otherworldly and the earthly is characteristic of Hinduism. Pārvatī, the mountain daughter, was a goddess of beauty, always admired for her voluptuousness. That her mere presence was enough to arouse Śiva's unbounded desire was fully understood by the sculptor, who endowed the image with a superbly lissome yet ample figure, luxuriantly sinuous jewelry and coiffure, and a costume vibrant with form-hugging folds.

This sculpture was created as a tool for meditation (dhyana) according to the traditional canon of proportion known from earlier bronzes of the Chola period. Iconographically correct in configuration, its proportions conform to long-reckoned measurements, from the feet and ankles to the head. The master who created the image was a technical wizard, capable of the utmost refinements in modeling the original wax over an armature, building up the mold and fitting its carefully placed channels for draining the melted wax, and finally chasing the bronze to the perfected state seen here. But given that the sculptor had mastered such requirements, only his genius enabled him to breathe life into this piece, one of the most artistically moving of all later Indian bronzes.

Devotees sufficiently pure in heart to draw power from this image's supersensual beauty can through it achieve the spiritual goal of samādī, the merging of the perceiver and the perceived.

While I am full of admiration for the writer's eloquence in describing the "superbly lissome and ample figure", it is difficult to appreciate its "luxuriantly" sinuous jewelry when it is conspicuous for elegant simplicity. Moreover, as we will note shortly, there is no evidence that the bronze was "chased" at all. And almost certainly the last paragraph of the entry must be disregarded altogether since the figure was never seen in its "naked" state by any devotee as it was not an image used in meditation but only in a procession and almost completely covered in clothing (see fig. 2).

In the auction catalogue<sup>3</sup>, the date suggested is ca. 1400 which means that it could have been produced either in the 14<sup>th</sup> or the 15<sup>th</sup> century. While Welch simply waxed

eloquent regarding the aesthetic merit of the sculpture and made a feeble and irrelevant attempt to suggest a “tantric” context for the image, the stylistic discussion in the auction catalogue too is remarkably inadequate and even confusing, as is evident from the passage quoted below:

During the Chola rule in South India from around the 9<sup>th</sup> to the 13<sup>th</sup> century, bronze sculpture excelled under royal patronage. This sculpture of Parvati arguably marks another step towards even greater refinement, following clearly defined canons of proportion that evolved to ever more complex and exacting standards. During the Chola period the hipswing of bronze sculptures of Parvati is predominantly to the left, while it now moves to the right mirroring the same outline. The sculpture represents perhaps the greatest level of achievement possible in terms of overall refinement, culminating in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, as is likewise found in other parts of Asia around the time. The sculptor’s capabilities are unmatched and this image can be ranked among the very finest of the period, a masterpiece in its own right.<sup>4</sup>

It is clear from the above that the writer is very muddled about the chronological position of the sculpture. He compares the piece to works of both the Chola and the Vijaynagar period (1375 – 1565) but ends up by suggesting a ca. 1400 date which is almost impossible. The great period of the Vijaynagar kingdom began with the rule of Devaraya I (1422 – 46) which would have been a more logical time for the production of such a masterpiece than ca. 1400.

While a number of books have been written about the history of the metal sculpture of the Chola period, no systematic study of the state of the art during the Vijaynagar period has yet been undertaken. In his monumental though uneven study of styles and chronology of South Indian bronzes, Sivaramamurti devotes regrettably short space to the Vijaynagar period.<sup>5</sup> In fact, while much has been written about bronzes of the Chola Period by several scholars following Sivaramamurti and Douglas Barrett in the sixties, as far as is known, not a single essay has been devoted to Vijaynagar bronzes.<sup>6</sup> In his otherwise comprehensive discussion of the arts and architecture of the kingdom, George Michell, an authority on the subject, also has remarkably little to say about the metal sculptures.<sup>7</sup> Since the sixties Chola bronzes have been extensively studied by R. Nagaswamy and Vidya Dehejia, among others who have included them in a more general investigation of Chola sculptures, but an art-historical analysis of Vijaynagar bronzes is yet to be undertaken.<sup>8</sup> Undoubtedly, Nagaswamy remains the greatest living authority on Chola bronzes and, in this study, therefore, I will primarily follow Nagaswamy's dating in my comparisons and Barrett's methodology.

## II

The Speelman sculpture of the goddess (devi) almost certainly represents Uma or Parvati, the spouse of Shiva, the most popular of the three gods—Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva—of the Hindu triad in Tamil Nadu, which is where it was most likely created. In his form as Nataraja, whose home is Chidambaram, Shiva was the patron deity of the Chola dynasty. Such metal images, however, were not created for daily worship but were used in processions during periodical festivals, when they would have been heavily

attired with voluminous and colorful garments and ornaments. This helped to protect the surfaces, though the faces are often worn out because of the application of ritual unguents. That this bronze too was a processional image is clearly borne out by the holes on the base which were used to secure the piece to wooden or bamboo poles during their journey through the streets or villages.



**Fig. 2. Clothed Image in Procession.**

In South India generally, and in the Tamil realm in particular, the installed image of the deities in a temple were regarded as sacrosanct and therefore immovable (achala bimba) and were often made of stone. Hence the need to create moveable representations for processions which were generally made of metal. One purpose of the processions may have been to allow the entire community to view the deities, especially for people of the lower castes who could not enter the temple sanctum. These transportable and surrogate images were commissioned usually by members of the royal house, one of the most well-known being Queen Sembiyan Mahadevi in the last quarter of the 10<sup>th</sup> century, and affluent patrons. Lavish accessories, such as clothing and jewelry, were also donated by the patrons to the temples.

