

## The Dancing Shiva: South Indian Processional Bronze, Museum Artwork, and Universal Icon

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### Abstract

Today, in addition to the Om sign or the image of Ganesha, the image of the dancing Shiva is one of the best known Hindu symbols in the world: the ‘Nataraja’ is not only omnipresent in museums; his image adorns holy cards, posters, holiday brochures, as well as countless websites and diverse esoteric and academic book covers. This article examines how this image could attain such great popularity. It focuses on processes of cultural appropriation and reinterpretation. Originally a southern Indian processional bronze, the dancing Shiva became transformed into a museum artwork and a universal icon. This paper traces the different actors, networks and interactions behind this career from southern Indian temples to the stages of the Western world.

### Keywords

Shiva, India, Hinduism, art, museum, dance, Orientalism

### 1. Introduction

Shiva is one of the most important, as well as one of the most fascinating deities in Hinduism. Especially in southern India he is often depicted as the King of Dance (Skr. *Nataraja*). Shiva dances the dance of bliss (Skr. *ananda tandava*); in him are revealed both joy and eagerness, anger and violence. Here, Shiva determines the rhythm of life and of time. He possesses immeasurable energies with which he determines the becoming, the being and the passing away of the whole of creation. In his dance he unfolds his omnipotence; he is the engine of constant change.

Like breathing in and breathing out, his creation first flows into him, only to flow out again with the next movement (Fig. 1). Shiva is the origin and the centre of the cosmic game. His dance has no purpose other than spontaneous self-development.<sup>1</sup>

The dancing Shiva in the Museum Rietberg, Zurich, originates from Tamil Nadu in south India and was probably cast in the twelfth century, during the time of the Chola kings. Through the international art market it entered the collection of Eduard von der Heydt (1882–1964).



**Fig. 1. The Nataraja as artwork and museum exhibit: Nataraja, Tamil Nadu, 12th century, copper alloy, Museum Rietberg, donated by Eduard von der Heydt, photo: Rainer Wolfsberger.**

<sup>1</sup> See Johannes Beltz, “Einleitung,” in: Johannes Beltz (ed.), *Shiva Nataraja: Der kosmische Tänzer* (Zurich: Museum Rietberg, 2008), 15–35, at p. 17–18.

He donated his collection to the city of Zurich, thus laying the foundation for what was to become the Museum Rietberg. The dancing Shiva was to become the Museum's emblem: in 1949 he was depicted on the brochures calling for the planned reconstruction of the Villa Wesendonck (Fig. 2).

But beyond the confines of Zurich, the Natajara is today one of the most important and best known Indian deities in the world. Not only is he omnipresent in the internet, but his picture also adorns holy cards, posters, holiday brochures, and book covers. What made him so popular and what role did museums such as the Museum Rietberg play in the process? This article will trace the change from regional cult figure to museum artwork and finally to universal icon.

## 2. The Birth of a Symbol

Up to the nineteenth century the visibility of the dancing Shiva remained restricted to India. Early travel reports by missionaries in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries show that they attached no great importance to depictions of the Nataraja. Bartholomäus Ziegenbalg, for instance, who showed an interest in different aspects of the gods of southern India, and described them in his *Genealogie der Malabarischen Götter* in 1713, presents the dancing Shiva in his direct ritual context but grants him no greater significance.<sup>2</sup> Nor did Abbé Dubois lay any special emphasis on the dancing Shiva in his *Institutions et Cérémonies des Peuples de l'Inde*, published in 1825; for him this is just one of the many possible forms which Shiva may take.<sup>3</sup>

