

Design Resource

Thanjavur Painting

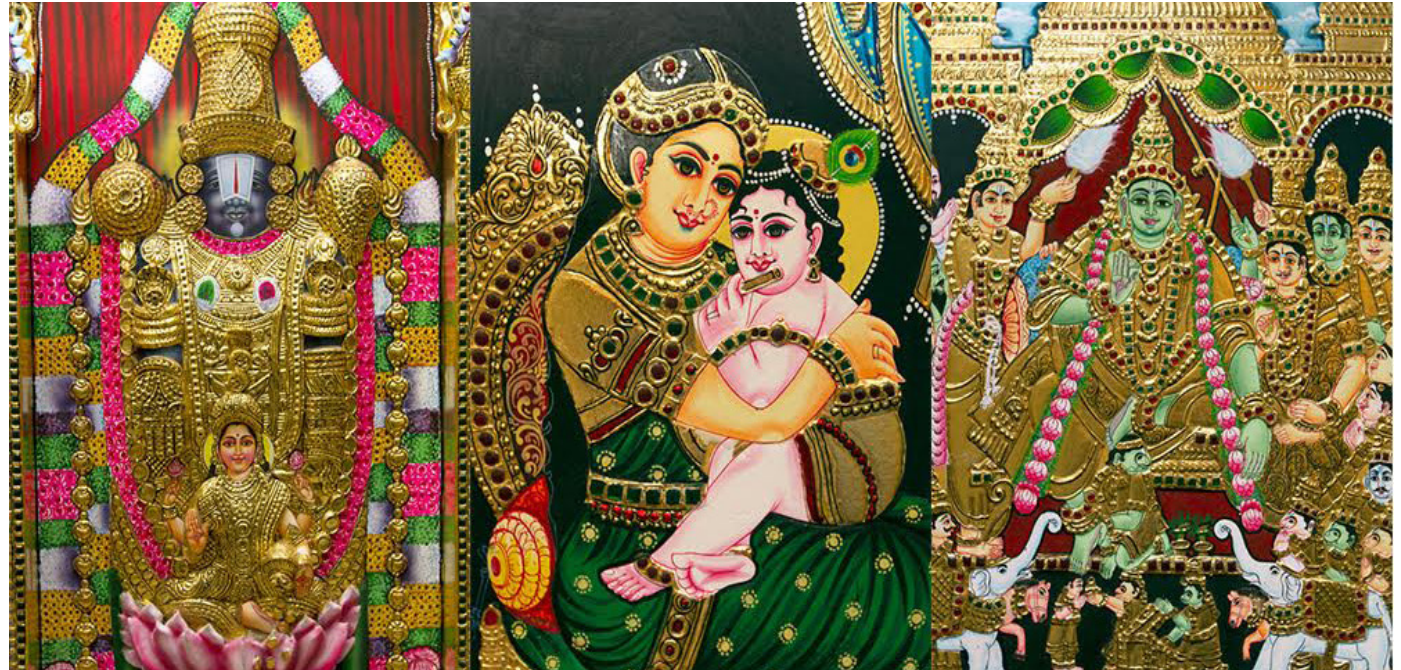
The Art of Painting with Gemstone

by

Ms. Amruthalakshmi Rajagopalan, Ms. Anisha Crasto, and Mr. J. Antony William
NID, Bengaluru

Source:

<http://dsource.in/resource/thanjavur-painting>



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Introduction

Gods, gold and gemstones are at the heart of this four hundred year old art form of palagai oviyam, better known as Thanjavur painting. The art began as visual representations of the Gods and Goddess described in detail in the Hindu scriptures and extended to Royal portraiture. The rise of the style coincided with the wave of Vaishnavism in Southern India. Themes are mostly based on the Vishnu puranas with Baby Krishna, holding a pot of butter being the most recurring visual in these paintings. The painting style is a historically developed amalgamation of Nayak, Maratha and British elements and it is bold in style and character. While the overall effect is striking, fine lines, gradation washes of skin tones and kayal vizhi eyes (the much loved fish-shaped eye romanticized by Tamil poets) are a testament to the devotion with which the traditional art form has been practiced in Thanjavur.