What is curious is that despite the fact that these metal surrogate images, though at times quite large, were solid cast and hence can be very heavy. One would have thought that it would have been both cheaper (less metal) and convenient (lighter) to cast them hollow. Perhaps, the solid cast images for the deities are considered a ritual and spiritual necessity; the bulls are often hollow cast. It is of particular significance that solid cast figures were desiderata during the Chola period and the Speelman bronze is indeed solidly cast. The method used was the cire perdue or lost wax process, where the wax model is encased in a clay mould into which the hot metal is poured. It is further worth mentioning that in the Chola period the figure was meticulously finished to the last detail in the wax model itself so that when it emerged from the mould it was a complete work requiring almost no chasing. Welch is therefore wrong when he writes that the bronze is a “crisply modeled and chased sculpture.” Bronzes of the Vijaynagar period were cast in a rougher state and the details were finished later by chasing which leave telltale signs of

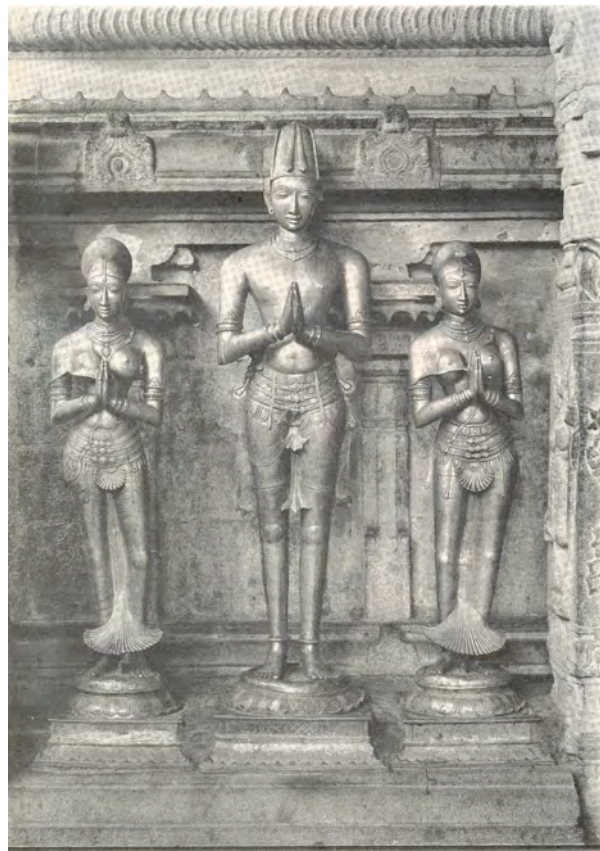


toolmarks. There seems no doubt that the Uma under discussion emerged from its clay mould with all details in a finished state. Hence, technically, the image should be assigned to the Chola rather than the Vijaynagar period.

