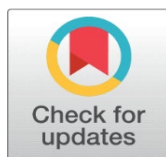


KERALA FRESCO: - A STUDY OF TRADITION, DECLINE AND ITS REVIVAL

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ABSTRACT

Kerala mural painting is one of the breathtaking art forms of India. This art showcases Kerala's artistic culture and also its spiritual heritage. Scenes from legends of Ramayana and Mahabharata, epics from Puranas and spiritual folklores are painted on the outer walls of the temple all over Kerala. These murals are rendered in only five colors derived from natural ingredients are the biggest collection of secco technique murals found in India. The art started around 9 century BC flourished during the Bhakti movement, peaked around 15th century CE and declined in early 19th century CE due to colonial influence and lack of institutional support. Although art schools and tourism have recently rekindled interest in Kerala murals, Commercial variations have lessened its styles authenticity. The paper discusses the origin, style characteristics and cultural importance along with the factors behind its decline and approaches required for reviving it. To make sure that this Legacy continues and gets enriched in Modern Times the paper suggests strategies like inclusion in art education, state sponsored preservations, digital archives and involving community for its propagation. Through analyzing historical data visual observation and expert interviews these studies suggest how traditional arts may keep up the pace with current changing world

Keywords: Kerala Mural Paintings, Traditional Art of Kerala, Legacy, Natural Pigments, Revival

1. INTRODUCTION

State of Kerala is blessed with natural beauty, exclusive spice production exotic beaches and an extensively rich cultural legacy; Mural painting being one of the most unique and enchanting art form of Kerala. India has a rich history of mural painting with evidence from the upper Paleolithic period which evolved into a rich and varied mural tradition in various parts of the country. Kerala murals have a very intricate linear detailing style, textured rendering and prescribed iconography. Kerala murals are painted on the outer walls of temples with themes generally related to the presiding deity. Panchavarna-five colours are used to paint these murals. The colours are extracted from naturally available material and plants. Depiction of stories follows strict iconographies that are described in books like Vishnudharmottara Puran and Silparatna. These murals use the Fresco-Secco method for wall preparation. Kerala proudly owns the largest collection of secco murals that shows its roots towards aesthetic tradition and devotional mindset.

Picture 1



Picture 1 Kerala Mural Painting

1.1. AIM

This study aims to examine the evolution of Kerala mural paintings starting from its traditional inception, cultural significance, historical background and strategies that can ensure preservation and growth of this bold and beautiful tradition.

1.2. OBJECTIVES

The major objective of this paper is to analyze the reasons and factors behind its decline apart from documenting its background and techniques. Secondly the study also accesses the role of artists and Government Initiatives for its revival and preservation. Lastly it will suggest convenient preservation methods.

1.3. METHOD

This study follows a qualitative & descriptive research approach to examine the tradition, decline and revival of Kerala Mural Art. The research used primary data collected through one-on-one interviews with renowned muralists, educators and temple trust officials. Field visit to nearly ten selected temples; visual observations and photographic documentation will stand as pillar for analysis of techniques. Secondary data includes scholarly publications and journal articles.

1.4. LITERATURE REVIEW

The tradition of Kerala murals is rooted deep in religious and aesthetic practices of the state. These aspects of the art are studied through art history, conservation methods and also cultural studies. The art lays its foundation with the help of ancient Sanskrit texts like Chitrastutam which is a part of Vishnudharmottara Purana. This purana has explained in detail the rules about proportion, posture, colour preparation, colour symbolism and iconography i.e. ideal way to represent the deities in this sacred art. (Nambirajan and Suresh 2015). This purana has continued to guide the new generation artists also. The materials and techniques used are studied by many artists and art enthusiasts.

Dr. Sandhya Ravi in her scholarly thesis highlights the cultural role of natural pigments-Laterite, Indigo, soot and plant-based extracts-used to reflect spiritual qualities like sattva, rajas, and tamas (Ravi, Sandhya. 2015).

Nambirajan and Suresh's catalog documents all the murals in high resolution photographs. Working for the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) they have documented murals from seven ASI protected temples which include Mattancherri Palace and Vaddkumanathan temple.

Institute of Mural Painting was founded in 1989 by the Guruvayur Devaswom Board, under the able guidance of Mammiyur Krishnan Kutty Nair. The institute trains young artist in the traditional gurukula system and runs a five-year diploma.

