

# Painting Processions: The Social and Religious Landscape of Southern India in a 'Company' Album

Crispin Branfoot

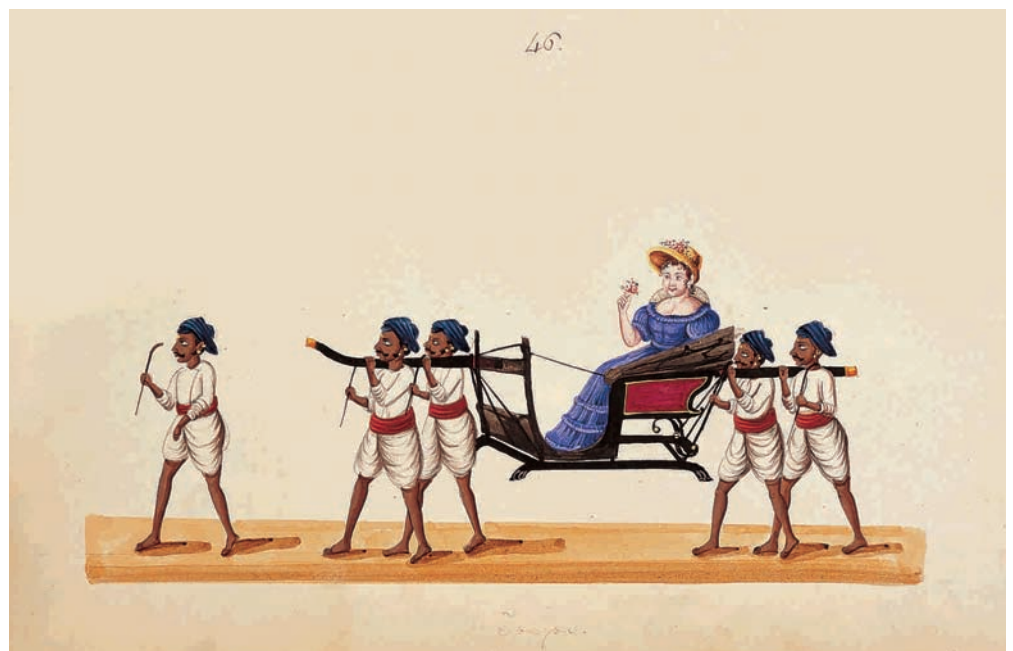
Travellers and residents in foreign countries often take home images of the places and people they have encountered, both as personal mementos and to inform their friends of their travels. Before the widespread use of photography in the later 19th century, many Europeans based in South Asia purchased sets of paintings depicting the flora, fauna, monuments and peoples of the region. Created by local artists but targeted specifically at a European audience, these works – often compiled into albums – constitute a popular genre known as 'Company' paintings. The name derives from the various East India companies established by Europeans in South and Southeast Asia, and in particular is associated with the paintings produced for the British from the late 18th to the late 19th century in India and adjacent territories such as Nepal and Sri Lanka.

The creators of Company paintings were often artists who had previously found employment at the Mughal and other provincial courts of India. However, by the late 1770s, the influx of Westerners either resident in or passing through British-ruled India provided them with a new kind of clientele. Local artists now frequently adapted both their subject-matter and their stylistic conventions to suit this new mar-

ket. One of the principal criteria for the identification of a Company painting 'is the degree to which it objectively observes the Indian scene in all its aspects, including natural history and human society' (Archer, 1992, p. 11). The main centres for production were in areas under British rule for long periods: Patna, Oudh, Calcutta and Murshidabad in the east; Delhi and Agra in the north; and Tanjavur and Trichy in the south.

In producing these works, Indian artists experimented both with new materials, such as pen-and-ink and watercolours, and new techniques, such as a receding foreground and shadowing. The quality varies from region to region and over the course of the century in which Company paintings were produced: some of the finest were the product of direct patronage, while others were made for the open market in the manner of postcard sets, especially as the number of Europeans increased significantly in the early 19th century. Such images are often depicted against a flat background, a characteristic commonly seen in album sets produced between 1820 and 1850. The figures are detached from their context; there is no intention to represent a particular person, strata of society, moment or place. Craft activities,

(Figs 1a-h) An album of  
'Company' paintings  
South India, c. 1830s-40s  
Watercolours on paper  
Height 22 cm, width 35 cm  
London Missionary Society/Council for  
World Mission Archives (CWML 500)



(Fig. 1a) Folio 46 showing a European lady on a palanquin

occupations and public religious events are subjects in their own right.

