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THE TANJORE WOMEN

She has designed India's First House, the Rashtrapati Bhawan. But her own home is a repertoire of Indian culture and religious tales. We travel through time with Sunita Kohli, one of the country's most acclaimed interior designers, to the era of Tanjore paintings, which fill up her residence.

(FROM LEFT TO RIGHT) SUNITA KOHLI, HER DAUGHTER MONELIKA, HER GRAND DAUGHTER AND HER MOTHER CHANDI SIR



A resplendent Lord Vishnu in repose welcomes us, as a royal scene from Lord Rama's crowning ceremony vies for attention from a wall lined with several bejewelled Lord Krishnas. An antique tortoise bronze temple lamp stands in one corner against a background of a collection of Narmadeshwari Shiva Lingams and Buddhist butter lamps from Ladakh. From the knick-knack rack against a wall shines a pure silver bust of a woman, intricately carved and obviously antique. She used to decorate the head of the pole-staff at a Tazia procession in Lucknow. All these fill up Padma Shri Award recipient interior designer and architectural restorer Sunita Kohli's home, that could easily be called a museum of Indian traditions, spiritual culture and epics. While she may have decorated elite spaces like the Rashtrapati Bhawan, the Prime Minister's office, the British Council building and several tony homes with a combination of influences from the East and the West, her own posh residence at Lodhi Road in Delhi is a repertoire of quirky utilitarian objects bearing religious sentiments.

But it was her collection of over 250 precious Tanjore and Mysore paintings which initiated us into the celebrated designer's home. "I want to tell the story of Tanjore paintings," says Kohli, who is authoring a book (*Tanjore Paintings. Golden Icons of South India*) on the legend of this not-so-well known genre of divine art from southern India.

Born in Lahore, convent educated in Lucknow, it's a trifle tough to understand her love for these glittering frames in primary colours. "It was during my travels as a child with my father that I developed a liking for architecture, history and design. As for my fascination with South Indian temples, it germinated from the fact that most northern Indian temples have been destroyed by conquerors. The madness to collect these paintings started in the '70s when I became

friends with Jaya Apparao, who had a collection of Tanjore paintings and was very knowledgeable on the subject. She is my guru as far as Tanjore paintings are concerned."

In the late-70s, North India was still ignorant about art from the South and had seen nothing like the opulent framed images of bejewelled gods and goddesses in vivid colours. So when Kohli started displaying her collection at her residence and at some select client's homes, criticism was expected. "These paintings made in and around Tamil Nadu's Thanjavur town in the 18th and 19th Centuries were mainly used in puja rooms in local houses. They were not meant for public display and very few outsiders ever got to see one. So when I started bringing them to Delhi first for myself and then for my clients, I was almost accused of popularising this South Indian school of art in the north," says Kohli.

We stare in awe at a collection of frames depicting Lord Rama's coronation. Titled 'Ramapatha Abhisheka', they are beautifully painted in reds and golds on a fabric that could have been from the 18th century. The primary position of power has been given to the Lord, who towers over every other human form in the frame. Around him stand the priests and other nobles. At the bottom of the painting, is depicted a line of people, smaller in size and in more neutral shades. "Tanjore and Mysore painting creators may not belong to any formal school of art but this art was directed by strict iconographic rules of Hinduism. The Divine was always the most decorated and the largest, whereas humans were smaller and simpler. The artist couldn't introduce figures that were not a part of the original legend being depicted in the frame. It was only the bottom-most row where the artist could paint either himself or the patron of the painting," she explains. We spot a couple of paintings that tell the tale of Lord Krishna

(FACING PAGE, TOP) KOHLI'S LIVING AREA WITH TANJORES ON THE LEFT WALL AND A GRANITE SCULPTURE OF A WESTERN ARTIST'S INTERPRETATION OF LORD VISHNU ON THE RIGHT WALL. (FACING PAGE BOTTOM, LEFT TO RIGHT) THE SILVER FROM THE TAZIA STAFF-POLE HEAD BOUGHT IN LUCKNOW AND A FEW PIECES FROM KOHLI'S NANDI COLLECTION. (BOTTOM) THREE ANTIQUE SILVER BETEL NUT CUTTERS.





(ABOVE) THE COURTYARD WELCOMING GUESTS WITH A TEMPLE AND A COLLECTION OF LIFE-SIZED LINGAMS FROM THE NARMADA RIVER. (BELOW) HER STUDY

and his gopis against an almost perfect background. The backgrounds are mostly picturesque with details, either from a temple or nature. She adds: "These paintings had very strong influences from the kingdom of Vijayanagara and the facial features of the figures are distinctly from South India. And the backdrops were either architectural or inspired from a photographer's studio. The paintings created after 1850, when photography came to India, have very strong studio-like backgrounds: picture-perfect and colourful. The second most powerful influence were the Jesuits, borrowing from whom some Tanjore paintings became framed in wooden window-like frames that could be opened and shut."

In Kohli's collection are a few Tanjores that are glistening with stones and gold, while others are more sedate. Kohli explains: "Though made with rich surface embellishments and pure gold foils, these paintings have a naivety about them. And their art can be placed between art and craft. Historically, it

A COLLECTION OF UNIQUE TANJORE PAINTINGS THAT SHOW LORD VISHNU IN REPOSE AND ANOTHER PLACED WITHIN A WINDOW-LIKE FRAME. A PATTERN THAT WAS INSPIRED BY THE TRAVELLING CHURCHES OF JESUIT PRIESTS. TANJORE PAINTINGS ARE PRICED IN LAKHS NOW. "I BOUGHT MY FIRST TANJORE FOR ₹ 250, IN 1973," SAYS KOHLI.

was a turbulent time when the British were in power almost in the whole of India and the influence of local dynasties, like Marathas and Mughals, was on the decline. People were trying to find peace in religion and were bringing in more of the divine into their homes. Unfortunately, the traditional material to make figurines of gods — bronze — was in short supply as most of it had been used up to make cannonballs to fight the British and the great Southern tradition of bronze-making was on the wane. Jewellery-making too, was declining and painters had lost their patrons. So, painters, bronze sculptors and jewellery artists merged to create Tanjore paintings, which are an amalgamation of all these fine arts. Thus, we see the use of real gold foils, semi-precious stones, pearls and even glass in these works."

Other than antique Tanjore paintings, Kohli prides herself on her extensive collection of Puja room items: *agarbattidaan*, *ittaradaan*, betel nut cutter, Buddhist butter lamps, Shaligrams, Vaishnavite temple lamps from Kerala and Narmadeshwari lingams

from Narmada river. "I used to travel extensively across the country and items from people's homes used to fascinate me along with their tales about the items. No other country in the world handles everyday objects so uniquely as in India and I have always been fascinated by the beauty and exquisite craftsmanship of almost pedestrian objects. Though I never wanted to build a collection, today, I can recall the tales each of these objects have," she says, taking us around the first floor of her home. She admits she has stopped collecting the paintings and is now contemplating gifting them to her children and grandchildren, especially her daughter Kohelika, who is a successful interior designer.

As for contemporary Indian art, Kohli is scathing: "We are producing a lot of art these days but unfortunately, a large part of it is trash. We have to step back and take stock of experimentation in art."

We don't push modernity any further. Instead, we leave the house of one of India's most esteemed interior designers with a new sense of awe, for our past & -