# WORLD ART HISTORY:

# *SHIVA NATARJA* AND THE CONCEPT OF AGENCY

---

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department

of Art History

University of Houston

---

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Art History

---

By

Kathryn Rae Tanner Chase

October, 2014

An Abstract of a Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department

of Art History

University of Houston

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Art History

By

Kathryn Rae Tanner Chase

# ABSTRACT

The purpose of this thesis is to demonstrate how a new method of art historical analysis that focuses on the agency of art works could be explored as a fundamental basis of world art history. I propose that the power of images is a common characteristic of art across the globe that's unhindered by time. It could be used as a tool to create a world art history that deals equally well with both Western and non-Western art objects.

I will use the Museum of Fine Arts Houston's thirteenth century, *Shiva Nataraja* sculpture to explore core issues in world art history. More importantly, I will use this sculpture to demonstrate how traditional analyses are beneficial to understanding certain aspects of non-Western art. While exploring the application of traditional art historical strategies, I will also discuss how those analytical strategies do not adequately address how the art object functioned in its original context. New methods of analyses need to be developed to create a world art history.

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

**Introduction** 1

**Chapter 1: Shiva Nataraja** 5

**Chapter 2: World Art History** 21

**Chapter 3: Agency** 41

**Conclusion** 54

**Appendix** 60

**Bibliography** 62

# Introduction

This essay treats the iconography of the dancing *Shiva Nataraja* as an exemplary case for the emerging field of world art history. The choice of this object is not happenstance: *Shiva Nataraja* is one of the most popular images of Indian art. These sculptures have become an iconic representation of this key region for the study of non-Western art.[1] In the Western academy, such an object type can still be seen as "non-Western", full of exotic form and meaning. To counter exoticism and more fully integrate such objects into the global art discourse, world art history proposes to construct a discourse that deals equally well with objects from around the world. This field emerges out of Western art history, and into a dialogue that proposes new methods of study that are applicable to both Western and non-Western art objects. This thesis will use the canonical *Shiva Nataraja,* or "Lord of the Dance", to explore core issues in world art history.[2]

This emerging field is a general practice that would primarily affect survey courses of art history. A world art history would enable introductory art history courses to discuss art from both the western and non-Western world in an equal manner, rather than primarily focusing on Western art. It would enable students to better appreciate art that they may have previously considered exotic by focusing on a commonality of art across the world. Finally, this way of thinking would also affect scholarly research.

---

[1] Padma Kaimal, "Shiva Nataraja: Shifting Meanings of an Icon," *The Art Bulletin*, vol. 81, no.3 (1999): 391.
[2] Ibid.

Fundamental to this discourse is the issue of determining unifying attributes that can be used to compare and relate all art. I propose that scholars could explore focusing on the relationship between the art object and the original viewer as a common characteristic unhindered by time. Cross-culturally, viewers respond to art. Exploring the agency of art objects could be fundamental to creating a more inclusive world art history. Therefore, this field would also encourage more scholarly research that focuses on studying the relationship between the art object and the original viewer.

Traditional iconography and stylistic analyses are crucial to understanding many works of art, but they do not deal productively with the original experience between the viewer and art object. The traditional organization of art into linear timelines is also not universally applicable.[3] Nonetheless, traditional art historical approaches have greatly enhanced our understanding of the *Shiva Nataraja* and non-Western art in general. The fundamental role played by a careful and rich iconographical analysis should be apparent in sections below and in any general historiography of Indian art.[4] In addition to iconography, the many important stylistic analyses of ancient Indian art allow us to track the important differences in regional traditions and to construct a chronology in the absence of documents.[5] However, these analyses do not adequately address the relationship between the art object and the

---

[3] David Carrier, *A World Art History and Its Objects* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2009): 1, xxv.
[4] Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, "The Interpretation of Symbols," in *The Essential Ananda K. Coomaraswamy*, ed. Rama P. Coomaraswamy (Bloomington: World Wisdom Inc., 2004): 103-109.
[5] Kaimal, *Shiva Nataraja: Shifting Meanings of an Icon*, 390-419.

original viewer within the original, religious context. The approach taken here attempts to present a careful iconographical analysis of the *Shiva Nataraja* to lay down the groundwork for a new approach that focuses on the agency of this object. If this approach is used, the new tool of examining the agency of the art object would be the focus of a world art history that enriches scholars' understanding of both non-Western and Western art.

When discussing the original context and understanding of art objects, it is important to use certain indigenous semantic terms to describe these works of art. Wilfried Van Damme, another scholar of world art history, argues that when "analyses of visual art are written in a language other than the one spoken by the producers and users of that art, key concepts and other crucial terms could then be retained in their original forms."[6] When these crucial terms are retained, "their meanings or semantic resonance remain intact as much as practically possible."[7] For example, in discussing Hindu art, such as the *Shiva Nataraja* sculpture, it is important to use the word *darshan* in its original language to retain the full resonance of the concept. Van Damme uses this example as well and points out that a quick English equivalent, such as "supernatural power" is a poor translation and does not encapsulate the true meaning of this concept. Using the aesthetic vocabulary of a specific tradition "may provide a fascinating

[6] Wilfried Van Damme, "Introducing World Art Studies," in *World Art Studies: Exploring Concepts and Approaches*, ed. Zijlmans and Wilfried Van Damme (Amsterdam: Valiz, 2008): 47-48.
[7] Ibid., 48.

entry into other cultural worlds, throwing a unique light on the creation, use, and experience of the visual arts in varying semantic and affective universes."[8]

The discussion of the *Shiva Nataraja* will introduce numerous indigenous terms. Scholars use French and Italian terms to study European art because the original artists were aware of these concepts and working to fulfill them. For example, it would be difficult to fully appreciate seventeenth century Italian Baroque art without understanding the concept of *chiaroscuro*. When one learns that these original artists worked toward portraying a strong *chiaroscuro*, a viewer can better appreciate the work of art in more detail and gain insight into the original intentions of the artist. When studying these works in an English-speaking environment, the term *chiaroscuro* is still used because there is not an English equivalent that describes this concept.[9]

The following chapter demonstrates how traditional analyses of art objects can enhance our understanding of non-Western art, such as the *Shiva Nataraja*. This chapter will also briefly introduce the concept of agency. The third chapter addresses the issues associated with the field of world art history. The unifying characteristic of agency will be discussed more thoroughly in the fourth chapter. Here, I will demonstrate how this concept can be used as a tool to enhance our understanding of art from all over the world.

---

[8] Ibid., 48.
[9] Ibid., 47-48.

# Chapter 1: Shiva Nataraja

The bronze, free-standing *Shiva Nataraja* is a thirteenth century sculpture found in the Museum of Fine Arts Houston. (Fig. 1) This *Shiva Nataraja* is one of many that were commissioned by the ruling dynasty from the eleventh through thirteenth centuries.[10] The Shiva demands attention from the modern viewer through his powerful, yet graceful stance. His dynamic position enables the viewer to imagine the movements of his graceful dance. His serene and peaceful expression contrasts with the action of his limbs and fills the viewer with a longing to experience that same peace despite the chaos of his or her own life. This hypnotic image captivates observers, encouraging them to walk around the sculpture to muse over the exquisite details of this elegant figure.

The original thirteenth century viewer would have also been entranced by the power and religious significance of this image. Numerous texts that describe the symbolism and significance of this dance are available to modern scholars that date to this century or earlier. The thirteenth century viewer would have recognized and appreciated the powerful symbolism that these details represent. The image speaks to the viewer, retelling the story of legends and lore about the Hindu god, Shiva. The symbolism reminds the viewer of the wisdom of Hindu philosophy, and encourages thought and respect.

More importantly, the relationship between the original viewer and this image encapsulates the power of art objects. This sculpture depicts the god Shiva, before whom all other Hindu gods are subservient. It would have been

[10] Vidya Dehejia, *Indian Art* (London: Phaidon Press Limited, 1997): 231.

placed within a temple dedicated to Shiva and placed on a pedestal to emphasize his divinity. This sacred object would have foremost been treated as a sacred object within a sacred context.[11] More importantly, through sacred ritual, the original viewer would have experienced this sculpture as a literal embodiment of the deity, Shiva. This object allowed the viewer to experience a moment of divine interaction. The *Shiva Nataraja* sculpture is a paragon of the power of images and the agency they exercise.

This image not only functioned as a religious image that exerted agency on its viewer, but it also acted on behalf of the ruling dynasty to strengthen the alliance between the kings and the priestly community. These images exercised agency on the viewer by attesting to the Chola's religious commitment and support. The Chola dynasty flourished from the tenth to thirteenth century, particularly in South India. In the tenth century, the Chola increased the production of these Shiva sculptures to garner support for their rule as they gained more control. These sculptures attested to the Chola's devotion to Hinduism and likely reinforced their belief that the gods supported their rule. They used this imagery to strengthen their alliance with the hierarchy of the religious community, appeal to the religious nature of the people, and reinforce the power of the dynasty. [12]

---

[11] Richard H. Davis, *Lives of Indian Images* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997): 18-20.
[12] Kaimal, *Shiva Nataraja: Shifting Meanings of an Icon*, 391.

Although Shiva performs many dances, this popular image represents the Nadanta dance of Shiva.[13] Modern scholars refer to him in Sanskrit as Anandatandavamurti, "he who performs the dance of furious bliss."[14] In Sanskrit, the term *Nataraja* means "Lord of the Dance" and refers to the *ananda-tandava*, his "dance of furious bliss" that creates and destroys the universe.[15] The Chola would have called him Adavallan or Kuttaperumanadigal, the "Lord of the Dance" in Tamlil, the language of southeast India. His dance both creates the universe and destroys it. However, through this destruction, he frees his devotees' souls from the bonds of deeds and egos. This is a dance of simultaneous joy and fury that "represents his mastery over the cosmic cycle and his promise to enlighten the faithful."[16]

This four-armed Shiva is caught in a moment of perpetual movement through his furious dance as he stands on a dwarf figure above a lotus flower pedastal. He overflows with meaning to express his divinity, power, essentially dual nature, and relationship with the devotee. The Shiva bears his weight on his right, bent leg as he lifts his left hip and extends his left leg to the right. This stance also represents the ideals of orderly geometry of sacred Indian dances. The deep flexions of the joints represent "somatic ideals of supple dynamism and perfect control."[17] His arms extend to the sides in symmetrical positions. They radiate out to articulate a clean circle and thus an orderly geometry that

[13] Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, *The Dance of Shiva: Fourteen Indian Essays* (Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1948): 85.
[14] Kaimal, *Shiva Nataraja: Shifting Meanings of an Icon*, 391.
[15] Ibid. 391.
[16] Ibid., 391, 394.
[17] Ibid., 402.

deities can realize far beyond human means.[18] His torso and face are frontally positioned.

