

Light of Devotion

Oil Lamps of Kerala

Carol Radcliffe Bolon

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Note on names of towns

This book uses the readopted traditional names of major towns in India. Kerala, land of coconuts, has reverted to use of city names that existed before the British renamed them. Both forms are in current use. The traditional names are now the new names. The old names are the former British names:

Traditional/Historic/Modern	Former (British)
Thiruvananthapuram	Trivandrum state capital
Kollam	Quilon
Alappuzha	Allepy
Kochi	Cochin (Ernaculum)
Thrissur	Trichur
Palakkad	Palghat
Kozhikode	Calicut
Kannur	Cannanore
Thripunithura	Tripunitura
Thanjavur	Tanjore, Tamil Nadu
Mumbai	Bombay, Maharashtra
Chennai	Madras, Tamil Nadu
Bengaluru	Bangalore, Karnataka

The three regions of Kerala are from north to south: Malabar, Cochin/Kochi, and Travancore/Thiruvithamkoor

Chapter 1

Art of Devotion

This study began as a documentation of the remarkable oil lamps in the Thrissur State Museum collection in Kerala merely to describe them and appreciate their aesthetic qualities. It began to grow when similar pieces were discovered in international collections.

The context of oil lamps in Kerala rituals, their legends, their festival use, seemed to enrich their place in world art and add to the distinct nature of Kerala lamps.

The fact that the metal art of Kerala had not been studied despite its excellence impelled my interest in adding a chapter on this art to the history of Indian art.

Although the earliest figural lamps of Kerala are of greatest interest, the brilliant diversity of other well-known types of lamps cried for inclusion since that too is a subject not previously broached in Indian art history.

During examination of the objects, surprisingly recognizable style and technology progression emerged into view suggesting dating clues for the lamps and for three-dimensional figure sculptures surviving in Kerala and around the world in public and private collections. Thus, the dating of Kerala's metal art can be seen in progressive stages despite the absence of dated pieces. While inscriptional records of gifts of oil, lamps, land to be worked to financially support oil lamps, etc. to temples underline the great importance of oil lamps to Hindu worship, paleographic study of inscribed lamps could in the future further the grounding of the early history of its metal sculpture.

Kerala's culture is rich and unique and is an important component of South Indian art, Indian art and world art. Yet, the study of South Indian bronze sculpture has been dominated by appreciation of Chola Dynasty bronzes of Tamil Nadu created from the 10th to the 13th centuries and their imitators. Many of these are exquisite and large, having been made for public viewing. In fact, the art of Kerala bronze images seems to have nothing to do in size, style, genre, function or temperament with the contemporary Chola bronzes though both are predominantly Hindu. Sculpted images in Kerala that bear Tamil traits are evidence of later influences, post-17th century from the Nayaks.¹ Early Kerala figure sculpture, so distinct from Chola imagery, deserves its chapter in the history of Indian religious art.

The oil lamps of Kerala are among the finest works of Indian art displaying infinite variety, ingenuity, skill and above all aesthetic excellence. The figural representations found on many lamps are of the greatest refinement in relief casting. There is no lesser quality of these miniature sculptures; they stand well in comparison to the best of three-dimensional or relief figures of deities in bronze and wood. Today the workshops producing any of these forms or media are not the same artists. Lamps are made by specific communities. Most brass and bell

¹ R. Nagaswamy, *South Indian Bronzes: Kerala*, in K. Khandalawala, ed. *Indian Bronze Masterpieces, the Great Tradition*, p. 17

metal lamps are made by *moosaris*, while gold lamps are made by a *thattan*. Metal workers are skilled artisans with titles and special hereditary privileges granted by temple priests as the reward for their work. Possibly in centuries past there was no such division of specialties but a single workshop. The functions of the diverse lamp types are also varied from ritual processional use, illumination of temple sanctuaries, to stage lights for Kathakali and other performance arts enacted in temples or to light domestic shrines. The lamps are worthy of study for their aesthetic value alone but exist and persist in a full and rich context. The Hindu precept of *akhanda jyot* means that a lamp used for worship should burn without interruption. The offering of lit lamps to deities is one of the nine essential Brahmanical forms of worship.

The tradition of their ritual use continues today. In addition, they are now also present in homes, hotels, restaurants, at weddings and at business meetings to solemnify any agreements or contracts.

The early survivors of Kerala lamps may hold the key to establishment of a chronology for Kerala sculpture inasmuch as the lamps quite often are individual figures, or bear throngs of small figures. Complex figure groups enliven many lamps, though that type of narrative figural lamp is no longer made and such examples are among the earliest. One lamp in the form of a temple model above an oil plate, 18 inches tall, bears many figures that directly compare in style to Kerala temple procession figures in bronze. While their inscriptions rarely include dates, we can date them by paleography confirmed generally by style of the images. Dates of such lamps can be extended to similar undated sculptures allowing us to establish a chronology of the surviving larger temple images more than has been possible in earlier research.² This analysis of the inscriptions on early Kerala lamps has not yet been undertaken.

