

TAMIL HERITAGE EMBODIED: 'RAJARAJESVARAM'- AN ICONOGRAPHICAL DECODING OF A SOLITARY PAINTING

Sharon K¹, Dr. Hemalatha²

1. Full-time, PhD Research Scholar, Department of History, PSGR Krishnammal College for Women, Coimbatore. Ph.No: 9514066569, email: sharonk6699@gmail.com
2. Assistant Professor, Department of History, PSGR Krishnammal College for Women, Coimbatore.

ABSTRACT

The enduring glory of Tamil art and culture, spanning millennia, finds vibrant expression in its diverse artistic traditions. Ancient Tamil kingdoms boast a rich artistic heritage, where literature and painting intertwine to create a vibrant cultural expression. Examining literary evidence from Sangam period texts, the article highlights the prevalence and importance of painting in ancient Tamil society, evidenced by references to diverse painting instances. This research article probes into the rich artistic heritage of Tamil Nadu, focusing on a single, often untouched mural, "Sage Teaching the Disciples," within the Brihadeeswara Temple in Thanjavur. While the temple's murals are renowned, this study aims to decode the narrative and symbolic elements of this particular painting, situating it within the broader context of Tamil art. Through detailed description and interpretation, the article deciphers the possible essence of the painting.

Keywords: Sangam Tamil Literature, kannul vinainar, vallon, vittakar, etc.,

INTRODUCTION

Tamil history stretches back over 2000 years, with evidence of early civilizations and kingdoms like the Cheras, Cholas, and Pandyas. Throughout history, mural paintings—artworks made directly on walls or ceilings—have served as more than mere decoration. They represent a fascinating intersection of historical heritage, cultural documentation and artistic expression. They are an unavoidable medium of religious commentary, societal instruction, and the historical narrative across diverse civilizations. The Brihadeeswara Temple in Thanjavur enjoys undeniable renown, owing in significant measure to the exquisite and historically significant murals that adorn its walls. This article explores the art of the Brihadeeswara temple, seeking to unravel an unnoticed painting among its murals. This study focuses on one not majorly noticed painting, the “Sage Teaching the Disciples”, a compelling example of Tamil Chola Art.

TAMIL LITERARY EVIDENCE OF PAINTINGS FROM THE SANGAM PERIOD

The ancient Tamil period especially the Tamil Sangam period produced a treasure trove of literature, including poetry, philosophical works, and grammatical treatises. This literature provides beneficial insights into the cultural, social and artistic life of its time. The mural tradition did not necessarily migrate from Western countries. The mural tradition in Tamil Nadu hails from the initial decades of the Common Era, as corroborated by several references in Sangam and Post-Sangam Tamil literature. Palaces and luxury homes were decorated with excellent paintings, which are frequently mentioned in literary works from this time period.

In Sangam Tamil literature, the paintings were known as *Oviyam*, *Ovam* and *Chittiram*. The painter was referred to by several names, including *Oviyan*, *Vittakar*, *Kannul Vinainar* and *Vallon*. *Oviyan* simply means a painter. *Vallon* referred to a skilled painter.

“இருந்தனை சென்மோ - 'வழங்குக சுடர்' என,
அருளிக் கூடும் ஆர்வ மாக்கள்
நல்லேம் என்னும் கிளவி வல்லோன்
எழுதி அன்ன காண் தகு வனப்பின்
ஐயள், மாயோள், அணங்கிய...”

Narrinai: 146: 6-10¹

Vittakar, is one who exhibited a very fluent and precise touch. Yet, the sense in which the word '*kannul vinainar*' appears in *Maduraikanchi* is intriguing.

“எவ்வகைச் செய்தியும் உவமங் காட்டி
நுண்ணிதின் உணர்ந்த நுழைந்த நோக்கிற்
கண்ணுள் வினைஞரும் பிறரும் கூடித்
தெண்டிரை யவிரறல் கடுப்ப வொண்பகல்
குறியவு நெடியவு மடிதருஉ விரித்துச்...”