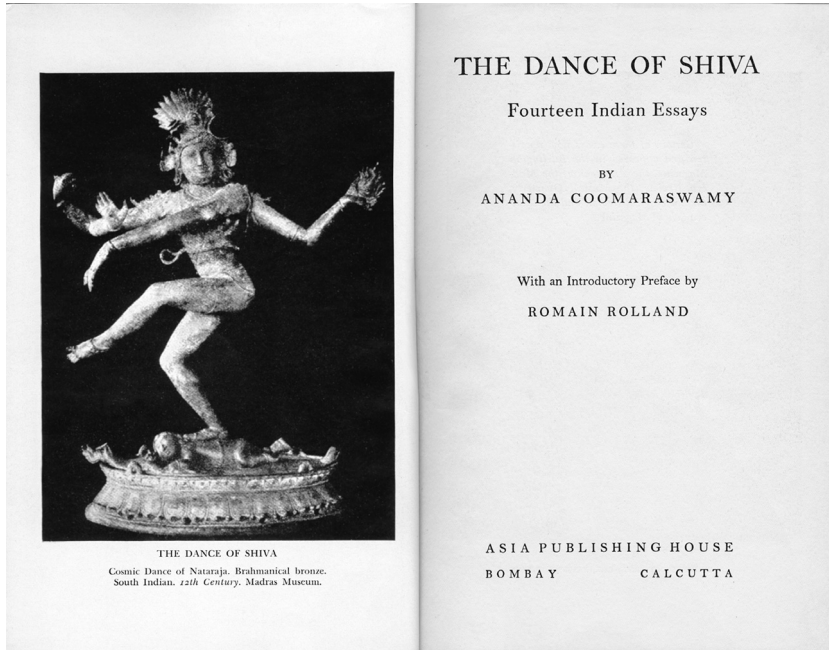
Global interest in the dancing Shiva goes back to the Romantic glorification of the Orient in the Western world. Philosophers, artists, museum curators, collectors, and writers were filled with enthusiasm for India and its gods which seemed so mysterious and exotic. The art historian Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy (1877–1947) was much influenced by and contributed to this enthusiasm. As the first curator of Indian art at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, and as a widely read author, he had a substantial influence on generations of academics and art lovers.

<sup>2</sup>) Bartholomäus Ziegenbalg, *Genealogie der Malabarischen Götter* (Halle: Verlag der Franckeschen Stiftungen zu Halle, 2003), 69.

<sup>3</sup>) Abbé Jean Antoine Dubois, *Leben und Riten der Inder: Kastenwesen und Hinduglaube in Südindien um 1800* (Bielefeld: Reise Know How Verlag Peter Rump, 2002), 500–501.



Fig. 2. The dancing Shiva as agitator for the reconstruction of the museum building, poster of 3rd July 1949, Museum Rietberg archives.



**Fig. 3. The birth of the symbol: title page of Coomaraswamy's widely read book "The Dance of Shiva."**

His most significant article "The Dance of Shiva" was first published in 1918 in a collection of articles with the same title (Fig. 3). For Coomaraswamy, the dancing Shiva is the most expressive of all Indian artworks. He is more than just a Hindu symbol; he is the image of all divine action:

A great motif in religion or art, any great symbol, becomes all things to all men; age after age it yields to men such treasure as they find in their own hearts. Whatever the origins of Shiva's dance, it became in time the clearest image of the activity of God which any art or religion can boast of.<sup>4</sup>

According to Coomaraswamy, no artist today—however great he may be—could create a truer and more exact image of this energy. Nature is immobile and cannot dance until Shiva wishes it. By dancing he maintains

<sup>4</sup>) Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy, *The Dance of Shiva* (Kingsport: Kingsport Press, 1952), 84.

it and, still dancing, he destroys all forms and names with fire. This is poetry—but nonetheless the manifestation of primal rhythmic energy.<sup>5</sup> For Coomaraswamy, the cult figure with its accompanying processions, dances, and music, became a universally understandable symbol, an intellectualized devotional image. The ritual context was moved into the background in order to establish Shiva's dance as a perfect example of the synthesis of science, religion and art.<sup>6</sup>

Coomaraswamy's ideas proved so convincing that they gained wide recognition. Not only art historians but also art lovers and admirers of India received them gratefully. Coomaraswamy offered what many were seeking after: he gave clear, simple and fascinating answers to complex questions. And at the same time he fulfilled a need for spirituality. His ideas echoed the spirit of the times, which were marked by deep admiration for the mystical Orient.