He looks toward the viewer with a soft gaze and a slight smile, creating a serene expression. The outline of an eye is carved out in between his eyebrows to symbolize his third eye, attesting to his divine wisdom. Both of his earlobes have large holes that have been stretched out by earrings. In his right ear he wears a males earring, and a female earring in his right. These feminine and masculine attributes symbolize his dual nature, his all-encompassing essence.[19]

Shiva's interior beauty and transcendent power are emphasized through his outwardly adornment. He wears an elaborate headdress. The artist stressed the meticulous details of this sculpture. The detailed design of the headband that stretches across his forehead is similar to the egg and dart pattern of ancient Greece. Most of the headdress is made of a wreath of tall cassia leaves that create two overlapping arcs, one taller set of leaves mimicking the arc of the front leaves. Like most headdresses in other cultures, this likely attests to his authority. Like other Shiva Natarajas, a cobra lies atop his head and intertwines into the bottom, front and center of his headdress. Above the cobra is an abstract depiction of a skull. Above these symbols are five, tall phallic designs that resemble the *linga*. The *linga* is a cylindrical phallic-shaped symbol that is the aniconic form of Shiva. It is the central object of worship in most Hindu temples.[20] Attached to the upper left section of the headdress is the form of a

---

[18] Ibid.
[19] Coomaraswamy, *The Dance of Shiva*, 86-87.
[20] Davis, *Lives of Indian Images*, 18.

crescent moon that represents time; as Shiva control cyclical time.[21] In the tenth century, it became canonical to also have the image of the goddess Ganga as a mermaid figure within his headdress or hair; however, this Shiva image does not have the Ganga depiction.[22] The rich details of his headdress are followed by the detailed adornment of jewelry on his body. Every symbol of his headdress is a symbolic manifestations of his religious power. These manifestations are are meant to legitimize his importance.[23]

He wears carved necklaces, armbands, bracelets, rings, and toe-rings.[24] Some of these decorations represent abstract forms of snakes, reiterating this powerful symbol associated with this authoritative god. He wears a cobra as a belt that wraps around the middle of his torso. The tail elegantly slides down his belly and the head of the snake glides toward his neck. On top of each shoulder, he has four, small flower-shaped motifs with ten petals. This motif represents the *chakra*, a discus or wheel, an important energetic force. Normally in south India, the chakra is depicted with four flames emerging from it, but this image does not. Whether these flames ever originally existed or have been lost over time is unknown. The chakras are also primarily associated with the god Vishnu instead of Shiva.[25]

The detailed symbols he holds in two of his hands are representative of Hindu doctrine, thought, and one of the more important attributes of Shiva, his

[21] Frederick W. Bunce, *A Dictionary of Buddhist and Hindu iconography, illustrated: objects, devices, concepts, rites, and related terms* (New Delhi, D. K. Printworld (P) Ltd., 1997): 57.
[22] Coomaraswamy, *The Dance of Shiva*, 86.
[23] Coomaraswamy, *The Dance of Shiva,* 86-87 and Kaimal, *Shiva Nataraja: Shifting Meanings of an Icon*, 395, 397 -398.
[24] Coomaraswamy, *The Dance of Shiva,* 86.
[25] Anna L. Dallapiccola, *Dictionary of Hindu Lore and Legend* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2002): 47.

all-encompassing, dual nature. These symbols are described in verse thirty-six of the *Unmai Vilakkam* text that was written during the same century as the statue (1255).[26] Earlier texts, such as the *Siva Puranam* (dated to sometime between the first and middle of the fourth century A.D.[27]) also describe the gestures and dance of Shiva. One of his right arms is bent and extends to the side. His hand is in the *damaruhasta* position in which a small drum (*damaru*) is held lightly between his index finger and little finger, above his other bent fingers. This drum represents a powerful symbol and ideology of Hinduism. It is through the *damaru*'s rhythmic beat that the entire universe is created (*shrishti*). Shiva represents creation. One of his left arms bends toward the left. In this hand, he holds the symbol of fire, *Agni.*[28] Again, his dual nature is emphasized because this flame represents the destruction of all creation (*samahara*).[29] *Agni*, or fire, represents cosmic destruction at the end of the age and represents Shiva's destructive properties.[30] He is both creator and destroyer. [31]

Themes of creation and destruction are crucial to understanding the cosmological centrality of Shiva. Time is cyclical according to Hindu philosophy. It is through destruction that creation occurs. Then, continues the cycle of life, destruction, and creation again. The fire also "destroys ignorance

---

[26] Karen Pechilis Prentiss, "A Tamil Lineage for Saiva Siddhanta Philosophy", *History of Religions*, vol. 35, no. 3 (1996): 231- 257.
[27] Rajendra Chandra Hazra, "The Date of the Visnu Purana", *Annals of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute*, vol. 18, no. 3 (1937): 265-275.
[28] Stutley, Margaret. *The Illustrated Dictionary of Hindu Iconography* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985): 3, 32.
[29] Dallapiccola, *Dictionary of Hindu Lore and Legend*, 144.
[30] Stutley, *The Illustrated Dictionary of Hindu Iconography*, 4.
[31] William C. Agee, *The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston: A Guide to the Collection* (Mount Vernon: The Press of A. Colish, Inc., 1981): 7.

and by extension it symbolizes knowledge (*jñāna*)."[32] This destruction does not have an entirely negative connotation, but instead represents the power to transform. "Agni is worshipped for intellectual brilliance and for longevity", rather than annihilation.[33] Shiva is omnipresent. He is creation and destruction, both male and female, the cycle of life and death.

The skull in the front center of his headdress also represents Shiva's dual nature of destruction and creation, particularly emphasizing his destructive forces. It has traditionally been understood as representing Shiva's sacrificial qualities.[34] For example, he is often associated as sacrificing himself when he broke the fall of the heavenly river Ganga.[35] However, the art historian, Padma Kaimal, has recently demonstrated how the skull is associated more with the wrathful forms of Shiva and the Goddess. For example, the famous three-faced bust of Shiva at the caves in Elephanta depicts the enraged face of Shiva as Aghora with cobras and a skull; whereas, the other three faces are tranquil and calm without the symbol of a skull. In other depictions that illustrate stories of Shiva, he wears a garland of skulls and human bones when he destroys the demon Andhaka or cuts of the god Brahma's fifth head. A similar garland is seen on the goddess Chamunda and Nushimbhasudani who hunger for sacrifice or crush demons. In moments of destruction, these goddesses also stand on one bent knee and their arms fan out in an explosion of energy mimicking Shiva

[32] Stutley, *The Illustrated Dictionary of Hindu Iconography*, 4.
[33] Ibid.
[34] Kaimal, *Shiva Nataraja: Shifting Meanings of an Icon*,.401.
[35] Stutley, *The Illustrated Dictionary of Hindu Iconography*, 10.

Nataraja's visual canon.[36] I have observed that Chamunda also stands above a crushed dwarf like the *Shiva Nataraja*. Just like the Shiva Nataraja, these goddesses represent the destructive nature of the universe. However, it is through destruction that creative energy manifests. Although Kaimal emphasizes the destructive nature of the *Shiva Nataraja*, I argue the original viewers would have understood time and the universe as cyclical and associated these destructive qualities with the forces of creation as well. For example, verse thirty-six of the *Unmai Vilakkam* (1255) equally emphasizes these dual characteristics of Shiva "Creation arises from the drum: protection proceeds from the hand of hope: from fire proceeds destruction: the foot held along gives release."[37]

Originally a halo of fire, the *tiruvasi* or *prabhavali*, would have encircled this Shiva to further emphasize his dual nature.[38] As previously discussed flames often denote his destructive forces, however these flames also symbolize the "vital force of nature emanating from his energy."[39] Creation is conjoined with destruction in a natural cycle. He creates both vitality and destruction through his furious dance. His dance symbolizes the five main energies (*panchakriya*) of the cycle and balance of the cosmos: creation (*shrishti*), preservation of creation (*stithi*), destruction of reabsorption (*samahara*), veiling reality and illusion (*tirobhava*), and grace (*anugraha*). The flame around him him represents the formulation of these energies. The position of his hands and

---

[36] Kaimal, *Shiva Nataraja: Shifting Meanings of an Icon*,.401.
[37] Coomaraswamy, *The Dance of Shiva*, 87.
[38] Agee, *The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston: A Guide to the Collection,* 7. And Stutley, *The Illustrated Dictionary of Hindu Iconography*, 112.
[39] Dallapiccola, *Dictionary of Hindu Lore and Legend*, 144.

feet further symbolize these *panchakriya* to the knowledgeable viewer. [40] The *Tirukuttu Darshana* (Vision of the Sacred Dance) verses from the *Tirumantiram* (ca. eleventh century[41]) also refer to these five activities that Shiva's dance manifests.[42]

The significance of this fiery arch is multivalent and represents other important aspects of Hindu philosophy and thought concerning the cycle and balance of the cosmos. A verse from the *Unmai Vilakkam* (1255) describes this arch as being the kombu or hook or ideograph of the written symbol, "Om".[43] Like Shiva, Om represents the eternal root of both creation and dissolution. It is an auspicious sound uttered at the beginning of rituals since it is believed to be the primordial vibration and the cause of creation, the vibration emitted by the sound of the *damaru*. Each part of the sound Om, A-U-M, represents the three *gunas* and *trimurti*. The *gunas* represent the three qualities of nature or fundamental principles of the universe, *sattva* (purity), *rajas* (energy), and *tamas* (inertia or destruction). [44] Again, Shiva is all-encompassing and represents all aspects of the universe. These are "the forces of nature or matter (*prakriti*) and belong to the theory of creation and evolution."[45] Of the trimurti, each letter represents one of the three main gods, A- Brahma, U-Vishnu, and M-Shiva. Brahma is the point of equilibrium between Vishnu (who represents preservation and renewal) and Shiva (who represents destruction and

---

[40] Ibid.
[41] Ibid., 394.
[42] Coomaraswamy, *The Dance of Shiva,* 88.
[43] Ibid.„ 92.
[44] Dallapiccola, *Dictionary of Hindu Lore and Legend*, 89. And Kaimal, *Shiva Nataraja: Shifting Meanings of an Icon*, 401.
[45] Dallapiccola, *Dictionary of Hindu Lore and Legend*, 89.

disintegration). The *gunas* also refer to the three ages of man, childhood, youth, and old age. They also represent morning, noon, and night.[46] This balance is mimicked by Shiva Nataraja's dance as he "dances the world into being, sustains it with his rhythm, and eventually dances it into annihilation."[47] Through his dance, he creates, destroys, and cycles through to create balance in the universe.

The *mudra* (ritualized and stylized hand position or gesture[48]) he makes in each hand is significant as well and is described in the thirty-sixth verse of the *Unmai Vilakkam* (1255).[49] He dispels fear and offers protection, symbolized by the imagery in his other right and left hand. His other right arm is bent toward the viewer and his open palm faces the viewer with his fingers slightly bent pointing upward in the *abhayamudra*. The open palm offers protection to the viewer.[50] The *abhayamudra* mudra dispels "fear because the presence of the divinity gives reassurance and protection to the devotee."[51] This is one of the two "earliest and most common mudras depicted on Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain images."[52] This gesture also likely represents the preservation of creation (*stithi*).

