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Art

Kerala's Mural Treasures

New Indian wealth spurs renaissance of remarkable wall-painting tradition

By G.K. Nair, Kerala

For decades the great tradition of mural painting in the South Indian state of Kerala stood on the precipice of extinction. It was old stuff, museum stuff, Keralites thought, and ready to recycle. Who would miss it, anyway? Turns out, lots of people. The art that inspired kings and temple priests for thousands of years has been resuscitated, this time by wealthy individuals and corporations who recognize its genius and can pay for the privilege. This is one of the unexpected perks of India's economic resurgence. Huge mural paintings, once found only on the walls of temples and palaces, now adorn five-star hotel lobbies and the homes of India's rich and famous--with 55 billionaires, India ranks fourth in the world. Art lovers are motivated by aesthetic value, but others purchase art as a status symbol. It's cool to be a connoisseur.

Golden Age

Kerala's murals stand tall in India's artistic history, with their technical excellence, spiritualized storytelling, bold strokes, bright colors and uniquely idealized people, animals and trees. Only the Indian state of Rajasthan has more murals than Kerala.

Experts tell us Kerala's mural tradition evolved as a complement to her unique architectural style, originating with the prehistoric rock paintings found in the Anjanad Valley. Archaeologists believe these paintings belong to different epochs, from the upper Paleolithic (before the last ice age) to the early historic period. Rock engravings dating to these ancient times have also been discovered in the Edakkal caves in Wayanad and at Perumkadavila in Tiruvananthapuram district.

Recent mural history can be traced to the seventh and eighth century ce. It is not unlikely that the early Kerala murals and architecture came heavily under the influence of the Pallava dynasty. During the 13th century the first frescos were created at Kanthaloore, Temple in Tiruvananthapuram district. From then to the sixteenth century, hundreds of works blossomed in palaces and sacred chambers throughout the state, a treasure trove of imagery depicting the many manifestations of Siva, Vishnu in His various incarnations and the beloved Ganesha.

Archaeological evidence indicates the most prolific period of mural art in Kerala began in the mid-sixteenth century. Many of the most exquisite murals were painted during the 15th and 16th centuries, when the second Bhakti movement swept through Kerala. That revival was led by great literary geniuses like Melapattur Narayanan Bhattatiri (1560-1646) and Putanam Nambudiri (1547-1640), pure bhaktars whose devotional literature kindled spiritual art. It is probable that the leading names of the movement, like Ezhuthachan, Melpathoor, Poonthanam, the venerable sage Vilwamangalam and the eighteen poets of the Zamorin's court, were instrumental in reviving the tradition of religious arts in those years.

The finest illustrations of this period are considered to be the Mattanchery Palace panels, depicting the Ramayana and the marriage of Parvati, and the temple paintings at Thrissur, Chemmanthitta and Thodeekkalam. Of all the ancient works, only two are dated: one in 1691 in the Pallimanna Siva Temple at Trichur, and a second in 1731 in the Sankaranarayana shrine of the Vadakkunatha Temple complex.

Srikumara's Shilparatna, a sixteenth century Sanskrit text on painting and related subjects, must have been enormously useful to early artists. This treatise, which discusses all aspects of painting, aesthetic as well as technical, has been acclaimed as a rare work on the techniques of Indian art, the like of which has never been published.

Decline and Resurgence

With the invasion of the Muslim warrior Tippu Sultan (1766-1782) and the later takeover of the Travancore temple trusts by the British (1811), wall-painting art fell out of favor in the 18th century. For 150 years it languished, and those who knew

the art grew fewer and fewer.

It took a disaster to halt the decline. In 1970 a fire broke out in Guruvayur Temple, burning down the walls and obliterating the murals. Faced with replacing the masterpieces, temple authorities realized, to their dismay, how few competent mural artists were available. Only three veterans could be summoned for the recreations: Mammiyur Krishnankutty Nair, M.K. Sreenivasan and K.K. Varier. "It is because of them that we are able to enjoy the wonderful works of art in the temple today," said a devotee of Guruvayoorappan.

The incident awakened the Guruvayur Devaswom to the urgency for revival of this traditional and uniquely Keralite art form. Driven in part by the prodding of Dr. M.G. Sasibhooshan, the Institute of Mural Painting was established in 1989. Today it thrives, offering a five-year course inside the temple premises (see sidebar this page). Institutions for learning and research in mural arts have also come up at the Sree Sankara Sanskrit College in Kalady, the Malayala Kalagram in Mahe and the Vastu Vidhya Gurukulam at Aranmula. Mural painting is also taught in the Banaras Hindu University in north India.

