

THANJAVUR MARATTA PAINTING AND FINE ARTS TECHNIQUE – A CASE STUDY

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Abstract

The Tanjavur styles of painting can also be studied as an interesting problem in influences. In them were adopted various techniques which found a new imagery; the new forms must have been an attempt to satisfy contemporary demands. We may say that these innovations evolved from the absorption of foreign ideas as well as from a reorganization of indigenous elements; the syntheses achieved have a distinct pattern or style of their own. Such a development presupposes the diffusion of ideas and techniques from elsewhere, and we shall see that there was opportunity for the dispersion and realignment of ideas. Men have a natural inclination for imitating or borrowing, rather than for creating their own solution to problems. New ideas, when they find congenial soil, coalesce with the existing tradition, that is, with the legacy of the predecessors. The complexity and orientations of this traditional inventory inevitably have a determinative effect upon the interests, the competencies, and the innovative potentials of the members of any society^[1]. Of course the creation of the innovator (and all cultural changes are initiated by individuals) depend on the fluidity of ideas.

Keywords: contemporary, indigenous, pattern, techniques, diffusion, borrowing, inclination

INTRODUCTION

Though Tanjavur painting is a late phase of art, its interest lies in its originality and in its compelling syncretic and symbolic forms. The short time span of this school and its limited output can be attributed to its confrontation with more powerful and modern forms of art. With the beginning of the twentieth century artists had to come to terms with a new method of seeing, as their patrons had only too soon acquired a different taste influenced by the academic art of the West, and by photography. This led to a lack of appreciation for

traditional art. Since we notice a direct connection between the social change and its artistic production. We may here examine the climate for art which first produced the style in a relatively traditional milieu.

The civilization of South India can be described as highly conservative; it is one where culture developed together with religion. T.S.Eliot refers to three important conditions necessary for culture, “the first of these is the organic (not merely planned but growing) structure, such as will foster the hereditary transmission of culture within a culture: and this requires the persistence of social classes. The second is that a culture should be analysable, geographically, into local cultures this raises the problems of regionalisms. The third is the balance of unity and diversity in religion that is, universality of doctrine with particularity of cult and devotion^[2]. All these conditions are seen to be characteristic of the Brahmanical culture with which we are here concerned. The people followed an ancient pattern of life peculiar to them which continued uninterrupted by political changes. Society was distinguished by its own hierarchy, customs, functions and festivities, giving its identity.

Eliot has also pointed out that culture is not static, a new civilization is always being made, it grows from the soil, “though it is the one thing that cannot be deliberately aimed at. It is the product of a variety of more or less harmonious activities, each pursued for its sake^[3]. In India the arts in particular are such a group of activities and are seen to be characteristically interrelated. Poetry, music, sculpture, dancing and painting follow parallel lines. All were impregnated by religious feeling, from orthodox religions as well as themes from the vernacular Kavyas and lyrics which reached the people through mystics, poets and musicians. Indeed a characteristic feature of Indian life is this relatedness of the arts that together express a collective vision, and a collective culture.

Perhaps it is not necessary to describe in detail the general organization of Hindu society, we know that it was divided into various castes and classes. With its increasing functional complexity and differentiation there arose a structural framework divided horizontally into diverse layers and this also led to the formation of the subcultures of the class or group. In historical times (as much as today) various cultural levels existed simultaneously, ranging from the most primitive to the highly sophisticated. Often each of these produced the art or music peculiar to it. At the top of the caste structure were the Brahmins an elite class, maintained as such by the kings. It was supposed that their culture and their role, as teachers, and philosophers, would benefit not only them but the whole of society. The elite, whether by caste or status, (as for instance members of the royal family or

the court), were not only the patrons of art but also the transmitters of culture. The individuals of such an aristocracy formed the intelligentsia; they were the consumers of the thought and the art produced both by themselves and by others. The elite whether of the court or of the court or of the priesthood had an important role to play as patrons and connoisseurs, in nourishing and sustaining art.

