



**Vishnu with Shri Devi and Bhudevi, central Tamil Nadu. Bronze, c. 1000.**

These exquisite pieces were produced during the Chola period (9th–13th century), when the art of bronze casting attained an unparalleled degree of excellence. Vishnu is portrayed as a youthful royal figure, elegantly dressed and bejewelled. His consorts, Shri Devi, also known as Lakshmi or Shri Lakshmi, a personification of prosperity, wealth and fame, and Bhudevi, the earth goddess, whom he rescues in his incarnation as Varaha, the Boar, stand gracefully at his sides. His association with the two goddesses reflects his royal status: a king is symbolically wedded to the earth, and his first and foremost duty is to protect her. Shri Devi is also connected with royalty: the fertility of crops, animals and the prosperity of the population depend on the king scrupulously performing his moral duties and ritual obligations.



LEFT: The two goddesses are dressed alike and wear the same jewellery but for one item. Shri Devi (above), the senior wife, stands on her consort's right and wears a breast band, whereas Bhudevi (below), the junior wife, stands on his left and is usually bare-breasted. Both have one arm flexed with the fingers poised to carry a flower.

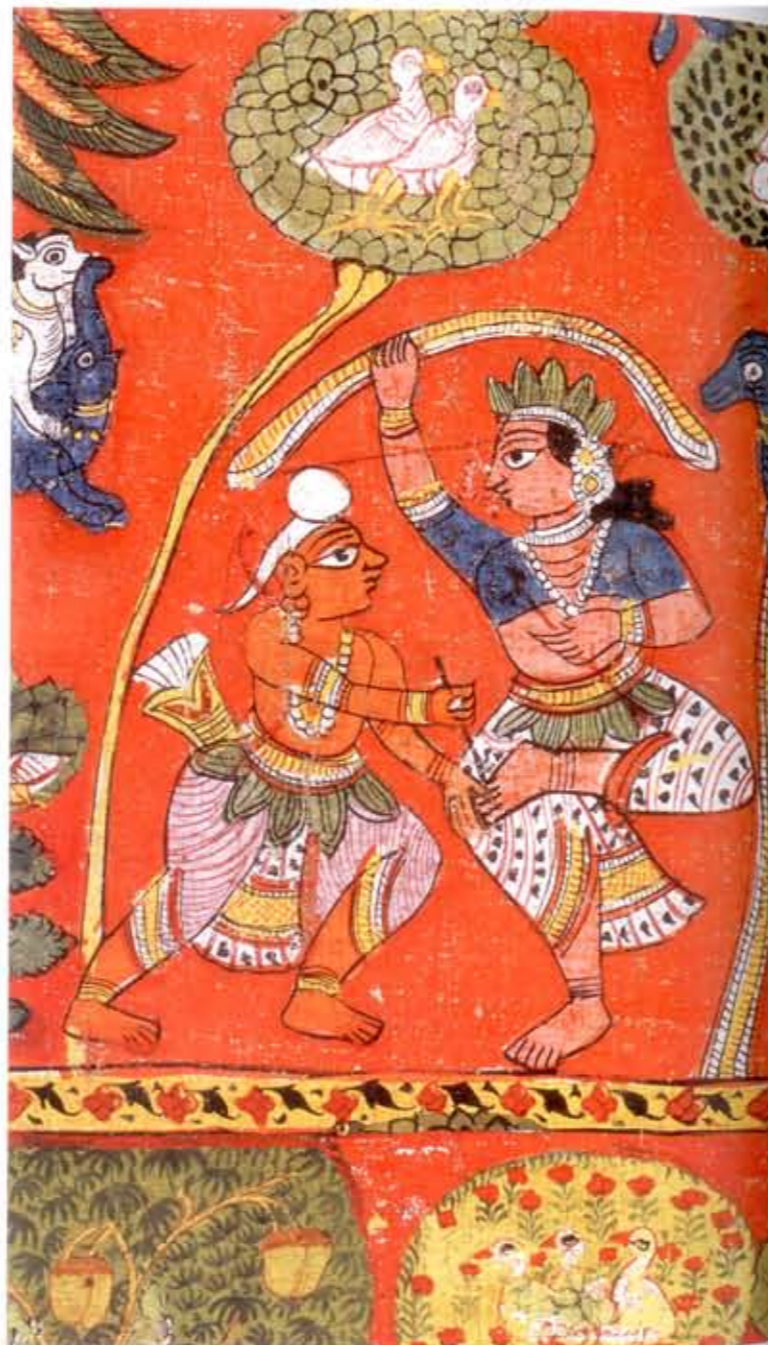


RIGHT: A magnificent crown covers Vishnu's head. He wears earrings, shoulder ornaments, necklaces, armlets, bracelets and anklets. Across his chest are a conspicuous sacred thread and a stomach band. An elaborate girdle with an intricate clasp adorns his waist, and a waistcloth is gracefully draped on his hips. His two upper hands carry his typical attributes of *chakra* (discus) and *shankha* (conch), the lower right is in *abhaya mudra*, the reassurance gesture, and the left is placed on his thigh.



**Bhavana rishi scroll, Telangana, Andhra Pradesh. Painted scroll, pigments on cloth, late 18th–early 19th century.**

In the course of his wanderings, Bhavana *rishi* arrives in a fabulous forest where he sees hunters carrying dead animals suspended by the legs on a pole, or across their shoulders; a bird catcher with a peacock perched on his left shoulder; Narasimha extracting a thorn from the foot of Chenchu Lakshmi; a huntress nursing a child while firmly holding a snake in her hand. A magnificent mythical bird, the *gandabherunda*, carrying in its claws four elephants, two *yalis* and two snakes, occupies the centre of the register. All around, the forest is alive with animal life: prowling tigers and squirrels climbing up the trunks of the trees in whose crowns live a multitude of different birds.



LEFT: According to a local legend from Andhra Pradesh, Narasimha met a lovely girl from the Chenchu community and fell in love with her. Her father, a Chenchu chieftain, put Narasimha through a series of tests, such as climbing tall trees, collecting wild honey, digging termite mounds and hunting. Having successfully passed these trials, he married the girl. Here Narasimha is shown extracting a thorn from the foot of Chenchu Lakshmi. She wears a leaf crown, a leaf belt, and stands elegantly lifting her bow, while Narasimha kneels at her feet. This is one of the most popular and frequently represented episodes of the story of Narasimha among the Chenchus.



RIGHT: Among the many fabulous beasts of Hindu mythology is the *gandabherunda*, whose name means 'having terrible cheeks'. This fierce two-headed bird, whose history is not fully known, was and still is the emblem of a several royal families, including the present-day Wodeyars of Mysore.