

Design Resource

Kerala Murals

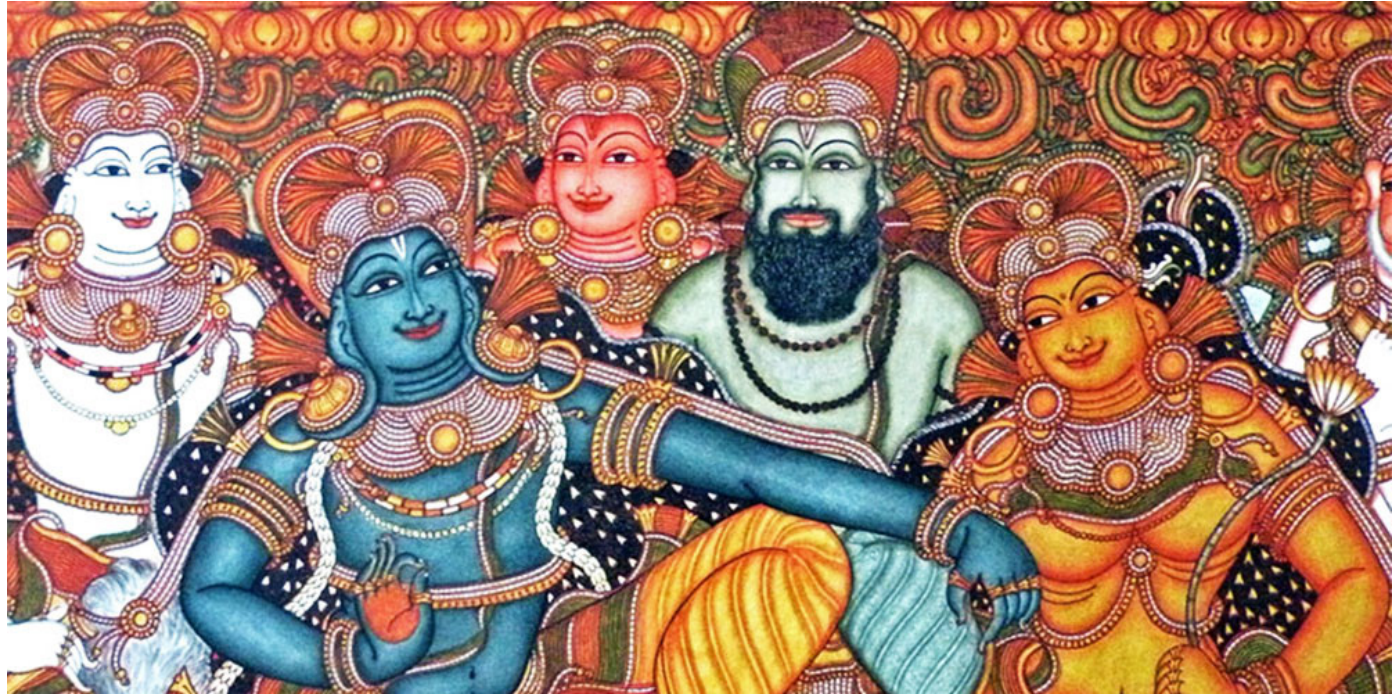
The Art of Painting on Walls

by

Prof. Bibhudutta Baral and Mr. Antony William
NID, Bengaluru

Source:

<http://www.dsource.in/resource/kerala-murals>



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Introduction

About Kerala:

Kerala, known as “God’s own country”, is situated on the south-western coast of the Indian subcontinent. Kerala has a rich assortment of religious influence in the crafts which is continued and secured for traditional and cultural retention. It holds the second place in having the largest collection of archaeologically significant mural sites after Rajasthan.

Kerala Murals - Introduction

The word ‘mural’ is derived from the Latin word ‘murus’, meaning ‘wall’. Murals refer to paintings embellished on visual components like the wall, ceiling, or other huge lasting surfaces. The murals of Kerala unfathomably stand out for their prominence in beauty, clarity and symmetry with unmatched linear accuracy. The peculiarity of Kerala murals is their simple and thematic presentation of idealistic reproduction of humans, animals and trees with technical excellence, illustrated with rich and delicate strokes, hued with bright colours which epitomize Kerala Murals. The murals palette consists of five colours or Panchvarna namely, yellow, red, green, black and white, prepared from mineral pigments and vegetables. These paintings belong to a distinguished lineage with its tradition carries influences from Ajanta. The themes are depicted using common iconographic symbols from the Puranas like Ramayana and Mahabharata from the Hindu mythology, which is illustrated highly with brilliance stylistically. The expressions are depicted with artistic mastery.”