Culturally speaking, tanjavur can be considered the heart of the Tamil country, with a civilization that had reached great eminence under the Cholas. It played an important role in attracting talent and in keeping alive a creative tradition through many centuries. Influences from other regions reached here either through travellers and commerce, or through war and reciprocally it was also a centre that disseminated ideas and styles. Among these influences (in the times were are discussing), was a very important Andhra component; Tanjavur having been a Vijayanagar principality during the days of that empire^[4]. Telugu was widely spoken and written and was the language of a great portion of the devotional hymns. Many of the court poets and writers wrote in Sanskrit and Telugu. Besides the Andhra contribution, a new addition to Tanjavu culture was that made by the Marathas. The Maharashtrians, besides bringing their own culture from their homelands, functioned as a bridge over which ideas and techniques from farther north flowed southwards. The descendants of Shivaji overran the greater portion of the Deccan overthrowing the crumbling Mughals and their satellites thus forming a corridor from north to south. The instability of the political regimes resulted in frequent wars during which armies, and markets and people, in their wake, marched from the Maratha country around Poona and Satara to distant territories both north and south. As a result each area with a local culture merged with and enriched the culture of the neighbouring areas – the Maratha armies functioning as a distributor or a catalyst^[5].

The Maratha culture in Tanjavur can be described as a satellite culture, in that it was distant from its place of origin and at the same time, geographically in a permanent relationship with the stronger Tamil culture. All three languages – Marathi, Telugu, and Tamil were spoken in and around Tanjavur. Eliot has pointed out that a people of a region should be neither too united nor too divided. If its culture is to flourish^[6]. Ideally, groups or classes should have a community of culture (which will give them all something in common) while, at the same time, each group retains a separateness, which causes some friction, thus providing a creative stimulus. Tanjavur had these characteristics. It was a historical city with a great past of its own, and the Maratha presence there was of value as a source of fresh

thought and influences. Further the Maratha dominance, though instituted by force, was not one that was basically in conflict with the Tamil Brahmanical culture.

The new ideas could be considered a liberating force in the sphere of politics and philosophy. This was because the Marathas brought to the South the teachings of the Maratha mystical saints with their emphasis not only on devotion, but on action and democracy a contrast to the rigid and ritualistic way of life that had previously obtained there^[7]. No one nation, no one language would have achieved what it has, if the same art had not been cultivated in neighbouring countries and in different languages^[8]. Though we have discussed the separate elements that went together in the making of the Tanjavur culture, we have to keep in mind that this pluralism or diversity has always been characteristic of Indian society. On the other hand, there were also political and social cementing forces such as acceptance of Dharma and the Hindu life style which was traditional.

The basic unity of Indian thought, its great mythologies and social organisation are a foundation that has been organic and alive throughout history. Muslim dominance did not succeed in annihilating it nor yet the regional fragmentation of the subcontinent. The local changes were changes of reconstitution and reformation, enabling new shoots to spring from an ancient soil. Thus the matrix of Tamil culture in Tanjavur became the meeting ground for streams from different cultures^[9]. The new milieu was inevitably destined to produce an art and expression that was both heterogenous and eclectic.

The term Tanjavur painting refers, therefore, to certain styles of painting which reached a characteristic form in the Tanjavur area during the Maratha period. The use of the name of the state may be considered arbitrary since the style or its sister variations occur also in Mysore and Andhra either contemporaneously or perhaps even earlier than in Tanjavur itself. However, the style seems to reach its culmination in Tanjavur and therefore this name may be associated with the group of styles of the period. No reference will be made at all to the ancient Chola paintings of Tanjavur. The Nayak paintings in the same locality are being discussed only as a legacy or heritage of the Maratha period. The Nayak art did indeed survive into later times; murals, in particular, show that the Nayak idiom continued to be used in the decoration of temples for many years. In discussing the Tanjavur styles we may also profitably compare them with the art of peripheral areas in order to speculate on the origins of its elements and especially on its relationship to other regional arts^[10].

Before embarking on a detailed discussion of the different kinds of painting that obtained at Tanjavur we may consider the general scope and variations of the work. The context was one which was eclectic, it was therefore natural that there was a multiplicity in the forms of art expression. The major kinds of painting being discussed here are sacred paintings of the deities and saints, portraiture both courtly and secular, painting on exotic media such as ivory and glass, murals, and lastly painted illustrations in manuscripts. From this enumeration it is clear that the artist was a versatile kind of person, generally he was a craftsman adept at several related crafts.

