

The Mattancheri Palace and Its Mural Paintings

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One set of murals is located in a room sometimes referred to as the Ladies Chamber. We have no external evidence for how any of these rooms was used, but certain features do imply this room might have been intended as a place where the King might enjoy female companionship. For one, it is quite secluded from the rest of the Palace. While the Palace occupies the four wings of only the first story of the two-story structure, the ground story forms the enclosure of the Bhagavathy Temple in the large central courtyard. The chamber occupies the lower story of a wing that extends from the south east corner of the Palace (and is therefore not part of the temple compound); above it is a spacious hall with a beautifully carved wooden ceiling, furnished with a swinging cot.

The five mural panels here each framed by its own painted border, depict forms of Vishnu, Krishna and Shiva. This kind of painting format is similar to murals in Hindu Temples of Kerala. In that each section of wall represents a particular deity, with a composition focused on the main central deity. Here, all treat themes derived from literature emphasizing *bhakti* (devotion) in terms of romantic or erotic love. For example, the main Shiva painting ..See illustration below...shows Shiva and Parvathy seated on a throne, with Parvathy on Shiva's lap as he embraces her, touching her breast while they gaze into each other's eyes. Beside the throne are there are their children, Ganapathy and Karthikeya, with Nandi in attendance. Their attendants are attentive devotees, and in some ways the scene echoes a courtly audience attending their King and his companion. Above them a lush tree sprouts elaborate vegetation , suggesting the abundance the God showers upon his devotees, and the flocks of fowl inhabiting its branches are attentive upon the divine couple as well.



Shiva and Parvati, Downstairs Room

Another painting in this room shows Krishna with the Gopis. He reclines, playing his flute with his two hands, while other hands caress and fondle his many companions; he even uses a foot! His loving gaze toward the women is returned – their attention is rivetted on him, either looking to his eyes for a glimpse of his divine love, or hoping to catch his attention by their caresses. This painting, perhaps more directly and dramatically than any other in the room, speaks to such ways of loving God, but this is the common theme shared by all. Also like the other panels in this room, the main scene is foregrounded against a pastoral landscape setting, lush with trees and vegetation amongst which are seen pairs of animals, often mating, thus echoing the theme and imagery of the main scene. SEE ILLUSTRATION BELOW



Krishna and the Gopis, Downstairs Room

A stair case in the adjacent room , leads to the so-called “ Staircase Room” above it, but in a corner of this in-between space are preparatory drawings in a pale red ochre line with added color in yellow for what appears to be a narrative, probably the marriage of Shiva and Parvathy. Why the project was abandoned is not known, but the firm yet lithe line of these drawings demonstrates the skill of local artists and some hint of the process of creating such works

SEE BELOW



Sketch for unfinished painting, downstairs chamber

The Staircase Room, situated in the south east corner of the Palace, where the south and East wings join, is embellished with murals around four walls. Unlike the Downstairs Room, where all the paintings are executed in a single style, here several styles are present. A lack of evidence about authorship and dating means we don't know if the different styles are the work of different periods or simply varied styles practiced by different artists (or schools) working at or close to the same time. Four panels or compositions are the work of a single artist or group. These are masterful works, executed in a painting style unique to the region extending from North of Thrissur to area south of Kochi – that is, the region at one time closely connected to the territories of the Kochi Rajas. The palette is rich and deep, the pigment thickly applied, so that the wall surface is not visible.

SEE BELOW: Bhagavathy and Ananthasayanam



Vishnu Anantasayin, Staircase Room

This group of paintings, like those in the Downstairs Room, each focuses on a particular deity and his or her companions and attendants, also like temple murals in the region. Several have been identified as representing the deities enshrined in specific local temples. If this is correct, it is likely that this is true of all four, even if they have not been identified yet. The paintings in south half of this chamber are distinct; the palette is lighter, the paint thin, and there are areas where we see the wall surface. These, too, depict Hindu deities, as in the image of Rama, depicted as if holding court.

