

*City of the Caves (Charipur),
Elephanta Island, India. All
photos by the author, 1978.*

Lingaistics

A Western sculptor discusses his fascination with the linga, which is rarely considered in esthetic terms because of its religious function in Shiva worship. Yet the linga fuses abstract form with symbolic values in a way that reveals the sexual impulse at the origin of sculptural form.

BY ALAIN KIRILI

The Hindu god Shiva is worshipped in many forms, the most common of which is the linga. Though found throughout India and Nepal, the linga is rarely present in the Indian art collection of our Western museums and rarely included in studies of Indian art. While not altogether unknown, the linga is frequently ignored by Western scholars both because of its status as a religious object and because of its largely abstract shape—often it is simply a very plain shaft of stone.

And yet the linga appears in many different ways. Its shaft may be entirely cylindrical or partly polygonal and its top may be rounded, flat or shaped like a half-moon (each type has a name). It may stand alone or on a basin called a "yoni" (frequently, the linga is only represented in bas-relief on the yoni). So too, many lingas of different heights may be set on rows of yonis.

There are other types of linga besides the yonilinga—for instance, the mukhalinga and the adhyalinga. The mukhalinga presents a carved head of Shiva with one of many images lower on the shaft (a lotus flower, for example, or a snake), and the adhyalinga represents the linga form itself etched into the shaft.

But it is the yonilinga that interests me most. A religious object, it comes in two forms: the chalalinga, small enough to be moved, and the achalalinga, heavy enough to be regarded as a sited object. Both forms are made from a

great variety of materials—rice, bread and unbaked clay as well as gems and metals of all sorts. Wood is also used as, of course, are stone and marble, the materials of the lingas reproduced here.

Yonilingas may be located along streets and sidewalks, embedded in walls just out of reach of the bustle of crowds, or set well apart in places of meditation. Even by the sacred rivers they induce a contemplative silence disturbed—as in Pashupatinath and Bagmati, Nepal—only by the faithful who come to cleanse themselves and to cremate the dead.

Often, yonilingas are moved or dislodged slightly by natural causes (floods, fires, even elephants) or by rival sects. These lingas (called suayabhuvalingas) are not righted again—broken pieces are either reattached by metal bands or simply discarded. The nonchalance here is only apparent: it really reflects a belief that lingas are live objects in perpetual evolution—a belief also displayed in the offerings, made to the lingas, of brightly colored powders, flowers, milk and honey.

Of particular interest to the Westerner is the abstract nature of the yonilingas—free, as many are, of all figurative decoration. From the beginnings of Shiva worship, this abstraction allowed for the lingas' great symbolic force. And yet, perhaps because of our old prejudice against abstract art, these lingas

are not as familiar to us as the erotic figures and contorted human and animal forms of other Indian art—even though sculpture in the West has moved to an abstraction of its own.

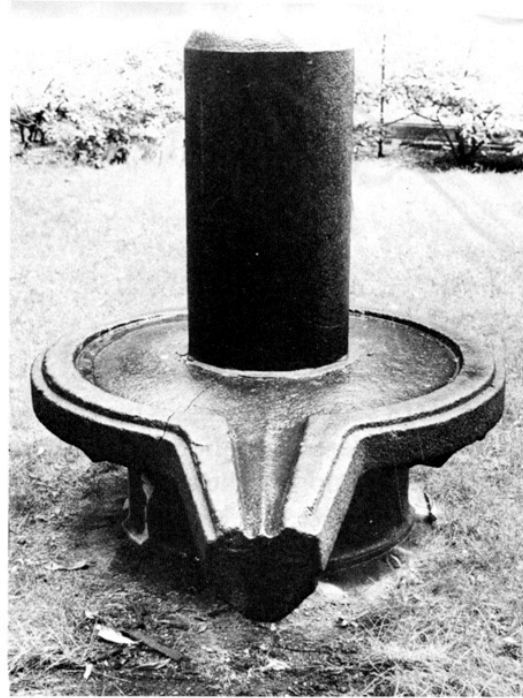
This similarity of the yonilingas to modern sculpture must be qualified, however. Though both tend to the abstract, the typical modern sculpture is physically independent, often even siteless, whereas the linga usually bears a close relationship to its setting, often a temple. (I felt the importance of site most strongly at a small, 12th-century sanctuary above Lake Dal in Kashmir. Within the narrow sanctum, open to the four points of the horizon, stood a black marble linga. In the semi-darkness, it seemed ready to burst its confines.)