Highly ornamented figures of god and goddess are main attraction of Thanjavur Paintings.



Natural colors derived from various flowers, stone etc. are used in the paintings.

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Artisan showing a Thanjavur Painting.



Gold work done on a painting to highlight the clothes and jewelry.

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House of the master Artisan.



Narrow lanes of Thanjavur houses many artists.

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A painting in process.



Workplace of a Thanjavur painter/artist.

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Artisan is explaining the process.



Basic and the most important raw materials used in making Thanjavur Painting.

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Small brushes cum stamps used to place kundan on the jewelry and borders of the cloth.

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Tools and Raw Materials

Palagai (Wooden plank): Traditionally, wood of the pazha pazham maram (jack fruit tree) is used as it does not invite termites nor it rots easily. Now a days plywood is used.

Attai (Cardboard)

Gada cloth (Cotton fabric)

Kezhungu passai (Indigenous gum): Gum from a root used for sticking cloth to the wooden base.

Chukangu powder (A root ground to powder): Used with fevicol as to coat the fabric.

Sunnambu kallu (Calcium carbonate stone): The stone is ground and sieved to fineness and used with chalk powder and gum from the karuvela maram for coating on cloth.

Polishing stone and Emery sheet: For smoothening the coated board in preparation for tracing the image.

Red stone: It is used in the past instead of sunnambu kallu for embossing work. It was mixed with chalk powder and gum. Red stone is believed to be longer lasting than sunnambu kallu.

Fevicol: Used with chukangu powder to create a maavu (paste) for coating the cloth.

Karuvela maram gondhu (Gum from the babul tree)

Chalk powder: Used in the coating of cloth.

Tracing sheet with a template for the painting.

Kari (Charcoal dust): Used to create impression of tracing on board.

Mai (Soot from vellakanni deepam): Used for preliminary outlining with brush. Also used for detailing the gold leaf embossing.

Kundan stones: Bought from Jaipur for the jeweled parts of the painting. Based on orders, precious stones are used instead of kundan.

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Kannaadi (Glass): Traditionally, glass was cut into required shapes using a diamond cutter. The cut glass, set in lac on a stick is then shaped by rubbing on a stone till it has soft curves. The glass is then placed on a silver plate with colour smeared on it. On heating the silver plate, the colour sticks to the glass. This coloured glass has better luster as compared to the kundan used today. Mirror is used for decorating borders. It was earlier made by artisans by setting padarasam (mercury) under clear glass.

Lac: Used for fixing glass pieces to sticks for shaping.

Gold leaf: A thin film of flattened gold. Made by artisans in the past by beating a gold bit by placing it on a thol (animal skin). In the 1930s and 40s it was imported from China. Now, gold leaf is procured from Jaipur. Fake gold leaf is available in Thanjavur and is used by many painters.

Scissor : For cutting gold leaf to size.

Cloth : for pressing emboss work.

Anil vaal brush (Squirrel tail hair brush): Made by the artisan according to required thickness.

Poster colors and opaque water colours: When used directly, the colors are stark, creating high contrasts. They are often used with a few drops of mooligai colours for a slightly subdued rendering.

Mooligai colours (pigments extracted from natural sources like leaves, root and bark): These colors are available at naatu marundhu kadaigal (country medicine stores) in the form of tablets or powders. These colors are grinded/churned and mixed with gum and water. The preparation of colors takes about two to four days and has a limited shelf life. Painting with natural colors creates a subdued tonal effect as compared to the stark effect of poster colors.

Other materials used are: Teak wood for frame and glass placed over painting.

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Palagai, wooden plank or cardboard is used for painting. Natural bright colors are used in paintings.

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Subtle colors depict calm moods.



Various natural colors in their native form, brushes and gold foil.

