
MURAL PAINTINGS AT MATTANCHERRI

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ABSTRACT

The mural paintings at Mattancherry, located in the city of Kochi in Kerala, India, are a testament to the region's rich cultural and artistic heritage. These murals, often found in the historic churches, temples, and colonial-era buildings of Mattancherry, are known for their vivid colors, intricate designs, and storytelling qualities. Rooted in traditional Indian art forms, particularly the Kerala mural tradition, these works represent a harmonious blend of indigenous techniques and external influences, including European Renaissance art. The murals often depict religious and mythological themes, such as scenes from the Ramayana, Mahabharata, and local folklore, as well as Christian biblical stories, which reflect the region's multicultural heritage due to centuries of trade, migration, and colonial encounters. Today, Mattancherry murals remain a key attraction for art historians, tourists, and cultural enthusiasts, preserving a legacy of artistic excellence while continuing to inspire modern interpretations of traditional forms.

INTRODUCTION

The mural paintings of Mattancherry, located in the historic city of Kochi in Kerala, stand as an exceptional representation of the region's vibrant artistic and cultural heritage. Known for their intricate details, vivid colors, and storytelling depth, these murals reflect a confluence of local traditions and external influences, making them a unique expression of Kerala's rich cultural tapestry. Mattancherry,

with its centuries-old history as a center of trade, migration, and colonial encounters, serves as a melting pot of diverse artistic traditions.

The murals, primarily found in churches, temples, and palaces in Mattancherry, date back to various periods, particularly during the reign of the Portuguese and Dutch in the region. While deeply rooted in the traditional Kerala mural style, the artworks incorporate elements from European Renaissance art, resulting in a fascinating blend of local and foreign aesthetics. These murals predominantly depict religious themes, such as scenes from Hindu epics like the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, as well as Christian iconography from the Bible, reflecting the cultural and religious diversity of the area.

What sets Mattancherry's murals apart is not just their stunning visual appeal, but their role as a historical record, capturing the social, cultural, and spiritual dynamics of the time. They offer insights into the artistic methods of the period, showcasing the use of natural pigments, gold leaf, and intricate iconography. Today, these murals continue to be an important aspect of Kerala's artistic identity, attracting scholars, tourists, and art enthusiasts alike, while serving as a reminder of the region's enduring legacy of creativity and cross-cultural exchange.

MATTANCHERRY PALACE

Mattancherry Museum is housed in a palace which is one of the oldest buildings of the Portuguese in the original style, unique from the historical and architectural point of view. This was built around 1555 A.D. by the Portuguese and presented to Veera Kerala Varma in order to pacify him and to compensate for having plundered a temple in the vicinity of the palace. Since then it served as a seat of the royal house and around 1665 A.D. It underwent a major repair at the hand of the Dutch and hence the palace is also known as “Dutch Palace”.

This two storied quadrangular building consists of long and spacious halls. The central courtyard enshrines deity of the royal family- ‘Pazhayannur Bhagavathy’. There are two more temples dedicated to Lord Krishna and Siva respectively. The upper storey of the palace where the present museum is housed consists of a coronation hall, bed chambers, ladies chamber, royal dining hall and other rooms. The palace represents the blending of European and Indigenous ideas of Architecture.

The glory of the palace lies in its mural paintings covering a total area of nearly 300 Sq.m. They have been done in three phases. The themes depict scenes from Ramayana, besides the puranic legends

connected with Shiva, Vishnu, Krishna and Durga etc. The paintings reflect the contemporary Arts, literature and social graces from a precious heirloom of Kerala's past. They also compare well with the coeval god crafts carving in figure. Works and facial molds and combine aesthetic purpose with realism.

The palace also housed museum. The exhibits are main portraits of the Cochin Rajas, their palanquins, Dress, Weapons, Umbrellas, Carpets etc. during the 15th century A.D. The Kochi royal family shifted their capital from Mahodayapuram to Kochi as a precaution against the attack of Zamorin. Later Kochi Rajah became the vassals of the Portuguese subsequently, Dutch came and they occupied Mattancherry in 1663 A.D.

1752 A.D. Travancore rules over run Kochi and Raja of Kochi entered into a treaty with the Travancore. Tippu Sultan's invasion of Malabar in 1789 A.D. made Kochi Raja his tributary. Tippu Sultan took control over Malabar and Kochi. The state was emerged Indian union soon after the Independence. The Mattancherry palace was built by Portuguese in 1555A.D. for Raja Veera Kerala Varma (1537-1565) as the gesture of their cordiality. It was subsequently repaid by the Dutch who succeeded the Portuguese and had since he called Dutch palace. The nature of its arches and generous proportion of its chambers represents features of European architecture. The palace is constructed in the form of Naalukettu (Quadrilateral structure). But its indigenous features are marked by wooden coffered ceilings and mezzanine flower arrangements. The central courtyard enshrines the Pazhayannur Bhagavathi, the patron deity of the Kochi royal family. The main rooms in this palace are palliarai/bed chamber (Ramayana room), the coronation hall, kovnithalam (stair case room) and the ladies chamber, the palliarai and ladies chamber especially carry on all their four walls the magnificent mural paintings, as many as 57 of them, covering a total wall area of nearly 10,000Sq.ft. They had been added in 3 phases from the beginning of 17th century A.D. to the end of 18th century A.D.

