

# VIJAYANAGARA ART AND ARCHITECTURE: A STUDY OF CULTURAL SYNTHESIS AND ARTISTIC EXCELLENCE

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## ABSTRACT

The Vijayanagara Empire represents one of the most remarkable phases in the history of Indian art and architecture. This study examines the architectural styles, sculptural traditions, and artistic expressions that flourished during this period. It highlights the development of temple architecture, fortifications, and palatial structures, along with their religious, social, and cultural significance. The research further explores decorative elements such as floral, animal, epic, and secular sculptures, as well as mural paintings, particularly in sites like Lepakshi Temple and Hampi. The study concludes that Vijayanagara art represents a mature stage of the Dravidian tradition, combining earlier influences with innovative features that contributed to a rich and enduring cultural legacy.

Keywords: Temple Architecture, Mandapams, Sculpture, Frescoes, Rayagpurams.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The Vijayanagara period marked a significant phase in the evolution of South Indian art and architecture. The rulers of this empire demonstrated a strong commitment to religious patronage and artistic development, resulting in the construction of magnificent temples, forts, and palaces across South India. Major centers such as Hampi, Penukonda, and Chandragiri Fort exemplify the grandeur of this architectural tradition.

The architecture of this period reflects both continuity and innovation, drawing from earlier traditions such as the Hoysala and Pandya styles while introducing new features like monumental gopurams and spacious mandapams. Temples functioned not only as religious centers but also as hubs of social, cultural, and economic activity, integrating diverse communities within the empire.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

This study is based on a qualitative and descriptive analysis of architectural and artistic features of the Vijayanagara period. The research primarily relies on historical descriptions, architectural observations, and stylistic interpretations derived from documented sources.

## 3. TEMPLES AND ARCHITECTURAL INFLUENCE OF THE VIJAYANAGARA EMPIRE

Temples in regions such as Hampi, Penukonda, Lepakshi, Tadipatri, Kanchipuram, Kadiri, Mathura, and Thanjavur exhibit a significant influence of the Vijayanagara architectural style. Notable examples include the Pampapatiswamy, ChakratirthaKodandaramaswamy, HazaraRamaswamy, Vithalaswamy, and Sri Krishna temples in Hampi. Similarly, the Papanasheswaraswamy temple at Lepakshi, Buggaramingeswaraswamy temple at Tadipatri, ChintalaVenkataramanaswamy and Narasimhaswamy temples at Kadiri, EkamranathaSwamy temple at Kanchipuram, and the VaikunthaPerumal temples are commendable representations of this style. However, it is important to note that some temples, such as those in Kanchipuram, do not fully adhere to the Vijayanagara style.

Key architectural elements from this period include the Sangeetmandapam of the Vithalaswamy temple, the Ekasilaradham, the Mahamantapam of the Krishnaswamy temple, and the Mahamantapam at Kadiri, all renowned for their intricate sculptures. The Rangamantapam of the Papanasheswara

temple in Lepakshi is particularly notable for its exquisite paintings depicting scenes such as the Dakshayagna, the marriage of Shiva and Parvati, and the Vatapatrashai. These images are often found in the sanctum sanctorum, though their colors and forms may fade over time due to camphor nirajanam (ritual waving of light).

The architecture from the Vijayanagara period not only gained fame but also revealed the rich sculptural traditions of the time. Vijayanagara sculpture primarily served a decorative purpose and is a prominent feature in all temples of this style. These decorations can be categorized into four main types: floral ornaments, animal ornaments, epic sculptures, and secular sculptures.

#### **4. ART AND ARCHITECTURAL STYLES OF THE VIJAYANAGARA EMPIRE**

The architectural styles of the Vijayanagara Empire were both complementary and distinctive. The characteristics of Vijayanagara architecture can be outlined as follows. The buildings of this period can be categorized into various types, including temples, forts (Durgas), and palaces (Mahals). Prominent examples of these structures can be seen in Hampi, Penugonda, Gutti, Chandragiri, and Kondaveedu. These sites showcase the architectural traditions and innovations of the Vijayanagara Empire, reflecting both the old and evolving styles.

Forts, commonly built on hills, were strategically constructed with walls on all four sides, forming two concentric enclosures. A distinct barrier often separated these enclosures, as seen in Hampi. While these forts were spacious, they did not exhibit elaborate decorative elements. The construction primarily used stone and bricks, with surfaces smoothed using bricks, stones, and a mixture of lime, jaggery, and sand.

Temples from this period, such as those in Hampi, Tadipatri, Ahobalam, Lepakshi, Kadiri, and Tirupati, highlight the evolution of temple architecture. These temples typically consisted of five enclosures: Bahirdwaram (outer gate), Rangamandapam (hall for public ceremonies), ArdhaMandapam (intermediate hall), AntaralaMandapam (inner hall), and Garbhagriham (sanctum sanctorum). The temples featured spacious layouts with vimanas (towers) above the brick-built sanctums and gopurams (monumental towers) on the outer surfaces, often referred to as Rayagopurams.

