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History, Myth, and *Maṭam* in Southeast Indian Portraits*

ABSTRACT: Portraiture emerged as a major interest in literature, sculpture, and painting in early modern southeastern India. While this may, on one hand, reflect an interest in historical documentation, it is also indicative of the wider significance of mimetic representation across the arts. Pursuing one avenue of implication, this essay elucidates the relationship between historical, mythic, and ideal representations of unique individuals through portraiture, focusing on the murals at the great temple of Citamparam.

KEYWORDS: portrait, mural, Citamparam, green, *maṭam*, Tirupperuntuṟai

Ampalavāṇa Tampirāṉ must have been an imposing figure. His portrait, made in the 18th century in the temple of Citamparam, depicts the ascetic against a light green background and crowned with *rudrākṣa* beads sacred to the god Śiva (Figure 1). On his brow are the three stripes of ash (*tripuṇḍra*) that mark devotees of Śiva; a yellow sandal-paste bindi sits between the eyebrows. His face is lined with age. His strong profile traces a delicately curved nose and full, relaxed lips. The whorl of his ear resolves in a lobe pierced by a single golden hoop. His white,

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closely cropped hair is pointilistically rendered and spreads across his face in the stubble of a white beard. His full abdomen is similarly dotted with white hair and white ash *tripuṇḍra*s. A staff tucked under his left arm helps support his weight and guides the eye over his finely worked cummerbund, adorned with flowers, which he wears over a sheer ochre *vēṣṭi* that falls to his knees. A preparatory sketch for a small figure at his feet, drawn in ochre, seems to look up at him. Both men cup their hands in reverence to Śiva.

This highly individualized image, a true portrait in the conventional sense of mimetic figuration, is a southern counterpoint to the better-known portraits produced in the same period in northern India and the Deccan. Portraits produced in the Mughal and Rajput courts have enjoyed interpretations that place them within their aesthetic and intellectual milieux, interpreting them in light of history informed by literature, politics, theology, global exchange, and documentation of the natural world. These developments are associated with interest in mimetic representaiton, from the naturalist observations of Babur to the rise of portraiture in Mughal art.[1] But as Crispin Branfoot has recently argued for portrait sculpture, artists in southern India were also "responding to similar changes across Eurasia in the perception and representation of individuals" (Branfoot 2018a: 15). Such changes are evident not only in the famous portrait sculptures of southeastern India, but also in its mural and manuscript paintings, ca. 1500–1800. Portraits produced in this historical and intellectual context represent singular, historical figures, but allow their subjects to live on indefinitely, present in their representations, and participatory in the ritual space and *purāṇic* narratives in which they are embedded. As exemplary individuals, they invite their viewers into participation devotionally, imaginatively, and bodily. Portraits, paradoxically, occupy the time and space of both history and myth simultaneously.

[1] Recent books that reflect such a method are Aitken 2016, Natif 2018, Singh 2018 and Khera 2020.

Of Pens and Portraits

Scholarship has long recognized a shifting conception of history that emerges in early modern southern India, manifest in the rise of professional writers (*karaṇam*s) and the composition of new kinds of histories and historiography.[2] Literature becomes newly interested in realistic description and facticity. In paintings, the interest in representation of historical events and the importance of writing is visually manifest. Images of reading and writing proliferate; the matter of authorship is given prominence in depictions of writing, as well as through label inscriptions that state both the authors and lineages of transmission for texts. Histories of sacred sites (*talapurāṇam*) become a major genre of literary composition, and these in turn are one of the most popular subjects for depiction in temple murals. Perhaps, then, it is unsurprising that portraiture of historical persons, too, emerges as a distinctive genre of pictorial depiction.

In southeastern India, as early as the 9th century, portrait figures appear in sculptural relief in temples. They are not visually distinct from one another, and it is only through the inscription of names accompanying the figures that one might recognize them as portraits (Kaimal 1999; Seastrand 2018). But beginning under Vijayanagara patronage of the 15th century, and reaching its apogee in the late 17th century, portrait sculptures placed in temples became sartorially and physiognomically distinctive doubles of their subjects, allowing them to remain in constant veneration of the deity within the temple and to participate in festivals in which the gods processed through the passageways in which such portraits are found (Branfoot 2007). Portraits functioned as everlasting doubles, perpetually presencing their subject in relation to the presence of God embodied in a bronze *mūrti*, *vigraha*, or

[2] This has been a matter of some contention. For arguments in favor of the idea of a new historiography, see Narayana Rao, Shulman, and Subrahmanyam 2003. See *History and Theory*, vol. 46 (3), October 2007 for a critical discussion of these issues among different scholars.

arcā.[3] In this, portraits follow the long tradition of lithic inscriptions that named the donors of particular structures and special rituals. As Leslie Orr has written, even in the absence of the physical body of the person, their presence was evoked through inscriptions on the walls of the temple.[4] Scholarship on portrait figures has tended to focus on political elites whose patronage is most visible because of their general perspicuity in the historical record. However, portraits of lesser political figures, other donors, and members of *maṭam*s (Skt. *maṭha*; loosely, *monastery*) are also commonplace.

