



Thanjavur Painting

A Journey of Heritage, Craft and Creative Evolution

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Abstract: Thanjavur painting, also known as Tanjore painting, is a distinguished classical art form of South India, celebrated for its rich devotional themes, intricate craftsmanship, and opulent use of gold embellishments. Originating in the historic town of Thanjavur, Tamil Nadu, this art form evolved under the patronage of the Nayakas, Marathas and other regional powers from the 16th century onward, reflecting a vibrant confluence of cultural, religious and artistic influences. Characterized by its bold compositions, vibrant color palette, raised gesso work, and three-dimensional gold detailing, Thanjavur paintings traditionally depict Hindu gods, goddesses, saints and mythological narratives, serving both devotional and decorative purposes.

Over time, the techniques, materials and thematic repertoire of Thanjavur painting have evolved. Contemporary artists experiment with modern substrates like plywood and canvas, synthetic pigments, and alternative gilding methods while incorporating secular, popular and contemporary motifs alongside classical religious subjects. This fusion of tradition and innovation has expanded the appeal of Tanjore art, making it relevant in modern home decor, interior design and the international art market. The accessibility of online platforms has further facilitated the global reach of Thanjavur paintings, connecting artists and collectors across regions.

This paper examines the historical development, artistic influences, methodological techniques and modern adaptations of Thanjavur painting, highlighting its enduring significance as a living art form. It also explores current trends, changing consumer preferences and the integration of classical craftsmanship with contemporary aesthetics, demonstrating the resilience, adaptability and timeless appeal of this century's old artistic tradition. The study underscores Thanjavur painting not only as a cultural and devotional heritage but also as a dynamic and evolving art form that continues to inspire artists and art enthusiasts worldwide.

I. INTRODUCTION



Thanjavur painting, also known as Tanjore painting, is one of the most celebrated classical painting traditions of South India, renowned for its opulence, devotional intensity and distinctive visual language. Originating in the historic town of Thanjavur in Tamil Nadu, this art form reflects a rich confluence of religious faith, royal patronage and refined craftsmanship. Its roots can be traced back to around the 16th-17th century, a period marked by significant cultural efflorescence in the region.

The early development of Thanjavur painting was nurtured during the rule of the Nayakas of Thanjavur, who governed under the suzerainty of the Vijayanagara Rayas. This era witnessed a flourishing of the arts, particularly classical dance, Carnatic music, literature in Tamil and Telugu, and temple architecture. Painting, especially of Hindu religious themes, was actively encouraged as part of temple rituals and courtly patronage. However, the fully evolved form of Thanjavur painting as it is recognized today emerged later, during the Maratha rule in Thanjavur (1676-1855). The Maratha rulers played a pivotal role in systematizing the style, refining its iconography, and extending patronage to artists who specialized in this unique genre.

Thanjavur paintings are distinguished by their rich, vibrant colour palette, bold yet harmonious compositions and iconic representation of sacred figures. One of the most striking features of this art form is the use of brilliant gold foil, applied over intricately modelled gesso work, which lends a three-dimensional quality and a resplendent luminosity to the paintings. The embellishment is further enhanced through the inlay of glass beads, stones and, in rare instances, precious or semi-precious gems. These stylistic elements not only enhance visual appeal but also symbolize divine radiance and spiritual abundance.

Stylistically, Thanjavur painting reflects a synthesis of multiple artistic influences, including Deccan, Vijayanagara and Maratha traditions, as well as subtle elements derived from European or Company school painting. Despite these influences, the art form retains a strong indigenous identity, deeply rooted in devotional practice. The primary subjects are Hindu gods, goddesses, and saints, depicted as objects of worship rather than mere aesthetic representations.

Narratives from Hindu Puranas, Sthala Puranas and other sacred texts form the thematic foundation of these paintings. Typically, the central deity or principal figure is prominently placed at the heart of the composition, often framed within an architecturally defined space such as a mantapa or a prabhavali. Surrounding this central figure are subsidiary deities, attendants, devotees and narrative elements that enrich the storytelling and symbolic depth of the artwork. While predominantly Hindu in subject matter, Thanjavur paintings also demonstrate inclusivity, with documented representations of Jain, Sikh, Muslim and even secular themes such as depictions of Sikh Gurus accompanied by Bhai Bala and Bhai Mardana in the 20th century.

Traditionally, Thanjavur paintings are executed as panel paintings on wooden planks, locally referred to as palagai padam (palagai meaning wooden plank and padam meaning picture). This technique contributes to their durability and distinctive texture. In contemporary times, while the devotional essence remains intact, Thanjavur paintings have also gained prominence as decorative and collectible artworks, often created as souvenirs for festive and ceremonial occasions across South India.

In recognition of its historical significance and cultural value, Thanjavur painting was accorded the status of a Geographical Indication (GI) by the Government of India in 2007, ensuring the preservation and authenticity of this timeless artistic tradition.

II. HISTORY



Tanjore (Thanjavur) painting is a distinguished classical painting tradition of South India, deeply rooted in the cultural heritage of Tamil Nadu. The art form originated in Thanjavur, the historic capital of the Chola dynasty, a city long celebrated as a centre of religion, art and learning. While its early foundations were laid through centuries of temple patronage, the style attained greater refinement and prominence during the 17th century under the patronage of the Maratha kings of Thanjavur, who actively encouraged religious art and craftsmanship.