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Artisan cutting a gold foil in the desired shape.



Scissors and kezhungu passai, a gum is used to cut the gold foil and paste the cloth on the board respectively.



With the decrease in the availability of natural colors artisans have also started using poster colors.



Fevicol is mixed with chalk powder to coat the cloth.

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A mixture of chalk powder and Fevicol.



Grinding stone along with sand paper and chalk powder-with- fevicol.

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Making Process

Fixing of cloth: A wooden board of required size is procured. A cardboard is placed on the board. Cotton fabric is stretched and stuck/pasted on the board using kezhangu passai (an indigenous gum). Once the fabric has adhered/attached well to the board, the process of coating the cloth begins.

Coating the cloth board: A maavu (paste) of chukangu powder and fevicol is prepared. Three coats of this paste are applied on the cloth board over a span of ten days including drying time in between coats. This coated area is then rubbed with a smoothening stone and emery sheet to obtain a surface with mild sheen and good texture. Coating of the cloth board helps prevent the painting from damage caused by moisture and heat.

Tracing the image: The painter has templates of religious themes to be used in the paintings. The template is in the form of a tracing sheet with pinpricks on the outlines. This tracing sheet is placed on top of the cloth board and dusted with kari (charcoal dust). The outline is further clearly marked using mai (soot) from a vellakennai lamp using an anil vaal (squirrel tail hair) brush.

Emboss and coloured stonework: A paste made of chalk powder, sunnambu kallu and karuvela maram gondhu is used to create the relief work. Using a brush, the first layer of the paste is applied to create a raised effect for the designated areas of the work. Once this layer is dry, finer details are painted on using the same paste to create raised patterning. At this stage, the coloured glass or kundan stones are embedded. They are stuck with Fevicol or chukangu paste. Once dried, the embossed areas are covered with gold leaf.

Gold leaf work: Thin gold foil is placed on an embossed area and measured for size. The foil is then cut to shape. Karuvela maram gondhu is applied on the back and pasted on the embossed area. The leaf is smoothened over the area using a piece of cloth. Using the pointed back of a paintbrush, the foil is pressed down to reveal the embossed details. In this manner, all the embossed areas are covered with gold leaf. In summer, the gold leaf takes about three hours to dry on the board. The edges of the shapes are trimmed for excess gold.

Painting: Depending on the grade of the painting, poster colour or poster colour + mooligai colour or mooligai colour is used. Colours are painted and allowed to dry in several coats. Skin tones are applied in stroke gradations to create softness. A fine outlining is done for features. The gold leaf, in some paintings is detailed with black soot or permanent marker for clearer contrasts.

Framing: The painting, once complete is placed inside a teakwood frame with clear glass on top. The local aasari (wood craftsman) makes the frame according to the dimensions of the painting and sends it to the painter.

