

# Manifestation of Traditional Techniques and Material Adaptations in Indian Contemporary Tanjore Painting

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## Abstract

Tanjore painting, one of South India's most cherished classical art forms, is celebrated for its intricate relief work, vibrant natural colours, and opulent gold embellishments. More than just visual splendour, the tradition carries deep spiritual and cultural significance. In today's rapidly evolving artistic landscape, contemporary artists face the challenge of maintaining its authenticity while negotiating practical constraints, changing patron demands, and global exposure.

The research draws upon interviews with four experienced Tanjore artists Swarna Raja Kochi, Ushaa Kannan, Mythili Ganesh, and Kanimozhi Santhanam to examine how traditional techniques are preserved, adapted, and taught. The study reveals that while certain material adaptations may be necessitated by modern circumstances, the spiritual core and rigorous methodology remain fiercely protected by practitioners who view themselves not merely as artists but as cultural custodians.

**Keywords:** Cultural preservation, Gold foil, Kanimozhi Santhanam, Mythili Ganesh, Spiritual art, Swarna Raja Kochi, Ushaa Kannan, Tanjore painting, Traditional technique

## Introduction

Tanjore painting, originating in the 16th century under the patronage of the Nayak and later Maratha rulers of South India, is a distinct genre known for its sacred themes, rich visual vocabulary, and meticulous technique. Traditionally practised by temple artists and later court painters, the form integrates devotion and aesthetics through its gilded surfaces, natural pigments, and layered relief structures.

Today, the global art market, digital art spaces, and evolving aesthetic sensibilities challenge the boundaries of traditional forms like Tanjore. While mass production and synthetic shortcuts threaten its authenticity, many artists remain steadfast in their use of traditional materials such as tamarind paste, chalk powder, and 22-carat gold leaf. This paper investigates the philosophies and practices of four such artists who continue to protect and pass on the sacred legacy of Tanjore painting.

This devotional focus is exemplified in Figure 1, which portrays Shiva and his family rendered in vibrant pigments, precise iconography, and symmetrical balance.



**Figure 1. Shiva and his Family, Mythili Ganesh**

### **Evolution of Tanjore Paintings**

Tanjore painting, known for its visual richness and spiritual depth, originated in the culturally vibrant region of South India. The roots of this classical art form can be traced back to the late phases of the Vijayanagar Empire (14th–16th centuries), whose patronage of temple art and architecture laid a strong foundation for many regional styles. (Chaitanya) The fall of the Vijayanagar Empire in the Battle of Talikota (1565 CE) led to the emergence of smaller kingdoms, among which the Nayaka dynasty of Thanjavur became a critical force in nurturing artistic expression. It was during their reign that the groundwork of Tanjore painting was solidified.

The Nayakas, originally vassals of the Vijayanagar rulers, inherited and further developed a rich visual language. They introduced elements of mural traditions, emphasizing religious narratives, iconographic detail, and bold colour usage. Murals adorned temple walls in and around Tamil Nadu, portraying episodes from the epics such as Ramayana and Mahabharata as well as devotional themes involving deities such as Shiva, Vishnu, and various forms of Devi. This mural tradition, heavily inspired by Bhakti movements, eventually transitioned into portable wooden panel paintings that could be installed in private homes, thereby domesticating sacred imagery (Thapar).

The Maratha conquest of Thanjavur in the late 17th century marked a significant turning point in the development of this art. (Mitter) Under the rule of the Bhonsle dynasty, particularly during the enlightened reign of Serfoji II (1798–1832), Tanjore painting witnessed its golden age. The Marathas were prolific patrons who institutionalized the art form by establishing ateliers and workshops within palace premises. (Krishna) The expanded narrative capacity of Tanjore painting, particularly during Maratha period, is illustrated in Figure 2, where Lord Krishna is surrounded by devotees, capturing both devotional intimacy and compositional grandeur. A cosmopolitan openness also emerged, with Christian themes such as the Madonna and Child painted in Tanjore style for colonial patrons. This adaptability without the loss of devotional intent helped the art form appeal to both religious and secular audiences. (Dahejia)

Despite colonial disruptions in the 19th century, Tanjore painting persisted through the resilience of artisan communities, especially the Rajus and Naidus of Thanjavur and Tiruchirappalli. These families passed down skills through generations, sustaining the purity of form while accommodating economic and cultural shifts.

In essence, Tanjore painting is not just a product of a singular dynasty or religion it is a layered outcome of centuries of interaction between royal patronage, religious fervour, regional artisanship, and evolving cultural values.