The influence of Tanjore painting extended beyond Tamil Nadu, receiving royal support in the Mysore region as well. King Krishnarajendra Wodeyar of Mysore was a notable patron who helped sustain and promote this rich tradition, allowing it to flourish across different parts of South India. This cross regional patronage contributed to stylistic continuity while also encouraging subtle regional adaptations. One of the most defining features of Tanjore painting is its lavish use of materials. The art form is renowned for incorporating brilliant gold foils, raised gesso work and decorative elements such as glass beads and in some instances, precious and semi precious stones. These embellishments create a luminous surface and impart a sculptural, three-dimensional quality to the paintings, symbolizing divine splendour and spiritual abundance.

Originally, Tanjore paintings were created primarily as devotional images intended for worship. The subjects most commonly depicted are Hindu gods and goddesses, portrayed in their divine grandeur and majesty. The figures are typically large and centrally positioned, with rounded, serene and idealized facial features that convey calmness, benevolence and divinity. The compositions are simple yet powerful, designed to draw the viewer's focus directly toward the sacred presence of the deity. Stylistically, Tanjore paintings are characterized by their rich and vivid colour palette, bold outlines, symmetrical compositions, and ornate detailing. Traditional mineral and vegetable pigments were used to achieve depth and intensity of colour, further enhanced by the reflective brilliance of gold leaf. The background settings often include architectural elements such as arches and decorative frames, which lend a sense of structure and sanctity to the composition.

Technically, Tanjore paintings are executed as panel paintings on wooden planks. In local terminology, they are known as palagai padam, where palagai means wooden plank and padam refers to picture. This method not only ensures durability but also supports the layered application of gesso, gold foil and paint, which is essential to the distinctive visual identity of the art form.

2.1 Vijayanagara Rayas

The Vijayanagara Empire, founded in the mid-14th century by the brothers Harihara and Bukka, emerged as one of the most powerful and enduring Hindu kingdoms in South India. Established with the primary objective of resisting the rapidly expanding Islamic powers from the Deccan and northern India, the empire became a formidable political and cultural bulwark. While external influences inevitably filtered into the southern peninsula over time, the Vijayanagara rulers played a crucial role in safeguarding and revitalising ancient Hindu traditions, particularly in the fields of religion, architecture, literature and the visual arts.

The empire reached its greatest political and cultural zenith during the reign of Krishnadevaraya (1509-1529), widely regarded as one of the most illustrious monarchs in Indian history. Under his leadership, Vijayanagara extended its dominion across the vast expanse of the South Indian peninsula. At its peak, the empire's territory stretched from the Tungabhadra River in the north to Kanyakumari at the southernmost tip of India and from the Malabar Coast along the Arabian Sea in the west to the Coromandel Coast bordering the Bay of Bengal in the east. This extensive territorial control facilitated the movement of ideas, artisans, and artistic practices across regions.



Krishnadevaraya was not only a skilled administrator and military strategist but also a devout patron of art and religion. In the years 1521-1522, he undertook an extensive pilgrimage across the Tamil country (Tamilagam), visiting several sacred centres and renowned temples. True to his deeply ingrained tradition of royal patronage, he made generous endowments to temples, religious institutions and scholarly establishments. These acts of munificence significantly strengthened temple economies, which in turn became important centres for artistic production.

It is widely surmised that a portion of this royal generosity was directed toward the support of artists, craftsmen and workshops attached to temples. Sculptors, painters, metalworkers and other artisans benefited from sustained patronage, enabling them to preserve classical Hindu artistic idioms while also refining and expanding their techniques. The visual culture fostered under the Vijayanagara Rayas laid a strong foundation for later regional art traditions, including temple murals, manuscript painting and panel painting styles that would evolve in the Nayaka and Maratha periods.

Thus, the Vijayanagara Rayas were instrumental not only in maintaining political stability in South India but also in ensuring the continuity and enrichment of indigenous artistic traditions. Their legacy profoundly influenced the development of South Indian art, creating a cultural framework within which later styles such as Thanjavur painting could emerge and flourish.

2.3 Thanjavur Nayaks



The Vijayanagara Rayas governed their extensive empire through a well structured administrative system that relied on Nayaka governors. These Nayakas were entrusted with the responsibility of administering distant provinces and semi-autonomous states, while remaining under the overall authority and supervision of the Raya. This decentralised yet efficient system enabled the empire to maintain political control and cultural cohesion across vast territories.

Within the Tamil region, three major Nayaka states emerged as significant centres of power and culture: Senji (Gingee), Madurai and Thanjavur. Among these, the Nayaka kingdom of Thanjavur was established during the reign of Achyutaraya (1529-1542), the half-brother and successor of the great Vijayanagara ruler Krishnadevaraya. The foundation of this state marked the beginning of an important phase in the political and cultural history of the Tamil country.

The Thanjavur Nayaka dynasty began with Sevappa Nayaka (1532-1572), who laid strong administrative and cultural foundations for the kingdom. His rule was characterized by political stability and effective governance, supported ably by his son Achyutappa Nayaka. Achyutappa initially served as a co-ruler and later succeeded Sevappa, ruling from 1564 to 1614. Under his leadership, Thanjavur continued to prosper as a regional power.

A significant turning point occurred during Achyutappa Nayaka's reign with the catastrophic decline of the Vijayanagara Empire following the Battle of Talikota in 1565. The fall of this once-powerful empire triggered a widespread migration of scholars, poets, philosophers, musicians and artists who sought patronage in more stable neighbouring kingdoms. Thanjavur, along with Mysore and other southern courts, became a major refuge for this intellectual and artistic diaspora.