Though we are describing the Tanjavur style as a clearly distinguished type it is necessary to keep in mind that the style is part of the larger pool of Karnatak culture. We notice that the arts of this period are highly functional and were made for a specific demand. Further there was a continuity in the arts from the sophisticated to the folk levels. A kind of vertical hierarchy, where each level fed from its descending or ascending variations. And similarly a horizontal continuity which linked the several arts of painting, sculpture, jewellery and other handcrafts.

A number of sociologists and other experts have discussed the culture of India in terms of the Great Tradition and the Little Tradition. To the Great Tradition they have assigned the classical forms of art and to the Little tradition the folk or popular forms⁹. Needless to say religion is one aspect of culture which spans both these traditions, uniting them. Also, the traditions are not separate Phenomena but inter-related and continuous, and are a source of ideals and nourishment to each other. The Tanjavur styles which we are considering are a midway group since the paintings are formed from elements of both. Further the meaning of these paintings is valid to both or all classes of people. At one end, it is ritualistic and courtly conforming to orthodox need, at another, it is popular and indigenous fulfilling a folk demand¹¹¹.

One characteristic of the style is that its forms, in spite of a certain rigidity, became a general form of ornament. Motifs which were often sacred representations of the deities were used in the decoration of houses, boxes, jewellery, metalware and other artefacts. Semi-ritualistic objects were, of course, designed with religious symbols and subjects, examples are the brass vessels used in worship, and the hand painted temple textiles used as hangings. The absence of any clear dividing line between sacred and secular and the widespread culture based on the epics and puranas made such subject matter acceptable. We also find other parallel arts such as Harikatha and the Kalakshepam showing the same features, they are at

once religious orthodox and popular and combine the several arts of music, recitation and drama.

Another kind of polarity which makes its appearance in this period is that which resulted from the impact of the West. Traditional art forms one end and at the other is a westernising trend, seen for example in late portraiture and in Indian painting for the British. This contact with the West, in fact, ultimately led to deep scated changes in the visual habits of the people and finally to the acceptance of foreign art. But to begin with, the new work was only characterised by marginal changes which were superficial and desctiptive, ill at ease in a changing social situation. The attempt to accommodate or compromise with the Western style was brought about solely by political and economic necessity, for it was the style.

The painters of Tanjavur were of Telugu speaking origin, they were and still are Kshatriyas and the community uses the suffix Raja or Raju after their names. The same community practised the arts in other parts of the Karnatak for we find similar families devoted to this vocation in Andhra and Mysore. Hemingway reports, "Some good painting is done at Tanjore by men of the Raju caste. They paint on wooden tablets or on cloth made beautifully smooth with a paste of powder and gum, and their drawing is correct and the tints employed astonishingly delicate and eve. But the designs are pictures are grotesquely adorned with sparkling stones or pieces of metal. Painting and drawing are commoner in this than in other districts. In the large towns, the temple walls and even the walls of private residences are often covered with figures of gods and heroes drawn or painted with considerable skill^[12].

The painters were, of course, orthodox Hindus and they approached this sacred task with an attitude of bhakti. The Sukranitilays down, "The characteristic of an image is its power of helping forward contemplation and yoga. The human maker of images should therefore be meditative. Besides meditation there is no other way of knowing the character of an image, even direct observation is of no use". While this demonstrates the idealistic nature of the sastraic injunctions to artists, they themselves were doubtless more pragmatic. The artist is influenced or guided by stereotypes which for him are typical motifs. He begins not with his visual impression but with his idea or concept. He is influenced primarily by images from the past which, by being copied or even constantly seen, are already a part of the memory. Thus the will to form is rather a will to make conform.

There was no great emphasis on originality, rather the artist worked within the conventions and framework in which he was born. He was innovator and creator who subscribed to the ideals of his people (Compare, for example, the role of the exponent in Indian music or dance). He was not concerned with expressing his individual thoughts and idiosyncrasies but rather with expressing the feelings and fulfilling the needs of the community as a whole. The silpins role was therefore one of service and responsibility.

We observe that the artist here has invented a style adapted to a task. The style and the medium create a mental set in which he can render only certain specific subjects. The individual can enrich the ways and means that his culture offers him, he can hardly wish for something that he has never known is possible.

