

Traditional Paintings of South India: A modified approach

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Historical background

The South of India has a rich heritage of Hindu art and architecture dating back many centuries. It also has a unique tradition of painted icons from schools of painting in both Tanjavur and Mysore, cities of great historic importance and cultural capitals of the states of Tamil Nadu and Karnataka respectively. They were the capitals of the Nayakas and Wodeyars, both originally the vassals of the Empire of Vijayanagara. After the fall of Vijayanagara the clan of artists branched out into two groups, known as the 'Rajus' in both regions, and were offered protection by the now independent rulers of Mysore and Tanjavur.

The resemblance between the paintings of the two schools is clearly visible as a result of their common origins. However they also have unique features that make it possible to differentiate between the two types of painting. The paintings depicted sacred icons of Hindu deities and their function was originally considered to be 'ornamental' since they were used to embellish the 'pooja' or holy place although many have subsequently developed a profound religious significance in their own right.

Significant features of Tanjavur and Mysore Schools: Tanjavur paintings

Tanjavur, as mentioned earlier, was a capital city with an ancient history. It attained great eminence under the Cholas when it was the premier city of an extensive empire. Even in the later Nayaka period, when the kingdom was a feudatory of Vijayanagara, it was a cultural centre and the fact that it was the seat of the provincial government, gave it a special prestige. The most typical Tanjavur paintings portray a gilded and gemset technique and depict sacred icons of the Hindu deities. Iconic styles of painting have developed in all those places where there is a religious movement around a specific deity. These ornamental paintings which were used in worship or served to embellish the pooja room have subsequently become revered as having an iconic or god-like status.

Tanjavur subject, colour and composition

The subjects of the icons were traditionally Child Krishna, Yashoda with Krishna, Coronation of Rama, Vishnu, etc. In Shivite figures, Nataraja and Shiva with Devi were most popular. The main figures were frequently copied from a well known painting by a master artist. Many of the paintings are also characterised by an architectural background.

The composition of the icons was characteristically static and consisted generally of one main figure, the deity, which was centrally placed. It was rare to find any narrative or illustrative subjects. The space was compressed and made thick by a heavy encrusting and enclosing ornamentation.

The drawing of the figures is monumental and robust and the three-dimensionality of the figures is further emphasised by shading or modelling. The shading is often in light blue if the figure is depicted in white, or in a darker tone than that of the body colour.

The colour schemes of these pictures are generally strong. There may be a deep green, strong blue or red background, while the principal figures are mainly in white or yellow, green or blue. Red and blue, or red and green arrangements often dominate the composition. The colours used are pure and flat and there is little interest in mixed tints. Variations are produced by texture and surface decorations. Whatever the colours, the major role is played by the gold, which tends to bind and hold the picture in its decorative structure. In early pictures, gold was used sparingly but with the development of the heavy gem-set style it took on a major role and the painting itself became a gigantic ornament.

Tanjavur supports

The Tanjavur paintings were generally created on wooden panels. A single panel of wood from the Jack tree was generally preferred however there are instances when three or four pieces of wood were joined together. Icons of this type can be very large sometimes on a monumental scale. A sheet of cardboard was traditionally pasted to the wood base with gum made from tamarind seed. Over the cardboard, one or two layers of cloth were pasted. The cloth was then coated with 'Sudha' a white coating made from lime. After several coatings of Sudha had been applied, the surface was smoothed by rubbing with a polished stone or shell. On this prepared surface, the drawing is executed with a brush, with indications of all the details including the places where the gems are to be set.

Tanjavur gesso

On the areas where gold or gems were to be placed, a paste called 'Sukkam' or 'gesso' was applied. The gesso was prepared from un-boiled limestone that had been finely ground and mixed with gum to form a sticky paste. A mixture of Chalk Powder (50%), Raw lime powder (50%), and Gum Arabic (as required) was mixed well in a bowl and sieved two to three times. The resulting mixture was then ground in a stone bowl by hand for two to three hours. The more grinding that took place the finer the gesso became. The gesso was tested for use by drawing a fine line on a test support with a brush. If the line flowed continuously then the gesso was well prepared and ready for use. If correctly made the gesso was very long lasting provided it was stored in a cool dry place. After the gems have been placed in position more gesso was applied raising the level surrounding the gems, so that they were held securely in position.



Figure 1: Example of Thanjavur painting. Krishna.



Figure 2: A detail of a Mysore painting, 'Geethopadesha' showing damage to gold on part of the figure prior to conservation and reintegration.



Figure 3: A detail of 'Geethopadesha' after conservation and reintegration.

