



The Hindu deity Shiva in the fierce form of Bhairava,
approx. 1300–1500
India; Karnataka state
Chloritic schist
Gift of the Connoisseurs' Council, 2000.6

WHO IS DEPICTED HERE?

Individual Hindu gods manifest themselves in many forms, in some cases including the ferocious and terrifying. Among his many guises, Shiva is an ascetic and mendicant who renounces conventional earthly existence to pursue extreme practices and austerities. This manifestation of Shiva as ascetic is the fearsome Bhairava form, who is accompanied by a dog and shown wearing a garland of severed heads. A common story about Bhairava is that he cut off the fifth head of the unruly god Brahma, and he was thus cursed to wander the earth with this severed head in his hand. Brahminicide, the killing of a brahman, is a tremendous crime whose penance involves years of mendicant life, living on alms, and carrying a staff and a skull. Bhairava can also be identified through his fangs and bulging eyes, which indicate his ferocity, his matted ascetic locks which have been sculpted into a headdress, his ascetic's begging bowl in the form of a skull cup, and the string of heads curving around his lower body. In some versions of the story, Bhairava's skull cup is formed from the skull of Brahma whose head he severed. The sculpture's right hand would have held a club surmounted by a human head. Bhairava wears a hissing serpent in the place of a loincloth. This form of the god Shiva, said to be the most terrifying, induces worshipers to confront their own fears.

The god's physical form is sensual and well proportioned in the same manner and precise dimensions of other South Indian figures, including those in stone and in bronze. The dog portrayed with Bhairava, considered his vehicle, may be explained by the association of funerary grounds with the presence of wild dogs. Cremation grounds were frequented by scavenger animals. In some textual accounts, animal and human sacrifices were also offered to the god.

HOW WAS THE SCULPTURE USED?

The sculpture may have been worshiped in a temple dedicated to Bhairava, or it may have functioned as a significant image in the context of a larger Shiva temple. Due to the transgressive, fierce, and terrific nature of Bhairava, in worship he received conventionally forbidden offerings such as alcohol and meat. The surface of this image is covered with boot black, a substance similar to shoe polish, which British collectors during the Raj often chose to apply to stone sculpture, apparently for aesthetic reasons. The image has been further modified by being rubbed with red-brown dirt, perhaps to enhance sculptural details.