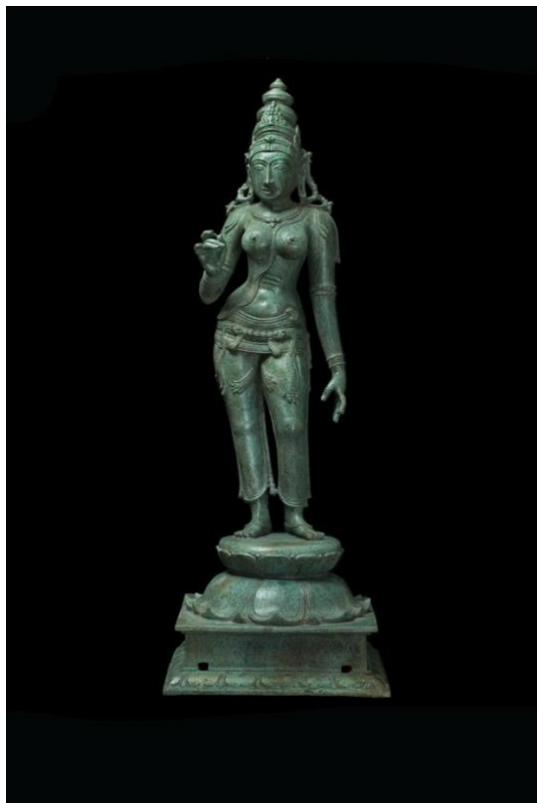


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TAMIL NADU, SOUTHERN INDIA, LATE
CHOLA PERIOD, MID-12TH CENTURY

Shivakami Uma

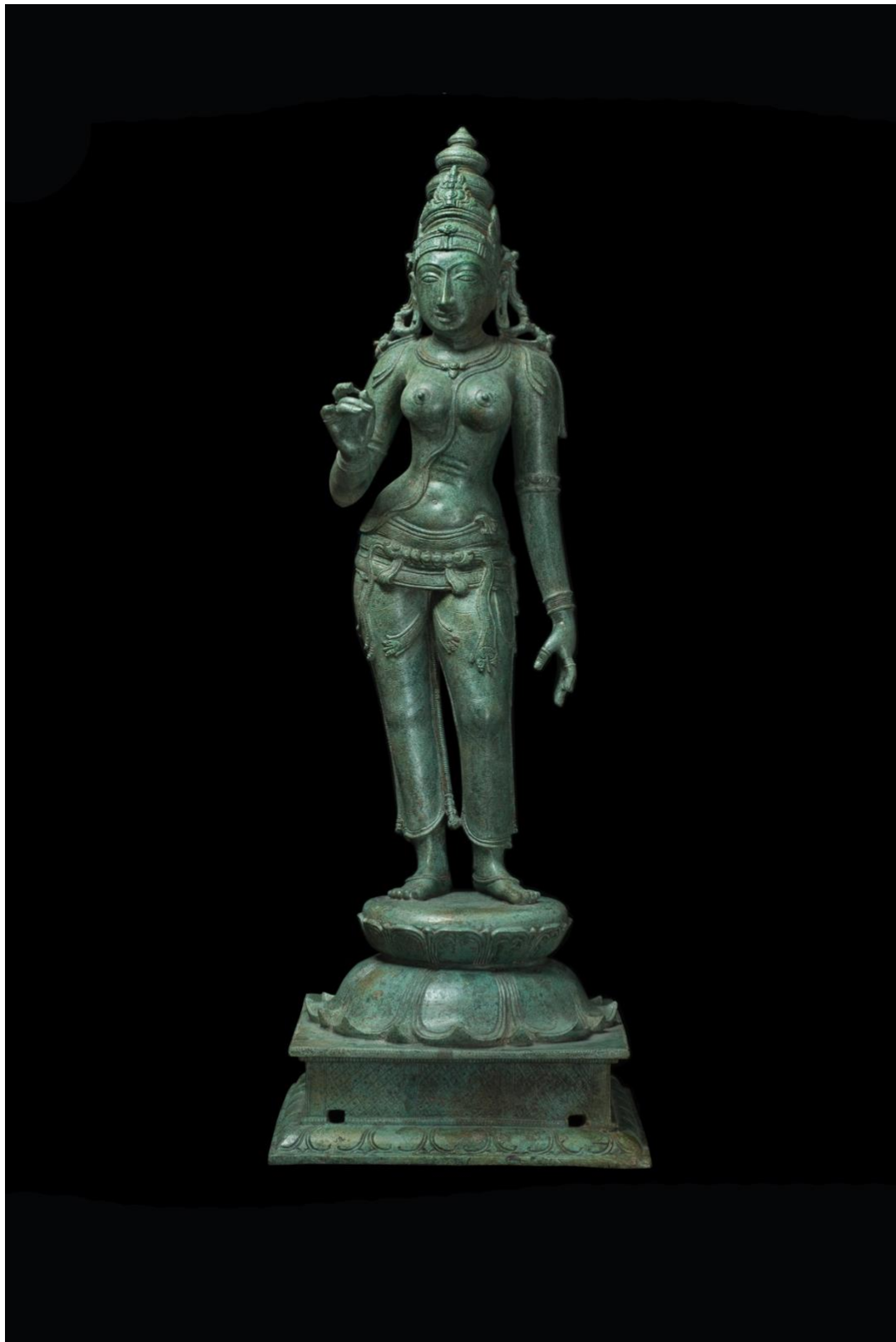
Bronze
Height 78.5cm (31 in.)

