Bronzes from Polonnaruwa

Posted on

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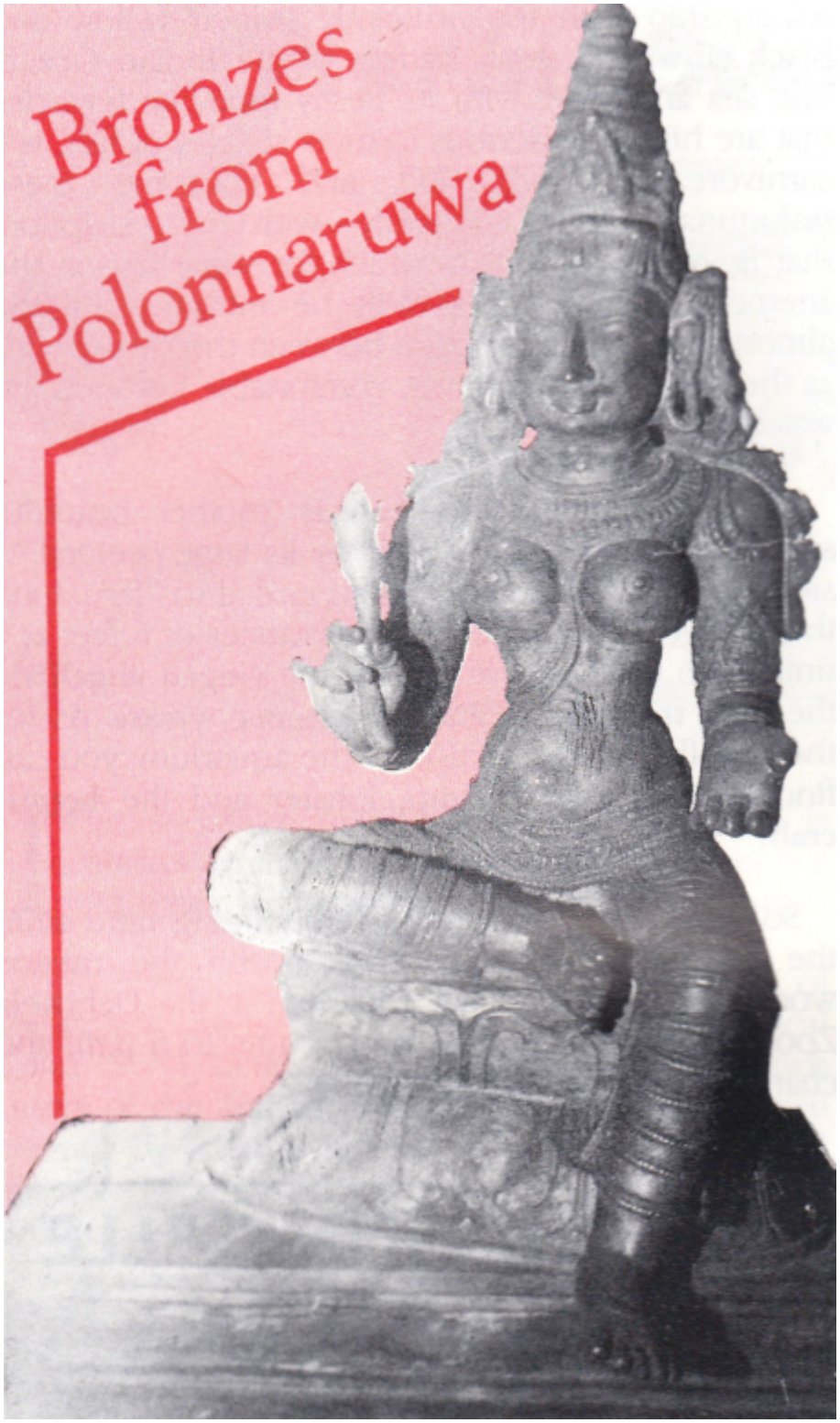