¹ Narrinai 146: 6-10

Maduraikanchi: 516-520²

It is interesting to note that other craftsmen required only the ability to work with their materials, whereas a painter required a high level of cognitive intellectual skills. The knowledge gained by the painter from keen analysis of the observable world must be worked in the realm of his imagination in order to generate magnificent works of art. As a result, a painter was both a skilled artist who created aesthetically appealing works and a spiritually successful person.

This is precisely what is conveyed in *Manimekalai*, when Udayakumara expresses his admiration for Manimekalai by comparing her to a painting created in the painter's imagination as “*oviyān ullatu ulliyattu viyappon*”.

“ஓவியன் உள்ளத்து உள்ளியது வியப்போன்

காவியங் கண்ணி ஆகுதல் தெளிந்து

தாழ்ஒளி மண்டபம் தன்கையில் தடைஇச்

சூழ்வோன் சுதமதி தன்முகம் நோக்கிச்

சித்திரக் கைவினை திசைதொறும் செறிந்தன

எத்திறத் தாள்நின் இளங்கொடி உரைஎனக்...”

Manimekalai 5:2³

The epic, *Sivaka Chintamani*, suggests that painting was a favoured pursuit among women. For example, it claims that they dropped the colour palette when they learned that Sivakan, the hero, had been transported to the royal court. *Pattinapalai* tells about the dust caused by the 'fast-running wheels' of the chariots ruining the paintings painted on the walls while describing the structures of Puhar, the renowned port city of the Cholas.

“யாதுபோலப் பந்தொழு?

யேறுபொசச் சேமுகத்

² Maduraikanchi: 516-520

³ Manimekalai 5:2

தேசோடத் அகள்கெழுமி
கிராடிய களிறுபோல
வேறுபட்ட வினையோவத்து
வெண் கோயில் மாசு ஊட்டு”

Pattinapalai: 45-50⁴

The king's palaces included special painted halls known as 'Chittiramadam'. A Pandyan ruler was known as “Chittiramadattu thunjiya Nanmaran”, and that implies he died in the Chittiramadam. This demonstrates the monarchy and nobility' taste and fancy for art.

“ஆரம் தாழ்ந்த அணிகிளிர் மார்பின்,
தாள்தோய் தடக்கைத், தகைமாண் வழுதி!”

Purananooru: 59⁵

Likewise, representations may be observed in *Nedunalvadaï* about a large palace with creeper motifs painted on its walls. *Maduraikanchi* describes a ‘Amanarpalli’ with painted walls that were as appealing as a polished copper plate.

“கல்பொளிந் தன்ன விட்டுவாய்க் கரண்டைப்
பல்புரிச் சிமிலி நாற்றி நல்குவரக்
கயங்கண் டன்ன வயங்குடை நகரத்துச்
செம்பியன் றன்ன செஞ்சுவர் புனைந்து...”

Maduraikanchi: 484-487⁶

Sangam Tamils examined the sky and drew the positions of the celestial formations in common areas to educate the general public about the concept of time, stars and planets. “Oviyappavai” is a phrase used to describe a woman who is as beautiful and graceful as the one depicted in the paintings. The art of

⁴ Pattinapalai: 45-50

⁵ Purananooru: 59

⁶ Maduraikanchi: 484-487

painting was highly regarded, and charming women were synonymous with those figures in paintings. Women used painted drapes called '*elini*' to conceal themselves when bathing in the Vaigai River. Evidently, *Silapadikaram* noted the painted curtains being placed above the stage where Madhavi performed her maiden dance performance. *Narrinai* mentions the painting of a sparrow on the drums (*parai*).

These Tamil literary works weren't just flights of fancy, they reflected the lived experiences of the Tamil people. Descriptions of painted decorations in homes, public spaces, and places of worship suggest that painting was integrated into daily life. The fact that these texts, spanning various genres, consistently refer to painting underscores its prevalence and importance. All these ancient Tamil literatures give ample evidence of paintings at that time.