The above date has been corroborated
by Metallurgical analysis.

Provenance

British collector in Singapore, acquired pre-1972.

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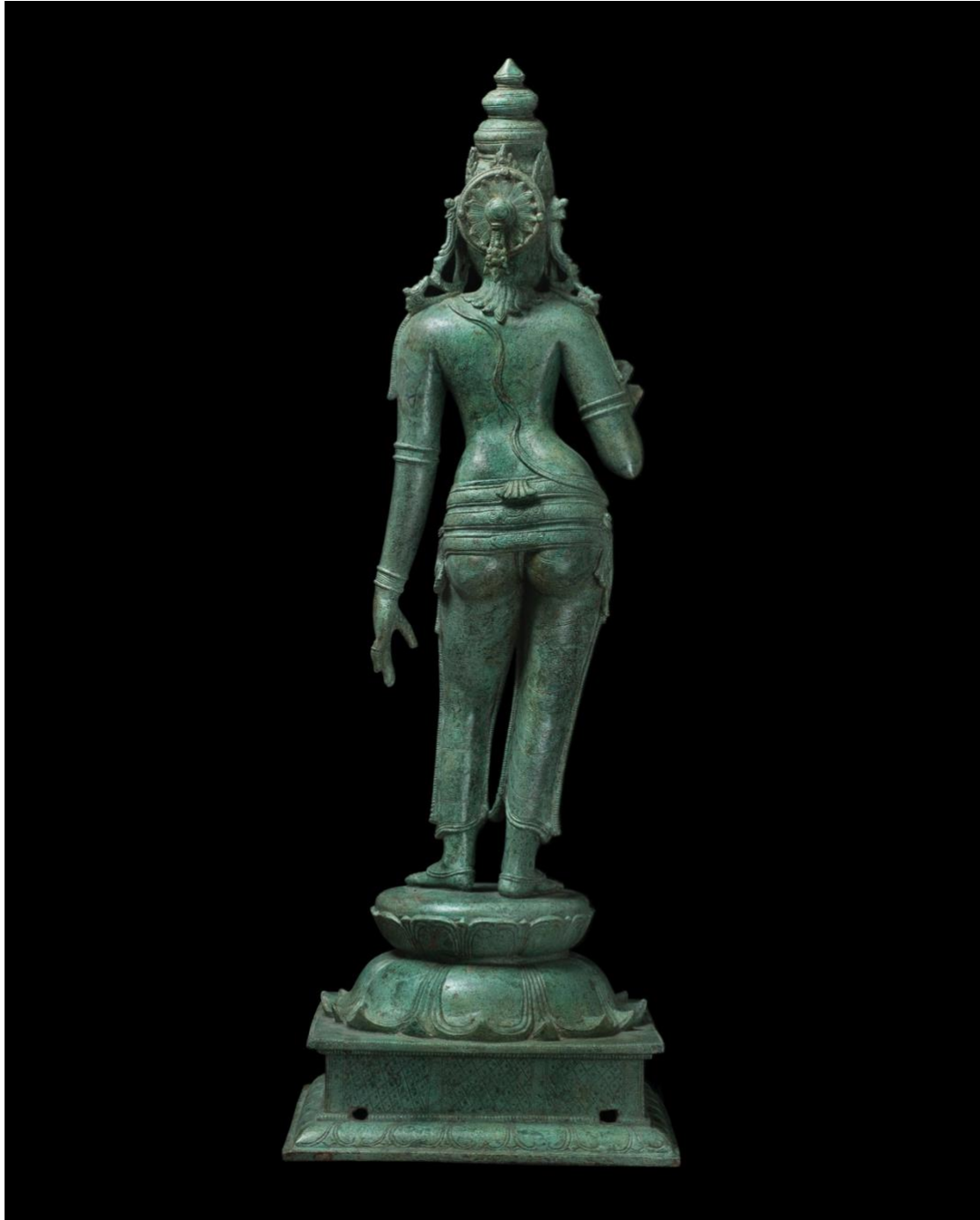


