

Tanjore Painting

The Thanjavur style of painting with its use of golden relief work and glittering gems is a major school in South Indian art. This ancient style has been revived in the modern age and has become quite a household art that commands a large market. The themes are largely religious, though secular portraits are also found. Thanjavur paintings are also made as murals, or on unusual media like glass and ivory.

Thanjavur between the 17th and 19th centuries was the melting pot for several new ideas and forms. Of this intermingling was born the unique art of Thanjavur Paintings,¹ which reached its culmination during the Maratha period. The style soon spread throughout the southern region, and was much in vogue for about two hundred years, approximately from 1700 AD to 1900 AD. Thanjavur itself reached the pinnacle of glory as the capital of the great Chola dynasty that took art and architecture to phenomenal heights. This was a period of trade, war and travel, and this meant a steady inflow of new cultural ideas. A notable influence came from Andhra Pradesh, as Thanjavur was under the Vijayanagar principality. Telugu was spoken and written in the city, and there was a large body of devotional songs composed in Telugu. The Maratha conquest brought in the next major inspiration. Though the regime ruled Thanjavur only for about 180 years, it contributed heavily to Thanjavur art. The school also owes a lot to Karnataka culture, with its vertical/hierarchical as well as horizontal associations with other art forms. For instance, in its vertical continuity with folk art or its horizontal continuity with painting, sculpture, jewellery and other handicrafts, the Thanjavur style incorporates elements of both folk and classical art forms.

The painters were mostly of Telugu-speaking origin and from the Kshatriya or warrior community. Until today, they retain the suffix Raja or Raju after their names. Apart from painting, these artists were proficient in sculpture and architecture. They also fashioned temple decorations, *yahana*, and puppets.²

The iconic style of this school cannot be understood in isolation. The typical Thanjavur painting is an offshoot of the gilt and gems



technique used to ornament the idols of Hindu deities. The iconic style translated in painting has a distinct relationship with religious belief, and its survival and growth are ensured by social and religious sanction. It is the crystallising of a certain religious form, and this form is regarded as a symbol of the deity himself.³ The style was constantly developed to attract devotees, and visual representation became secondary. The stylisation of sacred images thrived mainly because of the people's need for an accessible model to stand as a replica of the original deity.⁴

There are five characteristic Thanjavur painting styles: the Vijayanagar style of murals; court painting or portraiture; traditional wood sculpture; indigenous or folk painting; and the gold impasto paintings. Typical Thanjavur art is usually a sacred painting or portrait in the gilded technique, a mural, or a painting on unusual media like glass, ivory, mica or playing cards, and painted wooden shrines. The composition for religious works usually comprises a single main frame – usually palace or temple pavilion – within which the deity is placed. The colours are generally deep – green, blue or red background with the figures in white, yellow, green or blue. The



ornamentation is glitteringly bright in gold and gem work, as the paintings were meant for the usually dark *puja* rooms.

The portraits are of real or imaginary persons, represented by physical or moral traits.⁵ The trend was to make both religious and political figures formal and perfect, though there was a major change after 1800 AD, with the head now treated realistically and the rest of the painting conventional.⁶ The portrait colours were delicate and sometimes soft and smoky, and portraits of kings were drawn with patriotic gestures. The murals are of three types: the first are made within rectangular areas and have borders (the ceiling of the Virupaksha temple at Hampi). In the second type, the mural is painted in friezes or long horizontal strips that illustrate a legend in sequence (the Virabhadra temple at Lepakshi). The third type, especially in vogue in the Maratha era, comprises paintings of colossal figures occupying huge spaces on ceilings and walls (Virabhadra on the ceiling of the central shrine at Lepakshi). But the Maratha style declined when the decorative style was overshadowed by the need to represent a multiplicity of gods.⁷ The reign of Sarabhoji



It in the 19th century saw the introduction of new media. Glass paintings, generally made by glaziers, peddlers or printers, was introduced in the second half of the 18th century and became a popular art. Though sold at pilgrimage centres, they are inexpensive paintings created for the middle and lower classes. Ivory paintings were comparatively expensive and were in great demand, while simultaneously other inexpensive media like mica and playing cards flourished and were sold as souvenirs. Painted wooden shrines were part of the equipment of travelling priests and singers. The painting technique usually used unboiled limestone as a surface coat, with a pinch of yellow oxide added to it. A sketch is drawn with specially prepared charcoal obtained by burning a tamarind twig inside a closed tube. A base mixture known as *makku* is used for relief work. This is covered with gold leaf paint, made by applying silver leaf over the surface of handmade paper and then smoking it with saffron and other herbs. When wooden planks are used, the wood is covered with paper by using gum made from tamarind seeds, and then covered with unbleached cotton cloth.

The themes of the paintings are from the Vaishnavite tradition, though Saivite themes were introduced at a later stage.



The Bhakti movement saw paintings of saints, Alwars, Nayanars, Samarth Ramadoss, Guru Gobind Singh, etc. Episodes from the Mahabharata, Ramayana and other epic poetry were also introduced.

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1. Appasamy, Jaya, *Thanjavur Paintings of the Maratha Period*, New Delhi, Abhinav Publications, 1980, p. vii
2. Ibid., 34
3. Ibid., 30
4. Ibid., 30
5. Ibid.: 45. Cf. Grassi, Mauro and Battisti, 'Portraiture, India' in *Encyclopaedia of World Art*, Vol. XI, col. 469
6. Appasamy, Jaya, *Thanjavur Paintings of the Maratha Period*, New Delhi, Abhinav Publications, 1980, p. 52
7. Ibid., p.63

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