

Motives behind motifs

-Ankitha Srinivas, Bengaluru

The words “Art imitates life” is well suited when it comes to iconography. Inanimate objects are not devoid of decoration that humans enjoy. From floral offerings to God to trees that we worship, all can and have been incorporated as motifs in our temples.

The temples of Vijayanagara have ample variety of beautiful decorative elements. The walls and pillars are not only the foundation but also provide aesthetic space for carvings of sculptural motifs like humans, animals, flora, *Kīrtimukhas*, *Yālis* and other geometrical patterns.

As we first enter through the doorway, a lady with a creeper (*latā*) in her hand, at the bottom of the door panel invites us in. They are a symbolization of gate-keepers or *Dwārapālika*. Having been inspired by *makaras*, these creepers flow all the way to the top in the door jams, sometimes consisting of small-scaled sculptures of gods, men, and women dancing, singing, playing instruments, etc.



Figure 1 and 2: Somēśvara Temple, Halsuru

In the above images, a lady stands upon crocodile carving, holding the tail of the creeper, surrounded by miniature parrot sculptures, which reminds me of *Madanikas* from Bēlūr. The creeper blooms and swirls through the door jams, into designs that resemble peacock.



Figure 3 and 4: Bhōganandīśvara Temple, Chikkaballāpura



Figure 5, 6 and 7: Lepākṣī Temple, Anantapur

Here, the creepers are richly decorated with ensemble of musicians and dancers; tabla players, *kōlāta* dancers, etc. that resemble *Gandharvās*. They seem to enjoy the music that exists perpetually!



Figure 8, 9 and 10: Kōlāramma Temple, Kolār

In figure 8, a new and interesting addition of figures depicting common life such as hunters can be seen. There is a figure that plays with viewer's eyes with optical illusion too. The *dwārapālika*'s dressing is an excellent example of *Ahāryābhinaya*.



Figure 11: Somnātesvara Temple, Kolār

Kīrtimukha or “face of glory” is a very popular ornamental motif found in Vijayanagara temples that portray a terrifying monstrous face. They signify warding off evils and

guarding the good. They can be usually found at the outer walls, as motifs alongside *kumbhapanjara*, or around pilasters and base of pillars.

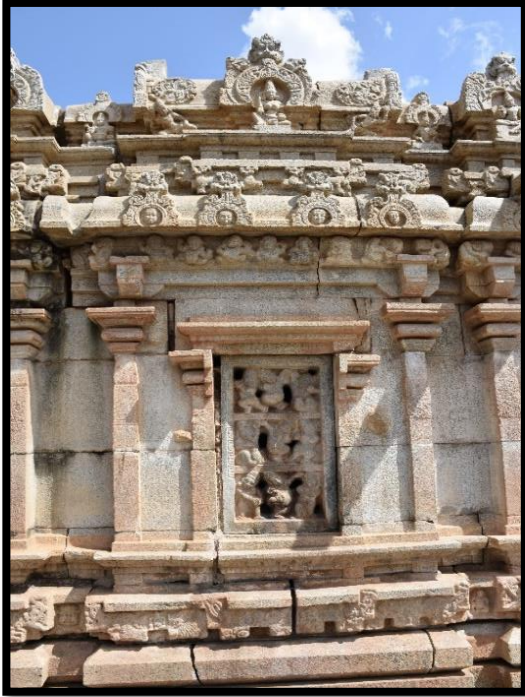


Figure 12: Somēśvara Temple, Halsuru

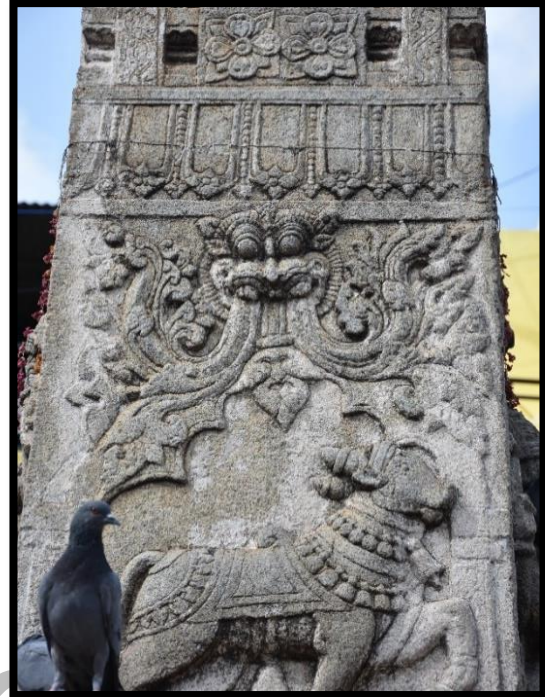


Figure 13: Bhoganandīśvara Temple, Chikkaballāpura

As we further go inside, we will find *yālis* at the entrance of the temples. Yalis are another unique addition in iconography of Vijayanagara. These bracket-like structured sculptures have animals, usually lion or elephants {*Simha yāli* and *Gaja yāli*} being controlled by a rider in a certain upward facing angle. They too, symbolize protection and valour.