### 3. The Museum Network

This growing interest in Indian art and religion was also reflected in the art trade and led to the founding of important private collections in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Most of these collections finally ended in big museums or formed the basis for new institutions. Eduard von der Heydt, patron and collector of non-European art, to whom we referred at the beginning of this paper, is one of the most remarkable examples (Fig. 4). Von der Heydt acquired the Nataraja in the 1920s from the famous Parisian art dealer C.T. Loo (1880–1957) who, incidentally, supplied all great collectors and museums in Europe and North America with bronzes from southern India.<sup>7</sup> The dancing Shiva fitted well into his concept of one universal and global art.<sup>8</sup>

In addition to his philosophical and intellectual interest, it was his interest in modern Expressionist dance that led him to acquire the figure. In an interview he tells about his time on Monte Verità and explains:

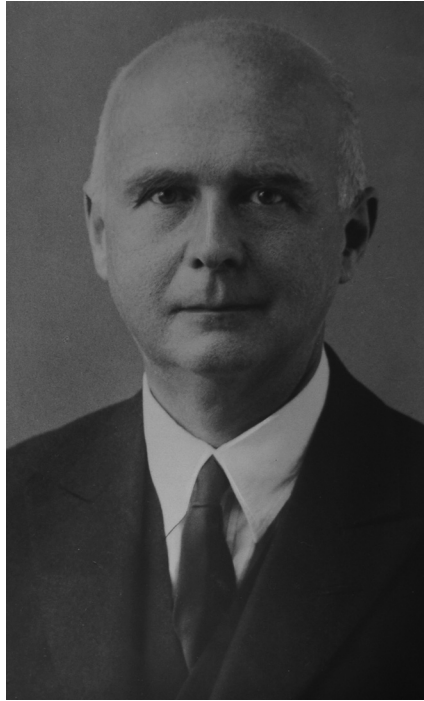
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<sup>5</sup>) Coomaraswamy, *Shiva*, 83

<sup>6</sup>) See Padma Kaimal, "Shiva Nataraja: Shifting Meanings of an Icon," *Art Bulletin (The College Art Associations)* 81/3 (1999), 390–419, at p. 391.

<sup>7</sup>) Beltz, "Shiva," 27.

<sup>8</sup>) Eduard von der Heydt, "Ich sammle," *Inspiré: Mode, Literatur, Kunst* 2/16 (1950), 7.



**Fig. 4. The collector, connoisseur and donor: Baron Eduard von der Heydt (undated photo).**

The well-known dancer Hertha Feist<sup>9</sup> was a regular and welcome guest who often danced in the evenings with great success. Mary Wigman<sup>10</sup> and Rudolph von Laban<sup>11</sup> also displayed their skills. Dance played a very important role at that time and inspired me to buy an Indian dancing Shiva figure which is kept today in the Museum Rietberg in Zurich.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>9</sup>) Hertha Feist (1896–1990), German dancer and choreographer.

<sup>10</sup>) Mary Wigman (1886–1973), pseudonym of Karoline Sofie Marie Wiegmann, German dancer, choreographer, and dance instructor.

<sup>11</sup>) Rudolph von Laban (1879–1958), really Rezso Laban de Váraljas, Hungarian dancer, choreographer and dance theoretician; he is considered as one of the most important founders of modern European dance.

<sup>12</sup>) Eduard von der Heydt & Werner Rheinbaden, *Auf dem Monte Verità: Erinnerungen und Gedanken über Menschen, Kunst und Politik* (Zurich: Atlantis Verlag, 1958), 32. All translations from German are mine.

This statement is important for our discussion, since it proves that the main reason for acquiring the figure was not material interest, nor interest in iconographic or stylistic details. Von der Heydt bought the piece because he loved modern dance.

Von der Heydt was not alone in his admiration of Oriental dances, but was part of a widespread movement, a wave of enthusiasm for Oriental and especially Indian dances—and in particular Shiva the dancing god. The earliest evidence of this seems to be a performance by the dancer Mata Hari in 1905 in Paris.<sup>13</sup> On 13 March, Mata Hari (a pseudonym of Margaretha Geertruida Zelle, 1876–1917) presented impressions of Indian temple dances before a selected audience. The industrialist Emile Guimet from Lyons had invited a carefully chosen audience of around six hundred people, artists, musicians, intellectuals, bankers, diplomats and politicians, aristocrats and art lovers. The performance took place on the upper floor of his collection building (today's Musée Guimet), in the library, which had been transformed into a kind of Indian temple with the aid of garlands and burning candles. In the middle—like an altar—was the figure of a dancing Shiva. Before this Nataraja, Mata Hari performed her sensational choreographies on the theme of creation, fertility, and destruction, ending with her removing almost all of her clothes in front of the figure. Her scandalous performances contributed significantly to popularizing the Nataraja.

