

KALAMKARI

Introduction

Kalamkari is an exquisite ancient craft of painted and printed fabrics. It derives its name from *Kalam* meaning Pen, and *Kari* meaning work, literally *Penwork*. It is a hand painting as well as block printing with vegetable dyes. Kalamkari art has evolved through trial and error over the last 3000 years. Techniques of craftsmanship in Kalamkari were handed down within the families from generation to generation.

India is rich in art and craft and Kalamkari which is painted on cloth is done in several parts of India and Iran. In Andhra Pradesh, both the Masulipatnam and Srikalahasti village are recognised as major centers for Kalamkari painting. Masulipatnam located on the south – east coast of India, 200 miles east of Hyderabad, and Srikalahasti 80 miles north of Chennai near Tirupati are the leaders in producing Kalamkari paintings. Kalamkari as practised in Masulipatnam is different from the Kalamkari practised in Srikalahasti.

History

It is believed that the earliest fragments of painted fabrics were found during the Indus valley civilisation and in ancient Greece before the time of Christ. The archaeological evidences tell us that the hand painting on resists – dyed cloth was discovered in the eighth century. The popularity of this art was found in the old writings of the French traveler, Francois Bernier. Other evidence like the illustration of the Hamzanamesh done at the time of Akbar, also talk about profuse use of painted fabrics produced in the Golconda region.



NFSC is a non-governmental, non-profit organisation, registered in Chennai dedicated to the promotion of Indian folklore research, education, training, networking and publications. The aim of the centre is to integrate scholarship with activism, aesthetic appreciation with community development, comparative folklore studies with cultural diversities and identities, dissemination of information with multi-disciplinary dialogues, folklore fieldwork with developmental issues and folklore advocacy with public programming events. NFSC aims to achieve its goals through cooperative and experimental activities at various levels. NFSC's public programming is supported by a grant from the Ford Foundation.

Contact

National Folklore Support Centre

No.65, Fifth Cross Street, Rajalakshmi Nagar,
Velachery, Chennai – 600 042.
Ph : 044-2450553, Fax : 044-2450553
Email : info@indianfolklore.org
Site : www.indianfolklore.org

NFSC in collaboration with Government Museum, Chennai announces its second public programme on kalamkari painting - Visual Art Traditions of India Series

Date : 3-7, July 2000

**Venue : Centenary Hall,
Government Museum, Chennai.**

Artists : Mr. C. Subramanayam, Mr. Narasimha

The Moghuls patronised this craft in the Coromandel and Golconda provinces. Thus the name *Kalamkari* comes from the Urdu word *Qalam* meaning Pen. Muslim influence and therefore trade links were traced between Safavid Persia and Qutbshi Golconda around the sixteenth century.

In the early seventeenth century, the Golconda cotton paintings as they were known, came from Chennai Golconda, and Masulipatnam became a well-known center. As Golconda was under Muslim rule, the artistic designs produced in Masulipatnam catered to Persian taste. As Srikalahasti was under Hindu rulers, it flourished directly under the patronage of temples, and exclusively drew figures and narrated mythological stories.

At the end of 1565, there was a great European demand, and new exotic Eastern motifs were created by both the Masulipatnam and Srikalahasti Schools. British East India Company and French East India Company asked for their choice of designs, and it is interesting to note that even a Chinese-looking Kalamkari was ordered by the French! Then a new type of Kalamkari named *Kanpur* emerged in Thanjavur and was patronised by the Maratharulers. It was delicately painted on the golden brocaded cloth. These clothes were made into sarees and dhotis and were worn by Chatrapathi Shivaji and by the royal families in the early nineteenth century. Srikalahasti style of figurative painting became important centre only in the nineteenth century. This specialisation with panels or individual episodes was taken from epics and continues in Srikalahasti even today.

In the beginning of twentieth century there was less demand for exporting Kalamkari painting and thereby it lost its creative value. The Kalamkari artists suffered, and most of them turned to different professions. Today as we entered into the new millennium, there is a flourishing demand on Kalamkari painting and this dying craft is saved! These Kalamkari paintings are always done for wall hangings, but today it is also painted on sarees, dhotis, dupatas, cushion covers, lampshades, table covers, bedspreads, napkins, etc.



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Narakasura Vadha - the killing of the demon Narakasura

Masulipatnam style of painting

Masulipatnam designs are Iranian in character with intricate and delicate forms. The old traditional block prints were largely used with Persian motifs like trees, creepers, flowers and leaf designs. Later came the Dutch influence when there was an increase in demand from Europe. This style of Kalamkari was mainly done on bed covers, curtains and also garments, as it was a popular demand from the west. In the nineteenth century block prints reached its peak and even today it's largely produced for Indians and foreigners.

Srikalahasti style of painting

Coming to Srikalahasti, temples were a major inspiration. The art flourished under the patronage of the temples with their demands for scrolls and wall hangings with story figurative and narrative components. It richly displayed episodes from the *Puranas*, *Mahabharata*, *Ramayana*, and other Mythological stories for their themes painted in the panels with a script running along the border. The subjects chosen to paint were restricted to Gods such as *Krishna*, *Brahma*, *Ganesha*, *Durga*, *Kirata vijayarajuna*, *Lakshmi*, *Rama*, *Shiva* and *Parvathi*.