In an article entitled, “Artist, Patron and Public in India” Stella Kramrisch describes the well-knit situation obtaining for the creative worker in traditional Indian society. The artist was a man with a vocation which he practised seriously, he met a social demand and received not only payment for his work but, depending on his talent and mastery, lands, cattle and other gifts. The patron was one capable of discrimination, of appreciating and rewarding talent. The making of sacred images had a special aim and had as its purpose and function the acquisition of merit on a spiritual plane. This merit however belonged to the patron or donor. The images were not valued merely as sculpture or painting but because they were endowed with magical powers. The physical presence of a work of art was felt to have power, primarily on the patron and then on all who saw and worshipped it^[13].

PAINTINGS IN THE GILDED TECHNIQUE

The most typical Tanjavur paintings are in the gilded and gemset technique and are sacred icons of the Hindu deities. We shall examine a few examples as key types though other subjects in a similar medium are also found. Though we may consider the Tanjavur paintings to be characteristic, variations of the style occur in neighbouring areas such as Mysore and Andhra and will be dealt with separately. The iconic style is therefore not an isolated phenomenon but is spread throughout the southern area and was practised for about two hundred years, approximately A.D.1700-1900.

Iconic styles of painting are seen to arise in all those places where there is a religious movement around a specific deity. While the gods of the Hindu pantheon have always been painted we find in such places a special deviation from the normal tradition towards a crystallizing of form, a form which can be regarded as a symbol and is identified with the

deity himself. The change or evolution from comparatively free or naturalistic to set or stylised shapes is the result of constant repetition and comes about because the meaning of the form to the devotee is greater than its visual representation. One may assert that the form of the painting depends entirely on its meaning, its aesthetic appearance is more or less irrelevant.

As mentioned earlier, these stylizations of sacred images occur at places which are specially holy and where numbers of pilgrims visit the shrine. Typical examples are the stylizations of Srinathji at Nathdwara or of Jagannath at Puri. The stylization is the result of (a) the unique nature of the conception with its typical attributes and (b) the need for a popular model which stands for a replica of the original. Such popular models are bought by the pilgrims to take home and may be painted on cloth, or paper, or even on carved wood.

Art historians have stated that provincial and popular art is fully a part of artistic culture, not merely a secondary branch of it. Indeed, at times it can be so vigorous as to overrun the art production of the major cultural centres and change its course. This is a matter of fact what seems to have occurred in the Tanjavur style, for here we find what can be called a popular art surviving as the major kind of art in a period of wars and political uncertainty. Again we note, It is therefore impossible today to admit of a theoretic distinction between the art of the main cultural stream on the one hand, oriented around the works of the major recognised artists and on the other the art which expresses a collective “ethos’ and is the result of a spiritual and voluntary”^[14] principle. Thus, we restore to an aesthetic level the whole range of handicrafts and industrial products and recognise the existence of an art work wherever ideological content is expressed or visualized in a definite and significant image, irrespective of the depth or complexity of that context.

Since art does not arise in an autonomous way we have to enquire into the factors which determine it. Such factors are the deeprooted and structural attitudes of social groups giving rise to racial and national characteristics as well as immediate factors, religious or moral which identify the history of art with the history of spiritual development or again social and economic conditions.

As Tanjavur painting is dominated by the iconic style it might not be out of place to consider the general nature of icons. Icons, though originally symbols or aids to worship, later became so identified with the deities represented that they were regarded as the deity himself. Thus, things, persons, and events are not only endowed with a special meaning they

are the embodiment of intangible spiritual ideas which take on a sensuous form. Iconology conveys a knowledge through images or pictures, one type of object represents another, and one event represents another. These paintings therefore are first of all dedicated, not to artistic aims, but to meanings. They follow a ritualistic religious tradition and are impressive because of their meanings. Such an art is not personal, but it is characteristically impersonal and contemplation is the primary purpose of this art.

Again this art which is devoted to image making is highly stylised. Stylisation itself always signifies spirit rather than person. The traditional symbol has both a form as well as a name. And this form is one which has evolved through many centuries of religious consciousness. Thus, we find the major representations of the gods following especially the sastric iconography. Both the subject and its depiction owe much to forms already existing in the repertory of Indian art.

Compared to the generally known Indian miniatures these sacred paintings are large in size and usually framed. They were made to be hung on the walls and were not viewed from close at hand. Some examples are very large and resemble murals. The heaviness of the style has something to do with the height and distance from which the picture is seen. The impact in a darkened room is that of a glowing presence.

