

## TANJORE GLASS PAINTINGS

Dr. S. Venkatesh\*

### **The Great Tradition Lives on.**

*In an overview of the Tanjore Glass Paintings, S. Venkatesh looks at them in the context of Indian art history and their place in modern times. A great deal of what they initiated in art continues to influence these pursuits to this day. The skill of Tanjore artists reach out across the centuries, defining our present day sense of aesthetics in the visual arts. Venkatesh examines the work of these inspired, extraordinary art of the period and how it influenced the traditions we know today.*

It is notable that there is of late a greater appreciation of the achievement in the less known spheres of art in our country, a better awareness of their artistic distinctiveness. These are mostly the popular or folkbased art forms that have been in vogue for a long time but have not been taken serious note of.

One of the fields thus rediscovered is that of Tanjore paintings. Art connoisseurs were aware of them but did not pay much heed of them for a long while. Recent studies of Tanjore paintings by art historians like Jaya Appasamy, Chodamani Nandagopal, Veena Shekar, Martha and i also have unravelled the distinctive beauty of these paintings and the uniqueness of the technique followed in their creation.

The term “Tanjore Paintings” generally evokes paintings done on wood and encrusted with gems, glass pieces and gold leaf. But the Tanjore artist also worked on glass, mica and ivory and attained rare mastery in these media. These are available to a lesser extent and have been studied less than the paintings done on wood.

Paintings on glass involve a difficult technique as these have to be done on one side of the glass sheet and viewed from the other side. For achieving this, the sequence of steps in the painting process has to be reversed. Last things have to be done first, such as shading of lines for achieving a modelling effect, fixing of gold leaf etc. First the outline of the picture is drawn with bold and firm strokes. Then the details are filled in to evoke the final picture. It is veritably a tour de force.

The complexity of the technique necessarily leads to a certain flatness of depiction and simplification of expression in the figures. There is also a certain doll-like quality about them. The importance of a figure in the painting is indicated by its relative size. The background is generally flat but relieved quite often by drapery, pillars and decorative features like lamp, chandeliers etc. The only attempt to give perspective is the drawing of the floor in a different colour and with patterns, which occupies a small space at the bottom of the painting.

The origins of Tanjore paintings are traced to the immigration of artists who came South from the Deccan along with the Maratha rulers of Tanjore. The Tanjore artists to this day are of Telugu origin. It has been said that paintings on glass done at Tanjore were a result of the Chinese influence brought in mostly by traders who had commerce with China. While the

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technique may have originated thus, the spirit and content of the paintings are totally Hindu. These paintings were made for decorating the puja room or for worship in the case of portraits. The British influence is also evident in the Victorian architecture of the arches and the columns, in the furniture and the drapery, in the lamps, the flower vases and the chandeliers that have been included. The subjects dealt with range from mythological ones like the childhood pranks of Krishna to secular ones like portraits of Kings and Queens and musicians. These paintings on glass are dated to a period not earlier than the 18-19<sup>th</sup> century.

According to me reverse glass paintings were introduced into India the late 18th century from China by way of the China Trade. Indian artists adopted the technique of reverse glass painting partly on account of its novelty and also because it was a relatively inexpensive medium which could produce rich effects. The technique proved extremely popular and soon spread through western and southern India (Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, TamilNadu, Maharashtra and Kerala) and even to former provincial Mughal capitals of Oudh, Murshidabad.

What is also significant is that there were some Chinese painters at work in India as well. One is known to have been at the court of Tipu Sultan and a large number of his glass paintings are in the collection of the Jagmohan Palace Art Gallery at Mysore. A lively market for reverse glass paintings, mainly depicting Hindu deities and portraiture by Chinese artists likely flourished, particularly on the west coast in places like Surat and Cambay.

In Tanjore – a small state with an old art tradition- a distinctive school of glass painting developed in the early 19th century and continued for more than a hundred years. The style was essentially Indian with rich colour and a bold and defiant style. It tended to repeat patterns of regional painting: images of deities, portraits and themes from the ancient myths, secular themes such as portraits of kings or nobles, courtesans and musicians. The colour was rich and the style bold and defiant. The subjects were clearly presented with a certain opulence and glamour.

Tanjore paintings are characterised by rich and vivid colors, simple iconic composition, glittering gold foils overlaid on delicate but extensive gesso work and inlay of glass beads and pieces or very rarely precious and semi-precious gems. Here the big eyes are fascinating. In Thanjavur paintings one can see the influence of Deccani, Vijayanagar, Maratha and even European or Company styles of painting.