One of the most impressive examples of the depiction of members of *maṭam*s may be found at the Atmanātacuvāmi Temple at Tirupperuntuṟai, popularly known as Āvuṭaiyārkōvil. Numerous portrait figures are found throughout the temple which, as it stands today, is largely an early modern construction (16th–18th centuries) with modern additions.[5] But the temple was famously founded in the 9th century: the temple's sacred history (*talapurāṇam*) describes its foundation by a minister to the Pandya king, who spent the king's money for horses on building the temple instead. This minister-turned-Śaiva initiate is known as Māṇikkavācakar; his "portrait" is found throughout the temple—but this is an image based in iconography, not mimetic fidelity. Later images of kings, that on the basis of style may be dated to the 17th and 18th centuries, appear much more specific in their individuation. Other figures in processional aisles and before the shrines reflect the costumes

[3] This is a strategy for royal and elite self-representation that continued into the 19th and perhaps even early 20th centuries. For a 19th-century example, see Simmons 2020, Chapter 5. See Branfoot 2018b for 20th-century examples of this genre of portrait sculpture.

[4] "The sponsorship of such services was a means of forging a relationship between the deity and the donor (or the person honoured by being named), and evoking that (absent) person's presence in the home of the god and his presence in the sequence of daily, monthly or annual ritual observances in which the god participated" (Orr 2020: 139–140).

[5] Dehejia writes that "the temple took shape in the twelfth century," but almost all of the temple as it stands today is much later (Dehejia 2002: 68). I thank Crispin Branfoot for discussing this with me.

of political elites, priests, or ascetics. While many of the figures remain anonymous, some possess stone-engraved labels, while still others are identified and honored with new metal signs or freshly painted notices proclaiming their identities.

The most conspicuous series of portrait figures frame the processional passage around the central shrine of Śiva as Atmanātar—a particularly striking contrast, as in this temple Śiva is formless, and thus invisible within the shrine.[6] Beginning on the west side of the south-facing temple, one encounters pious figures in sequence (Figure 2). They at first appear identical, slightly smaller than life-size, their hands pressed together in *añjali* mudra, their hair gathered under a cap in a topknot. Looking more closely, we find that each figure is slightly different, in height or build, in jewelry or floral adornment. In the absence of inscriptions, they merely appear as devotees, gesturing to human devotees the proper attitude of devotion, and standing in proximity to the god or saints who process through the space during festivals. These figures give way to others who are raised on plinths nearly half again as tall as the first figures. These images portray the legendary king Puruvasa dressed in the costume of a Vijayanagara elite, with a conical, forward-pointing brocaded hat (*kuḷḷāyi*), heavy pearl earrings, and lower garments worn all the way to the ankles; the modern label on the capital indicates that Puruvasa founded a festival at the temple: *puruvac cakravartti uṟcavam toṭaṅkiyavar*. The following column bears an image of saint Māṇikkavācakar, clad only in a loincloth and holding a manuscript labeled *tirucciṟṟampalam* [Citamparam]; he is posed directly opposite to an elite figure who may represent Māṇikkavācakar when he served the king, before his initiation at this temple.[7] Deities associated with

[6] There is a similar shrine at Citamparam wherein Śiva is formless, known as the *irakaciyam* (Skt. *rahasya*), secret. As we shall see, this is one of many connections between the two temples.

[7] There is another paired set of Māṇikkavācakar images, before and after his initiation, posed directly facing the central shrine of the temple, and designated with labeling signs. Dehejia dates the first of these to the 12th century and the latter two to

the *talapurāṇam* of Citamparam follow, including Ūrdhvatāṇḍava, Bhikṣāṭana, and Kālī dancing. The final figure in the western aisle depicts the 16th head of the Tiruvāvaṭuṯuṟai *ātīnam* (1869–1888), Mēkaram Cupramaṇiyatēcikar.[8] He is marked conspicuously with *rudrākṣa* beads around his head, neck, forearms, wrists, and pressed between his hands. The inclusion of members of the Tiruvāvaṭuṯuṟai *maṭam* is likely due to the fact that the temple at Tirupperuntuṟai has long been under the administration of that institution.

The northern aisle is a short, but important, space of passage interrupted at its center by a large pavilion that houses a shrine to the tree under which Śiva sat when he received Māṇikkavācakar and gave him initiation (Figure 3). Today, this shrine is raised as a stone pavilion topped by a golden hip roof, similar in form to the famous *cit sabha* at Citamparam, where Māṇikkavācakar eventually merged into Śiva. Further suggestive of the Citamparam connnection is that the tree is here sculpted in the shape of a *liṅga*. Indeed, as the figures of the western aisle and this architectural form indicate, the program seems to highlight the link between the temples of Tirupperuntuṟai and Citamparam, prefiguring Māṇikkavācakar's apotheosis at Citambaram through the echo of iconic images and architectural forms.

