

Discovering The Art Of Tanjore Paintings In Southern India

By Debi Lander

India bombarded my senses, mostly in good ways, although I admit I did not visit the slums in Mumbai. I swear I smelled curry as soon as I deplaned. My eyes feasted on vibrant colors all around. I felt I was looking at life through a 3-D kaldeiscope, one that was amplifying the intensity like a picture Photo-shopped with extra saturation. Pastel colored temples somehow shone as bright as neon. Golden statues of deities glowed with a life force. Women in shimmering saris, juxtaposed in hues and patterns I'd never put together, were pleasing in India. Even the fruit appeared ready to burst out of its sunkissed skin.

Early one morning, I toured the UNESCO World Heritage Brihadeeswarar Temple, also known as the Big Temple in Tanjore or Thanjavur, a city in Tamil Nadu. The fact that this temple celebrated its one thousandth anniversary in 2010 really astounded me. So often, I see ancient relics in museums and try to imagine life around them. However, this sacred site has remained in continual use, much the same for those worshipping there today as centuries ago. Many Hindus came with extended families, dressed in

their "Sunday" best. They bring flower offerings, reverently pause and touch icons, and pray. I had to sit down to absorb the great heritage of this sanctuary.

Afterward, my schedule called for me to see traditional artwork of the area and perhaps even shop and purchase a piece. Tanjore is famous for its paintings; artworks created in a style and technique that originated in the city during the 16th century.

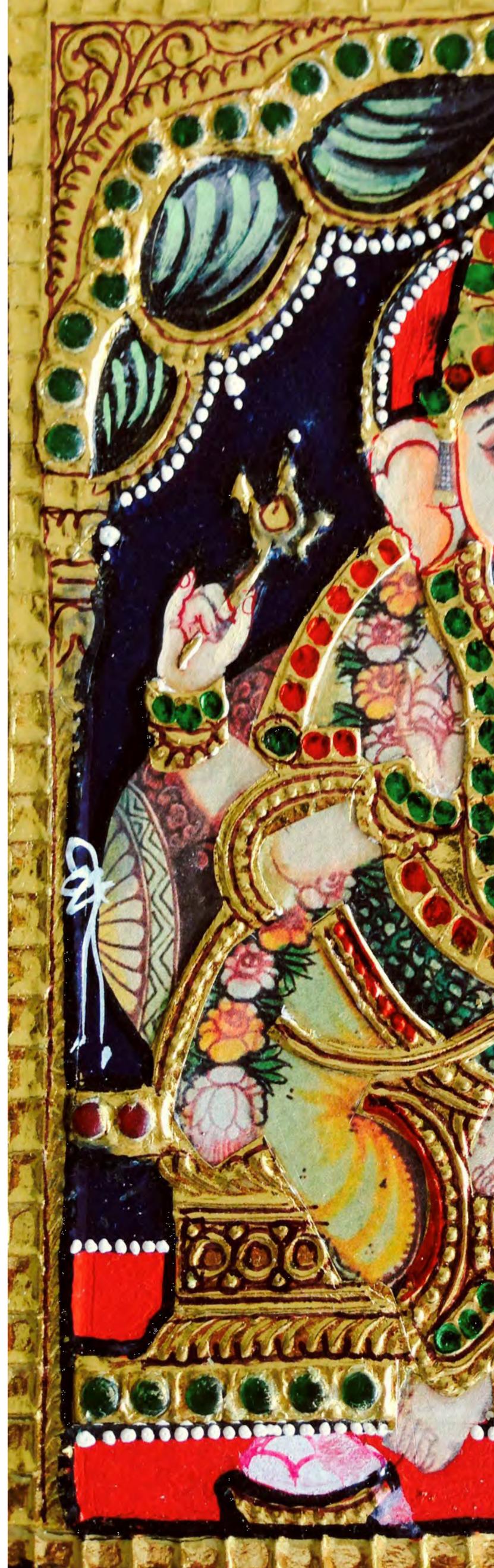
A typical Tanjore painting contains one main figure, a Hindu deity, with a well-rounded body and almond shaped eyes. This two-dimensional figure is typically enclosed by an arch or curtains. The artist uses a gilded and gem-setting technique - a process where gold leaf and sparkling stones highlight certain aspects of the painting and add depth.