Figure 14: Somēśvara Temple, Halsūru; Figure 15: Lepākshi Temple, Anantapura; Figure 16: Somnātēśvara Temple, Kolār

Dwarfish *Ganās* are yet another explored decorative motif. They are used in several combinations, doing various activities as friezes along with *Kīrtimukhas* in entrances, or simply on pillars of Mandapa.



Figure 17: Somēśvara Temple, Halsuru



Figure 18: Kolāramma Temple, Kolār

Animal depictions are important part of sculpture-making as they hold meaning in various aspects. They act as a connection to religious deities, as an empire's emblem, as fictional mythical beings, as favoured pet of the common, or of domestic use to the society.



Figure 19: Somēśvara Temple, Halsuru; Hamsas and Ganās

To the observing eye, it is easily seen that Vijayanagara sculptors favoured swans/*hamsa* as an element of decoration. They are found in multiple places in temples. The use of *Ganās*, animals and *Hamsas* are a feature of Nolambas.

Figure 20: Somēśvara Temple, Halsuru; Optical Illusion



Figure 31: Lepākshi Temple, Anantapura





Figure 22: Somnātēśvara Temple, Kolār; Chewing on a creeper

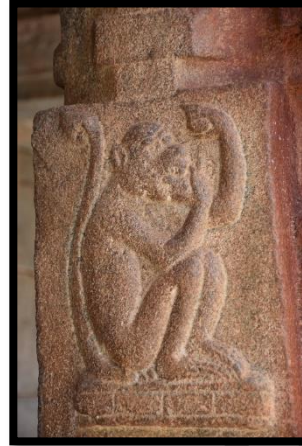


Figure 24: Bhoganandiśvara Temple, Chikkaballāpura



Figure 24 and 25: Somēśvara Temple, Halsūru; Humans with animals



Figure 26: Monkey enjoying a snack



Figure 27 and 27: Deers (from Lepākshi Temple, Anantapura)

Domestic animals



Figure 28: Bull with optical illusion



Figure 29: Cow providing her milk to Shivalinga

Elephants involved in different activities:



Figure 30: Pushing a banana plant

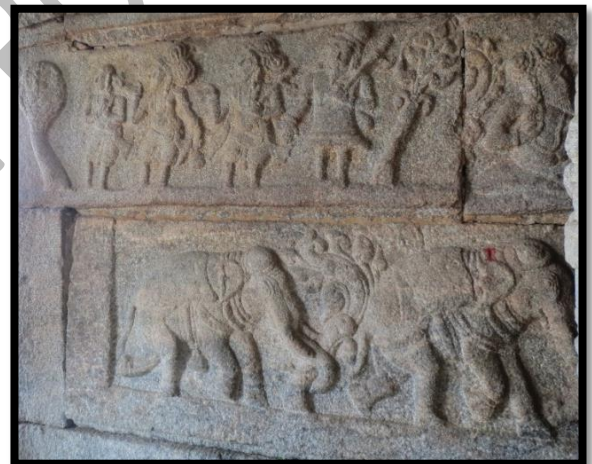


Figure 31: In a procession



Figure 32: Getting tamed by a mahout



Figure 33: Alongside a coconut tree



Figure 94: Somnātesvara Temple, Kolār; Elephants, kīrtimukha, śārdula motifs

Parrots as popular motifs due to favouritism as pet bird:



Figure 35: Somnātesvara Temple, Kolār

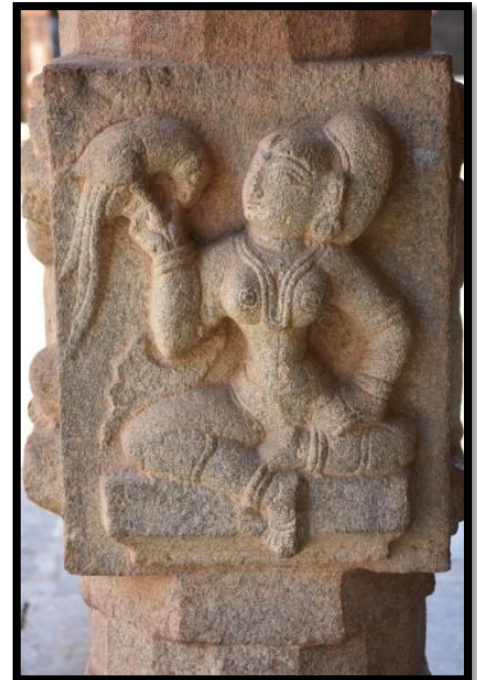


Figure 37: Bhoganandīśvara Temple, Chikkaballāpura

Plant and flower motifs

Floral motifs are not only beautiful and intriguing to look at, but also serve as inspiration patterns to textiles today with their innumerable combinations of patterns.

Figure 36: Somnātesvara Temple, Kolār



*Figure 37 and 38 : from
Lepākshi Temple,
Anantapura*



Here are creepers (*latā*), circular florals, mandalas, etc found on pilasters, top and low reliefs of pillars, and door panels from Lēpākshi temple, Anantapura.



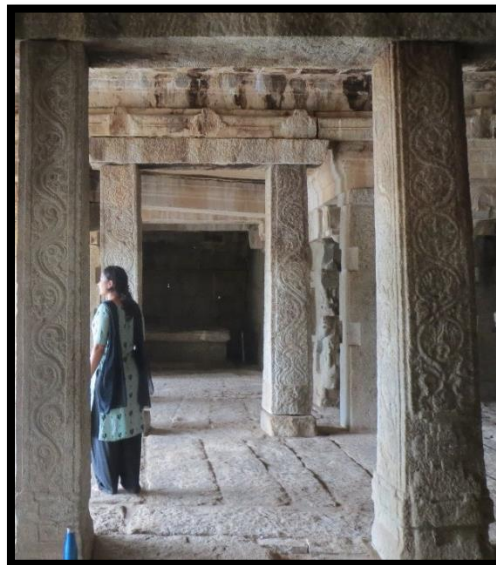
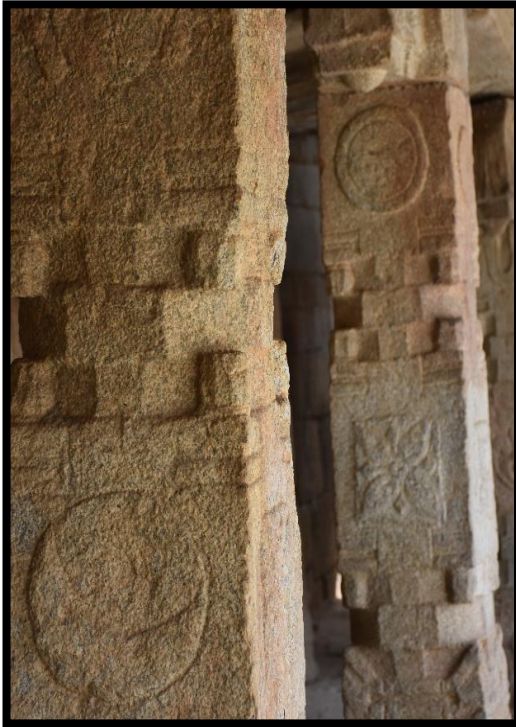




Figure 38: Virūpāksha Temple, Kolār: on the outskirts



Figure 39: Bhoganandīśvara Temple, Chikkaballāpura: spirals

Decoration is the most humanly activity to perform out of joy. It also provides an opportunity to showcase the bigger picture through subtleties, be it for a person or an empire's artistic pursuit.

Vijayanagara's sculptors have done a splendid job in creating these visually pleasing motifs that have been passed down by their preceding dynasties. These motifs help us get a glimpse of our history, and aesthetics of beauty, opening a much wider world of art.

Using flora and fauna as ornamental element seem as though to be the physical manifestation of myths associated with animals and plants previously, that were created to raise awareness among the general public about the importance and protection of biodiversity. In totality, it is simply a wonder to witness the marvels of time and geography engraved on stone.



About the author : Kum. Ankitha Sreenivas has been training under Dr. Dwaritha Viswanatha since 2013 in Nirmithi, an abode of arts and culture. She has successfully completed Bharatanatyam Junior and Senior Exam conducted by KSEEB and five levels of Bharatanatyam. Under the guidance of her Guru, she has been fortunate enough to teach the younger batches of Nirmithi and perform in various places under the institute. 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, by Noopurabhramari called- Nrityashilpa Yatra as an intern.**