Vasthuvudya Gurukulam at Aranmula in Thrissur district has a dedicated department for mural work is a unique institution under the Dept. of Culture, Govt. of Kerala. It also undertakes restoration projects.

Recent scholarly article written by Prof. Netra Todkar and Avachat Shirke examines how young generation artists are combining contemporary styles and themes. (Todkar, Netra & Shirke, Mukta. 2024). Chitraklekha Journal on Art and Design presents a case study, wherein traditional motifs of K.M are applied on modern use merchandise.

The above studies give provides insights into colour preparation, techniques and iconography. Efforts undertaken for their revival are not exhaustive. Restoration projects are also on a limited scope. This study aims to fill this void by combined analysis of historical documents and interviews.

2. POST OCCUPANCY EVALUATION (POE)

2.1. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The tradition of Kerala murals is a sophisticated art form of Indian wall painting that emerged and flourished between 9th and 18th century CE. These painting adorn the outer walls of shrikovil that is the sanctum sanctorum of Hindu Temples. "These paintings are characterised by intricate lines, vibrant colours, mythological themes, and strict adherence to iconographic principals derived from classical texts like the chitrasutram and Silparatna". (Nambirajan & Suresh 2015). The art originated during the Chera dynasty (9th-12th century CE) when temple architecture and art were sponsored by political ruling authority. Murals from this period show clear inspiration from Tamil and Dravidian style aesthetics. They focus on depictions of deities such as Shiva, Vishnu and Devi, drawn with divine proportions and idealised expressions (Ravi, Sandhya. 2015).

Cochin and Travancore dynasties became notable patrons of mural art. The royal family of Cochin supported mural art extensively. Famous murals of Mattancherry Palace are also done under Cochin sponsorship. The kings of Travancore fostered a cultural renewal that also encouraged mural paintings along with music and language.

Themes of Kerala murals are always from Hindu mythology, they narrate stories from puranas, legends of Mahabharata and Ramayana, stories of Gods and Goddesses. They always follow the rules set by ancient texts about posture, composition and colour coding. Red, Yellow ochre, green, black and white; the Panchavarna are derived from natural sources like laterite, indigo, lamp soot and plant extracts. (Ravi, Sandhya. 2015).

Kerala murals follow the technique of fresco-secco - a wall preparation method of painted over a prepared dry plastered wall. This technique is merged with local innovative substances which also form a part of religious beliefs, but have scientific reasons.

All the images in the mural are outlined with thin black lines. Shading is done by coating the base colour over and over again until desired effect is achieved. The murals are typically done in two-dimensional style and are filled with intricate patterns. Specific colours are used to show the spiritual aspect of a particular image.

By 19th Century all princely states were under colonial patronage, which affected the cultural spread of Indian art and values. New academic art came in fashion, and this caused decline of many indigenous art forms. However, Kerala murals great aesthetic religious roots, spiritual symbolism and précised execution techniques helped these murals to stand, endure the neglect and rise again in recent times through various revival efforts.

2.2. TECHNIQUE OF KERALA MURAL PAINTING:

2.2.1. WALL PREPARATION

Fresco-secco technique is used for preparing the wall base for Kerala murals. Also known as a dry fresco, it is a technique where pigments are applied to a dry, finished plastered wall. This plaster is granite or laterite mixture.

Then a plaster mix (2:1 ratio) of sand and lime with water and juice of Terminalia Chebula forms the first coat. 2mm thick coat of sand, lime (in 4:1 ratio) and cotton fibres (Gossypium herbaceum) is applied as second coat. Lastly calcium carbonate or lime is mixed with tender coconut water and applied as a thin coating several times until a clear white colour is achieved to on the wall. (Nambirajan & Suresh 2015)

Colour Preparation

Five colours; Panchavarna - pancha meaning five and varna meaning colour & are used. They form the core colours of the colour palette-Red, Yellow, Green, Black and white. Red is obtained from mineral like laterite, Yellow from yellow laterite or turmeric or yellow clay, Green from plants like Nilamari of Erevikkara, Black from lamp sooth and White- the base prepared as it is. These colours are mixed with natural binders like plant resins and tender coconut water before using them on the plastered wall.

