

George Michell (text), Bharath Ramamrutham (photography), Guy Trebay (foreword), *Mansions of Chettinad/Manoirs du Chettinad*. pp. 315: illustrations. Karaikudi: Meenakshi Meyyappan and Graf Media. 2015.—Reviewed by Anna A. Ślęczka (Curator of South Asian Art, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam).

Chettinad's unique heritage has hitherto received little attention from art historians and architects. Situated in the southeastern corner of Tamil Nadu, this area of empty, arid spaces, small country roads and—unusual in India!—little traffic, still feels remote and sees few tourists. Among patches of low, dry jungle rise tidy little towns with their characteristic 'mansions', founded by the mercantile Nattukottai Chettiar community who, according to a local legend, had migrated to this region from the coast. Chettinad means, in fact, 'the land of the Chettiars'.

Although the migration allegedly happened many centuries ago, most towns date from the 19th century and show conscious planning with regular grids of streets. Long and narrow houses with several inner courtyards, occupy the full length of the plot, from the street at the front to one at the rear. All are divided into zones progressing from the 'public' to the most private areas placed, usually, along an east-west axis, with spectacular carved doorways between the outer verandah and the first courtyard that marks the border between the outside and the inside worlds. Most houses have two storeys and look rather

grand comparing to those outside the Chettinad, hence ‘mansions’ or ‘Chettiar palaces’ as they are often called.

The outer verandah is the place to socialize with neighbours and to hold business meetings. Together with the area near the first courtyard, these are the most imposing and lavishly decorated parts of the house. The materials used in construction of Chettiar houses are of the finest sort, often imported from countries with which the Chettiar traded. The houses also feature decorative objects fashionable in contemporary Europe. And thus lavishly carved Burmese teak, rosewood and mahogany doorways and ceiling panels share space with English ceramic tiles with coloured floral and bird patterns, English and Belgian glass chandeliers and mirrors, and black and white marble floor tiles imported from Carrara. Traditional egg-based plaster, with its characteristic gloss and smoothness, applied on the inner walls is found next to European-style granite columns and cast-iron benches, resulting in a wonderful mix of European and Indian tastes. On the outside walls, Hindu gods and goddesses stand next to plaster figures of British soldiers bearing guns, to the amazement of foreign travellers.

The regularity and exceptional cleanliness of the streets gives the Chettinad settlements a ghost-town appearance, the more so, because several houses now stand empty. Chettiar merchants had gathered a great fortune through overseas trade, but it all came to an end after the Second World War. They had to abandon their trading posts in Burma, Malaya, Ceylon [Sri Lanka], and Indo-China following the independence of these countries and move back to India. Many returned impoverished and settled in larger cities in search of work. Women and children, who traditionally stayed at home when the men travelled for business, now followed as well. Many houses became abandoned, sometimes left with paid caretakers, and are used only for family celebrations, such as weddings. Some were converted into hotels, other can be visited for a small fee by still infrequent tourists. However, because each mansion is owned by a joint family, making such decisions is difficult as it requires all the heirs to agree. Renovation with original, costly materials is usually not possible, leaving most

houses in a state of dilapidation. Furthermore, the new appreciation for crafts means that many elements, such as the intricately carved timber doorways and antique ceramic tiles, are sold on the art market.

Fortunately, recent years have witnessed an awakening of interest in Chettinad's unique architectural tradition, of which this book is certainly a proof. In the words of the editor, herself coming from a prominent Chettiar family: "If we cannot safeguard their [the houses'] survival, we can at least document and record what remains...". And a record this book certainly is. With over 300 full-size illustrations, it follows the development of a typical Chettiar mansion over the period of 100 years, from the earliest examples until today. One should not, however, be misled by its 'coffee-table-book appearance' for the texts are written by a prominent scholar and author of several monographs on Indian art and architecture, George Michell. The book is divided into six parts: "Introduction", discussing the origins, commercial background, family ties and religious practices of the Nattukottai Chetiars, followed by the general description of a typical mansion, its zones and their functions, and the materials used. The following four chapters present the development of a Chettiar house over four periods: before 1850 ("Beginnings"), between 1850 and 1900 ("Early Splendour"), 1900–1930 ("Climax") and 1930–1950 ("New Directions"), on the basis of a few examples. These are accompanied by house plans included at the end of the book. The final chapter, "Abandonment and Revival", reflects on the sad fate of many important houses and recent attempts at rescuing. For readers not familiar with Indian terms, a glossary has been added. The book is an important contribution in documenting the unique, but now vanishing architectural landscape of southeast India.