PARADIGM OF TAMIL GRANDEUR - THE GREAT BRIHADEESWARA TEMPLE

Thanjavur, the name is believed to be derived from 'Tanjan', a mythical asura from Hindu mythology, and it reached its peak of splendour as the capital during the medieval Chola empire. It is an enticing city nestled in the green Kaveri delta. Thanjavur is home to the Great Living Chola Temples including the great Brihadeeswara Temple, popularly called "Rajajesvaram". It is locally called Peruvudaiyar Kovil as Rajaraja Chola lovingly addressed his God as Peruvudaiyar (the great Lord). Epigraphic evidence indicates that the construction of this Shaivite temple commenced in the 19th year of Rajaraja Chola's rule and was completed on the 257th day of his 25th year (1010 CE). The temple's vitality was sustained through renovations and maintenance over the subsequent millennium, notably under the Nayaks. During the reign of the last Nayak ruler, King Vijaya Raghava Nayak, the Great Chola Temples underwent restoration and enhancement. The Brihadeeswara Temple stands as a testament to the architectural prowess of the Chola dynasty, a magnificent structure that has earned recognition as both an awe-inspiring wonder and a designated UNESCO World Heritage Site.

SOUL OF TAMIL ART: THE BRIHADEESWARA MURALS

The Brihadeeswara temple's murals have a rich history. Though dedicated primarily to Shaivism, Vaishnavism, and Shaktism, these murals depicted mythological narratives of Shiva, Durga, Krishna, and Vishnu. Its breathtaking murals, despite the difficulties of painting on wet plaster in Tamil Nadu's humid climate, showcase an impressive fusion of paint and plaster, a testament to the advanced technology of

the time thus establishing the Brihadeeswara temple as a landmark of South Indian art, reflecting the devotion and grandeur of the Tamil culture.

WITHIN THE WALLS OF BRIHADEESWARA: TAMIL ART CELEBRATED

The Brihadeeswara Temple houses two sets of Chola paintings. One set is publicly accessible, adorning the walls of the temple corridors. The other, a more recently discovered set, resides within the temple's secret tunnels, connecting it to Rajaraja Chola's palace.

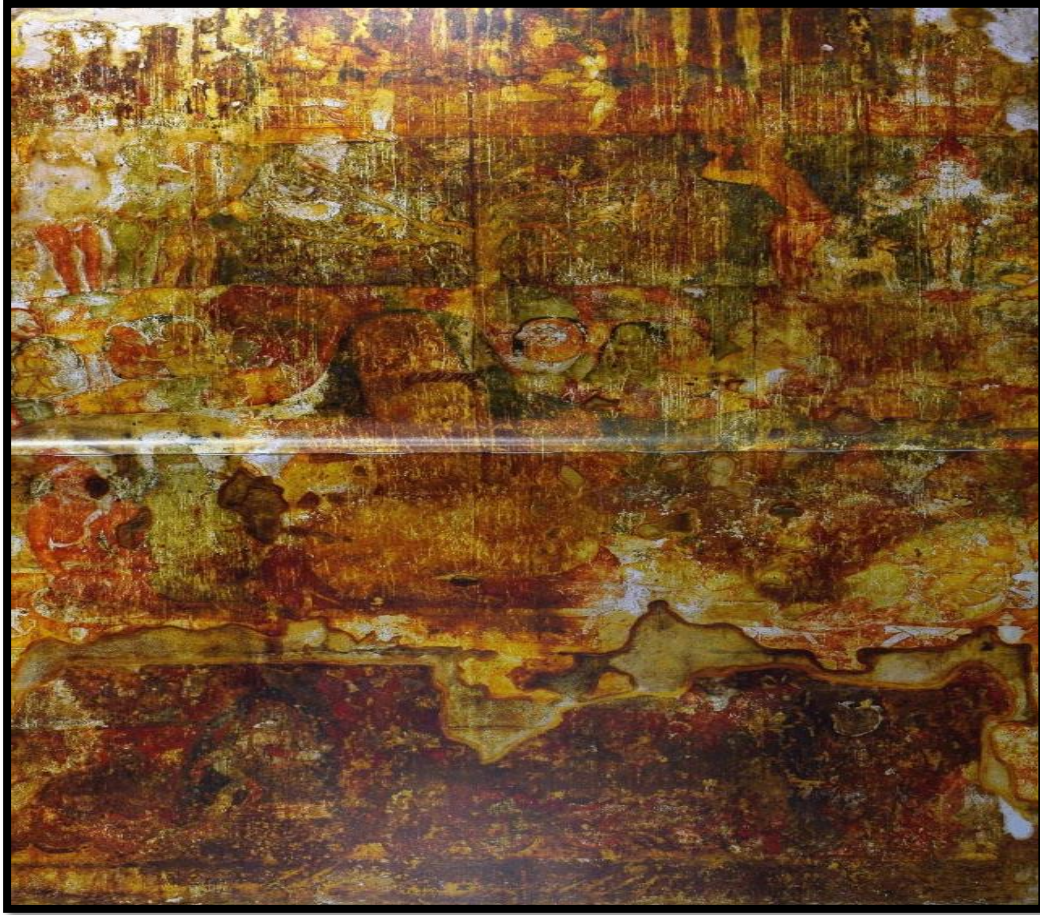
The temple's circumambulatory path features numerous frescoes stretching from floor to ceiling. Partially obscured by later Nayaka artwork, the Chola murals within the main temple depict scenes both of divine and non-divine elements such as Lord Dakshinamurthy with Bhairava, Shiva as Tripurantaka, Shiva as Ravananugrahamurti, the story of the poet-saint Sundara-murti Nayanar, Rajaraja Chola worshipping at Chidambaram with his three queens, celestial dancers and images of ascetics. Other notable paintings include Yashoda with infant Krishna, Rajaraja Chola with his Guru, Lord Rama and Sita, a moustached figure (possibly Ugra Pandya) spearing fish, a battle scene, likely depicting Rama and Ravana and so forth.