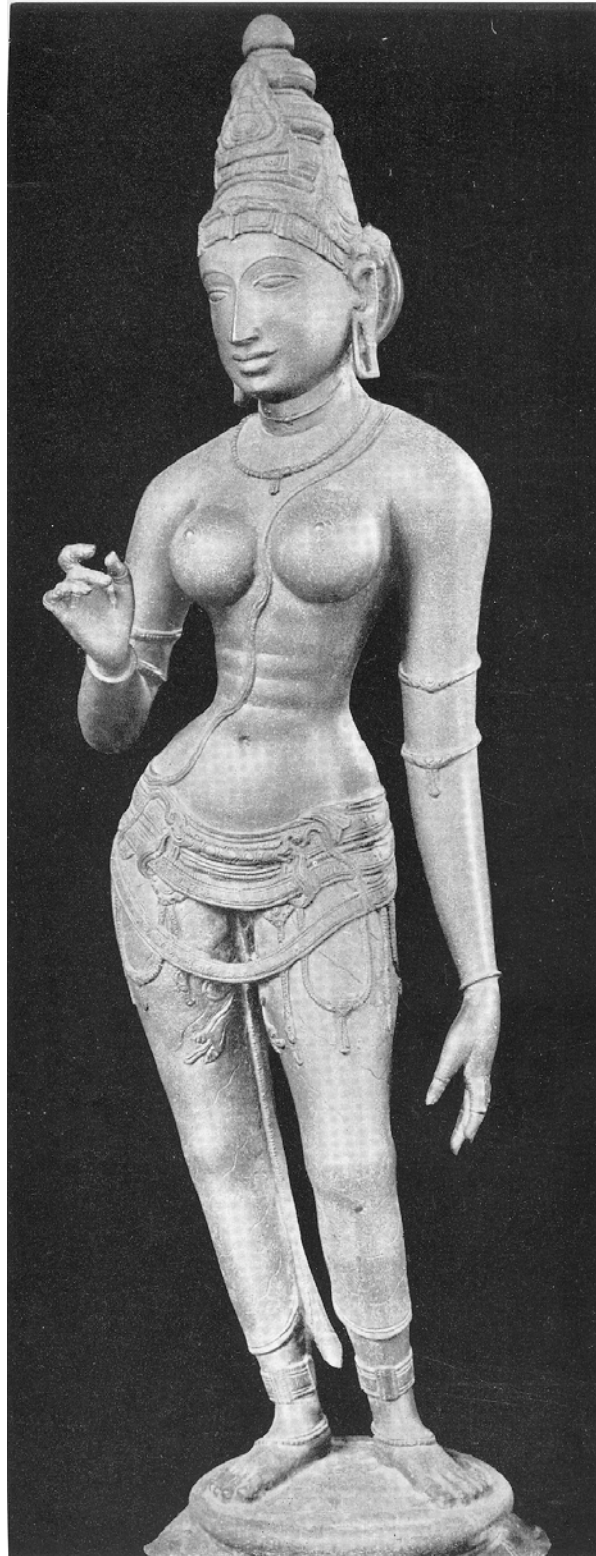
### III

Anyone familiar with the history of Vijaynagar must remember that the greatest phase of artistic activity in the kingdom stretches from the reign of Devaraya I (1422 – 46) to that of Achyutadevaraya (1509 – 42). Most lithic monuments of the dynasty survive in their capital at Hampi on the Tungabhadra river. Before Devaraya I the monarchs had limited resources and were busy in territorial expansion. As far as is known there were some earlier temples in pre-Vijaynagar style (10<sup>th</sup> – 14<sup>th</sup> according to George Michell<sup>9</sup>) on the nearby Hemakuta hill overlooking the village of Hampi. If indeed the Speelman figure was created during ca. 1400, it is unlikely that one of these modest temples would have been its recipient. There is no evidence of any major religious or artistic activity by the rulers before Devaraya. Moreover, the size and sophistication of the casting demands a major bronze casting center such as Tanjore or Chidambaram for it is equally unlikely that a casting center had been established at Hampi until the time of Devaraya when royal building activity began. Indeed, the greatest dated bronze masterworks of the Vijaynagar period are the large portrait statues of Krishnadevaraya and his two queens (fig. 3) in Tirupati. Clearly both stylistically and aesthetically the Speelman Uma and the queens represent two very different kettle of fish. No other bronzes of the Vijaynagar period are dated or can with any certainty be associated with the royal house.

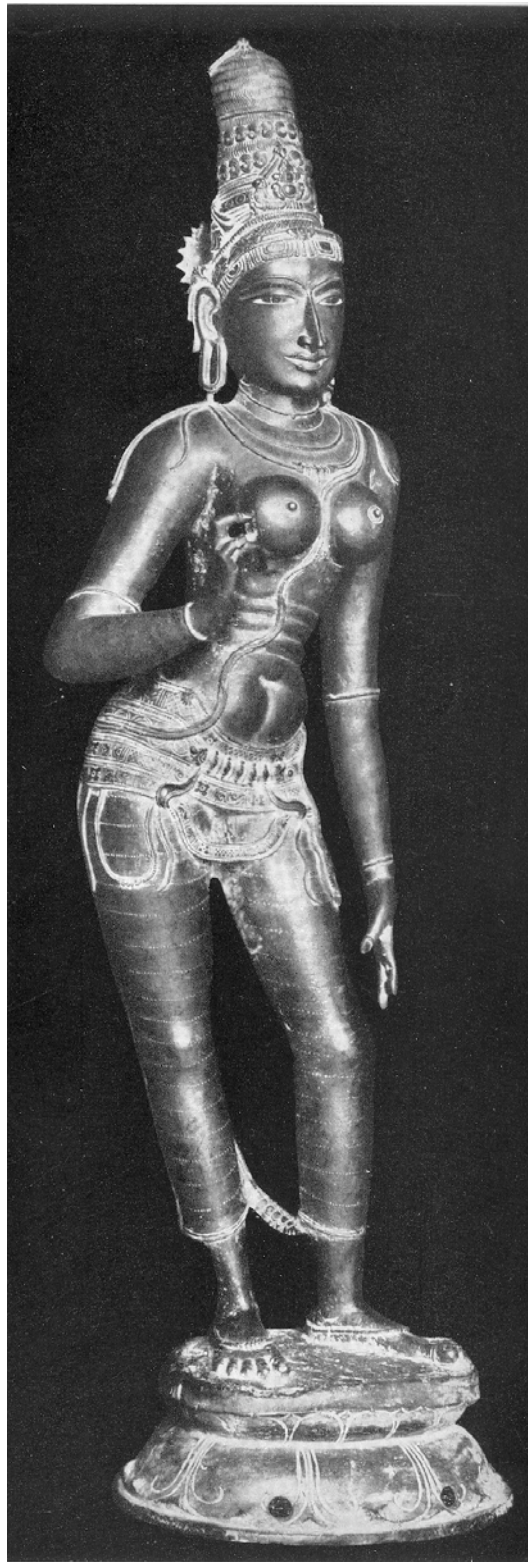
As it has already been stated, the 14<sup>th</sup> century date for the Speelman Uma as suggested first by Welch is not substantiated by any stylistic evidence. In the auction catalogue the unidentified writer has made an attempt to cite some parallels but the analogies are vague and reflect an uncertainty. At one place the author writes as follows: “Few other notable examples exists, but of later date,” and then cites two examples assigned to the 16<sup>th</sup> (fig. 4) and 16<sup>th</sup> – 17<sup>th</sup> centuries (fig. 5) by Shivaramamurti. If indeed the latter is of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, it would be post-Vijaynagar but more likely this is an earlier figure of 15<sup>th</sup> century, whereas fig. 4 is a Chola period work of no later than 12<sup>th</sup> century. If, however, one goes to Sivaramamurti’s brief description of these two figures one finds no attempt to justify the dating and, indeed, no discussion at all of the stylistic



**Fig. 3. Portraits of Krishnadevaraya and Queens, Vijaynagar, Early 16th century. Tirupati (Andhra Pradesh).**



**Fig. 4. Uma, Tamil Nadu, dated by Shivaramamurti to 16th century but here dated to 12th century. Tanjore Art Gallery.**