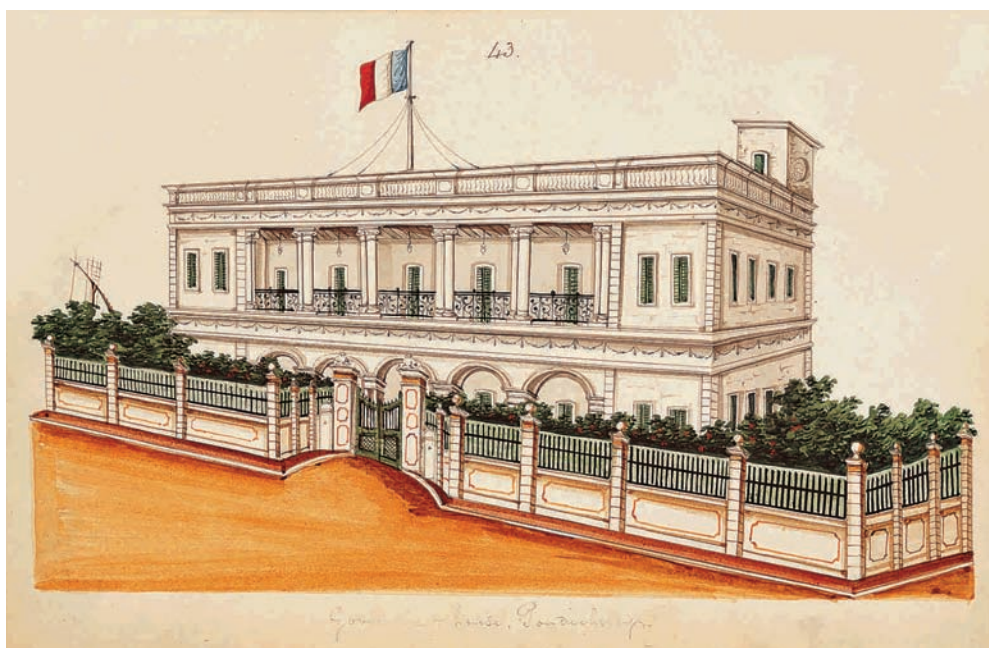
The Council for World Mission archives and library, on permanent deposit at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in London, features a particularly fine album of Company paintings produced in South India during the 1830s or the 1840s. The album is in the form of a bound manuscript containing 46 watercolours on European paper, each measuring 22 by 35 centimetres. Over half of these paintings depict a man and a woman against a bare background, engaged in a variety of occupations and crafts typical of the period. The remainder are of religious processions, marriage and funeral rites, and local architecture. Each work is numbered in pencil with a label identifying the scene in English.

Although the artists were Indian, the themes of these paintings appeal to a European eye, and their aesthetic conventions mediate between the two. These characteristics mark 'Company' painting as a distinct phase in South Asia's long pictorial tradition. A precedent for the genre and conventions of Company painting is an album of watercolours, dated between 1533 and 1546, in the Biblioteca Casanatense in Rome. The 141 illustrations depict the customs and costumes of the native peoples inhabiting the lands occupied by the vast Portuguese maritime empire, which stretched from the Red Sea to India, Sri Lanka, Indonesia and China. Like the later Company paintings, a large proportion of this earlier album's illustrations show a standing man and woman, who serve as representative examples of a social group or occupation, while others depict deities and festivals (ibid., 1992, pp. 12-13). By the 17th century, Europeans in India were already collecting paintings by Indian artists and

commissioning works from them. The paintings acquired by the Italian traveller Niccolao Manucci (1639-1717) in Golconda and Madras between 1685 and 1705 – and now divided between the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris and the Library of San Marco in Venice – similarly demonstrate the accommodation of European tastes and curiosity in subject-matter (Archer, 1970).

