

PADMANABHAPURAM PALACE

A TREASURE-HOUSE OF ART

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A visit to Padmanabhapuram Palace, thirty-three miles from Trivandrum, a mile off the main road to Cape Comorin, has within the past five years become a fixture in the tour-programme of visitors to the State. It has also become a place of culture-pilgrimage by family groups within the State and by groups of students from schools and colleges. Five years ago the Palace was a name. To-day it is known throughout the world of art as a unique centre in which the general visitor can admire and the curious-minded study examples of the main arts of the country (architecture, sculpture, wood-carving and wall-painting) of two and more centuries ago, in a condition of fair preservation that is being bettered by renovation as near as possible to their original state, and in their natural relationship to the uses of life rather than the valuable but artificial condition of a museum.

The rediscovery of the artistic value of Padmanabhapuram Palace began in 1935 as the unexpected result of a search for possible remains, of wall-paintings on the suggestion of Her Highness Maharani Setu Parvati Bayi, mother of His Highness the Maharaja. The search was not only successful beyond expectation as regards old-time murals, but led to the further uncovering of an intact example of Vijayanagar granite architecture and sculpture, and later to the disclosing of a gem of wood-carving. It took some time to get a full realization of the art-treasures contained in the Palace: (1) the Palace itself, a complete example of Kerala Palace architecture though with some extraneous additions;



The Entrance to Padmanabhapuram Palace, now a Temple of Art.

(2) the Navaratri Mantapam of the Vijayanagar period indicating the interaction of South Indian cultures in architecture ; (3) the same in stone sculpture ; (4) the Nerapura as an example of exquisite wood-carving; (5) the room of wall-paintings. It would be difficult to repeat, certainly impossible to multiply, such a collection of masterly examples of the major arts in their intimate association with one another as they were at their prime, with their reflections of the taste and thought of those for whom they were brought into existence, and their demonstration of the union of high idealism with beauty of feeling and extreme skill in execution. A short and unembellished account of each may be serviceable, especially to those who find it possible to give themselves the pleasure of visiting the Palace and not only admiring its artistic beauties but its impressive natural surroundings.

For some centuries (the exact number is not fixed) the Palace was the seat of the Government of Travancore State. In 1750, after consolidating the State in all but its present extent, Maharaja Marthanda Varma found it expedient to change the seat of Government to Trivandrum which was nearer the centre



An exterior view of the Chamber of Murals, Padmanabhapuram.

of his kingdom. Occasionally, succeeding Rulers spent short periods in the Palace, but the impulse of regal power and its ornamental accompaniments receded from it, and for generations prior to 1935 its historical and cultural importance was forgotten, its only title to memory being that of conflict within and without the kingdom. The assumption of Rulership by His Highness Sri Chitra Thirunal in 1931 opened an era of renewed interest in the artistic past

of the State and of effort to develop contemporary demand by the public for indigenous productions and the meeting of such demand by those who had a hereditary bent or a voluntary call to the creation of objects of art. Art galleries arose for this purpose which is not only laudable in itself but essential to the highest welfare of the people in providing collections of works of fine art for the development of good taste. Padmanabhapuram Palace came, as

briefly hinted above, within the orbit of the revived interest in local arts. Its own generous proportions and its congregation of typical Keralan features in architecture, roofing, carved wooden frontages, doors and verandas, gave it a right to attention on its own account as a complex of artistic eminence.

