

KALAMKARI AND PATTACHITRA VISUAL STORYTELLING AS HISTORY

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ABSTRACT

This paper treats Kalamkari (Coromandel Coast) and Pattachitra (Odisha, with Bengal's sung scrolls) as ways of making history visible. These pictures were never mere decoration. In temples, painted cloths stepped in for wooden icons at fixed moments in the ritual year, pinning down what the gods should look like and when they should appear. In village squares, performers unrolled long scrolls and sang the story as they revealed each scene, stitching myth, memory, and moral instruction into a shared timeline. In household workshops, families passed on the craft step by step—scouring and mordanting cloth, grinding pigments, burnishing grounds—so that colors “took,” lines held, and narratives read clearly. Technique and story moved together: the order of making reinforced the order of remembering. Read historically, Kalamkari and Pattachitra are living archives. They standardize sacred images, organize communal time through festivals and performances, and preserve practical knowledge in repeatable routines. The household—often with a gendered division of tasks—served as the archive's engine, ensuring continuity across generations. Thus, visual storytelling here does not illustrate history from the outside; it does history from within—by fixing forms, pacing time, and keeping collective memory legible on cloth.

Keywords: Kalamkari, Pattachitra, Icons, Myth, Image, Memory



1. INTRODUCTION

From the medieval period through the early twentieth century, Kalamkari on the Coromandel coast and Pattachitra in Bengal—together with the region's scroll traditions—functioned as integrated systems of knowledge, blending theology, memory, and technical practice. They were not simply ornamental crafts but tools of instruction within temples, households, and trading networks. Their visual conventions fixed sacred narratives, their sequential forms safeguarded practical knowledge such as pigment preparation, and their household organization assigned gendered roles in passing down expertise. Although colonial trade and technology reshaped their circulation, the traditions themselves endured, continuing to transmit culture. Seen in retrospect, they show how image-making, materials, and performance operated as long-lasting frameworks of knowledge that later informed the development of modern institutions.

1.1. INTRODUCTION: PICTURES THAT THINK

The understanding of South Asian picture-making is most often understood in terms of style and patronage, but another understanding was pointed to by Kalamkari and Pattachitra. It is preferable to view these practices as systems of knowledge, picture-text traditions based upon ritual rhythm, shared symbols and highly repeated practices. That is not just what they represent, but the manner of the manufacture: scouring, mordanting, outlining, and dyeing in Kalamkari; sizing, burnishing, pigment preparation, and lacquering in Pattachitra. They serve as memory devices beyond

written captions or verses in Jagannath imagery and *vesas* (costume forms), taking their place instead in series, as in the orderly arrangement of a Ramayana cloth or the successive story of a Bengal scroll. A paradigm in this essay suggests that these practices were working as a kind of living collection, maintaining theory, social code and collective memory from their methods and their images.

1.2. GENEALOGIES: TEMPLES, ITINERANTS, AND HOUSEHOLDS

There were threefold social contexts where these arts were distilled: in temple complexes, in itinerant performance circuits, and in household workshops.

Pattachitra constituted the rituals of Jagannath cult in Odisha with the economy. During seasons, the wooden icons were not allowed into residence, making approved substitutes necessary. The painted cloth *Anasara patti* was not ornamentation, it was a liturgical proxy, and its permitted forms, colors, and qualities had a strict liturgical discipline prescribed by practice in temples.

In the Bengal delta, long painted scrolls circulated with singers and storytellers, the *patuas*, whose repertoires braided epic episodes with local legend and topical news. Here, the image was bound to performance; knowledge moved with voice and scroll together.

On the Coromandel Coast, Kalamkari matured within household ateliers that supplied both ritual hangings and courtly or mercantile textiles. Pen-drawn hangings in Srikalahasti were narrative, didactic, and frequently monumental; Masulipatnam printed cottons were optimized for patterned repeats and border sets.

In all three ecologies, households were the basic unit of production and training. Knowledge—technical, iconographic, and ritual—moved through kinship, apprenticeship, and caste-based rights and duties.

2. KALAMKARI AND THE EARLY MODERN TEXTILE WORLD

From roughly the sixteenth to the eighteenth century, painted and printed cottons from the Coromandel Coast participated in one of the most consequential commodity regimes of the early modern world. Chintz and related cottons travelled from Indian ports to Southeast Asia, the Red Sea, Africa, and Europe. This circulation shaped what was made (color palettes that “read” in different climates and tastes; motifs adapted to foreign markets) and how it was made (increasing reliance on mordant/resist printing where repeatability was essential).

In this world, Srikalahasti and Masulipatnam outlined complementary craft ecologies:

Srikalahasti was a specialist in freehand narrative textiles. Temple hangings condensed epics onto panels that could be distributed to semi-literate masses without manuscripts or priests at every step.

Masulipatnam refined the block-printed Mordant and resist techniques for patterned fabrics. Here, the knowledge system emphasized registration, mordant chemistry, and fastness - a procedural literacy, which decides when the alum is, until a cloth should be long, and in which order the colors can be added without bleeding.

Trade boom and later European technological emulation display a historical constant: Kalamkari was never a stable repertoire; It was a problem-solving chemistry that applied to clothes, disciplined by rituals and market expectations.