Returning to the processional aisle, the figure positioned closest to the tree pavilion is the 17th head of the *ātīnam*, Ampalvāṇatēcikar (1888–1920).[9] He wears garlands of *rudrākṣa* beads around the crown of his head, neck and biceps, and holds a rosary of them between his palms. To the right of Ampalavāṇatēcikar stands one Śrīmat Kaṇṇappa Tampirāṉ. Kaṇṇappa wears similar attire, save for the crown of dreadlocks atop his head, adorned with a textile sash that falls from his proper

the 13th century (Dehejia 2002: 68). Branfoot suggests that at least the second pair date to the Nāyaka period (ca. 1550–1800) (Branfoot 2007: 201–202).

[8] I have relied on dates given in Madhavan 2002.

[9] The label reads: *17vatu mahāsannitānam, śrīlaśrī ampalvāṇatēcikar.* Cutler describes the presentation to Ampalavāṇatēcikar of a new *talapurāṇam* for this temple, composed by the famed Mīnākṣī Cuntaram Piḷḷai and recorded on palm leaf by his student U.Vē. Cāmināṭaiyar (Cutler 2003: 271–322).

right to left, adorned with a scrolling flower pattern that mirrors that of the cummerbund around his waist.[10] To his right, the first portrait figure of the northern aisle depicts a figure identified as a donor, perhaps the donor who renovated the tree pavilion,[11] and presumably the portrait statues that surround it. His name is given as Śrī Mu. Pe. Muttaiyā Ceṭṭiyār. Major renovation of both Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava temples by the Nāṭṭukōṭṭai Ceṭṭiyār community in the late 19th and early 20th centuries is well documented (Branfoot 2013; Branfoot 2019), and the portrait sculptures and pavilion for the tree may be assigned on the basis of style to this period.

The patronage of the Nāṭṭukōṭṭai Ceṭṭiyārs followed well established patterns of temple renovation by elites of the 16th and 17th centuries. The Tamil temple as we know it today, a huge complex built of successive enclosing walls around the central shrine, took shape in the 16th and 17th centuries. The expansion and renovations of that period were famously credited with portrait sculptures, a practice carried into the 19th and 20th centuries. Less esteemed by scholars are the painted portraits of donor figures. These figures are of interest not because they have been largely overlooked, but because they illuminate the sophisticated ways in which portraiture conveys both the uniqueness of the individual in historical time, as well as their participation in the continuously contemporary drama of ritual. Early modern portraits play with the tensions between figural representation, portrait and presence. In doing so, they allow for distinct readings, in which a viewer or a devotee might take the figure as a model of right conduct, an invitation to adopt

[10] Similarly, the pair's predecessors, stationed in the Śivānanda Manikkavācakar *sanniti* of the same temple, are dressed in distinguishing ways. The figure identified as *15th makā saṉṉitāṉam srilasri ambaḷavāṇatēcikar* stands nearer the shrine (just like the former Ampalavāṇatēcikar) and is similarly attired. He served as the head of the Tiruvavatuturai *maṭam* from 1845–1869. To the left, further from the shrine, stands one *srimat vaittiyanātan tampirāṉ kāṟupāṟu*. The title *kāṟupāṟu* indicate that he held a position of superintendent or manger. This figure, like the 20th-century *tampirāṉ*, wears a vaguely cone-shaped textile hat with a decorative border across the front.

[11] The inscription reads *Śrī Mu.Pe. Muttaiyā Ceṭṭiyār (kurunta mūlam tiruppaṇi*).

the position or attitude of devotion in one's own body; or the viewer may take them to be historical portraits, testifying to an act of pious generosity and deep connection to a site. In both readings, the historical figures are embedded in the site's mythic history.

Citamparam

To clarify what this means, let us return to the paintings at Citamparam with which we opened. The murals that adorn the goddess's temple within the famous temple compound at Citamparam are exemplary of the ways in which painted portraits inscribe their subjects into the history of the site, laying a deep claim that oscillates between perpetual, *purāṇic*, and lived temporalities. The shrine dedicated to the goddess Śivakāmasundari is a temple itself, east-facing, with sanctum, *maṇḍapa*, and *prākāra* walls surrounding it. The Goddess's shrine was probably constructed in the late 12th–early 13th century and renovated in the 17th.[12] The paintings adorn the ceiling of the *maṇḍapa*, which contains five aisles.[13] The north and south murals' narrative and textual content is not directly related to the goddess. Instead, the visual and narrative inscriptions relate the history of the sacred site and construction of the temple, as well as tales connected to major saints and incarnations of Śiva and Viṣṇu. The series concludes with the life story of Māṇikkavācakar, highlighting his initiation at Tirupperuntuṟai and his apotheosis at Citamparam.

