



**Rare Royal Indian Painted Table**

Kingdom of Travancore, India, c. 1866-1875

Carved and painted padouk

77cm high, 145cm diameter

Stock no.: A5855

Provenance: US private collection purchased in the 1990s.

This unique table is decorated with 22 oil paintings on each of the panels around the edge of the tabletop. They are arranged around a large floral burst in the central panel of the table, reminiscent of Dutch Old Master paintings. Carved into the rim of the table under each of the paintings is an escutcheon bearing a conch shell, the emblem of the Kingdom of Travancore. One of the panels features the portrait of Ayilyam Thirunal Varma, Maharajah of Travancore from 1860 to 1880. It appears to be copied from a photograph taken in 1866, when Ayilyam Thirunal received his first decoration from the British. As in this portrait, he wears the sash and medal of the Order of the Star of India. Our table may have been commissioned to commemorate this event, either as a gift to the Maharajah or from the Maharajah to the British colonial administration in recognition of his gratitude. Next to the Maharajah stands a woman who sports a large bun towards the front of her head, a distinctive hairstyle worn by the Nair women of Kerala. She is dressed in a white slip with a red shawl, a privilege reserved for royal women of Travancore, suggesting that this is the wife or daughter of the Maharajah. An example of royal

dress in this period is provided by Rajah Ravi Varma's 1887 painting *Presentation of a Jubilee Address to Queen Victoria* in the Royal Collections Trust (accession no. [RCIN 404097](#)).

The remaining panels depict scenes of caste and occupation in Travancore and parts of the Madras presidency, ranging from the Poo Pandaram, a Shaivite priestly caste, to the fishermen of the Kanikkaran.<sup>1</sup> In the background of several panels the *gopuram* of a Dravidian temple can be seen. It may be the Thanumalayan Temple in Suchindram, which was under the administration of the Maharajas of Travancore until the merger of Kanyakumari with Tamil Nadu. Ayilyam Thirunal introduced a lottery in 1875 to raise funds for the restoration of a large portion of the temple, and its inclusion may be a nod to his patronage.<sup>2</sup> The paintings are similar in theme to Company School watercolours produced in South India, such as an album in the British Museum (accession no. [1951.1006.0.1.8](#)) or another in the Victoria & Albert Museum (accession no. [D.307.9-1885](#)). However, no other examples of oil paintings of such scenes on furniture or wood are known.

The most esteemed court painter of Travancore was Raja Ravi Varma (1848-1906). Varma, who was closely related to the royal family of Travancore, was patronised by Ayilyam Thirunal. Varma was critically acclaimed during his own lifetime, winning medals at several international expositions.<sup>3</sup> Since his death, he has been internationally recognised and acclaimed as 'the father of Indian modern art'.<sup>4</sup> Though he is best known for his oil paintings of Indian mythology which amalgamate Western artistic techniques and traditional Indian iconography, he painted several scenes of courtly life which resemble those painted on the present table. An 1881 painting depicting Ayilyam Thirunal and his brother and heir, Visakhram Thirunal, welcoming the Duke of Buckingham, Governor of Madras, to Trivandrum, shares this style (now in the Ganesh Shivaswamy Foundation - [view here](#)). There is no evidence that Varma ever painted on wood, and without a signature it is impossible to make the attribution. However, the style, period, and fact that this was a royal commission make it likely that this was painted by a court artist in the circle of Varma.

The table itself is made from padouk, the wood of the *Pterocarpus* tree. It is carved in the style of the Madras Presidency. The rim of the tabletop is carved and pierced with a grapevine motif. The tilt-top mechanism stands on a columnar pedestal, which is carved with Rococo vegetal motifs. The base is comprised of four flat legs, carved with the same grapevine pattern and terminating in peacocks, standing on lobed ball feet. Standing on each of the legs is a fearsome lion with one paw raised and holding a cross. Though it is possible that the combination of lion, cross, and peacock represent the elements of a coat of arms, it is likely derived from designs in European cabinetry books such as Thomas Chippendale's *Gentleman & Cabinetmaker's Director* and Thomas Sheraton's *Cabinetmaker and Upholsterer's Drawing-Book*, which European clients provided for Indian craftsman.<sup>5</sup>

*n.b. accession nos are clickable links*

[1] Vysakh, A.S., 'Ethnographic Notes on Travancore as Gleaned from 18th Century Paintings', *Heritage: Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies in Archaeology* 8.1 (2020), pp. 811-840; Iyer, L.A. Krishna. *The Travancore Tribes and Castes*, vol. 1. Trivandrum: Superintendent Government Press, 1937. p. 59.

[2] Sugulchand Jain, N. *Lotteries: Beyond Fortunes*. New Delhi: Sugul and Damani, 2005. p. 55.

[3] Mitter, Partha. *Art and Nationalism in Colonial India, 1850-1922: Occidental Orientations*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994. p. 182.

[4] Kapur, Geeta. 'Representational Dilemmas of a Nineteenth-Century Painter: Raja Ravi Varma', *When Was Modernism: Essays on Contemporary Cultural Practice in India*. New Delhi: Tulika, 2000. pp. 145-178; p. 147.

[5] Jaffer, Amin. *Furniture from British India and Ceylon. A Catalogue of the Collection in the Victoria and Albert Museum and the Peabody Essex Museum*. New Delhi: Timeless Books, 2001. pp. 15-16.