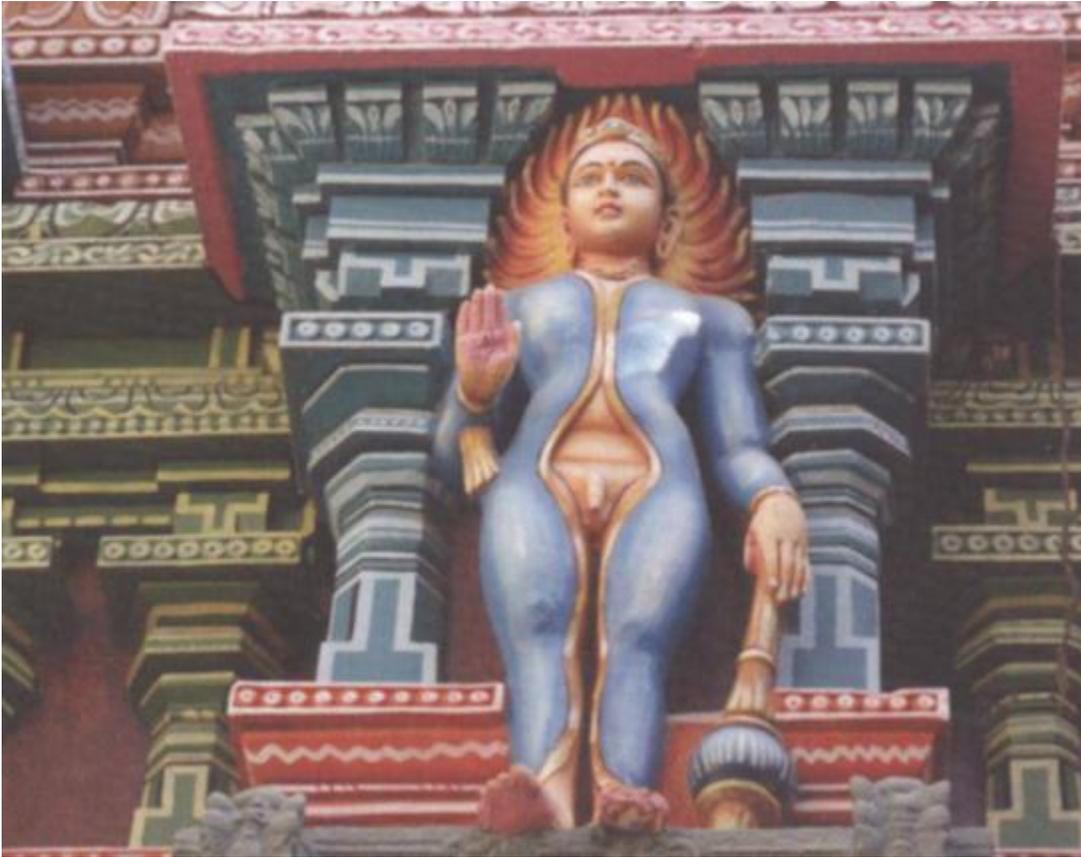


Madurai Sculptures.



A rare sculpture of Lord Shiva.



Sculpture depicting Arjuna in penance.



Lord Shiva and Lord Narasimha.



A sculpture of Lord Shiva with 25 heads and 50 hands.

It takes you on an easy tour of two dozen lesser known spots within the temple

The Temple Town's fame rests almost entirely on the Meenakshi Amman Temple. With its imposing gopurams and intricately carved pillars, various mandapams and numerous figurines, the famous temple is Madurai's window to the rest of the world.

No matter, how many times you have visited the temple, each time you chance upon something new. Many times you are left wondering about the magical power of the architectural wonder and the stories behind.

Culture preserved in stones

The Meenakshi Temple is the place where you feel so much of your culture and heritage is preserved in stones. The work on every pillar, tower, ceiling and walls is amazing that draws you in like a magnet irrespective of whether you are a devotee or a non-believer.

Often many visitors may just be walking around or inside the temple clueless about the art and history it holds. To guide them best, INTACH and CII, Madurai zone have come out with a pocket-sized book which gives visitors an on-the-ground look at some of the lesser known sculptures that hide so many a story.

The idea was conceptualised by INTACH member Rajesh Kanna following a heritage walk around the temple last year. "While preparing the clues for our participants, we discovered so many interesting facets to the Temple that we thought it would be befitting to compile them all into a booklet for the benefit of temple visitors," says Rajesh.

The pocket guide titled "Rediscover Meenakshi Amman Temple-Madurai" and priced at Rs.20 a copy has already gone for a first print order of 8,000 copies. The idea is to sell them in bulk to hotels and bookstores, the railways, airport and transport authorities besides the kiosks and stalls that border the temple.

"It is for these buyers to either distribute the guide free of cost or sell it to the people. Our idea is to provide the public with interesting information about the temple and also make it easily accessible," says Rajesh.

Rajesh and his team ensures you experience the best of the Meenakshi Temple by looking, for instance, at the Gopuram Tangis on the South Tower, akin akin to Atlas, the bearer of the Earth in Greek mythology. Or the statue of Lord Murugan seated on a white elephant and flanked by Goddess Valli and Goddess Deivanai, daughter of Lord Indra, or the interesting sculpture of Lord Ganesa depicted as an infant cradled by his parents on this tallest curvilinear tower.

Interesting depictions

Ravana with nine heads and playing the veena can be seen on the amman gopuram opposite to the West Tower, which has another interesting scene of Lord Murugan enlightening his father on the significance of "Om". A masterpiece sculpture of Markandeya who is saved by Lord Shiva from the clutches of Yama is seen hugging the Shivalinagm on the West Tower where another highlight is the pan-Indian mythology of churning the ocean of milk to create the universe with devas and asuras on either side.

Arjuna standing in meditation and a pre-marital encounter between Lord Shiva on a bull and Goddess Meenakshi on a horse are depicted in style on swamy gopuram opposite the West Tower.

So many times you may have walked around the Arasu and the neem tree within the temple complex. But did you know they are the remains of the earliest form of worship representing Lord Shiva and Goddess parvati. Near the Thirukalyana Mandapam, Shiva is seen with wings of a bird and head of a lion. This is the form of Sharabamoorthy, the form which Shiva took to tame

Vishnu when he became the ferocious Narasimha. There is another interesting form of Shiva wearing a coat made of javadu. It is called the chattainathar.

Locate Lord Maha Sadha Shiva with 25 heads and 50 hands on chitira gopuram, as he overlooks the golden lotus tank. Inside the 1000 pillars hall, there is a painting where Lord Shiva is showing the boundaries of Madurai to then Pandiyan king using a snake. It is called the ellai katiya padalam. Manmadan, the Indian God of Love and his wife Rathi find space on opposite pillars inside this hall.

Manmadan carries a sugarcane as his bow to stress the sweetness of life and a flower to show the tenderness of life, but the sculptures have been vandalised.

The booklet, with a temple map inside, contains many more such snippets that helps a visitor to discover the temple better. Each page contains a photograph and easy to read small text that makes the booklet a convenient reference for a self-guided tour.

<http://www.thehindu.com/arts/books/rediscovering-meenakshi-temple/article4221896.ece>

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