The great charm of the Kerala bronze, brass or bell metal figures on lamps derives from a heroic and dramatic intensity that seems to relate to the dance drama of Kathakali and other Hindu traditions of dance theater. In physiognomy, costume and gesture a major type of Kerala bronze image is quite like the visual expression of dancers in the Kerala Hindu tradition of dance theater. The heroic aspect of Hindu gods is emphasized. Their expressive faces have full and luscious features, broad mouths and bulging eyes. Their bodies are plump, compact and square. Their jewelry and its disposition on the body is distinct from other regional art styles or adornments and is familiar, especially in crown shapes, from the living dance theater. Small, about seven-inch, three-dimensional bronzes are often cast as groups of figures in a dramatic dioramic natural setting, for example Rama flanked by Sita and Lakshmana cast under a large spreading tree whose branches shelter all three figures (Figure 1). In this way, a literal vision of the great epic accounts of the god's exploits is created but one that is curiously like an outdoor stage set. In sharp contrast to the sinuous South Indian Chola bronze images of Tamil Nadu of the gods and goddesses, Kerala figures, as three-dimensional images or as relief figures on lamps, are dramatic, intense and bursting with robust liveliness, but not sensuous in the same way. Similar adjectives apply to the traditional dances and dancers of Kerala - Kathakali and Yakshgana.³ Yakshagana, which originated in Karnataka, is no longer performed in Kerala, but other dance forms such as Mohiniattam and Theyyam may be relevant.

² M. G. S. Narayanan, *Perumals of Kerala*, Thrissur, CosmoBooks, 2018: 25, notes that in the Chera period changes in letters in Valleluttu script from century to century helps date undated inscriptions.

³ M. B. Heston, *Powerful Bodies: Kerala Style Bronzes and Thinking about a Regional Style*, *Archives of Asian Art*, 54, 2004



Figure 1. Rama, Sita and Lakshmana, Kerala, c. 12th century, 6.5 inches, Collection of the late Dinesan Natesan, Bengaluru

The early metal oil lamps of Kerala of around the 14th century (possibly some exist from the 12th century or earlier) may be the finest ever created in South Asia or at least surviving. What was the motivation for producing so many wonderful oil lamps? Most were made on commission as a *dev danam* or *diya*, an offering to the gods, a meritorious gift presented to a temple priest in Kerala by a devout Hindu, perhaps a rich merchant or a ruler. In this way Hindu temple oil lamps are different from oil lamps of other cultures. While some in India were practical devices for lighting the night, these Hindu lamps were made to carry prayers to the notice of god through ritual use of light. Mosques are lit by lamps that are often glass painted with enamel and gilded. One such mosque lamp displayed in the Freer Gallery of Art, Washington D. C., bears a painted calligraphic inscription on its flaring neck which could be read easily when the lamp was lit (Figure 2). It compares the light of God to the light of a lamp glowing in the darkness.⁴ Thus, the divine and light are associated as they are in Hinduism, but the Islamic Egyptian lamp's function is to light space and create a special ambiance, not to carry a prayer.

Oil lamps may suffer scholarly discrimination as minor decorative arts just as they are mostly unnoticed by Hindus, so accustomed to their presence as they worship. Decorative art means any arts that are concerned with the design and decoration of objects that are chiefly prized for their utility rather than for their purely aesthetic qualities. Indian decorative arts are vastly understudied although their aesthetic qualities are often remarkable. Around the

⁴ F1957.19, Egypt, Mamluk period, c. 1360.



Figure 2. Oil lamp, Egypt, Mamluk period, c. 1360, Freer Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. F1957.19

world in ancient times the night was lit by oil lamps. Many cultures have documented their ancient bronze oil lamps extensively and they range from simple to deluxe as for example in Renaissance Italy. Yet what every Hindu knows about temple lamps, so basic to worship and traditions, is virtually unknown to non-Hindus. In the very limited literature on the topic, oil lamps are variously referred to as metal objects, metal art, utensils, ritual metal ware, ritual accessories, religious articles, ceremonial utensils, temple paraphernalia, industrial arts, minor arts, votive lamps, mobile lamps and stationary lamps, liturgical objects, motif lamps and decorative art objects. The use of oil lamps in Kerala and other regions is not restricted to Hindu temple worship. Similar lamps were made for use in Jewish, Christian and Muslim worship and are also found in secular locations blessing homes, restaurants, shops and hotels. Fire is of central importance to Zoroastrians (Parsis) but the oil lamps used in worship are simple pots of oil. Small clay single wick oil lamps, like pinch pots, are ubiquitous in India, but the focus of this study is on their more illustrious relatives cast in bronze, brass, bell metal, gold and silver. A large body of tribal or folk art coexists which does include oil lamps, often

very energetic and expressive but of a rather stiff aesthetic quality. At Theyyam temples in northern Kerala, Malabar, many of the same types of oil lamps are still used as are found further south in Kerala. Many diverse folk examples including Kerala oil lamps have been published by Kelkar, Anderson and Aryan. Tribal and folk forms of lamps are also outside this study, but certainly deserve full examination.

Because of the tradition of replacing old lamps with new shiny ones, replacing old thin metal lighter weight lamps with more expensive, heavy thick lamps, for purposes of this study established collections of museums or private collectors have been relied upon. These lamps are documented as to their age. The oldest preserved examples are of historical interest. Many of the same general designs continue to be made today by means of mass production, the ubiquitous type being the nila vilakku, a lamp made to be stationary.

Collections

Some public and other private collections of oil lamps have preserved their history. In Kerala, Thrissur was established as a center of great culture from early medieval times. The Thrissur State Museum has the most outstanding collection of oil lamps. The capital of the Trivandrum royal family, Thiruvananthapuram, likewise has left a rich collection of temple lamps some now displayed in the Kuthira Maliga or Kuthiamalika, Palace Museum or the Mansion of Horses (so called because of the horse heads carved to decorate the windows upstairs). This museum is located near the entrance to the great royal Padmanabhaswamy temple.