Collections assembled by European missionaries in South Asia have provided many Western museum collections with a range of dated ethnographic material from the late 18th century onwards, including textiles, folk paintings, mass-produced popular prints and portable wood shrines, as well as Company paintings. The SOAS album was formerly owned by the Reverend William Thompson (1811-89), a British missionary who was based in southern India from about 1836 to 1849. Thompson was connected with the Bellary Mission in modern Karnataka and, during the 15 years he lived there, also spent time in Madras. After the death of his wife, Jessie, in 1849, he left India to pursue his missionary work in southern Africa, where he lived in Cape Town until his death in 1889. The dates of his sojourn in India suggest the approximate dating for the production of the SOAS painting album.

Commissioned examples of Company paintings often included portraits of the patron, his family and servants or depictions of his home. An early 19th century example of a commissioned album is in the India Office Collection of the British Library (Add. Or. 39-70; see Archer, 1972, pp. 34-36). Dated *circa* 1828, it includes paintings of servants who are identified by name, a European man in a palanquin (probably the patron, who was the Fort Adjutant in Vellore) and a colonial mansion, all captioned as being in Vellore. The SOAS album likewise features depictions of Europeans, in-



(Fig. 1b) Folio 43 showing 'Government House, Pondicherry'



(Fig. 1c) Folio 14 showing a 'Coppersmith'

cluding a man and a woman riding in separate palanquins, suggesting that it was also a commissioned work (Fig. 1a). Although it is tempting to postulate that the European figures represented are Thompson and his wife, the fashions in which they are dressed are slightly anachronistic, appearing to date to around 1825-32 judging by European trends of the time. Even allowing for a delay of a year or two for these styles to reach India, this still would predate the British missionary's arrival. Two architectural paintings in the album provide other clues hinting at a different patron. These are depictions of important 18th century public buildings in French-administered Pondicherry, suggesting that the original patron was French (Fig. 1b). It thus can be concluded

that this album was probably painted by a Tanjavur artist working in Pondicherry or nearby Karaikal.

The first 28 folios of the SOAS album feature pairs of figures, a man in three-quarter view and a woman in profile, with labels identifying their occupations. These variously include a basket-maker, a shoemaker holding a pair of European boots, a carpenter making a European cupboard, a potter with a wheel, a stone-cutter and individual iron-, silver- and coppersmiths, the latter beating out a copper water-pot or *lota* (Fig. 1c). These craftspeople are joined by depictions of itinerant sellers of birds, toddy (an alcoholic drink made from palm sap), fish, coloured glass bangles and medicinal remedies. Other paintings and groupings include



(Fig. 1d) Folio 26 showing 'A native chief of superior rank'



depictions of a butcher, barber, clothes-washer, house servants attending to two European girls, a head servant with a parasol, and 'a native chief of superior rank' holding a sheathed sword over his shoulder and wearing a beautiful embroidered coat (Fig. 1d). While the depiction of these anonymous figures is standardized, the artist was clearly intimately familiar with the details of his subjects' occupations. In addition, the varied dress and textiles of southern India are all depicted with great attention to pattern, colour and sartorial codes.

Following these paintings is a series of five folios showing the various stages of a Hindu wedding: the bridegroom on a white horse going to meet his future in-laws; the bride and groom seated underneath a textile awning decorated with banana fronds while Brahmins conduct the ceremony before them and musicians play alongside; and a decorated palanquin for the newly-weds to ride in. Two other folios show scenes from a Hindu funeral: a deceased woman being carried in a procession and prepared for cremation, respectively.

While sometimes portrayed as a bastion of Hindu orthodoxy, southern India has always been a region of multiple religious traditions. For example, Islam has been present from at least the 10th century, while Christianity also has roots dating over many centuries – some would argue since the 1st century with the arrival of St Thomas – but more conclusively with the landing of the Portuguese on the South Indian coast after 1500. In the Hindu, Muslim and Christian communities, processions during religious festivals are important public events. Reflecting this tradition, a variety of religious processions is notably depicted in a series of six paintings in the SOAS album. A Muslim procession – which at first appears to be part of a Muharram celebration more

typical of northern India – is understood on close examination to be part of a Sufi festival celebrated at *dargahs* (tombs) in southern India, involving the ceremonial transportation of pots of sandalwood paste to the tomb of a saint (Bayly, p. 143) (Fig. 1e). Four Hindu festival scenes show a rich spectrum of activities. In one, an image of Shiva seated on his bull-mount, Nandi, is carried towards the pyramidal gateway (*gopura*) of a walled temple. Another image shows an alternative form of transport used for deities in addition to the palanquin and animal vehicle (*vahana*): this is the huge wood temple chariot known as a *ratha* or *ter*, on which the deity's image is placed and drawn around the public streets surrounding a temple (Fig. 1f). This ritual normally takes place on a single day in the year, usually after a great annual event such as the marriage festival of a god and goddess. In this scene, five men with standards precede a larger group pulling on ropes to drag the *ratha* along. This is decorated with brightly coloured textiles, hanging garlands and painted model horses, and the deity is attended by two women waving yak-hair fly-whisks (Fig. 1f).