Even local Christian churches, recognizing this revival and the importance of mural art in Kerala, have employed this art form to depict the Last Supper and other Christian stories, in the attempt to give their imported history a distinctively local look.

Color and Content

The subjects for murals are typically derived from religious culture and texts, peopled with highly stylized pictures of the Gods and Goddesses of the Hindu pantheon. Other common subjects are rishis and sages, their exploits and those of kings and warriors, as well as royal attendants, processions and the significant events which define the history of the place.

Dr. Subbanna Sreenivasa Rao, a leading writer on the subject (see his work at Sulekha.com) told us, "The human and the godly figures depicted in Kerala murals are strong and voluminous, drawn in running, smooth curves and subtle darkening of colors. The exquisite shading depicts the fullness and roundness of their form, resembling the paintings of Ajanta.

"The figures are highly stylized and rendered with elongated eyes, painted lips, exaggerated eyebrows and explicit body and hand gestures (mudras), decorated with elaborate headdresses and exuberant, overflowing ornaments. The strong and voluminous figures of Kerala murals with their elaborate headdresses have a close association with the characters from the dance dramas of Kerala.

"The expression of the emotions, too, comes out rather strongly. As compared to these figures, the animals, birds and plants drawn in the pictures appear closer to life. The wild and erotic scenes also are overtly shown without much reservation. The Gods, humans and animals are shown in combat and lovemaking. The murals take a holistic approach to existence, almost obliterating the thin dividing line between the sublime and the mundane, between religion and art."

These subjects are not fanciful representations of the artists' imagination but motifs exactly drawn from the Dhyana slokas, which are not mere prayers or hymns but word-pictures or verbal images of the Deities. These verses describe precisely the Deity's form, aspects, countenance, the details of facial and bodily expressions, posture, the number of arms, heads and eyes, ornaments, objects held in the hands, etc. Suresh Muthukulam estimates there are more than 2,000 such verses which help artists like him to visualize and paint the sacred forms. These slokas also lay down the theory of proper color schemes, the skillful management of which provides stylized balance and rhythm to the paintings.

Murals depict the epics, like Ramayana, and the classic frolics of Krishna as well as the mystic forms of Siva and Shakti. They recount the Hindu myths and the Kerala forms of worship and lifestyle. As backdrops to these highly stylized works, flora and fauna and other aspects of nature are also pictured.

In his Mural Paintings in Travancore K.P. Padmanabhan Tampy writes, "The great and distinctive art displayed in these paintings reveals a wonderful vitality and intensity of feeling, meditative charm, divine majesty, decorative delicacy, unique verisimilitude, subtle charm of color, fine texture and marvelous draftsmanship. The Kerala murals blend harmoniously with their surrounding architecture, wood carvings and decorative art."

Unlike the temple wall-paintings of nearby Tamil Nadu, which relate to either Siva or Vishnu, Kerala murals present Siva and Vishnu rather evenly. There are paintings of Siva worshiping Vishnu, and Vishnu offering worship to Siva. Kerala especially adores the depiction of Siva and Vishnu as one Being in the form of Hari-Hara, a common subject on the fresco walls.

Unique to Kerala murals is the Pancha-mala (five garlands) system, in which borders are decorated with relief-figures of animals, birds, flowers, vines and such: the Bhootha-mala depicts goblins and dwarfs; Mruga-mala, animals such as elephants and deer; Pakshi-mala, rows of parrot-like birds; Vana-mala, floral motifs; and finally, the Chithra-mala is composed of decorative designs.

Kerala murals are also typified by their rich, warm and loud colors. A traditional Kerala mural strictly follows the Pancha-varna (five colors) scheme, using only red, yellow, green, black and white. In fact, it is this adherence to a limited earthy palette that gives the murals much of their distinctive look and feel.

White, yellow, black and red are the pure colors, according to Shilparatna. The ocher yellow, ocher red, white, bluish green and pure green are the more important colors.

All pigments are derived from natural materials, such as minerals and stones, oils, juices., roots and herbs. The yellow and red colors are mixed from minerals (arsenic sulfide and mercuric sulfide), green from the juice of a plant locally called Eravikkara, black from the soot of oil lamps. White, the base, is prepared with lime. Colors are mixed in a wooden bowl with tender coconut water and exudates from the neem tree. Other methods, minerals and herbs are occasionally used, but always natural.