Raja Kelkar was a pioneer in collecting the other arts of India, the everyday arts, and his collection is rich in oil lamps to be seen today in his museum in Pune. He took great joy in the creativity and ingenuity of folk traditions and objects, as did K. C. Aryan. In Gurugram the K. C. Aryan Museum of Folk, Tribal and Neglected Art has a collection including folk lamp examples. Four generations of Natesans have collected and helped to build many collections of Indian art with a special interest in the art of Kerala. Lily Vijayaraghavan has a rich collection of more than 300 lamps gathered over her lifetime in her private collection in Chennai. Radeesh Shetty's collection in Bengaluru is substantial. Dakshina Chitra (museum) near Chennai displays regional types of lamps that are traditional but not old. There is a museum of lamps in Kozhikode. The Madras Government Museum has a collection of more than forty lamps published by Edgar Thurston in 1913.⁵ Also, in India the Napier Museum in Thiruvananthapuram, the Thrissur State Museum, and the Crafts Museum, New Delhi, have wonderful examples. The Museum of Art and Photography in Bengaluru and the Folklore Museum in Kochi have basic collections of lamps. Some lamps have been collected outside India. In the USA the Honolulu Museum of Art, Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Denver Art Museum, University of Missouri, Colombia, Museum of Art and Archaeology, the Bhansali collection in New Orleans and at the New Orleans Museum of Art, the Art Institute of Chicago and the Fowler Museum of UCLA in Los Angeles have some quality pieces.⁶ In Europe the British Museum, the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford and the Staatliche Museum in Munich have outstanding pieces. In Kerala families cherish their heirloom oil lamps and give others as temple dev danam or wedding gifts but they are not considered to be art objects

⁵ E. Thurston, V. Asari, and W. S. Hadaway, *Illustrations of Metalwork in Brass and Copper Mostly South Indian*. Madras, Government Museum, 1913

⁶ S. Anderson, *Flames of Devotion*, Los Angeles: UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History, 2006

to collect. Such is the depth of the Hindu tradition in Kerala. Probably the most remarkable oil lamps are unknown to the world because they are private family treasures. Namboodri women have a separate puja room by the kitchen of the house where a bronze tray serves as a platform for small figures of deities. They are referred to as kitchen gods. There are also undoubtedly other temple, public and private collections with excellent examples of oil lamps, mostly unpublished. No doubt exquisite examples which are not to be seen by the public at all are preserved in the treasury beneath the royal Padmanabhaswamy temple in Thiruvananthapuram. The trove is sealed and it is strictly protected as it belongs only to the god. It must be an exhilarating collection that would rewrite the history of art in Kerala if released (I am not advocating that it should be).⁷

The great variety and ingenuity of design of oil lamps of Kerala is often cited. At least 30 standard traditional types of oil lamps with individual names and distinct ritual functions are seen in Kerala. Some lamp types have multiple names or regional terminology. There are also lamps that can be one of a kind that seem to be the result of pure artistic ingenuity and sometimes humor. Many combine standard elements, lotus bud, birds, animals, trees, in a new format.

This monograph focuses on illustrating and explaining extraordinary examples of 12 of the major traditional types using other examples for comparison.

Festivals

The culture of lamps is inherent in the culture of India. Deepavali (Diwali), the India-wide holiday of lights, occurs for five days in Oct.-Nov. to celebrate the mythic event when Rama returned to India from Sri Lanka as a hero having rescued Sita, and the days are getting shorter. Lamps light up villages and cities all over India, but these are mostly small, clay oil cups, returned to the earth after use. Every Hindu home has one or more oil lamps and these are also lit for these holidays. Although Diwali is important all over India, it is not very popular in Kerala. Instead, Kartika Vilakku, during the Hindu month of Karthika (full moon day in November) is when homes are decorated with lamps, especially *gajalakshmi* lamps (Figures 25, 28, 31). Lamps are important also at the annual festival held on Makara Sankranti in Kerala at the Sabarimala temple in January.

The Lakshadeepam festival on January 14/15 marks the grand finale of a *yajna* or ritual sacrifice wherein Shri Padmanabhaswamy (Vishnu) is adored at the temple in Thiruvananthapuram by lighting of a *lakh*, 100,000, of lamps. This event occurs every six years and will occur next in 2022. It is a spectacular event which lights the sky.⁸

While lamps are practical to light the movements of priests in the dark sanctum of a Hindu temple, the power of the special atmosphere of warm, glowing light is an aspect of religion worldwide. We need only think of the sacred quality of light cast in Gothic European cathedrals from great stained-glass windows, or a sanctum lit by candle light creating a special atmosphere associated with the divine presence.

⁷ V. Bajaj, Beneath a Temple in Southern India, a Treasure Trove of Staggering ... New York Times, July 4, 2011. <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/7/4/world/asia/pacific>, 2011

⁸ Anderson, *Flames of Devotion*, pp. 61-67 describes the festivals



Figure 3. Wall of lamps, Mahadeva temple, Ettumanar, Kerala

The soft glow of the oil lamps gently throws its muted golden sheen on the exquisitely decorated idol and lingers in devotion on the grains of rice as they cascade over Her in what appears to be a shower of mellow gold, creating an out of the world enchantment.⁹ The image is bathed first and is wet. Lamplight makes bronze and silver look gold. There were actually many gold and silver oil lamps that may have since been remade into jewelry.¹⁰ The traditional use of special gold or silver lamps within the sanctum of major temples continues today.

Entire exterior walls of Kerala wooden temples are covered with a wooden latticework holding in each space a clay or simple metal oil cup which creates a lovely light especially at night, every night (Figure 3). Lamps are carried in procession around the temple by priests in multiple timed rituals daily, they are hung in the sanctum, they stand on their own before the sanctum, they are waved before the deity by priests. They are omnipresent.