**Fig. 5. Uma, Vijaynagar, 15th c. National Museum, New Delhi.**

peculiarities of Vijaynagar bronzes.<sup>10</sup> In the very next paragraph of the auction catalogue entry we read as follows:

It is interesting to compare the facial features to the famous Freer Uma attributed to the Sembiyan workshops during the Chola Period, that Vidya Dehejia has suggested to be a portrait of Queen Sembiyan Mahadevi as Uma Parameshvari, V. Dehejia, The Sensuous and the Sacred, 2002, cat. no. 14, pp. 124ff., and in the treatment of the outline and folds of the dhoti to the Rockefeller Uma of similar size, see V. Dehejia et. al., Chola: Sacred Bronzes of Southern India, 2006 cat. no. 10, p. 80f.<sup>11</sup>

Thus, it would appear that unable to accept Shivaramamurti's dating of the two figures and finding distinct similarities between the Speelman bronze and two Chola bronzes of the 10<sup>th</sup> and early 11<sup>th</sup> centuries, the writer split the difference, so to say, and arrived at the c. 1400 date. Yet, a few pages later in the catalogue a granite Devi is dated to the same period, which could not be stylistically and aesthetically more different and is likely a truer example of an early Vijaynagar sculpture.<sup>12</sup> Let us now look at the Speelman Devi more closely before placing it in its proper art-historical context.

#### IV

Demure and graceful, the lady stands elegantly in the hip-shod posture (aabhanga) on an open lotus atop a shallow rectangular base (fig. 6). With her right hip swinging away from the axis, the weight of the full form is carried by the upright right leg, while the left is bent at the knee to convey languid sense of movement. The firm, fleshy and slender legs are draped in a body-hugging garment whose volume is indicated by





**Fig. 6. Full Front View of Speelman Uma.**



**Fig. 7. Back View of Speelman Uma.**

horizontal linear striations with a rippling effect that not only emphasizes the superfine material but also enhances the sense of movement. While the garment acts as a tight sheath around the left leg, on the inside of the other leg a slim portion comes down to slightly flare out along the calf, thereby adding a realistic touch. Extreme care is taken to delineate the swinging layers of girdles and belts that hold the garment in place with the ends cascading down both legs in graceful undulation but with keen understanding and observation of the forms and functions of these appendages which again add a realistic touch. Noteworthy is the makara (mythical auspicious aquatic symbol) terminals of the clasp from whose mouths the strings descend like streams of water. The smooth outline of the ample and wide hips with the nuanced and subtle plasticity of the belly marked by the deep navel rises with sensuous curvaceousness to the slim, narrow waist enlivened with the most delicate rendering of the three rolls of flesh to lead our eyes to a pair of perfectly naturalistically modeled breasts with two small but prominent nipples. Between the breasts the sacred thread comes down rippling like a thin stream and is tied in an elegant knot across the left shoulder. The subtlety of modeling is again evident in the raised left shoulder to emphasize the tilt to the right, which together with the right-leaning head clearly indicate that she stood demurely on the left of her spouse Shiva. The posture's elegance is further enhanced by the disposition of the smooth slender left arm loosely dangling along the body in the characteristic gesture of such figures known in Sanskrit as lolahasta which implies languidness. Bent sharply at the elbow the right arm swings towards the body, the hand forming, with the professional grace of a dancer, the gesture known as the katakamudra. It may have held a lotus bud, a symbol of beauty.

Compared to most Chola or Vijaynagar female figures, her ornaments are remarkably simple. Her feet are embellished with a pair of plain anklets. A string of pearls and a simple necklace adorn her neck; the forms of the armlets and the bangles too are unostentatious. Characteristically the earlobes are elongated—a supernatural sign—but are unornamented. The egg-shaped face is dominated by a long nose, a full mouth and large almond-shaped eyes. The tall crown known as karandamukuta on her head is the most elaborate and luxurious of her ornaments and is the only indicator of her regal status.

