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The Very Idea of a Portrait

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The Very Idea of a Portrait

A SLENDER, POISED IMAGE of a sensuous female, flawlessly cast in bronze and identified for many years as an image of the goddess Parvati, stands a meter high on a pedestal within the Freer Gallery of Art (fig. 1). Sometime ago, I proposed that the image may be read with equal validity as a portrait of the Chola queen Sembiyan Mahadevi, idealized as divinity and portrayed in the guise of a goddess. This blurring and apparent overlapping of the categories of divine and royal portraiture has led me to explore in this essay the idea of portraiture in early India in an attempt to analyze its status and value.

A revealing commentary on the Hindu concept of portraiture is contained in an ancient Sanskrit play titled *Pratimā-nāṭaka* (Statue-play), written by fourth-century dramatist Bhasa and structured loosely around the story of Rama. In its third act, when prince Bharata, younger brother of exiled Rama, returns to his hometown, as yet unaware of the recent death of his father King Dasaratha, he marvels over the execution of the sculpted images in a newly constructed pavilion. Wondering whether its four figures represent deities, he prepares to bow to them, upon which the keeper informs him that he is in an ancestral chapel and that the images represent his father, grandfather, great-grandfather, and great-great-grandfather.¹ If the audience of the play did not ridicule Bharata for failing to recognize the

image of his own father, it can only be because, in the accepted style of the day, portrait images were always sculpted to bear a greater resemblance to images of the gods than to their actual counterparts. Although lively and individualistic figures often appear in genre scenes and narrative presentations, whether sculpted or painted, verisimilitude certainly was not the ruling principle in commemorative portrait figures of aristocratic or royal ancestors. These stylized portrait statues and paintings were presumably identified either by their exact placement in a chapel, monastery, or temple or by their use in specific rituals such as birthday celebrations or death anniversaries.

The earliest ancestral portrait gallery for which material evidence survives, though at its barest minimum, commemorated a group of seven members of Satavahana royalty and was carved in the first century B.C. in a cave at the head of the strategic Nanaghat Pass, located along the trade route that led down from the hills of the western ghats to the ports along the Arabian Sea. The royal portrait gallery would have been seen by merchants, traders, and other travelers who passed through Satavahana territory on their way to the west coast. Unfortunately, the stone bas-relief images themselves are damaged beyond recognition, and only the inscribed labels remain in the rock face above to apprise us of their identity.

The second such portrait gallery known to us commemorates the Kushan rulers of northern India. An ancestral chapel at Mat, just outside the town of Mathura, appears to have housed no fewer than four portrait images, much damaged today, carved from

FIG. 1.
Idealized portrait of Queen Sembiyan Mahadevi as Parvati, Chola period, ca. 998, bronze, 36 1/4 in. Courtesy Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, F29.84.

red sandstone, each with an identifying inscription. The single seated image is Vima Kadphises, an early Kushan ruler of the mid-first century A.D., clad in boots and tunic and seated on a lion throne with feet pendant in the position known as *pralambapādāsana*. The well-known standing portrait of the famous emperor Kanishka is little more than a silhouette created by the eccentric outline of his military mantle, which is also depicted in his coin portraits and was clearly his hallmark. Certainly the padded boots and woolen cloak would not have been normal garb in the hot plains of Mathura but symbolized the authority of these rulers and signified their central Asian origins. Across the lower edge of the cloak is an inscription that reads *maharājā rājātirājā devaputra kanishka*, or “Great king, king of kings, son of the gods, Kanishka.” A third portrait statue is identified by inscription as Kanishka’s successor Huvishka, and a fourth is an unidentified prince. While the heads of the standing statues are broken away, it is possible to reconstruct that of Kanishka from his coin portraits, which depict him clad in his military mantle and boots, with an unusually long beard and a conical central Asian cap. His attributes of boots, cloak, beard, and cap made him recognizable; the shape of his nose or jawline were secondary if not irrelevant. The shrine appears to have been constructed in Kanishka’s year 6, perhaps corresponding to the year A.D. 84, with additions during Huvishka’s reign.

One of the earliest examples of royal stone portraits from south India, sculpted in the seventh century and identified by inscribed labels, is seen in the Adivaraha cave temple at the site of Mamallapuram, some forty miles south of Madras (now Chennai). On one side wall, two queens flank the seated monarch Simhavishnu, who founded the Pallava line around 550, while on the opposite wall stands his successor Mahendravarman, who ruled from ca. 600 to 630, with two queens beside him. The two royal figures look so similar that they are almost interchangeable and may even be identified as one of a range of monarchs. Scholars have suggested that the standing figure is the later ruler Mahendravarman II and that the seated figure is his predecessor, Narasimhavarman Mamalla (ca. 630–68), who gave his name to the site.