Mantapam in Vijayanagar style

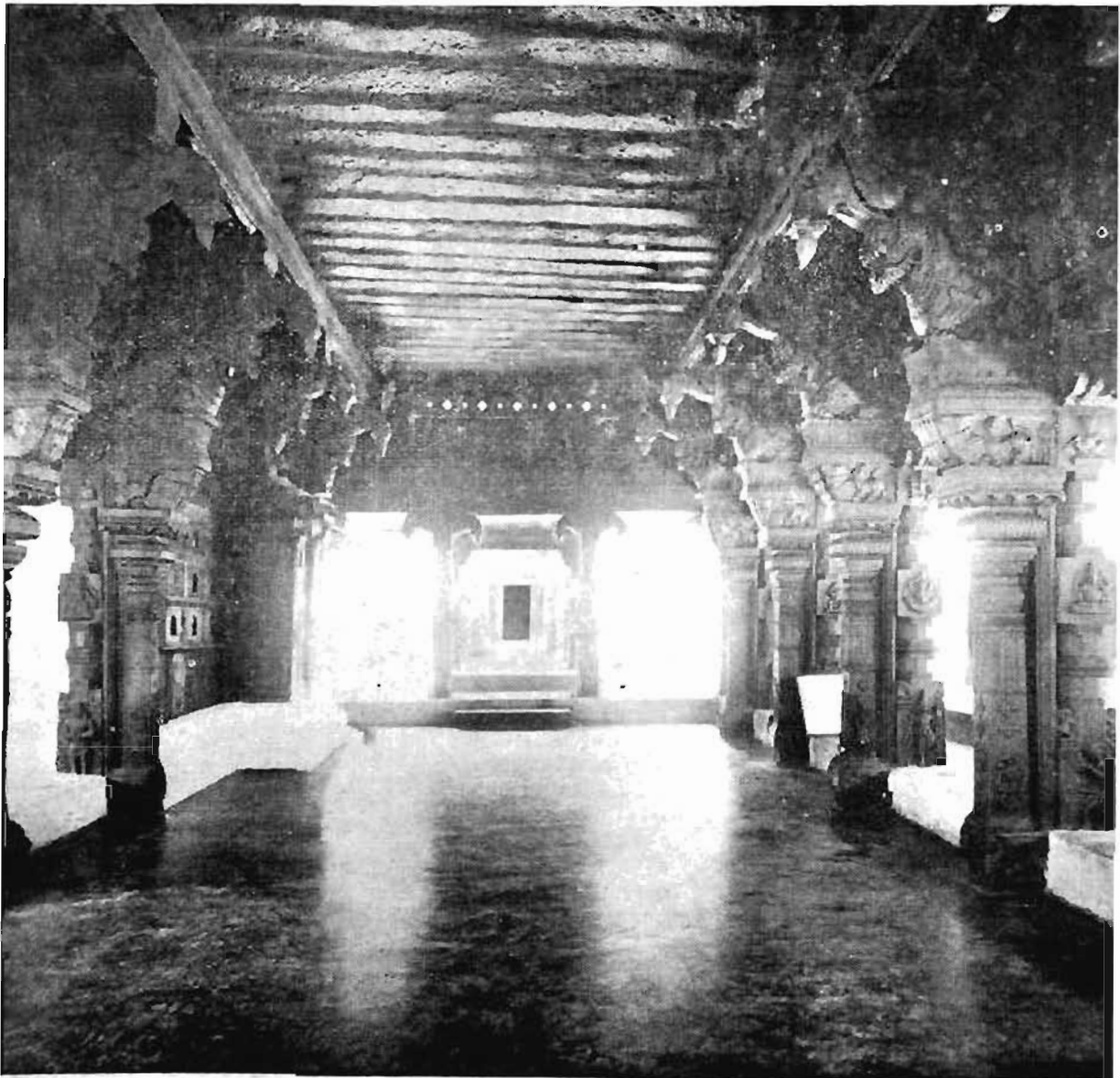
But within the Palace compound there was discovered, under a coagulation of decades of white-washing, what



The famous Chamber of Murals, hailed as "The Ajanta of Travancore"

