

SOME ASPECTS OF TRAVANCORE ART

By Dr. J. H. Cousins.

This is the first of a series of articles on various aspects of Travancore Art which Dr. J. H. Cousins, Art Adviser to the Government of Travancore has agreed to contribute to the "Travancore Information". The next article in the series will be on the Padmanabhapuram Palace, that treasure house of sculptures, carvings and mural paintings.

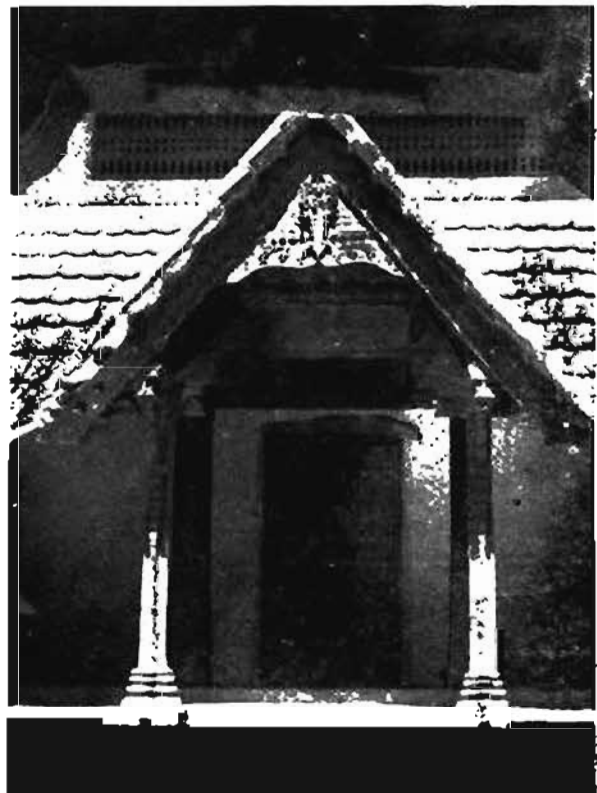
A paragraph in a newspaper recently told how a visitor to Travancore went through the Museum and Chitralayam (picture gallery) and called at Padmanabhapuram Palace on his way to Cape Comorin. The paragraph did not report that the visitor had gone into raptures over the Power House or the Water Works. This was not an omission. Nor does it imply that institutions which serve the physical needs of humanity have not their own admirable qualities. What it hints is that other things such as fine buildings, noble sculptures, beautiful carvings and paintings, things that are ordinarily given secondary notice if any, come occasionally for the time being into their own.

Roof Styles

Travancore is rich in expressions of the creative artistic impulse in humanity. A general note on the art of Travancore opens on its architecture because of its accessibility. The word architecture may sound too big for a house with a peculiarly shaped roof. Yet the essentials of architecture are there—not only the adaptation of means to ends (which adaptation is jargonized as "architectural function"), but the addition to bare necessity of a covering, of style that expresses a recognition of something beyond necessity, a Beauty that comes through special relationships of line and space and mass. We do not quite know how this magic is performed; we are not positively sure what

Beauty is. But there is something in the Travancore roof that gives us a peculiar sense of pleasure, and we shall call it Beauty though all the philosophers wag their beards (if they have them) in solemn doubt.

What happens is that a roof-ridge whose utilitarian function is fulfilled in being straight, becomes artistic in being slightly curved at both ends, and a gable that elsewhere stands plainly vertical to light and air becomes a thing of beauty in being slightly tilted, and still more so when



A typical gable roof with triangular panel.

