



# Kerala Mural Paintings

## Kerala: An Introduction

According to mythology, Parasurama an incarnation of Vishnu, weary of long years of war and bloodshed decided to undertake a penance in the Western Ghats. Varuna, the God of water responded to his prayers and granted him a boon. Parasurama was asked to throw his axe and the area and distance covered by the axe would be his. Known for his strength and valour, Parasurama swung his axe with such power and might that it reached Kanyakumari. This strip of land covered by the axe came to be known as Kerala. Another creation myth narrates how Varuna raised lands from beneath the ocean and formed the region called Kerala. Politically a merging of three regions in 1956 – Travancore, Cochin and Malabar, formed the state. In Sanskrit *Kerala* means, “Land added on” which is both mythically and geologically true of the origin of Kerala. Another opinion is that the name is derived from *Kera*, which means coconut in Malayalam. But there are also theories about the absence of coconut in Kerala, at that time. A more convincing view can be traced back to the *Chera* Dynasty. The Chera kings were referred to as *Cheralan* and *Cheralatan*. The Sanskrit word for *Chera* is *Kera* and *alam* means country. Thus the name Kerala or Keralam may have meant the country of the *Cheras*.

Whatever the origin story may be, Kerala is truly God’s own country, as it is popularly known. Situated on the southwestern coast of the Indian sub continent, it has the Western Ghats in its east, which extends from the north to Kanyakumari in the south. The Arabian Sea forms its western boundary. With a moderate and fair climate throughout the year, and a fertile land because of the rivers flowing from east to west, Kerala enjoys good and lucrative social and economic conditions. Though majority of the population are Hindus, there is a sizeable population of Muslims and Christians that have flourished. The Jews had settled in Malabar right from the time the apostle St.Thomas reached the Kerala coast in AD 49. Malayalam is the main language spoken here. We also see the existence of various tribes in different parts of Kerala. The Cheramans, Cheru, Cherumar or Cheramar are some of them. There are also communities like Pulluvas, Panas and Kaniyans. The Pulluvas are singers and act as harbingers of prosperous culture, Pannans and Velans as evil dancers. The Vannans, Velars and Malayars of Cannanore District were the original dancers of Theyyam a highly ritualistic dance with elaborate make up and costume and energetic footwork. Theyyam is also an important performing art in Kerala. The other performing arts found here are Krishnanattam, Kathakali, Mudi yettu, Bhadrakalikkalam, Thullal, Sarpakkalam and Padayani. In fact most of the facial expressions and gestures find their origin in performing arts like Kuttiyattam and Kathakali. The large and expressive eyes, the tender long fingers in various suggestive gestures, exaggerated eyebrows and the graceful body postures are all very much a part of the performing art traditions too.

The *Malayalees* as the people of Kerala are called are basically agriculturists though over the times occupations have changed according to the demands of the advancing world. Onam is the main festival, which the Malayalees celebrate with great pomp and show. It is a celebration of the past glory of Kerala. Vishu another major festival is a celebration for a great and prosperous year ahead. All Hindu festivals like Navratri, Shivaratri, Deepavali and Krishnashtami are celebrated with great vigour. Christian festivals like Christmas, Good Friday and Easter are celebrated with equal enthusiasm.



## Origin of the Murals

Taking into account several murals which are dated: Two painted verses dated 1691 A.D in Pallimanna Siva Temple at Kumbalanad, Trichur, Murals in Sankaranarayana shrine of the Vadakkunatha temple complex at Trichur dated 1731 A.D, the Kerala Murals may be traced back to the seventeenth century and was at its artistic peak till the nineteenth century. The revival of the Bhakti Movement by great literary geniuses like Melapattur Narayanan Bhattatiri (1560-1646) and Putanam Nambudiri (1547-1640) saw the rise of temple arts through their devotional literature. Thus a number of temples sprang up with murals and woodcarvings in various temples on themes like the Puranas, Ramayana and the Mahabharata. This evidence also dates the murals to the mid seventeenth century. Though the evidence of murals is traced back to the post Ajanta period and a number of cave engravings found, there is no doubt that the Kerala Murals flourished between the seventeenth and the nineteenth centuries.

Simplicity of subjects, technical excellence, thematic presentation, bold but delicate strokes, bright and beautiful colours, idealistic reproduction of humans, animals and trees are what characterize Kerala Murals. Subjects taken out straight from the Puranas or Ramayana or Mahabharata are illustrated highly stylistically and brilliantly. It brings out a certain depth of human feelings of passion and spiritual endeavor. In conception and composition, the murals have attained its highest artistic excellence. The dignified poise of the figures with expression of the faces that is so graceful yet dynamic is an important feature in a Kerala Mural. Every character appears to have their own charm from the beautiful and graceful figures of Gods to the devouring demon. Even a demon in an act of destruction spells out charm and whose activity is appreciated and admired thus displaying an artistic skill and brilliance.