Shiva's other left arm extends past his body to the right. This arm mimics the position of his left, outstretched foot. He relaxes his hand downward toward his lifted foot in the *gajahasta* "elephant hand" position that

---

[46] Ibid., 89, 190, 146, 190.
[47] Ibid., 144.
[48] Bunce, *A Dictionary of Buddhist and Hindu iconography,* 190.
[49] Karen Pechilis Prentiss, "A Tamil Lineage for Saiva Siddhanta Philosophy", *History of Religions*, vol. 35, no. 3 (1996): 231- 257.
[50] Kaimal, *Shiva Nataraja: Shifting Meanings of an Icon*, 393.
[51] Stutley, *The Illustrated Dictionary of Hindu Iconography*, 1.
[52] Ibid.

mimics an elephant's trunk.[53] This position indicates power and strength.[54] The lifted foot represents the refuge of the soul and "signifies the bestowing of grace and a refuge for the devotee".[55] Therefore, as he gestures toward his foot, he represents grace, salvation, and release (*anugraha*).[56]

It is significant that his lifted left leg rises above the ground, but not above his knee of the same leg. This position is called *bhujangatrasita*, which means "frightened by a snake".[57] Perhaps he lifts his leg away from the cobra that the figure beneath him holds. Although Kaimal points to this movement as being representative of Shiva's death at the cremation grounds, he does not specifically explain this connection. Perhaps since Shiva controls death, he prevents his own death by lifting his foot away from the deadly cobra. Kaimal argues that all of these features represent the more *tamasic* or destructive qualities evoked by his wild dance at the cremation ground.[58]

Shiva's right, bent leg stands on a dwarf who lays belly-down on a pedestal shaped like a lotus blossom. The dwarf twists his head to the left to look at Shiva. His right arm extends beyond his head in the position of the *sarpa mudra* (snake gesture) with his hand cupped facing forward that mimics a cobra snake.[59] His palm faces toward the viewer with his fingers lightly curled and his thumb bent toward his palm. He holds a cobra in his left hand. His left

---

[53] Kaimal, *Shiva Nataraja: Shifting Meanings of an Icon*, 393.
[54] Stutley, *The Illustrated Dictionary of Hindu Iconography*, 44.
[55] Coomaraswamy, *The Dance of Shiva,*87.and Dallapiccola, *Dictionary of Hindu Lore and Legend*, 144.
[56] Ibid.
[57] Kaimal, *Shiva Nataraja: Shifting Meanings of an Icon*,.402.
[58] Ibid., 401-402.
[59] Bunce, *A Dictionary of Buddhist and Hindu iconography,* 262.

leg is bent out to the side with the sole of his foot on the ground. His other leg bends up toward the sky.

This plump dwarf is known as *Aspasmara* or *Muyalaka*. He is a demon-dwarf that personifies the evils of ignorance and delusion (*maya*).[60] Shiva crushes the dwarf that personifies ignorance.[61] Thus, this action represents the conquering of the veiling reality or illusion (*tirobhava*). Shiva's "right foot rests on Aspamara and denotes his world-creative driving of life-monads into the sphere of matter, the lifted foot symbolizing their release. The two feet of the dwarf thus denote the continuous circulation of consciousness into and out of the condition of ignorance."[62] Like the fiery halo, it is through destruction that the energies of vitality are ignited and one can move away from ignorance and toward enlightenment.

Shiva is associated with several dances, but this particular dance represents the *Nadanta* dance. The dance incorporates symbols from a certain legend that took place in the town of Chidambaram in the golden assembly hall of the temple of Thillai, which is considered to be the center of the universe. [63] This is the place where the universe was first revealed to the gods and *rishis*[64] (an honorific term describing a wise man, holy man, or sage).[65] The *Koyil Puranam*, verses from the *Tirumantiram* (arguably dating back to the eleventh

---

[60] Stutley, *The Illustrated Dictionary of Hindu Iconography*, 10. And Dallapiccola, *Dictionary of Hindu Lore and Legend*, 144.
[61] Stutley, *The Illustrated Dictionary of Hindu Iconography*, 10.
[62] Ibid.
[63] Coomaraswamy, *The Dance of Shiva,* 84-85.
[64] Ibid..and Dallapiccola, *Dictionary of Hindu Lore and Legend*, 166
[65] Bunce, *A Dictionary of Buddhist and Hindu iconography,* 250.

century[66]) describe the Chidambaram temple, for *koyil* means temple.[67] It is understood to be the place where Shiva resides. This is the earliest site where we find evidence of Shiva Nataraja worship and it continues to be considered as his cultic home.[68]

The same text describes the legend in which the gods and rishis submit to the Shiva after his dance. Coomaraswamy admits that this legend may not have a close connection with the original meaning of the dance, but does not give reason for this statement.[69] However, the motifs described in this legend are found in the symbolism of these bronze Shivas, so there likely is a connection.

In this legend, Shiva and Vishnu travelled to the forest of Taragram where a group of heretical *rishis* resides.[70] These *rishis* taught that the universe is eternal rather than cyclical and that the souls have no lord.[71] Vishnu was disguised as a beautiful woman, Ati-Sheshan. The two gods tried to refute the heretical *rishis* and they became involved in a violent dispute. The *rishis* soon began to direct their anger at Shiva through violent incantations. They sent a tiger to destroy him, but Shiva stripped its skin off with the nail of his little finger and draped the tiger skin around him. Next, they sent a monstrous cobra to attack him, but he quickly clasped the snake and wrapped it around his neck like a garland. He then began to dance. The *rishis* sent the dwarf, Muyalaka at him, but he stepped on him and broke his back. Thus, the *rishis* were defeated.

---

[66] Kaimal, *Shiva Nataraja: Shifting Meanings of an Icon,* 394.
[67] Prentiss, "A Tamil Lineage for Saiva Siddhanta Philosophy", 231
[68] Kaimal, *Shiva Nataraja: Shifting Meanings of an Icon*, 397.
[69] Coomaraswamy, *The Dance of Shiva,* 85.
[70] Ibid., 85-86.
[71] Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty, *The Origins of Evil in Hindu Mythology* (Oakland: University of California Press, 1976): 313.

All the gods, *rishis*, and Vishnu witnessed this and then prayed that Shiva behold this mystic dance again. Shiva promised to perform the sacred dance again in Tillai, the center of the universe. [72]

Coomaraswamy published an essay "The Dance of Shiva" in the early twentieth century. For over eighty years, his readings of the Natraja have influenced scholarly writings about this icon type. Much of his understanding was based on medieval texts and songs written about this deity and his cosmic dance. However, Kaimal makes the same argument as Carrier when he questions whether contemporary art historians can ever fully understand these objects' original meaning due to the fragmentary nature of the surviving evidence.[73]

Kaimal also makes the interesting argument that verbal texts are not the simple equivalence to visual images. The connection between texts and visual images can be complicated reflecting a disconnect and difference of meanings between images and texts. Instead, he suggests that texts only give a partial glimpse into the past. The meanings of the sculptural form of the Shiva Nataraja probably changed over time and appealed to different audiences; therefore, it is unlikely that we will be able to fully recover all of these meanings. However, we can relate certain meanings of the Sanskrit tradition of dance commentary in order to better understand the symbolic meaning of this figure.[74]

---

[72] Ibid.
[73] Kaimal, *Shiva Nataraja: Shifting Meanings of an Icon*, 391. And Carrier, *A World Art History and Its Objects*, 99.
[74] Kaimal, *Shiva Nataraja: Shifting Meanings of an Icon*, 391

Kaimal disagrees with Coomaraswamy's lofty philosophical readings of Shiva Nataraja. He points out that earlier representations of the Shiva Nataraja were more likely associated with his attributes of death, cremation, and the destructive part of the cosmic cycle. Kaimal references tenth century texts that "describe Shiva wandering through cremation grounds like a madman, laughing, weeping, and dancing in ecstacy, surrounded by goblins, his body smeared with ashes from the funeral pyre and ornamented with the bones of the dead."[75] His association with funeral grounds is a reference to his control over death. Rather than focusing on Shiva's ability to create and enlighten, Kaimal argues the Shiva Nataraja focuses on his destructive (or *tamasic*) aspect.[76] However, as pointed out earlier, the *Unmai Vilakkam* (1255) text of the same century describes both his destructive and creative properties equally. Therefore, both analyses are correct because the Shiva is representative of both forces.

The original viewer would have understood the multivalent representations of Shiva's dual and all-encompassing nature in the *Shiva Nataraja.* This image created a relationship with the original viewer to revitalize his or her devotion. This sculpture reminded the viewer of the power of Shiva and his role in bringing grace to the devoted worshiper. It was believed to act on behalf of the divine to affect the viewer. By applying this concept of the agency to all art objects, a commonality is found in art across time and the globe. A new approach that incorporates this concept is necessary

[75] Ibid., 401.
[76] Ibid.

in creating a truly global art history and will be more thoroughly discussed in the fourth chapter.

# Chapter 2: World Art History

Any scholarly treatment of an ancient non-Western work, such as the Shiva treated here, runs into the series of basic problems identified by theorists of world art history. Can we write about a foreign piece using the tools and language of art history that were created to treat Western art? Must we make these art traditions entirely "other" and throw out most, if not all, of the tools developed to study Western art? Is there a more universal analytical language that would encompass much of the world's art traditions? While the possibility of a truly global art history has been an alluring prospect for art historians for some time, there have been few programmatic statements about the practice. To enter the problems of world art history, we will examine David Carrier's *A World Art History and Its Objects.* This book sets the groundwork for a more in-depth discussion concerning a world art history. Carrier asks, "Is a world history of art possible? What political impact could it have? And what structure?"[77] However, he does not present any answers to these questions. Instead, he aims to describe the dominant issues concerning the emerging field of a world art history in order to challenge future scholars to develop such a history.[78] Here too, I will not be pretending to offer any definitive answers, but instead will be looking for the most important strategies and questions that may help us to think about a future world art history.

Carrier's work is admittedly a prolegomenon to developing a world art history that primarily presents the issues in creating this field. His main point in

---

[77] Carrier, *A World Art History and Its Objects*,xxv.
[78] Ibid., xxv, xxvi.

writing this book is to highlight that "creating a world art history is very difficult. But finding some way to understand all visual cultures is the most urgent task now facing art historians."[79] There are already legitimate pressures in universities to create this field. This pressure will continue to increase as students from different backgrounds and cultural influences will demand a more diversified multicultural curriculum in the survey of art history.[80] Academic models are shifting to meet this demand. For example, University College London has even created a Masters of Arts program in Comparative Art and Archaeology that "aims to encourage students to think critically and work independently in a broadly comparative perspective across the boundaries of regional and period specialisation which have traditionally characterised the study of art."[81] A world art history may be seen as critical in today's globalized world.

In the past, the discipline of art history has primarily focused on creating tools to study European and American art, but as early as the 19th century scholars began to study art from outside those fields.[82] In his lectures on aesthetics in Berlin during the 1820's, George Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel proposed an aesthetic timeline across world art history that connected ancient Egyptian art to contemporary European Romanticism.[83] Hegel and a fellow art historian, Herder, are said to have influenced Franz Kugler, who published his *Handbuch der Kunstgeshichte* ("Handbook for Art History") in 1842. This text

---

[79] Carrier, *A World Art History and Its Objects*, 58.
[80] Ibid., xxiv.
[81] http://www.ucl.ac.uk/archaeology/studying/masters/degrees/ma_comparitive_art
[82] Van Damme, "Introducing World Art Studies", 55.
[83] Carrier, *A World Art History and Its Objects*, 27.

is credited as being the first survey of world art history including non-Western art.[84] In addition to examining non-Western works, others attempted to explore how non-Western art has influenced the canonical art history of the West. A sustained example of this strategy is the work of Rudolf Wittkower, which explored the impact of non-European civilizations on the art of the west in articles written in the 1930's, 40's, and 50's.[85]

In the last two decades, there has been an increase in the number of publications discussing world art history, all of which attempt to draw non-Western art into the corpus of art history in a meaningful way. While it is beyond the scope of this thesis to examine the themes in each of these scholar's works, a brief discussion of works leading to Carrier's world art history volume will be mentioned. John Onians was the first to propose and promote the concept of world art studies in 1996.[86] David Summers published *Real Spaces: World Art History and the Rise of Modernism* in 2003. James Elkins claims that since an art seminar roundtable in 2005, the globalization of the discipline has been attracting increasing interest.[87] In 2008, European art historians published a compilation of articles that explore the concepts and approaches of world art studies.[88] David Carrier published his book *A World Art History and Its Objects* the same year.

