

The Enduring Appeal: Unravelling the Narratives in Mysore Paintings

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Abstract

Indian Art, interwoven over millennia exhibits a glorious interplay of aboriginal traditions and culture. Amongst all art forms, Paintings underscore allegory and symbolism as a feast for the senses. This article “**The Enduring Appeal: Unravelling the Narratives in Mysore Paintings**” plunges into a tranquillity of Mysore paintings and their profound contexts on development. Acquiring insights from field visits, Government documents, Gazetteers, technical workshop notes, technical videos, books, journals, and so on. This paper explores the historical evolution and artistic refinements of Mysore Traditional Paintings, a prominent South Indian art form. The paper traces the lineage of Mysore painting, highlighting its emergence following the fall of the Vijayanagar dynasty and its subsequent flourishing under the patronage of the Wodeyar rulers. A detailed analysis of the artistic techniques employed in Mysore paintings, including the meticulous use of gesso work, gold leaf, and vibrant colours, is presented. Furthermore, the study explores the key themes and motifs depicted in these paintings, such as Hindu mythology, courtly life, and regional landscapes. Comparative analysis with another South Indian painting style, Tanjore paintings is conducted to elucidate the unique characteristics of the Mysore school. The paper concludes by emphasizing the significance of preserving this valuable cultural heritage through the recent conferment of the Geographical Indication (GI) tag, thus safeguarding the authenticity and promoting the continued flourishing of this exquisite art form.

Keywords: *Palette, Gesso, Pigments, Aquarelle, Fresco, Bhasma, Embossing etc.*

INTRODUCTION

Indian art boasts a diverse heritage, spanning millenniums and overarching a wide spectrum of types and styles. Amidst all artistic production, paintings bestow a nuanced perception which encompasses artistic, historical and cultural philosophies. The art of painting is incredibly diverse, encompassing a vast array of styles, techniques, and subjects from realistic portraits to abstract expressionism. Nestled in Karnataka, Mysore stands as a vibrant testament to India's heritage. Mysore integrates historical details and anecdotes with a beautiful blend of natural and constructed heritage. It is a heritage resort that preserves both intangible and tangible attributes. The city is referred to as the 'culture capital' of the state of Karnataka. It was the imperial seat of the Wodeyar Kings, who governed the Mysore Kingdom for several centuries and made substantial contributions to the art and music. The city is recognised for its palaces, museums, and art galleries. It enjoys widespread popularity through Mysore Paintings bestowed from its prestigious name "Mysore" itself. Recognizing their unique heritage and artistic value, Mysore traditional paintings have been granted the prestigious Geographical Indication (GI) tag recently. The article attempts to explore the artistry of Mysore School of Paintings in detail.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Sritattvanidhi, a 1500-page treatise commissioned by Mummadi Krishnaraja Wodeyar, is the most well-known of the manuscripts outlining the different intricacies of the Mysore school. This graphic digest contains pictures of mythological personages, as well as guidelines for artists on a wide range of issues such as composition, colour selection, individual traits, and emotions. These paintings also accurately show seasons, ecological events, and the realm of plants and animals as instances and themes.

Abhilasitarthacintamani, *Sivatatvaratnakara*, and *Visnudharmottara Purana* touch upon the purposes and values of painting, as well as the procedures for preparing pigments and brushes, the competencies of the *chitrakar* (artist) and the technique to be used.

METHODOLOGY

This research employed a mixed-methods approach combining qualitative and quantitative data collection and analysis techniques. Documented data through field visits to museums, temples and private collections. Gathered information through technical workshop videos, official Government websites, directories and archive documents.

RESEARCH DESIGN

A critical pictographic analysis approach was employed to examine the sources for this study. This approach entails a deeper review of the secondary data together with an analysis of the thematic and cultural contexts.

DATA ANALYSIS

The study encompasses the following analysis:

Historical Analysis

The paper traced the historical evolution through a chronological examination of archival documents.

Visual Analysis

The paper developed a detailed examination of Mysore Paintings to ascertain stylistic features and technical execution.

Thematic Analysis

The paper interpreted recurring themes and motifs that explore cultural significance.

Comparative Analysis

The paper scrutinized the Tanjore-style paintings to identify differences and similarities with the Mysore style.

Vijayanagar School-Artistic Seeds of Mysore School of Art

For barely over two centuries, the Vijayanagara Empire ruled the medieval terrain of South India. In 1336 C.E., previous chieftains Harihara and Bukka conquered the peninsular region and fortified their city near the Tungabhadra River in the Deccan plateau, naming it Vijayanagara, or the "City of Victory." The Vijayanagara monarchs used astute diplomacy and military skill to secure their domain from northern threats, extending their control across

southern India. Vijayanagar monarchs permitted overseas trade via coastal ports, controlling the trade of military supplies.