Bibliography

As previously remarked, Indian oil lamps have been published very little. Although they are an essential part of Hindu worship and are mentioned in many 100s of inscriptions from all periods as gifts to temples, they are never illustrated in any survey of Indian art. However, they are often mentioned with admiration, for example in *Splendors of Kerala*, Lance Dane commented that Votive lamps are Kerala's tour-de-force, cast in brass, bronze and bell metal. They are

⁹ A. T. G. L. Bayi, *Thulasi Garland*, Mumbai: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1998, p. 155

¹⁰ National Museum New Delhi, acc no. 90.898

rich in design and are a combination of beauty and grace.¹¹ In *India* Stuart Cary Welch wrote an entire exhibition could be held of Indian oil lamps, so remarkable are their variety and quality, and the lamps of Kerala are among the most appealing and imaginative.¹² Nagaswamy commented but did not elaborate “Another fascinating contribution of Kerala bronze makers are the great lamps of skillful workmanship figuring images of gods and goddesses.”¹³ Despite such enthusiasm there has been no serious attempt to document and study these oil lamps. In *The Art of Ancient India* Susan Huntington mentions the lack of scholarly study of the art of Kerala citing three reasons: the geographical insularity of the region bounded by the sea and the Western Ghats mountain range, the conservative religious restrictions of access to the temples, and the general inattention of scholars to late (medieval) artistic developments.¹⁴ She also comments Kerala art developed into what can only be considered a highly distinctive and original idiom, which offers a promising area for future research.¹⁵

The bibliography for Hindu temple oil lamps of India is very short and superficial. Raja Kelkar, above all, strove to publish examples he personally collected and displayed in his museum in Pune, but his observations are not a history of the art but an appreciation of the idea of light and the divine. The same is the tenor of an exhibition catalog published by Sean Anderson, *Flames of Devotion*.¹⁶ Van Lohuizen de Leeuw in *Sri Lanka Ancient Arts*, published six examples of oil lamps, all of which relate to lamps made in Kerala in their elegance and artistic vocabulary.¹⁷ A useful folio was published in 1913 by the team of Thurston, Asari and Hadaway of the mostly Tamil metal work in the Madras Government Museum, including about 40 examples of oil lamps already in the collection.¹⁸ The motivation for the publication was to preserve knowledge of the types and their means of casting for future generations of craftsmen. Each lamp includes line drawings and a cross section to make visible its means of construction. Comments about the pieces are sparse but pithy. This record serves to establish the more than 100-year heritage of the traditional lamps. These lamps, however, are not on exhibit at the museum in Chennai currently. In this collection in Tamil Nadu certain types of Kerala oil lamps are not seen including elephant lamps and mythic relief suspension lamps.

Other ancient cultures that produced excellent ancient oil lamps include Indonesia, Sri Lanka, Cambodia, Nepal, China, Rome, Syria, and Italy. Of the South and Southeast Asian cultures that created outstandingly beautiful oil lamps, none has been adequately documented, studied, or published.

The question arises, why are there more aesthetically outstanding examples of oil lamps in Kerala and why are they ubiquitous? A proposed explanation revolves around the fact of the traditional and conservative culture of Hindu Kerala, which is well acknowledged. As it was a part of India that was very internationally linked to other cultures and their religions through

¹¹ L. Dane, *The Metal Art of the Cheras*. In *Splendours of Kerala*. Bombay Marg Publications 1983, p. 126

¹² S. C. Welch, *India: Art and Culture, 1300-1900*, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 1985, p. 35

¹³ K. Khandalavala, *The Great Tradition, Indian Bronze Masterpieces*, New Delhi, 1988, p. 175; Gangoly was actually the most interested and rapturous scholar writing about Kerala oil lamps before the others: O. C. Gangoly, *Southern Indian Lamps*. *Burlington Magazine*. no. CDC, vol. XXIX, 1916a, pp. 141-2; O. C. Gangoly, *South Indian Lamps*, *The Journal of Indian Art and Industry*, 1886-1916; London vol. 17, Iss. 129-136, (Oct.), 2016b, pp. 77-81.

¹⁴ S. L. Huntington, *The Art of Ancient India: Buddhist, Hindu, Jain*, Weatherhill, New York, 1985, p. 615

¹⁵ Huntington, *The Art of Ancient India*, p. 601

¹⁶ Anderson, *Flames of Devotion*; see review by M. Meister in *Museum Anthropology Review* 1 (2), 2007, pp. 122-123

¹⁷ J. E. Van Lohuizen de Leeuw, *Sri Lanka Ancient Arts*, Commonwealth Institute, London, 1981, pp. 72-77

¹⁸ Thurston et al., *Illustrations of Metalwork*

sea trade since ancient times, its own traditions may have become especially protected and valued. In other regions of India oil lamps of a defining regional style are found though in lesser numbers and not of the degree of ingenuity and beauty of Kerala lamps. These lamps, from Orissa, Rajasthan, Karnataka etc., certainly deserve study and preservation. The long survival of the Hindu royal families of Kerala as patrons of Hinduism and its ritual arts may be considered to have lent endurance to these ritual arts. In other regions of India which are orthodox but perhaps were infused with other cultures, such objects might have more readily been recycled for their metal value resulting in a comparative paucity of old and exquisite examples today.

In other religious art forms in Kerala there is also great distinction from that of other regions and royal reigns of India. Only in Kerala is there such an extensive history and survival of wooden architecture with gabled tile roofs. Of course, equally remarkable is the sculptural adornment of these temples in wood or stone carving on their bases which are original even if the temple burned several times. Temples are and were also enhanced with large mural-like paintings of the myths and the gods on the interior walls of the temples. Kerala temples are, in short, multi-media creations. Unfortunately, wood burns and few pieces of architectural carving seen today are thought to have been created earlier than the 16th century. Temples have burned and been rebuilt many times. In fact, the use of open-flaming oil lamps may have contributed to this loss. However, of surviving wood sculptures, some in private collections, there are delightful similarities of inventive mythic depictions, the likes of which are duplicated in miniature relief imagery on bronze oil lamps. All of this applies to the wonderful, bright mural-like paintings on palace and temple interiors and exteriors, best known from the Mattancherry Palace. Narrative relief scenes depicted in cast bronze on early temple oil lamps are like miniature versions of these paintings or wood carvings (which were originally also painted in primary colors). A surviving excellent example of miniature relief work in bronze on a collar of a *dhavajastambha*, a rafter shoe encasing and protecting a wooden beam, in wood miniature carving, on Kerala jewelry or dowry boxes not to mention the art of goldsmiths, broadens our awareness of the range of art forms we must keep in mind.¹⁹ Temple and palace rafter shoes made to cover an architectural wooden beam were cast in relief with deities and are another location of metal figure sculpture unique to Kerala.