Tanjavur gilding

Gold was applied to both flat areas and embossed or raised areas. The Gold was generally used in its purest form although in some cases, a thin handmade paper pasted with silver leaf and smoked with saffron to give it the colour of gold was also used. The gold leaf application was carried out using a method developed by the Rajus. The thick leaf was cut into small pieces that were pressed onto the gem-set area in order to make an impression of the shape and location of the gems. The respective shapes of the gems were then cut out of the gold leaf and it was pressed into place using a soft cloth and a dilute gum arabic adhesive. Greater pressure would need to be applied if the embossing was high or the gems were of a particularly large size. The overlapping of the gold leaves was clearly visible, covering all the areas surrounding the gems and was completed prior to the application of the decorative paint layers.

Mysore school paintings

The traditional Mysore school was by and large a representation of the Vijayanagara School; as exemplified by the paintings in the ceiling of the Virupaksha temple at Hampi image? After the fall of the Vijayanagara Empire in 1565 AD, Mysore and Tanjavur became great cultural centres, where the traditional style of the Vijayanagara school was re-energised and given a fresh lease of life. During the rule of Mummadi Krishnaraja Wodeyar of Mysore, traditional art in Mysore reached its peak.

Mysore subject, colour, composition and technique

The most popular themes of the traditional paintings of Mysore school have been 'Devis'. Other themes that were also depicted included: 'Coronation of Lord Rama'; 'Kodanda Rama'; 'Dashavathara of Vishnu'; 'Dancing Shiva'; 'Crawling Child Krishna' and 'Yashoda Krishna'. It was common practise to copy the deities from existing paintings by a master artist.

Mysore supports

Prior to beginning the painting a support was prepared from paper, textile, wood or alternatively the surface of a wall. If paper was to be used it was provided with the rigidity required by attaching it to a secondary support, known as a 'Vasli', made from either paper pulp or a thick layer of old newspapers. The Vasli was made from a thin, light wooden plank to which sheets of paper were pasted using a thick starch paste until the required thickness was been achieved. The paper on which the painting was to be executed made up the final layer and was cut slightly larger than the board so that the margins could be wrapped securely around the edges and secured at the back. After drying the board in the sun, the surface was rubbed with a polished quartz pebble to render the surface smooth and even.

If a textile support was to be used it was first adhered to a wooden board using a thick paste made from dry lead white mixed with gum arabic and a small quantity of gruel. The board was then dried and in the same manner as the Vasli.

If a wooden support was to be used the surface was prepared with dry lead white, yellow ochre and glue.

Mysore pigments

The colours that were used were mainly mineral colours and tree extracts. They were white, black, vermilion, green, chrome yellow, yellow ochre, Indian red, crimson, amber, indigo blue, gamboge, etc. Additional colours were also produced by mixing two or more of the primary colours.

Mysore gesso

Gesso was made from the following ingredients: Lead White (2 parts), Gum Arabic (2 parts), Gamboge (1 part). Although the ingredients vary slightly from those used in the Tanjavur gesso the method of preparation, grinding and testing was the same.

Mysore gilding

A thin gold leaf was used for gilding the Mysore paintings. In order to handle the fragile leaf and prevent it blowing away during the gilding process it was sandwiched between a thin sheet of butter paper and a sheet of white writing paper. On a plain white sheet the sandwich of gold leaf was cut into several pieces. The surface that was to be gilded was brushed with dilute gum Arabic and the gold leaf lifted into position using the tip of a fine brush lightly moistened with the same gum. The process was repeated until the entire area was covered in the fine gold leaf. Finally a soft cloth was used to brush away any loose or unfixed gold leaf. Due to the thinness of the leaf the overlapping of the gold leaf was not visible in the finished painting.

After the gilding had been completed the paint layers were added, often copying images of the deities from examples by the masters, and then the entire painting was glazed by covering the painting with a thin paper and rubbing the surface with a soft glazing stone.

Tanjavur and Mysore schools – the similarities and the differences:

The paintings of the Mysore school are often mistaken for those of the Tanjavur school because of certain similarities resulted from their shared heritage. The features that the two schools shared included: architectural backgrounds; contemporary costume and ornaments characteristic of the local royalty. Both schools tended to have a conventional approach towards the depiction of the landscape. It was a common practice in both the Tanjavur and Mysore schools to copy from a master painting by tracing the original. Paintings of both schools are usually varnished.

Tanjavur characteristics

Tanjavur work was generally executed on a textile support. The gesso was made from raw lime powder mixed with a paste of powdered tamarind seed and its application characterised by high relief work. Pieces of coloured glass, jewels and even pearls were used to decorate the Tanjavur paintings. The gesso was coarser and weaker than Mysore gesso. The gilding was generally cut from thick sheets of gold leaf although gold-coated silver leaf was also used for some ornamentation. The paint work was executed with a wide range of colours and mixtures of colours.

Mysore characteristics

The Mysore painter favoured a support made from paper on cloth and wood. The gesso was made from white lead, gamboge and gum and was finer and stronger than the



Figure 4: A Mysore painting 'Coronation of Lord Rama' prior to conservation and reintegration.