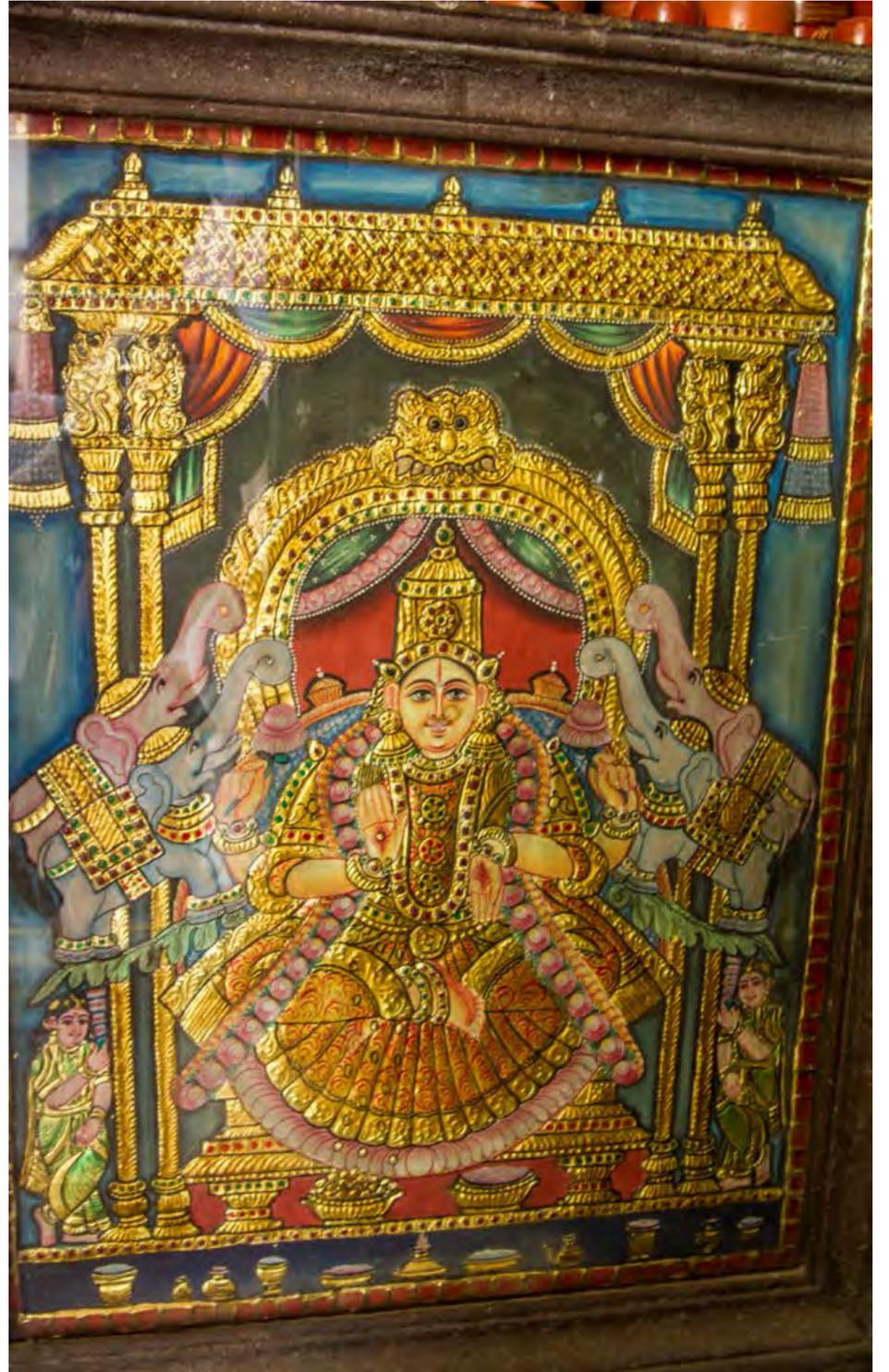
These pieces, like all of India, are bright, radiant and breathtaking. They add a glowing presence when placed in a darkened room. Works are considered sacred to the master craftsmen who usually choose to remain anonymous.

**My Ganesha
Painting**

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DISCLOSURE
MY TRIP TO INDIA WAS
SELF-FUNDED, BUT
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Over the centuries, minor changes have occurred in stylization - for example, the figures are no longer as round. While most of the paintings display the Child Krishna, presiding deities of various famous temples are also being depicted. But technique remains much as the original.

Galleries in Tanjore sell new art and almost all antique dealers carry older paintings. They are often handed down as heirlooms. Today, these paintings decorate puja rooms in residences, lobbies in major hotels and corporate offices. They also make nice gifts for weddings and other special occasions and, of course, souvenirs.

ABOVE
Tanjore Antique
Artwork

RIGHT
Art Gallery Sign



I was most fortunate to meet an artist, M. Venkatesh, who invited me to his studio to see the process.



An assistant begins gluing on sequins or other raised objects to add dimension.



She continues to glue on pieces.



Next, she applies gold leaf, lining it up and then pressing it down, creating three dimensional patterns and effects.



Then, the artist returns to the work and paints in details.



Finally, he adds semi precious jewels or other decorative touches.



Since I had become fond of the elephant shaped deity, Ganesha, I chose a painting of him. I plan to get it framed eventually.