

Tanjavur
Brhadīśvara temple **The Monument and
the Living Tradition**

MURALS

The paintings in the great temple of Tanjavur can be dated as belonging to three different historical periods, namely: Cōḷa, Nāyaka and Marāṭhā.

The main sanctum of the Brhadīśvara temple complex is so constructed that it is surrounded by two walls: an outer and an inner wall, separated by a 1.88 meters wide inner ambulatory passageway. On either walls of the dark and narrow passageway are found exquisite paintings. These paintings were discovered in the 1930's and were dated as belonging to the Nāyaka period. A closer inspection, however, revealed that the walls of the passageway consisted of not one but two layers of paintings belonging to two different historical periods. The original 11th century Cōḷa paintings were superimposed by the later Nāyaka paintings; the second layer had been performed without removing the original layer.

The paintings in the passageway of the Brhadīśvara temple are the only remaining examples of Cōḷa paintings that we have today. It is apparent from the lines, bodily postures and the expressions on the face in the Cōḷa paintings that the artists were equally skilled in handling both human forms and nature.

There is a vast difference between the Cōḷa and Nāyaka paintings both in the technique and color scheme. While in the Cōḷa paintings, the pigments have been integrated into the plaster, the Nāyaka artists painted over the plastered surface. As a result the Nāyaka paintings have started to peel off from the wall surface.

Marāṭhā paintings are seen in the two subsidiary shrines: Amman shrine and Subrahmaṇya shrine; Enclosure walls and Nandi Maṇḍapa. Many of these paintings were commissioned by Serfoji II in 1802-03.