In this media the figures are painted on the back of glass and are exposed to view from the front. Hence, great care and skill are required by the painter in super-imposing the colours one after the other in order to produce a total effect. This is a rare preserve of some families in Tanjore (TamilNadu). The finished work is neither idealistic nor realistic but yet has a delicacy and charm of its own. The picture is always kept in puja in the homes and is produced only on request.

Here we have a lot of collection of Tanjore paintings on glass. But I'm not going to explain and critic them all here. Only few paintings from this collection have been selected and described below.

### **1. Navneeta Krishna**

The infant Krishna is shown seated on a golden throne with his left hand around a butter pot and his right hand holding a ball of butter. He is flanked by Yashoda and Rohini, both

gorgeously robed and jewelled. Krishna, naked but for his sumptuous jewellery sits in a hall with a draped curtain hanging from the ceiling. As always Krishna is as a chubby child, part of his hair tied in a topknot adorned by jewels and the characteristic peacock feather. His back rests on a large bolster.

## **2. Samudramanthana**

At the centre of the composition is Mount Mandara, which emerges from an expanse of water dotted by lotus flowers. Vishnu, seen here as Kurma (the tortoise), supports the mountain, which is depicted as a pile of rocks on which dark squiggles suggest vegetation. The snake Vasuki is coiled around the mountain; the asuras hold him by his head, the gods by his tail.

The asuras, clad in short lower garments, are characterized by dishevelled hair, crooked or deformed noses, fangs, and occasionally, an animal head. Tripundra marks and vibhuti on their foreheads suggest their Shaiva affiliation. The gods, among whom only Brahma is clearly recognizable by this four heads, wear the usual dhoti, crowns and appropriate jewellery items. An interesting detail are the broom and the basket at the bottom of the painting. These may refer to the Jyeshtha or Alakshmi, sister of Lakshmi and goddess of misfortune, who was among the creatures that emerged from the churning. The goddess is not shown, but her attributes are depicted.

The upper part of the painting depicts the events following the retrieval of the amrita: on the left sit the gods to whom Mohini distributes the nectar, on the right are the asuras waiting for their turn. A striking feature of this work is that all the precious objects retrieved during the churning process have not been shown. The soft palette informing this charming work is very unusual. There is some slight damage where the pigment has flaked.

## **3. Balakrishna on Shesha**

The child Krishna, naked but for his jewellery and with an angavastra draped on his elbows, sits on a throne sucking his toe. As always, he is shown as a chubby child. Part of his hair tied in a topknot adorned by jewels and the characteristic peacock feather, and part of falls loose on his shoulders. His back rests on a large bolster, from behind which emerges the five-headed cosmic serpent, Shesha. The child Krishna flanked by Nanda carrying a lotus flower and Yashoda with a peacock in her arms. In the right hand corner is a gandharva floating on a cloud, scattering a rain of blossoms on the divine child. The panchapatras are neatly placed on a table in the foreground.

## **4. A Yajna**

A hall supported by pillars with a draped curtain hanging from its ceiling provides the backdrop to the ritual depicted in the foreground. The absence of obvious clues makes it difficult to interpret the scene. It is probable, however, that the painting illustrates an episode drawn from the Mahabharata. Yudhishtira (on the right) flanked by Draupadi sits at the side of the fire pit and pours oblations into the flame. Bhima, recognisable by his imposing size, dark complexion and his club, stands behind the couple. In the foreground, to the left of Draupadi is a crowned seated figure, probably one of the twins, either Nakula or Sahadeva.

Opposite Yudhishtira, facing the sacrificial flame sits a sage, holding a container in his left hand and raising his right hand as if reciting prayers. Near him is a second, smaller ascetic in the same pose. Behind them stand two further personages: the green-complexioned Arjuna, recognisable by the bow and quiver slung on his shoulder and possibly, the second twin. Various ritual implements and offerings dot the foreground.

### **5. Balakrishna with a Pat of Butter**

The infant Krishna is shown seated on a jewelled throne with his right hand holding a ball of butter while his left lies on the armrest Krishna, naked but for his sumptuous jewellery sits in a hall defined by pillars and floral garland hanging from the ceiling. As always Krishna is as a chubby child, part of his hair tied in a topknot adorned by jewels and the characteristic peacock feather. Unusual for this genre, he is depicted in characteristic blue. He is flanked by two elegantly dressed and bejewelled attendants, one ready to hand him more butter and the other holding a parrot. In the foreground is a capacious bowl filled with fruit.