---

[84] Van Damme, "Introducing World Art Studies", 52.
[85] Paul Wood, *Western Art and the Wider World* (West Sussex: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., 2013): 17.
[86] Van Damme, "Introducing World Art Studies", 27.
[87] James Elkins, "Art History as a Global Discipline", In *Is Art History Global? (The Art Seminar)* (New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, LLC, 2006): 3.
[88] Edited by Kitty Zijlmans and Wilfried Van Damme. *World Art Studies: Exploring Concepts and Approaches* (Amsterdam: Valiz, 2008).

This interest in a global art history reflects how the discipline continues to change and develop. Throughout its history, when the limitations of one method of study are revealed in art history, scholars develop another approach to study art.[89] Western methods of analysis have been integral to studying Western art and are valuable tools for examining many non-Western objects, such as the *Shiva Nataraja*. However, Carrier exposes the limitations of the traditional methods of study and demonstrates how these methods are not universally applicable.[90] In the end, he argues that a new, more inclusive approach needs to be developed.

A controversial issue that Carrier raises is the argument that "our world art history is imperialism seen aesthetically."[91] Carrier credits imperialism for the creation of narratives in art museums and art history. He states that when other cultures were dominated by the West or entered into the Western economy, their art would be brought to a Western museum and it is here that the first seeds of comparing art and creating a world art history began.[92] He argues that the creation of world art history is inherently imperialistic.

This argument that world art history is imperialism seen aesthetically stems from Carrier's admiration for theories developed by Immanuel Kant. He argues that Kant's method of aesthetic detachment found fullest flower in the work of Roger Fry, who believed that any experience can be an aesthetic one, simply by detaching ourselves and seeing that experience as a work of art.

---

[89] Carrier, *A World Art History and Its Objects*, 1
[90] Carrier, *A World Art History and Its Objects*, xxv.
[91] Ibid., 117.
[92] Ibid., 119.

Carrier then discusses how diagrams and charts that record art history can be experienced as art. Therefore, a chart that records the trade and influence of art between cultures can be seen as an aesthetic representation of European imperialism.[93] However, focusing on occurrences in history may not be relevant toward the present condition of art history. It is possible that Carrier used this argument to point out that "like the art museum, the world art history is an essentially Western creation."[94] Art history in general is essentially western; thus, European methods have been used since its creation and are important tools for analyzing most, if not all, art. It is naïve to think that globalization is not changing the focus and corpus of art history. Today, a new method is needed to study a world art history that is more inclusive of non-Western art.

Carrier exposes how traditional methods of study are not universally applicable in order to encourage future art historians to develop a new approach to studying non-western art.[95] However, Carrier is too critical of traditional analyses, claiming that they are "Eurocentric" and not applicable to non-Western art objects. He uses the term "Eurocentric" throughout his book "to identify arguments that rely too exclusively upon European ways of thinking."[96] This term seems to discredit approaches to art that have originated in the West. He is insistent that traditional ways of studying art need to be abandoned because they do not apply to non-western art. However, as demonstrated by the analysis of the *Shiva Nataraja*, traditional forms of study are beneficial to understanding

---

[93] Carrier, *A World Art History and Its Objects*, 117,119.
[94] Ibid., 135.
[95] Carrier, *A World Art History and Its Objects*, xxv.
[96] Ibid., xii.

certain aspects of non-Western art objects. I will replace the term "Eurocentric" with "traditional" to refer to methods of analysis that were created in the West, but are still applicable to studying certain aspects of art objects across the globe.

Carrier's vocabulary and disregard for traditional analyses create division and polarity rather than encouraging scholars to develop *additional* approaches to studying art that are more inclusive of all non-western art objects. His argument would have been more effective had he instead argued that traditional forms of analyses are *limited* in studying all non-Western art. More specifically, I argue that traditional analyses do not adequately consider how the art object functioned in its original society. I also add that these analyses do not fully consider how the original viewer would have responded to the art object. Traditional forms of analyses *can* be used to analyze many aspects of many non-Western art objects, but a new, more inclusive approach needs to be developed to study world art in a truly world art history.

I propose a method that focuses on the affect and agency of art objects can be used to study art across the world. This approach would enlighten the modern scholar as to the function of this object in its original culture. Structuring a world art history based on the study of viewer response and agency could help to deal equally well with both western and non-western art. Like any narrative of art, there will always be contention about the structure, but that does not mean that no attempt should be made. There will always be conflicts and issues with this development; regardless of these issues, there is an evolution in the discipline and art historians will have to evolve accordingly.

Art history that developed in Europe and America uses the term agency to describe the power of art objects. Therefore, art historians can still use the tools and the language of art history that have developed in the West. This common theme of agency is a uniting basis between difference of opinions in scholarship, religion, and cultural values. New forms of analyses will continue to develop in the attempt to study both Western and non-Western art objects in an equal manner.

Carrier argues the necessity of creating additional analyses for world art history when he describes the history of analysis of Jan Van Eyck's *Arnolfini Portrait* (1434). Different methods of analyses have helped scholars to better understand the *Arnolfini Portrait.* At the time this was painted, the movement toward naturalism was considered the most esteemed form of art. Thus, in the late 19th century, this painting was discussed in terms of its achievement in naturalism.[97]

When this form of analysis was exhausted, a new one was created. In 1934, Erwin Panofsky's study of this painting revealed the allegorical interpretations of the iconography. He looked to contemporary texts to determine the symbolic meaning of these objects. After this article was published, an emphasis on iconography became a main priority of the discipline. Scholars focused on interpreting the meaning of the visual images and symbols of works of art.[98]

---

[97] Ibid., 1, 29.
[98] Ibid., 1, 12.

When scholars felt an iconographical analysis of this painting had become limited, they developed other approaches to studying this piece. More recently, scholars have focused on examining the social history of the time. They studied the two figures and tried to determine how they represent the patriarchal marriage customs of the time. There was also increased interest in understanding the social role of the artist. In all of these different approaches, scholars looked to contemporary writings to help interpret the iconography and learn about social customs.[99]

Then, Carrier argues that these previous analyses are limited in specifically studying the foreign carpet in this painting. He argues that the carpet located behind the wife is one element that does not fit in with this "Eurocentric" unity of naturalism and Panofsky's study of iconography. Therefore, these traditional analyses are not applicable in interpreting the foreign, Muslim-made carpet.[100] He moves away from the context of the painting and into a lengthy explanation about how Renaissance owners of foreign carpets would have understood and treated these carpets differently than the original Muslim creator.

However, Carrier focuses too much on the limitations of traditional analyses and adjusts his arguments to meet this conclusion. His argument would have been more thorough had he stated that an initial traditional analysis may allow for some insight into the significance of Islamic-made carpets, but to better understand how these objects functioned in their original Islamic society, a new approach needs to be considered. Oftentimes, traditional analyses can be helpful

---

[99] Ibid., 1
[100] Ibid., 9.

in understanding certain aspects of a non-Western object, as demonstrated by the traditional analyses of the *Shiva Nataraja.* More specifically, traditional analyses can enlighten us about certain aspects of the carpet in this portrait. Scholars could indeed study the stylistic and formal elements. Had this been a prayer carpet, as Carrier asserts, scholars could study the symbolic imagery.[101] However, Carrier likely meant that these analyses do not explain how the real object from this painting would have functioned in its original Islamic society. Had he solely discussed Islamic-made carpets outside of this painting, his argument would have had fewer fallacies.

Carrier's argument about the limitations of Western analyses would have been more applicable had he thought in terms of how this carpet is not based on the Western prioritization of progress and canonization. The art historian, Parul Dave Mukherji, argues that the overarching story of art history focuses on progress and canonization.[102] Had Carrier focused on exposing how non-Western objects do not adhere to these Western priorities, his work would have been clearer.

Instead of abandoning these traditional analyses, as Carrier suggests, I propose that it is more important to develop a new analysis that strives to understand the original context of foreign art objects, specifically analyzing the affect it had on the original viewer. A new approach that primarily focuses on the relationship between the art object and the original viewer could help enlighten us about how these non-Western objects functioned in their original

[101] Ibid., 6-8.
[102] Parul Dave Mukherji, "Whiter Art History? Whither Art History in a Globalizing," World, *The Art Bulletin*, vol. 96, no. 2 (2014): 155.

culture. It should be noted that the European tradition has considered the relationship between the work of art and the viewer. In world art history, this method could be used as a unifying basis of analysis.

Scholars of a world art history envision a field in which art from across the world and time can be discussed as a whole rather than in isolation. They question whether there are any unifying characteristics or analyses that can be used to create a world art history. Instead of a single characteristic, I suggest that there is a fecund area that all art shares. I propose a new approach that specifically explores the affect of the art object on the original viewer. People of all cultures react to art objects. Their responses attest to the power of images to affect the viewer. This method would enable scholars to appreciate the significance of the art object in its own terms. Moving beyond traditional methods of analyses and toward a new study of agency could be a means that allows us to better appreciate art objects from across the world.

Once Carrier has challenged the reader to develop a new approach, he moves on to his discussion of his second main contention. Carrier argues that scholars need to abandon the specifically Christian, European tradition to understand art from other cultures with other religions. He states that, "in art history, as in ethics, atheism can be liberating."[103] He claims that religious preconceptions limit scholars in analyzing artworks. However, he uses a seventeenth century example to demonstrate his point. He explains how European Jesuit missionaries were shocked by the erotic Hindu art they

---

[103] Carrier, *A World Art History and Its Objects*, xxiv.

discovered at the caves at Elephanta in India.[104] He makes it seem as though modern Western viewers also automatically categorize non-western objects as pagan idols. Historically, there may have been a tendency to judge many non-western objects as simply pagan idols, but this is not a definitive reaction of *modern* viewers.