The entrances of these temples were grand, featuring 'True Arches' with intricate sculptures resembling line drawings adorning the sides, top, and bottom of the gates. Inside the temples, a flagpole with an altar decorated with lotus petals was often placed. The capitals of these altars resembled those of pillars, and the flagpoles were round, distinguishing them from the more common octagonal shape. This type of flagpole can be seen in Penugonda and Lepakshi.

The MahaMandapam, or the main hall, was typically square-shaped with numerous pillars. This hall, also known as the RangaMandapam or Mukhamandapam, featured pillars decorated with jantvalankaras (motifs of lions, horses, etc.) and floral designs similar to those in the EkamranathaSwamy Temple and VaikunthaPerumala Temple in Kanchipuram. The pillars often depicted dancers adorned with ornaments, as well as elaborate sculptures, particularly in temples such as Lepakshi and Kadiri.

The adhithanas (base platforms) of these temples were samachakra-shaped (circular), topped with chukurpu-shaped (circular) patikas (mouldings). Above these were quadrangular tables with pidapa (raised platform) adorned with padmalankarana (lotus decoration) and sambhasira (pinnacles). This construction style was consistent not only in the RangaMandapam but throughout the temples.

The Vijayanagara period, as exemplified in places like Lepakshi, showcases a profound appreciation for art. A notable feature of this period is the RangamandavaEthanam (Cup), often adorned with

ChitralkhalankruTamai (intricate paintings and decorations). Sculptures depicting deities such as Parsva, Parishodevatas, Dikrits, and the Trimurti are prominently displayed in various parts of the temples, including the Arthamantap, AntaralaMandavaMantapam, walls (Kudya), pillars, pilasters, and niches. These sculptures are not only religious but also serve decorative purposes. Interestingly, the sanctum sanctorum (Garbhagriha) is typically devoid of any decoration, maintaining a solemn and sacred atmosphere.

The architectural style follows a hierarchical pattern from bottom to top, including sections such as the head, table, head, sculpture, head, sculpture, and table, blending seamlessly in the upper parts. This architectural sophistication reflects the skill and artistry of the craftsmen of the time, as well as the administrative prowess and cultural customs of the Vijayanagara rulers, both in secular and religious contexts.

The structure of Upamandapas (subsidiary halls) varies, with no strict rules prescribed in the Pancharatras (Agama texts). These sub-mandapams are often dedicated to Ashtadikpalakas (guardians of the eight directions), Nava Grahas (nine planetary deities), and Ishtadaivas (tutelary deities) of local worshippers. Mandapams (halls) built at the corners inside the outer rampart are known as varamandapams, serving purposes such as charity and education. For example, the Papanaseswaraswamy temple in Lepakshi features spacious mandapams named after the seven days of the week.

Geometrical shapes such as triangles, quadrilaterals, hexagons, rectangles, and squares are frequently used in temple architecture. These shapes are primarily dualistic in nature, focusing on length, breadth, and the perceived thickness of the idols, giving them a trigunatma (three-dimensional) quality.

One of the prominent sub-mandapams constructed by the Vijayanagara lords is the KalyanaMandapam, intended for divine marriage ceremonies. Structurally, it resembles the Mahamandapam (main hall). In the Papanaseswaraswamy temple in Lepakshi, there is a mantapam adorned with intricate floral decorations, known as the LataMandapam.

In summary, the art and architecture of the Vijayanagara period, particularly as seen in Lepakshi, reflect a blend of religious devotion and aesthetic sophistication. The intricate sculptures, diverse architectural elements, and thoughtfully designed mandapams illustrate the cultural richness and artistic excellence of this era.

### **Floral Decorations**

Floral decorations commonly feature flowers, leaves, and vines, with the lotus being a prominent element. Various forms of lotuses, such as the shodasadalapam, are intricately carved. Lotus leaves are frequently engraved on pillars, sambhashirshas (capitals), walls, and adhistanas (base platforms). These decorations include UrdhwaPadmalakarana (upward lotus motifs) and AdahaPadmalakarana (downward lotus motifs). UrdhwaPadmalankarana is often found on altars and sambhashirshas, while Adhahpadmalankaranam is commonly seen on adhistanas.

These floral decorations not only express the duality of the sculptures but also showcase the skill of the sthapati (sculptor). The designs mimic natural forms and incorporate geometric shapes such as squares, triangles, and circles. This use of geometry is particularly notable in the non-human depictions found in Vijayanagara sculpture.

