

## Ethnoarchaeology Fuels 'Masters of Fire' Exhibition at UC San Diego's Geisel Library

September 28, 2008

Doug Ramsey

San Diegans will get the rare opportunity to see inside a culture of craftsmen who trace their work and bloodlines back nearly 1,000 years, when the exhibition "Masters of Fire: Hereditary Bronze Casters of South India" opens at the University of California, San Diego's Geisel Library on Oct. 6. The exhibition runs through Jan. 25, 2009.

As part of the UC San Diego Geisel Library policy, this exhibition is free and open to the public.

Curated by UC San Diego archaeology professor Tom Levy, the exhibition is based on his ethnoarchaeological research in the town of Swamimalai in the south Indian state of Tamil Nadu. For centuries Swamimalai has been the center of bronze Hindu icon manufacturing in the region, with its workshops passed down from generation to generation of hereditary *sthapathis* ('artisans' in Tamil).

"This exhibition looks at this ancient culture and society through the lens of one family-owned workshop that can trace its craft back at least 10 generations," said Levy, who recounted his research in a book, also called "Masters of Fire", published this month by the German Mining Press. "I'm especially proud that three of my co-authors on that book are the three brothers who now run the workshop, and who collaborated extensively throughout this project to ensure that it portrays accurately how this ancient craft has survived - and even thrived - into the 21st century. It is also great to collaborate with my wife, Alina, on this after 30 years of travelling to India together."

Levy is an associate director of UCSD's Center of Interdisciplinary Science for Art, Architecture and Archaeology (CISA3), which produced the exhibition, the first in a series to showcase its research. Based in the California Institute for Telecommunications and Information Technology (Calit2), CISA3 is a partnership of Calit2, the Jacobs School of Engineering and the university's Division of Arts and Humanities.

The UC San Diego Libraries also provided funding and support for the exhibition, which is located in a new first-floor exhibition space in the Geisel Library building adjacent to the Seuss Room.

"We are thrilled to partner with Calit2 and provide a venue for showcasing outstanding faculty research such as Tom Levy's 'Masters of Fire' exhibition," said Brian E. C. Schottlaender, The Audrey Geisel University Librarian at UCSD. "This new exhibition space in the Geisel Library building will provide a venue in the intellectual heart of the campus for illuminating UCSD's rich academic world for the benefit of the campus and the greater community."

Curator Levy holds the Norma Kershaw Endowed Chair in the Archaeology of Ancient Israel and the Neighboring Lands, and has had a distinguished career as a field archaeologist working in Israel and Jordan. Three years ago his research took him to Swamimalai to explore whether traditional bronze-casting technologies used by the town's craftsmen may hold a key to understanding production techniques in the Middle East during pre-Biblical times.

"Called the lost-wax technique, it's how the best bronze statues of Hindu gods are made in Swamimalai still today," said Levy, describing the way artisans carve a wax statue, then bake it in fine clay from the Kaveri River delta, and pour out the wax, replacing it with molten metal to replicate the original wax sculpture in great detail. "There are close parallels to the way we believe craftsmen produced high-end metal objects during the early Copper Age in the Holy Land."

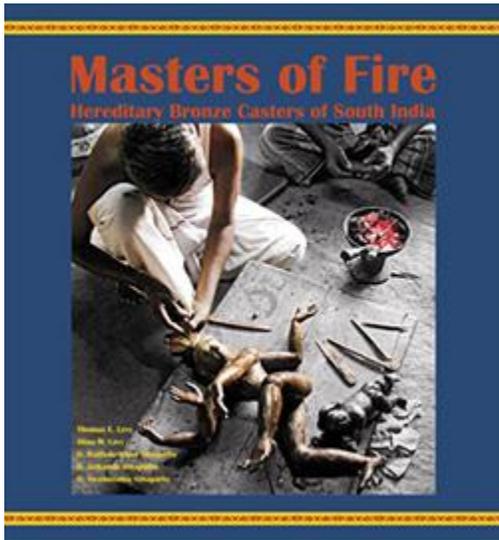
A high-definition documentary produced by Calit2 about the technique and its present-day use in Swamimalai is part of the "Masters of Fire" exhibition, along with dozens of photographs by Levy and his wife and collaborator, Alina Levy (a native of Goa, the former Portuguese colony on the Indian subcontinent). Visitors will also see some of the tools used in the hereditary workshop and recently collected by CISA3 archaeologist Adolfo Muniz; a large nataraja manufactured in Swamimalai; and seven miniature bronzes from the golden age of Hindu sculpture, the Chola Empire, which reached its zenith nearly 1,000 years ago. The sculptures are on loan from the collection of UC San Diego neurology professor V.S. Ramachandran, who directs the university's Center for Brain and Cognition.

"Masters of Fire" was designed by David Mayo, former director of exhibitions at UCLA's Fowler Museum and now president of David Mayo Art Exhibition Design (Los Angeles). Printing and mounting of photos and graphics were provided as a community service by Tim Stahl Photographics (San Diego), with additional artwork by Calit2's Cristian Horta. Julie Gay oversaw installation of the exhibit, and the San Diego Museum of Man - directed by Mari Lyn Salvador, which hosted "Journey to the Copper Age," an exhibition curated by Levy that ended in early 2008 - provided display cases for the Geisel Library space.

Note: Hi-res mages from the exhibition are available on request to [dramsey@ucsd.edu](mailto:dramsey@ucsd.edu).

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of South India

October 5, 2008 -  
January 25, 2009  
Geisel Library

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