The colors relate to the gunas, or attributes, of the subjects. For instance, green is employed for depicting the sattva (balanced, pure or divine) divinities; red and yellow for rajas (active, irascible) characters, and white for tamas (inert or base) events and creatures.

The brushes used are of three types--flat, medium and fine. Flat brushes are made from the hair found on the ears of calves, medium from the hair on a goat's belly and the fine brushes from delicate blades of grass.

Exacting Techniques

Mural artists are not merely illustrators but chemists as well, creating a complex concoction that will not only receive the organic pigments but will then resist the erosion of the elements for hundreds of years. Mr. K. U. Krishnakumar, Principal of the Institute of Mural Painting in Guruvayoor, explains that the walls must be painstakingly prepared with a rough plastering of lime and sand mixed with the juice of kadukkai or of a vine called chunnambuveli, all dissolved with palm sugar (jaggery). A smooth plaster--a similar mix with ground cotton added--is then applied. After ten days, 25 to 30 coats of quicklime and tender coconut water are applied, creating a thickness of about half an inch. Lemon juice is used to mellow the alkalinity of the surface. The mural is painted only after the wall is completely dry, using the fresco (Italian for fresh) technique of mural painting, which involves the rapid application of water-soluble pigments in a damp lime wash.

The art itself is defined in six stages, artist Muthukulam notes. Lekhya karma is the first, where sketching of the outlines is done in a light yellow color. Second comes the rekha karma which enhances and gives dimension to the outlines. The third stage, called varna karma, breathes life into the subject with the addition of colors. In the fourth stage, vartana karma, shading is added for depth and definition. Lekha karma is the tedious outlining of all forms, usually with black. The final stage is called dvika karma, where life is given to the eyes of the Deities and people, "awakening or stirring the work to life." This is also called samarpanam, which means an offering from the artist. A fine coat of resin is then painted on the surface to give it a glossy look.

While the ancient procedures remain fairly intact, modern times have brought changes. To meet the demands of clients and for display at distant exhibitions, Kerala paintings are often executed these days on plywood, cloth, paper and canvas. But the old genius is still evident in the work of Suresh Muthukulam and his students, in their renderings of modern Kerala village life, of contemporary Indian biographies and of the eternal Divinities. The old Kerala masters might be startled to see the murals in the lobby of the Mumbai Hyatt or on pillars in Delhi's Imperial Hotel; but even the most irascible of them would smile to know that his craft is alive and well in the 21st century. Pipi

Mural Art Around the Globe

Murals have adorned walls as long as there have been humans to scratch, paint, etch and carve them. From the prehistoric cave art at Lascaux, France, to the ceremonial wall paintings of ancient Egypt, Greece, Rome, India and Mesopotamia, the history of murals is rich and varied. The oldest mural communications, in Europe, date back 40,000 years. Preserved by the rocky shelters they inhabit, they typically depict religious ceremonies, hunting scenes and food gathering. New ones are continually being created while old ones are being discovered and restored--such as the 100 bce Mayan wall art in Guatemala, discovered in 2001.

The function of murals varies from culture to culture. In Tibet they are part of meditative Buddhist practices. During the Baroque period in England, Germany and France, royalty and rich patrons had allegorical and Biblical murals lavishly painted on palace walls and ceilings. In modern urban environments from Berlin to Brooklyn, graffiti has become a form of mural art exhibiting the angst, rebellion and narratives of disenfranchised city youth. From China to Russia and from New York to Milan, wall art has been used to spread political propaganda and, in counterpoint, to perpetuate the culture of mass consumerism. Chairman Mao and Calvin Klein alike have found the mural to be greatly useful and profitable!

Against All Odds: Keeping the Tradition Alive

When a temple fire destroyed historic wall masterpieces and only three living artists could be found, the Guruvayur Temple Devaswom Board founded the first school for muralists in 1989. Today dozens of youth live and work at the Sri Krishna Temple complex, preparing plasters, mixing pigments and making brushes. Funded by the government temple board, the five-year course hand-picks students showing extraordinary aptitude and provides them room and board and Rs. 500 a month for personal expenses. The rooms are austere pilgrim quarters and the food is the bare-bones free meal, called prasadam oottu, which the temple gives twice a day to visiting devotees. In small classes, the mostly twenty-something boys are taken step by step through a disciplined course under the rigorous tutelage of resident artisans.