This influx of talent greatly enriched the cultural landscape of Thanjavur. The Nayaka rulers provided generous patronage to these creative communities, allowing diverse artistic traditions to merge and evolve. After Achyutappa Nayaka, the throne passed to his son Raghunatha Nayaka, who was later succeeded by Vijayaraghava Nayaka. Among them, Raghunatha Nayaka is widely regarded as the most illustrious ruler of the Thanjavur Nayaka line.

Raghunatha Nayaka was an exceptional patron of the arts and himself a distinguished scholar and composer. His court became a vibrant center for music, literature, dance and the visual arts. Through sustained royal support, he helped establish a distinctive school of artists in Thanjavur. This artistic milieu laid the groundwork for the evolution of the Thanjavur style of painting, which would later attain its mature and recognizable form under Maratha patronage.

Thus, the Nayaka rulers of Thanjavur played a crucial intermediary role between the Vijayanagara and Maratha periods, ensuring continuity of artistic traditions while also fostering innovation. Their patronage not only preserved classical South Indian art forms but also created a fertile environment from which the celebrated Thanjavur painting tradition eventually emerged.

2.4 Marathas

The decline of the Nayaka dynasty in Thanjavur, largely due to internal dissensions and weak succession, created a political vacuum that paved the way for the establishment of Maratha rule in the region. Taking advantage of this instability, Ekoji also known as Venkoji (1676-1683), the half brother of Chhatrapati Shivaji marched into Thanjavur as a military commander under the Adil Shah of Bijapur, whom he served as a general. Following his successful campaign, Ekoji captured Thanjavur and laid the foundation of Maratha rule, marking the beginning of a new and significant phase in the region's political and cultural history.

Despite facing intermittent military conflicts and political upheavals most notably invasions by the Nawab of Arcot and later by Haidar Ali of Mysore the Maratha rulers of Thanjavur remained steadfast patrons of art and culture. Ekoji and his successors, including Tulajaji and the renowned Serfoji II (also known as Sarabhoji in Tamil), continued to extend generous support to artists, scholars and craftsmen. Their patronage ensured the survival and growth of artistic traditions that had been nurtured during the Nayaka period.

By the time Serfoji II ascended the Maratha throne, the political landscape of Thanjavur had undergone a dramatic transformation. The British East India Company had assumed full administrative control over the state, reducing the Maratha king to a largely ceremonial role with authority confined to the Thanjavur fort and a small surrounding territory. Compounding these challenges, Serfoji II had to overcome intense rivalry from his paternal uncle Amarasingha, who contested his claim to the throne and continued to operate a parallel court in Thiruvaidaimarudur even after Serfoji's accession.

In spite of these formidable obstacles, the reign of Serfoji II stands out as a golden period in the history of Thanjavur painting. It was during his rule that the art form attained its most mature, codified, and recognizable style characterized by raised gesso work, extensive use of gold foil, vibrant colours and a refined iconographic structure. Serfoji II's court became a vibrant centre of innovation, not only in painting but also in literature, music, medicine and education. His enlightened patronage enabled artists to experiment, consolidate techniques and elevate Thanjavur painting to a level of sophistication that continues to define the tradition today.

The Maratha period in Thanjavur eventually came to a poignant end with the death of its last ruler, Shivaji II whose greatness lay only in his illustrious lineage rather than in political power. Dying without a male heir, Shivaji II's demise provided the British with the pretext to annex the Thanjavur state under the infamous Doctrine of Lapse, bringing Maratha sovereignty to a close.

Following the decline of royal patronage, the responsibility of sustaining Thanjavur painting was assumed by influential mercantile communities, particularly the Chettiars. Known for their deep religious devotion and economic prosperity, the Chettiars emerged as significant patrons of the arts. As staunch Shaivites, they encouraged the depiction of Shaivite themes in Thanjavur paintings. A notable example can be found in the Chettiar monastery at Koviloor, which houses large scale Thanjavur paintings illustrating the lives of the 63 Nayanmars (Shaivite saints) and the 64 divine acts (Thiruvilaiyadal Puranam) of Lord Shiva, meticulously labelled in Tamil. Similarly, the Bhimarajagoswami monastery in Thanjavur preserves an impressive Thanjavur painting depicting the 108 sacred Vishnu temples (Divya Desams), reflecting the inclusive and expansive iconographic scope of the tradition.

In addition to indigenous patronage, the British, who entered Thanjavur in the aftermath of the Anglo Mysore wars, also extended limited patronage to Thanjavur artists. Their interest, often driven by curiosity and aesthetic appreciation, introduced new audiences and markets for the paintings, thereby contributing to the continued practice and adaptation of the art form during the colonial period.

Thus, despite political decline, dynastic conflicts, and colonial intervention, Thanjavur painting demonstrated remarkable resilience. Sustained by successive waves of patronage from Nayakas and Marathas to mercantile communities and colonial officials the tradition not only survived but evolved, leaving behind a rich visual legacy that continues to be revered in Indian art history.

2.5 Influence

The Tanjore style of painting emerged during a late and transformative phase of South Indian classical art, at a time when the society that nurtured it was itself undergoing considerable political, social and cultural upheaval. The decline of large empires, the rise of regional powers and the increasing presence of European colonial forces collectively shaped the artistic climate of the period. Within this complex historical context, Tanjore painting evolved as a resilient and adaptive art form, reflecting both continuity and change.

