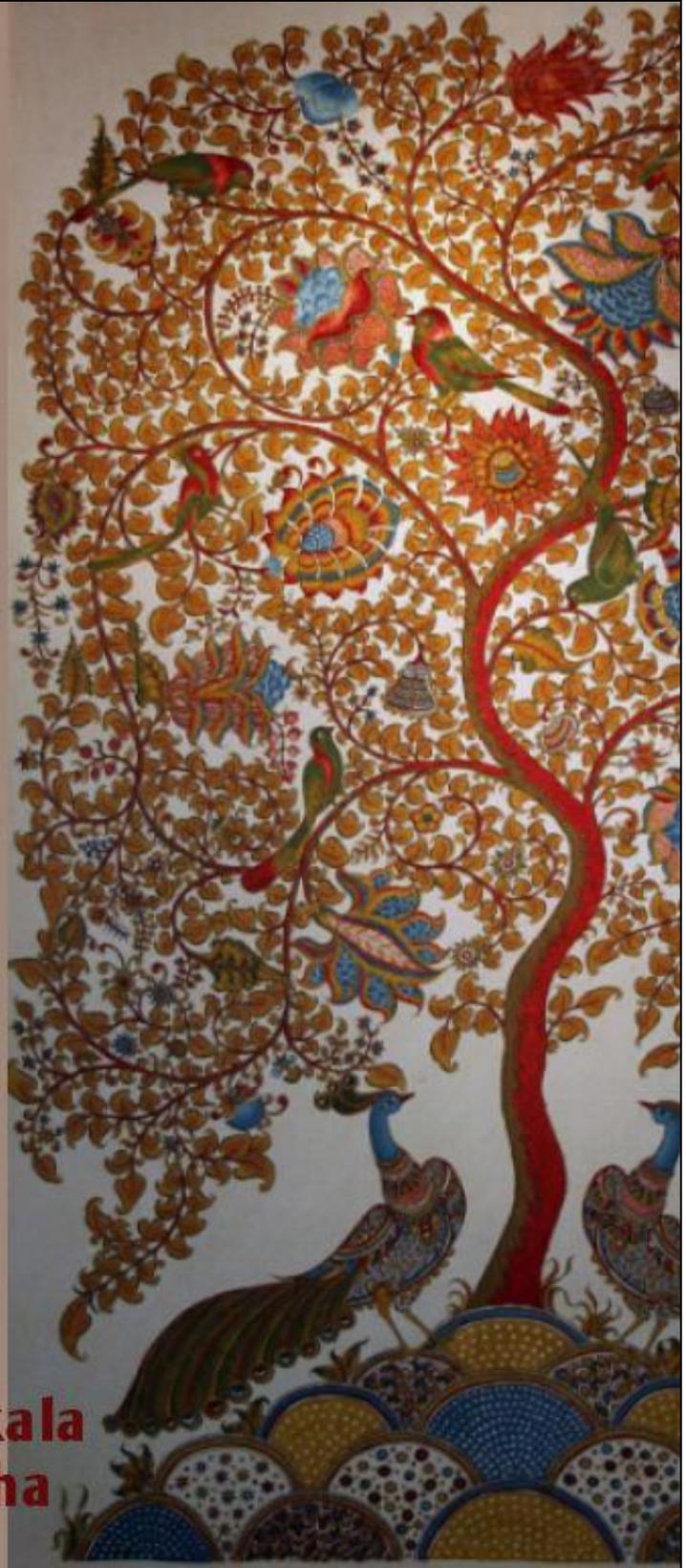


Kalamkari - The Painted Temple Cloths

By:
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Introduction:

A Home of textiles, India has always been known for its crafts and culture. The mesmerizing weaves, vibrant colors, intricate embroideries, decorative motifs, and elaborate costumes have been most sought after inspirations and possessions. The amalgamation of tradition with technique denotes the fact that work has always been worship, and thus has been followed with great devotion and reverence. Probably, it is this devoted detail that has put Indian textiles much in demand in the network of textile trade. Inherited through generations of family traditions, these crafts techniques have been nurtured and groomed under skilled guidance and thus have evolved to be known as heritage crafts of India.