3. PATTACHITRA AND THE GOVERNANCE OF THE SACRED IMAGE

In Odisha, Pattachitra crystallized as an authorized iconography for a temple politics. The work of the picture was not to innovate but to guarantee the appearance: the proxy panel currently had to create the illusion that the wooden icons, in solitude, could not display. This function stabilized a canon -tradition, characteristics and color hierarchies - whose stability was polished by ritual acceptance. The material sequence served the end: a laminated cotton ground that is sticking to the tamarind-seed binder, smooth and burnt to the high sheen; Conch shell white, mineral red and yellow, carbon blacks, and a palette drawn from vegetable blues and greens; oil lamps, a final lacquer sealing the surface to withstand soot and handling.

Since the commission was cyclical and the canon was permanent, learning here was repetition through time--same *vesas* reappearing with the festival calendar, the identical limits, the identical hands. The picture was a memory device for the community as much as an image of a deity.

4. BENGAL SCROLLS AND THE PEDAGOGY OF PERFORMANCE

Bengal's scroll tradition was a public classroom. Narrative unfolded as the patua unrolled the painting and sang. Architecture of the scroll -Horizontal segment, creative signs that combine with poetry units - gave an order of knowledge. The performance simultaneously put the moral persuasion, doctrinal instructions, and current affairs together, and the scroll itself became a portable collection of texts sung. Here, the writer was inseparable from voice; The recognized "authority" was the figure that could portray the picture and speak the picture.

Both Kalamakari and Pattachitra display how the process is a store of knowledge:

In Kalamkari, the black outline formed from fermented iron and jaggery must flow at a certain viscosity; an alum-painted area must not be too dry or too wet before being immersed in red dye; and indigo must be added without breaking any of the ties that were already there. The material itself tests each stage: a line that feathers, a red that doesn't "take," and a green that dulls. The order is the point of the argument.

In Pattachitra, the ground in laminated should not crack; Shell white should be covered evenly; The last line should be sat on the color without drowning. The order here is also non-negotiable. Success without text is verified; The object explains whether knowledge was implemented correctly.

These sequences ensured that memory did not depend only on manuscripts or priest custody. The body of the artisan - what to feel, when to pause, how to read the weather - there was a moving archive.

5. GENDERED STRUCTURES OF TRANSMISSION

In traditional artist households, the home functioned as both workshop and school, with gender roles shaping practice and teaching. Accounts from Odisha describe how all members of a Chitrakara family contributed, though senior men usually held authority over iconographic accuracy and final output. Women's hard work was central to labor-intensive preparatory tasks—such as preparing adhesives, burnishing, grinding pigments, and initial coloring—that ensured durability and clarity of the artwork. In Bengal, public storytelling through pater gān was predominantly performed by men, even when painting was shared within the family. Similarly, in Srialahasti and Masulipatnam, men managed atelier leadership and patron relations, while women provided the technical foundation through meticulous preparatory work.

This is no trivial sociological footnote. It implies that the same architecture of knowledge, which legitimises the canon, who holds a voice, who has command of the final line, was historically gendered, despite the fact that the expertise of women was structurally necessary to effective production.

Colonial-Era Reconfigurations (Eighteenth to Early Twentieth Century)

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the European consumer boom for Indian cotton set a platform for subsequent commercial sanctions and technical transfer. As European manufacturers mastered printing and dye chemistry, the competitive boundary was gone. For Kalamkari, it means some exports in Niches and re-evaluation of production towards regional courts, temples and internal markets. Procedural knowledge remained - because it was bound for ritual use and household pedagogy - but its circulation channels were narrowed or redirected.

In Odisha and Bengal, colonial rule changed revenue, pilgrimage and itinerant ecology. Nevertheless, the ritual calendar in Puri and Village Performing Circuit acted as orthodox forces, demanding authorized images and sang the stories. The historical sense is self-evident; the arts are not similar to the remains but to the mechanism of the work, which modifies the economy as a whole, softened by rites and pedagogy.

Comparing the two traditions with each other, there is a mutual rationalization and opposite priorities:

Support and Space. Kalamkari was made of textile and was flexible enough to be utilized in three canopies, curtains, and hangings, which could create immersive story spaces. The hard lacquered cover of Pattachitra was a moveable altar, setting the image in a liturgical space.

Time and Form. Kalamkari panels propounded intermittent readings; the style of Pattachitra with circular sacred time; The Bengal scroll unfolded the tale during the act it was being introduced.

Knowledge and Test. The abused cloth, the rejected proxy, the ineffective scroll now purified. In all three the test of purity was imposed in the public sector. Its test itself was traditional, as it has been repeated in festivals, markets, and village squares.

Kalamkari and Pattachitra historically served as systems of knowledge which were operated beyond written scholarship. His imagination coded religious ideas, his methods preserved chemical practices, his cycle structured collective memory, and his home became the center of skill transmission. With early modern trade, these traditions became widespread and technically advanced, while colonial disruption changed their movement, but did not erase their original arguments. Throughout history, gender roles were central: they shaped public statement, controlled the iconographic authority, and assigned the technical labour of women with great existence of image.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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