In keeping with the spiritual roots of the craft, students bathe at dawn in the temple tank, then offer worship and prayers at the first puja of the day. This and other religious disciplines assure that the young artists regard their work as a gift to the Gods and to humanity, an inner attitude considered crucial to attaining the

highest levels of prowess and grace.

Sanskrit scholars are commissioned to teach the famed Dhyana Slokas, the hoary holy text which describes the Deities and legends of the art. The verses include exquisite descriptions of the navarasas, the nine traditional emotions expressed by the face: love, laughter, fury, tragedy, disgust, horror, heroism and wonder.

The first class graduated in 1994, with Suresh Muthukulam (see page 67) ranking at the head, trained by Mummiyur Krishnankutty Asan, who passed away shortly thereafter.

Recently the Kerala government has added mural painting to its vastu science courses. The programs are much sought after. A gifted artist today can earn substantial sums selling through exhibitions. The best are earning millions of rupees a year.

Two Bold Contemporary Initiatives

On display at the Gandhi Smrithi Darshan gallery in New Delhi is perhaps the finest artistic exposition of Indian history and culture: an eight-part mural series on India's freedom struggle, created in 2001 by Suresh Muthukulam and his team. Celebrating India's 50 years of independence, it focuses on eight moments from the life of Mahatma Gandhi, father of the nation. The main piece, measuring four by six meters, took six months to complete. Done in dry fresco, the perfect medium to immortalize Gandhi's nonviolent vision, the paintings will endure for 2000 years.

Adorning the Mannam Samadhi in Changanassery is a work completed in 2005 by Suresh and team: the 'Saphalamiyathra' murals on the life of Mannathu Padmanabhan, the late leader of Kerala's Nayar clan. Six artists worked for two years to capture eleven moments in this hero's life, revealing a man who dedicated all his life and wealth to unite his community, walking away from luxury and leaving behind even his wristwatch, walking stick, pen and wooden shoes.

Portrait of a Modern Master: Suresh Muthukulam

When next you land at the new Mumbai airport, a massive 10' by 80' mural depicting flight will greet you, the work of S. Suresh Kumar, popularly known as Suresh Muthukulam. Traditionally trained and extraordinarily gifted, Suresh is arguably Kerala's leading muralist. His work can be found in hotel lobbies, museums and temples in 12 nations, and even at the Hinduism Today offices in Hawaii. (Full disclosure: we have been working with him for four years and have no claim of objectivity in telling his story!)

Suresh was born in 1971 in a central Travancore hamlet called Muthukulam in the Alappuzha district of Kerala, the sixth and youngest child of K. Sukumaran and Pulamaja. His aptitude became evident from his childhood when he drew illustrations of the stories of Bhagavatham recited by his father. Encouraged by his teachers, he excelled in school art competitions. "When as a boy I visited the Krishnapuram Palace, which is not far from my ancestral home, I was attracted by the mural painting of Gajendra Moksham drawn on the wall adjacent to the bathing ghat in the palace pond. It inspired me a lot," Suresh told Hinduism Today.

"Father soon took me to Mr. Varier who was teaching painting privately. I was led into a puja room inside the school where Ganapati was installed. To introduce me to art, Mr. Varier took a brush, sanctified it with some pujas and gave it to me with the order to draw Ganapati riding a mouse. With the blessings of the Ganapati, I did it to the satisfaction of my first guru."

He fine-tuned his skills at a school in Mavelikara, took a three-year Diploma in Painting from the Modern Fine Arts at Mavelikara (1986-1989), then joined a five-year degree course (1989-1994) in the Kerala mural tradition under an innovative gurukula system started by the Guruvayur Devaswom. "There I was fortunate to apprentice under the late great Mammiyoor Krishnankutty Nair, a master of the tradition. Together we restored a mural painting at the Padmanabha Swami Temple in Thiruvananthapuram. It took us four years to complete and we stayed at the site happily, only receiving boarding and lodging for our work. To us it was pure, selfless art, and a great opportunity to perfect our skills."

Raw talent and hard work earned him accolades and commissions in India and abroad. In 1995 he became a visiting lecturer at the Ravi Varma Institute of Fine Arts. When the state set up the Vastu Vidya Gurukulam at Aranmula to teach vastu shastra and mural arts, Suresh was chosen to head the mural section. His students are thriving in the field. He senses the traditional arts are in revival, as people

discover murals have more color, style and grace than modern works. He half jokes that "Modern art gives me the impression that it is done without bothering much with knowledge of the basics."