Tools and Raw Materials:

Kerala Murals are aesthetic in appearance and also eco-friendly due to the materials used in the various stages of painting. The five fundamental colours used for painting of murals are prepared from the mineral pigments and vegetables like leaves, fruits, stones and ores. The colours are blended in a wooden bowl along with tender coconut water and extracts of the Neem tree. The wall is prepared by application of various coatings for a durable, robust and clear layout, set for painting the mural. The tools and raw materials used for painting of Kerala murals require the following:

- Plaster consisting of lime and sand
- Water
- Extracts (Juice) of Kadukka (Mussels)
- Burnt husk
- Tender coconut water
- Extracts of Neem tree
- Turmeric powder
- Soot
- Acrylic Paints (contemporary painting)
- Five colours or Panchvarna used are yellow, red, green, black and white
- Wooden bowl for mixing of colours

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The Types of Brushes Used Originally were:

- Flat brush – Made from the hair taken from the back of the ears of the calves
- Medium brush – Made from the hair found under the goat's belly
- Fine brush – Made from the delicate blades of grass or tails of muskrats.
- Eyyam Pullu , a local leaf is treated and tied to the bamboo sticks
- Currently, Staple hair brushes are used

Important Steps in Colour Making:

1. Colour pallet and containers used to mix colours.
2. One half of the coconut shell used to mix and store colours.
3. For contemporary art, the canvas is used as the primary tool for drawing.
4. The traditional painting brush is made of elephant grass (Kuntalipullu).
5. The colours used for Kerala Murals are indigenously made using the traditional grinding tool.
6. Black is obtained from the soot collected in earthen pot.

Painting Process:

The traditional methodology of drawing mythical figures on the floor was called Dhuleechitramor powder drawing, using natural pigments, which is called Kalam (Kalamezhuthu). This ritual art is practiced in temples and sacred grove of Kerala with symbolizing the idols like Kali, Lord Ayyappa, etc which are made on the floorings, commonly using five colours. There are about six stages to Kerala Mural paintings, they are as follows:

First Stage: Lekhya Karma – Stage of sketching using a pencil or crayon.

Second Stage: Rekha Karma – Outlines made on the sketches

Third Stage: Varna Karma - Painting with colours of the human figures depending on the characters and common qualities. Green is used to represent divine and noble characters (Saatvik); shades of red represents power and wealth (Raajasik), lowly mean characters (tamasik) are depicted in white and demons in black. Spice and Paddy grains are also used for colouring.

Fourth Stage: Vartana Karma - Shading is done.

Fifth Stage: Lekha Karma -Final outlines of the painting, usually painted in black.

Sixth Stage or the Final Stage: Dvika Karma - The final and the finishing touches are done to the painting.

On completion, the mural is offered Pooja and worshipped with ritual songs, which is handed from one generation to another through vocal traditions only.

Fifth Stage: Lekha Karma -Final outlines of the painting, usually painted in black.

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On completion, the mural is offered Pooja and worshipped with ritual songs, which is handed from one generation to another through vocal traditions only.

Traditional Painting Methodology:

- The wall is ready for painting and the image is sketched out.
- The sketching is done using cow dung ash mixed with coconut water or water.
- Outlines were originally done with cow dung pencils.
- The pencil is made from cow dung called Kittalekhini.
- Bamboo sticks are used for outlining and grass blades and tree roots is commonly used as a brush.
- The size of the brush varies as per requirement
- The shading is adeptly colourized by symbolizing the characteristics separately for each god.
- The colours are indigenously obtained from the extracts of the leaves, roots, earth and stones.
- The colours are generally painted beginning with the lighter colours.
- The order of colouring is firstly yellow, red, green, blue and brown (mixed red and yellow)
- White is by no means used, except for the prevailing white spaces which are retained during the initial coating.
- On shading, black is used to delineate and bring life to the portrayal.
- The painting is over-coated with pine resin and oil for sheen and protection.

Contemporary Painting Methodology:

In due course of time, this art has transformed with easily available brushes purchased from the commercial market and the shading of the original colours can be distinctively noticed. The use of blue colour is also noticed over the passage of time. A shift from the walls to asbestos, plywood, cloth, paper and other frames can be noticed for aesthetics and effortless rationale. The contemporary mural painting consists as follows:

- Availability of ready-made canvas
- The drawing is traced out
- The outlines are drawn with red (on the canvas)
- Ready-made acrylic colours are used
- Extracts (Juice) of Kadukka (Mussels)
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The Institute of Mural Painting at Guruvayur Devaswom was setup in 1989 which offers a five years course on traditional mural painting.

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The artists work in groups to complete the various aspects of the murals painting.



A portrayal of lord Shri Rama and Sita illustrated on a canvas.