### The Philosophy of Technique and Material Integrity

For traditional artists, technique is not merely a set of steps but a sacred discipline. Each element from the wooden base preparation to the application of gold foil has cultural and symbolic resonance. (Chaitanya) Swarna Raja Kochi, a pioneer of structured online training for Tanjore painting, emphasises the importance of adherence to original methods. (Kochi) She refuses to compromise on materials even when facing longer timelines or market pressures. For her, painting is 90% a spiritual process and only 10% technique.

### Challenges in Sourcing and Sustaining Traditional Materials

Every stage of the painting process is steeped in centuries-old practice, blending physical craftsmanship with devotional discipline. While modern tools and commercial demands have led to adaptations, many traditional artists still adhere to authentic methods, believing that the sanctity and aesthetic power of the painting derive from its process as much as its iconography.

The process begins with the preparation of the base, which traditionally involved using a plank of jackfruit or teak wood. In modern times, waterproof plywood has become the standard, balancing durability with availability. Over this, a fine piece of muslin or mulmul cotton is tightly affixed using a mixture of natural adhesives originally tamarind seed paste, though Fevicol is more common today. This layer acts as a stabilizing membrane, giving the surface texture and strength.

While spiritual commitment remains strong among traditional artists, material challenges are increasing. Jackfruit wood, historically used as a base, is now rare and expensive, prompting many to shift to waterproof plywood. Swarna Raja still uses cotton cloth and lime plaster layered on this modern substitute to stay as close to tradition as possible.

Ushaa Kannan, who runs a gallery and teaching institution in Tanjore, also highlights the importance of termite-proofing and material preservation techniques such as the use of iron oxide. (Kannan) She notes a rising difficulty in acquiring authentic materials but remains committed to traditional sourcing, personally overseeing all gold foil applications to ensure quality. Figure 3 demonstrates the gesso technique and gold foil application in progress. Artist Ushaa Kannan's approach retains the meticulous techniques that gives the paintings their sculptural depth.



Figure 2. Lord Krishna and Radha, Usha Kannan

Mythili Ganesh sources all her materials from Chennai-based suppliers she trusts and has trained herself to adapt only where absolutely necessary. (Ganesh) Poster colours, which she uses for their richness and traditional effect, are applied with hand shading techniques, avoiding modern tools like spray guns.

### Symbolism and Composition

At the heart of every Tanjore painting lies the central figure usually a deity positioned in symmetrical alignment within a decorative frame or mandapa (arched shrine-like structure). This mandapa is often flanked by pillars, floral patterns, or celestial beings, signifying the sanctity of the space. The symmetry is not merely aesthetic but metaphysical: it represents order, harmony, and the cosmic balance upheld by the divine.

The central figure is always larger than the surrounding elements, highlighting its importance. The size hierarchy serves a didactic function, drawing the viewer's attention to the deity's presence and encouraging meditative focus. This compositional clarity where every element exists to enhance the divine subject distinguishes Tanjore painting from more narrative-driven styles like Pattachitra or Mughal miniature painting. The compositional centrality and symmetry discussed above are clearly seen in Figure 4, where Saraswati is seated in a richly adorned mandapa, symbolising intellectual and artistic enlightenment.



**Figure 3. Saraswati's Blessings, Mythili Ganesh**

Gold is a foundational material in both the physical and symbolic composition. It is not used merely for visual effect but for its connotations of divinity, purity, and immortality. Gold covers crowns, jewellery, thrones, and often entire background halos or archways. The shimmering effect produced by burnished 22-carat gold foil underlines the sacred aura of the subject, suggesting a divine light that radiates outward. Figure 3 demonstrates the gesso technique and gold foil application in progress. Artist Usha Kannan's approach retains the meticulous layering that gives Tanjore paintings their sculptural depth.

The arch or mandapa that surrounds the central figure is also rich in symbolism. Its stylized floral carvings, scrolling vines, and jewel-like accents are inspired by temple architecture, echoing the sanctum sanctorum (garbhagriha) of South Indian temples. (Dallapicolla) In this way, the painting becomes a portable shrine, a visual aniconic sanctum meant for spiritual reflection and ritual placement.

Beyond the main figure and shrine, many Tanjore paintings include additional symbolic elements. Peacocks common in depictions of Murugan or Saraswati symbolise beauty, divine song, and vigilance. Elephants connote strength and royal guardianship. The lotus, often painted beneath the feet of the deity

or in border motifs, signifies purity and spiritual awakening. These symbols enrich the visual language of the painting, offering layers of meaning for the viewer to interpret.