These narratives are based on the site histories, *talapurāṇam*s, of the temple: on the north, the *Citampara Māhātmya*,[14] and on the south,

[12] These dates are proposed by Thomas in his excellent dissertation on Tamil-area murals. He proposes that the paintings belong to the moment of renovation, sponsored by the Araviḍu king, Sri Ranga, in 1643 A. D. However, there is, as we shall see, reason to consider the patronage of a *maṭam* (Thomas 1979: 310–311).

[13] While the north and south aisles are original, the central aisle bears modern painting and is hence excluded from consideration here.

[14] Younger writes that the *Citampara Māhātmya* was written in the 12th or 13th century in Sanskrit, probably in response to the influx of North Indian pilgrims

the Tamil-language *Citampara Purāṇam* and the life of the saint Māṇikkavācakar. The texts are reworked in the 18th-century murals: those associated with the *Māhātmya* give special attention to the construction and disposition of the buildings that comprise the temple, while those that depict episodes from the *Purāṇam* include extended representations of the *tīrtha*s associated with the temple.[15] While the *Māhātmya* was, according to Paul Younger, "clearly a guidebook written for the use of North Indian pilgrims," the *Purāṇam* was addressed to local audiences and the development of Śaiva Siddhānta philosophy (Younger 1995: 166).[16] Just as the narratives associated with the site, deity, and devotees were reframed over time to suit new motivations and audiences, so we find that the visual narratives are an interpretation that evinces their makers' keen appreciation of monastic presence and the importance of places associated with them.[17]

The *Citampara Purāṇam* was written in 1508 by Tirumalainātar, a member of the Tiruvāvaṭutuṟai *maṭam*. This is the same *maṭam* whose members are depicted in sculpture and Tirupperuntuṟai, and it is widely considered one of the most venerable, wealthy, and influential institutions that contributed substantially to the development of

to the site. Kulke, meanwhile, dates the text to the 11th century; see Younger 1995: 126. In the early 14th century, Umāpati Śivācārya, using the *Citampara Māhātmya* as the source text, wrote a Tamil version titled the *Kōyil Purāṇa* containing an account of Śaiva Siddhānta, which was relatively new at that time; see Younger 1995: 163; Smith 2004: 97.

[15] The text consulted is Tirumalainātar, *Citamparapurāṇam*, eds. Pē. Irāmaliṅka Piḷḷai and A. Taṅkavēlup Piḷḷai (Ceṉṉapaṭṭaṇam: Makālakṣūmi Vilāca Acciyantiracālai, 1905). The southmost aisle tells the story of Māṇikkavācakar, and is discussed in Smith 2004.

[16] David Smith's 2004 essay on the murals identifies the narratives and texts to which the murals relate, as well as the order of the narratives within the space of the ceiling. Smith finds that the murals should be read from south to north, as this is the orientation of the Śiva temple and would be in keeping with the *pradakṣina* order of viewing. However, from the narratological point of view, they should be read from the north.

[17] Although I use the term "monastic" to refer to members of *maṭams*, this is a slight (though not uncommon) misnomer, as members of these confraternal institutions could also be householders.

Tamil Śaiva Siddhānta.[18] Like many other *maṭam*s that survive to this day, the Tiruvāvaṭuturai *maṭam* emerges in the historical record only in the 16th century.[19] *Maṭam*s, or their members, were largely responsible for the composition of *talapurāṇam*s, and in the early modern period, were intimately involved in the administration of temples and their lands.[20] These institutions were thus equally important to the economic and political landscapes of early modern southern India as much as to their religious milieux. In the murals at Citamparam, in the midst of visual renditions of the texts that praise the deities, saints, and sanctity of the site, we find portrait images of members of a *maṭam*, as well as emphasis on a portion of the text that recommends patronage of those institutions (Smith 2004: 100). Here, the promotion of the institution and veneration of those associated with it is evident in the narrative and pictorial content of the murals.

The 6th and 7th chapters of the *purāṇam* describe the ten *tīrtha*s at Citamparam, the glory of places sacred to Śiva, and the *ānanda tāṇḍava*, Śiva's dance of bliss. These are depicted starting with the 13th extant register. The series begins with the gods and sages each worshipping a Śivaliṅga with a bowl of white flowers that they offer to the god.[21] Inscriptions below each scene identify the different deities performing *pūjā* (Figure 4). This series concludes with an image of Śiva and his consort seated on a mountain and talking to Viṣṇu, after which follows

[18] As Rafael Klöber puts it, the institution "is considerably the oldest, richest, and most influential Saivite centre in Tamil Nadu" (Klöber 2017: 194). See also Koppedrayer 1990; Yocum 1990.

[19] Today, the institution is known as an *ātīṉam*, which designates it as an institution that oversees individual *maṭam*s. However the term *ātīṉam,* according to Koppedrayer, emerges only in the early eighteenth century. Koppedrayer 1990: 5, 12–13.

[20] For discussion of the contexts for the composition of Tamil *talapurāṇam*s, see Shulman 1980; Ramesh 2020.

