

ANCIENT FRESCOES IN TRAVANCORE.

History-making Discovery at Tirunandikkara

Note by Dr. J. H. Cousins, Art Adviser to Government:

Mr. R. V. Poduval, B. A., Director of Archaeology of Travancore State, found traces in 1933 of wall-paintings in the

mantapam of the Saivite cave-temple at Tirunandikkara, about 11 miles from Kuzhithurai which is 23/2 miles from Trivandrum on the road to Cape Comorin.



Ganapati—Panel I (33" x 40")



Parvati - Panel 7 (67" x 41")

The importance of such reliques of the ancient art of the country, attributed to the ninth century A. D. was realized, and the traces, though fragmentary and small, were carefully copied by the draftsman of the Archaeological Department, and were placed on permanent public view on the opening of the Sri Chitralayam (State Picture Gallery) in 1935. The fragments were identified as depicting Shiva, Parvathi, a devotee, and a hand in the *kathaka mudra* of the Bharatanatyā (classical Indian dance).

Affinity to Ajanta

The line copies, though obviously presenting Hindu figures, suggested an affinity with the pictorial manner of the Ajanta frescoes. The date of the founding of the shrine and mantapam and of its decoration by frescoes is fixed by an

inscription which has been published by the Department of Archaeology in the Travancore Archaeological Series, No. XV, pp. 291 and 292. The ninth century origin of the temple would bring its artificers chronologically within the Buddhist influence in cave-decoration; but research in the artistic history of this era awaits development, and it is to be hoped that the discovery under mention will help to stimulate it.

The discovery and copying of these precious relics of the remote art-history of the country aroused the hope that other memorials of a like kind might be found in the vicinity or elsewhere as the result of careful search. Subsequent visits, however, to the Tirunandikara site brought the discouraging news that the traces found in the mantapam were disappearing, apparently through the action of atmospheric and insect

agents; and no other remains of the frescoes of the period had come to light elsewhere in the State.

Mr. Katchadourian's Scrutiny

Happily an exhibition of copies of murals of Iran, Ajanta, Bagh and Ceylon, made by the Iranian painter, Mr. Sarkis Katchadourian, was arranged as part of the Birthday celebrations of His Highness the Maharaja in November 1940, under the supervision of the artist himself. Mr. Katchadourian, being an enthusiastic and experienced student, restorer and copyist of ancient oriental art, and familiar with the frescoes of India and Ceylon, expressed a strong desire to visit the cave-mantapam at Tirunandikkara. He had been much impressed by the copy of the fragments which he had seen in the Sri Chitralayam, and felt that a closer scrutiny of the walls of the mantapam might yield other vestiges, as had been his experience in the Bagh Caves of Gwalior. Arrangements for an examination were sanctioned, and its procedure and results are told in the following note.

Note by Mr. N. G. Pillai, B. Sc. Curator, Government Museum, Trivandrum:

In accordance with orders from the Officer in charge of the Government Museum, Trivandrum, of which I am Curator, I was in constant attendance on Mr. S. Katchadourian on his three visits to the cave-mantapam at Tirunandikkara in November 1940.

The cave is in the side of a large rock, a short distance behind another temple, on the bank of a brook. The small entrance to the cave is reached by a short upward flight of steps which lead into the rectangular hall (mantapam) in which remnants of ancient murals had been discovered by the Director of Archaeology in 1933, and in which Mr. Katchadourian hoped to discover more on a close examination. This hall is about 15 feet long, 10 feet wide, and 8 feet high. The shrine, containing a lingam, opens off the mantapam on the left side from the entrance to the cave, and is reached by four low

Siva and Parvati—First fragments of the Tirunandikkara frescoes discovered and copied in 1933.





Siva and the Elephant, (Iravata)—Panel 5 (39" x 30")

steps upward. The floor of the mantapam is raised into a low dais and margined at the back and right side by a narrow drain which comes out of the shrine, and a broad shallow trough disposed lengthwise in front.

The walls of the mantapam are divided into panels, of which there are three on each wall, except the left, which is divided into two panels of unequal size flanking the doorway to the shrine.

