

INDIA

FRENZ, A. and K. K. MARAR. *Wall Paintings in North Kerala/India: 1000 Years of Temple Art*. Stuttgart: Arnoldsche Art Publishers, 2004. 208 pages, color illustrations. Hardcover US\$75.00/£45.00; ISBN 3-89790-208-7.

The book focuses on the tradition of wall painting in South Indian temples. It is a documentation of murals in thirty temples in the region of northern Kerala. From the twelfth century onwards, artists decorated the exterior walls of the sanctum with pictures of important deities, like Shiva, Vishnu, Krishna, or Bhagavati. These scenes illustrate the rich Hindu mythology as well as the famous epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. The murals are painted in the Dravidian style, with yellowish red as the basic color and additional white, black, green, and bluish shades.

The book is co-authored by the German pastor and Indologist Albrecht Frenz and Krishna Kumar Marar, a photographer, teacher, and artist from Kerala. It has two forwards, by Heinrich von Stietencron, a German professor of Indology, and the Malayalam scholar Scaria Zacharia respectively. The core of the book (166 pages; 289 mainly color photographs) consists of thirty chapters that each introduces one temple site with its wall paintings. After a picture of the main building, several murals are shown (often close-ups) and explained. Additionally, there is a map to indicate the location of the temples. In the first chapter only—about the Shiva temple in Todikalam—some further information is provided on the architectural setting, the main construction (*srikovil*), and its ritual use. A total of 61 photographs of this laboriously restored Shiva temple (completed in 2003) give a vivid impression of its beauty. In the epilogue, Albrecht Frenz describes some basic features of Hindu iconography, the historical background of wall paintings in India as well as its present state in Kerala (27 pages, 10 photographs). Since the language of the book is both English and German, the amount of textual information given in this section is rather limited.

The main value of this book is that it invites the reader to consider a fascinating and hitherto rarely accessible tradition of Indian wall painting. The credit for this must go basically to the photographer Krishna Kumar Marar, who has painstakingly located and

documented these murals over a period of about thirty years. Nevertheless, the book has several shortcomings, which reduce its value as a scholarly contribution:

1. Besides the few lines that accompany each mural's depiction and explain its iconographic features, the authors do not provide any additional information about the respective temple. The chapter on Todikalām is promising and hints toward further investigation that could have been aimed for in case of the other temple sites. The epilogue by Albrecht Frenz, however, deals with the subject matter on a very general level. Since both authors only occasionally refer to secondary sources, readers are left to speculate whether this gap reflects a purely aesthetic approach to the murals or rather the current state of research work—in art, archaeology, and other disciplines.
2. With the exception of Todikalām, there are no hints regarding the measurements of the wall paintings. It often remains unclear whether the photographer focused on the entire mural or just a section. Apparently, some pictures show murals in various states of corrosion. In the epilogue the reader learns that some of the wall paintings have been demolished, others underwent restoration. However, apart from some black-and-white pictures (taken in 1983, page 62), there is no information about when photographs were taken. In cases where further deterioration or other problems occur (for example, fungus, or theft), this kind of data would be very helpful. Besides, there is no indication as to whether the date following a temple name actually refers to its construction or the age of the murals (as mentioned with reference to a list in the epilogue, pages 188 to 189).
3. The authors fail to compare the aesthetics and iconography of these murals with any other Dravidian art, whether they be ritual paintings or local dance traditions and their costumes (for instance *teyyam*). Neither do they consider any other historical or contemporary Indian conventions of wall painting.
4. The terminology used needs some thorough revision. For instance, the term *bhuta mala* is translated as “gnome border” (14), although the category of *bhuta* (literally, spirit) in South India may include goddesses like Bhagavati or Kali. Here the term designates “male and female figures, some of which are in erotic positions or playing musical instruments” (14)—who considers them “gnomes” and why? Similarly, the Shivaite symbols of *linga* and *yoni* are reduced to a Freudian reading as “an erect penis” and “the vagina,” which literally indicate fertility (180). In the German original, the technical term *svastika* is loosely rendered “Hakenkreuz” (182), and hence evokes the Nazi symbol with its arms bent towards the right (different to many Indian versions). Finally, there are obvious typing mistakes. For instance, the map of India spells “Dehli” (instead of “Delhi”) and freely mixes English and German versions (“India,” “Kalkutta”).

According to the publisher, the book aims to invite Non-Hindus to consider the culture and religion of India. This invitation, however, is hardly backed up with substance. It is a book neither for beginners nor for those interested in Hindu rituals. Some basic knowledge on Hindu mythology, however, will encourage art lovers and religious scholars alike to devote themselves to the expressiveness and poetics of these murals. Since, in recent years, other Indian traditions of wall painting have received close scholarly attention—for instance the murals in Shekavati (Rajasthan) or the *osakothi* tradition in Orissa (FISCHER and PATHY 1996)—it might be difficult for Albrecht Frenz und Krishna Kumar Marar to meet the expectations of some readers.

REFERENCE CITED

FISCHER, Eberhard, and Dinanath PATHY

- 1996 *Murals for Goddesses and Gods: The Tradition of Osakothi Ritual Painting in Orissa, India*. Indira Gandhi National Centre of the Arts, New Delhi and Museum Rietberg, Zürich.

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