Conversely, I argue that scholars should continue to try to use traditional methods of analyses to demonstrate how non-Western art objects can be just as complex and meaningful as Western art objects. The art historian, Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, is known for addressing this issue concerning Indian art when he reacted against European colonial prejudice toward Indian art objects that depicted the multi-headed and multi-limbed gods and goddesses. He in turn focused on delving into how these objects represent complex Indian philosophy and metaphysics.[105] By proving that these art objects are more than simply pagan idols and are complex works of art, he elevated the status of Indian art.[106]

Next, Carrier questions many aspects of the traditional organization of art in linear timelines. In traditional art analyses, scholars are concerned with the beginning, development, and perhaps end, of an art tradition, and how artists came into and modified traditions. The traditional way of studying images organizes art objects within linear narratives. Narratives place art in a historical context and on a temporal timeline in order to easily grasp the visual structure of this tradition.[107] Carrier spends so much time refuting linear narratives that he

---

[104] Ibid., 49.
[105] Mukherji, "Whiter Art History? Whither Art History in a Globalizing," 151-155.
[106] Ibid.
[107] Carrier, *A World Art History and Its Objects*, 23.

implies this method should be completely abandoned when developing a world art history. I argue that linear timelines are indeed beneficial to helping modern scholars better understand an art object, but that new methods of organization could be explored as well. I will use the examples that Carrier provides to demonstrate the limitations of a linear organization of art and how it should be questioned when creating a world art history.

First, other cultures may not be concerned with organizing time and art in a linear narrative based on the progression of a certain characteristic. This linear timeline is not universally applicable. Hindus and Buddhists understand time as cyclical and therefore have not necessarily been concerned with determining the beginning and end of a certain artistic tradition. In Indian Hindu and Buddhist philosophy, time is cyclical and "conceived as a vast revolving wheel with cycles of creation, destruction, and re-creation."[108] Most non-western cultures and systems of belief have a cyclical understanding of time. Therefore, a linear understanding of an artistic tradition may not applicable to studying art from all over the world.

Carrier argues that the second problem with the traditional timeline of art is the tendency to focus on the development toward naturalism. He points out that this is not a universally valued characteristic of art. However, the progression towards naturalism is not the sole principle of European or American art either, but historically, it has been a main element of European art and art history. Naturalism is commonly considered a general characteristic of western art, particularly to those who are not educated in art history. This association is

[108] Dehejia, *Indian Art*, 7.

grounded in the importance placed on Vasari's publication of *Lives of the Artists* during the middle of the sixteenth century. It is one of the early and defining treatises on Western art. Throughout the book, he constantly judges an artist's success by his ability to create realistic depictions.[109] He draws from interpretations of Pliny's (A.D. 23-79) writings from *The Natural History*, books VIII, XXXIV-XXXVII, arguing that the development of naturalism has been a priority since classical antiquity.[110] Later, Gombrich extended this narrative to encompass art from all cultures.[111] Vasari influenced Greenberg's model of art history into the mid-twentieth century. [112] This narrative based on the development toward naturalism has remained a common association of western art.

This naturalism-based timeline is not sufficient to describe art objects across the world. Many non-Western cultures were not concerned with naturalistic depictions and didn't have the same developmental history.[113] In India and China, naturalism was not a valued concept. In India, "the repetition of an idealized formula was extolled and prized" rather than a naturalistic depiction.[114] The Chinese were perplexed by European perspective and naturalism. [115] A naturalism-based timeline is often studied in survey art history courses, but is not entirely relevant as the basis for art across the globe.

---

[109] Georgio Vasari, *The Lives of the Artists,* trans. George Bull, (London: Penguin Classics, 1998).
[110] Ibid.
[111] Carrier, *A World Art History and Its Objects*, 44.
[112] Ibid., 31.
[113] Ibid., 3 29, 35.
[114] Dehejia, *Indian Art*, 13.
[115] Carrier, *A World Art History and Its Objects*, 43.

Carrier's third point points out that we may not have the sources to even determine the causal events of a single narrative of a non-western tradition. As previously discussed, traditional analyses often look to contemporary texts that discuss art to better comprehend a European work of art. This approach stems from the Renaissance when scholars looked to contemporary texts to understand artworks from the past, such as Vasari referring to Pliny the Elder's works to better understand classical artworks. However, this approach is not applicable to all art across the globe. For example, although China had an elaborate tradition of writing about art, that is not the case in India and the Islamic world where scholars did not write much about art.[116] Few historical accounts were kept of early Indian art; therefore, it is impossible to determine how artists modified an artistic tradition. It is suspected that the cyclical understanding of time in India "contributed to an indifference towards historical documentation."[117] Without contemporary texts that describe art, how can art historians piece together a complete narrative that describes the relationship between the original viewer and the work of art? This linear organization of art is not applicable to studying all art.[118]

Fourth, temporal narratives inaccurately treat traditions as independent timelines. Traditions are not isolated, exposing another fallacy of the linear organization of art. For example, illustrations of exotic art objects found in European artworks, such as the carpet in the *Arnolfini Portrait*, reveal how these traditions are not isolated. Carrier argues that when a distant art-making culture

---

[116] Ibid.,38.
[117] Dehejia, *Indian Art*, 7.
[118] Carrier, *A World Art History and Its Objects*, 3

makes contact with another tradition, the timelines intersect and the art can change accordingly. An artist who belonged to one tradition may influence an artist in another tradition. He argues that the Eurocentric timeline is an idealization.[119]

I point out that movement from an aniconic depiction of the Buddha to an iconic depiction is a perfect example of one timeline being influenced by another. In early Buddhist art, the Buddha was not shown in human form. The best-preserved examples of the aniconic stone depictions of Buddha are found at the Great Stupa at Sanchi in central India (original brick stupa c. 250 BC, enlarged and renovated 5-25 BC). The ornamental, stone gateways display carved images portraying the life of Buddha. He was originally a chieftain who abandoned his life and position in search of truth. Throughout this narrative, aniconic symbols are used to represent him. For example, according the story, the Buddha-to-be left the palace on his horse. In the portrayal of this narrative, the horse is depicted in different scenes riding away from the palace, but the Buddha is not actually illustrated. After he descends from his horse, a pair of footprints and a parasol indicates his presence instead of a human form.[120] Devotees would have understood these stories despite the omission of the image of the Buddha in human form.

It was not until the first century that Buddha was depicted in human form after being influenced by the Greek art tradition. Under Kushan rule, Buddha had been transformed from a living being who found salvation to being

---

[119] Ibid., 39-41.
[120] Dehejia, *Indian Art*, 52-53.

deified.[121] Now, his "followers required a personal focus upon which to pin their devotion."[122] The Kushan Dynasty had a strong relationship with the Greeks and was influenced by their culture.[123] The Greek images of their gods in human form contributed to the creation of an iconic Buddha. Thus, once these two timelines intersected, the Buddhist tradition was changed.

Fifth, Carrier questions the simplicity of these Eurocentric narratives. There has not been a definitive agreement among art historians on how timelines are connected. Carrier asserts that early influential art historians based their timelines on two assumptions: that artists have the same goal in reacting to naturalism or that they have different goals and were more influenced by their worldviews. Vasari, Gombrich, and Greenberg argued that the history of art depended upon internal constraints. They argued that all artists strove to develop naturalistic depictions or moved away from the illusionism of the old masters toward abstraction. Thus, artists of dfferent time periods had the same goal. On the other hand, Hegel, Marxists, and social art historians argue that scholars have to look at the larger culture to understand the development of art since each artist's goal is influenced by their particular worldview. There is no single answer on how to trace the development of art and organize it accordingly.[124]

Sixth, distinguishing timelines by shared visual features or artistic continuity is an idealization. An example of specific artistic continuity is the tradition that started with Cimabue, who trained Giotto, who then became a

[121] Ibid., 79.
[122] Ibid.
[123] Ibid.
[124] Carrier, *A World Art History and Its Objects*, 28-31.

source for the High Renaissance. An example of distinguishing art by a shared aesthetic is how the body of Islamic art has distinguishable features that differ from Indian and European art. But a shared visual resemblance is not always isolated to one tradition. For example, "a Donatello looks more like the Chinese Buddha than a David Smith." [125] Organizing art by traditional timelines is too fraught with fallacies to be used as the sole organization of a world art history.

Also, many art historians question why art objects should be organized in this way at all. Wollheim argued that a single art object should be studied independently. He believed placing a work of art in a narrative takes away from the quality of the individual work. He claims, "When historians use sequences of works of art to tell stories, we cannot entirely separate experience of the individual artwork from knowledge of its place within sequences."[126] However, other art historians, such as Carrier, favor timelines and argue that we need to study the art within the same narrative to better understand the individual object. Carrier also briefly argues that art historians can better understand art objects from China, India, and the Islamic world when they are studied in a comparative manner. Scholars will continually disagree with one another. There will always be discourse and discussion in the world art history arena.

Finally, I supplement Carrier's argument that linear timelines do not traditionally focus on how this object functioned in its original society. More specifically, they do not consider the agency or power of an art object on the viewer. For example, a timeline tracing the stylistic and iconographical

---

[125] Ibid., 36-37.
[126] Ibid., 22.

developments of the *Shiva Nataraja* from the tenth through thirteenth centuries deepens our understanding of this piece, but it does not enlighten the viewer about the original relationship between the object and the viewer.[127] A new organization of art that focuses on the unifying aspect of agency could be explored in the creation of a world art history.

I propose that scholars could introduce world art history through an in-depth comparative manner that focuses on the agency of the art objects to demonstrate how art objects across the globe have commonalities. Through this inclusive approach, scholars could then present revised linear narratives that are equally inclusive of non-Western art objects. By creating additional approaches to art that focus on how objects functioned in their original society, we can begin to understand a foreign art object on its own terms. Carrier explains, "to fully understand individual works of art, we need to understand their relationships with others, including, ultimately, art from all cultures."[128]

Carrier only briefly states the benefit of a comparative analysis when he quickly discusses the organization of a museum. Art from different cultures are usually placed in separate rooms. He points out that having a European work of art juxtaposed next to a non-western work of art would allow the viewer to learn more about other cultures and their own. By recognizing the unique values of art from different cultures, each culture can work toward a field of mutual understanding and respect. However, the traditional way of comparing art objects within a linear narrative is extremely educational. Once an art object

[127] Kaimal, *Shiva Nataraja: Shifting Meanings of an Icon*.
[128] Carrier, *A World Art History and Its Objects*, 25.

from anywhere in the world is studied in more detail, it would be beneficial to determine how it relates to other works of art within that tradition, if the tradition is known.

It is human nature to compare. Carrier falsely argues, "traditional cultures, Western and non-Western, were not very curious about each other."[129] Van Damme points out that human groups have long compared their appearance, products, customs, and beliefs with those of others. In the West, intercultural comparisons have been written about as far back as the 5th century BC, when the Hellenic thinker, Protagoras, discussed the differences and commonalities between ancient Greek city-states. Arguably, "modern" Western intercultural comparisons emerged during the Renaissance due to the rediscovery of cultures of Western Antiquity.[130] Carrier makes it seem that no culture in history had thought about how the visual world was connected prior to the beginning of imperialism in 1492. He tries to argue that Western explorers and imperialists were the first to compare visual culture from across the globe.[131] This is not an accurate history.

In order to create a world art history without as much contention, scholars must approach this field of study with an attitude of open-mindedness and appreciation. A thorough study using traditional analyses to discuss the unique characteristics of art objects from different cultures is important. However, it is even more important to focus on commonalities that unite different cultures. The concept of agency is one such commonality. This unifying characteristic can

---

[129] Ibid., 125.
[130] Van Damme "Intercultural Comparison and Art", 293.
[131] Carrier, *A World Art History and Its Objects*, 125.

lead to the creation of a world art history without as much contention. Further studies that suggest other commonalities of art across the globe will continue to develop through this inclusive and appreciative attitude.