Colour symbolism also plays a critical role. The use of deep reds, greens, and blues for backgrounds is not arbitrary. Red symbolises passion and energy, green reflects fertility and harmony, and blue denotes spiritual depth and detachment. Each deity's traditional colour palette is carefully maintained by experienced artists to preserve iconographic authenticity and emotional tone.

Another defining feature of Tanjore composition is the gaze of the deity. (Srinavasan) The eyes are deliberately large, expressive, and often painted last in a ritualistic act known as "netra darshan." As described by traditional artists, this is the moment when the painting is spiritually "awakened." The eyes are painted in such a way that they seem to follow the viewer from any angle a technique meant to establish a living connection between the divine figure and the devotee.

Facial expressions in Tanjore painting are typically serene, evoking a sense of divine tranquillity. The slight smile, almond-shaped eyes, and gentle tilt of the head are carefully rendered to inspire devotion, peace, and reverence. Unlike expressive narrative art forms, Tanjore painting uses stillness and centeredness to suggest inner spiritual strength.

Borders and backgrounds are equally important. Elaborate floral borders, geometric bands, or repetitive iconographic motifs frame the main image, adding rhythm and completeness to the visual structure. These borders not only balance the composition but also evoke the decorative elegance of temple murals and royal manuscripts.

### **The Role of Spirituality and Discipline**

One of the most striking themes unifying the perspectives of all four interviewed artists Swarna Raja Kochi, Mythili Ganesh, Kanimozhi Santhanam, and Ushaa Kannan is their unwavering emphasis on the spiritual dimension of Tanjore painting. While each artist brings a unique style and background to the tradition, all agree that true Tanjore painting is inseparable from devotional intent.

Mythili Ganesh, a contemporary practitioner with over 25 years of experience, insists that spiritual preparation is essential before beginning any painting. She paints only when her mind is calm and focused, often taking a ritual bath and chanting slokas dedicated to the deity she is portraying. (Ganesh) For her, the act of painting becomes a form of prayer. She places great emphasis on the eyes of the deity, which she considers the spiritual anchor of the entire artwork. According to Mythili, the eyes must not only be technically perfect but must also embody a sense of presence, so much so that they appear to look at the viewer from every angle, creating a continuous visual and spiritual connection.

Kanimozhi Santhanam, a traditionally trained artist from Tamil Nadu, echoes similar sentiments. She describes Tanjore painting as a meditative act, one that is both artistic and spiritual. (Santhanam) She begins each work only after a period of mental and physical preparation, emphasising that every line and application of gold leaf is part of a sacred ritual. For Kanimozhi, this process is not just about creating art it is about invoking divine energy. She passes on this philosophy to her students, encouraging them to approach the art not simply as a craft to be mastered but as a form of devotion that requires inner discipline. As shown in Figure 5, Kanimozhi's portrayal of Saraswati reflects not just iconographic correctness but devotional serenity, emphasized through expressive eyes and soft facial gestures.





**Figure 4. Painting of Goddess Saraswati, Kanimozhi Santhanam**

Swarna Raja Kochi, who has over three decades of experience and a global network of students, strongly believes that spirituality is the foundation of Tanjore painting. She often says that 90% of the work is spiritual and only 10% is technical. Swarna emphasises that without a devotional mindset, the process of creating a Tanjore painting becomes purely ornamental and loses its sanctity. In her classes and workshops, she teaches that each painting is not just a visual product but a spiritual vessel one that should transmit peace, beauty, and divine presence to the space it inhabits. (Kochi) Figure 6 presents artist Swarna Raja Kochi with one of her devotional compositions, a Rama panel, representing her commitment to spiritual energy over aesthetic experimentation.

Ushaa Kannan, known for her expertise in both Tanjore and glass painting, shares that she avoids commercial shortcuts specifically to preserve the spiritual energy of her work. She views every element of the painting from gesso work to the selection of gemstones as part of a sacred dialogue with the divine. (Kannan) For Ushaa, the longevity of the painting is symbolic of the enduring spiritual energy it carries.



**Figure 5. Artist Swarna Raja Kochi with her Painting of Shri Rama**

### Teaching, Transmission, and Public Awareness

The preservation of Tanjore painting in the modern world depends not only on the dedication of individual artists but on the strength of collective systems education, institutional support, community awareness, and cultural policy. As an art form deeply rooted in tradition and spirituality, its survival hinges on how well these support structures can balance heritage preservation with the realities of contemporary practice. Education is arguably the most powerful tool in safeguarding Tanjore painting's authenticity. Traditionally, this knowledge was passed through the guru-shishya parampara (teacher-disciple tradition), where apprentices would train under master artists for years before producing their own works. This model ensured not just technical proficiency but also a deep internalisation of the values, symbolism, and rituals associated with the art. Today, this model survives in more structured formats through workshops, certificate programs, and private studio classes led by established artists.