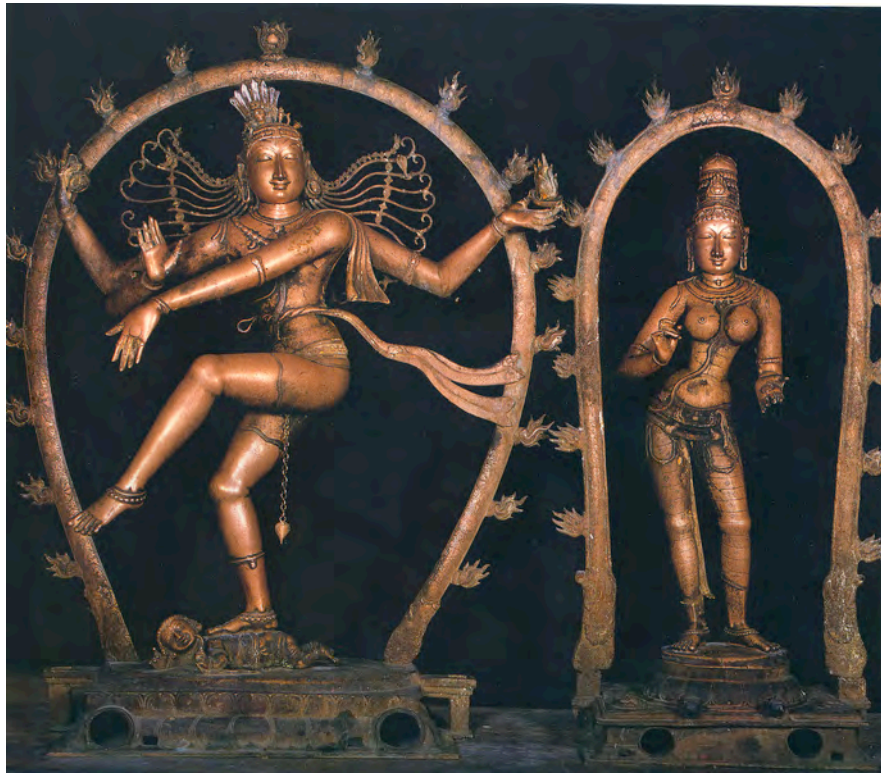
As is usually the case with Chola bronzes, the back view reveals how completely and realistically modeled the figures are, despite the fact that the rear is rarely seen by the devotee (fig. 7). No detail is left unfinished and due attention is given to every nuance of the flesh and limbs. Apart from the fluent outline, the buttocks are realistically rendered and the back is fashioned with subtle undulation. Strands of hair in ringlets spread fanlike on the neck and below the prominent small spoked wheel (shirashchakra) that serves as a discreet halo. Along with the elongated earlobes, the wheel is the only other concession to her divine nature. This kind of suave plasticity of the back is characteristic of Chola figures rather than those of Vijaynagar bronzes which are more coarsely rendered.

## V

In the auction catalogue (see p. 3 for the quotation) the writer correctly observes that the art of metal sculpture in the Chola realm achieved a state of perfection unparalleled in the history of South India. However, his next sentence that “this sculpture of Parvati [the Speelman Uma] arguably marks another step towards even greater



refinement” makes little sense because from the 12<sup>th</sup> century there was a distinct decline in the creative urge of the Chola tradition rather than displaying “greater refinement.” The third assertion that “during the Chola period the hipswing of bronze sculptures of Parvati is predominantly to the left, while it now [presumably ca. 1400] swings to the right,” as an indication of a later date for the Speelman Uma, is patently untrue. In fact, not infrequently in Chola bronzes the goddess stands with her right hip thrust out. This is specially so when as Shivakami she accompanies her dancing husband (fig. 8). It is also observable in some Vrishavahana ensembles, as in the example illustrated here (fig. 9). It should further be noted that in all Chola triads of Vishnu with his two consorts, Sri on his right always stands with a billowing right hip. Thus, this feature cannot be indicative of a Vijaynagar period date.



**Fig. 8. Nataraja and Shivakami, Chola Period, ca. 1010, Nageshvarashvami Temple, Kumbakonam.**



**Fig. 9. Shiva with Bull (Vrishavahana) and Uma, Chola Period, 900 – 950, Natanapurishvar Temple, Tandantottam.**

In the two Devi images in Shivaramamurti's book (figs. 4 & 5) that are cited as comparisons, we see the folds of the belly prominently rendered, though in two different modes. But this too is not a valid comparison for later dating because these folds, called trivali and rhetorically regarded as the three steps necessary to climb the breast mountains, are also visible in Chola figures (fig. 8). Chola sculptors, however, do not seem to have applied this beauty mark consistently. Nor were they steadfast in the manner of delineating the trait. Sometimes the rendering was cursory with three horizontal incisions as if applied during chasing, at others as rolls of flesh were integrated

in the wax modeling, as is the case here. Moreover, the bronze that Shivaramamurti dates to the 16<sup>th</sup> century (fig. 4) is likely an earlier sculpture, perhaps as early as the 12<sup>th</sup> century.

By Vijaynagar bronzes we understand works that were produced generally between 1400 and the eclipse of the kingdom in 1542. Apart from the example cited earlier (fig. 5), two others, also in the National Museum, are included here. One of these with the hip swinging to her right, is dated by the museum to the 15<sup>th</sup> century (fig. 10) and the other as 16<sup>th</sup> (fig. 11). The latter figure whose hip swings to the left thereby creating an awkward movement of the left arm has additional cascading tassel-like garments hanging down both legs and a different pattern of the dhoti. Otherwise the two figures show very little variations to warrant a large chronological gap between them. None of the three figures incidentally bears stylistic affinity with the royal portraits at Tirupati (fig. 3) which can be securely dated to not later than 1509 when Krishnadevaraya died. A third bronze Devi (fig. 12), also in the National Museum, is given a 13<sup>th</sup> century date in the label, which would make it a stylistic precursor of the 15<sup>th</sup> century figure (fig. 10), but how does one verbalize the differences and arrive at such conclusions?

Here is a brief attempt. Generally, the Vijaynagar period bronzes representing Uma do not show either the rich variety or a strong predilection for individualism that characterize Chola period figures, especially of the 10<sup>th</sup> – 11<sup>th</sup> centuries. Technically, the Chola bronzes are solid-cast and the salient details are rendered in the wax model itself, whereas in the Vijaynagar bronzes details are chased after casting and lack the finesse of earlier sculptures. Moreover, they are not rendered with the same meticulous care that is



**Fig. 10. Uma, Vijaynagar Period, 15th century, National Museum, New Delhi.**





**Fig. 11. Uma, Vijaynagar Period, c. 1525, National Museum, New Delhi.**



**Fig. 12. Uma, Chola Period, 13th century, National Museum, New Delhi.**

apparent in Chola bronzes. There are also distinct differences in the proportions used by the artists; Chola figures are usually taller and more graceful as well as realistically modeled and express a fluid sense of plastic grace. The Vijaynagar figures are generally of stunted proportions with artificial and stylized movements lacking the suave elegance and verve of Chola figures. This is clearly visible in the shape and plasticity of the breasts in Chola females, which are anatomically more realistic, whereas in the Vijaynagar figures they appear to be more pneumatic. Overall Chola figures have a more tactile surface than those created in the Vijaynagar period.