The themes depict here are mainly religious in nature. For the drawing of murals only natural colours were used. The complete story of Ramayana has been depicted in Semen panels on the walls of 'Palliarai' (Bed Chamber), paintings of Durga, Ganapathi, Vishnu as Audimurthi, Budhamatha, Rama Pattabhishekam etc. are also seen. The mural paintings such as Krishna Leela, Shiva Parvathy and Mohini where in the ladies' chamber. The ladies chamber consists of unfinished paintings and line drawings. They are mainly the scenes from Kumarasambhavam and Parvathiparinayam. There is a rare representation of Tippu Sultan in outline. This site is a centrally protected monument under the control of archeological survey of India since 1951 presently archeological museum is housed in the palace.

MURAL PAINTINGS IN MATTANCHERRY PALACE:

The wall paintings and pictures are mostly be seen in Rajasthan in India. Except Rajasthan, the antique wall pictures are largely seen in Kerala. In colour, charm and visual impact these pictures are equal to that of the drawings in Ajanta caves. The wall paintings in Kerala had been drawn between the fifteenth and nineteenth century.

THE ART OF WALL PAINTING AND KERALA

At least 2000 years ago the Indian artists should have started inscribing, drawing and decorating towers, walls and pillars with colourful pictures and paintings. It has become the part of our culture. There are many references about wall pictures in the Epic of Ramayana of Vatmiki, The Natyasasthra of Bharata and in the Naradasilpa.

THE WALLS FOR PAINTING:

On the well-built wall, mortar plastering will be done and make a rough column on which a smooth column will be made. The picture drawn there are called wall pictures. Dr. Paramasivan recorded that the rough columns are found with pictures in various parts of Kerala

COLOURS:

Saffron red, Saffron yellow, Green, red, white, blue, indigo, black yellow, and golden yellow are the major colours are used in the pictures on the walls of Kerala. Some people things that the colours extracted from green leaves and colours from the sap of the fruits are the only things used in painting. But the above mentioned colours had also been used in those wall pictures. The minerals and chemicals mined from a special kind of stone. The blue colour was made of sap of a plant known as Nili Amiri. Green colour was made of adding blue to the 'manayola' or adding blue to the 'Ervikara' available in the traditional medical shop. One of the ores of copper called "Malakite" had also used to make green. Oiled charcoal and Carbon were available for making black. It was customary that to use certain solutions such as the juice of citrus fruit to reduce the concentrations of the lime.

GUMS:

In order to avoid the shedding of the mortar had been used many kinds of gums. The colours drenched and mixed with lime and coconut water. These preparations of the artist. The gum of the neem, the sap of a special kind of tree associated with myths. In the ancient palm leaf inscriptions recorded that many other kinds of gums are used fix the mortar and colours from being faded and fainted. The colours are kept in kernels for the convenience of drawing and painting.

PICTURES AT MATTANCHERRY

Mattancherry Palace is nothing but a little bit better than other buildings and Go downs in the streets of The Jews in Mattancherry. On who imagines that the palace of Mattancherry is so marvelous epitome of architectural elegance and beauty of palace like padmanabapuram, will surely be disappointed.

The curved-edged window textured and regulated in European tradition is the reminder of the foreign invasion and influence. The central courtyard and the temples constructed in the north and south with the large pond at the extreme west of the palace are the only signs of Kerala tradition and culture.

There is nothing signifying but those who are seeking the soul of Indian art and painting are attracted to the palace of Mattancherry. The world-famous painter and artist Amritha Shergil came to the palace in 1937 at the age twenty-nine, she came to the palace as a pilgrim. She has copied the wall paintings as much as she can within three days. She wrote: “Incredibly beautiful”.

In her letter to Indu, her sister Amritha writes that the wall painting she espied in Mattancherry palace is the best she has ever had. They are stronger than that of the Ajanta walls. But in picturization Ajanta stands first. But it is notable that in the athire, ornaments there aren't any wanted lines, for everything is very keen and vilal.

CONCLUSION

The mural paintings at Mattancherry stand as a remarkable testament to the artistic genius and cultural richness of Kerala. These intricate and vibrant artworks not only highlight the skill and creativity of

local artisans but also reflect the historical and cultural exchanges that shaped the region over centuries. Through their depiction of religious and mythological themes, as well as the fusion of indigenous and foreign artistic influences, the murals offer a unique window into the past—revealing the complex interplay between local traditions, colonial encounters, and global art movements.

Today, these murals serve as a cultural and historical bridge, connecting contemporary viewers to the stories, values, and aesthetics of earlier generations. They preserve a legacy of visual storytelling that continues to inspire artists, scholars, and art enthusiasts, while also contributing to the global appreciation of Kerala's rich artistic heritage. The mural paintings of Mattancherry are not merely works of art; they are living expressions of the region's history, spirituality, and the enduring power of visual culture. As such, they remain a vital part of Kerala's cultural identity, offering both historical insight and artistic inspiration for future generations.

The palace of Mattancherry is linked with certain critical and fatal moments of the medieval history of Kerala. The Portuguese invaders seized the monopoly of trade and business in the west shore by quarreling with the zamorins and being friendly with Prince of Kochi. They built the old towers of the palace of Mattancherry.

The basement built with three feet stone constructed the wall with the same stone and two and a half feet breadth. The wall is plastered with the lime and the wall is thatched by tiles. Thin palace consisted of only 13 rooms. This palace is built and presented to Vira Kerala Varma of the kingdom of Kochi. It was to please the reigning king. The Portuguese gave the golden crown too. But Samurins didn't give any chances to the Kings of Kochi to enjoy the gift. The custom of wearing crown was abandoned from the day by which they have lost the 'Perumpadappu' the paternal land or promised land. The palace is now under Central Archeological Department and the crown is under the Kerala Archeology.

ENDNOTE

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