A further impetus was given by the Indian dancer Uday Shankar (1900–1977), who had a close relationship with the artist and art historian Alice Boner (1898–1981) (Fig. 5). Uday Shankar combined classical Indian dance forms with new forms of expression from Western theatre. The dancing Shiva was to become an important source of inspiration for him, too: he seems to have become aware of the Nataraja for the first time in 1924, when he received a publication by Coomaraswamy, the title page of which was adorned by a bronze figure of him.<sup>14</sup> He was deeply impressed and worked out a choreography centred around the cosmic dancer.

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<sup>13</sup> See Pat Shipman, *Femme Fatale, Love, Lies, and the Unknown Life of Mata Hari* (New York: HarperCollins 2007), 150–154.

<sup>14</sup> Ruth Abrahams, "Uday Shankar: The Early Years, 1900–1938," *Dance Chronicle* 30 (2007), 363–426, at p. 385; 404–405; Matthew Harp Allen, "Rewriting the script for South Indian Dance," *The Drama Review* 41/3 (1997), 63–97, at p. 91.



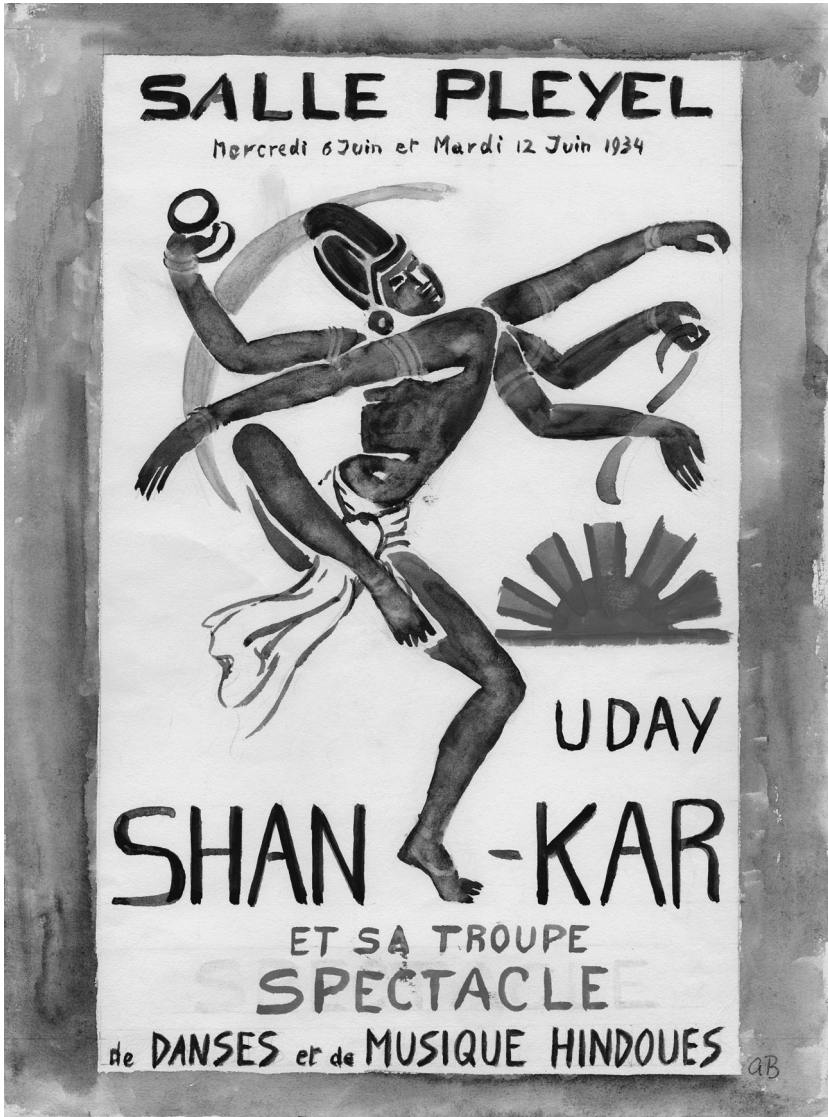


Fig. 5. Shiva dancing on Europe's stages: Alice Boner, draft for poster advertising the performance by Uday Shankar on 6th and 12th June 1934 in Paris, Alice Boner Archive, Museum Rietberg.