In view of the above discussion, what can be stated with certainty is that the Speelman Devi is not a work of the Vijaynagar period and its parallels must be sought in the earlier Chola period. It should be noted though that no two Chola bronzes, especially those of the highest quality, are exactly alike and distinctly express the sculptors' individual taste and predilections.

## VI

One of the earliest dated Chola Devi is the figure that forms a pair with the majestic Shiva as conqueror of the three cities (Tripuravijayadeva) in the Koneriraja temple dated to 977 C.E. and commissioned by Sembian Mahadevi (fig. 13). Common scholarly consensus also dates the famous Freer Gallery Uma to the 10<sup>th</sup> century (fig. 14). In fact, Vidya Dehejia even goes so far as to suggest that this may well be a portrait statue of Queen Sembian Mahadevi herself, though this is unlikely. A second dated landmark is the Devi accompanying the wellknown Vrishavahana Shiva dedicated in the





**Fig. 13. Shiva as the Conqueror of 3 Cities and Uma, Chola Period, dated 977 C.E. Konerirajapuram.**





**Fig. 14. Uma, Chola Period, 975 – 1000, Freer Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.**



**Fig. 15. Vrishavahana Shiva and Uma, Chola Period, dated 1012 C.E.  
Tanjore Art Gallery.**

year 1012 by the great king Rajaraja I (c. 985 – 1012), now in the Tanjore Art Gallery (fig. 16). Among other stylistically relevant sculptures are the elegant Uma of ca. 1000 in the Norton Simon Museum (fig. 16), the Rockefeller Uma, dated by common consensus to ca. 1010 (fig. 17) and the figure in Detroit of the first quarter of the 11<sup>th</sup> century (fig. 18).

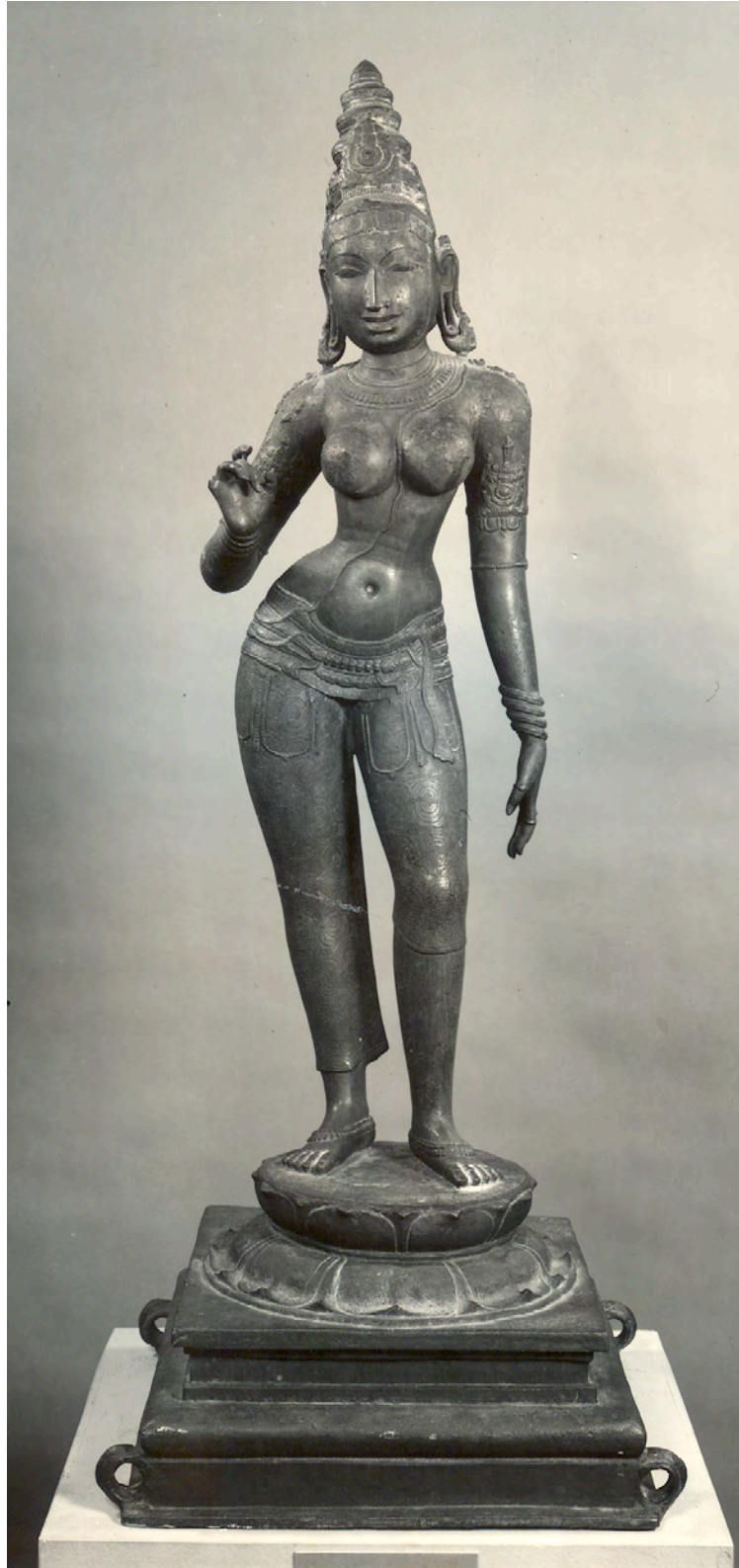
As I have stated earlier even a cursory glance at these pieces clearly establish how different they are in their proportions, plasticity, bearing and variations in the treatment of apparel and ornamentations. Despite the overall similarities and stylistic kinship each is an individual expression of the unknown Chola masters' visions of the goddess. This convincingly negates the general view that the sculptors were constricted by rigid traditions and did not leave their personal marks on their creations.

