



## The Museums In Thanjavur – A Historical Analysis

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### ABSTRACT:

*After offering a brief introduction regarding Thanjavur under various rulers, the distinctive collections made and preserved in different centres at Thanjavur are explained. Importance is assigned to the Raja Raja Cholan Museum, the Thanjavur palace Museum, The Saraswathi Mahal Library Museum and the different contents in them are explained along with the estimation of their values. They all prove the historical value of the city through the ages.*

### INTRODUCTION

During the reign period of Raja Raja I (985 - 1014 A.D.) Thanjavur, his capital attained and gained name and fame. By the treaty between Sarafoji and the English, Thanjavur became a British province after witnessing many political changes. From Vijayalaya for a period of 176 years Thanjavur was the capital of Cholas. Then it came under the control for Pandyas. From 1535 to 1675 it was the capital of the Nayak rulers and from 1675 to 1800 the Marathas controlled it. Then upto 1947 the British rule was there. From 1947 onwards it is a Municipal town. Since Thanjavur is known for the pilgrim tourism, due to the availability of the renowned Brahadeeswara temple, which was constructed by Raja Raja, the great and known for its articulated glories it becomes a must to have a historical analysis of that place with special reference to the museums available in that place. Further it is worth to note that majority of the objects which depict the history of that place are preserved in the museums located at Thanjavur.

The Raja Raja Cholan Museum, which is an archaeological museum, is located in the palace complex of Thanjavur. The Brahadeeswara temple is also having a museum within its complex, maintained by the Department of Archaeology. The Raja Serfoji II Memorial Hall is also a museum which consists of varieties of interesting objects. The Saraswathi Mahal Museum is another treasure house of palm leaf manuscripts, paper manuscripts etc. The Tamil University functioning from Tamilnadu is yet another significant museum known for the availability of Ancient historical objects. All of them are valuable treasures for historians and scholars as they consist of interesting objects varying from Anthropology to Archaeology. They are all collections which inspire the learned and others to enrich their knowledge and wisdom along with joy and happiness. They are institutions which collect, preserve the artifacts and specimens and make them accessible to the public for knowing the cultural heritage of the past Tamils. So they are trusted sources for writing the history.

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They are beneficial for researchers because they have acquired, conserved exhibits of "tangible and intangible heritages of humanity and its environment for purposes of education, study and enjoyment". They are all open to the general public.

They come under governmental, non-governmental, privately owned or family museums. As they contain objects depicting fine arts, applied arts, crafts, archaeology, anthropology, ethnology, history, cultural history, military history, natural history, coins, stamps, palm leaf and hand written manuscripts etc. They are beneficial for estimating the history with recorded details. The tourists, research scholars of History, Sociology, language are all benefited by the museums available at Thanjavur, a place located in the "rice bowl of India".

### HISTORY OF THANJAVUR MUSEUMS

Thanjavur, the eighth largest city of Tamilnadu due to its historical significance of the past, also known for the Chola art and architecture, is a renowned city due to its museums and artifacts and ancient paintings. Due to the Brahadeeswara temple and the museums Thanjavur serves as a paradise for tourists, history scholars and lovers. The museums of Thanjavur are adorned by the store work, paintings and bronze sculptures belonging to the Chola periods.

The Nayak palace, constructed in 1600 A.D. and used by the hereditary Nayak rulers is an abode of an art gallery, Saraswathi Mahal Library and Music hall called Sangeeth Mahal the stone sculptures available in the hall are the belongings of the Pallava, Chola, Pandya and Nayak periods. They expose not only the art motifs of different periods, but also the icons of different gods and goddesses. The panels of Gaja Samhara, Tripurantaka (Siva), Brahmma and a statue of Buddha are quite captivating and they stand testimony to the exuberant and excellent workmanship of the stone masons of the Pallava, Chola, Pandya and Nayak rulers of the different ages.<sup>6</sup>

The Dufoar hall is also a monument of the Maratha rulers. The fresco paintings and the glass paintings, the marble life size image of the Maratha ruler Sarfoji, the bronze icons belonging to the Pallava period, the number of bronze images of Nataraja, the cosmic dancer of the Chola period, the Nataraja figure of the 12<sup>th</sup> century etc., are the assets of that gallery. The sculptures of Sundaramurthy Nayanar (11<sup>th</sup> century), Parvathi (14<sup>th</sup> century), Somaskanda (8<sup>th</sup> century) Mahavishnu (11<sup>th</sup> century), the figures of Venugopa and Rukmani (16<sup>th</sup> century) the Vinadhara Dakshinamurthy (11<sup>th</sup> century), the Dakshinamurthy the begging image of Siva (11<sup>th</sup> century), the Rishbha Vahana and Parvathi (11<sup>th</sup> century) etc., are the figures available there.<sup>9</sup> All these figures reveal the contributions of the Pallava and Chola rulers to the development of iconography and religious concepts.