Over the years the Nataraja rose to become the symbol of Indian dance—in the West as well as in India.<sup>15</sup> The ‘neo-classical’ dance style known as *Bharatanatyam* grew up as a true reinvention of tradition: what was originally a ritual temple practice developed into a secularized cultural practice, and became a central component of the newly defined cultural heritage. What was once intended as a religious ritual became transformed into performances by professional dancers for which one had to pay an entrance fee.

Just as the original sacrifice to the gods found its way onto international stages as a dance performance, the dancing Shiva as a universal symbol also conquered the stage of global dance: in 1934, Professor Otto Kummel, the general director of the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, sent a letter to Eduard von der Heydt asking if he could borrow the dancing Shiva for his exhibition in the Palais of the Crown Princesses entitled “The Dance in Art.” As a reason for making this request he wrote that the Nataraja would be “the crown of the whole exhibition,” for the dance of Shiva was “the highest form of dance” in the world.<sup>16</sup>

#### 4. Shiva’s Dance as an Allegory of the Crisis-Ridden World

In addition to collections, museums, and stage performances, the dancing Shiva gained a wider significance in Europe and North America in the early twentieth century: he was seen as an allegory of the world’s destiny/fate. The disaster of the two world wars seemed to correspond to the cyclical periods of Hindu cosmology. The famous German novelist and poet Hermann Hesse (1877–1962) is quoted here paradigmatically.

In the face of National Socialism and the subsequent trauma of the Second World War, Hesse held up his *Glasperlenspiel*, in which he reduced every form of totalitarianism to absurdity.<sup>17</sup> He wrote about Hinduism and India:

<sup>15</sup> When performing in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London in 1947, the famous Indian dancer Ram Gopal (1912–2003) danced of course before a Nataraja; see *The Illustrated London News*, 20 September 1947, 327.

<sup>16</sup> Letter dated 9 December 1934, written in connection with the exhibition “The Dance in Art” in the Kronprinzessinnenpalais in Berlin (on behalf of the National Gallery and by order of the Ministry of Propaganda).

<sup>17</sup> Volker Michels (ed.), *Blick nach dem Fernen Osten: Erzählungen, Legenden, Gedichte und Betrachtungen, Jubiläumsprogramm zu Hermann Hesses 125. Geburtstag* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2002), 473–474.

It is wonderful: this people, capable of understanding and suffering like scarcely any other, has watched the cruel game of world history with horror and shame, the eternally revolving wheel of greed and suffering, it has seen and understood the frailness of all creatures, the greed and devilment of man as well as his deep longing for purity and harmony, and has found for the whole beauty and tragedy of creation these marvellous parables (...) of the powerful Shiva, who dances the degenerate world into ruins.<sup>18</sup>

Here, the dancing Shiva becomes an allegory of a world that is drifting towards disaster.<sup>19</sup>

Eduard von der Heydt also sees in Shiva a symbol of endangered humanity when he says:

Shiva is not only the creator but also the great destroyer. He creates the world in play, amuses himself with it and finally destroys it. This concept, which to some may appear a paradox or even cruel, is familiar to the Hindu. Perhaps now, in the age of the atomic bomb, it is no longer as foreign to the European mind as it was 50 years ago, when people still had a naive belief in progress.<sup>20</sup>

In these words he also expresses his scepticism regarding the modern Western world's belief in technical progress. With its mysticism, art, and wisdom, India offers a possible alternative, which he wants to show to other people: "I am happy that so many poor, machine-plagued Europeans can experience the quiet beauty of Asia through my collections."<sup>21</sup>

## 5. Spiritualization and de-eroticization

In the wake of Coomaraswamy, not only Western intellectuals but also Indian thinkers, such as Aurobindo Ghose (1872–1950), repeatedly

<sup>18</sup> Hermann Hesse, *Das Glasperlenspiel* (Zurich: Fretz und Wasmuth Verlag, 1956), 435–436.

