



Travancore paintings

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Abstract

Travancore paintings represent an important dimension of the artistic and cultural heritage of the former Travancore region. These paintings reflect the religious beliefs, social traditions, royal patronage and aesthetic values that prevailed in the region, particularly through temple murals, palace paintings and other traditional artistic expressions. The themes commonly depicted in Travancore paintings include Hindu deities, mythological narratives, royal personalities, religious ceremonies and scenes from everyday life. The distinctive use of natural colours, traditional techniques, symbolic representations and detailed compositions demonstrates the artistic skills of the painters. The development and preservation of these paintings were closely associated with temples, palaces and institutions supported by the Travancore rulers. Thus, Travancore paintings serve not merely as works of art but also as valuable historical sources that provide insights into the religious, cultural and socio-political life of the region. This paper attempts to examine the origin, characteristics, themes, techniques, patronage and cultural significance of Travancore paintings and highlights their contribution to the historical heritage of South India

Keywords: Travancore paintings, temple murals, palace paintings, traditional art, hindu mythology, royal patronage, natural colours, cultural heritage, South Indian art, historical heritage

Introduction

Painting in Travancore assumes significance due to the outstanding works of one of the greatest painters India has ever produced, Raja Ravi Varma. Nandakumar maintains that it was only with Ravi Varma that, the concept of an individual artist with a professional identity and career consciousness and an extra-social space that he had claimed for himself by his image and role as an artist, has come about in the Travancore cultural context. The art of painting in Travancore has a tradition that goes back to the immediate post-Ajanta period. The murals of Tirunandikkara in South Travancore are the earliest specimens of this art in old Travancore. A large-sized painting on the Gopuram of the Ettumanur Siva temple which has, for its theme, Siva as Nataraja trampling underfoot the spirit of evil represented by a demon, has been described by the art critic Dr. Coomaraswamy as "The only old example of Dravidian painting". The earliest specimens of painting in Travancore belong to the ninth century A.D. if not earlier. These were discovered in the rock-cut cave temple of Tirunandikkara. The hall inside the cave seems to have been once richly decorated with paintings, but these unfortunately perished through neglect in course of time. Amongst the few relics of them now visible are outlines of the figures of Siva and Parvathi which have an admirable finish of technique and a delightful expression of grace and benignant peace. Copies of fragments of five out of seven panels are exhibited now in the Sri Chitra Art Gallery at Trivandrum.

Folk Paintings

There are five types of folk painting in Travancore: kolamezhuthu, kalamezhuthu, chumarchitrimezhuthu (murals), mukhamezhuthu, mukhavaranganal (masks) and kireedam (headgear). As in the other folk arts, folk painting is intimately linked to religious rituals. Kolam is celebrated in all homes in Travancore by laying flower designs on the floor. Although flowers of all colours and shapes are

arranged in definite patterns, from a distance, they give the impression of a beautiful painting.

Temple Paintings

Travancore has always had the practice of decorating the walls of temples, churches and palaces with beautiful paintings. Traces of the most ancient mural paintings are believed to be in the cave temples of Thirunandikkara. Mukhamezhuthu of the ritualistic arts shows all the qualities of the painting tradition in Travancore. Colours are applied on the face in different ways for Mudiyyettu, Theyyam, Kalikettu, etc. Chutti is a major component of Mudiyyettu. Meyyechuthu is another special feature of the folk arts of Travancore. It is Theyyam that uses different types of meyyechuthu. Here the chest and stomach of the performers are painted. Of all the folk-art forms that employ mukhavaranganal (mask), Padayani, Theyyam, Tira, Poothanthira, Mariyattom, etc., are some of the important ones. A painting that belongs to a period not later than the sixteenth century A.D. is found on the gopura (tower) of the Shiva temple at Ettumanur, which, Dr. Coomaraswamy says in his book, 'An Introduction to Indian Art', is "the only old example of Dravidian painting." It is twelve feet in length and three feet in height. There is no possibility of fixing the exact date of this precious work, but an inscription within the temple engraved on the base of the circular Garbhagriha (sanctum sanctorum) shows that the repairs to the temple were begun during the Kollam year 717 (1542 A.D) and the purification ceremony was performed in the year 720 M.E. (1545 A.D.). The painting on the gopura may, therefore, be ascribed to a period not later than the sixteenth century. The theme of the picture is that of Siva, as Nataraja, trampling underfoot the spirit of evil represented by a demon. The dance that is depicted in the mural is supposed to illustrate the mental and physical energy of the Creator. The pose and balance of the figure of Siva are a marvel of pictorial art. The flying braids of hair and the ends of the cloth which are twisted about the waist and body suggest violent ecstatic