Inscriptions

The aesthetic excellence of these minor decorative arts is made more appealing for study, however, by the fact that many are inscribed. When a devotee's prayer is answered a *dev danam*, gift to the gods, is given in the form of a lamp, a votive offering, presented to the temple. Inscriptions on these lamps provide a view into religious and social history as well as dates for the objects directly or through associative context or paleography. Inscriptions provide prayers, names of donor, inventory numbers, weight of the metal, but rarely a date. Perpetual donations for oil for lamps and records of gifts of lamps are also inscribed on temple walls and have been published by Poduval and Narayanan for Kerala. Provisions for their perpetual illumination by legal endowments are also recorded most frequently in the form of gifts of cows, sheep, buffaloes whose milk is clarified into ghee to burn before the god. Inscriptions on lamps, which do not include dates, could be dated by paleography and confirmed by style

¹⁹ For example, a temple *dhavajastambha* collar in the British Museum, acc. 1880.1609, and an architectural rafter shoe with relief figures in the Natesan collection and the Napier Museum

of the images. Dates of such figural lamps can be extended to similar sculptures. Thereby an approximate chronology of surviving temple images might be more firmly established than has been possible in earlier research.

Inscriptions recording gifts of oil lamps or oil for lamps to temples are common in Kerala and all over India at all times. In Tiruvalla, about 86 km. south of Kochi, a set of copper plates were collected and arranged in the 11th century recording gifts to the temple Brahmins made over the past 300 years. Land of about 2000 kalam seed capacity (enough land to plant 330,000 lbs. of seeds) was allotted for *Nandavilakku* (the perpetually burning lamp). The income and food from the lands fed not only the lamp with oil, but the Brahmins and the extensive staff of the temple operations with food. The major type of gift to the temple god was sacred oil lamps (*tiruvillaku*), and such donations are recorded as coming from a Chera queen, king, governors and a Chola king and queen, as well as a large number of common people.²⁰ Where are these old lamps? They were certainly being made and gifted. Could the temple keep or use so many? Undoubtedly, they were recycled for the value of their metal.

Aryan Brahmins who settled in Kerala, coming perhaps from Chalukya lands as proposed by Narayanan, owned lands and villages around the temples due to pious donation of devotees to support the temples. Kings and other kshatriyas administered the lands. A Brahmin oligarchy controlled the agricultural wealth and dominated the culture and religion of the society and maintained a ritual monarchy for its administration. The kings were administrators beholden to the priests.

Many gifts of lamps or land were recorded on the temple walls or in the compound rather than on copper plates. On a rock near the Thiruvithacode temple of Shiva (Tamil Nadu) an inscription mentions an early 11th century king and a gift of gold for a lamp by a native of the town. On the base of the shrine of the same temple an inscription records the gift of five buffaloes for a perpetual lamp by Arangan Tiruvaypatl of Vembannur and again on the base of the sanctum a gift of land toward the expense of burning a lamp is registered.²¹

The Kanyakumari stone inscription tells of ten gold lamps gifted to Shri Padmanabha Perumal by Parantaka Pandya, a contemporary of King Chulothunga Chola between 1070 and 1120.²² This is an early date to prove existence of oil lamps but not the earliest by any means. Hindu scriptures state that "There have been and there can be no better gifts than the gift of lamps." Atonement for killing an animal required the fine of an endowment of a perpetually burning lamp in the temple in order that the hunter might escape revenge from the soul of the victim.

In Kerala metal oil lamps are often inscribed. Their inscriptions give the name of the donor, who hopes to acquire merit by the gift, and the weight of the metal used in making the lamp, as this is the measure of the degree of devotion of the donor, heavier metal being more expensive. The inscriptions themselves may be useful for dating by paleographic analysis. Their approximate date, thus gained, could help solve another puzzle—the dating of individual cast bronze figures of deities made in Kerala, which then have a datable style. This methodology for dating Kerala

²⁰ Listed by Narayanan, *Perumals of Kerala*, pp. 265-268.

²¹ R. V. Poduval, *Travancore Inscriptions, A Topographical List*. Trivandrum, 1940, p. 60

²² Bayi, *Thulasi Garland*, p. 111

bronzes offers an important anchor to study and analysis of the style of Kerala bronze art where otherwise scholars have been uncertain for decades.

The tradition of gifts of oil for lamps is known from temples in other areas of India. For example, in Aihole, an Early Chalukya site in Karnataka, on the Huchchimalli temple's front wall is an inscription dated 708 CE recording a gift of oil for the temple lamp.²³ This 8th century inscription gives an early date concerning the use of meritorious gifts to support rituals with temple oil lamps, but even in the stone relief imagery of Sanchi's great stupa (1st century BCE) we see depictions of oil lamps lighting the night scenes of the life of Buddha. Typical gifts made and recorded to fuel temple lamps include cows, sheep, and buffaloes whose milk is purified to ghee for burning in special lamps, and grants of land whose revenue will support the expense of oil, or just gold or money.