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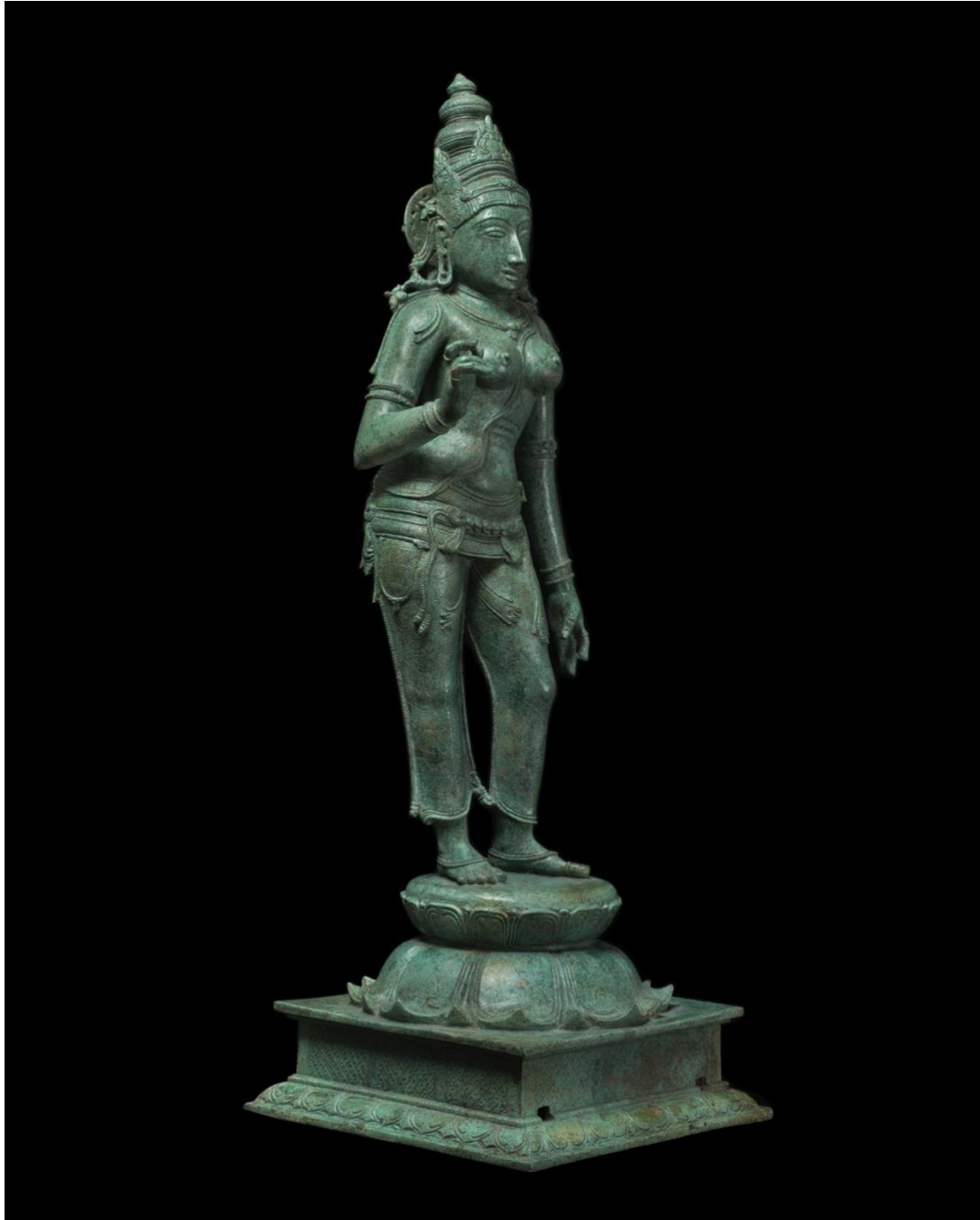