Unsurprisingly, the style is inherently syncretic in nature. Tanjore paintings exhibit a remarkable ability to assimilate and harmonise diverse cultural influences, including Tamil and Telugu traditions, Maratha court aesthetics, Deccan artistic idioms, European and Company styles, as well as local folk elements. These multiple strands were not merely juxtaposed but carefully integrated, resulting in a visual language that is at

once eclectic and cohesive. At its core, however, the style remained deeply rooted in South Indian artistic conventions.



The foundations of Tanjore painting draw heavily from earlier South Indian painting traditions, all of which were profoundly influenced by the Vijayanagara School. The legacy of Vijayanagara art characterized by iconic compositions, bold forms and a strong devotional focus served as a unifying framework within which regional styles developed. Among these, Kalamkari and Tirupati paintings appear to have exerted the closest stylistic influence on Tanjore painting. The narrative clarity, strong outlines and symbolic representation of figures seen in these traditions find echoes in the Tanjore idiom.

Tirupati paintings, in particular, provide valuable insight into the evolution of Tanjore art. Produced in the renowned temple town of Tirupati, these works employed a variety of materials and techniques, including painted terracotta reliefs, repousse brass work and paintings executed on paper and canvas. One of the most common forms consisted of painted and gilded terracotta relief slabs depicting the presiding deity. These were framed and enclosed in neatly crafted wooden boxes, making them portable objects of devotion that pilgrims could carry home as sacred memorabilia and install in their domestic puja rooms. Paintings of the main deity gilded and adorned with stone settings in a manner strikingly similar to Tanjore paintings are also well documented, further underscoring the close relationship between the two traditions.

In terms of materials and technique, early Tanjore artists relied on natural pigments derived from vegetable and mineral sources. Over time, however, these were gradually replaced by artificial paints, which offered greater consistency and ease of use. Regardless of the medium, Tanjore paintings are renowned for their striking colour schemes, dominated by vivid reds, deep blues and lush greens. This bold chromatic intensity, combined with the paintings' inherent richness and densely packed compositions, sets them apart from many other Indian painting traditions.



The subject matter of Tanjore paintings is predominantly devotional. Popular themes include depictions of Bal Krishna, Lord Rama and other Hindu gods, goddesses, saints and episodes drawn from Hindu mythology. The figures are rendered in a stylized, iconic manner, emphasizing divinity and spiritual presence over naturalistic representation. Ornamentation, symmetry and frontal positioning further reinforce the sacred character of these images.

Tanjore painting also shares an intimate relationship with allied crafts that flourished in Thanjavur, particularly painted and carved woodwork, as well as jewellery making traditions involving gilding and stone setting. The techniques of raised gesso work, gold leaf application, and gem inlay reveal a close exchange of skills between painters, wood carvers and jewellers, highlighting the integrated nature of artistic production in the region.



It is important to recognize that Thanjavur art was essentially functional in nature. These paintings were created to fulfil specific devotional, ritual or commemorative needs and were often commissioned directly by patrons. This functional aspect helps explain the iconic and formulaic style of Tanjore paintings, which stands in contrast to the more narrative, lyrical or exploratory qualities seen in traditions such as Pahari miniatures or Surpur paintings. In Tanjore art, clarity of iconography and devotional efficacy took precedence over individual artistic expression.

Thus, Tanjore painting represents not merely an aesthetic tradition but a living cultural practice one shaped by historical turbulence, enriched by diverse influences and grounded in the devotional life of South India. Its enduring appeal lies in this unique balance between artistic synthesis, technical richness and spiritual purpose.

III. METHODOLOGY



Tanjore (Thanjavur) painting is a traditional South Indian art form that originated in Tamil Nadu and evolved gradually over several centuries. Deeply rooted in history and cultural symbolism, this painting style is renowned for its elaborate detailing, luminous colour schemes, and distinctive application of gold foil. Owing to its rich aesthetic appeal and spiritual significance, Tanjore painting has gained wide recognition not only within India but also internationally, where it is increasingly incorporated into contemporary home decor and interior design.

The methodology of creating a Thanjavur painting involves a systematic and layered process that combines careful surface preparation, precise drawing, ornamental relief work and vibrant colour application. Each stage is crucial in achieving the characteristic richness and durability of the artwork.

3.1 Materials Required for Thanjavur Painting:

Before commencing the painting process, it is essential to assemble the appropriate materials. The quality of materials plays a vital role in the final appearance and longevity of the painting.

- **Base Surface (Wooden Plank or Canvas):** Traditionally, Thanjavur paintings are executed on wooden planks, which provide a sturdy foundation and support the raised gesso work. However, canvas is commonly used in contemporary practice due to its lightweight nature, ease of handling and cost-effectiveness.
- **Chalk Powder and Adhesive (Gesso):** Used to prepare the surface and create raised decorative elements.
- **Gold Foil or Gold Paint:** Essential for achieving the characteristic metallic brilliance associated with Tanjore paintings.
- **Tanjore Painting Colors:** Typically, water based paints are used for their brightness and smooth finish.
- **Brushes:** A range of brush sizes is required for outlining, detailing and filling in colors.
- **Palette:** For mixing and holding colors.
- **Pencil and Eraser:** For sketching the initial design.
- **Carbon Paper (Optional):** Useful for transferring intricate designs onto the prepared surface, especially for beginners.

