

The Spiritual Dimensions in Tanjore Painting

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Abstract

Tanjore paintings, a classical South Indian art form originating from Tamil Nadu, are renowned for their vibrant colors, intricate detailing, and rich spiritual symbolism. This paper explores the spiritual dimensions embedded within these artworks, tracing their historical evolution from temple murals to devotional icons. Through an analysis of materials, techniques, iconography, and viewer experience, the study reveals how Tanjore paintings function as visual expressions of Bhakti (devotion) and sacred storytelling. The use of gold foil, central deity placement, and symbolic motifs like halos and lotuses contribute to their spiritual aura, transforming them into tools for meditation and worship. Contemporary challenges and adaptations are also discussed, highlighting the tension between preserving tradition and embracing modernity. Ultimately, the paper argues that Tanjore paintings are not merely decorative but serve as profound conduits of divine presence and cultural heritage.

Introduction

Tanjore paintings, also known as Thanjavur paintings, are one of the most iconic classical art forms of South India. Originating from the town of Thanjavur in Tamil Nadu, these paintings are not just decorative pieces but deeply spiritual expressions rooted in devotion, mythology, and temple culture. This paper explores the spiritual dimensions embedded in Tanjore paintings, examining their historical context, symbolism, techniques, and the emotional resonance they evoke in viewers.

Historical Background and Origins

Tanjore paintings date back to the 16th century during the Nayak rule and later flourished under the Maratha dynasty. These rulers were great patrons of art and encouraged the development of temple-based visual culture. Originally created to adorn temple walls and palaces, Tanjore paintings often depicted Hindu gods and goddesses, saints, and mythological scenes. The spiritual purpose was clear: to inspire devotion and create a divine atmosphere within sacred spaces explorekumbakonam.com.

Materials and Techniques: A Sacred Process

The process of creating a Tanjore painting itself is spiritual. Artists traditionally use natural materials like vegetable dyes, gesso paste, and gold foil. The use of gold is not merely ornamental—it symbolizes divine light and purity. The layered relief work and intricate detailing are done with meditative focus, often accompanied by prayers. According to contemporary artists interviewed in a recent study, the act of painting is seen as a form of worship, where the artist becomes a devotee channeling divine energy ijfmr.com.

Iconography and Symbolism

Tanjore paintings are rich in iconography. Deities are portrayed in central positions, often seated on ornate thrones with halos, signifying their divine status. The eyes of the deities are exaggerated and expressive, believed to be the window to the soul. Each element—from the lotus flowers to the conch shells—has symbolic meaning. For example, Lord Krishna is often shown with a flute, representing divine music that calls the soul home. These symbols are not random; they are carefully chosen to evoke spiritual reflection and emotional connection.



Influence of Temple Architecture and Rituals

Tanjore paintings are deeply connected to temple architecture and rituals. The symmetrical layout, ornamental borders, and divine centrality mirror the structure of South Indian temples. Just as temple rituals aim to invoke divine presence, the paintings are designed to do the same visually. The use of gold and vibrant hues mimics the grandeur of temple festivals, while the depiction of deities in specific mudras (hand gestures) aligns with ritual iconography.



Devotional Function and Viewer Experience

The spiritual dimension of Tanjore paintings is most evident in how they are used and experienced. In homes and temples, these paintings serve as focal points for prayer and meditation. The vibrant colors and gold accents create a sense of awe and reverence. Viewers often report feeling a sense of peace and divine presence when looking at these artworks. The paintings are not just visual—they are emotional and spiritual experiences that connect the viewer to the divine.

Contemporary Adaptations and Challenges

Modern Tanjore artists face the challenge of preserving spiritual authenticity while adapting to new materials and global audiences. Some artists now use synthetic colors and machine-cut gold foil, which can dilute the spiritual essence. However, many still adhere to traditional methods and emphasize the devotional aspect of their work. Interviews with artists like Swarna Raja Kochi and Mythili Ganesh reveal that teaching the spiritual philosophy behind the art is just as important as teaching .

The Role of Bhakti (Devotion)

Bhakti, or devotional worship, is central to the spiritual ethos of Tanjore paintings. The Bhakti movement, which emphasized personal devotion to deities, heavily influenced the themes and style of these artworks. Saints like Meera, Andal, and Namdev are sometimes depicted in Tanjore paintings, reinforcing the idea that spiritual connection is accessible to all, regardless of caste or status. The paintings thus become visual hymns, celebrating the intimate bond between devotee and deity.

Gender Representation and Divine Feminine in Tanjore Paintings

One often overlooked yet spiritually significant aspect of Tanjore paintings is their portrayal of gender, especially the divine feminine. Female deities such as Lakshmi, Saraswati, Durga, and Andal are frequently depicted with grace, power, and spiritual authority. These representations go beyond aesthetics—they reflect the cultural reverence for Shakti, the divine feminine energy in Hindu philosophy.

The visual emphasis on ornamentation, posture, and expression in female figures is not just symbolic of beauty but of spiritual potency. For instance, Goddess Lakshmi is often shown seated on a lotus, holding gold coins and lotuses, symbolizing prosperity and purity. Saraswati, the goddess of wisdom, is depicted with a veena and sacred texts, reinforcing the spiritual value of knowledge.

Moreover, the maternal and nurturing aspects of goddesses are highlighted through soft facial features and warm color palettes, creating a sense of emotional intimacy. These portrayals serve as visual affirmations of the feminine divine, balancing the masculine energy often seen in depictions of gods like Vishnu or Shiva.

Conclusion

Tanjore paintings are more than just beautiful images—they are spiritual artifacts that carry centuries of devotion, symbolism, and sacred intention. From the materials used to the themes depicted, every aspect of these paintings is designed to elevate the soul and connect with the divine. In a world increasingly driven by commercial art, Tanjore paintings remind us of the power of visual culture to inspire faith, peace, and spiritual reflection.

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