Figure 5: A Mysore painting 'Coronation of Lord Rama' after conservation and reintegration.

Tanjavur gesso producing a picture of great clarity that was more durable than those produced by the Tanjavur school. The gilding was carried out using only thin pure gold leaf. The paint work was executed with a limited range of colours and rarely any mixtures were used.

Most common inherited defects in both the Tanjavur and Mysore school paintings

The Tanjavur paintings often experienced problems resulting from the wooden supports that were a characteristic of their construction. Fluctuations in the relative humidity (RH)



Figure 6: A Mysore painting 'Yeshodha Krishna' prior to conservation and reintegration.

frequently caused the wood to expand and contract resulting in cracks and the delamination of the ground layer from the panel. In addition the nails used to join the panels together suffered corrosion problems, resulting in a loss of strength as well as iron oxide staining to the primary support layer. Insect attack was also a common problem especially if the wood was of poor quality or had not been properly seasoned and consequently was still relatively soft. Another attraction for the insects was the tamarind seed glue used in the preparation of the panels.

The vasil boards that were a characteristic of the Mysore school were often adversely affected by the poor quality newsprint used in their construction. The acidity that was produced as the newsprint degraded would migrate into the primary support of the painting instigating hydrolytic degradation.

Problems that were found in paintings from both schools included the use of certain colours such as Verdigris, which although rarely used always contributed to corrosion problems of the support materials. Localised cracquelure problems presented by paintings from both schools appear to be associated with the uneven application of the varnish.

Traditional approaches to framing the paintings from both schools often created problems since the glazing was placed in direct contact with the varnished paint surface. This frequently resulted in the development of mould growth and in extreme cases the adhesion of the varnish layer to the glazing.

Re-integration

The reintegration process on these paintings was carried out in a manner intended to preserve both the function of the painting as well as the original materials and techniques.



Figure 7: A Mysore painting 'Yeshodha Krishna' after conservation and reintegration.

The function of the religious paintings

The original function of the paintings was as a support for worship or as a decoration for the holy place of worship. The paintings were not intended to have an aesthetic function but to act as intermediaries with the gods. Damaged or distorted figures of Gods and Goddesses can no longer be worshipped according to Hindu religious concept. Consequently damage or losses have to be re-integrated if the paintings are to continue to fulfill the function for which they were intended.

Client consultation

The reintegration work was aged after consultation with the clients. It was decided to re-integrate the areas of loss in order to preserve the function of the paintings whilst adhering to sound conservation practises. Although the infills would follow the traditional materials and techniques of the Tanjavur and Mysore schools there would be distinct differences that would allow a distinction between original and non original materials when closely examined. In keeping with the traditions of copying that existed within both schools it was agreed to replace the lost imagery with copies traced from the collection of traditional South Indian paintings held at the conservation centre.

The policy, materials and techniques in reintegration

The reintegration was carried out in a manner that could be easily distinguished on close examination. The materials and methods used were reversible. There was no re-creation, over enthusiasm or overlapping onto the original.

In order to carry out the re-integration work to the highest standard the conservation team familiarised themselves with the materials and techniques of both the Tanjavur and Mysore schools.

Particular attention was paid to the direction and source of illumination that was used during the conservation treatment as well as that which would be used for its eventual display since these play a critical role in evaluating materials and techniques for the reintegration.

Paper of very similar thickness and texture to the original paper was chosen for the infilling work. In most of the cases, indigenous paper was used for infilling, but in some exceptional cases European and Oriental papers were also used. The selected paper was toned down to the lightest of the background tones using Windsor and Newton water colour. Although pure earth colours had been used for the original paintings it was decided to use Windsor and Newton water colours to avoid any future confusion over original and non original parts of the painting. Some of the larger areas, where typical colours such as Ultramarine and Emerald had been used, were reintegrated with indigenous earth colours. The missing area was traced using transmitted light. Two types of tracing were carried out. The first was a template for cutting out the replacement infill. The second was to provide guidance on replacing the lost imagery.

The first tracing was transferred to an infill paper, leaving a border of about 3mm around the edges. The edges of the traced pieces were pierced and separated with sufficient fibres, which can hold and merge with the original. Both the infilling and painted paper was locally moistened using a mixture of IMS and water (50:50) before applying the paste. Wheat starch paste was used as adhesive. The thickness of the paste was maintained as per requirement. Soon after this the painting was sandwiched with release paper and soft synthetic felt and kept under sufficient pressure for about a week's time to avoid any distortion on in-filled paper.

The second tracing was transferred to some rough paper in order to work up the detail of the lost imagery. In some cases where missing portions were complicated with figurative work, a tracing was taken from a similar painting in the collection held at the conservation centre, in order to complete the missing portion. It was felt that this approach was in keeping with the tradition of copying that existed in both schools. The final drawing was transferred to the in-filled paper and carefully developed. Any small losses were carefully infilled with tinted or toned tissue paper pulp.