It is advisable to source high-quality materials from reliable art supply stores. While local art shops often stock basic supplies, online platforms may offer specialized items such as traditional pigments, gold foil and tools specifically meant for Indian classical art forms.

3.2 Preparation of the Painting Surface

Once the base surface has been selected, the preparation of the painting surface forms the first and most critical step. Traditional artists prepare a mixture of chalk powder and adhesive to create gesso, which acts as a primer and bonding agent. This mixture ensures proper adhesion of paint and provides a smooth, durable surface for further work.

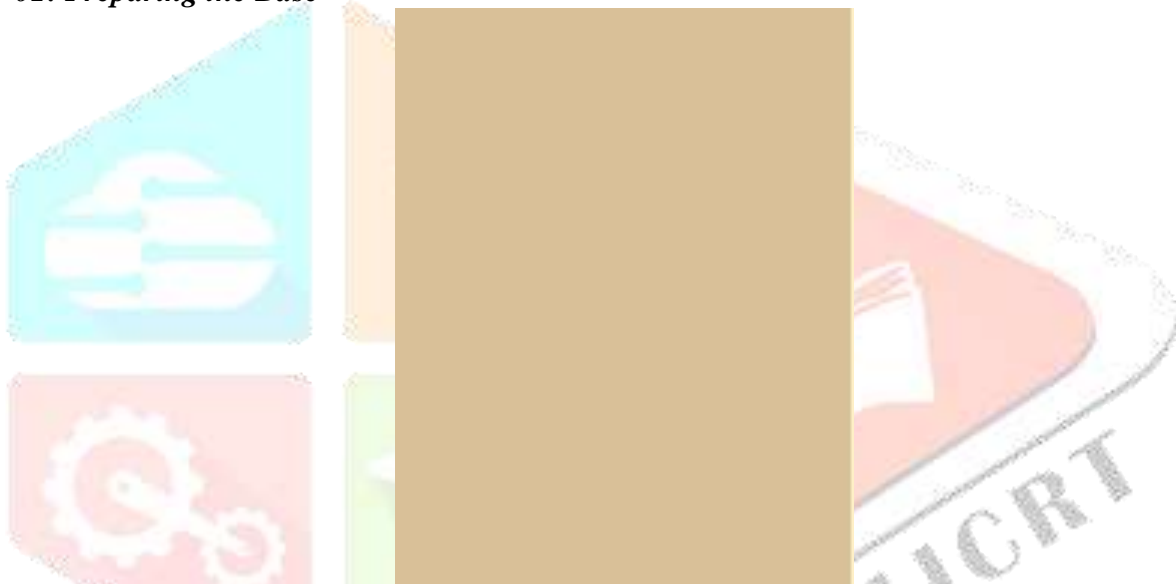
The gesso is applied evenly across the entire surface using a flat brush or spatula. Typically, two coats are recommended to achieve the desired thickness and smoothness. Each coat must be allowed to dry completely before the next is applied. Care must be taken to avoid uneven textures, cracks or bumps, as these can affect the overall finish of the painting.

For wooden boards, this preparation enhances durability and supports raised ornamentation. While canvas offers convenience and affordability, it may not provide the same structural support for heavy relief work as wood. Therefore, the choice of base should be made based on the intended level of detailing and ornamentation.

This prepared surface forms the foundation upon which the design, relief work, gold application and coloring stages of the Thanjavur painting process are carried out.

3.3 Steps Of Thanjavur Painting

STEP 01: Preparing the Base



Selection of the Surface

- Traditionally, Thanjavur paintings are executed on wooden planks, which provide a firm and durable foundation suitable for raised gesso and gold foil work.
- Wooden boards lend a classic and authentic appearance to the artwork and enhance its longevity.
- However, wood is relatively heavy and requires careful handling to avoid warping or damage.
- In contemporary practice, canvas is widely used as an alternative due to its lightweight nature, ease of handling and cost effectiveness.
- While canvas is convenient, it may not support heavy relief work as effectively as wood. The choice of surface should therefore depend on the complexity and level of ornamentation planned.

Surface Preparation

- Ensure that the chosen surface is clean, dry and free from dust or grease before beginning the painting process.
- If working on wood, the surface should be smoothened using fine sandpaper to remove any irregularities.
- Apply a base coat of gesso (chalk powder mixed with adhesive) evenly over the surface to create a suitable painting ground.

Painting Technique for the Base Layer

- Begin with flat washes to cover larger background areas uniformly.
- Use smooth, even brush strokes to avoid streaks, patches, or blotches.
- Gradually build up layers of paint to achieve depth and richness in colour.
- Allow each layer to dry completely before applying the next to prevent smudging and uneven textures.

- Patience during this stage is essential, as a well prepared base ensures a flawless and long-lasting final artwork.

Importance of the Base Preparation

- A properly prepared base enhances colour vibrancy, improves paint adhesion, and supports subsequent processes such as relief work and gold application.
- This foundational step sets the overall quality and durability of the Thanjavur painting.

STEP 02: Drawing the Outline



Selection of the Theme

- Traditionally, Thanjavur paintings depict Hindu gods and goddesses, saints and mythological scenes.
- However, there is no strict limitation on the subject and artists may choose themes based on personal interest or contemporary relevance, while maintaining the stylistic integrity of the art form.