[21] The identity of the first figure is not clear, but he is followed by Patañjali, Brahmā, Kālī, Yama, Agni, Indra, Mahaviṣṇu, Candra, Śani, Sūrya, Vālmīki, and a few others who appear to be sages, though their identities are lost. The image depicting Indra is the only one that is specific about the site, with white elephants on the side of the *vimānam* indicating the temple at Madurai.

a passage in the *purāṇam* in which he tells Viṣṇu about the glory of places sacred to Śiva.[22] Accordingly, the next three registers depict deities, saints, and devotees offering flowers to Śiva in his many homes across the subcontinent, culminating on the left side with the temple at Tiruvāvaṭuṯuṟai, the home of the text's author, and site of the *maṭam* to which he belonged. There follows the large concluding panel that corresponds to the climax of the 7th chapter of the *purāṇam*, depicting Śiva's *ānanda tāṇḍava*, to which the figure of Ampalavāṇa (described in the introduction of this essay) bears witness (Figure 5).

Bracketing these scenes of sacred sites are portraits of figures associated with *maṭam*s. In the first register of deities worshiping Śivaliṅgas, a trio of human figures frame the scene of Patañjali worshipping Śiva and the goddess (second from the left in Figure 3). Although the inscriptions are damaged, it is possible to make out the name of Aruṇācala Tampiraṉ Avarkaḷ below the figure standing behind Patañjali, his hands raised in reverence. Like the portrait sculptures we have already encountered at Tirupperuntuṟai, he wears an ochre *vēṣṭi*, *rudrākṣa*s around his neck, and a ring of *rudrākṣa*s around the crown of his head, indicated by the beads visible at the back of his head. His face betrays the stubble of his beard, a mark of humanity never seen on the gods, nor even on bearded semi-divine beings. On the other side of the shrine, a priest stands on the plinth and offers *prasādam* to a figure who stands below. Although the mural is severely damaged, obliterating most of the detail and inscription, the still extant elements of the costume of this figure, his fine *vēṣṭi* and cummerbund, are plainly discernible and consonant with other *maṭam*-affiliated figures.

The climactic scene of Śiva performing the *ānanda tāṇḍava*, is very large, taking the space of two or three normal registers (Figure 4). On the left of the scene is the shrine of Mūlattāṉīśvara, the *liṅga* of Śiva worshiped at Citamparam, while the goddess stands on the right. Beside this is the exceptional portrait of Ampalavāṇa, described at the outset of this essay.

[22] The worship of Śiva by Viṣṇu is described in verse 116 of Chapter 7.

The figure of Ampalavāṇa is by far the largest in the entire mural cycle. In a style of painting in which size conveys importance, this figure towers over gods and men alike. Who is this important figure, and why is he so prominently depicted here? The answer may lie in another inscription in the murals that mentions one Ampalavāṇa Tampirāṉ: it is associated with an image of the construction of the temple itself and records his donation.[23] *Tampirāṉ* is a title that can indicate an overseer of monks; at least in the context of the Tiruvāvaṭuturai *maṭam* it also appears to be a more general term for ascetics who have been fully initiated.[24] Although the temple at Citamparam is today closely associated with royal sponsorship—and indeed its medieval *talapurāṇa* identifies its foundation with royal patronage—it has never exclusively served political interests. In fact, its royal association appears to have begun long after its development as a cult center. The temple is famously run not by a *maṭam*, *ātīnam*, or even the government, but by a group of Brahmin priests known as *dīkṣitar*s. The prominent depiction of figures who appear to be associated with a non-brahmin *maṭam* is all the more striking for this fact; however, inscriptions at the temple attest to substantial patronage by various *maṭam*s (Younger 1995: 156, note 65). While the *Citampara Māhātmya* describes the foundation of the temple under the mythic king Hiraṇyavarma, who is said to have brought the *dīkṣitar*s with him to the temple, the mural that depicts the construction of the temple labels it as the *tiruppaṇi* (good or pious work associated with temple service or building and repairing the temple) of Ampalavāṇa Tampirāṉ.[25] The inscription is unclear as to whether

[23] The inscription reads *am[p]alavāṇa tampirā avakal tirupani* [*sic*].

[24] Kamil Zvelebil 1994: 1753. Yocum defines the term as "one who-has been granted full discipleship by the head of the Mutt" (Yocum 1990: 249), while Klöber defines it as "members of the Adhinam's ascetic brotherhood." Klöber elaborates that initiation "is restricted to male aspirants of a particular social background, namely from four different Saiva Vellala groups (veḷḷāḷar) and one Chettiyar community (ceṭṭiyār)" (Klöber 2017: 194).

[25] The earliest reference to a *maṭam* at Citamparam is dated 1234 (*ARE* 1958–1959, 305). Over the next twenty years, three more are mentioned in inscriptions. But it is

the murals or the temple renovation are the gift of the Tampirāṉ. It is thus tempting to identify Ampalavāṇa Tampirāṉ, credited for his *tiruppaṇi*, with the Ampalavāṇa who stands in devoted attendance on Śiva as Naṭarāja and Mūlattānīśvara.