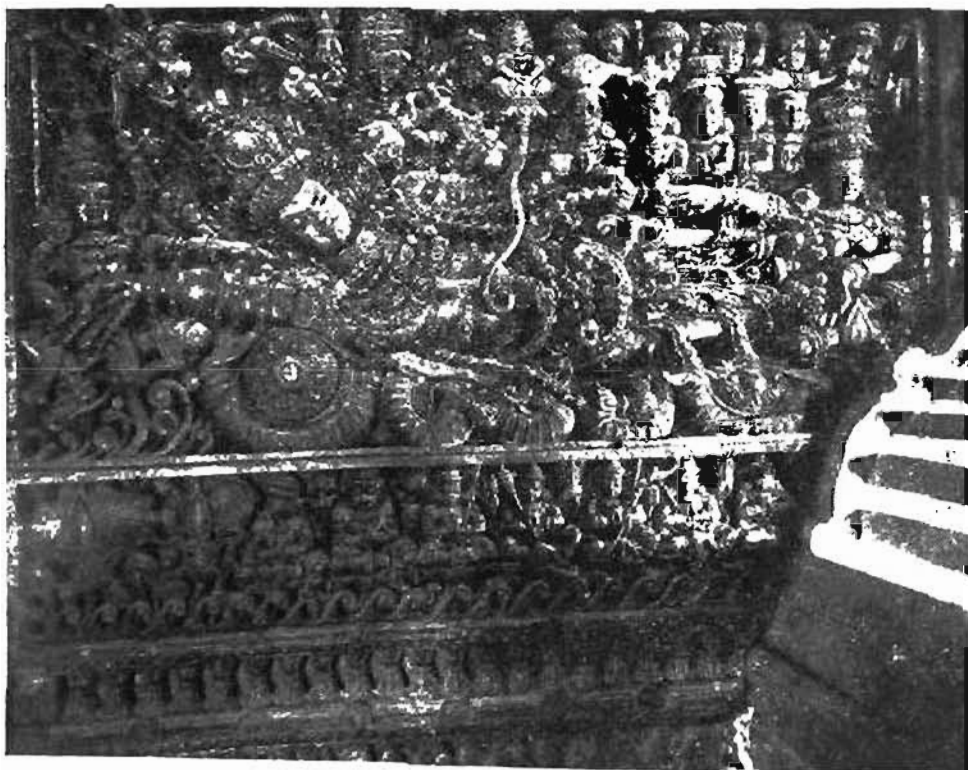


Golf links pavilion,
Trivandrum.

the desire for ornament makes it the triangular frame for another of the arts of Travancore—the art of wood-carving, of which more anon. Such distinctive roofing is everywhere in the State, with many variations in both

domestic and religious buildings. Interspersed with it are the conical roofs that cover the shrines of the small temples that are the simple and beautiful typical places of Hindu worship in central and northern Travancore. Other

Anantasayanam
—A good example of carving in wood.



small temples with elaborately figured spires (vimana) date back in origin to the classical age when Travancore had relationships with the Chola and Pandyan Kingdoms.

Padmanabhaswami Temple

In Trivandrum stands the great temple of Sri Padmanabhaswami, with its Dravidian gopuram (gateway) reflected in its ablution tank, impressive not only by its combination of strength and beauty in the temple as a whole, but by special details such as the Kulasekhara mandapam (assembly hall) with its perfect proportions and its fusion of architecture and sculpture. This fusion it achieves in pillars that are at once structurally essential in support of the heavy stone roof, and artistically satisfying in their figures of Deific beings and incidents related in the ancient Hindu scriptures. The mantapam is one of the most beautiful examples of sculptured architecture in India. Those who cannot realize this by direct sight can get a fragmentary indication of the strength and style of its sculpture from plaster casts of a number of pillars which have been placed in the State Museum in Trivandrum. Here also can be seen casts of other sculptures of Travancore including portrait sculpture whose existence and whose artistic and historical importance have recently been realised, and will in due time receive detailed exposition.

A Synthesis of Styles

From even the foregoing mere reference and from other temples such as Suchindram which, with the Padmanabhaswami temple at Trivandrum, links Travancore with the architectural and sculptural tradition of Madura, Tanjore, Rameswaram, and other Dravidian centres; Aranmulai and Thiruvalla and others that in their varied

groupings of gabled roofs over cleverly varied structures testify to the fine concept of form and the masterly skill in craftsmanship of the old builders—it will be seen that Travancore State contains a synthesis of the architectural styles of South India.