The composition is characteristically static and consists generally of one main figure, the deity, centrally placed; only rarely does one come across narrative or illustrative subjects. The deity is formally housed within an enclosure, of a palace or temple pavilion. Even when there is no architectural background such an enclosure is created by means of an arch, curtains, or formal surrounding borders. Thus the space is circumscribed and there are very limited possibilities for depicting movement. One may say the space is compressed and made thick by the heavy encrusting and enclosing ornament^[15].

The central figure is set out in his most characteristic attitude which is symbolic he may be surrounded by other aspects of himself consorts or votaries. The figures however occupy a limited place being entirely on the surface of the picture.

There are no figures or limbs which extend into the interior, so that the painting is the visual equivalent of a bas relief where the carving is of necessity confined to the surface. Here the planar limitation is accepted without trying for illusionary effects. The deity with his or her attributes, vahana, consorts, or devotees is pressed upon the place and appears as in a pageant the gilded effects to give certain theatricality to the scene.

The drawing of the figures is monumental and robust. The firm clear brush outlines are no doubt descendants of a long anterior tradition. They enclose the form heightening its rotundity and massiveness. Even in the depiction of ascetics one does not come across figures that are attenuated or emaciated. There is a fondness for well being that is also considered to be right.

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The artists maintained comprehensive sketch-books in which the models of the deities were drawn. They were well acquainted with the iconographic formulae relevant to each. Coomaraswamy mentions that these drawings “are of special interest on account the great boldness of the freehand brush outlines and for the extremely archaic character of some of the designs. The roundness of the figures is further given emphasis by shading or modelling. The shading is often in light blue if the figure is in white, or in a darker tone of the body colour. (This modelling is not to be confused with light and shade in the Western sense, though the foreign method of showing cast shadow is sometimes seen in minor details). As noted earlier the chief figures in the composition follow a hieratic convention, but the artist is sometimes able to exercise a little freedom in the portrayal of secondary figures in the borders or in a horizontal panel below the main subject. Here one can often observe a charming spontaneity in the drawing of familiar object, children and animals. The division of the picture space into smaller areas or panels either below, on the sides, or all around, is quite frequent^[17].

The colour schemes of these pictures are generally strong. There may be a deep green, strong blue or red background while the principal figures are mainly in white or yellow, green or blue. Red and blue or red and green arrangements often dominate the composition. The colours used are pure and flat, there is little interest in mixed tints. Variations are produced by texture and surface decoration. Whatever the colours, the major role is played by the gold which tends to bind and hold the picture in its decorative structure. In early pictures of this period the gold was sparingly used, but with the development of the heavy gemset style it plays a major role and the painting itself becomes a gigantic ornament.

These ornamented paintings with their rich and sumptuous effects were used in worship or served to embellish the puja room. It is striking that there is a paucity of bronze images produced in this period. The painted and jewelled icons may have substituted for them to an extent. The scarcity of bronze was perhaps due to the fact that the available metal was necessary for the manufacture of guns (bronze is also called gun metal). Further, images of bronze of a larger size were not permitted to be installed in private houses and if they were, they required the rituals for them to be performed by Brahmins. The sacred icons therefore fulfilled a specific need and their highly decorated character was an expression of devotion. Philip Rawson states, "The attitude towards ornament reflects an instinct deeply rooted in the Indian character. To ornament is also an expressing of respect or may have magical or other auspicious properties. At a later stage it not only expresses but provides status as the lavish jewellery of Gods does in South India. Visual art even purely representational art fulfils both these functions of ornament vis-a-vis the house, temple or manuscript it adorns. Rawson refers to reverence, magical function and status which are attributes of ornamentation.

In citing the Vijayanagar wall painting. I refer in particular to the style of two examples to which the Tanjavur painting seems related 1. The ceiling of the Virupaksha temple at Hampi and 2. A similar small ceiling decoration at Sri Astotra Lingam mandapam at the great Siva temple at Srikalahasti.