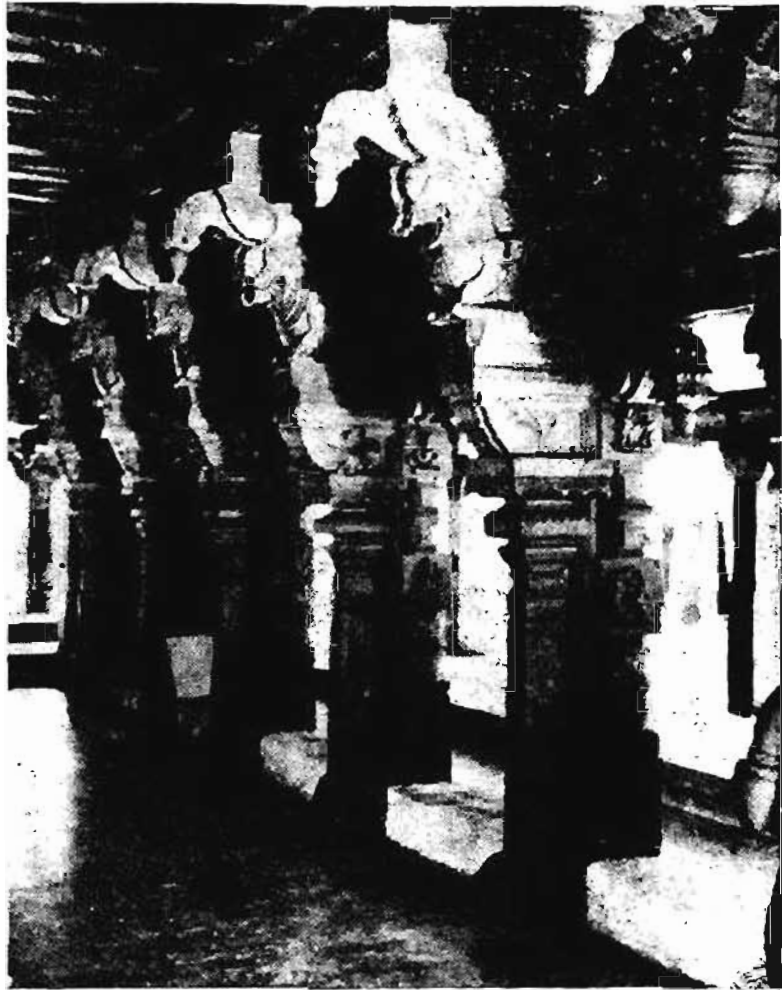
turned out to be a mantapam in front of a Saraswati shrine in the characteristic Vijayanagar style of monolithic granite pillars, thickly carved with Hindu deific figures and Pauranic incidents. These were only seen in their fullness, and with the pleasing effect of colonnades of sculpture topped by elaborately carved capitals, after much labour on the removal of the misguided attentions in chunam of former guardians, and the restoration of the small

(73 feet by 20 feet on its floor) but exceedingly distinctive hall to its original condition, a process still going patiently on. No record of the age of the mantapam has come to light, but comparison with other similar buildings of the same era puts it provisionally in the late sixteenth century. Whether it was constructed as a detail of the main Palace, or the latter grew around the mantapam, is a matter of speculation as yet; but it seems to be fairly settled



The Navaratri Mantapam.

Another view of the Navaratri Mantapam.