This sitedness points to another difference between the linga and modern sculpture: the linga is primarily an instrument of active worship (indeed, it is frequently omitted from sculpture studies and shows precisely on this ground), whereas modern sculpture announces its freedom from any such function. And contextually, of course, the two forms could not be more different—the linga with its origins in Sanskrit texts, modern sculpture with its own supposed logic of abstraction.

So why am I, a modern Western sculptor, drawn to the linga? Certainly my interest is not that of an historian or a mere lover of the exotic. No, it is the symbolic power of the form that stimulates me. To me, the yonilinga is a



Mukhalinga with Shiva heads in temple near Badami, southwestern India.

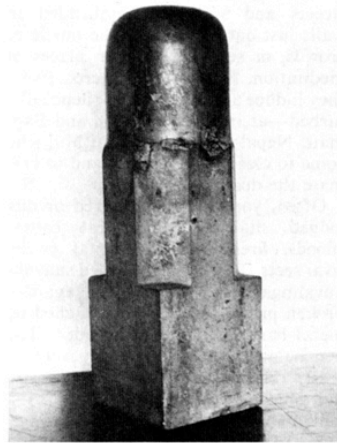


Yonilinga, 72 inches high, in garden of Musée Guimet, Paris.

“sign” (the word “linga” actually means “sign,” in particular the male “sign,” the phallus), one that communicates directly on the level of sexuality—Shiva as source of life—and so resists the Western bias that abstract art be seen in strictly formalist terms.

It was not by chance then that I focused on the linga on my two trips to India. I hoped that contact with this “source of life”—so Freudian for me, so religious for the Hindus—might lead me to a sculpture of my own that would be more sensitive to the sexual impulse at the origin of form.

One aspect of the linga might bear directly on my work. The relationship in the linga between the yoni and the shaft is extremely precise (the proportions are derived from Indian mathematics and Sanskrit texts) and, given the simplicity of the elements, unexpectedly varied. Such subtle passages from “base” to “column” are not always found in formally analogous sculpture in the West. The yoni, it is clear, is no simple support. It is also symbolically important: in Shiva worship it represents the female principle just as the shaft represents the male. Together, they comprise both the structure of the sculpture and the symbol of



Linga, 18 4/5 inches high, Musée Guimet, Paris.

Shiva. The interaction of these two elements is thus no mere “matter of form.”

The linga is instructive not only for the subtle relationship between support and shaft, but also for its emphasis on verticality and circumambulation. For me the essence of sculpture resides in

its vertical regard. For Freud too the definition of sculpture was primarily “per via di levare,” which can mean both “what is raised” and “what is taken away.” To sculpt is to take away, (symbolically) to “castrate”; it is also to raise, to “erect.” Sculpture, I think, enfolds this contradiction between potency and castration. Certainly it is felt strongly in front of the lingas in India.

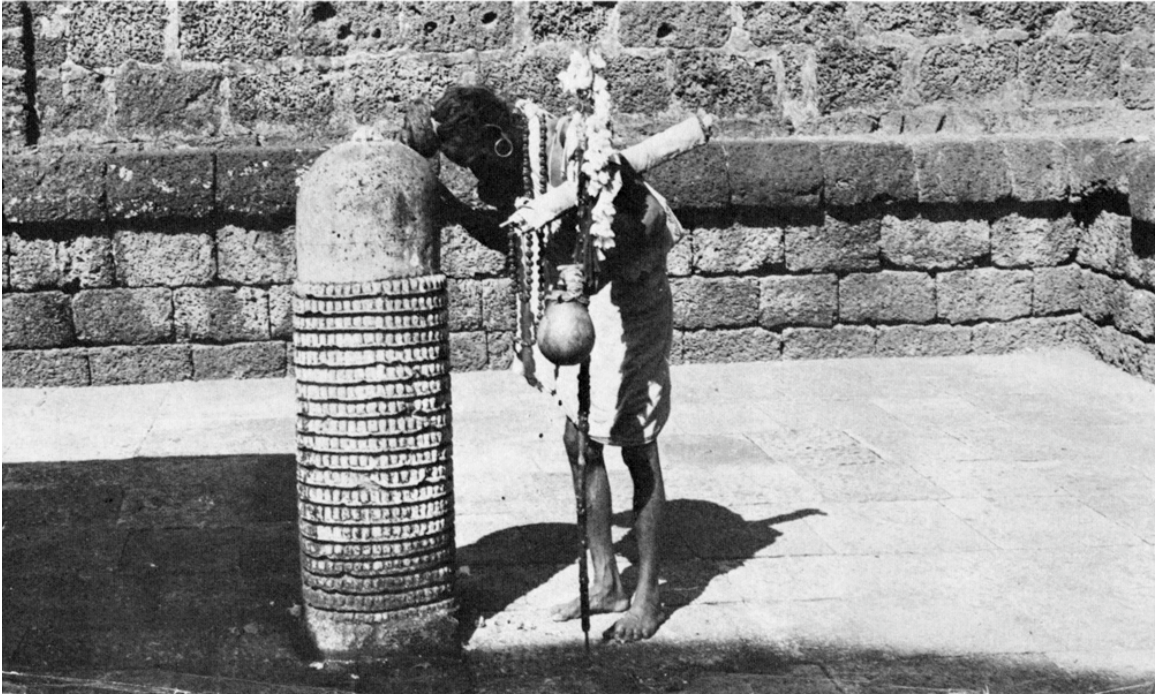
According to one myth, Shiva was charged by Brahma to create mortals, but he refused, and castrated himself: the linga thus also represents Shiva’s phallus taken root in the world. One linga in particular evoked this strange myth for me. In Bhubaneswar I found a linga with many lingas carved on its shaft. I asked the priest how many there were. He answered 100,000. I objected: though numerous, there were certainly not 100,000. No, he told me, Shiva extends deep into the earth—he is endless.