At the Virupaksha in Hampi we notice that the ceiling area is divided into clearly defined panels. Each of these panels is almost like a small Tanjavur painting. For example, the principal figures are enclosed in an arched space. Above can be seen a row of Vinamas or Shikharas or minarets with trees. A broad border below is also common, this is sometimes filled with smaller architectural units or with subsidiary figures; in some there are musicians and dancers in a frieze. In the Tanjavur painting a similar predella with subsidiary figures is quite usual. Of course, it should be kept in mind that the Vijayanagar style itself cannot be considered alien, since it was formed of various elements of Chalukyan and Chola art. Further we find an arrangement of figures all in one plane, and a specific interest in textures created by pattern. The treatment is stylised and the line is continuous and wiry and full of waves and crinkles, but tight rather than loose or vague.

Here I may suggest that the Vijayanagar style could have borrowed the patternistic composition of its from its northern Islamic neighbours. Painters moved from court to court and were not averse to limiting each other. It would seem that the insistence on a

composition in a panel and a panel with subdivisions into a central arcade and other registers or parts one above or beside the other, is a Deccani feature and is probably ultimately of Central Asian origin. Deccani painting was a well established style using elements from abroad. It pervaded the central Indian belt and included the kingdoms of Bijapur and Golkunda (Hyderabad was founded in 1589). Golkunda was the wealthiest of the Deccan kingdoms and had an archive trade with South-East Asia and Persia.

The Deccani miniature painting of this period was often lavishly enriched with gold and strong colours. The composition is more or less symmetrical with the background of flat architecture, which consists of several registers one above the other. There is a fondness for textural pattern with which the ground is covered; often numerous vessels are placed in the foreground. The gold work is embossed with raised lines or designs both in the architecture and in the costumes.

The composition in both Ahmednagar and Bijapur is characteristically formal. The architecture is almost a flat design. For example in Raga Sri, we have three clearly defined compartments with domes, the whole arrangement is completely flat and like a pageant. In both Tarif-i-HusaynShahi and Raga Sri, the chief characters are seated on thrones with bolsters, flanked by attendants on either side. Many of these pictures have borders, the flat areas such as those of the floor or walls are filled up with arabesques or designs. The Deccani Islamic states influenced their neighbours precisely because of their excellent work. In fact small Hindu Deccani kingdoms also developed a delicate iconic type of painting decorated with gold and of great elegance at such places as Shorapur.

Though, on the surface, Deccani painting may seem remote from Tanjavur, yet it seems to have common features with it such as 1. Its static formal composition; 2. Its love of surface texture; 3. Its architectural backgrounds which are symbolic rather than realistic and 4. Its love of gold decoration. These features are certainly not part of earlier south Indian painting.

Secondly, we see the influence of court painting and portraiture. It was only after the rise of portraiture as an accepted genre that we find the subject matter that is a figure, enlarged to a size that fills the page or composition. Traditionally, figures have always been small, but with the development of court portraiture (and where the painting is devoted to a single figure) the artist is often interested in eliminating the environment and in giving his figure a heightened dignity. If, in earlier portraits, the subject is often seen on horseback or

against a landscape, in the later paintings he is often seen seated or standing in an interior. It is again from the Deccan and through it, from influences of the north that we see figures seated leaning against bolsters, often the only environment is of curtains in scallops. Other features found in late northern portraiture are the representation of angels or flying figures with wings, glass lamp shades, chandeliers and other furniture. The bolsters and divans are no doubt, common to all Indian court scenes. The Tanjavur portraits will be discussed separately, but here they may mention that the portraits in general are more controlled in colour and show some pictorial interest though the arrangements are generally somewhat stiff. The intent in the portrait is to “present” an image or make an “appearance”. The usefulness of this connection to icons is very apparent.

CONCLUSION

The portrait painters of this era could fare no better, no doubt they were the same artists as painted the icons, but they were circumscribed by a different set of limitations. The major portions of the portraits were of the royal family. In the portraits of the king there was obviously little scope to be either inventive or imaginative, the king was depicted formally again and again, in a pose that was static, attired in a regal costume and asserting his kingship. If there were also portraits of lesser mortals these aimed at perpetuating a likeness for posterity rather than creating a true painting. The new interest in man, the new observation of character was practically wasted since it was combined with a rigidity not suitable to free expression and with an absence of pictorial experiment. In the conventional portrait there was a complete lack of emotion; the painted figure was only a symbol of the real one. It was only very occasionally as in the paintings of women and children that the artist warmed to his subject and conveyed to us a feeling of his feeling.

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