Contemporary Temple Mural Painting in Tamil Nadu: Piety and Popularity

Swapna Malarmeni Sathish

SYNOPSIS

This study is based on the hypothesis that the mural tradition in Hindu temples may be seen as a continuing practice as evidenced by the contemporary murals being painted in temples in Tamil Nadu. These contemporary murals have been considered from the varied perspectives of the artist, the patron and the temple authority involved in their creation, while analyzing the roles of piety and popularity in the intention, production and reception of these murals. In conclusion these murals are seen as positioned against a traditional backdrop, yet entrenched within the framework of popular art through the recycling of images—with the artist forming the pinion in locating the paintings, physically, ideologically and art historically within the range of the popular—physically within the temple, ideologically relating to the notions of piety and popularity, and falling within the scope of art history as related to popular culture.

As a tradition, mural painting in India boasts a long history evident in its prehistoric beginnings. The earliest extant remains of what is commonly termed 'classical' mural painting in India can be found at Ajanta dating from the second century BCE. The body of Ajanta murals has the connotation of the 'classic' and is accorded high repute because it exhibits immense 'maturity' in terms of style, line, figuration and composition. Its significance also comes from the 'noble' subject matter depicted, specifically religious and courtly. Most importantly, it is pan-Indian in that the style has travelled, with derivations being seen centuries later in Sittanavasal, Kerala, Sigiriya and even in the Far East.

However, after the eighteenth century, painted decoration in temples is not mentioned in art historical literature. Murals have not been studied as belonging to the 'classical mural

tradition,' subsequent to the paintings of the Nayaka periods of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Enough time has gone by since then for there to be a continuation appended to the history of religious mural painting in India. Nonetheless current scholarly research and publication have ignored this area of Indian art.

The paucity of art historical scholarship in this particular arena would lead one to assume that in southern India such murals in Brahmanical Hindu temples have not been painted. On the contrary, this is not the case. Paintings have since been created on the temple walls and the tradition still continues to this day. Mural painting exists not in the 'classical' convention, but as a popular expression. Commonly known as '*kamalam paintings*' in Tamil Nadu these murals are born of tradition, but are engaged in the contemporary idiom. The difference between the conventional and the contemporary mural paintings in temples is principally apparent in the variance of the representation. In the contemporary scenario, visualisation has inevitably assimilated the substance of diverse external influences that have emerged with time. There have been changes in cultural practices as well as a paradigm shift in aesthetic sensibility.

While much has been written about the 'external influences', namely prints, calendar art and cinema, all of which are not usually associated with tradition, little has been published about the contemporary murals, per se. This almost undocumented field in the visual arts—contemporary temple mural painting in Tamil Nadu—forms the area of research with select examples forming the focus of the study. With contemporary temple mural painting being sandwiched between the sacred and the secular in terms of theme and representation respectively while forming an essential part of the culture, the emphasis is placed upon aspects of piety and popularity.

The aspects of piety and popularity will be addressed by viewing the painted murals through the context of the temple space, the artist, the patron, the temple priests and the regulating or governing authority of the temple, namely the Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowments (Administration) Department [HR&CE] of the government of Tamil Nadu. The paintings themselves form the primary sources on which the study is

premised. However the purpose of this study is not to deal with the subject matter of the painted schemes in detail, but to understand the position of these murals in the context of worship in the Hindu temple in Tamil Nadu.

These contemporary temple mural paintings can be seen as a trajectory of traditional painting in their contextualisation within the mural tradition and the modern democratic polity of the state of Tamil Nadu. With time, paintings in temples have assumed a different character in keeping with the changing times, newer technology and cultural influences, and in doing so they have inadvertently lost their place within the 'classical' framework. The change in the style of representation and expression may be considered an important reason as to why these contemporary murals are not being regarded as belonging to the original classical tradition.