Let us now see how the Speelman Uma shares stylistic features with some of these other figures. The breasts of the Freer, Norton Simon and the Speelman figures are remarkably alike in their proportions, shape and nuanced and sensuous plasticity. Similar also are the narrow waists and the flaring of the curvaceous hips, a touch more pronounced in the case of the Speelman figure. The shapes and forms of the legs are the most elongated with realistically modeled thighs in the Freer bronze and the plumpest and the most rotund in the Norton Simon Uma, while they are somewhere in between in the Speelman lady. In the Simon bronze the shoulders are wide and straight, which is generally the case with other early Chola females. Noteworthy is the fact that most unusually both shoulders of the Freer Uma slope down significantly. The sculptor responsible for the Speelman figure has only the right shoulder drooping while the left is raised as is the case with the Detroit Devi. Both shoulders of the Rockefeller Uma also





**Fig. 16. Uma, Chola Period, c. 1000, Norton Simon Museum, Pasadena.**



**Fig. 17. Uma, Chola Period, 1000 – 1025, The Detroit Institute of Arts, Detroit.**

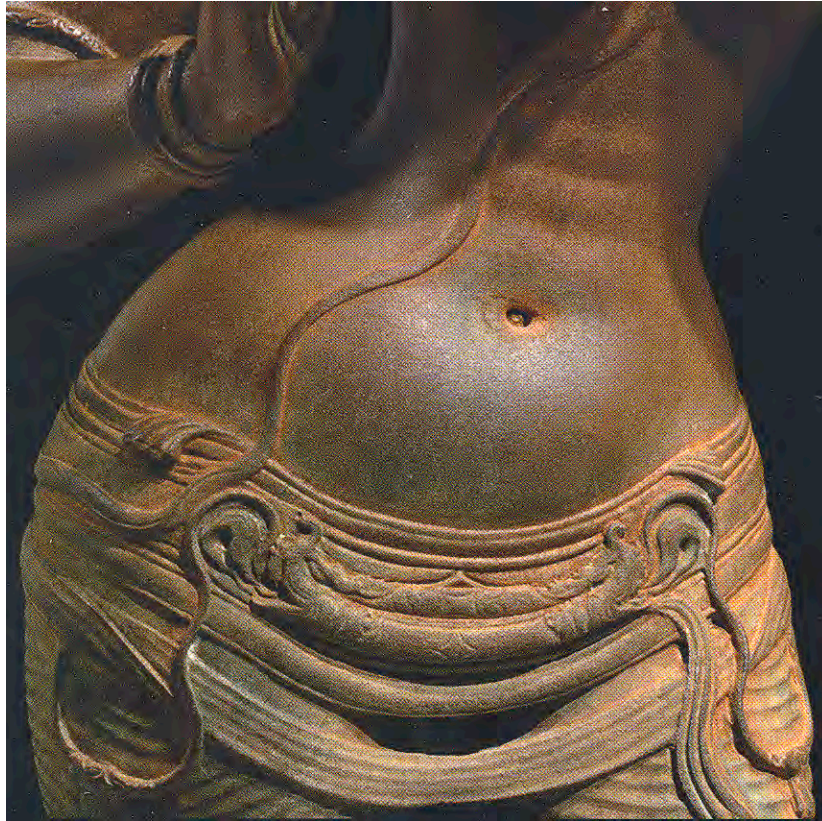


**Fig. 18. Uma, ca. 1000, Rockefeller Collection, The Asia Society, N.Y.**



slope but more gently. Subtle differences of modeling are clearly visible in the delineation of the backs and specially the buttocks, each figure displaying particular shapes emphasizing individuality. However, the closest similarity is with the Detroit goddess in the treatment of the form, the proportions, though the Speelman figure's right hip is more luxuriant, the plasticity of the pelvic area and, of course, the tilt of the head, a little less pronounced in the Detroit Devi. A detail that again emphasizes the idiosyncratic predilection of the Speelman Uma is the position of the right arm, sharply bent at the elbow and the hand closer to the right breast, rather than the more frontal position in the other bronzes.

The garment is treated differently in each bronze. Some have more elaborate floral or geometric designs, but the Freer, Rockefeller and the Speelman figures share the same pattern of folds though with different volumetric emphasis. Even more pronounced differences are noticeable in the design and treatment of the girdles and belts around the hips of all the figures, the simplest being in the Freer bronze, which is the most distinctive in its utter simplicity compared to the other 10<sup>th</sup> century bronzes, all of which have more elaborate appurtenances. The Speelman figure's girdle and belt are a little more elaborate but are rendered with remarkable clarity, restrained elegance and liveliness. Particularly engaging is the tiered rendering of the multiple layers of the girdle across the hips with the third tier given prominence with makara head terminals from whose mouths emerge the undulating ribbons with lyrical grace (fig. 19). When it comes to the jewelry, the Speelman figure is by far the least ostentatious and closer to the Freer bronze than the general run of Chola females, whether mortal or divine.