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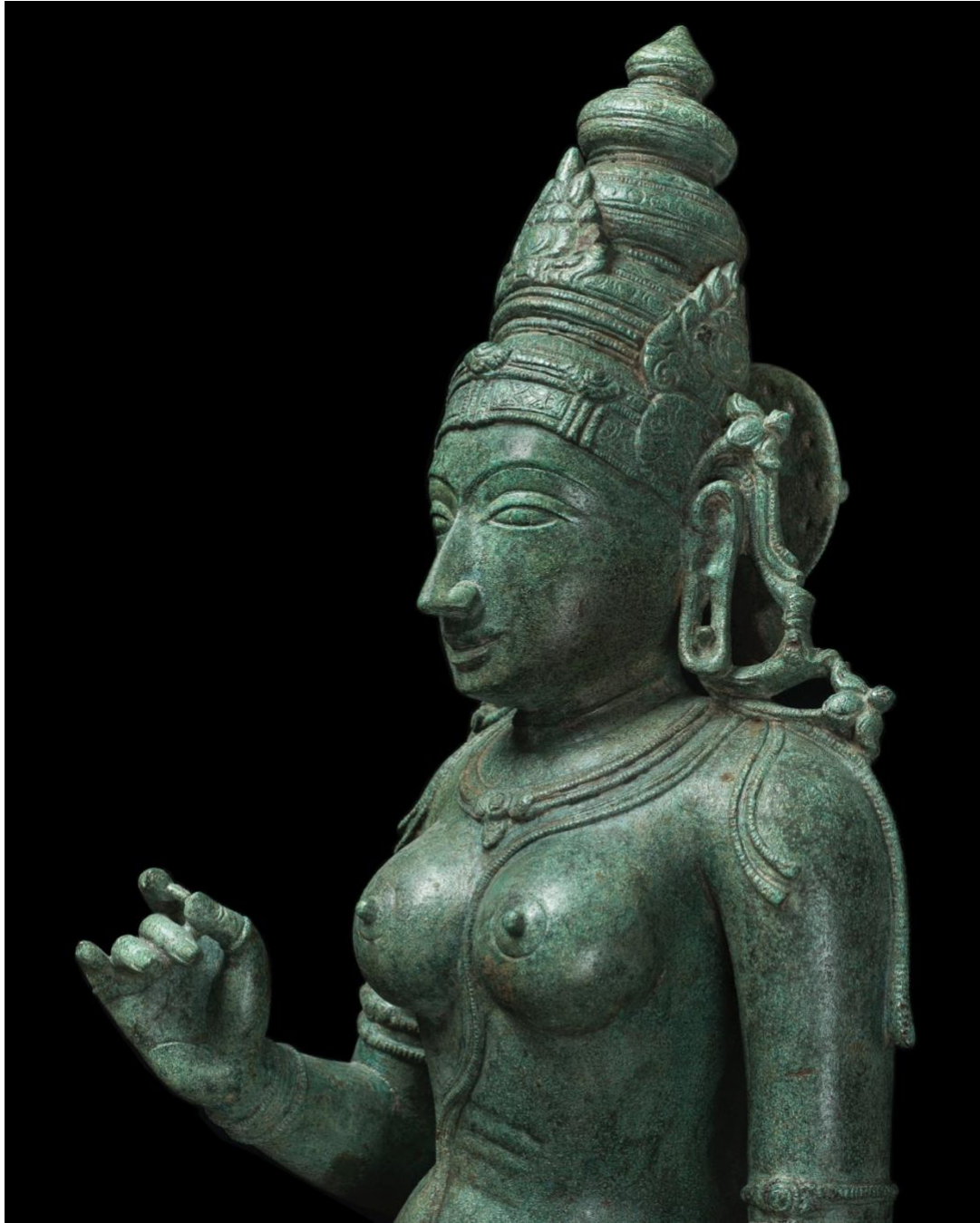