The wealth accumulated through trade aided the empire's sponsorship of art and literature. The ruins of this ancient metropolis not only represent its importance in history but also highlight its important function as a major urban centre and commerce route hub. According to Portuguese, Italian, and Persian travellers, Vijayanagar evolved as a flourishing metropolis with well-equipped irrigation, booming bazaars and great palaces, comparable to the grandeur of Rome. Finally, Vijayanagara shines as a visionary southern kingdom monarchy that bridged the cultural divides of Kannada, Telugu, and Tamil. The monarchs of Vijayanagar promoted art, literature, architecture, religious, and philosophical debates. Furthermore, it effectively depicts the enormous influence of Islamic ideals on Indian courtly life throughout the Vijayanagar period. Along with architecture, the Vijayanagar rulers were avid supporters of painting. Vijayanagara School of Painting was a significant South-Indian art entity. Whilst many Vijayanagar paintings depict mythological narratives and epic tales, they also shed light on the Vijayanagar Empire's culture and customs. Mysore painting, an important type of South Indian classical painting, evolved from the Vijayanagar School of painting which began in southern Mysore in the state of Karnataka.

Rise of Mysore School of Paintings

Painting in Karnataka has a rich and lengthy past, dating back to the Ajanta period. The distinguished school of Mysore painting emerged from Vijayanagar School. The Mysore school of painting was established in 1565, following the fall of the Vijayanagar dynasty in the battle of Talikota. In the wake of the fall, artists under royal patronage fled to other locations such as Mysore, Surpur and Tanjore. Raja Wodeyar recuperated the families of artists who were in difficulty at that juncture. The Mysore school of painting rose to prominence under the Wodeyars' reign. The Mysore school, whose greatest traditions were obvious in the 17th to 19th centuries however was relatively unnoticed by the rest of the world. The paintings emerged as an enhancement of the traditional Vijayanagar School. Ranadhira Kantheerava Narasimharaja Wodeyar and Chikka Devaraja Wodeyar, successive heirs of Raja Wodeyar fostered art by having numerous temples decorated with deities and mythological paintings. However, the subsequent conflicts between Hyder Ali, Tipu Sultan, and the British resulted in the forfeiture of these treasures. The Mysore style was resurrected in the early 19th century by "Mummadi Krishnaraja Wodeyar". During his reign, the monarch himself showed a strong and personal interest, resulting in a handful of the most beautiful and sophisticated works. The pictures in the manuscript of the great cultural encyclopaedia '*Sritattvanidhi*' demonstrate the king's refined taste. Mysore-style paintings can be witnessed in Mysore, Shravanabelagola, Shrirangapatna, Sira, Mudukutore, Chitradurga, Raichur, Hampi and Lepakshi in Andhra Pradesh. Mysore paintings are well-known for their elegance, unique colour palette, and emphasis on detail. Murals illustrating the Battle of Polilur, together with the work of Tipu Sultan's Daria Daulat Bagh palace in Ganjam are excellent instances of the Mysore style of painting.

Unveiling the Symphony of Temple Murals

Mural paintings saw a renaissance during the Mysore School of Art and Vijayanagar Empire, owing to the Chalukyas' keen interest in Badami's murals. Some important instances are as follows.

The Veerabhadra Temple in Lepakshi, Andhra Pradesh, is a notable example, with very beautiful Mysore paintings, particularly on the hall ceiling. Murals on its ceiling disclose scenes from epics such as the Ramayana and Mahabharata as well as portraits of the temple's patrons. Sublime artwork can be observed within the paintings on the ceilings of the shrines including *antarala* and main *mandapa* which were done over a fresh plaster lining of lime mortar. These works depict Lord Vishnu's incarnations in exquisite detail and have intriguing compositions that highlight period clothing and facial gestures using vegetable and mineral pigments combined with lime water in tones of ochre, yellow, black, green, blue, and with a red background. These Fresco paintings are created using a quick Aquarelle technique on moist plaster to ensure that the colours integrate with the plaster and become cemented when it dries.

In a similar vein, the Virupaksha Temple in Hampi has murals adorning its ceiling, which largely depict religious themes. These paintings are simple and vibrant, with a linear fashion that conveys movement and vitality in the characters. The temple's *mandapa* ceiling features a painting of Vidyaranya, the master of Harihara, and Bukka being lifted on a palanquin. They are organised into rectilinear blocks of varying sizes that depict narrative events such as Pampa and Virupaksha's marriage, in which characters are presented in profile with huge front-facing eyes and slender waistlines rendered in a mix of colours of black, red and light blue.