SEE ILLUSTRATION BELOW:



Rama in audience, Staircase Room

To my mind, the finest murals at Mattanchery Palace , and indeed perhaps the most magnificent murals to survive in Kerala, are what I call the Ramayana murals, in the south western corner room. The space traditionally regarded as the private space of the senior male in a conventional *nalukettu* palace. These paintings stand out among all the surviving paintings in Kerala in several ways. Even though they are organized into separate compositions like those in other rooms of the palace, all the paintings are linked in a narrative, the Ramayana epic. Furthermore, within each panel, the story depicted is a continuous narrative, with sequential episodes spilling into one another (and usually following a different pattern in each panel). There is no interest in space or setting; the story is told through the figures themselves, who are packed into these densely crowded compositions as one scene spills into the next. This can mean that it is sometimes difficult to follow the story, to make out exactly what is represented, but the painters responsible for these spectacular murals clearly understood that their audience, the King and his Court, had heard Rama's story (and commentaries) countless times; and by the 18th century (when I believe they were executed), they had certainly witnessed Kathakali dance drama performers enacting Rama's tale at this court – quite likely in this very palace – and other local performance traditions. Kochi rulers were not only patrons of Kathakali; several were also authors of plays.

For someone unfamiliar with this painting mode it can be daunting to read the Ramayana Murals, since at first they might appear to be a jumble of figures in no particular order, even when they tell a story the audience already knows. But the effort is worth it, for even if these artists were working within well established conventions of style to relate a familiar narrative they were at the same time interpreting that story with thoughtful intelligence. For example, just as Valmiki only rarely hints at or speaks to the divinity of Rama, the painters here are likewise mainly concerned with telling this very long tale of the human Rama, the would-be heir to the throne of Ayodhya, who is instead exiled, along with his wife Sita and brother Lakshmana; Rama must first find and recover Sita after her kidnapping by the demon king Ravana, after which he returns to Ayodhya and succeeds to the throne. But just as Valmiki reveals Rama's real nature as Vishnu at the time of the sacrifice enacted on behalf of King Dasaratha to effect the birth of an heir, so in the first panel (Bala Kanda) we see Vishnu appear as a deity, rising from the sacrificial fire. SEE ILLUSTRATION: His presence is powerful and commanding, and reminds us of the point of the entire epic; that Vishnu will be born in the form of Rama to defeat the forces of evil as personified in the demon Ravana. Vishnu is represented differently from the figures in the narrative. His posture is frontal and upright and he looks directly out, like an icon in a temple, while the other figures' faces are slightly turned and their bodies move with a gentle bend as they gaze and gesture toward one another. SEE BELOW:



Vishnu, Balakanda, Ramayana Room

The painters were also concerned that the figures convey the various emotional states of the *rasa* system of aesthetics. Any number of instances could be cited, but I want to focus on what I see to be the dominant mode of this narrative; that is, the *vira*, or heroic, the mode of valour, a mode clearly appropriate to the heroic actions of Rama as he battles Ravana and his forces in the efforts to find and rescue Sita from Ravana's palace fortress. The panel depicting the series of battles that culminate in Rama's and his forces final defeat of Ravana (from the Yuddha Kanda) fills most of the west wall of the room and is nearly three times the length of any other. Also these are the scenes that a viewer would encounter – at eye level – when entering the room from the adjacent Coronation Hall. In battle, both Rama and his brother Lakshmana are shown in *vira* mode, following well-established conventions in Kerala(see illustration): their backs are arched like practitioners of the martial art *kalaripayattu*, their eyes are wide and alert as they embody the single-minded focus that enables their success in battle (see illustration). Ravana, on the other hand, is depicted in *raudra* or furious mode (see illustration): his eyes are so wide they bulge, and the fangs as well as the pottu dots or marks on his face signify that his fury has come to control him; as a result he will die at the hand of Rama. The energy, the effort, and control required of these warriors is convincingly and powerfully rendered,

See the three illustrations below:



Rama and Lakshman in Battle, Yuddhakanda, Ramayana Room



Rama and Ravana battle, Yuddhakanda, Ramayana Room



Ravana, Yuddhakanda, Ramayana Room

So not only do these paintings stand out from others in the region in that they depict an epic narrative that continues within each panel and from panel to panel. The manner in which the narrative is told, its energy and dynamism, but also the concern with an interpretation of the story, rendered through the system of rasa aesthetics, demonstrate the sophistication and skill of these artists. We lack any information about the painter or painters responsible, and Kerala murals that include a painted inscription mentioning the painter(s) are in fact rare. The few known instances, however, reveal that at least some of these painters were Brahmins, a point that is somewhat surprising given that the art of painting seems to have more typically been the work of the artisan class. This is only one of many questions that remain about Kerala painting and its artists, and given the fragile state of so many murals, the need for further research is urgent.

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