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Shivakami, meaning 'beloved of Shiva', or 'queen consort of the great god', is one of the forms of Parvati or Uma.

The northern name of Parvati means 'Daughter of the Mountains', as she is the offspring of the minor god Himavan, the personification of the Himalayan range. Naturally, the name Parvati is less relevant in the south and the more universal name Uma is used, meaning 'goddess' but also implying 'mother' since it replicates what is commonly one of the first sounds a child makes to its mother.

This particular statue of Shivakami Uma was created to partner the glorious Natarajah presently with John Eskenazi (Fig. 1) – Natarajah being the ultimate manifestation of Shiva, Uma's husband. Situated at the centre of all things, his dance directs the passage of time. As his wife, Shivakami Uma is witness to this, but she is also the motivation that drives him. This reiterates the assumption in tantric Hinduism that the male deity's intellectual qualities unite with the goddess's physical force to release spiritual energy. This force may then reveal to the devotee the understanding of spiritual wisdom that will propel the soul into a higher level of consciousness. According to the Bhagavata Purana, Shiva is the cosmic seed and Uma the womb into which it is implanted and eternally united in marriage they are the life force that promotes the act of creation.

The marriage of Shiva and Uma represents the perfect union and they are customarily shown together, sometimes even as a single deity, Ardhanarishvara (Fig. 2). Otherwise, whether shown formally or playfully, they are invariably besotted with each other. In her Shivakami form, Uma is depicted alone, but her statue is placed as close as possible to that of Natarajah, whose ring of flames prevents her from touching him on this occasion. Uma's controlled, thoughtful demeanour contrasts with Shiva's irrational and unpredictable anger, but like him her personality is diverse. She manifests as the loving expression of the Great Goddess, who is the mother of Brahma, Shiva and Vishnu and thus at the root of all things. The Goddess's manifestations also include Durga, the conquering heroine who vanquished a demon that no other god could defeat, as well as the fearsome Kali, who relishes blood sacrifices; it is sometimes said that these goddesses are angry aspects of Uma, rather than individual forms of the unseen Great Goddess and in them, devoid of emotion, Uma releases her energy in its purest form. Equally able to exert her benign influence, Uma is not simply Shiva's consort, but a powerful goddess in her own right. She represents a feminine ideal, that of a gentle and compassionate mother, which is perhaps how the Chola queens saw their relationship with their subjects.

The title Shivakami is a formal title that would have been understood by the royal or aristocratic patrons of the temple for which the statues were made. Uma's royal status is in no doubt in this elegant, crowned figure; she radiates the qualities of authority and compassion that the Chola family wished to display to their subjects in their generous donations of bronze statues to the temples. The strong personality of the goddess also reflects the influence of the Chola women on state policy and, more importantly, on the religious affairs of the Empire.

