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NATIONAL TREASURES

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Capturing on canvas the concealed countenance of India's temple Deities

Attending South India's majestic Hindu temples, such as Madurai's Meenakshi citadel, evokes profound reverence and joy. As bhakti-filled devotees bathe in the powerful radiance of the Deity, they long to somehow bring the Deity's image, which may be hundreds or thousands of years old, back to their own homes for personal worship. But this is ethically impossible. Even taking photographs or video of a temple's main sanctum is traditionally taboo. The Gods, however, do have recourse to appease their devotees' desire for constant company. In 1978, they enlisted Sri. A. Manivelu to paint their portraits. Divinely inspired, Manivelu, 56, patiently sits before the temple's sanctum sanctorum for hours at a stretch to sketch India's Gods and Goddesses and later to bring them to life in oil and watercolor. Manivelu, the chief artist of Jnanabumi, a monthly Tamil family magazine, thus fills a unique niche in the art world. He also regularly produces original art for Hinduism Today, including the Publisher's Desk illustrations. Our Insight section this month displays another of his commissions--fourteen illustrations of the ancient Tirukural scripture. Manivelu recently spoke with Hinduism Today at his home near Chennai.

On the drive to portray divinity

At age ten, my wife endured the extremely traumatizing experience of losing most of her family to small pox. Depressed, she became unusually withdrawn, and I only discovered her condition after our marriage. I fervently prayed to almighty God, seeking His grace for my wife's fast recovery. This spiritual involvement naturally gave me the urge--and a special power--to render God's images on canvas.

On his heritage

My ancestors were chariot and temple builders. I am in the ninth generation of this lineage. It is the custom of temples to appoint the elder sons of chief temple builders to assume the father's post after his demise. My elder brother is currently holding such a post. My father, Sri Arumuga Achari, was a chief temple builder, carpenter and also a capable artist.

On his home village

I was born in Sikkal village of Tanjavur, Tamil Nadu. Sikkal is famous for the Surasamhara temple festival, which denotes the day Lord Murugan received the Vel from His mother Shakti. On this auspicious day the vighraha (image) of Lord Muruga perspires the same way human beings do. Even after wiping it again and again, the vighraha continues to perspire.

On his early life and training

After schooling I became a mechanic, and eventually the supervisor of a firm. Meanwhile, I had great interest in my family profession of painting and did this in my spare time. I learned from my father, beginning at age ten. I did not attend any art school or classes. I assisted my father and carefully

observed his methods. He usually painted near the temple or at home. The chief artist of Kalaimagal magazine and guru to me, Sri Kumarasamy, taught me how to shine as a devotional painter.

On his transition to full-time painting

When Jayendra Saraswathy Swami of Kanchi Peetam visited Chennai two years ago, I showed him my paintings and asked him to bless me. He was impressed and advised me to quit the supervisor job and concentrate on painting full-time. With that blessing to sustain me, I complied.

On his depictions of temple icons

There are differences between paintings for ordinary magazines and portrayals of temple deities. My guru Sri Kumarasamy said, "Artists in abundance draw mundane pictures, but only a few can depict the Gods." Ever since he told me this, I painted only the Gods. Since 1978, Jnanabumi has commissioned me to portray the vighraha in the main sanctum of India's most popular temples. Before entering the temple I observe religious disciplines such as fasting, early morning worship and japa. Some people tried to intimidate me by saying that the fierce-looking Gods will curse me if I went too close! But nothing but blessings have ever come to me. I do a sketch prior to the abhishekam, ritual bathing, and after the decoration. Finally, I draw sketches of the face--every detail is noted. I ask the priest for the temple's customs--what jewelery and dress are used on the deity, how many garlands are put on, etc. I draw the sketches just as I see the deity, asking the priest not to decorate just for the painting. I take a week to sketch, then do the painting at home within 45-60 days. I have completed about one hundred paintings--all

published in Jnanabumi and suitable for home worship.

On why modern Gods look like film stars

Some art students draw the same type of amateur pictures over and over again and these images stay in their minds. After graduating, they repeat the same style. Therefore, the present pictures are the same as they had practiced long ago. An artist must observe every part of the body carefully for his pictures. He must tell himself that the eyes must be like this, and the nose should be sharper and so on. He must be self-critical of his paintings.

On finance and the future

Everything is God's grace. My father used to say, "Do not worry. If not this God, some other God will look after you. The Gods will not let you starve." I believe my children will have the same intuition as I did to portray the Gods. My second son has completed a course in fine art. A person should not treat painting the Gods as a chore. It should be done on one's own free will, with full involvement and commitment.