Techniques

The Kalamkari art of painting undergoes a laborious, slow process of resist - dyeing and hand printing. Many stages have to be undergone before the final results are achieved. Unlike other styles of painting, Kalamkari painting demands a lot of treatment before and after the painting is completed on the cotton fabric. Depending on the treatment of cloth, or quality of the mordant, the colours change accordingly. Every step from soaking of cloth, to sketching the outlines to washing and drying the cloth, is done carefully and correctly.

All the world over people are turning away from dangerous chemical dyes. The harmless, naturally dyed fabrics is used for Kalamkari painting. The artists believe in using natural dyes, extracting from bark, flower and root. One would be stunned to know that the colour red is obtained by using the Indian madder root, yellow from the pomegranate seed or even mango bark, and colour black from myrobalam fruit. No chemical dyes are used in producing Kalamkari colours!

The process used for both schools of Kalamkari painting is more or less the same. The only major difference is that Srikalahasti paintings, depend entirely on the brush - like pen where as the Masulipatnam style uses block-printing procedures. The process done in Srikalahasti is more tedious. The cloth is treated and washed twice, and two or three times alum is painted.

Stages

- ⊖ Cloth is first whitened by immersing it in a solution of goat or cow dung and letting it dry in the sun for a few days.
- ⊖ Cloth is then treated in Myrobalan solution. Ripe fruits

are used in Masulipatnam, raw ones in Srikalahasti. Milk is then added to the solution to prevent the colour spreading in the next step.

- θ The iron acetate solution is filled in, either for solid spaces or as outlines, with a brush – pen in Srikalahasti, and wooden blocks in Masulipatnam.
- θ All the areas meant to be red are painted or printed over with the alum solution as a mordant. Mordant is a substance that fixes the natural dye on the material.
- θ After applying alum, the cloth is kept for at least 24 hours. Then the excess mordant is removed by washing the cloth under flowing water.
- θ The dyeing is done for the red colour by boiling with the red colouring materials.
- θ All the portions which are not to be blue are covered with wax.
- θ The waxed cloth is immersed in indigo solution. In Srikalahasti the blue is painted with the *kalam*. Then the wax is removed by boiling the cloth in water.
- θ The yellow is painted on to produce yellow and green.
- θ The cloth is finally washed again and dried before final colours emerge.

Central part of a temple, Kalahasti region, 19th century



Folklore

During our fieldwork in Srikalahasti we met with Kalamkari Artist, Mr. C. Subramanyam. He lives with his wife, Jakkama, and his five children. His wife and children are also trained in Kalamkari painting, and they all paint together with other artisans in the house. Mr. C. Subramanyam was trained as a Kalamkari painter from 1966-67. His master was J. Lakshmaya. In 1974, he received national award from the President of India. In 1991-93 he taught forty students, on behalf of Government of India. Best Kalamkari artist, according to him, is Guru Rambhoji Naik from Anantpur district, because he could paint all different styles from traditional, modern, floral, to folk. When asked what is meant by folk style of painting he explained that the folk style could be imaginative and subjective. For example, the arm of Krishna could extend up to embrace women, which is very unrealistic in the modern style.

C. Subramanyam recounted interesting stories. He spoke with great enthusiasm..... There is a village called *Nunna*, near Vijayawada which is dominated by the Yadava caste. They perform *Jata* a ten-day festival. It is also called the *Gargama Festival*. During this time the villagers from Nunna come to Srikalahasti village and take with them Kalamkari paintings from Srikalahasti artists. They perform pooja, prepare pongal, practice rituals of animal sacrifice, and light lamps. It is mostly performed on full moon night. Then the paintings of goddess *Gargama* were given by the Yadavas to the Srikalahasti artists to repaint them. In exchange they gave away their old paintings and paid exorbitant fees. And these ancient paintings were sold to antique collectors. This is practiced even today. This *Gargama festival* is similar to Shankaranti or Pongal festival and is held during the month of May or June in Srikalahasti.

The story of *Mathamma* is also interesting. The Madigas of Andhra Pradesh who trace their roots to *Kartaveerjuna* perform a festival called the *Mathamma Festival*. These Madigas went to Srikalahasti artists and then paint figures of *Mathamma* and *Kartaveerjuna*. And during this ten-day festival these Kalamkari paintings are displayed.

Addresses of Kalamkari artists who helped us with this workshop :

Mr. C. Subramanyam
16/61, Paragal,
Srikalahasti,
Chittoor (Dist.) A.P.
Tel : 08578 – 61693

Mr. Prabhakar
C/o.Kalakshetra Foundation
Kalamkari Unit,
Tiruvanniyur, Chennai-600041.
Tel : 044-4914523

Kalamkari workshop – Schedule

Date	3 - 7, July 2000
Venue	Centenary Hall, Government Museum, Chennai
Time	10.00 a.m. – 5.00 p.m.
3 July	Inaugural function Introduction and demonstration on Kalamkari Painting Learning the techniques and drawing the outlines
4 July	Introductory lecture Alum processing Complete the Sketch
5 July	Lecture on technical aspect of Kalamkari Boiling and washing of the painting Yellow processing
6 July	Lecture demonstration Green and blue processing
7 July	Kalamkari exhibition and guided tour in museum Final touches of the painting Closing Ceremony

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