2.2.2. PAINTING PROCESS

On the prepared white base, the murals are sketched using a lekhini (pencil made using extracted yellow colour) into a composition with basic outlines and no details.

- **Lekhyakarma:** is the first step of sketching imagines.
- **Rekhakarma:** The line work is followed with brush work using yellow ochre colour.
- **Varnakarma:** colouring the murals. It starts by colouring all the yellow ochre parts first then followed by red, green, white is achieved by keeping the area blank so as to expose the base (write in colour) and finally black is used.
- **Lekhakarma:** final intricate detailing is done using black colour.
- **Divkakarma:** Finishing process involves applying of varnish made with pine and sesame oil, which adds permanence and brightness to the murals. (Nimbirjan and Suresh-2015)

Picture 2



Painting by Sreenath ST.

Picture 2 Painting Process

Picture 3



Painting by Sreenath ST.

Picture 3 Detailing the Mural

2.2.3. BRUSHES

In traditional method brushes are made personally by the artists using locally wild grown arrowgrass (*Aristitidia setacea*). A long process goes into making fine brushes for various applications. The hairs are tied to bamboo stick to form a brush. These brushes are still in vogue.

2.2.4. THEMES AND ICONOGRAPHY

The themes of Kerala murals are from Hindu epics and mythology, stories from Ramayan, Mahabharata, incarnation stories of Lord Shiva, Vishnu, Laxmi, Adishakti, and various Gods and Goddess are illustrated on the temple walls.

Since the architecture of Kerala temples is intricate, no continuous proportionate plain area is available to depict one story in a continuous plane. Hence there is no set direction to depict the story. The layout is done as according to the available space, where the story may even continue from wall to wall. The images are placed close to each other, leaving no negative space and are distinguished using chain borders. Many a times two stories overlap each other and hence a person should know the story beforehand to actually understand its representation on the wall. The images of stories depicted follow a hierarchy through size, posture, colour and adornment. Main deity of character of the story is larger in size, placed centrally and then surrounded by smaller images of attendants or devotees.

Each deity is assigned a colour as per its gunas (traits) like Krishna and Vishnu in blue, which symbolize cosmic power, shiva in white, representing ascetic purity, Devis in red or vermillion showcasing power of fertility and demons is green. The stance of these images is conveyed through their hand gestures a facial expression. The hand gestures, body gesture facial expression, seating style base, on which they are sitting, who all is around the deity and in which colour; all is mentioned in detail in the text - Silparatna which is followed very strictly while illustrating the narrative.

Picture 4



Source <https://images.app.goo.gl/oH7d8Lu7C8k2vGqv7>

Picture 4 Murals Integrated with the Temple Architecture

2.3. PATRONAGE

During Perumal kings of Kerala (9th Century CE) first time themes and art motifs were stabilized for wall paintings. This was the golden age of ritual and spiritual efflorescence in Kerala, as largest number of temples had been embellished with extensive mural panels". (Satyamurthi 2003)

The fashion of decorating temple walls with murals was high in Pallava, Pandya and Chola regions. This wave travelled to Kerala, and the knowledge was shared in the region of Ay. Kings and gradually passed to rest of Kerala. In this transmission of the art is it local traditions merged, and Kerala murals emerged into a unique style. During the second Pandya Empire (12th Century CE) mural art again expanded which was subjugated by Chola power.

Later many, temples murals were commissioned under Chera dynasty (9th-12th CE). Cheras: especially king Kulasekhara Alwar was prominently associated with the Bhakti movement and encouraged Shiva and Vishnu Bhakti. This much fueled the Chera's to fund the temple decoration with murals so as to educate and spiritually uplift the common people. Similarly royal family of Travancore supported temple art and architecture in mid-18th century. C.E. (Varma 109). The murals in Cochin Palace - The Mattancherry palace, have a large collection very well preserved! but no evident proof of who commissioned the paintings. But as they are on interiors of the palace, it must have been funded by the Cochin King.

2.4. DECLINE OF THE ART

Flourished under royal patronage, this art began declining with the colonial influence. Local rulers no longer had any power over finances and hence temple murals faced a rapid and sudden decline.

British introduced western artistic ideas and academic art schools in India. These schools brought in oil paints and aesthetics that stressed naturalism and linear perspectives which were totally contrast to the flat two dimensional symbolic and highly stylized way of Kerala murals. European art gained fame and prestige; as a result, the local muralists were left with no opportunities to practice their art.

