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தமிழ்தமிழ் வரிசை
தமிழ் பகுதியானால் அறக்கட்டல்
THANJAVUR PAINTINGS IN KOVILLOOR

PHOTOGRAPHED BY C. NACHIAPPAN (KOVILLOOR SWAMY)

KOVILOOR MADALAYAM TRUST KOVILOOR, KARAIKUDI
KOVILLOOR PAINTINGS

For the first time, art lovers and devotees can feast their eyes on this spectacular gallery of gods, goddesses and godmen, outside the puja room of the Kovilloor Mutt, Karaikudi, where they have been worshipped for over a hundred years. In them we see once again how religion and art remain inseparable in India, as twin streams nurturing the aesthetic and spiritual quest.

Originally commissioned by Sri-La-Sri Veerasekara Gnanadesika Swami, Head, Kovilloor Mutt, these exquisite paintings have been photographed by C. Nachiappan, Kovilloor Swamy, who heads the Mutt today. The colours blaze forth in these reproductions on paper, as if they too are encrusted with gold leaf and gems as the originals are.

This collection will spring a surprise even on those familiar with Thanjavur paintings, a style that came into its own under Maratha rule in Tamil Nadu. It includes rare forms and themes, treated with finesse in every detail. Vaishnava, Shaivata, Shaakta, deities are well represented. The homage to Siva finds magnificent expression in the panels of his different forms, while the 64 episodes of the Tiruvilayaadal Puranam are told with their rasa intact. A portrait of one of the pontiffs of the Sringeri Mutt, adds a touch of realism.
INTRODUCTION

Over a hundred years ago during the reign of Sri-la-Sri Veerasekara Gnanadesika Swami of Koviloor Mutt the construction of the temple of Koviloor was successfully completed along with a temple tank with ‘Myya Mantapam’ (Pavilion in the middle of the tank), special vahanas for deities etc. He was a great architect of Koviloor, who executed many artistic projects to beautify the place. His sense of art and aesthetics pervaded the Mutt and its surroundings. During his time twelve beautiful vahanas were made exquisitely by Sri Sethurama Staphati’s father of Karaikudi, which were considered masterpieces of that time. As the Swamis of the Mutt worshipped Lord Siva as a great Guru of Gurus, every Mutt of the Koviloor Adheenam is adorned with a beautiful picture of Lord Nataraja.

Sri-la-Sri Veerasekara Gnanadesika Swami also ordered and acquired beautiful Thanjavur paintings for the Mutt, which are housed even today in the Pooja room of the Matadipathis. They have been the treasured possessions of the Mutt ever since. Besides the depiction of the 64 stories of the ‘Thiruvilayadal Puranam’, there are also other paintings on Vaishnavite, Kaumara, Ganapathy and Saktha themes, as also a large, elegant Nataraja and one of Dattatreya; a rare depiction of a sanyasi, that is, Sri Narasimha Bharathi of Sringeri Mutt, also can be seen.

Not many get an opportunity to view these admirable creations. This book offers the opportunity to not only view them in the beautiful photographs but even to possess them.

We dedicate this book to Sri La Sri Thiruchi Gnana Desika Mahaswamigal of Kailasa Ashram Mahasamastan.

Koviloor Aadeenam
THANJAVUR PAINTING

Culture and religion in South India have been always interconnected. A system of hierarchy, customs, functions and festivities gave the society of the time a specific identity. The members of the royal families were the patrons and promoters of art and culture. Many of them were also scholars and connoisseurs in the various fields of art. Religious monasteries or 'mutts' also played a major role in promoting arts and culture.

Thanjavur is known as the 'cradle of culture' keeping alive the tradition of creativity in music, dance, painting and sculpture besides literature and attracted talents from other regions, which also influenced the local styles and ideas. Being a principality of Vijayanagar, the Nayak influence was strong and later came that of the Marathas, intermingling with the then existing strong Tamil culture. Boasting of a great past historically as the capital of the Cholas and their architectural marvel Bhrahaddeeswarar temple, the Marathas provided a fresh air of thought and influence acting as a channel for ideas and techniques to flow from further north, though they preferred to maintain the political and social conditions as a legacy from the Nayaks. The Vijayanagar culture was quite strong in the South and was a period of creative growth and the Nayak as representatives in Thanjavur made special efforts to preserve Hindu ways and culture.

During the Maratha period a certain style of painting obtained a characteristic form and became known as Thanjavur painting, though similar styles could be found in Andhra Pradesh and Mysore around the same time. This style formed a linkage of different arts like painting, sculpture, jewellery and handicrafts. Many motifs used as sacred representations of deities became part of the decorative element in this iconic style of painting.

The roots of this art can be traced to Tirupathi, where the temple was the meeting point of devotees from Andhra, Kamataka and Tamil Nadu, which has later evolved into the variations, of which Thanjavur was one. The deities painted in the gilded and gemset technique became part of sacred icons. This technique was practiced in the southern region, albeit under different regional names, between 1700 and 1900 AD.