movement. On the braids of the hair are a crescent, a small figure of the Goddess Ganga and a serpent. Snakes are seen coiling all around the picture. The figure of Siva is smeared with white ash. The figure radiates bliss, glory and peace. It inspires joy in his worship and strikes terror in the mind of the wicked. On the whole, the sixteen-armed picture of Siva in his mystic dance, symbolizing the rhythmic motion of the Universe is a masterpiece of pictorial art. A few damaged specimens of a group of paintings, presumed to belong to the same period, are found on the outer walls of the Garbhagruha of the Siva temple at Vaikom. From the temple chronicles relating to the year 1539 A.D., it is seen that there was a fire between 1529 and 1539 A.D. and that the temple was afterward rebuilt and consecrated. The paintings may, therefore, be taken to belong roughly to a period between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries. There are twenty panels of about forty deific figures which appear to have retained their ancient charm, though in some cases they have been of late interfered with by retouching. This style combines a clear-cut line with a singular purity and delicacy of colours. Though many of the panels have been subject to damage, those that have survived have a commanding grandeur and power. The most important of the paintings of Travancore are found on the topmost floor of the four-storeyed building in the Palace at Padmanabhapuram, the former capital of Travancore. There are nearly fifty scenes of mythological interest painted on the four walls of the room. They are designed with masterly skill and have remained wonderfully fresh. They are a valuable artistic heritage full of charm and stimulating interest.

The faces of many of the figures depicted are elongated. Most of them, though conventional in type, show a fascinating design and craftsmanship, enhanced by the glamorous magic of colours. Every scene has completeness of spirit and symmetry. The paintings include the major figures of the Hindu Pantheon and some incidents from the Puranas. The Royal Palace at Mattancherry, built by the Portuguese and presented to Veera Kerala Varma, the Ruling Chief of Cochin about 1555 A.D. is noted for well-preserved mural paintings belonging to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The Palace underwent renovation at the hands of the Dutch in 1663 A.D. The Ramayana scenes depicted in the rooms situated in the west of the Coronation Hall are a marvel of pictorial art. Four other chambers in the upper and lower storeys of the Palace are also painted with murals which although of a later period are remarkable specimens of unsophisticated workmanship, representing the contemporary social life of Travancore. In their technique and mode of decoration, they are almost akin to the mural paintings on the walls of the Sankaranarayana shrine in the Vadakkumnathan temple at Trichur, which according to an inscription recorded was completed on the 23rd of September 1731 A.D. The Krishna Leela scenes are comparatively of a later date. Despite the refixing of the plaster on certain portions of the wall and the continued burning of an oil lamp in one corner of the Chamber, these paintings are found in a state of good preservation. At the other end of the Coronation Hall known as the Kovinithalam or staircase room are seen on its walls six complete and one incomplete set of pictures representing the three popular Hindu cults viz., the Devi cult, the Vishnu cult and the Saiva cult.