*“The great and distinctive art displayed in these paintings reveal a wonderful vitality and intensity of feeling, meditative charm, divine majesty, decorative delicacy, unique verisimilitude, subtle charm of colour, fine texture and marvelous draughtsmanship”* (K.P. Padmanabhan Tamy in Mural paintings in Travancore)

Hoysala Art is far from the Kerala murals in terms of technique and style but with regards to ornamentation of the figures, it follows more or less a similar style. Over ornamentation of figures is what brings Kerala Murals and Hoysala Art together. Both male and female figures are heavily jeweled and beaded. The colours are bright and vibrant.

## Themes

The subjects and themes in the murals are centered on the Hindu pantheon of Gods and Goddesses drawn from the description in the invocatory verses or *Dhyana Slokas*. More common representations are of Vishnu in different incarnations, Ganesha, and manifestations of Siva. We see murals in the Pallimanna Siva Temple devoted to Siva-Parvati's marriage, the Ramayana Story being narrated on the walls of the Mattancheri Palace and in the Sankara Narayana, the Mahabharata is retold. Padmanabhapuram Palace houses murals depicting puranic themes from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and Krishnapuram Palace at Kayamkulam has a large panel of Gajendramoksham from the first half of the eighteenth century. Panayannarkkavu Murals are based on Hindu mythology painted on the walls of Sapta Matha temple of Panayannarkkavu and Ettumanoor Murals has scenes from the epics along with an imaginative scene of a music concert by Gods and Goddesses. Pundareekapuram Murals are various scenes from the Hindu epics and also the frolics of Lord Krishna. It would be interesting to bring into account the influence of the mural paintings on Christianity. On various churches like the St. George's Orthodox Church has Christian murals bringing out biblical characters and narrating stories from the scriptures. Mar Sabore and Afroth Church at Akapparambu in the outskirts of Ernakulam also have murals of scenes from the bible. Interestingly St. Mary's Church at Kanjoor has on both sides of its entrance a battle scene between the armies of Tipu Sultan and of the English East India Company. It is also apparent that the history of Kerala Murals has its origin in the temple walls and thus a study of Kerala Murals is not complete without pondering on the architecture of Kerala and its association with the murals.

## Colours and techniques

*Panchvarna* or the five colours yellow, red, green, black and white make up the colour scheme of Kerala Murals. They are prepared from mineral pigments and vegetables. The yellow and red colours are from minerals, green from juice of a plant locally called *Eravikkara*, black from the soot of oil lamps and white remains the base, which is prepared with lime. The blending of the colours is done in a wooden bowl with tender coconut water and exudes from neem tree.

There are at least six stages before a Kerala Mural Painting is complete. *Lekhya Karma* is the first stage where sketching by pencil or crayon is done. The second stage is the *Rekha Karma* which enhances the outlines of the sketching done. The third stage called *Varna Karma* breathes life into the painting with its colours. Here all colours are appropriately filled in. The colouring of the human figures is done according to the characters and their common virtues. The divine and noble characters (*Saatvik*) are painted in green, those inclined towards power and wealth (*Raajasik*) is painted in shades of red, lowly mean characters (*tamasik*) in white and demons in black. In the fourth stage or the *Vartana Karma*, shading is done. Fifth stage called the *Lekha Karma* brings us to the final outline of the painting which is usually in black. The final and the finishing touches stage is called *Dvika Karma*.

The walls are first plastered with lime and sand mixed with water and juice of Kadukka to a thickness of about half an inch that forms the base of the painting. After allowing this to dry another coating is plastered on the coated surface to a thickness of about 2mm. Finally a mixture of lime with tender coconut water is applied for the white colour.

