22.6: The Nayak Dynasty

Nayak Architecture

The Nayak reign in South India was renowned for its unique style of temple architecture.

Learning Objectives

Describe the temple architecture of the Nayak Dynasty

Key Takeaways

Key Points

- The Nayak dynasties emerged in South India after the downfall of the Vijayanagar Empire in 1565, when the Nayak military governors declared independence; they then ruled from the 16th to 18th century.

- Nayak rule was noted for its administrative reforms, its artistic and cultural achievements, and the creation of a unique style of temple architecture. Nayak architectural style was characterized by elaborate hundred- and thousand-pillared mandapas (outdoor temple halls), the high gopurams (towers) with painted stucco statues on the surface, and long corridors.

- Nayak civic architecture combines Dravidian and Islamic styles, as exemplified by the palace erected by King Thirumalai Nayak of the Madurai Nayak dynasty in 1636 CE.

Key Terms

- Dravidian: An architectural idiom that emerged in the Southern part of the Indian subcontinent or South India,
consisting primarily of temples with pyramid shaped towers that are constructed of sandstone, soapstone, or granite.

- **mandapa**: In South Indian architecture, a pillared hall or porch fronting a Hindu temple that may be attached or detached from the building.
- **gopuram**: A monumental tower, usually ornate, at the entrance of a temple, especially in Southern India.
- **embossed**: With raised letters or images on the surface.
- **foliated**: Having a structure of thin layers.

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**Background: The Nayak Dynasty**

The Nayak Dynasty emerged in South India after the collapse of the Vijayanagar Empire. The Nayaks, former military governors of the Vijayanagar emperors, declared their independence in 1565 and established their own kingdoms, ruling from the 16th through 18th centuries. Nayak rule was noted for its administrative reforms, its artistic and cultural achievements, and the creation of a unique style of temple architecture. They also renovated temples that had been sacked by the Delhi Sultans. Thanjavur painting, a famous South Indian school of classical painting, also emerged under the Nayaks.

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**Nayak Architecture**

**Temples**

There are many distinguishing features of Nayak temple architecture as pioneered by the Nayaks of Madurai and Tanjore. Among the main characteristics are the long corridors; the carved hundred-pillared and thousand-pillared *mandapas* (outdoor temple halls or porches); and the high, multi-storied *gopurams* (towers adorning the entrance of a temple), richly decorated with brightly-painted stone and stucco statues of animals, gods, and demons.
*Gopuram, Meenakshi Amman Temple*: Gopurams from the Nayak Period are adorned with brightly painted stucco statues of gods and goddesses, demons, and animals, both real and mythical.

Arguably the greatest example of the Nayak style is the Meenakshi Amman Temple at Madurai that was built between 1623 and 1655 CE. The temple has 10 ornate gopurams and a hall with 985 pillars, each of which is a sculpture in the Dravidian style.
Hall of a Thousand Pillars, Meenakshi Amman Temple: Each pillar in these Nayak, many pillared temple halls is carved in the shape of a god, goddess, or mythical beasts such as the griffin.

The temple complex also includes a sacred temple tank, the Porthamarai Kulam, or Pond with the Golden Lotus. A portico on the west side of the tank contains remnants of Nayak paintings from the 17th and 18th centuries.

Civic Architecture

Nayak civic architecture combines Dravidian and Islamic styles, as exemplified by the palace erected by King Thirumalai Nayak of the Madurai Nayak dynasty in 1636 CE. The palace features an octagonal throne room topped by a dome that rises 70 feet, held up by massive circular columns linked by Islamic pointed arches. The structure was constructed using foliated brickwork and the surface details finished in stucco mixed from shell lime and egg whites to provide a smooth and glossy texture.

Nayak Painting

In addition to its architecture, the Nayak Dynasty in South India was renowned for the development of Tanjore painting.

Learning Objectives

Discuss painting of the Nayak Dynasty

Key Takeaways

Key Points

- The Nayak Dynasty is known not only for its unique style of architecture, but also for its mural and wall paintings.
- The style of Thanjavur painting originated under the Nayaks of Thanjavur around 1600 CE, and one can see the influence of Deccani, Vijayanagar, Maratha, and even European or Company styles of painting.
- Renowned for their surface richness, vivid colors, compact composition, glittering gold foils overlaid on delicate but extensive gesso work, and inlay of glass beads or semi-precious gems, these paintings serve primarily as devotional icons.
- The subjects of most paintings are Hindu gods, goddesses, and saints; there are also many instances when Jain, Sikh, Muslim, other religious and even secular subjects were depicted in Thanjavur paintings.
- Artists under Nayak rule also painted murals and frescoes on the walls of temples and other buildings, mostly featuring religious subjects or images of royal power.
- The Nayaks issued coins made of gold and copper that featured figures of the king, animals, and Hindu gods and goddesses such as Shiva and Parvati.

Key Terms

- Thanjavur: A city in the South Indian state of Tamil Nadu and an important center of South Indian religion, art, and architecture; known for its particular style of painting that emerged under the Nayak Dynasty in 1600 CE.
• **Puranas**: A vast genre of Indian literature about a wide range of topics, particularly myths, legends, and other traditional lore.

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**Thanjavur Painting**

Ruling from the 16th through 18th centuries in South India, the Nayak Empire was noted for its administrative reforms, its artistic and cultural achievements, and the creation of a unique style of temple architecture. In addition, Thanjavur painting, a famous South Indian school of classical painting, emerged under the Nayaks.

**Characteristics**

Thanjavur painting originated under the Nayaks of Thanjavur (anglicized as Tanjore) around 1600 CE, and one can see the influence of Deccani, Vijayanagar, Maratha, and even European or Company styles of painting. Renowned for their surface richness, vivid colors, compact composition, glittering gold foils overlaid on delicate but extensive gesso work, and inlay of glass beads or semi-precious gems, these paintings serve primarily as devotional icons. The subjects of most paintings are Hindu gods, goddesses, and saints.

Episodes from Hindu Puranas, *Sthala-puranas*, and other religious texts were visualized and painted with the main figure or figures placed in the central section of the picture, surrounded by several subsidiary figures, themes, and subjects. The figures are static and often located inside decorated arches or curtains. Eyes are broad and the outer lines are either brown or red, except for the god Krishna’s eyes, which are depicted in blue. There are also many instances when Jain, Sikh, Muslim, other religious and even secular subjects were depicted in Thanjavur paintings.
**Process**

Thanjavur panel paintings were usually done on solid wooden planks. The artist began by making a preliminary sketch of the image on a base of cloth pasted onto the wood and applying a mixture of zinc oxide and adhesive to the base. After the drawing was completed, the jewelry and apparel on the image were decorated with semi-precious stones, lace, or thread. They applied a mixture of chalk powder and African gum for an embossed look, and the painting was covered with gold foil and finished with dyes to color the figures. Artists under Nayak rule also painted murals and frescoes on the walls of temples and other buildings, mostly featuring religious subjects or images of royal power.
The Nayaka Murals: These murals illustrate images of Nayak Kings and Queens at Srirangam Temple, with inscriptions in the Kannada language.

Coins

The Nayaks issued coins made of gold and copper that featured figures of the king, animals, and Hindu gods and goddesses such as Shiva and Parvati. Both real and mythical, depictions of animals included bears, elephants, lions, and fish (the emblem of the Pandyas who had ruled Madurai before the Vijayanagar and Nayak rulers). The coins also carry inscriptions in Tamil, Telugu, Kannada, and Nagari scripts.

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