Keeping in tune to its cultural traditions is one such textile craft, Kalamkari, the dye painted textile of India. With a 3000 year old history, Kalamkari is believed to have been known in Persia in addition to India. Practiced in both printed and painted styles, Kalamkari has been popular within the circles of textile trade. Symbolically named after the technique of its making, 'Kalam/ Qualam' meaning pen and 'kari' meaning art, Kalamkari has been prevalent in several parts of Southern India. The commercial capital of the Nizam ruled Golconda state, Masulipatnam (Machilipatnam in the present day) in Andhra Pradesh has been the seat of this craft. Referred to as "chintz" by the English and "pintadoes" by the Portuguese, Kalamkari was patronized by the Moguls and later by the Europeans in India. The art form reached its pinnacle of popularity between the 16th and the 19th centuries³.

Srikalahasti, a temple town within the Chitoor District of Andhra Pradesh, India is home to kalamkari in its painted form. Identified as a craft of historical value Kalamkari has gone through stages of refinement from the time of its evolution as a traditional

tapestry, been shaped with the folk beliefs, transformed under the Muslim rule as a secular craft and further settled itself as a flourished item under the British gaining International trade market appreciation. It is recorded that the craft which has blossomed into an International art form has been baptised as Kalamkari by the Qutb Shahi dynasty ¹. Srikalahasti in the 19th century flourished directly under the patronage of temples, with their demands for hangings with strong figurative and narrative components ². Thus fabrics exhibiting rich vibrancy of natural colors painted to depict the grandeur of mythological tales have become a unique character of Kalamkari at Srikalahasti.

Tools used:

The principle and only tool used in making these painted cloths is the 'kalam'. Kalam is an improvised brush made of bamboo stick pointed at one end and thick at the other.



In the middle wool or jute yarn is tied around in the form of a ball and held by wrapping twine around it in a crisscross manner. The dye is taken in a small pot and with the pointed end of the brush dipped from time to time; the dye is painted on the fabric as per the pattern required. The thickness of the tip of the kalam is determined by the fineness of the line desired.

Dyes used:

Natural dyes, discovered through the ingenuity and persistence of our ancestors, can resist brightly for centuries or millennia and may be found hidden in such diverse places as the roots of plant, a parasitic insect and the secretions of sea snail ⁴.



Kalamkari employs the usage of such natural vegetable dyes and the artists of kalamkari are well versed with their usage. Vegetable dyes are organic in nature, and both the process of extraction and application of color to fabric is laborious and time consuming. The application of natural colors needs help of mordants to fix the color on to the fabric. Thus the tedious nature of dyeing coupled with painting with kalam makes the kalamkari of Srikalahasti a coveted item.

A detail of dyes used and the application is compiled as under:

Source	Purpose / Color	Raw material		Remarks
		Local name	Botanical/ Technical name	
Vegetable	Red colour	Chaval kodi/ Chevellikodi/ Chay root	Oldenlandia umbellata	
		Pobbaku	Narigama alta	Acts as a carrier of colour
		Suruli chekka Or Surruduchekka	Ventilago madraspata	Helps in lending intensity to the red
	Yellow colour		Myrobalan flowers	
		Dhanimma beradu	Pomegranate rind	Sometimes used to achieve yellow, however the colour is slightly dull
	Blue	Neel	Indigo	Process is tedious, laborious and costly hence discontinued
Synthetic		Neeli mandu	Ultra marine blue	
Vegetable	Outlining of motif	Chinta boggu	Tamarind twigs	
	Treatment of the grey cloth	Karakkai	Myrobalam fruit	
		Buffalo milk		Creates a leathery surface and prevents spread of color
Mineral	Obtaining black colour		Rusted Iron fragments	
		Sugarcane jaggery		
		Palm jaggery		
	Mordanting the fabric	Patika	Alum	

Process:

Step 1

Preparation of grey cloth: Required size of grey cloth is soaked in water for one hour and thoroughly kneaded and washed to remove the starch and then dried.



Step 2

Treatment of the grey cloth with myrobalan fruit and milk solution: The prepared grey cloth is soaked in the myrobalan solution in the pot for 10 to 15 minutes taking care that the cloth is evenly soaked. The excess solution squeezed and the fabric is allowed to be dried in open fields. The cloth takes on a light yellow colour.



Step 3

Outlining in Black: The outlining of the main theme and figures are drawn free hand with the help of charcoal twigs.



Step 4

Painting in Black: The charcoal outline is traced with a kalam giving a permanent black outline. Finer details of the theme are also painted



Step 5

Painting in the mordant alum solution for red color: The fabric is spread on a woollen rug and the portions which are to appear red are painted with the alum solution. The cloth is dried in shade for a day.