Representativeness has been a criterion for the selection of the seven examples to be studied. The examples chosen for this study are geographically limited to the state of Tamil Nadu. The major temple towns of religious and historical significance in Tamil Nadu, in terms of *sthala yatra* (*thala yatirai* in Tamil) or pilgrimage may be listed as Madurai, Kanchipuram, Kumbakonam, Srirangam, Palani, Tiruchendur and Chidambaram. Since Kanchipuram, Kumbakonam, Srirangam and Tiruchendur do not have contemporarily painted mural schemes in major temples, the study has been limited to dealing with Madurai, Palani and Chidambaram. The list also includes temples and large shrines within temple complexes from smaller towns such as Srivilliputtur, Pateeswaram and Tiruvahindrapuram respectively. In Srivilliputtur, the Andal temple underwent elaborate renovation with the mural paintings forming part of the renovation scheme. Pateeswaram may be viewed as belonging to the immediate vicinity of the important temple town of Kumbakonam, with the Durgambigai shrine, dedicated to an important cult deity worshipped by the Tamil people, being of historic relevance. The Hayagreevar shrine at Tiruvahindrapuram is noted as a popular site of pilgrimage. All the temples in the study, excepting the Nataraja temple in Chidambaram, are administered by the HR&CE.

I have consciously considered it necessary to stay away from examples of numerous small wayside shrines that dot Tamil Nadu as this would in effect become unwieldy due to the sheer mass of material that it would involve thereby diluting the focus of the study. The examples in the study have been chosen on the basis of a number of criteria such as geographical location within Tamil Nadu, sectarian that is Shaiva, Vasihnava and Shakti, large temples and shrines within temple complexes and so on. They are as follows:

- Shivakamasundari shrine, Nataraja temple, Chidambaram
- Pandyanayakar shrine, Nataraja temple, Chidambaram
- Meenakshi Sundareswarar temple, Madurai
- Andal temple, Srivilliputtur
- Dandayudhapani Swami temple, Palani
- Durgambigai shrine, Thenupureeswarar temple, Pateeswaram
- Hayagreevar shrine, Devanathaswami temple, Tiruvahindrapuram

While earlier paintings exist in some of these temple spaces, such as the Nayaka murals in the Shivakamasundari shrine, all the paintings focused upon in this study are from within the ten year period from 1996-2006 or later. The contemporary paintings at Madurai are as yet incomplete and may be seen as an interesting case in the attempt to recreate the traditional post-Vijayanagara style rather than accepting the changes of contemporaneity. This mural scheme is included in this study because it is not a 'restoration' but a 'recreation' of earlier paintings albeit in a 'classical' manner using natural pigments.

The study is introduced in terms of a brief chronological understanding of the classical mural tradition. The physical and ideological aspects of the sacred space of the South Indian Brahmanical temple are addressed. Chapter one locates the examples in the study elaborating on the painted mural schemes with respect to the themes and their visualization. Chapter two reveals the relationship of the murals to the artist or *sthapathi*, the temple governing body and the patron. Chapter three investigates the question of visual piety in these murals while chapter four seeks to make a claim for the popular presentation of these religious images. Finally the conclusion offers a reflection on the

murals and their position within the sacred precinct of the temple and addresses the implications of piety and popularity in the painted images.

The nature and content of these contemporary mural paintings derives from a long classical tradition regarded as high art, at least in relation to religious paintings on the walls of ancient Hindu and Buddhist monuments. However in terms of their visualisation there is evidence of the influence of popular culture and popular imagery. Evolutionary methodology has been seen as appropriate in charting the transition of religious painting from the traditional to the contemporary. These paintings have always belonged to the 'popular' in terms of being addressed to the masses and are evidently not meant for select viewing in terms of an exclusive audience. Created specifically for public viewing, although within a hierarchically conceived sacred space, the contemporary murals may be seen as probably having evolved from the very elements that appeal to mass taste, such as cinema and calendar art, and appreciated as a successful tool in mass communication.

The concept of *sthala yatra* ensures wide spectatorship. Furthermore, the presence of these paintings allows a visit to the temple to develop into a wholesome experience for the devotee. Piety may be read variously within and without the themes that are chosen for representation, as a feeling of devotion, an act of reverence or as an attitude of religiosity.

The obligation to donate to the temple in some form is most often fulfilled by scheduling a *puja* to be performed on special occasions from funds that have been earmarked for the purpose. In certain instances when this seems inadequate the need for a more generous philanthropic act and a deeper commitment initiates a commission, whereby the patron-devotee occasionally sees fit to provide for maintenance and upkeep of the temple, new facilities for fellow pilgrims or the decoration of an area of the temple or shrine. This may be a routinely devout act from the point of view of the patron, merely a habit or pattern, a customary familial gesture or in gratitude for favours received through devotion or for prayers that are yet to be answered.