Initial Sketching

- Begin by creating a light pencil sketch on the prepared base surface.
- The sketch should be done gently to allow for corrections and adjustments without damaging the gesso layer.

Creating the Design

- Artists with strong drawing skills may sketch the design freehand, ensuring accuracy in proportions and placement.
- Beginners or those less confident in freehand drawing can use carbon paper to transfer a pre-drawn design onto the surface.
- This method ensures neatness and consistency, especially for intricate motifs and ornamental details.

Composition and Proportion

- Maintain symmetry and balance, which are essential characteristics of Thanjavur paintings.
- The central figure, usually the deity, should be prominently placed, with supporting elements arranged harmoniously around it.
- Pay close attention to facial features, posture and ornamentation, as these define the divine and iconic quality of the artwork.

Tips for Beginners

- Start with simple and less complex designs to avoid unnecessary difficulty.
- Break down intricate elements into manageable sections.
- Take sufficient time during this stage a well planned outline forms the foundation for successful relief work, gold application and coloring.
- Avoid rushing, as mistakes at this stage can affect the overall finish of the painting.

STEP 03: Applying the First Layer of Paint



Selection of Colors

- Traditional Tanjore paintings are renowned for their vivid and rich color palette, including deep reds, lush greens, royal blues, bright yellows and occasional earthy tones.
- Each color carries symbolic and cultural significance. For example:
 - Red often symbolizes energy, power and auspiciousness.
 - Blue is associated with divinity, calmness and serenity.
 - Green represents fertility, nature and balance.
- While maintaining traditional hues is recommended, artists may experiment with modern variations to suit contemporary themes or decor purposes.
- Ensure the overall palette remains balanced, avoiding clashing or overpowering colors.

Preparing the Paint

- Use water based paints or traditional pigments for the first layer.
- Mix the colors on a palette to achieve consistent shades and smooth textures before applying them to the painting surface.

Technique for the First Layer

- Begin by filling in the larger areas of the composition, such as background elements and the main deity's clothing or ornaments.
- Apply the paint evenly using flat or medium brushes, avoiding streaks or blotches.
- Allow this base layer to dry completely before proceeding to subsequent layers, as it provides the foundation for depth, shading and detailing.

Tips for Beginners

- Focus on clean, even application, as a smooth base enhances the richness of later colors and highlights.
- Do not rush the drying process patience ensures a professional finish.
- Maintain the outline lightly visible beneath the paint to guide accurate placement of details in the next stages.

Importance of the First Layer

- The first layer sets the tone, depth and harmony of the painting.
- It serves as the foundation for subsequent layers, shading, relief work and gold application, which define the distinctive look of a Tanjore painting.

STEP 04: Adding Gold Foil / Gold Paint



Preparing the Surface for Gold

- Identify the areas where gold is to be applied, typically ornaments, jewelry, halos, thrones and decorative borders.
- Apply a thin layer of adhesive (traditionally a mixture called bole or any suitable craft adhesive) on the selected areas.
- Ensure the adhesive is evenly spread and slightly tacky before placing the gold foil.

Gold Foil Application

- Carefully lay the gold foil onto the prepared surface.
- Use a soft brush or cotton ball to gently press and burnish the foil so that it adheres completely to the surface.
- Remove excess foil by lightly brushing or wiping with a soft cloth.
- Polish the foil with a dry, soft brush or cloth to achieve a clean, luminous finish.
- Ensure patience and delicacy, as gold foil is fragile and prone to tearing.

Gold Paint as an Alternative

- For accessibility, gold paint can be used instead of foil.
- Apply multiple thin layers of paint rather than a single thick layer to achieve a uniform, metallic sheen.
- Let each layer dry completely before applying the next to enhance the richness and prevent smudging.

Highlighting and Detailing

- Use gold accents to emphasize key elements, such as jewelry, crowns, halos or decorative motifs.
- Careful detailing adds depth and dimension, creating a subtle three-dimensional effect.
- This step transforms the painting, giving it the signature opulence and regal quality that distinguishes Tanjore art.

Tips for Beginners

- Start with small sections to practice the application technique before working on the entire painting.
- Avoid rushing; careful handling and gradual layering are key to a polished and professional look.
- Ensure that gold areas align with the underlying sketch to maintain overall balance and symmetry.

Importance of Gold in Tanjore Painting

- Gold is central to the Tanjore aesthetic, symbolizing divinity, grandeur and sacredness.
- Properly applied gold foil or paint enhances the painting's visual impact and spiritual presence.

STEP 05: Adding Final Touches and Embellishments**Embellishments Overview**

- The final stage of a Tanjore painting involves adding decorative details and highlights that enhance its richness and visual impact.
- This includes applying gold foil or paint, adding gem inlays and refining intricate elements of the artwork.

Gold Foil Application

- Identify the areas that require gold embellishment, such as jewelry, crowns, halos, thrones and decorative borders.
- Apply a thin layer of adhesive to the selected sections. Allow it to become slightly tacky before placing the gold foil.
- Carefully lay the gold foil over the adhesive, and use a soft brush or cotton pad to gently burnish it so it adheres smoothly.
- Remove any excess foil using a soft brush or cloth to avoid uneven patches.
- Polish the applied foil lightly to achieve a clean, lustrous finish.