The register that follows the *ānanda tāṇḍava* provides a coda to this scene (Figure 6). On the right, two large figures are labeled; they are attended by a smaller figure on the far right, and all of them face with reverence a non-Brahmin figure who distributes flowers, likely as *prasādam*. This non-Brahmin priestly figure wears a large hoop earring, a cloth passed over his chest, and a green length of cloth over a long white *vēṣṭi*. The two figures to whom he gives flowers are larger in scale. The first wears the same crown, necklace, and rosary of *rudrākṣa* beads that we observed previously. His body is marked by sacred ash, and he wears a finely decorated length of cloth around his waist and over his ochre *vēṣṭi*. An inscription to his right identifies him with the title *piḷḷai*,

in the post-Vijayanagara period that *maṭams* become central to the running of institutions. It has not been possible at this time to trace the history of *tampirāṉ*s or *maṭam*s associated with the temple at Citamparam. This is research that would shine an important light on not only matters of patronage, but networks of scholarship, pilgrimage, and economic flows between institutions and regions. However, it is noteworthy that the founder of the Tiruvavaṭuturai *maṭam*, Namaccivaya, lived at Citamparam, and is attested in inscription as the serving superintendent at that temple when the Vijayanagara king provided food for Śaiva ascetics (ARE 1913, no. 346; see Koppedrayer 1990: 142–144). Koppedrayer further notes that at the time of her research, the personal *liṅga* of Umāpati (see note 14, above) was believed to be housed at Tiruvavaṭuturai, again providing an important link between the two sites (143). Also suggestive of the Tiruvavaṭuturai connection is that the name Ampalavāṇa is common in the history of heads of the Tiruvāvaṭuṭurai *maṭam*, but not, it would appear, of other prominent *maṭam*s, according to the data compiled by Madhavan (2002). Were one to connect the patronage of the mural paintings to Tiruvāvaṭuṭurai, the head of the *ātīṉam* from 1770–1789 was one Ampalavāṇa Tēcikar (Madhavan 2002: 195). This would preclude credit for the 17th-century renovation of the goddess temple. However, it would accord with the timing of the return of the image of Nāṭarāja, which had travelled to Tiruvārūr for safekeeping during a period of intense political turmoil, and returned to Citamparam in 1773 (Younger 1995: 146). This moment marked a return to normalcy after a period of disruption and even military occupation of the temple, and would likely have occasioned acts of renewal such as re/painting of sacred spaces.

a title commonly used for non-Brahmin *maṭam*-members. The figure next to him wears a white turban and cummerbund over a very fine diaphanous *vēṣṭi*. The label inscription to his right is illegible. Water damage has also removed most of the inscriptions; however, the words that remain legible suggest that the label is historical rather than *purāṇic* in content. It seems to quote one Ampalavāṇa (*kuṟa ampalavāṉa*[26]), and mentions donations of food (*aṉṉadāṉa*) and the goddess's temple (*ammankovil*).

The next scene, reading from right to left, shows two figures praising Śiva as Nandikeśvara, accompanied by the goddess as his consort. Both of the portrait figures wear ochre *vēṣṭi*s and the ash of Śaiva devotees on their bodies. The first, whose name begins with Aru- and is identified as *tampirāṉ*, wears only a golden hoop in his ear and a long *rudrākṣa mālā* around his neck. His large belly hangs over his ochre cummerband and short *vēṣṭi*. The second figure, to the left, is older: his long white mustache and beard fall down to his chest, obscuring his *rudrākṣa* necklaces. He wears an ochre turban, *vēṣṭi*, and cummerbund over his slim frame. An inscription below identifies him as Muttukumāra *tampirāṉ*.

All of these portrait figures are stylistically differentiated from figures who are part of the *purāṇic* narrative: their eyes are small, their proportions are human. In contrast to the image of Nandikeśvara, for instance, the kneecaps and musculature of the human figures are naturalistic compared to the perfectly circular kneecaps and red highlights of the god's limbs. The faces of the portrait figures are not only more individualized, they are more life-like. The artist has taken pains, for instance, to delineate the folds of the ear, in variance with the simplistic two tones of Śiva's ears in Figure 6. So, too, are human bodies more naturalistic in their diversity: short or tall, thin or pot-bellied. Indeed, once identified, it is starkly apparent how different in scale, proportion,

[26] I have transliterated the name throughout this essay as Ampalavāṇa. However, it is sometimes written in the murals as Ampalavāṉa; it is not uncommon for the inscription to eschew retroflex letters.

detail, and naturalism the portrait images are from the highly idealized bodies of even the human figures of the *purāṇic* narrative.