These sacred paintings were quite large and were also framed and hung on walls. Somewhat heavy in style due to the distance and height from which the work was seen, in a darkened area, they obtained a glowing presence.
These richly ornamented works became the icons of worship and almost replaced bronze images, whose production came down during that period. Limited in their objective, these paintings stressed sanctity rather than artistic achievement and were sacred objects limited to the Pooja rooms.

But portraits were not unknown, such as those of the rulers and courtesans.

Thanjavur paintings have obtained a lease of life in the recent past; young and old persons take keen interest in learning and practicing the art. Though the basic technique and style are maintained, chemical colours and glues have replaced the natural ones. Also these paintings have come out of the Pooja room to the living room. At least one Thanjavur painting is a must on the walls of the affluent.

Lakshmi Venkatraman
The central figure is represented in a symbolic and his/her most characteristic pose, surrounded by other figures like consorts, relatives etc. such as Krishna and Yasodha, or Krishna with Rukmini and Sathiyabhamma, Siva and Parvati, Sri Ramapattabhishekam in which Rama is accompanied by Sita, his brothers and Hanuman. The vahanas of the deities are also included in the imageries. On rare instances there can be found narratives with more than one figure. The composition is rather static and the figure/s are placed within a framework like a pavilion with arches, curtains and decorative borders.

There is absolutely no attempt at realism and the figures are drawn in a special rounded style, which gives them a sense of massiveness, with very clear outlines. The plump figures follow certain iconographic formulae and comprehensive sketch books were handy for the artists. But the artists had the liberty to use their imagination in secondary figures, which were smaller in size than the main figure. The picture space is often divided into smaller panels at the bottom or on the sides or even all around.

There is a mild sense of relief to these paintings, particularly with the use of gems and heavy gilding. The outlines of the jewellery and other ornamentation have been raised by applying putty, a mixture of natural gum and chalk powder. The colours used also were prepared from natural sources.

These paintings were done on wooden panels and were known in Tamil as “palagai padam”. First a sheet of cardboard was pasted on the panel with a gum made of tamarind seed. One or two layers of cloth were pasted over this and coatings of lime/chalk powder was applied. The surface then was smoothened by rubbing it with a polished stone or shell. On this surface the drawing was done with brush with all the details. Where gems or gold had to be placed, a paste then known as “sukkan” made from a fine powder of unboiled limestone mixed with glue was applied; then the stones were embedded in it; more of the paste was applied around the stones raising the level. In the spaces in between, designs were drawn with the brush using the “sukkan”; then thin gold leaf was pasted with a stiff glue, allowing the embossings to be seen on the surface. Finally the rest of the areas were painted.

The application of gold and gems was not quite indigenous, but ideas borrowed from Mughal, Rajasthani and Deccani paintings. As expert craftsmen and jewellers the Thanjavur artists were able to refine and perfect the technique.

Though no light and shade effect was given, a little bit of modelling was done with light blue if the figure was in white or a darker tone of the blue if it was of the figure. Strong, bright colours such as red, blue and green were used to fill the figure, with white, yellow, green or red depending upon which colour was prescribed to which deity. The colours were pure and not muddied, but red tints were attempted. The decorative structure was held together by the use of gold. Though earlier it was limited, once the picture had to be bright, the gold became more important, many parts of the assuming the character of gold encrustment.
Scenes from Thiruvilayadal Puranam
Scenes from Thiruvilayadal Puranam
Scenes from Thiruvilayadal Puranam
Scenes from Thiruvilayadal Puranam
Scenes from Thiruvilvadam Puranam
Nataraja
Meenakshi  
Subrahmanya
From the top:
1. Lingamoorthi
2. Umamaheswarar
3. Sandyanrittamoorthi

From the top:
1. Lingodhbhava
2. Somaskanda
3. Nataraja
From the top:
1. Suhasana
2. Bhujangasana
3. Kalyanasundara
From the top:
1. Ardhanareeswara
2. Bhikshadana
3. Kamadahana

From the top:
1. Gajasamhara
2. Simhagna
3. Lakuleeswara
From the top:
1. Paasupathamoolthi
2. Yoga Dakshinamoolthi
3. Kshetrapalaka

From the top:
1. Gangala
2. Veena Dakshinamoolthi
3. Veerabhadra
From the top:
1. Gurumoorthi
2. Gowrivarpithamoorthi
3. Matsyasamhara

From the top:
1. Aswarooda
2. Chakradanasvarooopa
3. Varahasamhara
From the top:
1. Gajantika
2. Gowrireelasamanvita
3. Prartanamoorthi

From the top:
1. Jalandaravadamoorthi
2. Vishapaharana
3. Raktabikshaayaradaanamoorthi
From the top:
1. Ekapada
2. Garudanataka
3. Sishyabhavamoorthi
Sri Rama Pattabhishekam
Krishna
Tripurasamharam
Veerabhadra
Chakradaana Swaroopa Moorthi
Suhasanamoorthy
Lingodbhavar
Subrahmanya with Consorts
Palaniyandavar
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