The pictures representing the marriage of Parvathi with Siva featuring exactly the story of Kumarasambhava as described by Kalidasa though left incomplete, form an ideal of incomparable beauty and represent a study of the social life of Travancore. Unfortunately, these paintings are now in a state of deterioration, having suffered from thoughtless whitewashing. They form two sets, one representing Krishna Leela i.e., dallying of Siva with Vishnu Maya or Mohini. The panel has suffered considerable deterioration while the rest have been spoiled by recolouring. The figures of Kirathamoorthi, who assumed the form of Kiratha, hunter and presented the weapon of Pasupatha to Arjuna for the annihilation of the Kauravas; Vishnu as Yogasanamoorthi painted in a mixture of black and yellow colours and made to recline on the serpent Adishesha with head directed to the left of the observer; Krishna as Govardhanodharaka, holding a lot the Govardhana in his left hand; Umamaheswaramoorthi, representing Uma and Maheswara; Mahalakshmi and Bhootamatha; Vishnu as Bhogasanamoorthi and Hiranayagarbha, etc., are some of the finest pieces of pictorial achievement in the history of Travancore art. The framework of traditional painting in Travancore was strong as long as it was supported by a living realization of the principles that had set it up. As in wood carving so also in painting, each craftsman leaves on it the total of his ability, matured under particular contingencies of inheritance, surroundings and racial memory. These may be polished as urban or rustic. The scenes represented in the Mattancherry Palace are characterized by vitality and action; the figures are drawn with admirable skill and painted with a deep understanding of the colour values. The unknown artists who painted these knew well the canons of painting known as Shadanga. These pictures are not frescoes but tempera. All the figures have a rhythmic quality, poise and grace, and they are a finished work of a transient school trained in pictorial art. The faces of all the figures have a tranquil sense and suavity. They combine Saundarya with Lavanya or beauty with grace; and the artists who painted them on the walls have displayed great power of intuition, contemplation, meditation and technical skill and draftsmanship. Though the Mattancherry Palace has no architectural beauty, it is a massive building divided into narrow but long chambers decorated with about 1,000 square feet of murals distributed in four chambers belonging to three different periods beginning from the seventeenth century to the middle of the nineteenth century A.D. In the ancient Siva temple at Tiruvanchikulam are seen five panels of mural painting covering a space of about 105 square feet, the best of which is one depicting a fighting scene from Mahabharata. These are very badly damaged. A few relics of murals depicting some scenes from Ramayana and Markandeya Purana are also found in the Chemmanthatta shrine, covering an area of 190 square feet; but an excellent vestige of mural art is preserved in the Vadakkumnathan temple at Trichur, particularly on the walls of the Sankaranarayana shrine, which depicts incidents from the battle of Kurukshetra and portraiture of Nataraja, Dakshnamoorthi and Ganesa. Six damaged panels, presumed to belong to the latter half of the seventeenth century A.D. depicting Siva, Vishnu, Subramanya, Ardhanareeswara and two female figures have been found recently in a small shrine in the Siva temple at

Thripparangode possessing remarkable skill in artistic workmanship.

Mythological Interest

The paintings of Raja Ravi Varma are mostly of scenes and figures of mythological interest. They are remarkable for their richness of tone. Ravi Varma's best work was in oil portraiture; of which he was one of the most accomplished masters of the art in India. The dawn of a new era of painting in Travancore has been inaugurated by two eminent artists Sri K. Madhava Menon and Sri K.C.S. Panicker. Many difficulties prevent extensive studies to be conducted on rare and unusual portraits. Most of the paintings are located within temples that are still under worship. Extensive documentation is very difficult. Many of the paintings face conservation problems. They are often covered with soot emanating from ritual lamps. Some of the paintings in places like Thiriprayar faces critical problems like *Vedi Vazhipadu* or the bursting of crackers. Frequent blasts create vibration and produce soot that deposits on the paintings. The lack of mechanisms for regular cleaning of the paintings hinders the efforts of preservation. Temple authorities need to be sensitized to protect the rare paintings rather than erasing or redrawing them. The subjects for murals were derived from religious texts Palace and temple murals were glorified with highly stylized pictures of gods and goddesses of the Hindu pantheon. It was not a fanciful representation but drawn from the descriptions in the invocatory verses or 'dhyana sloka'.

Mural Paintings

The mural tradition of Travancore evolved as a complement to her unique architectural style. A close study of the mural art of Travancore will prove to be valuable in understanding the state's art and cultural tradition. It was a tradition that was not averse to incorporating the best of the diverse cultural and aesthetic influences that it was open to. But, alongside, it was also able to retain and preserve its quality. The state of Travancore holds second place in having the largest collection of archaeologically important mural sites, the first being Rajasthan.²¹³ According to scholars, the Travancore school of the painting represents the final and fading phase of Indian traditional painting. These wall paintings are characterized by their linear accuracy the adherence to colour symbolism, elaborate ornamentations and sensitive portrayal of emotions.