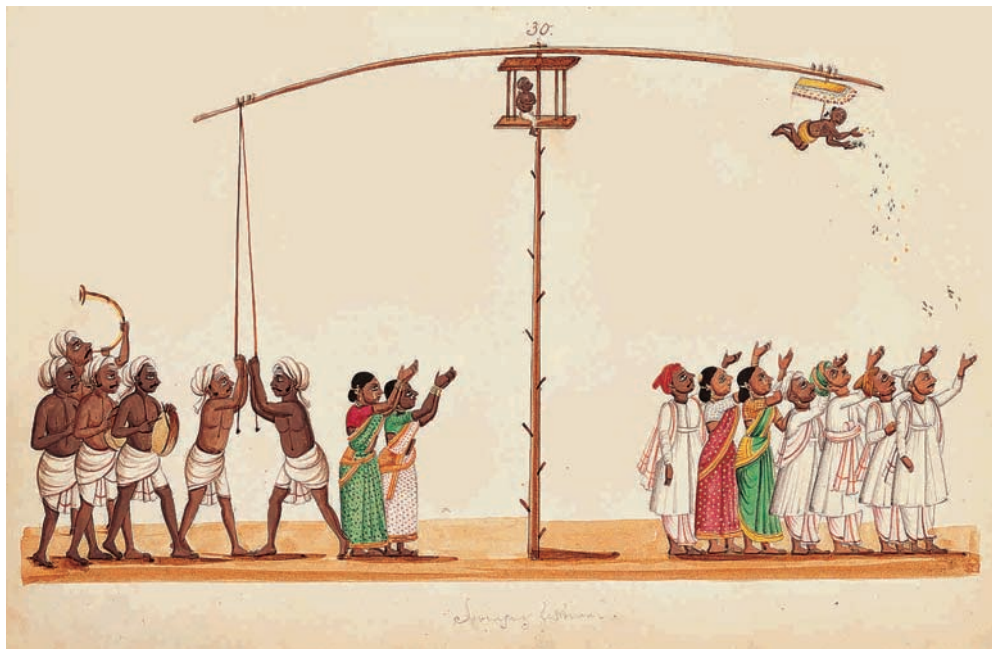
Two other paintings depict fire-walking and hook-swinging, festival events that both fascinated and horrified Europeans of the period. In the first scene, a man steps across a bed of glowing coals before a group of men with Vaishnava caste-marks preparing to do the same, and another group holding a goddess in a palanquin on their shoulders. In the second scene, a crowd watches as a man suspended by hooks through the muscles of his back hangs from a long cross-beam atop a tall pole (known in Tamil as a *cedil*) (Fig. 1g). As is common practice, he scatters flower petals over the crowd of men and women below, conferring blessings upon them, while a group of musicians play. These extreme forms of asceticism, together with the piercing of the tongue or



(Fig. 1e) Folio 29 showing 'A Muhammedan procession'



(Fig. 1f) Folio 32 showing 'Drawing an idol car'