Such debates offer fair demonstration that artists did not sculpt images recognizable by their physical characteristics; rather, correct identification was possible only from inscribed labels or specific references to the sculptors’ commission.

PORTRAITURE RETAINED this character during the succeeding centuries of Chola rule. In the tenth century, temples began to commission a range of portable bronze images of the deities to be used in daily and weekly rituals, as well as in an increasing range of annual festivals. Though images of deities were doubtless the prime commissions, inscriptions at Rajaraja’s Great Temple of Tanjavur, completed in the year 1010, speak of the gift of no fewer than four bronze portraits of Chola royalty among its total of sixty-six bronze images. Emperor Rajaraja’s sister, Kundavai, gifted an image of her parents, King Sundara Chola and Queen Vanavan Mahadevi, while the temple manager, Adittan Suryan, gifted images of the reigning monarch Rajaraja and his chief queen Lokamahadevi. Unfortunately, these temple images of Tanjavur royalty have long since disappeared, depriving us of an invaluable source of information (or confirmation) regarding the nature of portraiture. Yet both the earlier Pallava practice just reviewed and later Vijayanagara imagery to which we shall refer would suggest that the Tanjavur images were idealized royal portraits. The Tanjavur temple contains two additional portraits of Rajaraja, one sculpted and the other painted; both portray a generic idealized figure with locks piled high in imitation of his favorite deity, Shiva. Verisimilitude appears to have been of little consequence.

While the Tanjavur temple inscriptions do not address what motivated the creation of its four bronze royal portraits, the inscriptions of Rajaraja’s grandmother, Sembiyan Mahadevi, cast some light on this question. Queen Sembiyan was a great patron of the arts who was active in building temples and commissioning bronzes for a period of at least sixty years; her earliest dated gift belongs to the year 941, while the latest occurred in the year 1001. Sembiyan Mahadevi founded a town that adopted her name; she settled there a group of Chaturvedi brahmins and

also constructed the Kailasanatha temple. Sembian herself was commemorated in a bronze portrait statue that was probably commissioned during her lifetime, perhaps at the behest of her son Uttama Chola. A later inscription of Sembian's great-grandson, Emperor Rajendra, speaks of special arrangements made for the celebration of Sembian's royal birthday in the month of Chittirai (March-April) at the Kailasanatha temple. The inscription makes specific provisions for the worship of her portrait statue alongside the image of Rishabhavahana, or Shiva with his bull. It speaks also of a great hall within the Kailasanatha temple that took the queen's name (*Sembiyan Mahādeviyār periya maṇḍapam*) and may have been used for her birthday celebrations.

In the context of idealized portraits that resemble images of deities, I would like to revisit my earlier suggestion that the evocative bronze image in the Freer Gallery is intended to portray Sembian Mahadevi. While conclusive proof of such a suggestion may be impossible to produce, several features seem to indicate the probability of such an identification. It has always been recognized that the image is stylistically idiosyncratic in its proportions, in the marked and even exaggerated slope of its shoulders, in the naturalistic handling of its full heavy breasts, and in its solemn, thoughtful expression. It is not a standard image of the goddess Parvati. The suggestion that its Sri Lankan origin explains its deviation from the norm does not hold up to serious scrutiny; stylistically, the image displays features that indicate its manufacture in the heart of the Chola country. Elsewhere I have spoken at length about its many features of form and decoration, which indicate it belongs to the very end of the tenth century, the date at which a portrait image of Sembian is likely to have been made.² Additionally, some unconfirmed reports apparently suggest that the image, acquired in 1929, perhaps through C. T. Loo, was recovered from a temple tank close to the town of Sembian Mahadevi.³

What considerations could have led Sembian's son or grandson to commission a bronze sculpted image of the queen? From all that we learn about her, Queen Sembian was a remarkable personality. A lavish patron of the sacred arts, she contributed generous gifts of images, land, and cash endowments

toward the creation of twenty-one temples. She was a woman with a remarkable sense of historic documentation, which was rare in ancient India. Her numerous temple inscriptions inform us that when she replaced brick temples with those built of stone, she ensured that all the original dedicatory inscriptions were reengraved on the new stone structures, alongside her own record. Her inscription at the Aduturai temple states:

While dismantling the earlier part-brick, part-stone structure, the inscribed stones were carefully removed and preserved for the documents engraved on them; and when the new structure was completed, all in stone, this great soul Sembian Mahadevi ordered that the old inscriptions recording grants, donations, etc. of all earlier kings which had been damaged or worn out, be faithfully engraved on the walls of the new structure.⁴

At the temple of Tirukodikaval we learn that once the old inscriptions had been reengraved on the walls of the newly built stone temple, Queen Sembian ordered that they be discarded, as they had served their purpose.