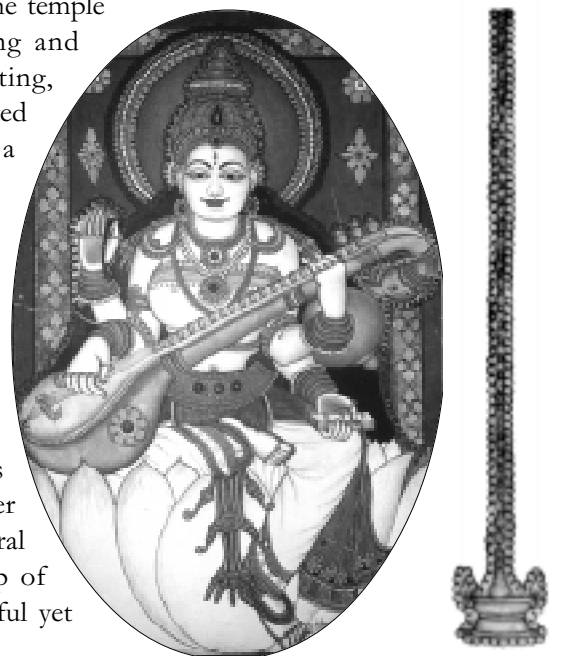
Originally, three types of brushes were made and used: flat, medium and fine. Flat brushes were made from the hairs behind calves' ear, the medium from the bottom of goat's belly and the fine brush from delicate blades of grass. However in due course of time and change, use of easily available brushes from commercial market and shading of the original colours can be distinctively noticed. The use of blue colour is also noticed over the passage of time. The paintings have been brought down from the walls to plywood, cloth, paper and other frames for easy to make and use purposes.

## Kerala Murals now

A fire broke out in Guruvayur Temple in 1970, which burnt down the walls and the murals. When the temple authorities wanted to renovate the temple walls and paint them again they found that there were very few artists who could take on the responsibility. If not for few artists like Mammiyur Krishnankutty Nair, M.K Sreenivasan and K.K. Varier who took up the task of recreating the murals we would not have been able to enjoy the wonderful works of art in the temple now. But this incident made them realize the need for preserving and continuing the tradition. As a result, the Institute of Mural Painting, Guruvayur Devaswom was established in 1989. The Institution is situated inside the temple premises and offers a five-year course taught in a traditional pattern.

## Acknowledgements

Our sincere thanks goes to Shri K.C Manavendranath, Director of Anganam Theatre Group, Kerala and his family for their warm hospitality and also for assisting and guiding the researchers during their fieldtrip. We are also grateful to Shri. K.U. Krishankumar and Shri. Pratheesh Odakkali for their time and enlightening the researchers on Kerala Murals. Our deep gratitude also goes to Shri Krishna Varier for his wonderful interview on the origin and changes in Kerala Mural Painting Traditions. We are grateful to Camlin and Medimix group of Companies for their support towards the workshop. We remain grateful yet again to Sankeshwaraa Papier (P) LTD for their support.



## Online Resources

- [www.orgpeople.com/org.projects/murals](http://www.orgpeople.com/org.projects/murals)
- [www.kerala.com/keralaarts/html/fineart.htm](http://www.kerala.com/keralaarts/html/fineart.htm)
- [www.kalakeralam.com/finearts/murals.htm](http://www.kalakeralam.com/finearts/murals.htm)
- [www.templenet.com/arts/murals.html](http://www.templenet.com/arts/murals.html)

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NFSC in collaboration with Government College of Fine Arts, Chennai announces its thirteenth public programme- *Kerala Mural Painting Workshop*- as part of its *Visual Art Traditions of India Series*

Date: February 3-7, 2003

Venue: Government College of Fine Arts, Chennai

Time: 10:00 a.m. – 4:30 p.m.


For registration contact: Rola/Siva at NFSC, New no. 7, Fifth Cross Street, Rajalakshmi Nagar, Velachery, Chennai-600042

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National Folklore Support Centre (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. Folklore is a tradition based on any expressive behaviour that brings a group together, creates a convention and commits it to cultural memory. NFSC aims to achieve its goals through cooperative and experimental activities at various levels. NFSC is supported by a grant from the Ford Foundation.

## Workshop Schedule

Date: February 3-7, 2003

Venue: Govt. College of Fine Arts, Chennai

Time: 10:00 am – 5:00 pm

February 3, 2003 Inaugural

Lecture by  
Shri K.U. Krishnakumar,  
Principal, Kerala Mural  
Institute

Introduction and  
demonstration

February 4, 2003 Preparing the base of the  
painting

Sketching

February 5, 2003 Outline and colouring

Colour Preparation: a  
demonstration by Shri  
Krishnakumar

February 6, 2003 Colouring contd.

Lecture

February 7, 2003 Finishing touches

Valedictory

## Exhibition-cum-sale

The artists will be exhibiting their works for sale at the Art Gallery of the Government College of Fine Arts from February 3-7 from 11:00 am – 5:00 pm.

All are cordially invited.

## Our artists

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