In Kerala such gifts are recorded in Tamil or Malayalam. Some revealing inscriptions from stone temple parts are listed by Poduval. In the Venkatalapathi temple at Alakiyapandyapuram, in Tamil in Kollam era 299 (CE 1123) a Pandya dynasty civilian gave money for the temple lamps.²⁴ This 12th century inscription is of interest because it reminds us that, although Pandya art has barely been studied, the Pandyas were a major political presence and art influence in Kerala. Entire temples in Kerala were financed and built by Pandyas. Gifts are described in inscriptions as gifts for a perpetually burning lamp (Nandavilakku), which is an important lamp for communication with the divine. One royal grant records a request for a tax on oil mills for lamps at a certain temple.²⁵ We learn also of gifts to support oil lamps in Jain temples: 25 cows, 50 sheep.²⁶ In 1750 a stone lamp stand before the temple was the gift of Marttandan Sankaran of Kulikkatu.²⁷ The Tamil King Rajendra Chola (r. c.1014-1044 CE) gave gold for a lamp to a Shiva temple in Muncirai, Tamil Nadu.²⁸ It is unclear if this is for a lamp to be made of gold or to buy oil. Many lamps, most of them now recycled, were made of gold. In 1611, Ammai, daughter of a temple officer, gave money for the festival expenses to the god, and it states in this inscription that she made the Krishna image.²⁹ We thereby have evidence of women as patrons of oil lamps in this traditionally matrilineal society wherein lineage and inheritance are traced through the mother's line. Another early, dated stone inscription relevant to oil lamps is ninth century on the temple at Parthavivapuram in Tamil Nadu, written in Sanskrit and Tamil in Grantha and Vatteluttu (or Vattezhuthu) scripts, recording a gift of gold for lamps by Pancavan Brahmahirajan.³⁰ A loose stone at the same temple states that Sankaran Ranasingan set up a silver image in the temple.³¹

In 1625, in Suchindram in the far south in Tamil Nadu a grant was made under Vijayanagara auspices to the temple by Nagammai, daughter of Terur, for making a lamp borne by an image and for keeping it burning, i.e., a *deepalaksmi* type lamp, perhaps.³² Gifts are made by and recorded as being given by women and by men.

²³ J. F. Fleet, Inscription of Vijayaditta Satyaraya at Aihole. *Indian Antiquary* 8 (57), 1879, p. 284.

²⁴ Poduval, *Travancore Inscriptions*, p. 8

²⁵ Poduval, *Travancore Inscriptions*, p. 36

²⁶ Poduval, *Travancore Inscriptions*, p. 39

²⁷ Poduval, *Travancore Inscriptions*, p. 40

²⁸ Poduval, *Travancore Inscriptions*, p. 189, No. 13

²⁹ Poduval, *Travancore Inscriptions*, p. 164, No. 17

³⁰ Poduval, *Travancore Inscriptions*, p. 167, No. 2

³¹ Poduval, *Travancore Inscriptions*, p. 167, No. 4

³² Poduval, *Travancore Inscriptions*, p. 216, No. 75, in Sanskrit



Figure 4. Metal shop employee inscribing a new kindi, Mannar, Kerala

Records inscribed on sets of copper plates rarely record gifts of oil for lamps. Instead, they contain political history and land grants to temples. One copper plate, however, records in Malayalam a gift of lands by the king's agents in 1540 for the maintenance of a *torana* of lamps (that is a giant door-size arch covered with cups for oil and wicks to be lit) in the Padmanabhaswamy temple in Thiruvananthapuram.³³ We also see this type of giant illuminated doorframe at the famous temple of Meenakshi Amman in Madurai, Tamil Nadu.

The tradition of inscribing lamps continues today. Purchasing a new, mass-produced oil lamp in a metal shop in Kerala in 2001 for the benefit of his wife and to be given to the temple, a

³³ Poduval, *Travancore Inscriptions*, p. 319, No. 70



Figure 5. Tree-shaped lamp, inscribed 1555, Denver Museum of Art, Colorado, height 25 inches, diameter 15 in, Gift in Life Trust from Mrs. Irene Littledale Downs in memory of William H. Downs, acc. no. 1964.8A-E. Photo Courtesy Denver Art Museum

young husband has her name inscribed on it in the shop by an employee with an electric stylus (Figure 4). The inscription includes the weight of the metal, but, alas, no date. He is also buying and having inscribed a *kindi*, a spouted holy water pot for ritual use, to give to the temple priests, another ritually used object. These objects price is based on the weight of the metal.

In ancient to medieval times, inscriptions were also written on the lamps before gifting, and in rare cases the inscription was cast in the lamp when made. In fact, the only cast inscribed date on an oil lamp that I know of is in the Denver Art Museum collection. That Malayalam

inscription was read and published by Nagar.³⁴ This small lamp (25 by 15.5 inches), is important because it is dated 1555 in an inscription on its base (Figure 5). The inscription is partially incised and partially cast in high relief around the base. The incised portion gives the name Kodena, the donor, perhaps a king. The cast relief writing contains the word *kotujuram* which might mean high fever. Extrapolating from this, the lamp may have been donated with a prayer for the cure of a loved one from high fever. Since the date portion of the inscription is cast in the metal it must be original. The tree has three tiers or levels of branches encircling the trunk. The trunk is not very naturalistic and the branches leading to the cups are formulaic in design and form a net-like pattern. This example is a standard and abundant type still made today, though now made by machine. At its apex is a lotus bud-shaped finial associated with Shiva, described to me by a Vaikom temple priest as the generative part. The lamp is cast in three sections. Its metal content is heavy with thick cast walls. This is the only clearly dated oil lamp discovered thus far. Since it is not figural it does not help with the effort to date other lamps or sculptures by association of style except to say that by 1555 the type was standard and not creatively detailed.