We may assume that what inspired Sembian's family to commission this first known metal portrait of Chola royalty was their appreciation of her remarkable personality, her integrity, and her sense of historical awareness, together with their desire to preserve for posterity the memory of a great queen. Perhaps the artist who sculpted the bronze image perceived in Sembian Mahadevi such power and eminence that he could envision her as comparable to none less than Parvati, the great goddess. Would the queen have been recognized from this image, in which queen and goddess seem to mingle and merge? Very unlikely. Is it reasonable to expect such recognition? Once again the answer is no. But when the image was carried in procession during her birthday celebrations, all would have recognized her.

Portraits of the Tamil saints provide another rich field within which to consider ideas of portraiture, and the allied concept of recognition of portraits, that prevailed in south India into the sixteenth century.

FIG. 2.
*Dancing child-saint Sambandar, Chola period,
twelfth century, bronze, 18 3/4 in. Courtesy Freer
Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, F76.5.*



The majority of temples in the Tamil country possess a complete set of images of its saints, either the sixty-three Shaiva Nayanmars or the twelve Vaishnava Alvars. Though images of child-saint Sambandar, whether dancing (fig. 2) or standing, show total lack of concern for physical likeness or visual specificity, they may be termed portraits in the sense that they are recognized by the devotee. The figure of an unclothed infant, with one hand pointing upwards and the other hand either in the gesture of dance or holding a cup, makes the image instantly recognizable. Devotees would have told one another that this was the child who was given a cup of divine milk and who, after pointing toward the heavens when questioned on the source of the milk, burst into joyous songs in praise of the godhead. The artists took hold of the essential elements of Sambandar's life story and used them to formulate his portrait. Yet the prevailing twentieth-century confusion over images of child-saint Sambandar, mistakenly labeled in many museums as "dancing child Krishna," points once again to the blurring of categories of divine and, in this case, saintly rather than royal. Artists apparently visualized the beloved child Sambandar in the mold of the only other child figure with which they were familiar; to them this was the standard and accepted formula. The length of Sambandar's nose or the shape of his eyes was not important. Visual specificity and verisimilitude were likewise deemed unnecessary and irrelevant in the case of the Christian saints. One is reminded of Robert Browning's poem "Fra Lippo Lippi," in which Brother Lippo Lippi painted individualized figures of the Catholic saints only to be chastised by the prior, who wanted a standard type:

Paint the soul, never mind the legs and arms!
Rub all out, try at it a second time.

Even the portraits of lesser donors on Chola temples,⁵ though displaying more individual physical traits, are nevertheless types—ecstatic devotees—rather than recognizable individuals.

Portraits that are likenesses came into vogue in northern India when the Mughal emperor Akbar himself sat for his portrait so that his likeness could be captured by artists, directing also that portraits be

painted of his courtiers and nobles. The various Mughal emperors are clearly distinguishable one from the other in their painted portraits; Akbar cannot be mistaken for Jahangir, nor Jahangir for Shah Jahan. And indeed the artists took pains to portray the emperors at varying stages of their careers: as young princes, at the height of their power, and as aging monarchs. Admittedly, however, it is when Mughal artists moved away from royalty to eccentric physical types like dervishes and faqirs that they produced their most precise and vivid portraits—warts, moles, and all. An evocative drawing of a portly man relaxing with a jug of wine before him makes us feel we are encountering a specific individual (fig. 3). This freedom, which the artists enjoyed once they were released from the restrictions of portraying royal figures, is equally evident in pre-Mughal painting. Painters depicting the Buddha's life story in the fifth-century Buddhist monastic caves at Ajanta tended to produce stylized figures; but they adopted a rich and vivid mode of depiction when they turned to portraying witches, dwarfs, and other marginal figures. Notably, literary texts suggest that wall paintings were a regular part of the decoration of monuments; but Ajanta alone survives as testimony of this ancient mode of decoration.