Despite being stylistically distinguished form the figures of the *purāṇam*, however, the portrait figures nevertheless participate in the *purāṇic* narrative and scenes of adoration. One cannot mistake the fact that Ampalavāṇa is present for the vision of Śiva's cosmic dance. Nor can there be any doubt that the figures observing Patañjali's *pūjā* attend the scene, inscribed into presence through both text and image, and receiving *prasādam*. Though it could be argued that the portrait figures merely imagine the scene, as a devotional practice or religious experience, the presence of God is a reality for those who experience it. Moreover, as David Shulman has shown, imagination and reality were understood in early modern southern India to be interlinked. As Shulman writes, "seeing is believing (the Tamil commentary glosses this interactive process as *nampikai*, 'belief,' made possible by the imagination). But true seeing is not the trivial business of looking at an external object; it is, rather, a matter of co-imagining" (Shulman 2012: 187). Here, perhaps we are witness to imagination, even implicated in it, as we are invited into just such a "co-imagination" of the divine presence. The historical figures enjoin their viewers to experience the same vision of devotion, even as they simultaneously assert their own presence at the divine dance of Śiva. This duality is suggested formally, too, through the frame that separates the historical individual from the divine moment, human participant from gods and demigods.

There is one more attribute of the paintings that, to my mind, secures their status as both portrait and participant in the narrative: The color green, which serves as the background for the portrait figures, bridges the ontological and chronological distance between history and *purāṇam*, individual and exemplar.

Of the seven portrait figures identified through inscriptions in these eleven registers from the *tīrtha*s to the dance of Śiva, five of them are depicted against a mint green background. Throughout the entire mural cycle, green is reserved as a background color for historical portraits or for narrative figures undergoing transformation. Although green is

used to color trees or clothing, nowhere is it used as a background color except in exceptional moments. We find a green background where Hiraṇyavarmaṉ is cured of leprosy when he bathes in the temple tank at Citamparam; it highlights Māṇikkavācakar when he merges with Śiva within the sanctum at Citamparam. In other moments, it is used to mark portrait figures, as we have seen. In the *purāṇic* narratives, a green background indicates a transformational state; in portraits it similarly signals an ontological instability, an image that is both portrait of the historical person and representation of one who participates in *purāṇic* events.

Portrait Green

The convention of painting portraits against a mint-green background is best known from the work produced at the imperial Mughal court, beginning with Akbar (r. 1556–1605) and continuing under his successors, Jahangir and Shah Jahan.[27] The convention may be observed across Mughal-inspired portraiture well into the 19th century; it features in portraits produced in Rajasthan, the Punjab, and the Pahari states; it was also a convention in Deccani and southern courts. In fact, when one starts to look, the use of green pigment in portraiture is everywhere, sometimes as the background color, sometimes in a bit of architecture behind the sitter's torso, sometimes as a touch of green within a golden nimbus around the head. Although there are portraits at all times and places that do not make use of green background, there is no portrait in which green is used wherein it does not depict someone of importance. The use of green behind the head of the subject is undeniably a sign of rank or status. In the 18th-century mural portraits of southeastern India, we find it used for figures that are not merely portraits—already a mark of distinction and honor—but which occupy two different ontological spaces, that of myth and that of history. I have argued elsewhere that this ontological ambivalence allows the figures to occupy both places

[27] A full investigation of the development of this convention is needed, but is beyond the scope of this essay.

at once (Seastrand 2022). Implicit in this argument is that artists and viewers of the 18th century recognized those two kinds of time to be distinct enough to require the figure who bridges that difference to be visually marked.

The use of green pigment for portraits is most evident in the murals produced for the Cētupati court at Rāmanātapuram (ca. 18th c. with later additions). These paintings take up erotic and courtly themes, as well as what we might term historical scenes, including battles, *durbār*s, and worship at famous temples. In many of these we find that a green background distinguishes the royal figure (Figure 7). Sometimes the entire background is green, and sometimes only the frame around the king—which may be an architectural detail, a decorative item such as a pillow, or simply a free form representation. We find green as the background when the king watches dance or listens to music; it is the highlight behind the king embracing his beloved; and it identifies the king who shoots lotus-bud arrows from a sugarcane bow in the guise of Kāma, the god of love. It is the color that distinguishes the king as he transacts with both the tutelary Goddess, Rājarājēśvari, and with Rāma, the paradigmatic god and king, to whom the Cētupatis trace their right to rule. Green is used to denote the king, his family, and intimates in scenes of royal audience or in worship of a deity.

The convention of portrait green could be understood as part of the cosmopolitanism of the Nāyaka milieu. As Nagaswamy has shown, paintings at the Rāmaliṅka Vilācam (the audience hall at the Cētupati palace) show a great interest in the exotic, including styles and designs of the Deccani and Mughal courts, as well as those of Europe (Nakacami 1986). But the green color does something much more interesting: it distinguishes figures who are not only important, but whose reality as historical figures, as specific individuals, is no less important than their transcendence of a single moment as exemplar: exemplary king, lover, and devotee. This is as true for the paintings in the palace at Rāmanātapuram as it is for those in the temple at Citamparam; court or temple context seems to make no difference to the formal language of painting.

