

THE PAINTED WALLS OF KERALA

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The mural art of Kerala evolved as a befitting complement to her unique architectural style. Every aspect of Kerala's traditional arts, in general, existed in perfect harmony with the pervasive greenery of her landscape - nothing loud, nothing discordant. The most striking features of the murals of Kerala are their remarkable linear accuracy, elaborate and stylised ornamentation, adherence to a colour symbolism and a very sensitive portrayal of emotions. It is a fascinating world of natural colours, inviting the onlookers to participate in the drama of the subjects portrayed.

Although much of this priceless heritage has been lost due to negligence and indifference as well as the ravages of time, the silver lining in the cloud is that concerted efforts are now being made to preserve this diminishing wealth. Until recently, quite a number of old mural sites in many a temple were smothered with white wash or emulsion paint in an over zealous attempt at renovation.

A study of mural of Kerala is also a study of iconography and elaborate rites. The subjects of mural were invariably from religious texts. The pantheon of the Hindu religion appeared as subjects within the frame of a panel. The creative springs of the mural artists were the incantatory verses or dhanya slokas invoking a particular god or goddess.

The search for the oldest mural site of Kerala will lead one to the rock-cut temple at Thirunandikkara, which is now in Kanyakumari district, Tamil Nadu. What one will find there today beneath the roof are only hazy outlines of frescoes presumed to date back to the 9th or 10th century AD. The mid-sixteenth century is generally considered to be the period when mural art revived throughout Kerala. A Sanskrit text on architecture, tantra and allied arts, *Silpartna* by Sreekumara, was written during this period, and was of great contemporary interest to the mediaeval artists. It also sheds light on the murals belonging to the later mediaeval period, which adorned temple and palace walls.

Painting in the palaces at Mattancheri, Krishnapuram and Padmanabhapuram, in the Vadakkumnatha Temple (Trichur), and in temples at Chemmanthitta (Trichur), Thodeekalam (Kannur), Panayanarkavu, Thrichakrapuram and Kottakkal are splendid examples of the changing phases of the mural tradition of late mediaeval Kerala.

Remarkable specimens belonging to the later period of the mediaeval ages (17th and 18th centuries) can be found in two temples in the district of Kottayam at Ettumanoor and Pundarikapuram. The former is about 12 km. from the town of Kottayam which the latter is in the village of Midayikunnam near Thalayolaparambu, about 30 kms. from Kottayam town.

Ettumanoor of today has all the characteristics of a modern provincial town of Kerala that is all set on the track of urbanization. But till about four or five decades ago, this was a town which grew around the centuries - old temple of Lord Shiva. The sprawling temple complex still retains its solemn grandeur and deep silences are punctuated by the beats of the temple drums and cymbals. Although the structure of the temple with its circular main shrine is in itself a study in architectural elegance, what made this temple renowned among art lovers where the mural found in the inner, as well as outer walls of the old gopuram or gateway of the temple. These mural, particularly those on the inner wall of the gopuram have attracted the attention of some of the greatest scholars in the world of Indian art, like Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, Stella Kramrisch, Fuku Akino and C.Sivaramamurti.

The inner mural panels are quite large. The left one, the Nataraja mural, measures 360 cm. x 217 cm. and the right one, of Lord Vishnu reclining on Anantha, measures 580 cm. x 247 cm. In the Nataraja panel, the dancing Shiva is the point of the focal centre. He is portrayed as a sixteen armed figure and is circumscribed in his entirety with a decorative band. Beyond him are the crowd of spectators, consisting

of celestial beings and sages, enthralled by the divine dance. An outstanding feature of this remarkable mural is the convergence of the lines of vision of the secondary figures in the frame to the eyes of the central figure, which in turn diverges to a point at infinity. The eyes of Nandi the Bull alone are not up-raised. In a posture characteristic of bovine creatures, Nandi listens to the rhythm and music of the celestials with ineffable bliss, his head cradled between his fore and hind legs.