Famous painter Raja Ravi Verma mastered this academic art and painted all deities in naturalistic manner, human like making them look more beautiful rather than spiritual. The printing medium added to this change. Lithographic prints of 'The Birth of Shakuntala' shook the entire art community in 1894. The press later printed popular images of Hindu deities like Lakshmi, Ganesha, Vishnu, and Saraswati which were used for worshipping in every household.

In 18th & 19th century the dominant hereditary guild system, also caused damage to the system of transmission of knowledge from master to disciple. End of royal patronage and this guild system forced many muralists to take other occupations. This resulted in loss of technical knowledge about mural art. After a few decades there were no young generation who had technical, authentic knowledge and skills of Kerala murals.

As time passed large number of temple murals lost its value, faced neglect, lack of maintenance and started degrading. The environment also took a toll on these murals. Humidity, insect hives and webs deteriorated the murals. Lack of awareness caused murals to further deteriorate due to oil soot, lamp heat, and attachment of electricity wires.

In some cases, murals were plastered over in an effort of renovating the temple structure. Murals were also repainted in some remote temples with new mediums and lower quality skills. This was all because of lack of awareness about its culture and historical value.

3. REVIVAL EFFORTS

The Travancore Archaeological series (1910) do have mentions of cultural heritage of Kerala and thus "helped bring scholarly attention to the state of Kerala's temple murals" (Varma 125). The Guruvayur Devaswom Board established the first institute to teach mural art under leadership of Mammiyur Krishna Kutty Nair in 1989. Students that are trained here contribute to the restoration and revival of this art nationally and internally. Archaeological Survey of India has around seven temples under its protection and undertakes restoration work. Few Temple trusts independently do come forward for restoration process as shared by artist Dr. Saju Thiruthil in his interview, but they are not really aware of how tedious, scientific and expensive the process is and hence no further actions are taken on it. Sometimes they turn towards local painters to repaint the murals. Formally trained muralist are setting up Gallery culture to revive the art. One of such galleries is Art & Mind International Mural Gallery and Study Center - Dr Saju Thuruthil

Picture 5



Source <https://images.app.goo.gl/jeRnDtATrvQYhhCn9>

Picture 5 Mural Painting adorning house walls.

Picture 6



Source website: <https://share.google/DQl5ae7X6DEuEXDnu>

Picture 6 Exterior of Art & Mind International Mural Gallery

Picture 7



Source website: <https://share.google/DQl5ae7X6DEuEXDnu>

Picture 7 Interior of Art & Mind International Mural Gallery

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

- Kerala murals have deep historical roots and develop as a temple art under various royal patron commissions.
- Though it has many artistic influences Kerala murals have emerged as a unique art due to its intricacy and high aesthetics.
- Advent of western art schools and colonial rule the art suffered decline to an extent that it was on verge of extinction.
- It is gradually reviving in the modern 20th century and also is evolving into contemporary aesthetics.
- Earlier only male artists practiced this art, but modern times have increased participation of women, making it a gender-neutral skill. This initiative was taken by Guruvayur mural institute by admitting female students.
- Print Media and commercial institutes are encouraging designers to incorporate this art in modern merchandise so as to increase awareness regarding this art form.
- Resorts, hotels and houses are hosting large murals as a part of showcasing traditional theme in its architectural interior.

5. OBSERVATION AND CONCLUSION

Kerala Mural Paintings despite of being rich in artistic ground and cultural value are still in a neglected state. Though revival and restoration efforts are being undertaken they need to be accelerated and in right direction. Major reasons for decline were colonial obstruction, western style art school aesthetics and no fund support. These issues have contemporary solutions like use of easy colour mediums, available canvas and digital drawing aids which generate printable outlines sketches. This has allowed many art enthusiasts to become muralists. But lack of formal knowledge dilutes the authenticity of the art. Revival approaches need to be backed by formal education of its techniques and historical value so as to avoid adulteration of fancy trends which taint the authenticity. Restoration is a very scientific field which requires experts in both chemical analysis and mural art. It also requires a huge amount of finance. All these factors make restoration a limited approach for preservation of existing damaged murals. Digital preservation is one of the methods which can be implemented without loss of authenticity of the art and also requires comparatively less finance.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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None.

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