The Saraswathi Mahal Library, which offered pleasure to the Nayak rulers of Thanjavur, attained a developed stage during the Maratha rulers of Thanjavur and the contributions of the Maratha ruler Serfoji II (1798-1832) influenced by the Dutch Missionary Fr. Schwartz added a new glorious chapter. The manuscripts available in Sanskrit (39,300 nos), Tamil (3500), Marathi (3076), Telugu (846), Persian (22) languages<sup>8</sup> throw much light on the social, political, administrative and cultural pursuits of the Maratha period. The Museum attached to this library is also a praiseworthy one, even though it is small in size. The intellectual manuscripts, the original drawings, Atlases, paintings in paper, canvass, wood, glass are quite unique and absorbing.<sup>9</sup> The portraits of the Thanjavur Maratha rulers are of great historical value. They even testify to the creation of a museum even by notable collections of different varieties.

Since knowledge and intelligence are the pre-requisites for having a developed affluent society, much importance is assigned to the museums which render direct knowledge and wisdom as eye witness. The Faculty of Arts, functioning in the Tamil University, Thanjavur compresses of departments of drama, dance, music, sculpture, architecture and they serve as museums due to their collections.

#### Gleanings from the Museums

The various sections of the Thanjavur museums create aesthetic, romantic and intellectual senses among the visitors. As they are all permanent institutions they enable the visitors to interpret their collections for their personal interest. They serve as centres of learning across the barriers of culture and languages. The artifacts belonging to different periods assist the visitors of all ages and academic background. Though many centuries have passed the objects expose the materials of the past. Further they even invite tourists to know the cultural phases and artistic features. Since the museums are beneficial for maintaining public relations. They maintain a mutual understanding between the institutions and public.

The metal images provide maximum message about their age, development and purpose. The images of Nataraja, Somaskanda, Dakshinamurthy etc. indicate the uplift of Saivism and treatment of Murugan as the son of Siva and Uma. The panel paintings of Thanjavur have wooden support. Jack tree blanks are pasted with cloth and primed with sukkan paste.<sup>11</sup> The different kinds of paintings available expose the technical skill of the painters and qualities.

The Tourism Department of the Government and the tour operators today never skip the visit of the Museums of Thanjavur while they make arrangements to the Thanjavur Brahadeeswara temple, Swarga Garden, Thanjavur Palace etc. The museums too have become centres of attraction to the tourists due to the advertisements given by the Tourism Department to Museums.

The armoury section of the palace museum of Thanjavur contains fire arms and a handsome gun offered by the East India Company to Sarfoji II and some of them are preserved in the Madras Musuem.<sup>12</sup> The cultural property housed in the Thanjavur Musuems are protected with "expertise knowledge of multitudes of discipline". At the same time it is worth to note that certain images were dilapidated due to the Malikafur's invasion. The destroyed Ganapathy statue available in the southern side of the Art gallery will attest it.<sup>14</sup> In the same way in the Tirupurantaka bronze image the figure of the deer is missing in the right rear hand.<sup>15</sup> In the art gallery two pieces of pillars brought from Nolambabadi by Raja Raja I are installed and they testify to the fact that it was a customary practice among the victorious rulers to collect art pieces from the vanquished areas as war monuments.<sup>16</sup>

The Paintings generally called Thanjavur Oviyam available in the museum are unique expressions of South Indian painting. This was the outcome of the impetus assigned to painting by the Tanjore Nayak rulers during the 17th century. The variety of depictions centre on classical dance and music. The wonderful colour combination and the theme employed are all superb. The figures of Hindu gods and goddesses are all drawn. The figures of saints too find their place. The mythological stories are also drawn and much stress is also assigned to accuracy of details. Everything is executed stage by stage. As an initial measure importance is assigned to the preparation of the base which is made up of a cloth pasted on a wooden blank. The figures are drawn subsequently. Then they have started decorating the figure with ornaments and dresses. Laces and threads are used mainly as decorative elements. For making the paintings to attain permanency gold foils are used. Thus they stand testimony to the existence of a renowned independent art.

#### Conclusion

Thus Thanjavur, the main destination of the Cholas, known for its fertility and prosperity is now serving as a monument of art, architecture and culture. Due to the cultural superiority for over a period of 1000 years, it has become centre of historical as well as tourist importance. While the museums of Thanjavur assists the enhancement of historical knowledge, the palace, the Brahadeeswara temple, the Saraswathi Mahal Library, the Sivaganga Garden are centres of cultural value. As the museum materials belong to the periods of Pallavas, Cholas, Pandyas, Nayaks and Marathas they expose the composite nature of the culture of the Thanjavur region.

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- 4.Nadana Kasinathan, Raja Rajechuram, Dept. of Archaeology, Government of Madras, 2010, pp. 1-4.
- 5.Personal visit to the Museums on 10th and 11th February, 2011.
- 6.Personal visit to the Saraswathi Mahal on 16th February, 2011.
- 7.As they belong to various dynasties they specify the values of a particular period. From the Somaskanda panel of the Pallava period, the Bhikshadana, Rishabhavahana of the Pallava and Pandya periods we are able to have the development of architecture.
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