It was only as a “lingaist” that I was allowed to enter this and other Shiva temples. In Bombay on my second trip to India, I met with a Shiva priest and discussed with him the lingas and Shiva worship. My interest surprised and pleased him, and he presented me with a token, a linga in the



Worshiper with yonilinga adorned with flowers in a temple near Ahmadabad, western India.

Priest with "linga of 100,000 lingas" in courtyard of the temple of Parashurameshwar in Bhubaneswar, southeastern India.





Rows of lingas in temple of Brihadishvara in Tanjore, southeastern India.

Yonilinga in countryside temple near Badami, southwestern India.





Yoniliga with pedestal in the courtyard of the temple in Pattadakal, south central India.

form of an amulet, that would enable me to enter temples otherwise forbidden to non-Indians.

From Bombay I traveled throughout southern India, where Shiva worship is most vital and the linga remains an "objet de culte," and in Madurai and Tanjore I witnessed many Shiva rites. Though there are no strict rules, the worshipper (if he is wealthy enough) places richly colored powders and flowers atop the linga and covers it with milk and honey. As an onlooker and occasional participant, I was seduced by the colors and sheen imparted to the linga—indeed, the sexual nature of the worship is clear.

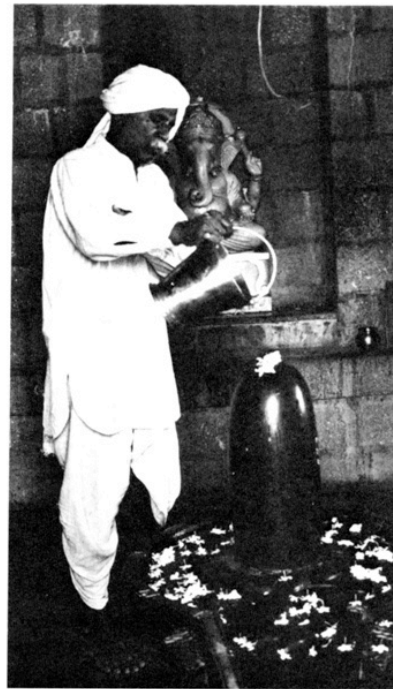
Seeing the lingas in situ made me aware of their central role in Shiva wor-

ship. The Indians distinguish between "live" lingas and "dead" lingas: the former are those still in use by the cult, the latter are those with only archeological value. This distinction reminded me of the importance of active ritual to many works of art, especially sculpted objects. Indeed, the symbolic profundity of religious statuary has often depended on the liturgical richness of its cult. The worship of Shiva through the linga points up this spiritual quality of sculpture—a quality that is largely absent from recent sculptural practice in the West. □

Author: Alain Kirili is a French sculptor living in New York.



Worshiper before a covered linga (with an oil lamp above the linga and a copper cobra coiled around it) in a temple in south India.



Worshiper before a yoniliga adorned with flowers and water (with a statue of Ganesha in the niche) in a temple in southern India.