**Fig. 19. Detail of Speelman Uma.**

Indeed, the closest comparison for the simplicity of the ornamentation of the Speelman Uma is offered not by other Devi images of the Chola period but by the unique figure of Yasoda once in the Pan-Asian collection and now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art (fig. 20). When I first published this charming sculpture, I dated it to the 11<sup>th</sup> – 12<sup>th</sup> century, which I still adhere to for reasons that would only prolong this report.<sup>13</sup> The sculpture was subsequently published by Stuart Cary Welch and curiously given a Vijaynagar attribution without any reason whatsoever.<sup>14</sup> Even a casual comparison between the Speelman Uma and the Yashoda will make clear their remarkable kinship in stylistic properties, disarming simplicity and aesthetic aplomb. Their closeness is further apparent in their metallic similarities as well as the smoothness of their unencumbered



surfaces. I am convinced that they were both created, if not by the same master sculptor, then certainly in the same workshop, very likely in the eleventh century, and definitely no later than the twelfth. As is the case with the Freer Devi, the Metropolitan Yasoda and Krishna and the Speelman Uma represent unique instances in the history of Chola bronzes when we can say that the unknown masters responsible for their creation were inspired geniuses.



**Fig. 20. Yashoda and Krishna, Chola Period, 11th century, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.**

## VII

The above discussion allows us to conclude unambiguously that the 14<sup>th</sup> century or ca. 1400 date for this magnificent sculpture is clearly arbitrary and has no basis in either the historical context or art-historical evidence. While scholars are yet to establish clear stylistic definitions and characteristics of bronzes of the Vijaynagar period, it should also be pointed out that there has been no attempt yet to distinguish with conviction bronzes of the 13<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup> centuries. This, of course, makes the task of precisely dating bronzes over a large stretch of time from the 13<sup>th</sup> to the 17<sup>th</sup> period extremely difficult.

Nevertheless, one can definitely assert that in comparison with what is generally considered bronzes of the Vijaynagar period—stretching from about 1400 to 1550—the Speelman Uma is radically different. If it is a bronze of the period then we must concede that it is the greatest post-Chola period metal sculpture created in South India by a sculptor who was both unconventional and of unequaled brilliance. While we have seen in our discussion above that within the Chola tradition the various Devi images show distinct variations despite their general similarities, thereby indicating personal idiosyncrasies of master sculptors, there is a sustained quality and expressiveness in these works that is not reflected in the bronzes attributed to the Vijaynagar period. With unambiguous certitude the Speelman Devi not only reflects the high technical quality and aesthetic finesse of the Chola Devis generally attributed to the Early Chola Period, but it also clearly bears the stamp of an individual master, as is seen particularly in the Freer Devi. Such bronzes were not created simply by observing rigorously all the iconographic injunctions, stylistic norms and theories of proportion. Rather, they are inspired visual

expressions of the lyrical elegance of the passionate poetry of the saints and the mystics. Such ostensible expressions of both rapturous serenity of passion and spiritual harmony can be better appreciated by recalling the sensuous eulogy of the Goddess attributed to the great Vedanta philosopher Shankaracharya (8<sup>th</sup> century):

Slender by nature, wearied from the burden of overhanging breasts,  
with bent form that seems to be cracking slightly at the navel and the  
abdominal creases—  
ever to your waist, which no more than a tree on the trembling rim of a  
torrent  
has any stability, may there be safety, O daughter of the mountain.

When your breasts, which had suddenly burst your bodice as it met their  
(your breasts') swelling curves,  
two golden jars, were rubbing against your armpits at his (Kāma's)  
forcing,  
Kāma, trying to save your waist from breaking, O Devī,  
bound it three-folded as it is, triply as with the withes of the lavalī creeper.

The lord of the mountains, O Pārvatī, weight and width from his own  
buttocks (punningly, mountain spurs) cut off and bestowed on you as  
dowry;  
hence the entire earth this wide and weighty  
expanse of your buttocks conceals and outweighs.

Not only is the Speelman Uma a literal visual transcription of the physical description of the goddess in the above verses, but it is a much maligned figure that should now rightfully take its place with the great sculptural and spiritually moving Devis created around c. 1000 by unknown master sculptors of the Chola realm.

### Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Welch 1985, pp. 27-29. Welch suggested c. 1450 as its date.

<sup>2</sup> Levenson, no. 347, p. 488.

<sup>3</sup> Christie's Catalogue 2007, lot 257.

<sup>4</sup> Christie's Catalogue 2007, p. 56.

<sup>5</sup> Sivaramamurti 1963.

<sup>6</sup> Barrett 1965.

<sup>7</sup> Michell 250.

<sup>8</sup> See bibliography for Dehejia's and Nagaswamy's contributions.

<sup>9</sup> Michel 1989, p. 398.

<sup>10</sup> Sivaramamurti, p. 66.

<sup>11</sup> See note 3.

<sup>12</sup> Christie's Catalogue 2007, lot 262. If this bronze Devi is a characteristic product of 16<sup>th</sup> century Vijaynagar, then it is difficult to believe that the Speelman Uma was created only two centuries previously.

<sup>13</sup> Pal 1977, pp. 128-129.

<sup>14</sup> Levenson, cat. # 348 where he attributes it to 15<sup>th</sup> c. Karnataka which is altogether unacceptable.

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