

Painted stories of Lepakshi

-Ankitha Srinivas, Bengaluru

On the borders of Karnataka, in Anantapura District of Andhra Pradesh, lies the exquisite marvel of humankind, Lepākshi Temple. It was built in 16th century by the governor brothers Vīraṇṇa and Virūpaṇṇa, under the reign of King *Acyuta Dēva Rāya* of Vijayanagara Empire.

It is an abode to many historically important spots, namely the Vīrabhadra Swami Temple, the hanging pillar, *Nāṭyamandapa*, *Nāgalinga*, *Lepākshi Nandi*, *Durgapāda*, and the well-known mural paintings.

Why these visually pleasing murals were made is a thought to ponder upon. They were traditionally created to beautify space but over the time gained importance politically and historically. They are said to have great impact on the passers-by, especially in a place often and largely visited, such as a temple.

The Lepakshi paintings, that adorn the ceilings are notable specimens of mural paintings of Vijayanagara period. They are one of the largest murals in Asia, depicting important themes and mythologies from Hindu mythology, Purāṇās, and the contemporary life of cosmopolitan society. They stretch in lengths from 5 to 23 metres and in heights varying from 1 to 2 metres.

Some notable paintings are:

1. Lord Vīrabhadra



The multi-handed Lord Vīrabhadra, a vastly worshipped form of Lord Shiva is seated, in the expanse of 16 feet, decorated with many ornaments, and is surrounded by devotees.

2. Girijā kalyāna



A depiction of the marriage of ever famous Shiva and Parvati; Shiva shown as the biggest figure with Parvati beside him, and sages and attendants praying ardently. The enormity of Lord is intentionally portrayed through physique of his and normal humans around him. Subsequently, this panel shows their arrival on *Nandi*.

3. Pārvati and her companions



Being one of the most amusing panels, here Pārvati is getting ready for her wedding with the help of her maidens. It showcases a variety of sarees, its patterns, textiles, and designs. The hairstyles and skin tones are also a fresh detail. The upper body seems to be bear, except to that of the Goddess (in green), who has ornaments and a longer plait.

4. Kirātaarjuna



Among the many Shiva-based murals, this is the one which portrays the story of the Mahābhārata hero Arjuna and Kirāta, the disguised form of Lord Shiva. Here, Arjuna is sitting, praying to Lord Shiva for his win against the boar-hunter Kirāta.



5. Manu Nidhi Cōlan

The popular tale of the king who sacrificed his own Prince son for his wrongdoings is an echo of the justice and harmony maintained in the kingdoms.

Some other murals are the in ardha-mandapa ceiling, which has about fourteen panels depicting the legends and manifestations of Shiva (*Dakṣiṇamūrti*, *Bhikṣātanamūrti*, *Harihara*, *Ardhanārīśvara*, *Kalyāṇasundara*, *Natarāja*, etc.)¹; *Draupadi Swayamvara*, Lord Vishnu and incarnations, etc. One which grasps your attention is the young *Gopālakriṣṇa*'s painting whose eyes always meet with yours, a 3-D effect to the viewer's eye. Apart from this there are many pictorials of saints, rulers, soldiers, musicians, dancers, and other aspects of the common life.

This site being mythologically important, with instances like *Durgapāda* and Le-Pakshi tale, establishes a close connection with *Mahābhārata* and *Rāmāyaṇa*, which can be seen in their mural art as well.

The paint has its pigments derived from mineral, chemical, vegetal, leaves or stones.² With careful observation you can usually see a hole carved into the ground directly under these painted ceilings, where the paint would be prepared. First, lines are drawn, and then colours are filled in, with yellow, red, green, and black being used significantly. Prominent and distinct features of Vijayanagara style of mural would be side profiles, frontal eyes, dark borderline or limework, slender waists, etc.³ that highlight the piece in their own different ways. Space is hardly left blank, and is instead filled with intricate designs. Though after many retractions, the Vijayanagara-style architecture and colour composition remains splendid.

In a panel with *Vīraṇṇa* and *Virūpaṇṇa*, the builders of the temple are shown to be standing with folded hands along with other courtiers, praying to Shiva and *Pārvatī*. On one hand, it is a wonderful amalgamation of history and myth. On the other, it is an exquisite depiction of clothing styles. These men in the drawings are shown wearing *dhōtīs* and cylindrical headgears called *Kulavi*. They have chequered and clothes of other prints tied around their waist which contrast with the plain *dhōtīs*. They are also illustrated slightly inclined to their left. And the female illustrations provide a multitude of saree patterns and designs; cheques, stripes, polka, etc. that serves as an inspiration to a lot of designers, craftsmen, textiles and motifs around India and the world.² The paintings also show a striking resemblance to Togalu Gombeyāta/ Tholu Bommalēta or leather shadow puppet art. It is possible that this art form was highly influenced by mural art since it has its roots in temple culture, design, and style.⁴

Unfortunately, due to climatic and other conditions, the hues of the paintings have been deteriorating. The ASI provides surface level chemical treatments and blockage of leaking holes, and hence protects the precious epitomes of our tradition.⁵

It is important to know what these paintings mean, or suggest because each line and dot open a vast world of rich and forgotten history. All of these is what shapes people and the

¹ Sreenivasa Rao. (2012). sreenivasaraos.com

² 5 Senses Tour Manager. (2017). 5sensestours.com

³ Neha Grover. <https://prepp.in/>

⁴ Aloka Hiremath and Jaya Jaitly. <https://artsandculture.google.com/>

⁵ Ramesh Susarla. <https://www.thehindu.com/>

society they live in, and in turn affecting a complete culture. The inter-connectedness is visible from the smallest to the biggest, from art to life, and we must embrace it.

About the Author:



Ankitha Srinivas has been training under Dr. Dwaritha Viswanatha since 2013 in Nirmiti, an abode of arts and culture. She has successfully completed Bharatanatyam Junior and Senior Exam conducted by KSEEB and five levels of Bharatanatyam.

Ankitha is currently studying PU 2 in Transcend Group of Institutions, pursuing commerce. Alongside dance, she has indulged herself in yoga and nattuvangam too.

She is a part of the enriching initiative, Nrityashilpa Yatra as an intern.