Gold Paint as an Alternative

- Gold paint is a convenient option for those who may not have access to foil.
- Apply thin, multiple layers of gold paint rather than a single thick coat to ensure even coverage and metallic sheen.
- Allow each layer to dry completely before applying the next.

Highlighting and Detailing

- Use gold accents to emphasize key features and create depth, such as highlighting ornaments, architectural motifs and decorative patterns.
- This step gives the painting a three-dimensional effect, making the central figures and motifs visually prominent.
- Pay attention to symmetry and proportion, ensuring that all embellishments complement the overall composition.

Optional Gem and Bead Inlays

- For traditional Tanjore authenticity, glass beads, semi-precious stones or pearls can be added to crowns, jewellery or borders.
- Secure each piece carefully with adhesive, ensuring proper alignment and spacing.
- This step adds texture, brilliance and tactile dimension to the artwork.

Final Checks and Finishing Touches

- Examine the painting for any uneven areas or gaps in color or gold application.
- Smooth out any inconsistencies and make minor adjustments as needed.
- Allow the painting to dry completely before framing or display.

Importance of Embellishments

- Embellishments are the hallmark of Tanjore painting, enhancing its opulence, sacredness and visual grandeur.
- This final stage transforms a simple painting into a rich, devotional artwork, embodying the traditional Tanjore aesthetic.

STEP 06: Finishing Touches and Preservation**Final Inspection and Touch-Ups**

- Carefully inspect the entire painting for any missed areas, uneven colors or imperfections.
- Correct any minor mistakes or gaps in paint, gold foil or embellishments to ensure a flawless and polished finish.
- Pay special attention to edges, outlines and small decorative details, as these contribute to the overall harmony of the artwork.

Application of Protective Varnish

- Once all touch-ups are complete and the painting is fully dry, apply a thin layer of clear varnish.
- The varnish serves to protect the surface from dust, dirt, and minor physical damage, while also enhancing the vibrancy of the colors and the shine of gold accents.
- Use a soft brush to apply the varnish evenly, avoiding streaks or bubbles.

Framing and Display

- Proper framing not only enhances the aesthetic appeal but also provides physical protection for the painting.
- Choose frames that complement the traditional richness of Tanjore art without overshadowing the work itself.
- Avoid exposure to direct sunlight, moisture, and extreme temperature changes, as these can fade colors and tarnish gold elements.

Routine Care and Maintenance

- For long-term preservation, dust the painting gently using a soft, dry cloth or brush.
- Avoid using water, chemicals or abrasive cleaning agents, as these may damage the pigments or gold leaf.
- Store or display the painting in a stable environment away from direct sunlight and excessive humidity to maintain its original vibrancy and luster.

Importance of Preservation

- Proper finishing and maintenance ensure the longevity of the artwork, allowing future generations to appreciate the intricate craftsmanship and devotional essence of Tanjore painting.
- These practices safeguard the colors, gold embellishments and delicate details, preserving the painting's traditional grandeur and visual brilliance.

IV. CURRENT TRENDS



Thanjavur paintings continue to be produced even today, although the rigor, intricacy and virtuosity that characterized the masterpieces of the past are not always maintained. Efforts to preserve and promote this traditional art form are evident through regular revival programs, exhibitions, workshops and training camps organized by various cultural institutions, including State Governments. Over time, the materials and techniques employed by artists have evolved in response to cost, availability and individual preference. For instance, plywood has largely replaced traditional jack wood and teak, while synthetic paints and adhesives are increasingly favoured over natural mineral and vegetable colors. Muck powder, a fine chalk powder, continues to be used to create the characteristic raised, three-dimensional relief effect, maintaining the signature depth and texture of Tanjore paintings. Alongside the classical religious and mythological themes, contemporary artists are now exploring popular, modern and even secular subjects, reflecting changing tastes and broader cultural narratives. While it is encouraging that Thanjavur painting retains its relevance, challenges such as commercialization and a decline in traditional aesthetics are evident in some mass-produced works. Despite these concerns, the style, form, and ornamental elegance of Thanjavur painting continue to inspire contemporary artists. The legacy is visible in the calendar prints of Kondiah Raju and his students, which retain the solid, iconic quality of Tanjore art in contrast to the naturalism popularized by Western influenced painters like Raja Ravi Varma. Over the years, artists have also innovated by combining traditional Tanjore techniques with other art forms, producing mixed media works on mirrors, glass and canvas, while retaining hallmark features such as the use of gold foil. This adaptability demonstrates the enduring influence and versatility of Tanjore painting, ensuring that it remains a vibrant and evolving component of India's artistic heritage.

4.1 Modern Trends That Influence Tanjore Painting



In contemporary times, Tanjore painting has evolved significantly, reflecting changes in artistic sensibilities, materials and market demands. While the foundational principles, themes and techniques of this classical South Indian art remain intact, modern artists are experimenting with innovative methods and materials to give the traditional form a fresh and contemporary appeal. Today, Tanjore artists are exploring new color palettes, creative compositions and ornamental embellishments, blending traditional techniques with modern design elements. These innovations not only enhance the visual appeal but also allow the art to resonate with contemporary tastes and aesthetics.

Artists are increasingly using lightweight wooden boards, plywood and canvas, along with synthetic paints, modern adhesives and alternative gilding materials, making the art form more accessible and easier to produce without compromising on the characteristic richness and depth. Moreover, the incorporation of modern motifs, secular themes and even elements of popular culture alongside traditional religious imagery reflects the adaptability of Tanjore painting to changing cultural contexts. This evolution demonstrates that Tanjore painting is not a static tradition, but a living art form capable of responding to the preferences of modern collectors and audiences.