One of the most significant aspects of piety in Hindu worship is expressed in the 'sacred gaze' or *darshan*—the act of seeing and being seen by the deity. Painting these religious images is in itself a pious act for the artist, and a means of *darshan* for the viewer-believer. These paintings, located at various sites within the temple are often found in areas where people congregate before or after worship or stand awaiting *darshan*. When the paintings are placed along the inner *prakara* walls, in close proximity to the *garba griha*, they may serve as an instrument of contemplation while the devotee circumambulates the otherwise plain and dark nucleus of the temple. These paintings are accessible to everyone, to all devotees, for any period of time unlike the image in the *garba griha*, which is beyond the reach of the common man at certain times of the day.

The representation of Hindu religious art is either narrative or iconic, with mythological and religious stories being interlinked. The iconic is not totally bereft of narrative for it incorporates the sub-stories and themes even within the prescribed canonical forms of particular deities within its element. The narrative here is usually based on the *sthala purana* (*thala varalaru* in Tamil) which are mythological stories pivoted on the deity to whom the temple or shrine is dedicated, while the iconic representations illustrate the manifestations of the deities enshrined therein. The rigidity of the *sastric* rules does not seem to apply, for such painting elicits a more open representation. Stringency in iconographical representation is adhered to, and yet, flexibility is apparent as the paintings are essentially for public consumption.

Customary ritual practices call for repainting and renewing of the paintings, thus affirming their ephemeral nature as opposed to the sculptural and architectural scheme of the temple which is only re-plastered, renovated and repaired. This assures their disassociation from history and allows for their being devalued as being too modern, in turn becoming a problematic for academic study.

The religious images are not meant to be seen and appreciated merely as works of aesthetic beauty for they are truly products of the body and the soul, of seeing and believing. Their production and reception are beyond the confines of pure aesthetics.

They are not independent of their function or their social or religious relevance. Studying the images alone would be incomplete, especially without considering the religious context, the imagination and perception of the believer for whom the image is intended.

The popular rendition of the manifestations of the deities on the temple walls further validates the mass-produced images that are housed within the *puja* room in the home and revered as icons. The images, both hand-crafted as in the murals and mass-produced such as the images in the *puja* room, are part of the same chain of faith, one validating the other for its authenticity and thereby, implied piety. These images sanctify the space they inhabit by their very presence for their subject matter is sacred and the intention, worship. In the case of the *puja* room, the presence of the image invests sanctity within a private living space; while in the *mandapas* and corridors of the temple, the presence of the paintings add to the inviolability of the communal space. But it must be remembered that while the space on its own is structured as sacred—it is also the presence of the devotional image and the rituals that accompany its existence there that add to the sanctity of that specific place.

The paintings on the walls narrate the *puranas* or mythological stories linked to the Hindu religion. Most of these stories are part of embedded knowledge, narratives that are already part of the mass consciousness of Hindu devotion thereby aiding in recall and reaffirmation of the known. The local *puranas* are site-specific and special in terms of fulfilling the efforts of *sthala yatra* to a particular site. These stories are visually rich in narrative content explaining to the viewer the composite legends of the religion. *Sthala puranas* also persuade devotees to visit the *sthala* by detailing the benefits or merits of visiting such temples, thereby directly encouraging pilgrimage and indirectly encouraging revenue inflow to the temples. Considering the perceived necessity for captions to accompany the images when the viewer is already faced with such rich narrative, what is the assumption made? Is it that the artist is unsure of the viewer's fluency with the narrative and sees a need to compound understanding? Then who is the narrative aimed at, the believer or the sceptic? If aimed at the sceptic, then the painting does not seek to merely reinforce belief, but to teach the untaught. In certain instances the captions are in

English, the popular language of the times further reinforcing the above, and vying for a popular status.

The images on the temple walls are often conceived as prints, rather than as murals. They have been visualised as prints enlarged on walls creating the effect of calendars hung on walls like within a home or a shop interior. Calendar art by its pervasive nature created a recall factor in the mass psyche. Its drawing from sources such as Ravi Varma's original paintings gave it a measure of authenticity, while the availability of nineteenth century lithographic prints from numerous printing presses gave it ubiquity. It is this recall factor which the calendar art image demands that is brought into these contemporary temple murals. By drawing from the visual culture of calendar art and god posters the artist is in fact allowing the viewer to bring to mind the image as seen in his *puja* room. These images may be expected to create a feeling of security, in that the religious images will possess familiarity and may even evoke childhood memories. The strong sense of identity of the gods created by the nineteenth century lithographic print imagery is deeply rooted in the worshipper's mind—and it is this familiarity that the artist seeks to draw on. It is true that the icons in the temples are somewhat difficult to relate to while these popular images are easier to identify with. The visual language of religious cinema and promotional hoardings are also drawn upon to stimulate the viewer's ability to envisage the object of worship in a more identifiable manner.