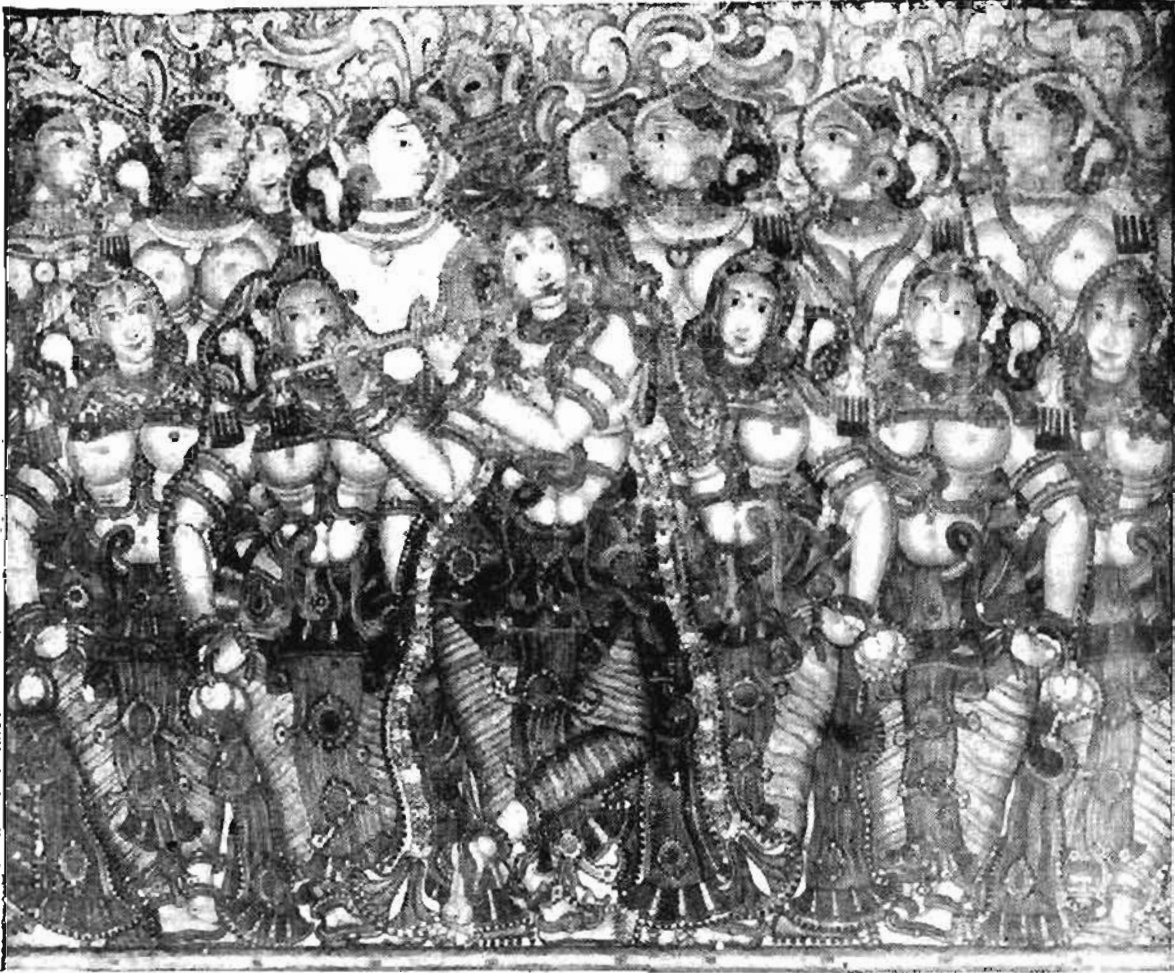
that the original building of the Palace began considerably prior to the mantapam, though the early structure cannot now be identified. At the instance of Her Highness Maharani Setu Parvati Bayi an image of Saraswati Devi has been installed in the long disused shrine at which the Maharaja used to worship and in whose hall performances of Bharata Natya and indigenous drama were given to select audiences in their season. The installation of the image is not for worship but in order to give visitors of all faiths an idea of a Hindu shrine.

It is not unlikely that a photographic survey of the architectural and sculptural details of the charming

building will before long be undertaken and the results made available in reproductions to those interested in reminders of the artistic achievements of the State.

The Chamber of Murals

The mural room, which first drew attention to the Palace, and remains one of the most important single collections of wall-painting in India, was found on the top (fourth) floor of what had been the private rooms of the Maharaja, the top floor being his own bedroom. This fact, and the sanctity which it gave to the room, happily preserved it from the white-washers who obliterated many murals on the lower floors and corridors. The walls of the mural room



Sri Krishna and the Gopis — one of the Padmanabhapuram Murals.

are covered without interval by remarkably vivid depictions of Pauranic personalities and incidents, a notable feature being the repetition at both ends of the room of the figure of Sri Padmanabhaswami in order that the image of Deity should be the first thing to be seen by the Maharaja whichever side he awoke on. The wooden cot, richly carved in black and gold, on which His Highness slept, occupies a position in the mural room. The room is 33 feet long and 16 feet wide, giving a perimeter of painting of 98 feet.

The walls are $9\frac{1}{2}$ feet high. The picture surface is, therefore, about 900 square feet.