Of course there will always be scholars who argue that comparisons expose more differences between cultures rather than encouraging intellectual thought and appreciation. Other scholars will argue that one cannot understand another culture unless they were originally a part of it. Both of these arguments are too extreme and create unnecessary and pessimistic obstacles in creating a world art history. By approaching the creation and study of a world art history through a more inclusive and appreciative attitude, a world art history can encourage a more thorough comprehension of culture.

In order to better understand art objects across the globe and time, I argue that scholars should explore new methods of analyses and organizations of art that study commonalities unhindered by time. When certain methods of analyses are limited or exhausted, new methods are developed to further scholars' understanding of works of art. A new method that focuses on the relationship between the viewer and the art object could be used as a tool to study both Western and non-Western art objects in a similar manner without as many limitations.

# Chapter 3: Agency

*"People are sexually aroused by pictures and sculptures; they break pictures and sculptures; they mutilate them, kiss them, cry before them, and go on journeys to them; they are calmed by them, stirred by them, and incited to revolt. They give thanks by means of them, expect to be elevated by them, and are moved to the highest levels of empathy and fear. They have always responded in these ways; they still do. They do so in societies we call primitive and in modern societies; in East and West, in Africa, America, Asia, and Europe."*[132]

The ability of art objects to influence outcomes - to act, as it were - encapsulates the concept of "agency." The aesthetic characteristics, contexts, and purposes of art objects may differ, but art objects affect viewers across the globe. These objects take on certain fundamental characteristics of being - human, divine, or other. This is not due to some miraculous event where the object has come alive, but simply because the viewer *experiences* the work of art as living. Van Eck describes this as "the living response theory."[133] Observers may experience art objects differently, but they still respond to the art object as they would toward a living person. This basic commonality of agency can be explored as a focus of a world art history.

Alfred Gell introduced this idea of art objects having agency in his anthropological theory of visual art based on the examination of social interactions. He was interested, above all, in the way an art object creates and sustains social relations among the individuals that interact with that object. He terms this system of social interactions around an art object (or any social

---

[132] Freedberg, David, *The Power of Images"*, 1.
[133] See Caroline van Eck, "Living Statues: Alfred Gell's *Art and Agency*, Living Presence Response and the Sublime," *Art History*. vol. 33. no. 4 (2010): 6. For further information on the living response theory.

anchor) as a 'social nexus'. He argued that art objects are a part of these social interactions because they act as substitutes for real persons.[134]

Regardless of the terminology scholars use, be that agency, affect, power, enchantment, or something else, there are specific means by which objects participate in and change social outcomes.[135] The viewer experiences the work of art the same way he/she would respond toward a living being, thus the art object acts as a representative of a human being. Because art objects across the globe are not all connected by aesthetic qualities or symbolic meanings, a world art history could further explore what the object *does* rather than what it *means.*

Art is understood as being equivalent to social agents that affect the mind.[136] They are extensions of personhood. Social agents may be persons, things, animals, divinities, anything at all.[137] Gell describes these objects as social agents because the term doesn't depend on biological life.[138] "All that is stipulated is that with respect to *any given transaction* between 'agents' one agent is exercising 'agency' while the other is (momentarily) a 'patient'."[139] The viewer is the patient that receives that agency. However, Van Eck points out that patients are not entirely passive, and may resist the agency exerted by the social agent.[140] Not all viewers react toward an art object in the same way.

---

[134] Ibid.
[135] Marian H. Feldman, "Object Agency: Spatial perspective, Social Relations, and the Stele of Hammurabi" in *Agency and Identity in the Ancient Near East: New Paths Forward*, ed. Sharon R. Steadman and Jennifer C. Ross (London and Oakville: Equinox Publishing Ltd, 2010): 148-51.
[136] Van Eck, "Living Statues", 4, 16.
[137] Gell, *Art and Agency*, 22.
[138] Ibid., 8.
[139] Ibid. 22
[140] Ibid. 23.

However, an anthropological approach studies these social relationships without regard to the aesthetic value or meaning of a work of art. Ross Bowden points out how Gell focuses exclusively on behavior and refuses to differentiate between aesthetic and religious experience. Unlike Gell, Van Eck does not ignore the aesthetic dimensions of art objects. She purposefully considers the response of the viewer in order to better understand how the art object as a whole creates a relationship with the viewer. In art history, the aesthetic value of these art objects differentiates them from being just another type of social being. Gell's focus on behavior does not explain why some viewers respond in a particular way to art objects and others do not. By disregarding the aesthetics as a whole, Gell's argument is pertinent only to the response by the viewer, not the agency of the object.[141]

The study of the destruction of images helps to reinforce the concept of agency and how people respond to art as they would toward a living being. The destruction of art has occurred from across the globe and time, from the iconoclasm movement to the destruction of the Buddha statues in Afghanistan. Van Damme points out that a cross-cultural examination can help us to better understand the relationship between humans and images. [142] These art objects were considered to have such a powerful affect on the viewer that people reacted toward them with violence.

---

[141] Caroline van Eck, "Living Statues: Alfred Gell's *Art and Agency*, Living Presence Response and the Sublime," *Art History*. vol. 33. no. 4 (2010): 8-9.
[142] Van Damme "Introducing World Art Studies", 28- 29.

Freedberg discusses how the disgrace, mutilation, or destruction of images of political leaders are felt to pass on to the person they represented.[143] Monuments were destroyed throughout Russia during the Russian Revolution; images of the president of the Philippines were attacked after his overthrow in 1986; images of the Shah were attacked after their fall in Iran; images of Sadam Hussein were dramatically removed after his fall.[144] The anger these protestors felt toward the actual person was directed at their image. The art objects were treated as living representations of those people. The objects had such a powerful affect on the viewers of that culture that they reacted toward them with destruction to also destroy their power and affect.

Likewise, Freedberg discusses how in most cases of art vandalism, the culprits feel that they are attacking a system or ideology and thus they personify that system through the art work and attack the art work as they would a person. For example, the man who attacked Rembrandt's *The Nightwatch* in 1975 specifically slashed the Banning Cocq who was dressed in black because he believed it represented the devil. Likewise, the attacker of Michelangelo's *Pieta* claimed he was the Messiah and had come to save the world. The man who threw acid on Rubens *Fall of the Damned* in 1959 claimed "he had been subject to a systematic campaign of literary suppression and that his aim was to bring peace to the world to end all wars."[145] The woman who slashed Velazquez's *Rokeby Venus* in 1914 did so to draw attention to the cause of women and the

---

[143] Freedberg, *The Power of Images*, 413.
[144] Ibid., 390-1, 413.
[145] Ibid.

plight of suffragettes in prison. These people reacted toward the objects with violence like they would toward a real being.

Extrapolating from the most important aspect of Gell's work and associated scholarship, one could argue that a world art history could focus on the importance of reception instead of traditional aesthetics and Panofsky's iconography. In terms of this essay, it is clear that art objects from India and the ancient Near East are paragons of this concept of agency. Like other cultures of the non-western world, many of these objects would go through a ceremony that would transform the inanimate into a living being that could accord agency on its own.[146] To the devotees and viewers, these objects would literally embody a living presence.

The *Shiva Nataraja* bronze sculpture from the thirteenth century, now housed in the Museum of Fine Arts Houston, is one such example of agency in an art object. However, the museum experience and traditional analyses fall short in reflecting how the object functioned in its original. The original setting for this sculpture would have been quite different. Currently, the sculpture is surrounded by Indian art ranging from the first century to more recent contemporary art.[147] The museum label states the title, date, material, and a brief identification of some of the symbols of the sculpture. In a museum setting, it is displayed as a "religious icon from another culture as a self-contained aesthetic

---

[146] Irene J. Winter, "Agency Marked, Agency Ascribed: The Affective Object in Ancient Mesopotamia," in *Art's Agency and Art History*, ed. Robin Osborne and Jeremy Tanner (Malden, Oxford, Carlton: Blackwell Publishing Ltd , 2007): 44.
[147] Davis, *Lives of Indian Images*, 17. And http://www.mfah.org/art/departments/arts-asia/

object, meant to be appreciated for the beauty of its essential sculptural form."[148] Although it is placed within the same space as other Indian art object to attempt to give a minute idea of the original context, the museum context is still limited. Originally, this sculpture would have been appreciated for far more than its aesthetic beauty. Viewers would have experienced it as a living deity.

The concepts of agency and living presence response are epitomized in the Hindu and Buddhist concept of *darshan*.[149] *Darshan* literally means "seeing".[150] It refers to the central act of Hindu worship when the eyes of the worshiper meet the eyes of an actual deity within a sculpture.[151] Viewers will look upon the image of the deity, such as the *Shiva Nataraja*, to receive the deity's *darshan*, to receive its truth, and experience its presence. Prayer, ritual, incense, flowers, bells, offerings, and other modes of worship that engage all of one's senses, contribute to this direct contact between the divine and the worshiper, enabling the viewer to be enveloped in a moment of grace and blessings that differs from the gloom of earthly space and time.[152] An art object acts as a living being that creates a relationship with the viewer and affects the viewer's mind, psyche, and perhaps actions.

Worshipers would treat this sculpture as if they were communing directly with their god. An icon's identity was created through what Richard H. Davis refers to as a dispensation, the cultural assumptions and ideas that framed the

---

[148] Davis, *Lives of Indian Images*, 17.
[149] Julius Lipner, *Hindus*: *Their Religious Beliefs and Practices* (New York: Routledge, 1994) 281.
[150] Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, *The Wisdom of Ananda Coomaraswamy: Reflections on Indian Art, Life, and Religion,* ed. S. Durai Raja Singam and Joseph A. Fitzgerald. (Indiana: World Wisdom, Inc., 2011): 291.
[151] Dallapiccola, *Dictionary of Hindu Lore and Legend*, 56.
[152] Lipner, *Hindus*: *Their Religious Beliefs and Practices*, 281.

response of the viewers. Through ritual procedures, the divinity would embody the sculpture. The viewer would respond to this sculpture as a real being and would react accordingly. The viewer would be able to glimpse into the all-encompassing nature of Shiva though this sculpture and therefore the sculpture had a translucent quality. The viewer believed that the object would come to life through these rituals; therefore, it was experienced as a live being.

Davis discusses the notion of translucency and how these deities were believed to exert agency through these objects. These objects were not viewed as merely inanimate objects; they were believed to be a living deity and were treated as such.[153] These sculptures were translucent, enabling viewers to directly experience a god. Viewers would develop a relationship with sculpture and glorify it as a living deity in order to receive blessings directly from the god.

