



Visual Grandeur of the Empire: A study of Vijayanagar mural paintings and their cultural significance

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Abstract

A stronghold of South Indian culture, the Vijayanagar Empire (1336–1646 CE) is well known for its magnificent mural paintings and architectural wonders. The stylistic elements, themes, techniques, and iconographic narratives of Vijayanagar murals are examined in this essay, with a focus on those found in temples such as Tadipatri and Lepakshi (Veerabhadra Temple). The study looks into how religious devotion, mythological narrative, and sociopolitical identity are reflected in these murals. To place Vijayanagar within the larger South Indian mural tradition, a graphical chart classifies regional mural styles. The artistic, religious, and cultural significance of the mural paintings of the Vijayanagara Empire are the main topics of this research paper. The Vijayanagar murals, especially those found at temple locations like Lepakshi and Hampi, are colourful visual narratives that portray mythological tales, religious scenes, royal processions, and common cultural activities. They flourished between the 14th and 17th centuries. These murals, which were created with natural pigments and the fresco-secco technique, are distinguished by their rich ornamentation, expressive figures, and bold lines. In addition to serving as devotional aids within temple architecture, the study examines how the murals celebrated the splendour of South Indian heritage, promoted social values, and communicated political legitimacy. The study highlights the importance of preservation while placing Vijayanagar mural art within the larger framework of Indian mural traditions through iconographic and stylistic analysis. The empire's lasting cultural legacy and its advanced artistic vision are still demonstrated by these paintings.

Keywords: mural techniques, South Indian art, Indian iconography, the Bhakti movement, Lepakshi temple, Vijayanagar murals, and fresco secco

Introduction

In order to give a thorough examination of the mural art that flourished during the Vijayanagar Empire (1336–1646 CE), a golden age of South Indian history, the research paper "Visual Grandeur of the Empire: A Study of Vijayanagar Mural Paintings and Their Cultural Significance" was written. Students, scholars, and art historians with an interest in Indian visual culture, temple architecture, and historical art practices are the target audience for this study. Critically analysing the themes, styles, and techniques used in the mural paintings of important temple sites like Lepakshi and Hampi is the instruction for this study. The religious, mythological, and sociopolitical narratives that are depicted in these murals deserve particular attention. The use of natural pigments, the fresco-secco technique, and symbolic iconography should all be taken into consideration, along with comparisons to other Indian mural traditions (like Kerala and Ajanta).

The study should also discuss the cultural setting in which these pieces were produced, examining the ways in which art served as a means of royal propaganda, education, and devotion. Lastly, the study ought to stress how crucial conservation initiatives are as well as how these murals contribute to our understanding of the Vijayanagar Empire's artistic and spiritual heritage. Charts and visual documentation are encouraged.

Historical Background of Vijayanagar Murals

Harihara and Bukka Raya established the Vijayanagar Empire (1336–1646 CE), which grew to become a strong South Indian dynasty that supported religion, art, and architecture. During this time, mural painting was very popular, particularly during the reigns of Achyuta Deva

Raya and Krishnadevaraya. These colourful murals were mostly painted on temples; Lepakshi, Hampi, and Tadipatri are a few prominent examples. These paintings, which depicted epics like the Ramayana and Mahabharata, demonstrated the empire's adherence to Shaivism and Vaishnavism. Vijayanagar murals, which are created in the fresco-secco style with natural pigments, are a singular combination of devotional expression, royal symbolism, and narrative art in mediaeval South India.

These murals were executed mainly in fresco-secco technique, using natural pigments and limestone plaster on granite walls.

Iconography and Themes

| Theme | Description |
|--------------------|---------------------------------------------------|
| Mythological Epics | Ramayana, Mahabharata, Shiva Purana |
| Devotional Imagery | Shiva, Vishnu, Virabhadra |
| Royal Processions | Kings, queens, musicians, dancers |
| Narrative Panels | Episodes of divine intervention and battle scenes |

The Ramayana, Mahabharata, Bhagavata Purana, and Shiva Purana are the main sources of inspiration.

Deities like Shiva, Vishnu, Parvati, Lakshmi, Ganesha, and Veerabhadra are frequently portrayed.

Stories about Shiva and Parvati's marriage and Veerabhadra's wrath are common, particularly at Lepakshi Temple.

Intricate scenes of gods, sages, and celestial musicians (Gandharvas, Apsaras) attending divine events are frequently shown in murals.

Grandeur, motion, and divine order are all conveyed in the compositions.

Murals depicting kings, queens, dancers, and musicians establish a connection between divine legitimacy and royal authority.

The beauty of Vijayanagara courtly culture is emphasised in these pictures.

Notable Imagery: The ceiling mural of Veerabhadra Temple, Lepakshi depicting Virabhadra in divine rage Dancers and musicians showcasing courtly culture

Artistic Characteristics

The Vijayanagara Empire's mural paintings exhibit a unique and complex visual language that combines regional aesthetics, religious devotion, and royal ideology. Red ochre, lamp black, indigo, lime white, turmeric, and other natural pigments derived from minerals and organic sources were used to paint these murals, which were mainly done in the fresco-secco technique, on dry lime-plastered walls. The bold, rhythmic line work that defines the contours of figures

and forms is one of the most striking aspects of the artwork. Large almond-shaped eyes, ornate costumes, and elaborate jewellery adorn these stylised yet expressive figures. In order to emphasise their spiritual or political significance, the compositions frequently employ hierarchical scaling, making gods and royalty larger than servants and commoners.