The use of green pigment in South Asian portraiture may have emerged out of Mughal conventions, but certainly accompanied an interest in representation itself that we can observe in both literary and visual arts of the period across the subcontinent. While the conventions of portraiture, such as the strictly profile presentation, physiognomic mimetic fidelity, and the use of green background are shared with North Indian and Deccani painting, the artistic and intellectual context of early modern South India made these innovations appealing and led to their adaptations and integrations in southeast Indian murals.

Conclusion

Studies of premodern art and architecture tend to privilege royal benefactors, whose names become the basis for periodization, and whose benefaction is often assumed for both architectural and artistic activities. However, an account that considers the authorship of Tamil *talapurāṇam*s and their visual depiction help us to see materially the ways in which we know historically that *maṭam*s came to play a central role in the religious, economic, and political lives of temples, their patrons, and constituents.

The sculptures of Tirupperuntuṟai indicate the preeminence of figures associated with the Tiruvāvaṭuturai *maṭam* and suggest a link between the three centers of Śaiva devotion: Tirupperuntuṟai, Tiruvāvaṭuturai, and Citamparam. That these figures appear alongside portrait sculptures of Ceṭṭiyār donor-renovators of the temple suggests that what was a long-standing association of the *maṭam* with the temple received new impetus with Ceṭṭiyār largesse. Such donation draws on tradition that triangulates political or economic power, temple administrators, and temple donations. Indeed, murals elsewhere in the temple picture the 18th-century Arantāṅki Toṇṭaimān kings alongside temple officials (Seastrand: forthcoming); the 17th- and 18th-century copper plate inscriptions of the Cētupati kings record donations to the Tiruvāvaṭuturai *maṭam* for the benefit of the temple at Tirupperuntuṟai (Iracu 1994: 296–300, for example). The figural sculpture produced by the 19th-century renovations at Tirupperuntuṟai,

including not only the portrait sculptures but the hip-roofed platform over the tree sculpted in the shape of a *liṅga* that commemorates the initiation of Māṇikkavācakar, links Tirupperuntuṟai to Citamparam.

The Citamparam murals similarly elevate members of a *maṭam* through inscriptions and portraiture, especially in the depiction of the Citamparam Purāṇam, composed by a member of the Tiruvāvaṭuturai *maṭam*. Noteworthy is the fact that the pictorial *talapurāṇam* begins on the north side with portraits and an inscription of *tirupaṇi* attributed to Ambalavāṇa in a painting that shows the construction of the temple, and that the same figure appears named in a portrait at the culminating image of the *talapurāṇam*, the dance of Śiva. The chapters that promote individual temples and donation to monastic institutions, meanwhile, depict the most of portraits. The concluding narrative brings us back full circle to the life story of Māṇikkavācakar.

The use of the color green as a background for portrait images and moments of transition, as when Māṇikkavācakar is absorbed into the Śiva *liṅga*, is emblematic of the ways in which early modern concerns are taken up in distinctive ways in southeastern India. As in other courtly traditions of portraiture, it signals that the subject is, indeed, a portrait, and is accorded honor. In addition to these transregional and trans-stylistic meanings, the use of green background appears in murals to signal transformation, or the occupation of two ontological grounds: that of historical fact, and that of perpetual presence in mythic narrative.

A conventional reading of the inscriptions and portraits examined in this essay discloses facts of dates and names that studies of art and architecture offer the historian. Paintings and sculptures produced in the 16th through 18th centuries in southeastern India also offer a fascinating record of thinking about the ontology of images, the relationship between representation and reality, and between imagination and the worlds of action and experience. While the particular ways in which these problems are articulated and developed may be unique, they are also, importantly, engaged with transregional concerns, styles, and conventions. Portraits invite us into an imaginative space of presence, not only of the figure depicted, but of the reality of the representation, both historical and *purāṇic*.

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Figure 1. Portrait of Ampalavāṇa, Śivakāmasundari Shrine, Citamparam. Photo by author with permission, 2011.

Figure 2. West processional aisle, first *prākāra*, Atmanātacuvami Shrine, Tirupperuntuṟai. Photo by author with permission, 2015.

Figure 3. North processional aisle, first *prākāra*, Atmanātacuvami Shrine, Tirupperuntuṟai. Note tree pavilion on the left, and portrait images (from left to right) of Ampalvāṇatēcikar, Kaṇṇappa Tampirāṉ, and Muttaiyā Ceṭṭiyār. Photo by author with permission, 2015.

Figure 4. The gods worship Śiva, Śivakāmasundari Shrine, Citamparam. Photo by author with permission, 2011.

Figure 5. Śiva dances the *ānanda tāṇḍava* at Tillai, Śivakāmasundari Shrine, Citamparam. Photo by author with permission, 2011.

Figure 6. Portraits of *tampirāṉ*s and others in worship of Nandikēśvara, Śivakāmasundari Shrine, Citamparam. Photo by author with permission, 2011.

Figure 7. Portraits of the king of Rāmanātapuram, Rāmaliṅka Vilācam (Ramalinga Vilasam), Rāmanātapuram. Photos by author with permission, 2010.