In southern India, where Mughal influence was peripheral, recognizable portraits came into vogue somewhat later. Portraits of the Vijayanagar rulers (1356–1556) continue to be of a stylized type. The famous bronze portraits of Emperor Krishnadevaraya and his two queens, today in the Tirumala Devasthanam at Tirupati, are generic idealized aristocratic images that could equally well be portraits of any royal or aristocratic group. It is only with the Nayaks of Madurai, once governors of the Vijayanagar emperors, that recognizable portraiture comes into its own. Emperor Tirumala Nayak (r. 1623–59) began to commission portrait statues of the entire Nayak lineage, to be carved against the granite columns of one or other hall in the temples he constructed. The result is an ancestral portrait gallery with rulers arranged in chronological order and ending with Tirumala himself, who is portrayed in temple after temple as a portly figure with his stomach rolling over his lower garment and his turbanlike headgear barely

FIG. 3.
*Seated man, attrib. Basawan,
Mughal period, ca. 1580–85,
3 3/8 × 3 1/8 in. Courtesy Freer
Gallery of Art, Smithsonian
Institution, F53.60.*



containing the bunched hair that falls over to one side. Was this trend toward verisimilitude in portraiture to some extent due to the contact with the Portuguese, whose help Tirumala sought in his battle against the Sethupatis of adjoining Ramnad? No clear answer arises.

WE MAY PERHAPS attempt a working hypothesis to explain the indifference to verisimilitude in so much of Indian portraiture. In the context of Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain India, it may be necessary to reexamine, even redefine, the philosophic concept of the individual self. It could be said that the Christian and Islamic self combines self as body and self as soul, the body being indispensable for the resurrection that will occur on the final Day of Judgment. The same body in which the soul dwelt while on earth, with its specific physiognomic peculiarities, will be resurrected to contain the soul in the next world. By contrast, indigenous Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain beliefs envision a disembodied entity, a soul that returns repeatedly to earth, each time temporarily assuming a body with particular physical characteristics, only to discard it and assume a totally different body the next time around. The physical features of a body exist only for a single lifetime and not for eternity. The Bhagavad-Gita puts it succinctly:

As a man discards
worn-out clothes
to put on new
and different ones,
so the embodied self
discards

its worn-out bodies
to take on other new ones.⁶

The Buddha, for instance, is believed to have assumed 550 different bodies, including that of the elephant Chaddanta, the monkey Mahakapi, an acrobat, the *vaiśya* merchant Visahya, brahmins Sumedha and Shyama, and *kṣatriya* princes Mahajanaka and Vessantara. Finally born as chieftain Siddhartha, he severed all bonds and achieved salvation; he discarded the body, never again to be confined in bodily form. Perhaps it is not so strange, after all, that the reproduction of physiognomic likeness held little significance in a society which believed that the physical features of the present birth would be replaced by a new set of bodily features in the next birth and that the ultimate state of salvation is the self unencumbered by a body. Furthermore, Indian religious systems upheld the suppression of the ego; figures with visual specificity may well have been seen as catering to that very quality of egoism that they sought to destroy.⁷ An idealized outer form is one distinctive answer to the demands of portraiture.

Portraits have always existed in India, though the nomenclature may be misleading to the modern reader because these stone, metal, or painted portraits paid little attention to physical resemblance. The artists' idea of portraiture, especially of royalty and sainthood, tended toward idealized visions of the quality, character, and stature of the subjects rather than a precise likeness of their physical features. If this hypothesis is valid, it is not surprising that a metal portrait of a great and revered queen was modeled on the iconography and style employed to depict the divine Parvati. □

Notes

1. A. C. Woolner and Lakshman Sarup, trans., *Thirteen Plays of Bhasa* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass reprint, 1985), 172–76.
2. Vidya Dehejia, *Art of the Imperial Cholas* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 36–38.
3. Conversations with Samuel Eilenberg in 1988. We acquired the image, which had been stored in Paris, through H. Kevorkian.
4. *Annual Report on South Indian Epigraphy*, no. 35 (Madras, 1907).
5. Padma Kaimal, “Passionate Bodies: Constructions of the Self in South Indian Portraits,” *Archives of Asian Art* 47 (1995): 6–16.
6. Barbara Stoler Miller, *The Bhagavad-Gita: Krishna’s Counsel in Time of War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), chap. 2, verse 22, p. 32.
7. Pratapaditya Pal, *The Art of Tibet: A Catalogue of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art Collection* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1990), 57.