The impact of other forms of art in these temple paintings is evident in the imitation, adaptation and incorporation of perspective, light and shade, depiction of the figure, composition, background and colouration. The artists have handled the challenges of proportion, perspective, colour and harmony to arrive at a style that is characteristic— being primarily identified with popular calendar art and termed 'kitsch'. Indeed, all the examples in the study rely on quotation, as evident in the hybridity that is in consequence of borrowing from other cultural expressions ranging from cinema to traditional iconic images. Some influences are pronounced, while others are more subtle.

The artist has inherited the imagery from various sources many of which are not immediate to the artist. While traditional Indian art has set conventions, various events in the nation's history have seen to it that styles are imbricated, and other stimuli are absorbed, engendering what may be a postmodern inclusivity. The period of colonial rule has given what was once 'foreign', much familiarity. Many 'foreign' features have thus been long absorbed into Indian painting as integral features.

Looking at the historical aspect, each new interpretation of the age-old themes adds to the character of the mythology being presented and re-presented. In its re-presentation newer elements emerge unwittingly, staying in tune with the idea of progress. As an analogy to the manner in which the murals are repainted—re-presented afresh yet saying the same stories—the old manner is renewed rather than replaced, adding layers to the history and depending heavily on the images of the past. Borrowings are inevitable. There is no break, but instead a continued progression brought on by the assimilation of other elements from a longstanding tradition.

Realism is the bridge that helped the mythic become the historic. What was seen as belonging to a mythological past is grounded in the present. This is achieved by the allusion to realism which provides certain authenticity to the image. The influence of photography is apparent, allowing the viewer to consider the story as real. The photographic studio backdrop that serves as background, and the collaging of styles of representation creating a popular pastiche, suggests familiarity with the visual culture of the immediate past.

The less the viewer discriminates the more the chance that the artist can produce work of dubious standard. It is a form of commercialisation then, and it is not long before the formula grows to become dull and meaningless. This is the idea of giving the masses what they expect, and with repetition comes the loss of the spark and therefore a decline in the established standard. With the masses discriminating less on the quality of the work, there is the increased possibility of the commercialisation and commodification of the paintings. It is a part of the taste and culture of the temple-going public and should be

seen as an expression of its times, thereby validating the need for scholarly study. The lack of individuality and the continued idea of conforming to the expected norm, removes creativity and thereby potential for growth or improvement. Gaining not only public acceptance but also increasing popularity through standardisation is the criteria to be met.

To the artist, the creation of these murals is a serious matter for he sees in it the pride of being within the ambit of a 'perceived' tradition of classical mural painting. His authorship is important for it exists within the attenuated space of the painted wall which subsists within the traditionally-constructed structured space of the temple. However, as art, it is a fact that the paintings are apparently the continuation of a tradition. The artist physically places these images on view for the devotee, picturing what he deems worthy and important. He is given freedom in representation and allowed to take credit for his creation by signing his name. It is thus the artists' vision of the deity that the devotee sees, in order to believe.

The intention of the artist, the patron and the temple authority are seen as significant in the production of these murals. These paintings serve several purposes, some apparent, some implied. The paintings may serve a didactic purpose in terms of educating the public or as a means of reinforcing and reinstating beliefs. But what is it that seems to be the primary factor that instigates such religious patronage and popular production—piety, publicity or propaganda? The practice of painting the names of patrons prominently may be viewed within the contemporary local community as according prestige and honour. The reception of these murals by the viewer is based on the familiarity of the popular imagery used by the artist, and also the theme that is depicted on the walls. The popular, as drawn from everyday living, strengthens the intention of the artist in allowing the viewer achieve the task of having *darshan*—of seeing and believing—one of the major objectives of worship and an integral aspect to piety.

Durgambigai shrine, Thenupureeswarar temple, Pateeswaram

Hayagreevar shrine, Devanathaswami temple, Tiruvahindrapuram