Discovered by the then Archaeological Commissioner, H. C. P. Bell, in 1907 and

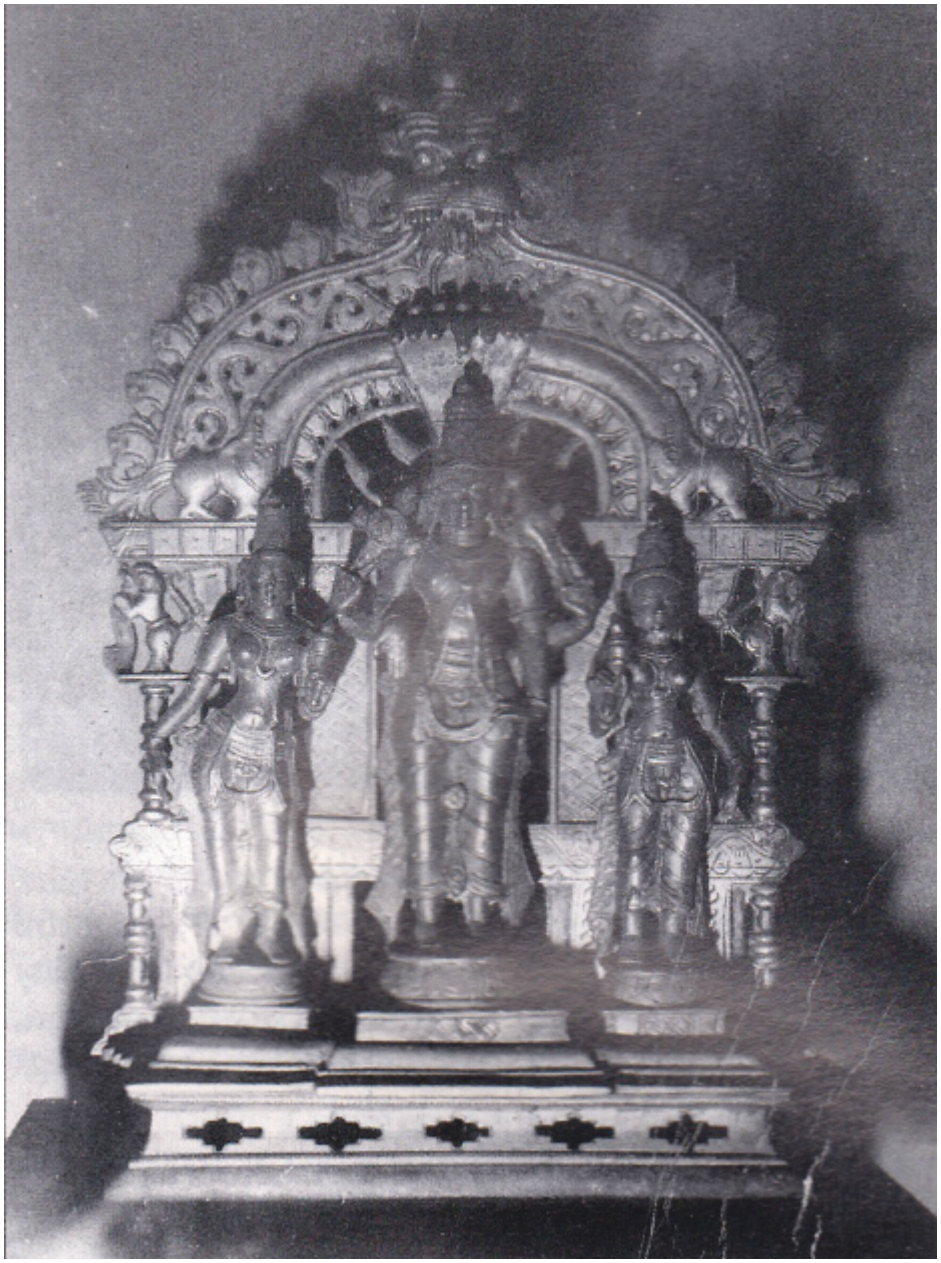
1908, the “Polonnaruwa Bronzes” of Sri Lanka are among the most magnificent of their kind of bronze-casting work in the world. They are displayed in rooms on the ground floor of the Colombo Museum in their glass cases, each exhibit complete with its relevant tag to make its identity clear to the visitor. They make a very impressive collection and few fail to be fascinated by these works of master-craftsmen in Polonnaruwa a thousand years ago.