Gesso

Since freshly prepared gesso is very strong compared to aged gesso care had to be taken to avoid the introduction of internal stresses. It was therefore decided to use a modified material that reflected the strength of the aged gesso in order to repair the embossed areas. The material was made up from: Chalk Powder (50%); lime powder (50%) and 5% Gelatin in water. The mixture was ground together in the traditional manner and applied in thin layers in order to avoid the formation of cracks.

Gilding

It was particularly challenging to match the newly applied gold leaf with the original gold leaf. In most of the paintings 24 carat goldleaf had been used, which does not change its colour during ageing process. However, it can become dull due to changes in the colour of the varnish, weathering and an accumulation of surface dirt. However despite these changes it retains its gleam. Attempts to match the colour of the new gold to that of the original using watercolour washes were



Figure 8: A detail of a Mysore painting 'Durga on Lion' showing an earlier repair and reintegration prior to treatment.



Figure 9: A detail of a Mysore painting 'Durga on Lion' after conservation and reintegration.

unsuccessful since they resulted in a loss of the gleam.

Since the traditional gold application method was irreversible it was decided to first attach the gold to an intermediary support of Japanese Lense tissue paper using diluted gum Arabic. Gently stressing of the surface of the gold achieved a good match to the colour and gleam of the original gold. The gold infills were secured in position using gum arabic.

The modified approach to the gilding worked well on the Tanjavur paintings and on the unembossed Mysore paintings. However in cases where there was intricate relief work the intermediary support prevented the gold moulding itself to the complex design and in such cases the traditional approach was used.

Conclusion

The conservation staff of ICKPAC faced challenging decisions while restoring the traditional Tanjavur and Mysore school paintings. They have tried to achieve a balance that takes into consideration the need to maintain the function of the religious paintings by re-integrating their imagery whilst at the same time preserving the integrity of the materials and techniques used in the original.

Although reintegration is an integral part of conservation there has been very little debate on appropriate approaches to the re-integration of works of art on paper.

As a result of their experiences with the religious paintings from Tanjavur and Mysore the Conservation team have had the opportunity to consider different approaches to

reintegration that can not only preserve the intended function of the object but can be conducted within the limits of conservation ethics.

In this instance it was of particular importance to preserve as much original material as possible since the paintings are the primary source of information on the materials and techniques used in the schools of Tanjavur and Mysore. There is very little documentary evidence on their respective materials and techniques, which has resulted in the loss of a rich cultural tradition. Although a revival of the dying tradition was instigated at the end of the 20th Century there is an urgent need for further research into these paintings in order to keep them alive for future generations.

Abstract

The South of India has a rich heritage of Hindu art and architecture dating back many centuries. It also has a unique tradition of painted icons from schools of painting in both Tanjavur and Mysore, cities of great historic importance and cultural capitals of the states of Tamil Nadu and Karnataka respectively. The cities were originally under the control of the Vijayanagara Empire but after its fall the new rulers of Mysore and Tanjavur offered protection to the groups of artists known as 'Rajus'. These artists painted sacred icons of the Hindu deities that were used to embellish the 'pooja' or holy place. Although originally conceived as 'ornamental' many have subsequently been attributed with a profound religious significance in their own right.

The materials and techniques used in the icons created by the Rajus were tightly family secrets only passed down through family members by word of mouth. Consequently there is very little documentary evidence outlining the practices of the Rajus and what little that can be learnt must come from the paintings themselves.

The paper discusses the issues faced by conservation staff of ICKPAC when restoring the traditional paintings from the Tanjavur and Mysore schools. Situations frequently occur in which private clients want the missing portions of their paintings to be recreated. Many clients consider the function of the paintings to still be essentially ornamental or decorative and therefore cannot see the ethical dilemma faced by the Conservation staff who have to measure such demands against the need to practice restraint while retouching what have become important historic works of art. In the case of the paintings from the Tanjavur and Mysore schools preservation of the original materials is of particular importance since they are the only source of information on the traditional materials and techniques of the Rajus. The solutions adopted by the staff at ICKPAC are often a compromise in which re-integration is carried out but only using materials of appropriate archival quality in a manner that can be easily distinguished on close examination and which could be easily removed if required.

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Biographical details

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Acknowledgements

We are very grateful to Mr. S. Subbaraman, Director of ICKPAC for all his support and encouragement to work on this project and to prepare this paper. Our thanks are also due to Miss Madhu Rani K.P., Conservator and Miss Gayathri Devi.K, Office Assistant of ICKPAC for their co-operation. Our thanks Mr. Mike Wheeler, Senior Paper Conservator, V&A Museum for his valuable advice on preparing this paper

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