<sup>19</sup> In his preface to Coomaraswamy's *The Dance of Shiva*, the French novelist Romain Rolland (1866–1944) warns that Europe has become trapped in a blind alley of arrogance and dissatisfaction. It should therefore look to Asia, where everything is harmonious; there, everything has its place in a wonderful harmony. See Romain Roland, "Foreword," in: Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy, *The Dance of Shiva* (Kingsport: Kingsport Press, 1952), 7.

<sup>20</sup> Von der Heydt, "Ich sammele," 6.

<sup>21</sup> Hilde Baronin von Buol-Wischenau, "Die Tugenden Asiens, Gespräch mit dem Ostasienforscher Baron von der Heydt," *Neues Wiener Abendblatt*, 313 (13 November 1937).

describe the spiritual depth of Indian art. Thus, Aurobindo explained: “The inspiration, the way of seeing is frankly not naturalistic [...]. The Indian sculptor is concerned with embodying spiritual experiences and impressions, not with recording or glorifying what is received by the physical senses.”<sup>22</sup> In other words, the Indian sculptor produces his work of art only after he has closed his eyes to physical reality.

Thus, art is not a copy of reality but is an indication of the sublime and the hidden. None other than the famous sculptor Auguste Rodin (1840–1917) underlines these assumptions in a book on Hindu sculpture, published in 1921 together with Coomaraswamy. In the dancing Shiva, he admires above all that which cannot be seen, namely, the unknown depths, the ground of life.<sup>23</sup>

In a similar way, the Swiss artist and art historian Alice Boner considers symbols to be the purest art form and the proper language of metaphysics (Figs. 6 & 7):

Such art is not there for its own sake, but in order to reveal the One transcendent Truth. It has no other purpose than to be the herald of a universal doctrine and to support religious and spiritual efforts [...]. It does not want to stay with the ephemeral, accidental, transient appearance of things, but with their essential being. It wants to transform the material world of forms and lead it back into the world of ‘ideas’ from which it originates.<sup>24</sup>

The spiritualization of Shiva’s perception is accompanied by de-eroticization. This tendency can most clearly be seen in the case of the *linga*.<sup>25</sup> This symbol is really the most adequate way of depicting Shiva, for it is formless (Skr. *arupa*). The *linga* is also the most important ritual object in a Shiva temple. It is located in the holy of holies and is worshipped there in a *yoni*.<sup>26</sup> Just as the *linga* stands for the male principle, the

<sup>22</sup> Elisabeth Beck, *Sri Aurobindo on Indian Art: Selections From His Writings With Photographs* (Ahmedabad: Mapin Publishing, 1999), 199.

<sup>23</sup> Auguste Rodin, “La danse de Civa,” *Ars Asiatica*, 3 (1921), 9–13, at p. 10.

<sup>24</sup> Alice Boner, “Der symbolische Aspekt der Form,” in: Georgette Boner & Eberhard Fischer (eds.), *Alice Boner und die Kunst Indiens* (Zurich: Museum Rietberg, 1982), 101–106, at p. 101.

<sup>25</sup> Phallic symbol of Shiva. However, in Sanskrit the word *lingam* has no directly erotic connotation. The neuter means “characteristic” or “feature.”

<sup>26</sup> In Sanskrit *yoni* means “lap,” “womb” or “origin.” It is a stylized vagina.



**Fig. 6.** The artist and the symbol: Alice Boner, undated composition drawing of a bronze figure of the Shiva Nataraja, Alice Boner Archive, Museum Rietberg.



Alice Boner in ihrem Haus in Benares, 1938

**Fig. 7. The artist in her spiritual home: Alice Boner in her house in Benares (taken in 1938), Alice Boner Archive, Museum Rietberg.**

bowl-shaped *yoni* symbolizes the female principle, and together *linga* and *yoni* symbolize the merging of the microcosmos and the macrocosmos, of human senses and natural elements, of ritual actions and cosmic events (Fig. 8).