The *Shiva Nataraja* sculpture would have served as a processional icon and would have literally embodied the presence of the god, Shiva. The sculpture was likely housed in a Hindu temple. Worshipers would enter the temple to interact directly with the god through aniconic and iconic images of Shiva. The priestly guidebooks of the time recommended that priests perform rites of worship (puja): smearing oils and creams on it, showering it with flowers, and bathing it with different liquids. They would dress it with garments and adorn it with ornaments. They would sing devotional hymns to it, feed it, and play music for it. Though, the aniconic image of the *linga* would have been the main focus of worship.[154] However, in medieval South India, not all members of society

---

[153] Davis, *Lives of Indian Images*, 21, 23, 43.
[154] Davis, *Lives of Indian Images*, 19.

were allowed to enter the temple and be in the presence of Shiva. In order for all members of society to experience Shiva's grace and beneficent presence, processional bronzes would have been taken outside of the temple walls for a procession during the *nityotsava* (regular festival) and the occasional *mahotasava* (great festival). Through a coming alive, sacred ritual, Shiva would literally transfer his presence to mobile bronze images and go on a procession enabling worshipers to experience the god directly. Through this ritual, the sculpture would have been understood and experienced as a living being.[155]

The Hindu and Buddhist ceremony of opening the eyes of a sacred image is still practiced today at the consecration of a new image.[156] The consecration ceremony involves five stages. This ceremony is both a rite of "completion and inauguration; it marks, essentially, the transition from inanimate manmade object to one imbued with life."[157] The third phase of the consecration ceremony brings the object to life through the *netronmilana* or *netra pinkama* (eye-ceremony), the awakening and opening of the eyes of the image.[158] In this stage of the process, a sacrificial pavilion and pedestal would be created for the image to be placed on. The priest would then outline the eyes using a golden needle. [159] Then, the priest rubs the eyes of the image with certain materials, such as ghee or honey, while reciting praises to bring the image to life.

---

[155] Ibid., 18-20.
[156] Winter, "Opening the Eyes," 382-83
[157] Freedberg, *The Power of Images*, 82.
[158] Winter, Irene J. "Opening the Eyes and Opening the Mouth: The Utility of Comparing Images in Worship in India and the Ancient Near East." In *On Art in the Ancient Near East.* ed. M. H. E. Weippert, Thomas Schneider, Eckart Frahm, W. Randall Garr, B. Halpern, Theo P.J. van den Hout. vol. 34.2. (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2010): 382-83. And Freedberg, *The Power of Images*, 82.
[159] Winter, "Opening the Eyes," 382-83

The object would then be washed and purified and carried in a circumambulation procession around the local village. During the procession, it would be placed on a sacred pedestal and carried on the shoulders of temple servants or in a wooden vehicle pulled by ropes. Temple officials would have treated it like a noble member of society by waving flywhisks and covering it with a parasol.[160]

In the fourth phase, the object would enjoy a restful interlude, dwelling in water.[161] In the fifth stage the image is bathed, dressed, fed, and ornamented.[162] It would receive “the honors one would bestow on the body of a king.”[163] It would be “awakened each morning, bathed, offered meals, delighted with music and dance, and put to sleep in the evening.”[164] Fine clothing and elaborate jewelry would adorn the bronze in order to emphasize its living presence. Various substances were poured over it to add additional powers and capacities.[165] Prayer, ritual, incense, flowers, bells, offerings, and other modes of worship that engage all of one’s senses, contribute to the manifestation of the object coming alive.[166] Plates of food, such as rice, banana, the betel leaf, or coconut would have been placed in front of it. Incense would have been lit and placed before the embodiment of the god as well. The burning of incense and

---

[160] Ibid., 382-83
[161] Davis, *Lives of Indian Images*, 20, 35, 36.
[162] Ibid., 36 and Winter, “Opening the Eyes,” 378.
[163] Kaimal, *Shiva Nataraja: Shifting Meanings of an Icon*, 393.
[164] Ibid., 393.
[165] Davis, *Lives of Indian Images*, 2036.
[166] Julius Lipner, *Hindus*: *Their Religious Beliefs and Practices* (New York: Routledge, 1994) 281.

the sound of reed horns and drums would further engage a viewer's senses. [167] These rituals helped to encourage *darshan*.

Through ritual and worship, *darshan* is obtained from the god through this sculpture. *Darshan* is a blessing conveyed through the eyes.[168] Direct contact between the divine and the worshiper enables the viewer to be enveloped in a moment of grace and blessings that differs from the gloom of earthly space and time.[169] This artwork acts as a living being that creates a relationship with the viewer and affects the viewer's mind, psyche, and perhaps actions.

Irene Winter, a scholar of the ancient Near East, wrote a compelling article comparing the ritual practices of the ancient Near East to rituals in India that are still practiced today. These modern practices enable scholars to gain a better understanding of the religious culture of the ancient Near East.[170] Both societies were developed within states, manifesting a stratified social hierarchy, organized within an agrarian-based economy, and were characterized by large urban centers. Both also have had a significant investment in large-scale religious architecture and were devoted to cultic practice. In both cultures, there also resided a permanent, specialized priesthood often characterized by a hereditary office. This high office presides over and directly engages with images in worship. Both societies are urbanized, stratified, and polytheistic societies. Particularly comparable, both societies have specific ritual attention to

---

[167] Davis, *Lives of Indian Images*, 20.
[168] Gell, *Art and Agency*, 116
[169] Lipner, *Hindus*, 281.
[170] Ibid., 377-404.

three-dimensional images. Winter argues that the religious practices between these two societies are likely to serve as analogues for one another.[171]

In the Near East, this ritual process is described in ancient texts as the "Mouth Opening Ceremony."[172] The texts describing this ceremony are dated to the first millennium BCE, but they are bilingual in both Sumerian and Akkadian, suggesting that this tradition goes back into the third millennium BCE. This ritual was also practiced in ancient Egypt. During this coming alive ceremony, the mouth would be opened, then the eyes, followed by the rest of the senses. This ritual transformation would empower the image to speak, see, or act and exercise its own agency. These art objects could be ritually charged with such power to channel divine forces, that they were considered to literally embody a certain deity.[173]

I would like to argue that the second step of this ceremony, the opening of the eyes is more important than the opening of the mouth, echoing the importance placed on the eyes in India. Perhaps the emphasis on the mouth was done to allude to the object's humanness, as humans can speak. There seems to be a tradition in the Near East with a great emphasis on visual attention.[174] Even in the *Epic of* Gilgamesh, Gilgamesh is instructed to see and experience the temple precinct of Uruk. He is advised to look at the walls and walk around and

---

[171] Winter, "Opening the Eyes," 381.
[172] Irene J. Winter, "Opening the Eyes and Opening the Mouth: The Utility of Comparing Images in Worship in India and the Ancient Near East," In *On Art in the Ancient Near East,* ed. M. H. E. Weippert, Thomas Schneider, Eckart Frahm, W. Randall Garr, B. Halpern, Theo P.J. van den Hout, vol. 34.2, (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2010): 382.
[173] Winter, "Opening the Eyes," 380-383, 445
[174] Irene J. Winter, "The Eyes Have It: Votive Statuary, Gilgamesh' Axe, and Cathected Viewing in the Ancient Near East." In *On Art in the Ancient Near East,* ed. M. H. E. Weippert, Thomas Schneider, Eckart Frahm, W. Randall Garr, B. Halpern, Theo P.J. van den Hout. vol. 34.2. (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2010): 434.

examine them. There is also evidence of eye stones, with dedication messages by the donor written on them.[175] Arguably, the eyes are often one of the more exaggerated features and thus a main emphasis of many images in the ancient Near East. When another power would conquer a different city-state, they would gouge out the eyes, not the mouth, of the statues to literally kill the statues. Again, the destruction of images attests to their agency on the viewer. This stress on the eyes is similar to the stress on the eyes in the Hindu coming alive ceremony. Therefore, by understanding the Indian ceremony of opening of the eyes, we gain a better understanding of the agency of art objects in the Near East.

Certain votive statues from the Early Dynastic Period in Mesopotamia have inlaid eyes with lapis lazuli pupils that are differentiated from the white material of the rest of the body. (Fig. 2) Originally, they "were placed in shrines either seated within their own chapels or standing in direct visual contact with the resident deity".[176] The assembled statues found in the Square Temple at Tell Asmar (third millennium BCE) in the 1930's are an example of these art objects facing toward a shrine with an absolute and focused attention. The large eyes are the expression of devotion and admiration toward the awe-inspiring divinity that they looked toward on behalf of the devotee. In this case study, the art objects acted as extended personhoods of the donor. The statue of the god that they were facing was a social agent as well and was considered to literally embody that deity. Part of the agency that this art object exerts is the ancient Sumerian idea

[175] Ibid., 434
[176] Ibid., 433

of *u-di*. *U-di* is equivalent of ad-miring, which is the ongoing act of looking.[177] Their eyes are emphasized to demonstrate their ongoing looking and admiring of the deity on behalf of the devotee.

Typical of many non-Western votive figures; these art objects are supposed to act on behalf of the donor or creator and create a relationship with the god it is offered to in order for the patron to receive blessings. The votive figures acted as social agents for the devotee to experience what can be seen as a Near Eastern analog of *darshan.* The votive figure would stand in for the devotee and gaze at the god in order to receive blessings and transfer those blessings to the devotee. These votive figures acted as extensions of the donors. They were intended to exert agency from the donor to the gods in hopes that the gods are receptive to the agency of these objects. There are even instructions in letter prayers for the statues to speak to the deity on behalf of the devotee.[178]

This emphasis on what an object *does* over what it *means* is an important aspect to explore when studying “non-western” art. It should also be noted that according to the ‘institutional theory of art’ the reason modern scholars call these objects art is because modern scholars think they are art, not because the people who made it think so.[179] These objects were created with a specific intention and are more than just aesthetically pleasing or symbolic artworks. Art historians need to study the original context of these objects to better understand their importance and agency. They are not merely art objects, but were considered as living beings that were part of the social nexus of that culture.

[177] Ibid., 433, 444, and 453.
[178] Ibid.
[179] Gell, *Art and Agency*, 5.

# Conclusion

My proposal is that a truly comparative world art history could allow art historians to study objects across time and the world. Such an organization could be explored as a means to cope with both the differences and commonalities across cultures. A robust comparative method is key. This comparative method enables viewers to learn more about other cultures as well as their own. Juxtaposing several works of art also enables observers to investigate and better understand the unifying characteristic of agency. Despite the many differences in aesthetic qualities, meanings, and intentions, all art objects can and do affect the viewer. Focusing on a commonality is key to creating a world art history.

The traditional organization of art into linear narratives is laden with flaws when studying non-Western art and should be questioned when creating a world art history. Timelines are based on representing a series of causal events. But the concept of a linear understanding of time is not universally applicable. Hindus and Buddhists understand time as cyclical and therefore have not focused on the beginning, development, and end of an artistic tradition. Timelines are usually based on the development of naturalism, which is a characteristic of art that was not valued in other non-Western cultures such as India and China. European and American scholars look to contemporary sources to determine the causal events within a narrative. However, non-Western cultures such as India did not have an elaborate tradition of writing about art; therefore, how can modern scholars determine the causal events for a certain Indian tradition when contemporary sources are not available? The

traditional organization of art treats timelines as independent. But art traditions are constantly intersecting and affecting one another. There are also inconsistencies amongst art historians about how timelines are connected. Influential art historians, such as Gombrich, organized art based on the development of naturalism. Whereas other influential historians, such as Hegel, have organized art depending on how they reflect a particular worldview. Distinguishing timelines by a shared visual feature is also an idealization. For, the *Shiva Nataraja* looks more like a Bernini sculpture rather than a Calder, yet the Bernini and Calder sculpture are part of the European, American timeline. Other art historians question whether art should be compared to other artworks within that tradition at all. Wollheim argues that comparing an art object to others distracts from the individual object. More importantly, I argue that timelines do not traditionally focus on the original relationship between the art object and the viewer nor the agency or power of an object. Even the timeline that the art historian, Padma Kaimal created to trace the stylistic and iconographical changes of the *Shiva Nataraja* throughout time does not primarily focus on the relationship between it and the original devotee. Instead, a new, comparative method should be pursued in developing a world art history.

