

Displaying South Asian Heritage: The Global Nataraja Image

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Abstract: Is the bronze image of Shiva as the Lord of Dance (Nataraja) representative of South Asian heritage? Museum collections in the U.S. certainly make this claim, since this image is one of the most sought-after among both institutional and personal collectors. This paper argues that the image of Shiva Nataraja is important for understanding South Asian heritage, but that the museum culture's attribution of meaning to the image as well as its display of the image need further nuance in order to accurately convey the localized meanings and treatments of Shiva Nataraja in South Asian contexts. In particular, this essay will draw on the poetry of the Tamil poet-saint KaraikkalAmmaiyar as well as on the classic image of the Buddha in seated meditation to promote the argument that art from South Asia needs to be linked to concrete practice in order to accurately represent the meanings and treatments of images in the South Asian context, which will in turn more accurately represent the heritage of South Asia to the U.S. public.