### **6. Vishnu with Consorts**

Vishnu, Sri Devi and Bhudevi ride on the eagle Garuda; beneath them are the snow-clad peaks of the Himalayas. The artist takes great care in depicting the chakra and shankha, Vishnu's attributes, that stand out clearly against Garuda's extended wings. The god's lower hands—interestingly left is pink instead of blue—are in abhaya and varada mudras. His long lotus garland frames Garuda's chest, as if to stress the divine nature of the bird. Both the god and his vehicle wear a conspicuous Tenkalai namam on the forehead. The traditional enmity between Garuda and the snakes is hinted at by the wriggling cobra he holds in his talons. The two goddesses carry large chamaras.

### **7. Gajalakshmi**

Gaja Lakshmi, crowned and garlanded, is seated on a lotus with an elephant (gaja) to either side pouring water over the goddess from vessels held in their trunks. Gaja Lakshmi has four arms, the upper two holding lotuses and the lower two in Abhayamudra and Varadamudra. She is also flanked by two elegantly dressed and bejewelled attendants waving chauris (fly-whisks). The lady of the lotus – goddess Lakshmi, known as variously known as Sri, Padma and Kamala is the consort of Vishnu, also considered goddess of wealth and prosperity. When she is flanked by two elephants which are showering holy water on her, she is known as Gaja-Lakshmi. Elephants are symbols of stability, wealth and prosperity in Indian art.

### **8. Krishna with Consorts**

Indian painters love to dwell on the romantic involvement of Krishna with the gopis, in particular with Radha. There are, however, a number of works, especially in the 'Tanjore' school, depicting the god with his arms on the shoulders of his queens, Rukmini and Satyabhama. The scene is set in palatial surroundings. Elaborate pillars with rearing lion capitals support the ceiling from which hangs a draped, gold-coloured curtain adorned with

pearl tassels. The blue and green floor tiles are impeccably polished. Krishna wears his typical yellow dhoti, held in place by a sash hugging his hips. His hair is tied in a topknot and adorned with jewels and a peacock feather. A number of necklaces and a floral garland hang from his neck. The attire of the two queens mirrors the fashion of the period.

### **9. Rama and Sita**

Rama, the hero of the Hindu epic Ramayana, was a king of Ayodhya and is regarded as an ideal ruler and a paragon of virtue. This painting shows the wedding of Rama and Sita. Rama, depicted with green skin sits facing Sita. Both are wearing ceremonial garlands and clothes that are adorned by jewels.

### **10. Vasishtha Maharishi worships Kamadhenu, Western India. reverse painting on glass by a Chinese Artist**

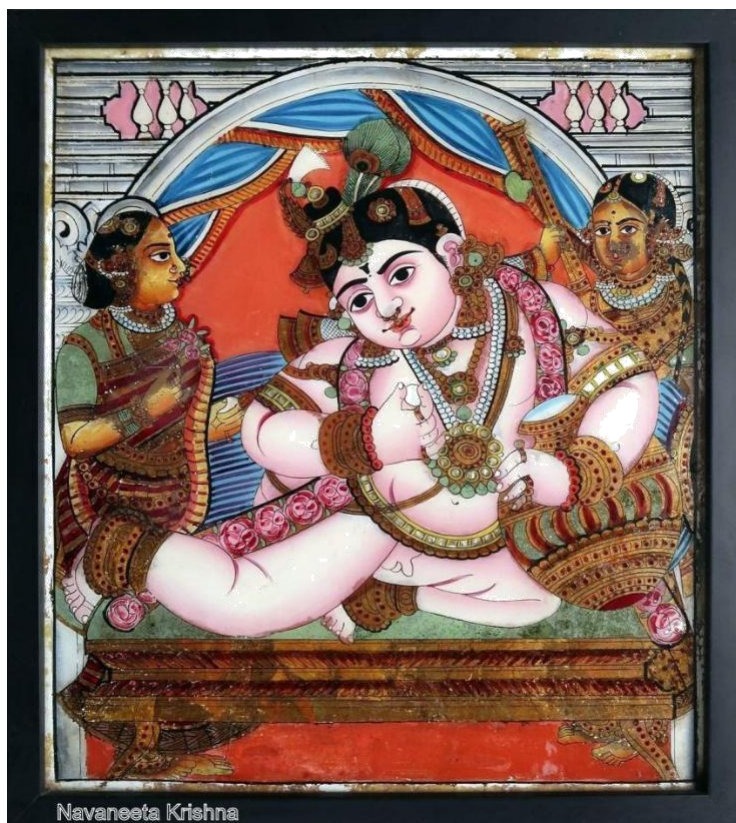
In a hilly region, the sage Vasishtha sits on a tall throne in the shade of a tree, probably the kalpavriksha. In his right hand he holds a flower, which he will throw at Kamadhenu and her calf during his puja. Before him is a water pot, in which is yet another flower. The rishi wears a tall cap—possibly the Chinese artist did not understand the hair gathered in a tall jata makuta—and a flowing beard covers his chest. Instead of depicting Vasishtha seated on a deer skin, the artist chose to depict the deer skin on his lap. Opposite him is Kamadhenu, with a woman's face, long plaits, variegated wings, the tail of a peacock and two cow's tails. Around her neck she wears the same ornaments in blue-black and red as worn by the sage, and a fetching hat is shown on her head. Her diminutive calf sucks at her teat.