Other information is contained in inscriptions added to lamps. For example, the royal collection of lamps given to the State Museum in Thrissur by H. H. Maharaja of Cochin in about 1960, was inscribed on the greatest of the lot, e.g., the masterpiece lamp, number 10/2, number one of eighty of Devaswom Board of Cochin, *Tulam* 3, *Palam* 70 ¼. A *tulum* is a weight of 3 kg. and a *palam* is 1/100th of a *tulam*. This lamp weighs 29 kilograms, or about 63 pounds. The temple *devaswom* board donated these lamps to the museum in 1960.

The weight of the metal is often recorded on the lamps, though less often on the earliest lamps than the later ones which are much thicker cast metal. The heavier the metal, the more expense, the more meritorious the gift. The earlier lamps, however, that are more artistically inspired, are of much thinner metal casting and contain a higher percentage of bitumen and therefore are lighter and more receptive to detailed casting. The tradition that is continued of making heavy, massive metal lamps with thick walls as a display of devotion and wealth came into vogue only around the fifteenth to sixteenth century it seems. It is thereby easy to distinguish a delicate, light weight, uninscribed, fourteenth-century lamp from its massive eighteenth-century descendent. In fact, the price of an oil lamp today depends on its weight. Tarnished old lamps are exchanged for shiny new lamps at the ritual metal object stores. Old ones are melted to make new ones that are machine made and mass produced. The new ones are purchased by devotees and given to the priest at the temple to carry their prayers with some priestly help. The practice seems somewhat analogous to Christians lighting a candle and saying a prayer for a sick relative. The excessive numbers of bronze, bell metal or brass oil lamps given to major temples results in their quiet sale back to metal shops. If a lamp was used at an important temple, like the Guruvayor temple, then it has a higher sale value. Temples have storehouses and storehouses of temples, like Padmanabhaswamy in Thiruvananthapuram, must be quite full of remarkable lamps that were given to god centuries ago. That would include many made of gold or silver. The metal alloy referred to as bell metal is used for making bells, cymbals and oil lamps. It has a higher tin content than bronze (4:1 ratio of copper to tin) which increases the rigidity of the metal and its resonance for bells and cymbals. It is harder than bronze.

³⁴ S. Nagar, Dipa Lakshmi -The Votive Lamps of India, *Pantheon* 38 (2), 1980, p. 142

Dating difficulties

When can the earliest of surviving oil lamps be dated: 10th, 12th, 14th 16th century? The conservative answer is the early 12th century but I would place a few as early as the 10th century.

The question of dating of Kerala bronzes is challenging. One Kerala oil lamp in the Denver Art Museum previously mentioned bears an inscription with the date 1555 (Figure 5). That particular dated *vriksha vilakku* is a common non-figural type and is not of any special quality. Scholars have tended to give Kerala bronzes rather late dates. Some see a relation to Hoysala bronzes of the 12th to 14th centuries with exuberant ornament as evidence for an influence on Kerala style from this late dynasty's art produced in Karnataka. On the contrary, I am among those who see Kerala style as consciously individual to distinguish it from that of other dynastic styles such as Hoysala and Chola. There is a style that is purely originated in Kerala by the Cheras (c. 850-1124 CE). It is distinct in iconography, use, and in figure type. Given the terminus ante quem of the Dadigamma elephant lamp of 12th century, to be discussed later, I am inclined to date certain Kerala bronze figures and lamps in metal earlier starting in at least the early 12th century CE. Other factors for this argument will be explained. The Cheras were a power in relation to the Brahmin oligarchs between 800-1124 CE.

The context is there, though sparse. There are early Buddhist and Jain stone carvings and early bronzes by the 10th century. We know there has been a long and continuous tradition of wood carving and mural painting, temple arts that burned in temples and has been replaced many times through many centuries. We also know that there is a tradition of loss by the recycling of gold, silver and bronze images replaced by new ones. There may be a comparatively small surviving body of objects to study Kerala sculptural style. I would like to distinguish further the Chera style and the style of art in Kerala that is a mixture of Chera and Chola or Tamil style elements, the result of fluctuating political borders and aesthetic influences.

Loss due to the tradition of recycling metal pieces, burning problems of wooden temples with their paintings leaves us with a less fulsome chronological progression to study style. It may also be relevant that Kerala was divided within by kingdoms in different regions especially the southern tip. It seems that each may have fostered a slightly idiosyncratic style through the local metal workshops. Encouraging news is that old pieces come to light during road building projects, or in one case, when the temple tank was drained for deep cleaning of a temple during the Covid 19 pandemic (Figure 141).³⁵ In these latter cases bronzes images recovered seem to easily date to the 10th century. In the face of invasion, it was common to hide the temples' murti underground in a hidden vault or in the temple tank.

Regional workshops, such as one that must have existed at Thripunithura, created a line of imagery contemporaneous with the work of other regional workshops, but each with a distinct style, compounding this absence of a very large body of work from each to study. As stated by Heston I suspect that stylistic differences within the 'Kerala style' bronzes are probably the result of a number of developments.³⁶ There must have been a number of different centers of bronze casting, foundries, each with its own distinctive idiom, and these could well have

³⁵ Times of India.com 6/11/20

³⁶ Heston, *Powerful Bodies*, p. 83. This is the most serious discussion of dating considerations for Kerala art.