A CLOSER LOOK - DECODING THE ESSENCE OF “SAGE TEACHING THE DISCIPLES” PAINTING

Discovered in 1931 and restored by the Archaeological Survey of India in the 2000s, most of the murals have suffered some damage over time from camphor smoke and lamp soot. Despite its damaged state, this analysis deciphers the intricate details of a larger painted scene “Sage teaching the disciples”, exploring its various elements to uncover the narrative and symbolic meanings embedded within its composition. The sanctum of the temple comprises fifteen chambers, within which numerous murals are located. This prominent composition is evident in Chamber Five.

Fig.1 Sage Teaching the Disciples Painting whole view

(source: from the book “Chola Murals” illustrations)



A sage-like figure is depicted in a dull tone with very thin lines. He was drawn in a heightened proportion to the other figures on the panel, dominating a huge area to highlight his prominence and eminence in the depiction. The Sage figure is petite and stout. He has a lengthy moustache that flows into a long grey beard. He is wearing an exquisite crown with a datura flower (*Oomathampoo*) set in the ornate hairdo. The lower edge of this hairdo features a long cloth knotted around the head.

His wide eyes look to the left. His mouth is wide open. It indicates that he was conveying profound words. His right leg is lifted and his right hand is rested on the kneecap, while his left hand is held like the *kataka hasta*, signalling that he is actively teaching. He has one long string of white beads around his neck, as well as a simple armlet. His entire body has a yellow colour. He is positioned in a comfortable posture on a red pillow with a backrest. Near his right leg is a short trisula, which could be a sign of his cult.

To his left, three people remain seated on the floor. The very first individual, seated next to the left of the sage, can be identified as a male, whilst the other two are women due to the profuse neckpieces. Each of the three displays their royal status by wearing a decorative crown (*kirita*). Of the three royal disciples seated to the sage's left, the closest is likely the king, while the other two are presumed to be queens. They hold their right hand in the identical stance, *kataka hasta*, as the sage's left hand, as if they are replicating what the sage has recited. All three are seen holding a palm leaf in their left hand. Both the Vaishnava and Saiva Siddhanta branches of the Bhakti Marga emphasized the necessity of acquiring knowledge from a qualified teacher for salvation. This belief fostered a complete adoration and surrender to a Guru. During the reigns of Rajaraja Chola and Rajendra Chola, Gurus from the Pasupata sect were prominent. If the depicted disciple is indeed Rajaraja Chola, the sage could be Udaiyar Sri Rajarajadevar Gurukkal, mentioned in an inscription as Rajaraja Chola's Guru.