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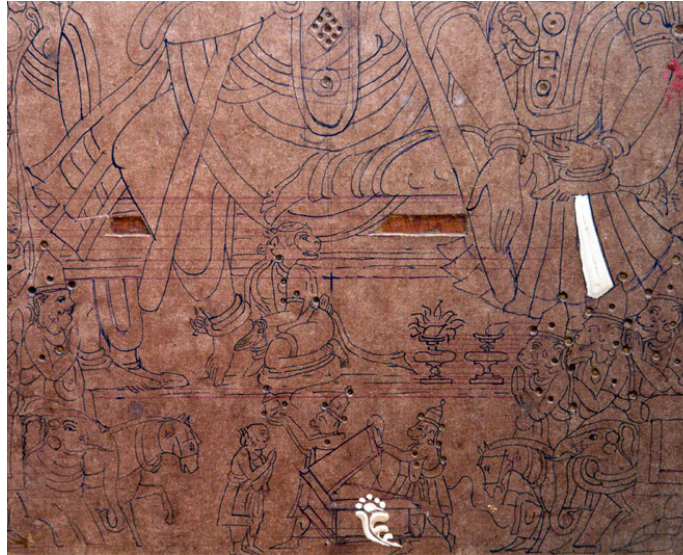
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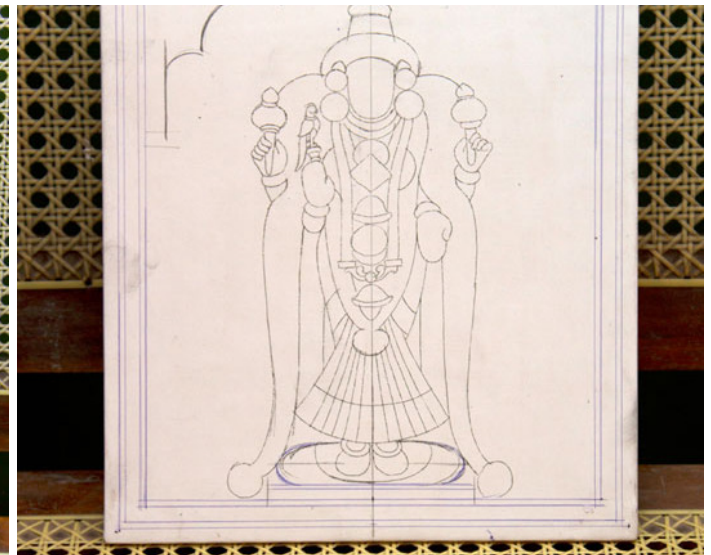
Initial sketches are made on the ply board.



Small holes are made where beads are to be applied, so that the beads get fixed in the frame.



A canvas with sketches of god and goddess ready to be painted.



Sketching done on a white board.

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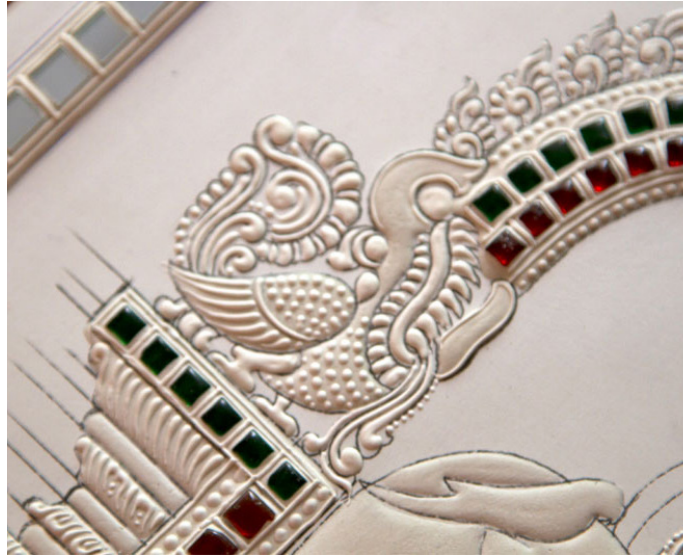
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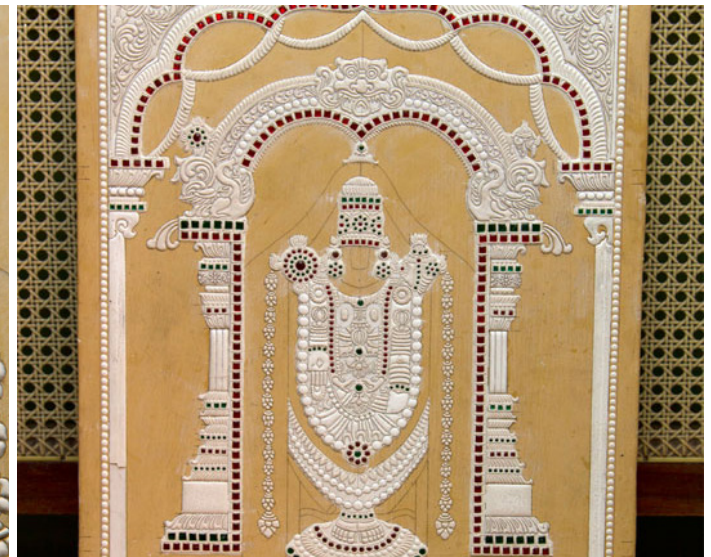
The drawing area is first coated with single layer of chalk powder and Fevicol mixture, in order to raise it from the base surface.