We must turn from the architecture of Travancore and its associated sculpture with the foregoing mere hint, as this article, owing to natural limitations of space, bears as much relationship to its immense subject as a finger-post does to a forested mountain towards which it points. But in turning away we may apropos of the possible question as to whether the distinct architectural style of Travancore is a thing



A part of Padmanabhapuram Palace.



Another specimen of wood carving.

of the past, call attention to the row of Public Offices which is being built in Trivandrum on the opposite side of the main road to the State Museum. In the new buildings, after half a century's deflection of architecture into Hellenistic, modernistic and non-descript styles, the Kerala style of gable-roofing enters once more into public building, and induces interesting structural modifications in order to cause the body to live up to its head, and at the same time to bring traditional architectural ideas into collaboration with modern practical needs. The beautiful Museum building opposite the Public Offices shows a satisfying fusion of Indian styles under artistic groupings of the Kerala roof and the "Malabar gable". The Golf-links Pavilion, off the road to Kaudiar Palace, also shows an effort to hold on to the

indigenous in architecture. Both buildings were put up over half a century ago.

Wood Carving

Bearing in mind the fact that nearly a third of the surface of the State is under forests, and that the forests provide many varieties of timber useable in building and its decoration it would be natural to assume that wood-carving would be a prominent activity of the people, particularly as the impulse to exercise the creative capacity on the materials of nature was strong in them.

The collection of photographs of carved screens in "Malabar gables" on Kerala-style buildings would not only make a delightful hobby but would produce a fascinating variety of solutions of the problem of how to apply

design in wood to a triangular area. The problem of design in wood has been met by art-craftsmen in many countries east and west, but the combined genius and environment of Travancore have solved the problem in ways specially their own. Those ways reflect the interaction of Pauranic stories, as visualized by the mental eyes of Travancore, with conventionalizations of local forms of nature (animals, shells, foliage and the like) under the spur and control of a temperament that finds release and happiness in giving a remarkable sense of objective reality to its imaginative expressions. No piece of Travancore wood-carving can be dismissed as wooden. In the mysterious way of art, inanimate materials are given the similitude of life.

Padmanabhapuram Palace

Examples of the wood-carving of Travancore can be seen everywhere; in the gables mentioned above, in veranda pillars, in door-posts, in the supports of bay-windows, in the axles of bullock-carts, in traditional "Nair houses" built and ornamented in wood. But to get an idea of the art at its fullest and best and most available, one has to take the thirty three-miles trip by road south-east from Trivandrum to Thackalai and thence a mile to the left to Padmanabhapuram Palace, the centre of State Government for centuries before 1750, when Maharaja Marthanda Varma moved his capital to Trivandrum to meet the necessities of rapid expansion northward which he himself had carried out. Here one finds, in a good state of preservation which has been stabilized for generations to come by renovations that are still in

progress (November 1940) remarkably fine wood-carving of over two centuries ago, in the buildings and in their structural and decorative details; in the *poomukham* (flower-face) of the gabled and pillared entrance to the reception hall and, over it in the *mantrasala* (speaking-place) in the floral capitals of lines of pillars, the pair of mounted huntsmen on each side of the entrance, the masterpieces of amazingly carved pillars and beams in one place and elsewhere of ceilings from which hang numerous flowers each the same shape and size and each different from the other in design.

Exquisite Achievement of Plastic Genius

Adjacent to Padmanabhapuram Palace is a set of three small wooden buildings from one of which steps lead down to a bathing-tank. Their modern tiled roofs, seen over a high wall, give no hint of the artistic riches that the buildings, now known collectively as the Nerapura, have bidden for many generations from few eyes save those of colonies of borer beetles. Careful restoration of the Nerapura, still in progress, has brought back to almost its



Carved wooden doors and rafters.



A sculptured granite pillar in the Padmanabhapuram Palace.

original condition a work of superlative art, a treatment of carving as though it were jewelling. An extraordinarily fine æsthetical sensibility and delicate but firm skill went into the creation of a thing of beauty that, notwithstanding its relative smallness, is worthy of rank

among the most exquisite achievements of plastic genius.