Shiva's matted locks are thrown behind him in a maze of radiating lines. Flowers, probably flung at the Lord in adoration, coiling serpents and the three-legged, four-armed Bhiringi are seen enmeshed in the hair. Shiva also has Apasmara, the demon, squirming under his left foot while his right is raised in dance. A sense of suppressed movement is captured in each and every figure. Stella Kramrisch, art historian and former curator of the Philadelphia Museum, was eloquent in her appreciation of this particular mural. "Like a gigantic butterfly caught in a stained glass window and transformed into its luminosity is the shape of the dancing Shiva", she enthused. Close to the Nataraja panel is a smaller mural of Shiva as Aghoramurti, with a fearsome, terrible mien and figure. This was a form that was propitiated by kings and warriors before they embarked on battles in the days of yore.

The mural of Lord Vishnu to the right of the doorway also has an array of gods, celestials and numerous sages filling every inch of space around the main figure. But the effect of a crowd does not leave behind an impression of uncomfortable cramming. More than anything else, in both these panels, one can sense a perceptible energy that has the power to assuage agitated souls.

Compared to Ettumanoor, Pundarikapuram is a very small private temple, a small square shrine circumvented by a saddle roofed, elongated structure known as the chuttambalam in Kerala's temple architectural parlance. A visit to this temple is also an aesthetic delight to any lover of art. The wall of the shrine is covered with several mural panels of a very fine quality, featuring themes from Hindu myths and the Puranas. As one goes round the shrine, murals of Durga as Mahishasuramardhini, the slayer of the demon Mahisha; Krishna holding the gopikas spell bound with music from his divine reed in the idyllic garden of Vrindavan; Rama Pattabhishekam or the coronation of Rama as the king of Ayodhya; and a Yakshi, capture our attention and interest. The picture of the vengeful and fiery-eyed Durga vanquishing Mahisha, the buffalo-headed demon is a very arresting and dramatic one. The sheer size of the mural (1.45 mt. x 1.65 mt.) and the fury and strength the subjects seem to exude are undoubtedly impressive. That this was a popular subject with mural painters is underlined by its occurrence in several temples in various parts of Kerala as a Chemmanthitta in Trichur, Arpookkara in Kottayam, Panayanoorkavu near Mavelikkara and Morazha in Kannur. What makes the Mahishasuramardhini mural at Pundarikapuram different from the rest is that the former portrays the fury and force of the encounter while the latter mostly captures the triumph of destruction.

Close to the Durga panel is the picture of a Yakshi, the Circe of our groves who lures men to their doom. The beautiful siren is drawn standing beneath a palm admiring herself in the mirror she holds in her left hand and applying sindhoor on her forehead with a finger.

The most magnificent of the murals is certainly the picture of Lord Sastha, resplendent on a beautiful white horse. He is the god of hunters and hunting and therefore, has a very impressive retinue. Holding a bow in his left hand, he has a broadsword hanging at his side and his hunter's net has trapped several animals of the forest. Beside its sublime beauty one cannot but help dwell upon the symbolic meaning of the painting. The dark forest is the dark ignorant human mind and the ensnared beasts are those vices like greed, lust, jealousy, etc. which pursue man doggedly. The representation of Sastha as hunting the beasts of the jungle is therefore symbolic of the triumph of the mind over the senses.

Beside temples, murals also decorated the walls of many rooms in palaces. The Dutch Palace in Mattancheri is visited by many tourists daily. Apart from its architectural singularity - the palace is a synthesis of Portuguese, Dutch and Kerala architectures - the Murals that adorn the chambers have also won the admiration of many visitors. In the room adjacent to the old durbar-hall of the palace, the walls are so heavily decorated that it creates an impression of a heavy mural tapestry. A host of scenes mostly from the Ramayana are on display here. Even on the ground floor one can see beautiful murals portraying the subjects from the Bhagavat Gita and Puranas. Some of these paintings appear incomplete with only thematic outlines in ochre, like the picture of Goddess Parvati putting the finishing touches to her bridal make-up, attended by several ladies-in-waiting.

That Amrita Sher-gil, who visited this palace in 1937, was fascinated by what she saw in the Mattancheri palace is obvious from what she wrote home to her sister. These "perfectly marvelous old paintings" surprised the painter in her with its technique and the painter's keen observation and knowledge of form. She believed that the lines of these mural artists were far more powerful than those of the Ajanta frescoes, although the latter were surely superior in their painting skills.