**Figure 6. Usha Kannan applying Gold Foil on her Painting**

Usha Kannan, with over two decades of experience, shared how she trains her students in the traditional method. “I don’t teach shortcuts. First, I show them how to prepare the board, how to mix the gesso, how to place the stones. Only when they respect the process can they call it a true Tanjore painting.” Her teaching includes not just technique but mindset insisting on patience, precision, and ritual discipline. Her students are taught to treat the painting space like a sanctum, to maintain purity, and to avoid haste. This ethos creates artists who see themselves as custodians of a sacred practice rather than producers of an object. In Figure 7, Usha Kannan can be seen mid-process working on a Sri Balaji panel, an image that captures both the technical and devotional dimensions of her teaching philosophy.

In addition to private mentorship, institutions and cultural bodies have also taken steps to preserve and promote the tradition. Government-sponsored programs such as the Development Commissioner for Handicrafts (DCH) under the Ministry of Textiles have supported Tanjore painters through recognition, workshops, and artisan fairs. State-run craft museums and heritage festivals provide platforms for live demonstrations and artist interactions, helping to bridge the gap between creators and audiences.



**Figure 7. Artist Swarna Raja Kochi with her Painting**

Several universities and fine arts colleges in South India have introduced modules on Tanjore painting, exposing art students to classical techniques. While not all graduates go on to become traditional practitioners, this exposure increases appreciation and scholarly engagement with the form. More recently, digital platforms and social media have enabled wider reach. Artists now teach online, share process videos, and build communities of learners and admirers from across the globe.

All four artists are deeply involved in education. Swarna Raja runs the Academy of Traditional Art and has taught students from 17 countries. (Kochi) She insists on teaching the traditional method without dilution and has developed structured curricula to preserve the sacred process. Figure 8 shows Swarna Raja Kochi, whose global student base and detailed instruction modules demonstrate how traditional techniques are being taught rigorously across modern platforms.

Kanimozhi, though working on a smaller scale, mentors' students with a strong emphasis on traditional technique. (Santhanam) Mythili, who has completed thousands of paintings, believes that students must understand the spiritual value of what they create. (Ganesh) Even Ushaa Kannan, running a commercial studio, keeps the sacred aspects intact and teaches with the same philosophy. (Kannan).

### **Innovation and Boundaries of Adaptation**

While fiercely protective of tradition, these artists recognise the need for contextual adaptation. Ushaa and Swarna both mentioned taking commissions that include non-Hindu deities like Mary and Jesus, provided



they retain spiritual resonance. Kanimozhi has accepted family portraits in Tanjore style but integrates sacred symbolism to maintain the essence. (Santhanam)

None of the artists are interested in trends that prioritise speed or aesthetics over depth. (Zehra) They resist commercial dilution by refusing bulk orders or fast timelines, emphasising that true Tanjore painting takes time, patience, and reverence. As visible in Figure 9, even as Swarna Raja accepts commissions with broader themes, she maintains adherence to sacred symbolism and structured discipline of the Tanjore tradition.



**Figure 8. Artist Swarna Raja Kochi Showcasing her Work**

## Conclusion

Tanjore painting continues to thrive through the dedication of artists who uphold its sanctity. Based on the field interviews conducted with Mrs. Swarna Raja Kochi, Mrs. Usha Kannan, Mrs. Mythili Ganesh and Mrs. Kanimozhi Santhanam, this research has revealed clear, consistent patterns in how contemporary artists balance the preservation of traditional techniques with the demands of modern practice. In a time of rapid aesthetic shifts and commodification, these practitioners act as both creators and cultural guardians. Their resistance to material shortcuts, commitment to spiritual practice, and efforts in education ensure that Tanjore painting remains a living, breathing tradition.

The continuity of this sacred art depends not just on technique but on intention. These artists unanimously reject commercial shortcuts like synthetic foils, acrylic paints, or POP. For them, authenticity lies not just in visual style but in spiritual intention behind each step. The ritual act of painting the deity's eyes, often performed with chanting, reflects the deep integration of devotion with technique.

At the same time, the study highlights a few practical adaptations. Jackfruit wood, once standard, is now replaced with waterproof plywood, and in some cases, poster colours are used, however, always applied using traditional methods. These changes are made with care, ensuring the spiritual and visual essence of the painting is preserved.

By staying rooted in tradition while adapting mindfully, these artists serve as cultural custodians, ensuring Tanjore painting remains both timeless and relevant.

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