This is a Chinese artist's version of a theme very popular in south Indian albums and 'Tanjore' painting

There is no doubt that Tanjore paintings on glass have their niche in Indian art not only because they were tours de force technically. But also because they have a certain pleasantness about them arising from the fullness of the figures depicted and the choice of colours used. The quaint admixture of foreign influence enhances their charm. The vigour and boldness of the lines that form the figures and objects establish their artistic stature. And last of all. They tell us of a unique period of our history when Indian and Western artistic influences were in the melting pot. The Tanjore artist quietly put down his reactions to his times in these works. These paintings are held in high value and appreciation by people all over the world.

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1. Navneeta Krishna.



**2. Samudramanthana.**

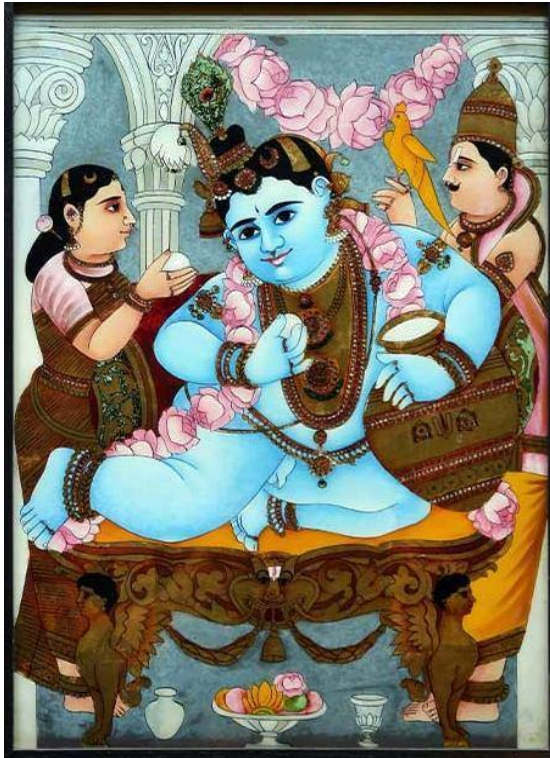


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4. A Yajna





5. Balakrishna with a Pat of Butter.



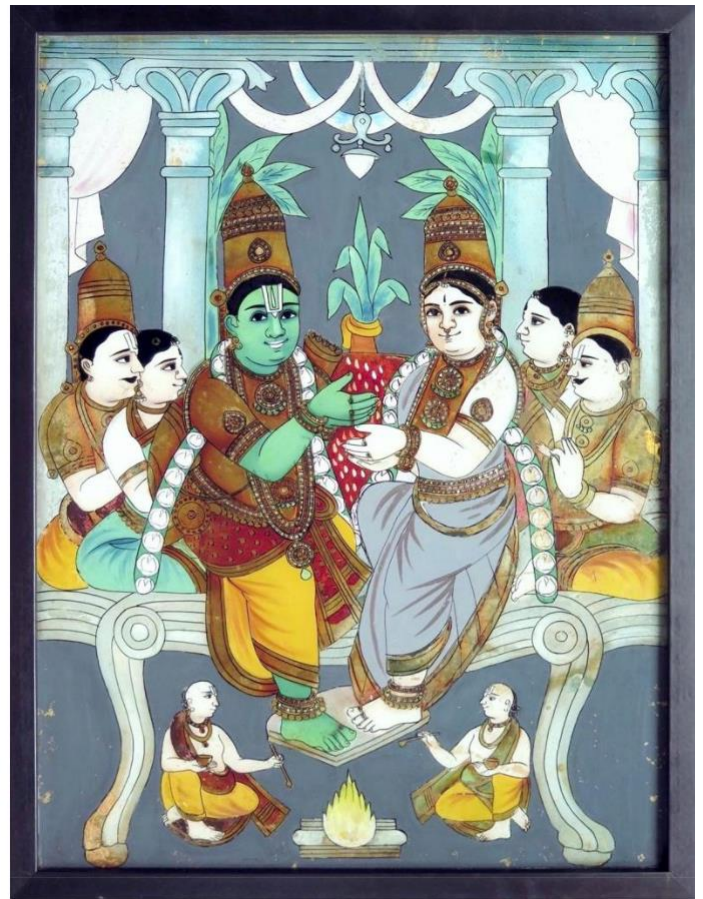
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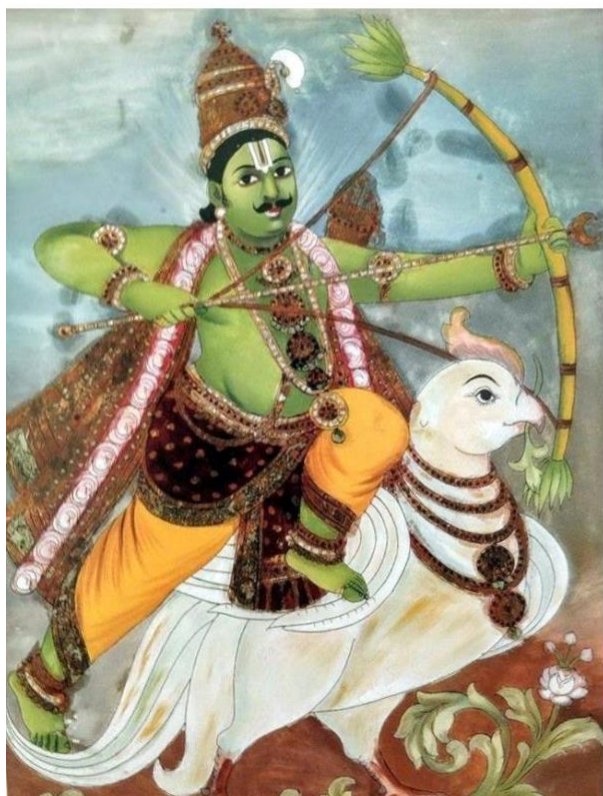


8. Krishna with Consorts.



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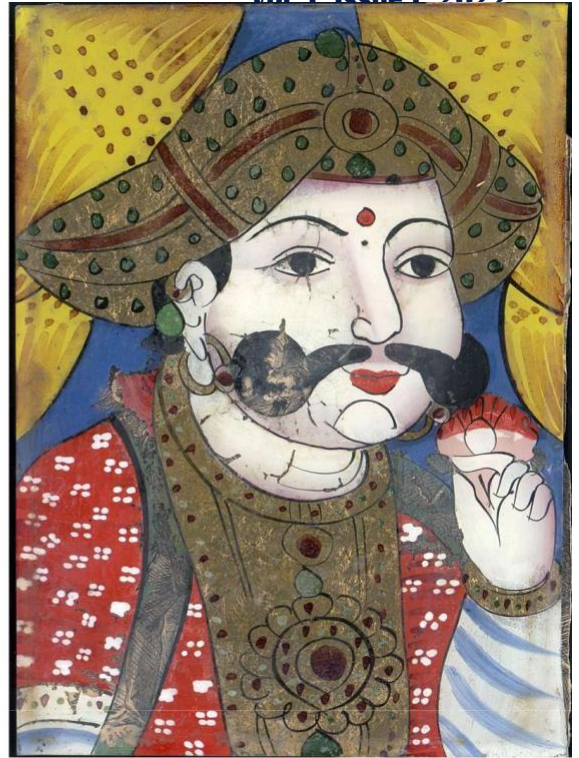
**10. Vasishtha Maharishi worships Kamadhenu.**



**Kamade**



**Couples.**



Tanjore King Sarfoji 2.



Gajalakshmi



Musician