The intrinsic strength of Shivakami Uma radiates throughout the sculpture. She stands in the triple-angled pose, tribhanga, with her right hip projecting and her left knee bent. Here, the stance is relaxed and natural; later on through the Post-Chola and Vijayanagara periods it became increasingly stylised, so in this instance that aspect of the sculpture is indicative of a 12th century rather than later date. The fleshiness around her hips, the realistic stomach and breasts and the beautifully detailed nipples are typical of 12th century sculpture.

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In her Shivakami form, Uma does not display a meaningful hand gesture; instead, her right hand is posed in Katakamukha, illustrating her willingness to accept a flower offered by the devotee which she will then share with Natarajah. This hand pose is also her invitation for the devotee to approach her. Her left hand is held in Lola, simply resting by her side. The hands are expressive, with a slight tension in the right shoulder providing a sense of spontaneity to the raised hand; it is as if, at any moment, the goddess will stretch out her hand to receive an offering. Shivakami Uma inclines her head slightly to listen to the prayers being offered by her devotee. Her face is calm and benign, with a slight smile on her lips intended to offer encouragement both to her devotee and to Natarajah. Her beauty is comparable to that of the Natarajah statue she was made to accompany, with a prominent arched brow line, large eyes, aquiline nose and sensitive mouth; however, her face is slimmer. At the back of her head, her hair is arranged in neat tresses that rest just below the nape of her neck, the central one forming a leaf shape. The siraschakra (lotus wheel) at the back of the head is indicative of the late Chola period. This element is unfortunately missing from the accompanying statue of Natarajah, where it would presumably have been of the same design.

Shivakami Uma is finely dressed, befitting a queen or bride. Her skirt seems to be made of a diaphanous material that falls in even folds on her thighs. The upper edge of the skirt curves slightly around her stomach; this is a return to the mid-10th century fashion following a period when the curve frequently appeared more exaggerated. The belts around Shivakami's hips are in the late Chola fashion. The three ribbons exactly match those worn by Natarajah and like his, each is fastened with a different jewel at the back. Numerous scarves and ribbons fall from the mekhala (jewelled clasp) at the front and seem to sway as the goddess moves. A soft scarf knotted on each hip, an element that is occasionally seen in 10th century images, becomes more towards the end of the 12th century.

Shivakami Uma wears a simple necklace with trefoil pendant, matching basubands and simple bracelets. As a goddess, she wears a yajnopavita (sacred thread), which is normally only worn by men and it twists and undulates across her body. A prominent flower rests at the top of each ear, with another similar one seen on each shoulder. The blooms may represent a form of jasmine (known in India as Malli), which is used in certain rituals, notably during the marriage ceremony. Rather than wearing kundula (circular earplugs) Shivakami's ear ornaments are designed to hold flowers. These closely resemble the ornament worn by her accompanying Natarajah in his right ear. In South Indian statues from the 11th century onward, Uma wears the karandamukuta crown, which becomes taller and heavier looking over the course of time. The form resembles a temple superstructure and perhaps shares that symbolism, protecting the soul of the goddess or queen who wears it.

Similarities between the statues of Natarajah and Shivakami confirm that they emanate from the same imperial atelier. Shivakami would have been cast some time later than Natarajah, as it is appropriate for a wife to be a little younger than her husband. With similar consideration, Shivakami would have been fashioned by a different master artist to Natarajah as it is inappropriate for husband and wife to share a single family lineage. Nevertheless, it is clear that the two artists shared the commission and consulted each other as they visualised the statues, which share a number of details, notably in their matching jewellery and the beautifully formed petals of the lotuses on which they stand.

The figure of Shivakami and the pedestal on which she stands are a single casting. More often, they are separate elements in which a flat plate supporting the figure fits into the lotus.

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Fig. 1. *Natarajah with Shivakami*, Tamil Nadu, Southern India, Late Chola Period, Mid-12th century. Courtesy of John Eskenazi Ltd



Fig. 2. *Ardhanarishvar*, Tamil Nadu, Post-Chola period 14th century. The Art Institute of Chicago.



Fig. 3. *Standing Parvati*, Tamil Nadu, Southern India, Chola Period, first quarter of the 10th