

THE LIVING ART OF THANJAVUR



Deep in the heart of old Thanjavur City in Tamil Nadu a narrow path weaves its way between houses with deep verandahs. The patch of land in front of the doorsteps is decorated with the traditional Kolam, a design made fresh each morning with rice powder. Enter one of the small doorways & emerge in a long, enclosed verandah. At first sight it resembles a small art gallery but then a close look reveals innumerable paintings of Hindu Gods & Goddesses on the walls. They range from miniatures measuring a few square inches to frames as large as doors, gleaming, twinkling & reflecting light in the cool interior. These are examples of the famed “Tanjore Paintings” [Tanjore being the anglicized name for Thanjavur].

Walk further into the building, past the dark living room with its huge Oonjal, the traditional teak swing suspended from the ceiling, to the room at the rear with the best natural light & ventilation. This is the studio where the art is created. To use the term ‘painting’ would be preparing a misnomer. Tanjore art is not as much painting in the normal sense of using paint on paper or canvas as it is of making a collage of a devotional theme incorporating the processes of sketching, painting, bas relief, embellishment with gold foil & pasting of semi-precious stones & mirrors for heightened effect.

The origin of this ancient art form lies in the fabled Vijayanagara Empire (1336 – 1646 AD) which included large areas of present day Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh & Tamil Nadu. Thanjavur was a part of the Kingdom. The Vijayanagara Kings were great patrons of all forms of art. It is speculated that this art form began as a method of decorating building interiors – walls & doors. The interiors of palaces were painted with depictions of important events in the King’s reign – coronation, famous battle-field victories & other scenes that the king commissioned, while the wall paintings & murals in temples involved religious themes. Remnants of these wall paintings can still be seen on the walls of the Temple of Virupaksha in Hampi the capital of Vijayanagara Empire, in the temples of Lepakshi in Andhra Pradesh and the Temples of Kamakshi & Varadaraja in Kanchipuram. Thanjavur itself has samples of this painting in the interior of the first tier of the Gopuram of Periya Kovil of Brihadeeswara. Since access into the Gopuram is restricted, replicas of these paintings can be seen in the Museum situated in the temple compound. Over time, the technique was used in smaller compositions such as portraiture or the depiction of a religious theme. Under Sevappa Nayak (Viceroy of the Vijayanagar Ruler) & his successors the arts received substantial patronage. In the process Tanjore Paintings

flourished. With the break-up of the Vijayanagar Empire after the decisive defeat at Talikota, it splintered into several principalities, Thanjavur being one of them. Migrating artists in search of patronage found the principality an attractive destination.



Gajalakshmi

Even though the Telugu Nayaks in Thanjavur were replaced by the Marathas in 1675 AD, artists continued to enjoy steady patronage. Serfoji II, the preeminent patron of the Letters & the Arts, commissioned several paintings on diverse themes. The work can still be seen at the famed Saraswati Mahal Library in Thanjavur. Very good examples of the style here are the portraits of Saraswati, Ramdas the Guru of the Bhosale Dynasty & Adi Sankaracharya.

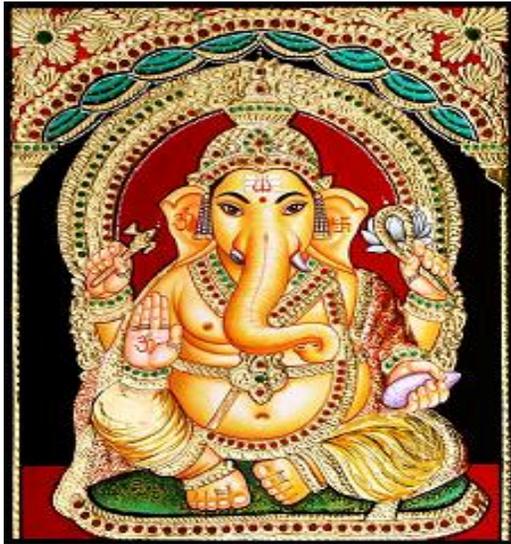
By this time, the painting style had evolved into two schools – the Mysore style & the Tanjore style. The Tanjore style has itself undergone several changes since its early days. The base material shifted from temple & palace walls to thick paper which was embossed & highlighted with gold. It then moved to wood with a paper & cloth cover to lend it durability. Even the material used changed with circumstances – starting with gold foil embellishment to the use of emeralds, rubies, uncut diamonds & pearls [when encouraged by royal or rich patrons], only to be replaced by semi-precious stones & mirrors today. The technique evolved from a flat rendering of the image albeit with embellishment to that of bas-relief that provides a three-dimensional effect.

The base is a single wooden plank of the Jackfruit Tree. After smoothening, the board is first covered with a sheet of paper that is pasted on it in order to prevent warping. The next layer is of white cotton cloth with the edges & corners neatly folded & pasted to the back of the board. The cloth is then coated with a mixture of glue & lime. As in earlier times and even today, artists following the traditional method of preparing the coating mixture use unboiled lime & tamarind seeds. However, another compound which is easier to prepare is also used nowadays. It is essentially a mixture of water, synthetic adhesive & french chalk powder or plaster of Paris. After the application of the prepared compound, the surface of the cloth-covered board is polished with a pebble or sandpaper to make the surface even. This ensures a smooth surface for painting.