Besides the temples described above, the Kalyana Sundareswara temple in Nallur village features brilliant artwork. These works of art were recently uncovered in the temple's sanctum sanctorum. They are regarded as peculiar paintings of the past and are thought to have been painted around the 15th and 16th centuries. It was revealed that the paintings were created during the reign of the Vijayanagara kings. The paintings depict Narada playing the veena, an artist holding a couple of cymbals, and an infant Skanda grasping a lotus. These paintings were produced with natural colours. Kudvayil Balasubramanian, a historian and archaeologist, informed us about the finding of these rare artworks. He recommended the authorities to safeguard these paintings since they offer information concerning the history of painting in Tamil Nadu.

Artistic Instruments and Techniques

The artists themselves created all of the elements for traditional Mysore paintings, such as paints, brushes, gold foil, and board and so on. The art pieces were rendered using charcoal made by smouldering tamarind stems in an iron chamber. The brushes were manufactured from a variety of materials, including the hair of squirrels, camel, and goats. Still today, painters prefer squirrel hair brushes over synthetic brushes as they are more solid and refined. The technique for combining colours varies. Some artists utilise porcelain tiles to effectively mix colours. Tiny plates and coconut shells for background colours are used. The colour is obtained in crystalline form and mixed with water. In the case of poster colours, surplus oil is removed from the top to obtain a matte texture. Artists have recently attempted to work in acrylic mediums in order to sustain the freshness of colour for a longer stretch of time. Acrylic paint is used to highlight the flatness of the backdrop in a painting. Gold leaves, mirrored objects and semi-precious stones are employed to impart a majestic appearance. Traditionally, *Bhasma* or gold dust was used rather than gold leaves. All paintings are created with conventionally crafted gold foils. Embossing is performed with a blend of raw limestone strained through muslin fabric and blended with copper sulphate, chalk powder and glue in a certain proportion. The artistic endeavour lasts for generations as the colours used are fungi-resistant.

From Concept to Canvas – Mysore Painting Process

To create a Mysore painting, an extensive amount of effort, resilience and exceptional skills are required. Earlier, artists would use 10-20 sheets of newspaper to create a base for painting before applying the drawing sheet with refined flour. Artists have updated their technique for using the base now. They start painting on mount board, which is covered with ivory or cartridge sheets. The paper board was created from scrap paper or paper pulp, which was sun-dried and then softened with a refined quartz stone. If the ground was fabric, it adhered to a wooden plank using glue made from dry white lead (*safeda*) combined with gum and a tiny amount of gruel. After drying, the board was tarnished. Wood surfaces were prepped with gum, dried white lead and yellow ochre.

The first step involves the artist to create a rough drawing of the image on the base. Then, a paste commonly referred to as 'gesso paste' is used. Gesso is a paste made of gamboge, white lead powder and adhesive which is deployed as an embossing substance and overlaid with gold foil. Gesso paste creates a slightly higher illusion of carving to those portions of the painting that require adornments and set to dry. The artist applies two coats of this paste to achieve a good raised surface. The surface is then coated with gold foil deploying Arabic gum. Nowadays, 'favicon' is used as a substitute for gum. Daubing varnish following gesso paste to prevent gold foil cracking in the course of time.

They let the gold foil dry for a further 6-8 hours. Subsequently, a brush is used to scrub off the excess gold. Because gold foil is quite expensive, they reuse the leftover gold foil on other paintings. The subsequent painting is created with watercolours. Watercolours and synthetic poster colours are used as alternatives for natural dyes in modern times. The core colours that we can see in any Mysore painting are: green, red and blue. Earlier, the colourants used emanated from natural resources and were very few, such as blue, green, yellow, black, red and white.

Colours were extracted from flowers and foliage, and earth colours were also utilised to a significant degree. For instance, the colour green was made by filling a copper container with lemon juice and burying it for a few days to induce it to turn green. To minimise the glossy effect, usage of a blend of black Indian ink and poster colour and design intricately on gold foil. After the painting has completely dried, it is wrapped with thin paper and lightly scraped with a smooth soft stone.