### **Animal Ornaments, Epic Sculptures, and Secular Sculptures**

In addition to floral decorations, Vijayanagara architecture features a variety of animal ornaments, epic sculptures, and secular sculptures. These elements further enrich the visual and cultural landscape

of the temples, illustrating the artistic versatility and narrative depth of the period. The animal decorations of the Vijayanagara period prominently feature figures such as elephants, horses, lions, and monkeys. These motifs are commonly found on the capitals of pillars and other architectural elements. Particularly noteworthy are the lion, aesugu (griffin-like creatures), and horses depicted standing on their hind legs. Additionally, line drawings of fish, turtles, chickens, peacocks, and various birds adorn the temple walls and pillars. While these animal motifs are visually striking, they do not exhibit a unique departure from the Hoysala style, suggesting a lack of innovative creativity in these decorations during the Vijayanagara period. Instead, they appear to be more formulaic and printed in nature.

In summary, the temples influenced by the Vijayanagara architectural style reflect a sophisticated blend of religious devotion and artistic expression. The intricate sculptures, elaborate decorations, and geometric designs highlight the cultural richness and artistic excellence of the Vijayanagara Empire.

## **5. ORNAMENTS AND SCULPTURAL ART OF THE VIJAYANAGARA PERIOD**

### **Epic and Utilitarian Sculptures**

Sculptures from the Vijayanagara period also include human figures and animal motifs that narrate stories from epic texts such as the Mahabharata, Bhagavata, and Ramayana. Examples include the tales of UdamuriKannappa, Chiruthondanambi, and SitaKalyanam. These sculptures serve a utilitarian purpose, primarily aimed at conveying legendary stories to devotees. They are not purely decorative but have a didactic function. Notably, these sculptures are not strictly dualistic; they also exhibit the trigunatmika (three qualities) tradition, as seen in temples like LepakshiPapanasheswaram, HampiVithala Swami, KalahastiKalahasteswara Temple, and KanchiEkamranathaswamy Temples.

The human figures in these decorations are characterized by elongated arms (ajaanubahus) and women adorned with elaborate jewelry (sarvabharanbhushitas). The recurring depiction of Tandapa Krishna in these sculptures is believed to symbolize the flourishing Hindu philosophical traditions of the Vijayanagara period.

### **Secular Sculptures**

Secular sculptures from this era depict a variety of social scenes and professions. Prominent themes include Marangi Kula (flower sellers), Vainikula (musicians), Nattuvarandra (dancers), YuvatiYuvakula (youth), Ashvikula (horse riders), and warrior sculptures. These secular sculptures provide a contemporary feel, portraying men and women as described in the literary works of the time—varijakshas (lotus-eyed), rambhoras (slender-waisted), and ajanubahus (long-armed). This representation reinforces the Chittalakana-sampradaya (realistic tradition) that these depictions are grounded in reality rather than imagination.

The secular sculptures also showcase various recreational activities such as kandukakreeda (ball games), kolatam (stick dancing), running races, and chess. Additionally, they offer insights into the fashion and weaponry of the period, displaying details of male and female adornments, swords, shields, clubs, and spears. It is noteworthy that warriors wearing helmets are absent from Vijayanagara sculptures, indicating a possible cultural or stylistic preference.

### **Influence and Development of Vijayanagara Sculpture**

Although Vijayanagara sculpture shares similarities with Hoysala sculpture, it exhibits a unique development in its trigunatmakatha (three qualities narrative) style. This evolution is primarily attributed to the use of different building materials and construction techniques. The prevalence of temple construction, considered one of the seven acts of virtue, necessitated the use of softer stones

such as bandalet (local term for a type of stone), which were more suitable for detailed carvings than the harder granite stones. This shift contributed to the development of sculpture that resembled line paintings, characterized by intricate and delicate designs.

In conclusion, the ornamental and sculptural art of the Vijayanagara period, while influenced by earlier styles such as Hoysala, showcases a distinct evolution in its narrative techniques and decorative elements. The combination of religious, epic, and secular motifs reflects the cultural richness and artistic ingenuity of the time. This blend of tradition and innovation highlights the significance of Vijayanagara sculpture in the broader context of Indian art and architecture.

## **6. PAINTING IN THE VIJAYANAGARA PERIOD**

The pinnacle of Vijayanagara painting can be attributed to the Papanashesvara temple at Lepakshi. The temple's Rangamandapam and various other structures are adorned with remarkable frescoes. Among these, notable examples include GauriKalyanam, Dakshayagnam, Seethakalyanam, and PataPatrasai. These frescoes, created by mixing colors with lime water and applying them to a powdery wall or ceiling, exemplify the artistic excellence of the Vijayanagara painters. The eyes of the figures in these paintings, particularly in the depiction of Patapatrasai, reflect the exemplary virtue and skill of the artists.