M.G. Sasibhooshan has brought to light some of the exquisite and classical mural paintings of Travancore in Ilankunnappuzha Subrahmanya temple, Palliman temple, Chemmanthitta Shiva temple, Vaniyamkulam Cherukatukulam, Thrikadiri Trimurti temple, Panjal Ayyappan Kavay, Durga of Cheranalloor temple, Arjuna of Kottakkal temple, Mohini of Keezhoor temple, Markandeya and Siva of Vaniyamkulam, and Krishna and Balarama of Pundarikapuram. The places at Padmanabhapuram, Krishnapuram and Mattanchery are the important sites for Travancore Murals. The temples at Panayannarkavu, Pundareekapuram, Pandavam, Thrissoor, chemmanthitta, Kaliampally and Thodeekkalam are equally famous for their frescoes. The church frescoes have paid more attention to a more or less realistic representation of human anatomy. The churches at Cheppad, Akapparambu and Ankamali are important for their old wall paintings. In the Siva temple at Vaikom are seen twenty paintings of about forty Puranic

figures, which have been assigned to the period between the 14th and 16th centuries. Though they have been subsequently retouched, they still retain their original charm. The Subrahmanya temple at Udayanapuram has mural paintings noted for their high level of artistic excellence. Ganapathi, Siva and Parvathi with Subrahmanya and Ganapathi, Nataraja, Sastha on horseback and Vishnu in Santhanagopalaram are the most interesting of the Udayanapuram murals. The Siva temple at Tiruvanchikulam contains five panels of mural painting covering a space of 150 sq. ft. One of these depicts a fighting scene from the Ramayana. The walls of the Sankaranarayana shrine in the Vadakkunnathan temple, Trichur, preserve mural paintings that depict incidents from the battle of Kurukshetra and deities like Siva, Ganesa and Dakshinamurthi. The Siva temple, Tripragode, the Sri Rama temple, Triprayar and the Krishna temple at Guruvayur contain mural paintings noted for their remarkable skill in workmanship.

All these paintings belong to a period from the middle of the 17th to the 18th centuries when pictorial art in Travancore was in its most active phase. The Todikalam temple near Kannavam in Tellicherry Taluk has some beautiful mural paintings which represent scenes from Hindu mythology. Another famous painting obtained from a palace in Travancore is that of Gajendramoksham in the Krishnapuram Palace. The murals of Kanthaloor temple in Thiruvananthapuram district (thirteenth century) and those at Pardihipapuram and Trivikramapuram in Thiruvananthapuram (14th century) are the oldest extant temple frescoes of Travancore. Representing the prolific period of mural art, viz., the period between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries A.D. is the Ramayana murals of Mattancherry palace and the paintings in the temples like Thrissur Vadakkumthana temple, Chemmanthitta Siva temple and those at Kudamaloor and Thodeekkalam in Kannur district. They represent a latter phase in the evolution of medieval mural tradition. Likewise, the wall paintings at Panayannarkavu, Trichakrapuram, Panjal Kottakkal as well as those in Padmanabhapuram and Krishnapuram palaces and those in the inner chambers and the lower floor of Mattanchery Palace, represent a much later period in the evolution of medieval mural tradition. A priceless treasure of art, it measures 14 feet by 11 feet and has been assigned to the first half of the 18th century. In its features, it bears resemblance to the Nataraja panel in the Ettumanur temple. In the words of Dr. Cousins, "It is a masterpiece in size, conception and execution". To cite an instance: the Nataraja figure at Ettumanur is enclosed within a circular rim, a motif noticed at Aimanam near Kottayam, as well as at Edacheri Amsam, in Kozhikode. Yet, for the study of variations in styles, the murals of the Mattanchery palace, Cochin, offer the best scope available so far. The mural paintings of Travancore, states Kapila Vatsyayan, tend to give larger than life-size to the characters of miniature paintings on palm leaves. On a carefully selective basis, the Travancore mural painting may be classified into the following themes

1. The Ramayana scenes
2. Some puranic episodes such as Shiva and Vishnu as Mohini or Siva and Ganga
3. Vishnu as Venugopala or Govardhan giridhari
4. Siva performing the Tandava dance