In items of wood carving elsewhere the central impulse has been theological and symbolical. In the Nerapura, theology and symbology were set aside, the building being secular as far as that term may be applied to a Hindu house. There is no Deific image and no Sastraic symbol in the Nerapura. The work of the master-craftsman and his helpers was simplified to the creation of beauty in wood by cutting designs on it. This they did with a perfect sense of place and proportion, and unfailing delicacy and strength of skill. Lintels, posts and steps of doors, beams and pillars, are transformed by art from plain timber into almost audible expressions of loveliness of shape and disposition. Floral design conventionalized from indigenous originals and geometrically placed predominates. Ceilings are studded with lotus-forms each treated in a different manner. A shell pattern and a bird-pattern make variations with a flower-pattern in long horizontal bands. Lizards put a rhythmical top to door-posts, lintels have two in the centre symmetrically stalking a fly placed between them. Beams carry items of sunken design that are marvels of cleverness. So are pilasters and pillars; one of the latter is a gem of composition, decoration and workmanship. The Ramaswami Temple in the town of Padmanabhapuram, has a pierced wooden frieze of the Ramayana on panels

round its shrine, an amazing *tour de force* of wood-carving of over two centuries ago.

"Ajanta of Travancore"

Another of the major arts of Travancore is found in Padmanabbapuram Palace on the fourth floor of the central pagoda, which was the bed-room of the Maharaja before the Palace was vacated in favour of Trivandrum in 1750. Here, owing to the sanctity of the upper room, there has been preserved in almost perfect condition a gallery of Pauranic mural paintings that, in the phrase of a visiting American connoisseur, makes the room "the Ajanta of Travancore". The room is not large, but every inch of the four walls is covered with paintings of a most distinctive character, wonderfully laid out as a whole and individually composed, and carried out in the "expressive line" that is the principal feature of traditional Indian painting, and in excellently contrasted colours that give a gracious restfulness to the eye. For the benefit of those who have not the opportunity to go to Padmanabbapuram, there is a fine set of true copies of some of the murals in the upper hall of the Sri Chitralayam at Trivandrum. Elsewhere in the State, as in the Sri Padmanabhaswami Temple at Trivandrum, in the temples of Ettumanur, Aranmulai, Thiruvattar, and in the Palaces of Trivandrum Fort and Krishnapuram (old Kayamkulam), there are well preserved murals that in their similarities and differences present a rich subject for comparative research.

Thirunandikara Frescoes

Behind all these striking wall-paintings lies a history of art development that is only beginning to be known and studied. Up to early in November, 1940 it had been assumed that the oldest records of ancient Travancore painting were the fragments copied in 1933 from the walls of the outer mantapam of the cave-temple of Thirunandikkara and preserved in the mural gallery of the Sri Chitralayam. But recent careful study of the walls of the mantapan



Another specimen of a sculptured, Stone pillar in the Padmanabha puram Palace



The ten Avatars and Anantasayan done in kuffgari.

brought a number of precious fragments to view, and these have been lovingly, intelligently and expertly copied, and will shortly be added to the gallery as a priceless reminder of the pictorial genius of the artists of Travancore twelve centuries ago.

There are other art-crafts in Travancore of fine distinction—carving in ivory,

kuffgari work in silver on iron, carving in sandal wood, silver-smithery—but these do not come within the scope of this brief indication towards the major arts of architecture, sculpture, carving and painting, in which excepting sculpture, re nascent movements have recently arisen and give promise of a renewal of high achievement.

NOTICE.

Sealed tenders, superscribed "*Tender No. 29—Tenders for M. S. Materials, etc.*" are invited for the supply of M. S. Materials, etc., required for the State during the year 1116 M. E. The tenders should be addressed to the Secretary, Stores Purchase Committee, and should reach the office of the undersigned *at or before 11 a. m. on 30th January, 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 office of the undersigned on payment of in cash B. Rs. 5 per copy. Duplicate copies of the tender forms can be had at the rate of 8 annas each. Full details will be found published in the Travancore Government Gazette, dated 24th December, 1940.

Office of the Stores Purchase Committee,
Trivandrum, 19th December 1940.

C. KUMARA DAS,
Secretary.