From any vantage point in the Mahamandapam, the frescoes captivate the viewer's mind. The beauty and delicacy of these paintings can be compared to the pictorial styles of the Mughal period, showcasing a blend of medieval artistic traditions. The primary themes of these frescoes are derived from legends and the narratives of Puranas and Itihasas. The colors used were created by mixing natural juices and glues, resulting in vibrant shades of red, white, and green. These paintings are comprehensive in both perspective and shading, and their decorative elements are akin to the sculptural adornments found in Vijayanagara architecture. Similar frescoes can be observed in temples at Hampi, Anegondi, Somapalle, the Varadarajaswamy temple in Kanchi, and the Varthamana temple in TiruppanaKundram.

## **7. RELIGIOUS AND SOCIAL IMPACT OF VIJAYANAGARA ART**

The arts of the Vijayanagara period were deeply intertwined with religious traditions. Contrary to some opinions, it can be asserted without doubt that the temples and mathas of that era did not promote superstitions. Instead, they contributed to beneficial social integration and reinforced the absolute power of the Vijayanagara nobles. The art of this period helped bridge the gap between human civilization and nature, fostering a closer relationship with the natural world. The decorations and artistic expressions of that time were distinctive and played a significant role in achieving a fully matured state of art that was accessible to all societal classes.

Art historian Permi Brown notes that the architecture of the Vijayanagara period marks a mature stage of the Dravidian tradition. The southern predecessors of the Vijayanagara tradition, the Hoysalas and Pandyas, had achieved a high level of architectural excellence, which the Vijayanagara builders further developed and perfected. This legacy of artistic and architectural achievement not only highlights the cultural and historical significance of the Vijayanagara period but also underscores its lasting impact on Indian art and architecture.

## **8. DISCUSSION**

The architecture of the Vijayanagara Empire can be broadly categorized into religious, military, and secular structures. Temples were the most prominent, featuring a systematic layout consisting of multiple enclosures, including the Garbhagriha, Antarala, Ardhamandapa, and Mahamandapa. The

towering Rayagopurams served as monumental gateways, symbolizing both religious devotion and royal authority.

Forts were strategically constructed on hills with concentric enclosures, emphasizing defense rather than ornamentation. Palatial structures, though less preserved, indicate the sophistication of royal architecture.

Mandapams were central to temple architecture, serving both ritualistic and social functions. The Rangamandapam and Kalyanamandapam were particularly significant, hosting ceremonies such as divine marriages. These halls were supported by intricately carved pillars depicting dancers, deities, and mythical creatures.

Geometric precision played a crucial role, with shapes such as squares, rectangles, and hexagons forming the structural basis of temples. This geometric planning contributed to the three-dimensional (trigunatmaka) representation of sculptures and architectural harmony.

Sculpture was an integral part of Vijayanagara architecture and can be classified into:

- Floral Decorations: Lotus motifs and vine patterns symbolizing purity and aesthetic beauty
- Animal Motifs: Lions, horses, elephants, and mythical creatures adorning pillars
- Epic Sculptures: Narratives from the *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata*, and *Bhagavata*
- Secular Sculptures: Depictions of daily life, including dancers, musicians, warriors, and social activities

These sculptures served both decorative and didactic purposes, conveying religious stories and social values to the public.

### **Painting Tradition**

The Vijayanagara period also witnessed remarkable developments in painting, particularly frescoes. The murals at Lepakshi Temple represent the pinnacle of this tradition, depicting scenes such as *Dakshayagna*, *Gauri Kalyanam*, and *Sita Kalyanam*.

These paintings were created using natural pigments mixed with lime, resulting in vibrant colors and lasting impressions. The themes were primarily derived from Puranic and epic narratives, enhancing the religious atmosphere of temple spaces.

### **Cultural and Religious Significance**

Vijayanagara art was deeply intertwined with religion and society. Temples and associated institutions functioned as centers of education, charity, and cultural integration. The artistic expressions of this period bridged the gap between human life and nature, promoting harmony and social cohesion.

Moreover, the architecture reflects a synthesis of various traditions, demonstrating the empire's inclusive and adaptive cultural outlook.

## **9. CONCLUSION**

The art and architecture of the Vijayanagara Empire represent a culmination of South Indian artistic traditions, marked by innovation, grandeur, and cultural depth. The integration of architectural planning, sculptural richness, and pictorial expression highlights the advanced craftsmanship and aesthetic sensibilities of the period.

From monumental temples and forts to intricate sculptures and vibrant frescoes, Vijayanagara art stands as a testament to the empire's religious devotion and cultural sophistication. Its legacy continues to influence South Indian architecture and remains a vital part of India's heritage.

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