Discovery of Fragments

Our first visit, on November 1, was purely exploratory. We made a preliminary survey of the mantapam in order that Mr. Katchadourian might satisfy himself as to whether any traces of ancient frescoes remained, beyond those already discovered and copied in 1933, that might justify further visits with a view to copying them. In our search,

helped by a hurricane lamp lent by a Brahmin attendant in the shrine, we were well rewarded. The inside of the front wall and the outer panel of the right-hand wall did not yield any traces that could be followed up. But elsewhere, as detailed below, we found a number of fragments between gaps, and these drew from the artist the conviction that there was enough to make at least another visit well worth while.

From the disconnected traces that we could make out by the dim light of the lantern, we found, after careful study, the following, beginning with the panel on the left of the doorway to the shrine:—

Panel No. 1. Fragments of a Ganapati with attendants.

Panel No. 2. Fragments of what appeared to be a Krishna.

Panel No. 3. Head of a mythological animal (yali) at one corner, and one clear hand among a number of fragments in the centre (copied in 1933).

Panel No. 4. Centre panel on the wall opposite the entrance to the cave: traces of two seated ladies, one complete (copied in 1933), one fragmentary, in the top right-hand corner; in the centre a hand holding a vina or tamburu, with a figure suggesting Saraswati, but of which few useful traces remained.

Panel No. 7. Traces of Parvati (copied in 1933) and worshippers.

The ceiling of the mantapam showed traces of plaster, but none of frescoes except a small geometrical design towards the right end.

Details of the Temple

I noted the following details of the temple. On each side of the entrance to the cave there is a column of granite supporting the slanting roof over the entrance. The level area in front of the door outside might have been a covered



Mr. Sarkis Katchadourian, the Iranian artist, who copied the Tirunandikara frescoes, seated in front of his copy of the Bodhisatwa, an Ajanta fresco

Panel No. 5. Incomplete head with an elaborate crown (the Shiva copied in 1933); and an elephant's head almost touching the ceiling, suggesting the four-tusked elephant of Indra.

Panel No. 6. Right-hand wall facing the shrine; a few unidentifiable fragments.

veranda as suggested by two shallow square pools where pillars might have stood. The rain-water in the two pools was full of minute worms and other organisms. The space between the two granite columns mentioned is walled with masonry which converts the inner court into a dark ill-ventilated room depending for air and light solely on a



Yali--Panel 3 (33" x 34")

small grilled window at the left end. When the door was opened for this first visit, a hot, malodorous current brushed our faces. In the various corners and crevices were colonies of tiny beetles (*coleoptera*) which remained motionless for hours together. These not only occupied corners, crevices, and empty wasps' nests that were abundant, but even the under side of the plaster on which the frescoes had been made. In the dark corners of the walls lurked large lizards bearing variegated patterns. There were also numerous spiders and other insects. These, though scientifically interesting, might be part of the agencies that have destroyed the frescoes, the other being foul air engendered by keeping the cave closed against

fresh currents of air from outside. A subsequent qualitative analysis of a small sample of the crumbling plaster revealed the presence of iron, aluminium, and calcium salts.

Tracing the Fragments

On our second visit, on November 12, which had been justified by the first, we were equipped with drawing materials and a bright petromax lamp. I assisted Mr. Katchadourian in cutting suitable sizes of tracing paper and fastening them to the panels with beeswax. Line by line the visible fragments were traced with the utmost care by the artist. Where lines were missing, areas suggesting the outline of a map indicated the irregular gaps. Four hours of continuous hard work in acute

discomfort yielded a promising collection of suggestive fragments. I was uncertain in my mind that such copying of fragmentary lines was worthy work for an eminent artist. But I was mistaken, and soon realized that the trained eye of an artist alone could follow up the curves and differentiate between the angle of a nose and the angle of an elbow, or the tip of a finger-nail and that of an ear-lobe.

On his return to his hotel in Trivandrum that evening, and the next morning, Mr. Katchadourian worked on the transferring of the traced lines to canvas-backed paper; and we went again to the temple, at noon, on November 13, with a table, a drawing-board, colours and other articles. The canvas-paper bearing the traced lines of the preceding day was stretched on the drawing-board, and on this the artist

went over the copied lines in water-colour, checking every section with the utmost care in circumstances of foul air that would have deterred all but one devoted to his work. Mr. Katchadourian also made careful notes of the tints in the fragments that still remained for insertion in the finished copies.