H. C. P. Bell himself and other scholars of the time examining these ‘finds’ were inclined to believe the bronzes had been cast in South India, but further discoveries made in 1960 in Polonnaruwa compelled scholars and experts to revise their views. Bronze casting was an art long known and practised in Sri Lanka and bronze statues and other artefacts from the island were exported to the sub-continent and Southeast Asian countries, even to Thailand and China, long before the 11th century AD, which is the undisputed date of the “Polonnaruwa Bronzes”. Polonnaruwa or ‘Janathapura” as it was then called was the seat of a South Indian (Cola) governor at that time. In 993 AD. the country had been invaded by the powerful Cola ruler, Rajaraja, who was extending his empire from Tanjore in South India to the islands of the Indonesian archipelago and Sri Lanka was of vital strategic importance to him in his campaign. A weak ruler in Anuradhapura (ancient capital of Sri Lanka), an indifferent bureaucracy, a discontented militia and an aggrieved people taxed to the hilt without economic relief, had created a state of anarchy in the island, which conditions the Cola emperor was quick to exploit. Cola rule was established all over the island’s north and the king of Lanka taken away a prisoner to South India.

‘The hands that built viharas and dagobas and fashioned images of the Buddha were made to build hrines for Siva and Vishnu and to sculpture their images.” (Archaeological Art Series: No. 5, C. E. Godakumbura) But the Sinhalese sculptors of Polonnaruwa…consciously or not introduced their ideas and forms to the architecture and sculpture they executed (Godakumbura). This is evident in the “Polonnaruwa Bronzes” as well. The unearthing of more bronzes, as well as other statuettes and the discovery of the remains of at least sixteen Siva devalas in the ancient city of Polonnaruwa, now give scholars and experts greater opportunities to examine and study the bronzes excavated in the first decade of this century. Today’s evidence confirms that the statues and statuettes were cast in Sri Lanka in the North Central Province itself (then known as the Raja Rata or King’s Province).

Among the most compelling of the bronzes displayed in the Colombo Museum are those of Nataraja, an incarnation of Siva, and Parvati as Sivakamasundari.

The “Nataraja Bronze” images are 55 and 3/4 inches and 5 and 5/8 inches in height respectively. They are among the finest discovered, and unique in many respects. One noteworthy inset is the row of musicians superimposed on the original frieze of pilasters and lions on the front side of the lotus pedestal. A rare feature are the female musicians: a cymbalist and a drummer beating kettledrums, which is proof that during the Polonnaruwa Period of Sri Lanka’s history (10th – 12th centuries AD.) women drummers were not unknown. The dwarf in the statue closely resembles the dwarfs at the Vatadage or Circular Relic Chamber in Polonnaruwa and are further proof of the ‘local’ craftsmen at work on these masterpieces. The smaller ” Nataraja” figure is complete in every detail of the concept of Siva as “King of the Dance of the Cosmos”.



Siva with two female attendants.

The higher-than-three-feet statue of Parvati, consort of Siva, is one of the most beautifully proportionate statues of a goddess ever to be discovered in the medium of bronze-cast statuary. The neck is long in the tradition of Indian beauty down the ages and the breasts large and full but of a natural size. The drapery, it has been claimed, has some resemblance to that of the statue of Parakrama Bahu at Polonnaruwa. It has a marked resemblance to the great five-foot goddess Tara

bronze appropriated □□y Governor Sir Robert Brownrigg and taken away by him to Britain when he left Sri Lanka in 181 . According to one account, “he picked up the statue in a jungle in Polonnaruwa when he was touring the district near Trincomalee.” The statue, matchless in its beauty, lies now in the British Museum and all efforts by Sri Lanka to recover it have been of no avail.

Among the other bronzes exhibited in the Colombo Museum are those of other Hindu deities such as Skanda (deity protecting the area of Ruhuna in the southeastern part of the island) riding his peacock mount; a goddess seated in the graceful Lalitasana posture; the figure of Siva as Somaskandamurti in a very well-proportioned pose; a 30¼ inch size statue of Vishnu the Preserver, second in the Hindu triumvirate.

Several small statuettes of the Hindu gods and goddesses and their artefacts are also displayed. Apparently most of these were also found embedded in clay pots and buried in the soil around the Siva devalas and their vicinity in Polonnaruwa. It could have been that when at last the Colas were challenged in ‘Janathapura” by the people of Lanka, now ready to retrieve their land from the yoke of the conqueror, the Hindu priests were taken by surprise as the Sinhala armies poured in through the breached gates. In their haste to save the bronzes they must have placed them in pots or buried them in the premises, removing the jewellery and ornaments that decked the statues as was customary and as is still done to images in Hindu temples in India and Sri Lanka.

More systematic and scientific excavations undertaken long after Bell’s time have revealed many more such bronzes yet to be classified and displayed. And we can only wonder how many of these superb masterpieces of the medieval bronze-sculptors’ art in Lanka have been lost forever, stolen or removed to other museums and private collections in other parts of the world.