developed along differing chronological trajectories That is why the older museum collections such as Thrissur and the British Museum are so important. Pratapaditya Pal has dated a Hindu bronze seated Vishnu in the Bhansali collection (New Orleans), which is rich in Kerala images, to 10th century which seems appropriate to me.³⁷ A major discussion of dating problems has been published by Heston.³⁸ Nagaswamy has dated two standing bronze figures of Vishnu in the Trivandrum Museum to 8th century and the very similar Melaiyur Maitreya to 700 CE, which seems likely to me and a Vallabha Ganapathi to 10th century. The Vishnu-Maya Durga, encrusted with ornaments like the Thrissur *dvarapala*, is dated 13th and later - 17th century (Figures 135-138).³⁹ I would agree with commencing the chronology of bronzes around 700 CE, with fine pieces in the 10th and continuing through the mid-12th century. By the 14th and 15th century they become rote. In northern Malabar in the 10th century, we know of remarkable Buddhist bronze figures such as the 5-foot tall seated Avalokiteshvara in the Kadri Manjunatha temple in Mangalore dated 968 and other meditating stone Buddhas. Thereafter, Buddhist images in Kerala do not seem to have been made or were destroyed.⁴⁰ There is evidence of Buddhist practice from quite early in Kerala, but its decline began in the 8th century and it was gone by the 11th century.

Today some temples have images of the gods on their outer walls made from colored neon lights, some of them flashing or moving. In most cultures the advent of kerosene lamps of the west and then electricity around 1922 ended the production of oil lamps, candelabras, torches and other fiery forms of light, but in India especially the magical quality of flaming light is still valued along with the ancient importance of ritual oil lamps as a means of relation to the divine. Furthermore, when the monsoon hits and electricity fails, oil lamps are still dependable. So far in India neon lights have not replaced oil lamps although the gods are depicted in neon at some temples. The traditional production and persistent use of oil lamps in Kerala, a very orthodox Hindu culture, is stronger than in any other region of India. In fact, although the entire world depended on oil lamps before electricity for 1000s of years, their use in India today is the only major and continuous traditional use in the world. That is because the sacred and daily rituals of Hindu worship utterly require oil lamps. Their light symbolizes knowledge which dispels darkness and ignorance. Knowledge is the greatest wealth. God is the illuminator of all knowledge, He is the *chaitanya*, spirit or principle of knowledge. Thereby, light is worshipped as the deity itself. In temple rituals when it is necessary to move a deity from place to place, from one temple to another, a lamp is lit from the lamp in the temple sanctum and carried by a priest to the second temple deity's sanctum. The *chaitanya* of one temple can be transferred to another and later returned. A special lamp is used for this transportation, the *changalavatta* (Figures 110-114).

The gift of an oil lamp to the temple gains the donor merit, the quantity of merit depending on the metal weight of the lamp. Huge, old oil lamps (if not sold) grace the entry to the temple and again to the sanctum in major temples.⁴¹ These may be 100s of years old. They represent

³⁷ P. Pal, *The Elegant Image, Bronzes from the Indian Subcontinent in the Siddharth K. Bhansali Collection*: Mumbai, Marg Publishers, 2011, p. 174

³⁸ Heston, *Powerful Bodies*, pp. 63-93

³⁹ Khandalavala, *The Great Tradition*, pp. 170-173

⁴⁰ J. C. Harle, *The Art and Architecture of the Indian Subcontinent*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1986, p. 354, Figure 281

⁴¹ A. T. G. L. Bayi, *Sree Padmanabha Swamy Temple*. Mumbai: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan 2000, p. 257 describes a bronze twelve-tiered lamp at the door to the inner sanctum of the Padmanabhaswamy temple, with figures at the base on top of a tortoise, claimed to be one of the finest of its kind in Kerala.



Figure 6. cleaning disassembled oil lamp

the cultural history of Kerala, and yet they are often sold never to be seen again. Many of them have legends associated with them. In the sanctum gold or silver lamps are required to honor the deity and in this clarified butter (*ghee*) will be burned rather than sesame (*gingelly*) or coconut oil because it burns more purely and produces less soot. Nonetheless, they must be cleaned daily and the person who cleans them does so because he has the inherited right to perform that specific ritual devotional duty (Figure 6). Certain lightings of lamps are performed by people of temple status at regular times during *pūja*. It is an act of devotion to light the lamps as it is to donate oil or wicks for them daily. The wick maker in some cases fills a hereditary honorific position granted by the temple priests. He rolls 1000s of cloth wicks by hand against his thigh daily and may need to engage assistants to meet the need.⁴² There

⁴² P. Seth, *Heaven on Earth, The Universe of Kerala's Guruvayur Temple*. Niyogi, New Delhi, 2009, p. 99

may be five or more regular daily *pujas* at a temple plus special ones paid for by a devotee for a special prayer requiring a constant and large supply of materials which are paid for by donations. Daily the lighting of the temple *deepastambha* is necessary, then there are sanctum *pujas* and processional *pujas* with the deity carried on elephant back which also require lamps many times a day, and daily there is the *deeparadhana* offering at dusk of lights lit on the entire outer and inner temple enclosure walls. This requires lighting of about 1000 lamps on the latticed walls (Figure 3). Nighttime performances of Kathakali or other traditional arts also require large *nila vilakku* to dramatically light the faces of the actors. They serve as stage lights. But they are seen everywhere throughout the temple. The daily cycle of *puja* always requires oil lamps, does not end, and the supplies are the duty of the devotees and an act of devotion and merit to donate.

It is my hope that this study might stimulate an appreciation of the part these oil lamps play when preserved in keeping the record of Kerala's heritage of the art of metal casting in service of worship of the divine. Perhaps an interest will arise in the preservation and study of examples of the creations of the *moosaris* (metal workers) of centuries past which continues today. As Thurston hoped in 1913 to make information available from the Madras Museum collection about how traditional craftsmen made the lamps, with the photographic record of this study the magnificent legacy of Kerala aesthetics will be passed to future generations of devotees, art lovers and scholars.