Unlike the dancing Shiva, the *linga*—as the most important symbol of Shiva—has never received the same worldwide attention. One reason for this could be that the Christian West was offended by its shape. Goethe found the combination of *linga* and *yoni* repellent when he said: “Und also, ein für allemal, der Lingam ist mir ganz fatal!” (“And so, to tell the



**Fig. 8. Shiva's 'formless' image: Shivalinga, South India, 20th century, copper alloy, Museum Rietberg, photo: Rainer Wolfsberger.**

truth, I find the linga quite off-putting!").<sup>27</sup> Abbé Dubois even saw in the *linga* proof of the fact that "all founders of false religions appeal to the lowest instincts of their proselytes and had to flatter their passions." For him the *linga* is a propagandistic attempt to play up to people's sexual desires and therefore a "despicable symbol."<sup>28</sup> Both these quotations show that, to put it crudely, an erect penis in combination with a vagina as its foil could not be presented to the European public.

When seeking universal symbols for Hinduism, it was necessary to find alternatives. The modern, spiritual, globally oriented Hinduism of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries brought new, different images. People liked to see a creator god as an exalted being, as a-sexual as possible. Open eroticism and sexuality were to be avoided, giving way instead to the sublime, the symbol and transcendence.

And while in Indian temples Shiva's female partner still stands firmly at his side, she is completely missing for instance in Hesse's considerations. Art lovers such as Eduard von der Heydt acquired Hindu goddesses

<sup>27</sup>) Johann Wolfgang Goethe, *Poetische Werke, Gedichte und Singspiele II, Gedichte, Nachlese und Nachlass*, Berliner Ausgabe (Berlin: Aufbau Verlag, 1980), 400.

<sup>28</sup>) Dubois, *Leben und Riten*, 503.

for their collections, but they were never regarded with the same degree of fascination as the Nataraja.

## 6. Conclusion

In the course of the past two hundred years, a range of meanings has been attributed to the dancing Shiva, some of which have not lost their topicality to this day. This process of reinterpretation has its origin in a nineteenth-century glorifying admiration of India, the dynamic of which today is referred to as Orientalism. As the result of a discursive exchange between the West and India, the Nataraja evolved into one of the most important icons of a new, universally conceived Hinduism. During the search for suitable symbols that would also be appreciated in the West, he took on a key role in the visual repertoire of the new world religion, in addition to the sacred syllable “Om,” the flute-playing Krishna, or the elephant-headed Ganesha. This ‘global’ Shiva exists without local histories and rituals; he has become ‘emancipated’ from his South Indian origins (Fig. 9).



**Fig. 9. The Nataraja in his ritual context: procession with Shiva and his female partner in Cirkali, Tamil Nadu (January 2007), photo: Johannes Beltz.**





**Fig. 10–11.** The Nataraja as a cosmological symbol dancing in front of the CERN in Geneva, <http://public.web.cern.ch>, photo's: Maximilien Brice

For the purposes of the discussion in the present volume, the findings presented in this paper can be summed up as follows: The history of the Nataraja from his southern Indian origins right up to his appearances on European stages is a history of changing meanings, contexts, places, and networks. This has very little to do with the material qualities of the figure or its ancient age.<sup>29</sup> The dancing Shiva found its way into the Museum Rietberg because it was an ideal projection screen for various religious needs and was embedded in divers discourses. This complex process of interpretation—involving not only museum curators, collectors, or sponsors, but also artists and intellectuals in India and Europe—is of course still going on.

Thus, the well known philosopher, physicist and writer Fritjof Capra, has popularized the Nataraja since the 1970s as a cosmological symbol: Shiva's dance is an analogy of the dance of the smallest particles in physics.<sup>30</sup> It is therefore quite consequent that a dancing Shiva was unveiled on June 18th 2004 at the CERN (Centre Européen de Recherche Nucléaire) in Geneva (Figs. 10 & 11). The figure was donated by the Indian government as an indication of its long association with this research centre.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> See for instance Krzysztof Pomian, *Der Ursprung des Museums: Vom Sammeln* (Berlin: Klaus Wagenbrecht 1998), 79.

<sup>30</sup> "The metaphor of the cosmic dance thus unifies ancient mythology, religious art and modern physics," Fritjof Capra, *The Tao of Physics* (London: Fontana, 1976), 258–259.; see also Harp Allen, "Rewriting," 83–84.

<sup>31</sup> <http://public.web.cern.ch/press/pressreleases/Releases2004/PR10.04ECouncil.html>; <http://www.fritjofcapra.net/shiva.html> (accessed 25 October 2010).

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