Mysore Paintings - Themes Explored

In the Mysore style of paintings, the most popular themes are coronation of Sri Rama (*Sri Rama Pattabhishekam*), Goddess Rajarajeshwari, Chamundeshwari (the ancestral deity of the royal house of Mysore), ten incarnations of Lord Vishnu (*Dashavathara*), apart from Goddess Saraswathi and Lakshmi, Sri Rama with bow and arrows (*Kodanda-Rama*), wedding of Shiva and Parvati (*Girijakalyana*), Sri Krishna with his adoptive mother (Yashoda-Krishna). Mysore artists in the 19th century painted Hindu myths, gods, and epic heroes, as well as scenes from courtly activities and battles. Although the subjects were sacred and mythological, the models used were practical life. The models have fish-shaped eyes, an oblong jutting chin, the traditional royal hairstyle of Mysore and draped in sarees, portrayals of royal jewels and a Mysore headpiece. Goddesses' feet are propped on flowers to express reverence. Most paintings feature human faces in profile, and the figures stand with a slight slant, with their feet directed in a uniform direction. All of these paintings can be found mostly on the ceilings of the *mandapas* and the temple's hallways. Some demonstrate events from Draupadi's marriage

and *Kiratarjunya*. A few further photos depict Viranna and Viruppanna with their sons and bodyguards. They are seen in wide white robes with a patterned cloth around their waists. Many paintings' architectural backdrops are exact replicas of Mysore Palace's architectural elements.

Plenty of paintings depict scenes derived from shlokas found in the book "*Devatahanama Kusumamanjari*" written by "*Mummadi Krishnaraja Wodeyar*". In the painting style "*Krishna Sakhis*" the figure is depicted from the rear. Traditionally, paintings were based on schematic themes from Tirupati, Srikakulam, Shrirangapatna, Kalhasti and Kanchipuram other locations. Environmental events, flora and fauna, Seasons and Ragas are all brilliantly described as co-themes in these paintings.

A Comparative Glance - Tanjore & Mysore Paintings

The Vijayanagar School of painting gradually developed into numerous South Indian painting styles, such as the Mysore and Tanjore schools by absorbing the regional artistic traditions and customs. It is an offshoot of the Vijayanagar School of Art which flourished in Tanjore. There are little but peculiar differences between the Tanjore and Mysore styles of paintings. Tanjore Paintings are painted on a fabric and mounted onto a wooden frame whereas Mysore Paintings are done on paper and then placed on wood or canvas. Tanjore paintings use both gold and silver wafers however Mysore paintings only use a gold wafer. Tanjore's gesso work is thicker than the Mysore painting. It resembles a three-dimensional effect by using wooden cardboard to improve the density of the gesso layer. Mysore paintings' gesso work is low relief and complex in contrast to the Tanjore School's heavy gold relief work. Tanjore painting uses dense gold foil, whereas Mysore painting uses delicate foil. Tanjore paintings' major theme is to show Krishna's life but Mysore paintings' theme is generic.

Elements in Mysore School of Paintings

Mysore paintings are remarkable for their peculiar characteristics. Some noteworthy elements are detailed subsequently.

- Gesso work was the trademark of all traditional Karnataka paintings. Gesso was employed in Mysore art to create detailed motifs of clothing, jewels, and geometrical elements on arches and pillars.
- European influences are intertwined in its design. Indian Gods and Goddesses perched on a French chair, European handling of clocks, landscape, clock, candles, and chandelier. This is introduced in light of Tipu Sultan's French relationship.
- It has a specialized feature '*Mysore Ganjifa*' inclusive of the broader Mysore School of Art. The term '*Ganjifa*' is derived from the Persian word '*Ganjifeh*' meaning playing cards. These game cards are distinguished by their classic hand-painted design. Given that the primary goal of the game was to instruct and gain knowledge from sacred scriptures, all 18 Mysore-Ganjifa-style games were intended to feature stories from the epics, Hindu Puranas and so on. Today, in addition to mythical topics, artists have begun to paint portraits of Maharajas.
- Frescoes of Hindu goddesses and gods as well as themes from Hindu mythology on temple walls and ceilings are a hallmark of the Mysore school of painting. Forms, postures and colours are delineated to highlight innovative folk components in traditional depictions. The paintings demonstrate a cohesive structure, with symmetrical designs and balanced dimensions that accentuate their picturesque appeal.

CONCLUSION

Indian art has a profound impact on art movements worldwide, influencing artists and art movements across the globe. The splendid yet austere Mysore paintings progressed from time to time. While rooted in tradition, Mysore paintings continue to evolve, with contemporary artists exploring new themes and expressions while staying true to the core principles of the art form. The Geographical Indication (GI) tag for Mysore traditional paintings is a rightful recognition of its artistic merit and cultural value. GI tag is vital in protecting them from imitation and ensuring their authenticity. This helps preserve this art form for future generations and supports the livelihoods of the artisans who create them. It emphasizes the significance of maintaining and fostering such distinct art forms, which are an indispensable component of India's rich legacy. Mysore Traditional Paintings are more than just beautiful objects; they are a cultural treasure. They reflect the artistic sensibilities of the region, preserving ancient traditions and showcasing the skill and dedication of generations of artists.

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