I present the argument that a world art history could experiment with organizing art in a new, comparative way that encourages viewers to abandon their own preconceptions while also being educated about the unique characteristics of art from different cultures. A comparative analysis of different artworks enables scholars to focus on the commonality of agency in art works

across time and the world while also learning about the significance of each of these works of art. This new way of thinking about art could lead to the beginning of the development of a truly world art history.

For example, one could juxtapose one of the numerous copies of the now lost *Aphrodite of Knidos* by Praxiteles (4th century BC) with Van Gogh's *Starry Night* (1898), and the bronze *Shiva Nataraja* sculpture from the MFAH (13th century). Aesthetically, these works seem to have little in common. A naturalistic, yet idealized depiction of a Greek god seems to have little with an impressionist landscape painting and a Hindu sculpture of a non-idealized god.

However, when we study the agency they exert, we can find a commonality. The Aphrodite is arguably the most famous female Greek nude. Hundreds of copies have been made since its creation over 2000 years ago. She was so risqué, lusted after, and appreciated that Pliny the Elder wrote that the king, Nicomedes offered to buy this sculpture and pay for the debt of the people of Knidos. He also wrote that a man had fallen in love with the sculpture, embraced it, and even masturbated to it.[180] Regardless of whether this story is true, the legend attests to the power of this art object. Even within a museum, viewers ambulate around this object to examine each angle of the object. Observers want to investigate her shy, yet provocative stance. They react toward her as they would toward a real person who is trying to get out of the bath and covering herself up in a seductive gesture.

---

[180] Pliny the Elder, *Natural History: A Selection.* Penguin Books, Ltd., trans John F. Healy, 1991, XXXVI.20-21.

Without knowing anything about the artist or symbolic and metaphorical meaning of the Van Gogh painting, the artwork often evokes an emotional response in the viewer. The dark colors and thick, heavy brushstrokes create a frenetic energy that contributes to feelings of unease and sadness. Once one understands the symbolism of the death in the cedar tree and the metaphor of the starry night, they are further moved in their reaction toward this painting. When they understand the context of the artist, discovering that this is the view from his room in the asylum where he stayed days before his death, they feel the emotional intensity of the painting and react accordingly. The painting invokes certain feelings, actions, and responses from the viewer.

Prior to understanding the religious significance and symbolism of the *Shiva Nataraja*, a person raised in the West and unfamiliar with the Hindu religion would likely react toward this painting with curiosity, confusion, and perhaps distaste. Its aesthetic qualities are very different from the western canon. By emphasizing the necessity to think beyond the traditional understanding of art in an open-minded way, an observer has the chance to better understand and appreciate the symbolic meaning of this sculpture as well as the power that this image had on the original viewer.

The *Shiva Nataraja* sculpture is a paragon of how to approach what have often been considered as foreign objects. Traditional analyses of this object allow observers to appreciate the depiction of the human form and the complex iconography. An in-depth iconographical analysis would enlighten the viewer of how Hindu philosophical thought is represented in this imagery. Philosophical

meaning is expressed throughout this sculpture, from the position of the hands, to the objects he holds, and the decorative symbols found in headdress and across his body. The Hindu understanding of the universe and the cycle of life and death, destruction and creation, and the balance of the cosmos are expressed in every aspect of this sculpture. However, traditional analyses are limited in discussing the original relationship between the image and the observer, an approach that is integral to understanding how the object fucntioned in thirteenth century society.

It is important to discuss the original context of this sculpture. It would have resided in a temple and been used as a processional sculpture for religious celebrations. Through a religious ceremony and ritual, the *Shiva Nataraja* is believed to come alive and literally embody the god, Shiva. It would be treated as a living person, being worshipped, bathed, dressed, and fed. Devotees would commune with the god directly through this sculpture. The devotee experiences *darshan*, where the viewer really sees the god through the sculpture, and in turn, the god sees him or her. This sculpture enabled the devotee to experience blessings and grace directly from the divine. This sculpture was understood to act as a living deity that created a relationship with the viewer. It affected the viewer's mind, psyche, and actions.

A world art history should explore new methods of analyses in addition to traditional forms of analyses. I argue that focusing on what an object *does* rather than what it *means* could be used as a tool to unify art across the world and time. Other new methods of analyses and commonalities will further

contribute to this field of study. When studying art objects within an academic or museum setting, scholars need to contemplate how differently the original viewers would have understood these objects within their original context. The ability of the art object to act and influence the viewer is a unifying characteristic of all art across time and the globe. This discourse could explore the unifying aspect of agency that in turn will also educate the viewer about the unique characteristics of art from different cultures.

A world art history allows each culture to gain a better understand of their own art and values. "Multiculturalism matters, Danto suggests, because to be fully aware of your own culture, you need to know others." [181] This argument is Hegelian in essence. Hegel argued, "to properly understand yourself, you need to be recognized by others. Self and other thus are essentially linked together."[182] It is through comparison that we can better comprehend the details and reasons behind each culture's values and perceptions of the universe.

---

[181] Carrier, *A World Art History and Its Objects*, 132.
[182] Ibid.

# Appendix

Fig. 1. *Shiva Nataraja*. $13^{th}$ century. Bronze. 29 1/4 x 21 x 9 inches. Museum of Fine Arts Houston. Available from: http://www.mfah.org/art/100-highlights/shiva-nataraja/ (accessed September 25, 2014).

Fig. 2. Two Gypsum Statues with Folded Hands (Votive Statues). circa 2700 BCE. Gypsum. male figure, height 72 cm; female figure, height 59 cm. Iraq Museum, Baghdad, Nr. 19752 and Nr. 19751. Available from: ARTstor, http://www.artstor.org (accessed May 8, 2014).

# Works Cited


Agee, William C. *The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston: A Guide to the Collection.* Mount Vernon: The Press of A. Colish, Inc., 1981.

Bowden, Ross. "A Critique of Alfred Gell on 'Art and Agency." *Oceania*, vol. 74, no. 4 (2004): 309-324.

Bunce, Frederick W. *A Dictionary of Buddhist and Hindu iconography, illustrated: objects, devices, concepts, rites, and related terms*. New Delhi, D. K. Printworld (P) Ltd., 1997.

Carrier, David. *A World Art History and Its Objects.* University Park:Penn State University Press, 2009.

Coomaraswamy, Ananda K. *The Dance of Shiva: Fourteen Indian Essays.* Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1948.

Coomaraswamy, Ananda K. "The Interpretation of Symbols." In *The Essential Ananda K. Coomaraswamy.* edited by Rama P. Coomaraswamy. 103-109. Bloomington: World Wisdom Inc., 2004.

Coomaraswamy, Ananda. *The Wisdom of Ananda Coomaraswamy: Reflections on Indian Art, Life, and Religion.* Edited by S. Durai Raja Singam and Joseph A. Fitzgerald. Indiana: World Wisdom, Inc., 2011. , 291.

Dallapiccola, Anna L. *Dictionary of Hindu Lore and Legend.* London: Thames & Hudson, 2002.

Davis, Richard H. *Lives of Indian Images*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997.

Davis, Wendy. "Abducting the Agency of Art." In *Art's Agency and Art History*, edited by Robin Osborne and Jeremy Tanner, 190-219. Malden, Oxford, Carlton: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2007.

Deheja, Vidya. *Indian Art.* London: Phaidon Press Limited, 1997.

Eck, Caroline van. "Living Statues: Alfred Gell's *Art and Agency*, Living Presence Response and the Sublime." *Art History*. vol. 33. no. 4 (2010): 3-19.

Elkins, James, ed. "Art History as a Global Discipline." In *Is Art History Global? (The Art Seminar)*. 3- 23. New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, LLC, 2006.

Feldman, Marian H.. "Object Agency: Spatial perspective, Social Relations, and the Stele of Hammurabi" in *Agency and Identity in the Ancient Near East: New Paths Forward*, edited by Sharon R. Steadman and Jennifer C. Ross. London and Oakville: Equinox Publishing Ltd, 2010.

Freedberg, David. *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991.

Gell, Alfred. *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998.

Hazra, Rajendra Chandra. "The Date of the Visnu Purana." *Annals of the Bhandarkar. Oriental Research Institute*, vol. 18, no. 3 (1937): 265-275.

Jourdan, *Oriental Rugs: Turkoman*. vol. 5. Woodbridge: Antique Collectors' Club Ltd., 1989.

Kaimal, Padma. "Shiva Nataraja: Shifting Meanings of an Icon." *The Art Bulletin*, vol. 81, no.3 (1999): 390-419.

Lipner, Julius. *Hindus*: *Their Religious Beliefs and Practices*. New York: Routledge, 1994.

Mukherji , Parul Dave. "Whiter Art History? Whither Art History in a Globalizing." World, *The Art Bulletin*, vol. 96, no. 2 (2014): 151-155.

O'Flaherty, Wendy Doniger. *The Origins of Evil in Hindu Mythology*. Oakland: University of California Press, 1976.

Pliny the Elder, *Natural History: A Selection.* Penguin Books, Ltd., trans John F. Healy, 1991.

Prentiss, Karen Pechilis. "A Tamil Lineage for Saiva Siddhanta Philosophy." *History of Religions*, vol. 35, no. 3 (1996): 231- 257.

Stutley, Margaret. *The Illustrated Dictionary of Hindu Iconography.* London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985.

Van Damme, Wilfried. "Introducing World Art Studies." In *World Art Studies: Exploring Concepts and Approaches*, edited by Kitty Zijlmans and Wilfried Van Damme, 23-61. Amsterdam: Valiz, 2008.

Georgio Vasari, *The Lives of the Artists,* translated by George Bull, (London: Penguin Classics, 1998).

Viviano, Frank. "Kingdom on Edge: Saudi Arabia". *National Geographic Magazine.* (2003). Accessed September 2013, http://ngm.nationalgeographic.com/features/world/asia/saudi-arabia/saudi-arabia-text

Winter, Irene J. "Opening the Eyes and Opening the Mouth: The Utility of Comparing Images in Worship in India and the Ancient Near East." In *On Art in the Ancient Near East.* Edited by M. H. E. Weippert, Thomas Schneider, Eckart Frahm, W. Randall Garr, B. Halpern, Theo P.J. van den Hout. vol. 34.2. 377-404. Leiden: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2010. 377-404. Originally published in *Ethnography and Personhood: Notes from the Field.* Edited by M. W. Meister. (Jaipur and New Delhi: Rawat Publications 2000): 129-162.

Winter, Irene J.. "Agency Marked, Agency Ascribed: The Affective Object in Ancient Mesopotamia." In *Art's Agency and Art History*, edited Robin Osborne and Jeremy Tanner, 42- 69. Malden, Oxford, Carlton: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2007.

Wood, Paul. *Western Art and Wilder World*. West Sussex: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., 2013.

Zijlmans, Kitty and Wilfried Van Damme, eds. *World Art Studies: Exploring Concepts and Approaches*. Amsterdam: Valiz, 2008.