In conclusion I would say that I consider it one of the special privileges of my life, and a unique and valuable experience, to have had the opportunity of accompanying Mr. Katchadourian in this important work of discovering and recording existing traces of the superb mural art of our ancestors in Travancore. His devotion to the work was an object-lesson. In the hot and stuffy atmosphere of a partially lighted room, I watched him lose himself in what he was doing, oblivious of time, of hunger, of fatigue, of everything except the work in hand.

Musicians - Panel 4
(43" x 41")



Note by Mr. S. Katchadourian, Iranian Painter :

Sometime ago I casually read a few lines about Tirunandikkara Temple and its fragments of ancient frescoes which greatly interested me, but I was unable to gather further details.

Fortunately during my recent unexpected visit to Travancore I was offered every opportunity for the fulfilment of my wish to know more about the frescoes. Thanks to the courtesy of Sir C. P. Ramaswami Aiyar, the Dewan, I was enabled to visit the temple, and copy the precious remains of ninth century frescoes still visible in the temple.

The temple lies at the foot of a hill, carved out of a gigantic granite rock, with two plain columns for the entrance, like the frescoed cave at Sittanavasal near Pudukottah.

With much anticipation I entered the hall of the temple, but was disappointed to see the damaged works of art confronting me with their sad appeal. However, I received, after a while, the impression that the surviving bits of such old works could speak volumes to the world of art if carefully studied and copied.

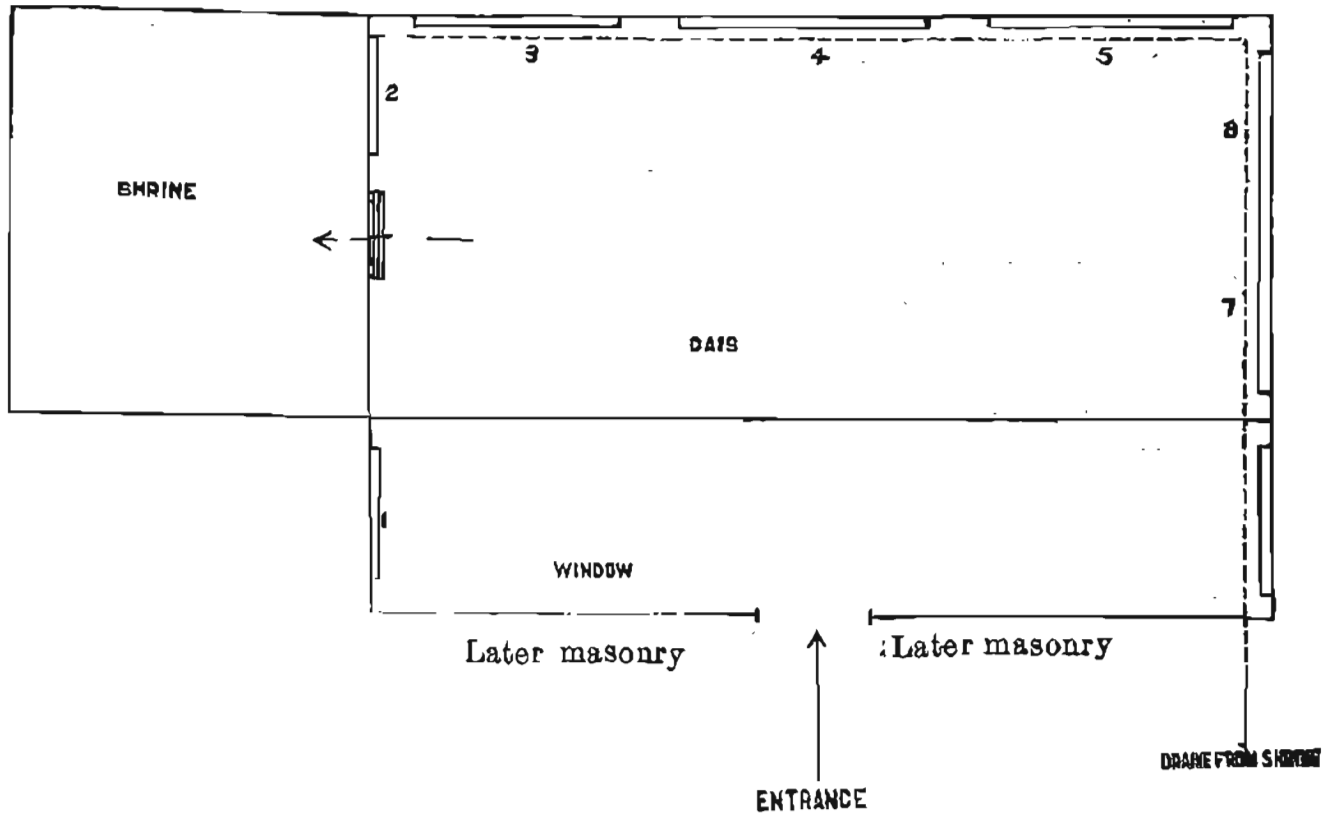
Not long ago, the beauty and freshness of these works had been obscured by obstructing the light which ought to penetrate between the columns, through building an ugly wall. Time has already had its effect, and the supreme beauty once dedicated to the Gods has been almost obliterated. It was possible only with great effort and concentration to follow the fundamental richness of the broken lines that could be made out on the once fully painted panels, each