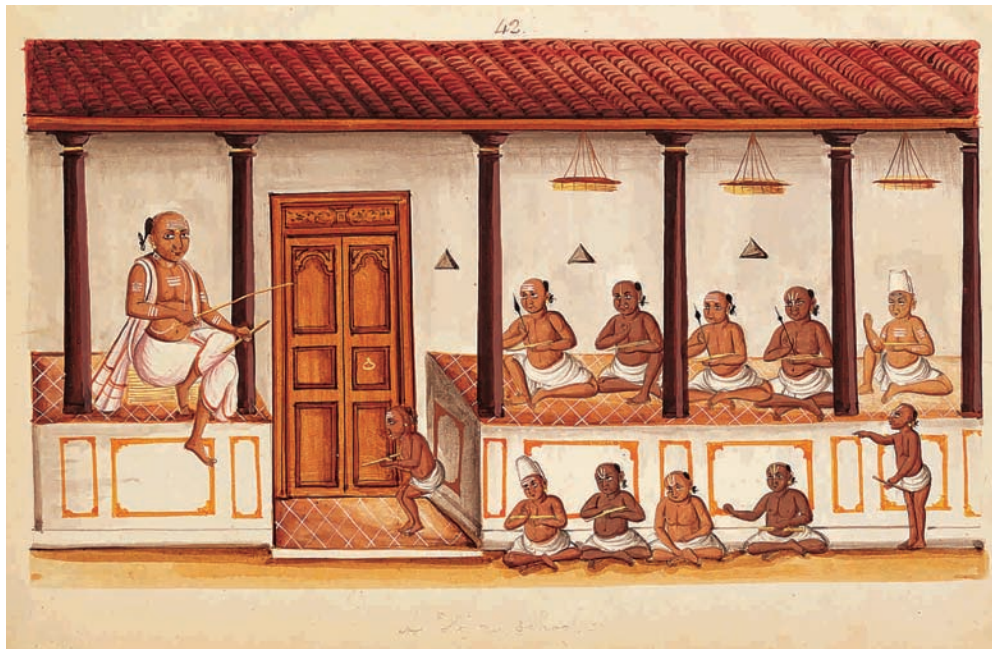
(Fig. 1g) Folio 30 showing 'Swinging festival'

cheeks with metal weapons or hooks, are common among lower-caste Tamil communities. They are associated with the worship of powerful local deities such as Murukan, identified with Shiva's son Skanda, and the independent goddess Mariyamman. In the later 19th century, the growing influence of European missionaries and the criticism voiced by the Western-educated Indian elite led to a campaign to ban hook-swinging in eastern and southern India, the main areas where it was practised (Oddie, 1995). Widely disseminated paintings of this practice, such as the one depicted here, contributed to written accounts in the press that led to its attempted suppression.

Late 18th and early 19th century 'Company' painting

albums from South India typically contained schematic depictions of religious buildings featuring site-specific deities in their temples, such as Minakshi at Madurai or Ranganatha at Srirangam, and often accompanied by identifying captions in Tamil or Telugu and English. The SOAS album departs somewhat from this convention in its final three paintings of architectural structures. The first shows a scene in a religious school where a Shaiva man seated on the raised front porch of a traditional Tamil-style house faces eleven smaller male figures, perhaps adolescents, all inscribing palm leaves with a metal stylus – the traditional medium for texts in southern India even after the introduction of paper in the 13th century (Fig. 1h). Hanging from the ceiling





(Fig. 1h) Folio 42 showing 'A Hindu school'

between the heavy teak columns are bundles of manuscripts. The other two paintings are of specific European-built structures in Pondicherry: the Palais du Gouvernement (Government House, now Raj Nivas) with the French tricolour flying from the roof, and the Baroque-style Eglise de Notre Dame de la Conception (Cathedral of Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception). The latter is painted in a European Picturesque manner with a sense of perspective and some indication of the immediate surroundings. (The former building was constructed around 1770 following the destruction of Pondicherry by the British in 1761, while the church was completed in 1791.)

South Asian Company paintings are, in essence, a pictorial response to the cultural encounter between Europe and South Asia. The SOAS album perfectly illustrates the point made by William and Mildred Archer that, at least until the 1830s, 'Indian landscapes and "native characters" were not merely instances of the picturesque; they were news' (Archer and Archer, p. 103). The album also exemplifies the 19th century interest in classification and ordering. In India this is widely seen in the surveying, and later the census activities, of British colonial administrators and soldiers such as Colin Mackenzie (1754-1821) and Francis Buchanan (1762-1829). However, it is important to note that South Asian painting albums are not an isolated phenomenon. During the same period, works with similar characteristics – the so-called 'China Trade' paintings – were also produced for a European market by local artists in south China (Clunas, 1984).

From the 1860s, Indian artists painting for a European audience had to compete with the newly introduced medium of photography, which soon came to dominate ethnographic and architectural studies; by the 1890s, the genre of Com-

pany painting had largely disappeared. The SOAS album offers a glimpse of an earlier era of visual interaction between South Asia and its European visitors. The circulation of such paintings helped to form an image of Indian society and religion in European communities within South Asia and also, indeed, for those at home.

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