Opinions differ as to the date of the paintings. Historical records are silent on the subject. Documents contemporary with the paintings were probably destroyed less than half a century ago in an incurious bout of clearing-up. Others that may have been removed from Padmanabhapuram to Trivandrum in or after 1750 have not come to light. The existence of the paintings at

the time of Maharaja Marthanda Varma is assumed. The turbulent conditions of most of his reign appear to preclude time for art-interests. The likelihood of a future transfer of Government would not encourage an extensive scheme of wall-painting. In the relatively quiet terminal years of his reign, Maharaja Marthanda Varma gave much attention to details of the rebuilding of the Sri Padmanabhaswami temple at Trivandrum, but it is not considered likely that he would have caused the Padmanabhapuram murals to be painted then. Their own evidence is that they were in a used room, not a vacated one. That they were painted prior to the reign of Maharaja Marthanda Varma is not unlikely, but in the absence as yet of direct historical testimony as to their date, the most that can be said for them is that they belong to a period prior to 1750, and are at least two centuries old. This is a short time beside the known age of Ajanta, but indicates what Ajanta cannot, namely, that the art of mural painting of remarkable distinction in composition and colouring was in operation in Travancore at a time sufficiently near our own to encourage hope of its renaissance. That the murals belong to a school of art of wide extent is seen in the existence of similar, though slightly modified, paintings from Suchindram in the south to Trichur in Cochin State in the north. Good copies of the Padmanabhapuram Palace murals have been hung in the Sri Chitralayam in Trivandrum, for all to see.



Harihara—another Padmanabhapuram Mural.



A View of Padmanabhapuram Palace. Dr. Cousins may be seen in the cent of the group in the foreground.

Treasures of Wood-carving

The art of wood-carving, native to a land of forests that produce numerous timbers suitable for building and decoration, is well represented in the main Palace of Padmanabhapuram, the most complete single example of this being the superb central pillar and the richly carved beams that it supports in the room in which the Durga celebration is held annually. But in 1937, two years after the revival of interest in the Palace, during a visit of Their Highnesses, an exhaustive inspection of the Palace compound and its constituents, led to the realization of a treasure of wood-carving in a tripartite building in a small compound outside the Palace wall by the side of a bathing-tank. The Nerapura, as the three small buildings are now called, is built entirely of wood.



The clock tower at Padmanabhapuram, one of the oldest in India.

It may be surmised that the present tiled roofs do not do justice to the mind that controlled the creation of a work of beautiful art, and certainly carried out the roofing otherwise than it now appears. But under the roofs, with the home-like atmosphere that the buildings convey, a marvellous collection of wood-carvings was discovered just in time to rescue them from borer beetles that fortunately preferred flat wooden surfaces for their homes to carved ones, and from the neglect that human ignorance of artistic values had allowed one of the most precious creations of beauty and skill to suffer. Master craftsmen had obviously let themselves go in putting their best craft in design and cutting into the production of a three-in-one work of art within the limits of motifs from nature—flowers, shells, birds, lizards—worked into the lintels and jambs of door-posts, the stems and capitals of pillars, and all manner of adornments on walls and ceilings.

The presence of so lovely an achievement of the carver's art is explained (whether before or after the event it is

impossible at present to say) by stories that differ in detail but mutually indicate that the buildings were created some distance from the Palace, and were removed from their original position to the present as a penalty on the owner of the building for a discourtesy to the Ruler of the time. Who the Ruler was is not clear, but it is taken that the building was where it is in the time of Maharaja Marthanda Varma, and is, therefore, at least two centuries old. Recognition of the unique importance of the Nerapura has resulted in careful renovation that has abolished the borer-beetles and removed their traces and the accumulation of centuries of dust. Under the latter, timber of fine texture, has been bared, and the whole will before long put on the exquisite appearance of its prime.

The Palace and its artistic accompaniments shortly mentioned above, have been declared a preserved monument. A curator and staff are in daily attendance to show visitors over this remarkable group of masterpieces of the past art of the State. Buses stop at Thackalai, a mile from the Palace.