of which has its history to tell. Perfection is the only word that can be used to describe their quality. The colouring is clear; a few of the works are on white background with red filling, and touches of green and yellow. The harmony of the colours is admirably suited to each subject, and shows its superb quality of workmanship. The symbolic touches of heavy and light lines, are in themselves a measure of the religious inspiration of the craftsman reflected in the great legends of Kerala. This supreme work was done by the great artists of Travancore of ninth century A. D.

My gratitude to His Highness the Maharaja and Her Highness Maharani Setu Parvati Bayi, and to Sir C. P. Ramaswami Aiyar, for having given the opportunity of making copies of these great works, and paying the reverent homage of an artist at this shrine of Art, knows no bounds. In the discovery and copying of the fragments of Tirunandikkara frescoes a new chapter in the History of Indian Art has been opened.

Further note by Dr. Cousins:

Photographs of the first copies of the Tirunandikkara fresco-remains made by Mr. Katchadourian as recounted by Mr. N. G. Pillai above are reproduced with these first authoritative notes of a momentous event in the art-history not only of Kerala but of all-India. Though fragmentary, the copyable vestiges are deeply impressive in their keen suggestiveness of beauty in feeling and craftsmanship. Their affinity with the nobility, idealism and religious assurance and clarity of the great art of their era is obvious. Their



PLAN OF THE CAVE TEMPLE AT
TIRUNANDIKKARA WITH POSITIONS OF
FRESCO-PANELS.

historical connection with frescoes elsewhere in the peninsula is a matter for future exposition. The Tirunandikkara frescoes, as now known, constitute a priceless testimony to the artistic eminence of Travancore in the remote past, and provide invaluable material towards a chapter in the art-history of India heretofore only vaguely suggested by the morsels of ancient wall-painting rescued from oblivion in 1933. From the fragments now faithfully and intelligently recorded, and shortly to be

placed on permanent public view in the Sri Chitralayam in its unique collection of copies of murals not only from Kerala but from other parts of India, imagination can dimly recreate the pictorial beauty of the cave-temple in its hey-day eleven, perhaps twelve, centuries ago, and reach the thought that, in a land where such religious and artistic zeal was concentrated, there may yet be found other similar reliques of antiquity awaiting discovery, record, and preservation.

NOTICE.

Sealed tenders superscribed "Tender No. 36 of 1116 for *Non-ferrous Metals*" are invited for the supply of brass, copper, aluminium, etc. required for the State. The tenders should be addressed to the Secretary, Stores Purchase Committee and should reach his office at or before 11 a. m. on 10th March 1941. No tender received after the time and date specified above, will be accepted *on any account*. The tenders should be in the prescribed form, copies of which can be had of the undersigned on payment in cash of B. Rs. Two per copy. Duplicate copies of the form will be issued at 8 annas each. Full details will be found published in the Travancore Government Gazette dated 11th February 1941.

Office of the Stores Purchase Committee,
Trivandrum, 7th February 1941.

C. KUMARA DAS,
Secretary.