These themes are repeated in many sites which range from the Padmanabhapuram Palace in South Travancore to the Vadakkunnatha temple in the north. Nevertheless, there is a distinct Travancore character which makes them unique among Indian mural paintings. Travancore's mural paintings are the frescos depicting mythology and legends, which are drawn on the walls of temples and churches in South India, principally in Travancore. Ancient temples, churches and palaces in Travancore, South India, display an abounding tradition of mural paintings mostly dating back to the 9th to 12th centuries when this form of art enjoyed royal patronage. The traditional style mural art form, using natural pigments and vegetable colours, is being revived by a new genre of artists, actively involved in researching and teaching mural art. Travancore Kalamandalam, lately renamed Kalamandalam Deemed University of Art and Culture, is a major centre for learning Indian performing arts, especially those that developed in the southern state of India, with special emphasis on Travancore. Kalamandalam follows the Gurukula sampradayam, the ancient Indian education system based on residential tutelage. Kalamandalam was conceived to provide training to its students in the Gurukula Sampradaya, an ancient tradition of residential schooling where students stayed with the teachers, sharing the same atmosphere and learning from them the nuances of the arts.

Travancore on the south-western coast of India has won the admiration of every visitor because of its resplendent greenery and luxuriant vegetation. Every aspect of Travancore art blends into this pervasive greenery with perfect harmony. Nothing loud, nothing discordant. Every work of art maintains a subdued tone. One can say that the tradition of painting on walls began in Travancore with the prehistoric rock paintings found in the Anjanad valley of the Idukki district. Archaeologists presume that these paintings belong to different periods from the upper Paleolithic period to the early historic period. Rock engravings dating to the Mesolithic period have also been discovered in two regions of Travancore, at Edakkal in Wayanad and Perumkadavila in Thiruvananthapuram district. It is not difficult to trace the roots of the Travancore mural styles to the more ancient Dravidian art of kalamezhuthu. This was a much more fully developed art form connected with religious rituals. It was a ritual art of sprinkling and filling up different colour powders inside outlines sketched with the powder. Mural paintings of a much later period roughly the early half of the nineteenth century are noticed on the walls of the Sri Rama temple at Triprayar. They show a vigorous design, a highly rhythmic compositional sense and rich decorative pattern. All these belong to a period from the middle of the seventeenth to eighteenth centuries which appears to have been a period of unprecedented activity in pictorial art in Travancore. They are all drawn with power and precision, and display phenomenal art in drawing, grouping and colouring figures. Dr. Cousins had said that "art in the highest calls for high objective depiction, for the expression of the subjective state of mind and emotion and the recognition of the transcendental all-enfolding life of the cosmos".

These elements are notably present in the pictorial vestiges of mural art in Travancore in which are seen a rich profusion of simple and elegant beauty combined with humanity is seen and enjoyed. It may not possess the qualities of supreme greatness but it expresses to the full the

soul not only of those who produced it but of those for whom it was wrought. Four mural paintings belonging to the same period are found on the walls of the Srikoil of the Vishnu temple at Aranmula. Each of them measures 63 inches in length and 50 inches in height, painted in pairs on either side of the façade of the central shrine. Another wall painting of special interest belonging to this period and depicting a palace scene was noticed in the Karivelapura Malika attached to the Fort Palace, Thiruvananthapuram. A mural scene depicting the Puranic story of Gajendramoksham, occupying a wall space of 154 square feet (14 feet horizontal and 11 feet vertical) was brought to light in the Krishnapuram Palace. In execution, posture and composition it is a priceless piece of artwork and is the largest in the State so far discovered. Specimens of mural painting of a later and decadent period, roughly of the late eighteenth century are found on the walls of the temples at Panayannarkavu near Mannar. There are two temples, one dedicated to Shiva and the other to Bhagavati. Both are decorated with well-preserved mural paintings. On the walls of Vadakkunnatha temple at Thrissur are found two rare paintings which are about 350 years old - a reclining Siva and a Nataraja with 20 arms. Side by side with the great achievements in the pictorial art of the country, there was fostered and kept up the primitive art of the people. A fusion of decorative and representative impulses inherent in the religious cults and beliefs of the people is one of the principal features distinguishing this art. Decorative geometrical designs of a conventional character in the form of Padma (Lotus), Swastika, or Chakra (Wheel) are the necessary concomitants of temple rituals in the State.