Once the board is prepared, a sketch is made on it with the finer details of the image & background to be rendered including the areas where the semi-precious gems are to be placed. Following this, the gems are glued in position. The next step is rendering the relief or gesso which lends the three-dimensional effect to the painting. To ensure that the painting is made

attractive, the relief work needs to be extremely fine & intricate. The gesso is used essentially to highlight specific parts of the image such as jewelry as well as folds & borders in clothing.

The material used for gesso is essentially a mixture of edible glue [gum Arabica] & chalk powder. This paste is squeezed through a hole in a cotton bag, a cone or is squeezed with a brush on the defined areas of the sketch. When dried it is skillfully & intricately covered with gold foil. The gold foil has to be cut exactly to cover the gesso & then applied with the right amount of pressure to ensure that the foil is not spoilt nor the foil partially glued.



Ganapati



Saraswati

Painting is the next step in the process. The main figure is usually coloured white with slight shading of other colours. The background is of contrast colours such as blood red, ultramarine or navy blue & green. The colours used were originally natural dyes which traditional artists still employ today. Others, for expediency, use poster & acrylic colours. The predominant themes are religious – essentially Gods & Goddesses of the Hindu pantheon. Krishna in his background reigns supreme – as Vatapatra Sai, the baby lying on the banyan leaf with his big toe in his mouth; Navaneetha Krishna, the toddler with a pot of butter in his hand & Krishna with his mother Yashoda. Other Krishna Themes are usually the God with his consorts Rukmini & Satyabhama; Krishna dancing with Gopikas & Krishna with Satyabhama on Garuda. Rama Pattabhishekham, the coronation of Rama, is another perennial favourite. It is a depiction of the tableau of Rama's coronation where the central figure of Rama is flanked by his wife Sita, his Brothers & members of the Darbar with the ever-faithful Hanuman at his feet. A magnificent rendering of this theme is at the Ramaswamy Temple at Kumbakonam, 35 Km. from Thanjavur. The painting is about 8 feet in height. Adjacent to it is an equally imposing painting of Hanuman, the Royal Bhakta. The artists of the Tanjore School of Painting return time & again to the subjects of Narasimha, the Goddesses Lakshmi – depicted often as Gaja Lakshmi & Santana Lakshmi, Saraswati & Paravti. Other subjects that have been adopted recently are of the Sikh Gurus & the scene of the Nativity of Christ.



Venugopal

Though the themes remain predominantly religious, the social & cultural milieus in which these paintings are situated make them unique. Royalty & the Gods are depicted with absolute pomp & show. The ornamentation & dress of the main figures offer rich panoply to view. These comprise bolsters & cushions, several types of flower garlands mainly stylized strings of lotus, jewelry to decorate every part of the body-armlets, bangles, girdles for the waist, finger rings & toe rings, nose rings & studs worn both on the sides of the nostrils as well as in the center, hair ornaments such as Chandraprabha & Suryaprabha, multi-tiered necklaces with pendants, waistbands, ankle-bands & ankle chains.

Saris & dhotis have elaborate borders. Sometimes the saris are gold-based with small coloured motifs on them. Winged cherubs, chandeliers & drapes with tassels reflect traces of the British rule in India. The grammar of this art form includes rendering the figures with plump cheeks & well-rounded torsos. Aquiline features are unacceptable. The main character is flanked by smaller images as demanded by the theme. Secondary images include birds, animals & trees.

Traditionally a wide, plain teak wood frame was the norm. However, some frames used nowadays are Chettinad frames & other highly intricate ones. Starkly simple frames are also used so as not to shift attention from the main painting.

The Tanjore style is not confined to wall paintings alone but is also used to decorate ornamental plates, mantapas, pooja cupboard panels & vahanam for the transport of deities such as Garuda, Sesa, Hanuman, Kamadhenu, Nandi in temple processions, Annapakshi huge enough for temple processions as well as smaller ones for display in homes are also where the Tanjore style is used for decoration. The retiring room in the shrine for the Devi in the some of the main temples called Palli-arai is also decorated in this style. In fact, there was a time when wooden lamps two to three feet high were decorated in this style and displayed in homes.



Shiva & Parvati

Even today, artists of the Tanjore School keep traditional practices, methods & themes alive. Their ancestors migrated into Thanjavur from Telugu speaking areas during the Nayak period of the city's history and they remain rooted in their language & culture. Their surnames are usually Raju or Raja. Creating a Tanjore painting is a family enterprise. Everybody in the family is involved in the various processes that a painting has to go through; the work being assigned to an individual only after a period of apprenticeship. The student progresses to more difficult aspects of the painting as his expertise increases. The most important & demanding part is drawing the eyes of the figures which are usually rendered by the senior most artists.