The lavishness of the Vijayanagar court is echoed in the murals' exquisite attention to textile design and ornamentation. Another distinguishing feature is narrative clarity; the murals are readable by both literate and illiterate audiences due to the sequential arrangement of continuous storytelling across panels.

There is little spatial depth, and figures are frequently shown in front or in profile, depending more on compositional flow and overlap than on perspective. In spite of this, the paintings have a vibrant, dynamic presence that captures emotion and movement, particularly in dance, combat, and divine manifestation scenes.

Graphical Chart: Comparative Analysis

Graphical Chart: Comparative Features of South Indian Mural Styles

| Feature | Vijayanagar Mural | Kerala Murals | Ajanta Murals | Nayaka Period Murals |
|-------------------|-------------------|--------------------------|------------------|------------------------|
| Period | 14th–17th C | 9th–19th C | 2nd B.C–6th A. D | 16th–18th C |
| Key Themes | Shaiva-Vaishnava | Hindu Puranas | Jataka Tales | Mythology + Royalty |
| Technique | Fresco-secco | Fresco-secco | True Fresco | Fresco-secco |
| Color Palette | Earthy & vivid | Rich natural | Softer tones | Bold, contrasting |
| Line Work | Bold, defined | Elegant curves | Graceful & fluid | Angular & expressive |
| Location Examples | Lepakshi, Hampi | Mattancherry, Ettumanoor | Ajanta Caves | Thirumala Nayaka Mahal |

Cultural and Religious Significance

The Vijayanagara Empire's mural paintings from the 14th to the 17th centuries vividly capture the political, religious, and cultural climate of South India. With their strong visual narratives that depicted stories from the Ramayana, Mahabharata, and Puranas, these murals, which have their roots in Hindu religious traditions, helped the general public understand difficult theological concepts through striking imagery. They were essential in promoting the Bhakti movement's core beliefs, which included the omnipresence of divine beings, moral principles, and individual devotion.

The main locations for these murals were temples, which developed into visual education hubs where followers could interact with holy tales without knowing how to read or write. The murals served to foster spiritual awareness and were more than just ornamental; they were instructive and symbolic. Culturally, they promoted and preserved the music, dance, dress, and rituals of Vijayanagara's court, providing an insight into the daily life and artistic sophistication of the era.

In terms of religion, these paintings established a symbolic link between governance and spirituality by showcasing rulers frequently in close proximity to gods, thereby solidifying the king's divine right. All things considered, Vijayanagar murals continue to be an essential part of India's artistic and cultural legacy, embodying a harmonious fusion of devotion, strength, and inventiveness.

Preservation and Challenges

Because of centuries of exposure to the environment, neglect, and human interference, the preservation of Vijayanagar mural paintings is fraught with difficulties. These paintings were made using the fresco-secco

technique, which is extremely vulnerable to humidity, water seepage, temperature changes, and biological deterioration despite being long-lasting. They are mainly found on the walls and ceilings of temples such as Lepakshi and Hampi. Many murals have deteriorated over time due to pollution, mould, and soot, or they have faded or flaked.

Human actions like overtourism, graffiti, and unpermitted restorations have further jeopardised their integrity. Original context and details have been lost due to ignorance and poor documentation. Although the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) has implemented a number of conservation measures, such as protective barriers and chemical treatments, large-scale restoration is hampered by a lack of sophisticated technology and limited resources.

For these works of art to be preserved in the future, digitisation initiatives and scholarly research are essential. Support at the policy level, education, and community involvement are also becoming more and more necessary to guarantee long-term protection. Future generations would be deprived of a priceless artistic and cultural legacy if the Vijayanagar Empire's famous mural legacy—a distinctive fusion of spirituality, beauty, and history—is not preserved immediately and thoroughly.

Conclusion

Among the most outstanding accomplishments in Indian art history are the mural paintings of the Vijayanagara Empire. These murals go beyond simple decoration to become potent instruments of religious expression, cultural identity, and visual storytelling because of their elaborate compositions, vivid colours, and expressive figures. A sophisticated artistic language that is intricately woven into the political and spiritual fabric of the era is revealed

through the study of Vijayanagar mural paintings, particularly those found at locations like Lepakshi, Hampi, and Tadipatri.

These murals reflect social values, royal authority, and daily life in addition to telling stories of mythology and devotion. Their imagery upholds the legitimacy of rulers by demonstrating their closeness to the divine, celebrates divine-human relationships, and advances the principles of the Bhakti movement. The murals, which were created using the fresco-secco technique and natural pigments, demonstrate Vijayanagar's exceptional aesthetic sensibilities in terms of form, symmetry, rhythm, and symbolism. Notwithstanding their cultural significance, these murals face numerous obstacles because of human neglect, environmental deterioration, and preservation issues. To preserve and record them for future generations, immediate and persistent action is required. To ensure their survival, community involvement, digital archiving, and educational programs are essential.

To sum up, Vijayanagar mural paintings are living records of a glorious past that capture the empire's artistic brilliance, religious devotion, and cultural sophistication. They are more than just historical artefacts. By conserving and researching them, we not only protect a visual legacy but also acquire important knowledge about the values and worldview of a past time.

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