The fine detailing and ornamentation is done using five brushes with the mixture of chalk powder and Fevicol.



Kundan is applied to enhance the jewelry, cloth etc.



A painting with Kundan pasted on it.

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Artisan taking measurement of the amount of gold foil required to cover a certain area.



The gold foil is cut into desired shape.



It is pasted on the design with a help of a glue.



The foil is pressed gently with the help of a cotton cloth.

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To bring out the embossed surface the foil is further pressed with the pointed back of the paint brush.



A painting applied with gold leaf.



Finely embossed patterns with gold leaf and enhanced by Kundan along with mirror in the border are the main charm of the Thanjavur painting.



Finally painting is done using natural or poster colors.

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Shadow work done on ladies top.



Elegant Kairi-Mango motif done on sari.

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Products

Vaishnavite themes in Thanjavur paintings developed during the Nayak period. The most popular themes include:

Vennai Thali Krishnan (Krishna with a pot of butter)
Ramar Pattabishegam (The crowning of King Rama)
Saraswati and Gaja Lakshmi (Lakshmi flanked by elephants)

Royal portraits were also painted in this style. The traditional/puranic themes are the most sought after. Some recent paintings by Shambaji Rajah Bhosle feature Gods and Goddesses who were not traditionally portrayed in this style including Chandramukeshwar, Shiva-Parvati and Bhooma Devi and the 108 Bharatanattiyam poses of Shiva. These paintings have been visualized after a rigorous study of narratives in the Puranas. Today, artists undertake family portrait orders and the occasional recreation of a famous Ravi Varma painting in Thanjavur oviyam style. Apart from paintings the artisans also make idols of god and goddesses.

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Krishna eating butter and playing.



Paintings of goddess Lakshmi and lord Ganesh.

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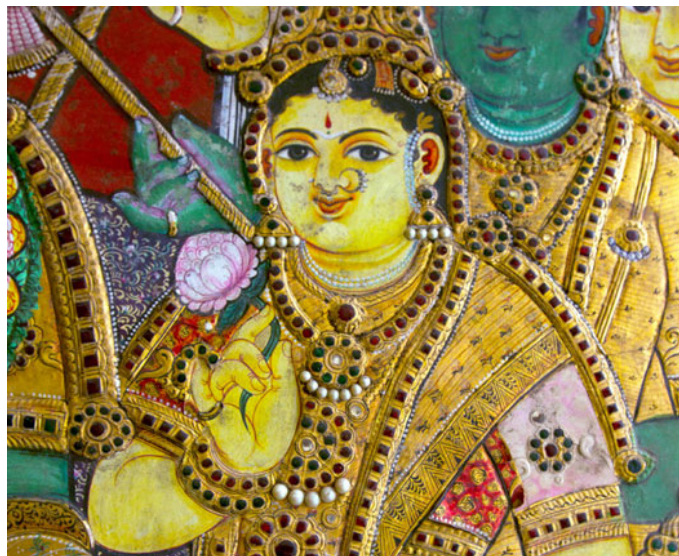


A replica of one of the paintings from Raja Ravi Varma.



Painting of god along with other court people.

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Lady with a lotus flower.



Krishna on shehnaag.

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Replication of an old painting.



Krishna with his mother.



Krishna as a child.



Three dimensional painting of Goddess Saraswati.

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A three dimensional painting under process of final coloring.



Different types of paintings framed and displayed.

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Lord Jagannath painted in bright colors.



Lord Shiva along with other people.

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Paintings of different sizes and frames displayed at the artisan's place.



Idols of god and goddesses. Idols of god and goddesses.

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