The changes in techniques and materials have also influenced pricing and market trends. Unique artworks that combine traditional craftsmanship with contemporary innovation often command higher prices, while simpler or mass-produced pieces cater to broader audiences. The dynamic interplay of heritage and modernity ensures that Tanjore painting remains both culturally significant and commercially viable in today's art market.

In essence, the modern evolution of Tanjore painting through experimentation with materials, colors and design reflects its resilience, adaptability and enduring relevance, allowing this centuries old art form to flourish in the present while continuing to honor its rich traditional legacy

4.2 Mixing Tradition and Modernity in Tanjore Paintings



In contemporary practice, Tanjore painting has embraced a dynamic fusion of traditional techniques and modern artistic expressions, creating a unique interplay between the past and the present. While the classical elements such as intricate relief work, gold embellishments, and devotional themes remain central, modern artists are increasingly incorporating contemporary subjects, abstract patterns and even pop culture references into their compositions. This blending not only expands the thematic repertoire of the art form but also enhances its relevance and appeal to a wider, more diverse audience.

Tanjore paintings that combine historical motifs with modern aesthetics are particularly captivating because they maintain the technical mastery, symmetry and ornamental richness of the classical style while introducing fresh visual narratives that resonate with today's collectors and art enthusiasts. For example, traditional depictions of deities may now be set against modern backdrops, contemporary color schemes or stylized patterns, bridging devotional heritage with current artistic trends.

This fusion of old and new demonstrates the remarkable flexibility and adaptability of Tanjore art, showing that it is not a static tradition but a living form capable of evolving without losing its identity. By integrating innovation with classical techniques, artists are able to keep the art form vibrant, relevant, and commercially viable, appealing both to connoisseurs of traditional Indian art and to those seeking modern decorative aesthetics.

In essence, the blending of traditional craftsmanship with contemporary creativity highlights the timelessness and universality of Tanjore painting, proving that this centuries old art form can continuously reinvent itself while honoring its rich cultural and devotional legacy.

4.3 Changing Consumer Preferences in Tanjore Paintings



In today's ever evolving art world, understanding consumer preferences is crucial for artists and collectors alike. Modern art enthusiasts increasingly seek Tanjore paintings that combine traditional craftsmanship with contemporary appeal, reflecting both historical richness and modern sensibilities. Buyers are drawn to artworks that tell stories, evoke emotions and create a distinctive atmosphere in their homes or workspaces, making the art not just decorative but meaningful.

Tanjore paintings hold a special place in this context because they are timeless, culturally rich and meticulously crafted. The intricate relief work, use of gold foil and vivid colors connect collectors to centuries of South Indian devotional and artistic heritage. At the same time, when paired with contemporary design elements, innovative themes or subtle modern interpretations, these paintings fit seamlessly into modern interiors, blending traditional charm with contemporary aesthetics.

For today's artists, the evolving market presents immense opportunities for creativity and personal expression. By integrating their own stylistic touches with classical Tanjore techniques, artists can develop unique works that appeal to both traditional collectors and modern art buyers. This fusion of heritage and innovation broadens the audience base, allowing the art form to resonate with younger generations who value originality, storytelling and aesthetic versatility.

Ultimately, the changing preferences of consumers highlight the adaptability and enduring appeal of Tanjore painting. The market now encourages experimentation, giving artists a platform to showcase their skill, creativity and contemporary relevance, ensuring that this centuries old art form continues to thrive in the modern era while retaining its cultural and devotional essence.

V. CONCLUSION



Thanjavur painting stands as a luminous testament to the continuity and resilience of South Indian artistic traditions. Rooted in deep devotional intent and nurtured through successive phases of royal, mercantile and community patronage from the Vijayanagara Rayas and Nayaka governors to the Maratha

rulers and later indigenous patrons this art form has evolved while preserving its core aesthetic and spiritual values. Its distinctive visual language, marked by raised gesso work, radiant gold foil, rich colours and iconic compositions, reflects not merely artistic excellence but a living cultural philosophy where art, faith and daily life intersect.

Over the centuries, Thanjavur painting has demonstrated remarkable adaptability. While its classical form was shaped and codified during the Maratha period, subsequent social and political changes did not diminish its relevance. Instead, the tradition absorbed new materials, techniques and themes, responding to changing patronage systems and contemporary tastes. The shift from natural pigments to synthetic colours, from solid wooden panels to canvas and plywood and from exclusively devotional imagery to modern and mixed media expressions illustrates its capacity for renewal without erasing its identity.

In the present context, Thanjavur painting occupies a unique position at the crossroads of heritage and modernity. Revival initiatives, academic interest and growing market demand both physical and digital have helped sustain the tradition, even as commercialization poses challenges to aesthetic integrity. At the same time, evolving consumer preferences have opened new avenues for artists to reinterpret tradition with personal and contemporary sensibilities, ensuring that the art remains meaningful to newer generations.

Ultimately, Thanjavur painting is not a static relic of the past but a dynamic, living tradition. Its enduring appeal lies in its ability to balance sacred purpose with artistic innovation, historical continuity with modern relevance. As long as artists, scholars and patrons remain mindful of its cultural depth and technical rigor, Thanjavur painting will continue to shine as a vital and inspiring chapter in India's artistic heritage.

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