Step 6

Red Dyeing: The alum painted fabric is put into the red dye liquor and boiled for an hour. This gives a brownish red shade and the process may be repeated if a darker shade of red is preferred.



Step 7

Bleaching: The cloth after developing the red on the alum painted pattern is to make the unpainted portion white, if desired. Traditionally bleaching is done by soaking the cloth in water mixed with goat dung, the fabric is squeezed and left of the night. Next morning the fabric is washed thoroughly and dried in sunlight taking care that the painted portions face downwards. The cloth is kept moist by sprinkling water over it hourly. The treatment with goat dung is repeated in the night followed by a repeat of drying. The process is repeated for the third time, but this time the painted side is revealed to sunlight. Depending upon the whiteness preferred the process may be repeated a number of times. The portions painted with the black and alum retains their black and red colors respectively while the rest become white.



Step 8

Painting in yellow: A repeat of the process of treating the fabric with buffalo milk solution is done to prevent spreading of color and making the surface leathery. The bleached and milk treated fabric is spread on a blanket and the portions desired to be yellow and green are painted with the help of a kalam. Once painted, the fabric is allowed to dry in sunlight and washed the next day.



Step 9:

Painting in Blue and green color: If a blue color is desired, the cloth is once again treated with diluted buffalo milk. The cloth is finally washed and dried. However, the blue applied by the ultra-marine blue is not as fast as desired; hence the cloth is washed very lightly and carefully.

Blue dye (Indigo or ultramarine blue) is applied on yellow portions to achieve green color.



Motifs:

Patronized by the Mughals in the Coromandel and the Golconda provinces, the art form branched out into two schools. Masulipatnam, under the Golconda province catered to the Mughal tastes with its Persian influence, while Srikalahasti under the Hindu rule took to symbolism from the Hindu mythology ³.



The temple town of Srikalahasti has been a major source of inspiration for the artists of Kalamkari and the craft served the purpose of a religious tapestry. Commissioned by the temple patrons, kalamkari pieces in all their vibrancy adorned the temple walls and

ceilings. The detailed visual narrations often served as backdrops for the wandering minstrels, who sang in praise of God. The use of kalam provided increased scope of artistic ingenuity, and restricted the usage of repeats.

The pictorial glory of Indian mythology may have been best captured by the artists of kalamkari as the figures had a unique quality. The forms are folk and more imaginative than real. However, though bounded by tradition the artist had the freedom for individual expression and no two panels were the same under the same theme. A few distinguishing characteristics of these painting have been:

- Rich and intricate detailing
- Use of solid colors and no shading done
- Rounded faces, long, big and expressive eyes.
- Heavy chins for women and men in moustaches
- Story painted in compartments with the story unfolding in a linear manner
- Depiction of entire scene
- Stylised natural forms used as decorative borders.
- Certain color symbolism was adhered to though not rigid:
 - Blue was associated with deities especially Gods
 - Yellow often used to depict female body colour and also in simulation of gold ornaments
 - Hanuman was depicted in green
 - Red was used to depict demons / bad characters



Present Status:

The craft reached its pinnacle of popularity between the 16th and 19th centuries, but by the early 1980's the Srikalahasti hangings were no longer purchased for ritual use and the craft lost its demand. While the craft marked its presence among the printed as well as painted textiles in the panorama of Indian textiles, the printed form has always enjoyed wide popularity and the painted version endured its own struggles to remain afloat. Reasons such as changing market preferences, availability of cheaper imitations,

modern techniques, and tedious nature of dyeing and painting and ready availability of synthetic dyes could have resulted in reduced patronage within the markets.

Efforts in orienting the craft towards current market preferences have been initiated and today painted kalamkari is not only restricted to temple hangings but diversified as fabrics for apparel, furnishings and accessories. The fabrics such as chiffons, georgettes, crepes and raw silk have been added to the conventional coarse cotton base material. Motifs too have been oriented and new natural forms inspired from nature, figurative and temple motifs have been added to the ancestral motif directory. Traditional color story of black, blue, green, yellow and red had been widened with addition of new colors such as brown, orange, maroon and pink.

Conclusion:

Kalamkari in its traditional form has been passed over from generation to generation and the craft managed to preserve its natural roots. However, the need for further sustenance of the craft is vital to restore its past glory. The craft thrives upon the usage of natural dyes and techniques in its making, and thus is a true example of sustainable practices in area of textiles.

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