The figures of Shasta, Kali and Durga are generally drawn. The materials employed in their painting are -charcoal powder for black, rice powder for white, the powder of turmeric for yellow, the powder of green leaves for green and a mixture of turmeric and chunnam for red. The figures drawn with these colours are lively and vigorous; they have a rude barbaric splendor. The history of painting in Travancore from about the last quarter of the 18th century marks a distinct change through the influence of foreign schools on local talent. The portraits of Kartika Thirunal Rama Varma Maharaja, Bala Rama Varma Maharaja and four princesses of the Royal family, now in the Ranga Vilasom Palace at Thiruvananthapuram are specimens of water-colour paintings on the model of the Mughal miniatures, presumably by indigenous artists. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, Travancore seems to have taken a lead in the art of painting and produced several painters of merit. The performance of religious rites necessitated the development of a special kind of pictorial art in Travancore known as Kalamezhuthu. Decorated geometrical designs of the conventional type like Padma, Swastika and Chakra are indispensable in connection with the observance of temple rites. Moreover, the cult of Durga, Sastha and Kali has been practiced in Travancore temples by drawing the figures of those deities on the floor and singing hymns in their praise for 41 days a year during the Mandalam season. Some relics of mural paintings, presumed to be of the fourteenth century, have been noticed on the walls of the Thiruvampadi shrine in the Sri Padmanabhaswami temple, Thiruvananthapuram.

A painting that belongs to a period not later than the sixteenth century A.C. is found on the gopura (tower) of the Siva temple at Ettumanur, in North Travancore, which, Dr.

Coomaraswamy says, in "An Introduction to Indian Art" is "The only old example of Dravidian painting." Bearing a close resemblance to the mural art depicted on the walls of the Sri Padmanabhaswami temple at Thiruvananthapuram are a few paintings on the walls of the central shrine in the Tirumuzhikulam temple dedicated to Lakshmana at Mulakulam, in the vicinity of Vaikom and Ettumanur. Though many of them are damaged, their colours have crystalline purity. The roots of the extant mural tradition of Travancore could be traced as far back as the seventh and eighth century A.D. It is not unlikely that the early Travancore murals along with its architecture came heavily under the influence of Pallava art. The oldest murals in Travancore were discovered in the rock-cut cave temple of Thirunandikkara, which is now in the Kanyakumari District of Tamil Nadu.

Church Paintings

Churches of Travancore also contain some valuable pieces of paintings. The Jacobite Syrian Church at Cheppad is renowned for its beautiful and historically significant murals. These murals kept in the Holy of Holies depict the great Apostles, scenes from the life of Jesus Christ and a Malankara Metropolitan. They are exquisite specimens of indigenous mural art and have a distinct Travancore touch about them. The Jacobite Syrian church at Mulanthuruthi contains some beautiful fresco paintings by foreign artists depicting biblical scenes. The St. Sebastian's Church, Kanjur, contains a unique kind of mural painting. On the walls of this church are painted a remarkable action picture of European officers in the red uniform of the English East India Company fighting, along with the bare-footed Travancore soldiers. The spatial distribution of the wall paintings throughout Travancore is also a significant pointer. Despite differences, there exists a basic unity in this vast repertoire of murals not only in form and colour but also in minor motifs.

Conclusion

Travancore paintings constitute a significant part of the artistic and cultural history of South India. Their themes, colours, techniques and symbolic representations provide valuable evidence of the religious beliefs, cultural practices, social life and royal traditions of the Travancore region. The patronage extended by the rulers, temples and other institutions played a major role in the development and continuity of this artistic tradition. Apart from their aesthetic value, these paintings function as visual historical records that help researchers understand the cultural identity and historical experiences of the region. However, changing social conditions, environmental factors and inadequate conservation pose challenges to their survival. Therefore, systematic documentation, scientific conservation, academic research and public awareness are essential for protecting this valuable heritage for future generations. The study of Travancore paintings consequently contributes not only to the understanding of traditional Indian art but also to the broader reconstruction of the cultural history of Travancore

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