Two saintly-looking males sit to the right of the sage. One is older, and the other is considerably younger. The older person, with red skin, appears to be away from the sage in a standard sitting posture. His right arm resting on his knee, was not in a receptive posture like the others. He is gazing carefully at the sage. With a heavenly look and enchanted state of mind, the younger individual has a green complexion. They also have separate palm leaf carriers. Unusually, a white cat is depicted at the distant end. The sage is obviously teaching his five disciples—two of whom are saints and three of whom are royal heirs.

This sermon takes place in a delightfully rendered setting. The sage is seated in a large cavern. The remaining gaps are inhabited by ascetics and various wild creatures. While some of the wild creatures are lying back in the shade, others wander freely across the hillock. There is a wild boar on the distant right and immediately a deer next to it. Two lions are perched on a ledge with a view of the valley, clearly anticipating their prey. Two cheetahs sat attentive and ferocious. Additionally, a hunter with a bow and arrow is making his way into the picture focusing on a boar. Two elephants were present in the scene. A tree branch is being broken by one elephant and the broken branch is being carried up the hill by another. It depicts the utilization of elephants in heavy tasks which is impractical of human capabilities, thereby visually representing the considerable strength of an elephant. The list of creatures on the hilltop is completed by a wild bear. Amidst these scenarios, three pairs of ascetics are depicted discussing something. One of the pairs appears with monkey-like features. Another pair consists of two female ascetics who are facing the sage while folding their hands.

Fig.2 Sage Teaching the Disciples Painting split view

(source: www.sreenivasaraos.com)



The banyan tree, which has lavishly grown and covers the entire area, is being worshipped by three devout followers on the right and one on the left. A pouch containing a clump of peacock feathers and some ritual objects suspended from a tree limb, adds to the solemnity. An eight-armed Bhairava, followed by a vicious dog was also portrayed. A cobra gently climbs up the branch from the bottom, pounding its tongue as it searches for prey in the tree.

The animals in the tree are alarmed by the cobra's entry. It is clearly evident as a few birds flew off noticing the cobra even from a distance. Three peacocks are propped up in pairs and one solo. There is a pair of owls sitting in peace beside the cobra. The painter possibly intended to depict a daytime setting, highlighting the contrast with the owls' nocturnal nature and their resulting unawareness of the snake. A squirrel is displayed as busy gathering fruits from the tree.

The painter's skill is evident in the depiction of the four monkeys' varied reactions to the cobra's arrival. One monkey, perched on a branch behind the snake, is cautiously preparing to have a safe leap.

Another, directly in the cobra's path, flees with visible terror etched on its face, the fear emphasized by the strong lines of its raised eyebrows. A third monkey, positioned further back and out of the cobra's immediate sight, observes cautiously. Finally, a fourth monkey, distant from the threat, remains completely oblivious to the danger.

The upper third of the panel, presented as a farsighted view, features the white-complexioned figures of Shiva and Parvati. The painter imagines that the intense teacher-disciple interaction below has drawn the attention of Shiva, who is accompanied by the seven mothers (*Sapta-matrikas*). They are seated beside a pond which is ravaged by a crocodile. While the seven mothers—Brahmi, Kaumari, Mahesvari, Varahi, Vaishnavi, Indrani, and Chamunda—are depicted, the composition properly accommodates only the first five. The scene depicts a discussion and exchange of knowledge. This analysis has attempted to reconstruct and interpret the narrative and symbolic elements of the depicted painted scene, despite its affected condition.

CONCLUSION

Tamil Nadu has a thriving art and culture scene and strikingly supports the artists to push boundaries and explore new forms of expression while preserving the legacy of the past. The painting, even in its damaged form, serves as a testament to the artistic skill of the bygone Tamil era, the importance of the depicted subject matter, and the cultural context in which it was created. By examining this single mural in-depth, a broader understanding of the strong connection of royalties to their gurus, reverence to the God they worshipped and the competence of the artists of the Tamil region. This study will not only shed light on the specific mural itself but also offer insights into the broader artistic and cultural milieu of the ancient Tamil age.

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