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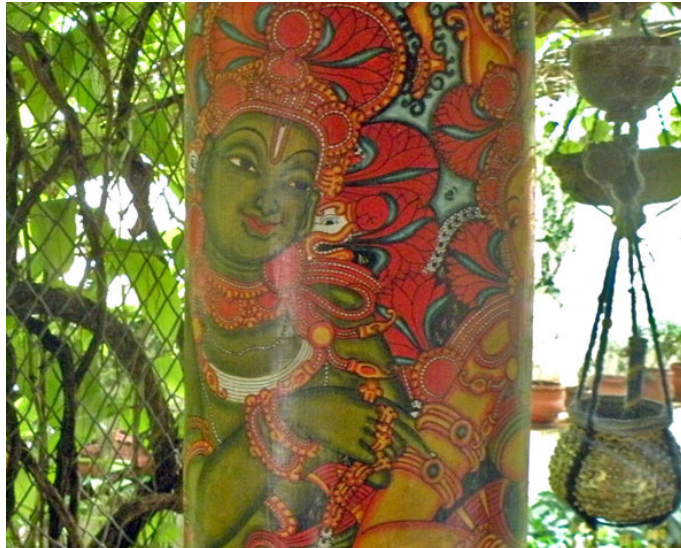
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The representation from hindu mythology elegantly depicted on the pillar.



The elegant vase charmingly depicting Lord Krishna with the flute.



The traditional method of preparing the colours which are grinded, filtered and dried.

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Preparing the Wall

A mixture of crushed limestone and sand is stored for about three to four days. There are three stages towards the preparation of the wall.

First Stage:

This mixture is blended with water and a molasses solution. This mixture of lime, sand, water, molasses solution (dissolved jaggery) and juice of Kadukka (mussels) is mixed well and this rough plaster is evenly applied on the wall.

Second and Final Stage:

Ground cotton is also added for plastering. Each application of this mixture is of half an inch thickness. On drying the process of application is repeated until it is of 2 mm thickness. Over this mortar, lime (white) and tender coconut water is applied to gain a whitish appearance, acting as a primer to the wall.



A depiction of typical Kerala Mural on the wall.



The decorative piece of art which can be exhibited in the interiors and exteriors.

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Colour Making Process

The wall is prepared for painting and the images are sketched out free-hand using cow dung ash mixed with coconut water or water. The outlines were originally done with cow dung pencils, called Kittalekhini. The shading is adeptly colourized by symbolizing the characteristics separately for each god. The colours are indigenously obtained from the extracts of the leaves, roots, earth and stones. The colours are generally painted beginning with the lighter colours. The order of colouring is firstly yellow, red, green, blue and brown (mixed red and yellow). White is by no means used, except for the prevailing white spaces which are retained during the initial coating. On shading, black is used to delineate and bring life to the portrayal. The painting is over-coated with pine resin and oil for sheen and protection. The five fundamental colours used for painting of murals are prepared from mineral pigments and vegetables like leaves, fruits, stones and ores.

- Green is obtained from the extracts of a local plant called Eravikkaraor from mixed dried and powdered red leaves of Neela Amari (Indigofera) (blue in colour) and Eruvikkara leaves (yellow in colour) are used in different proportions for shades of green.
- Black, from the soot of the sesame oil which is collected inside a mud pot or burnt husk.
- Yellow is obtained from turmeric powder or from fine ground laterite stones which is used for yellow and red, which is filtered and dried.
- Red from the minerals like a mixture of lime and turmeric powder.
- White is obtained from lime.

The colours are blended in a wooden bowl along with tender coconut water and extracts of Neemtrees.

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Black is obtained from the soot of the sesame oil which is burnt and accumulated inside a mud pot.



The accumulation of the soot in the mud pot.



The colour is mixed in a coconut shell.



Red is obtained by grinding and mixing of lime and turmeric powder.

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The method of preparing the natural colours.



The colours are ground on the traditional grinding stone called Ammikal.

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Yellow is obtained from turmeric powder or by grinding laterite stones.

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Product

Renowned widespread illustrations of Vishnu in various personifications are the oldest paintings found in Kerala. Other common murals are of Ganesha and manifestations of Siva.

Thrissur houses many mural paintings in the temples like:

- Pallimanna Shiva Temple with the illustrations of the story of Ramayana on the walls of the Mattancheri Palace and in SankaraNarayana, Mahabharata is retold.
- Vadakkunatha Temple with twin sets of paintings – in the interiors and the other in a small shrine.
- The Chemmanthatta Temple of Shiva has sculptural art of Krishna and Balarama at its entrance.

Others murals can be found in:

- The Padmanabhapuram Palace houses murals portraying puranic themes from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.
- Krishnapuram Palace at Kayamkulam has a big panel of Gajendramoksham existing during the earlier eighteenth century era.
- Panayannarkkavu Murals depicts Hindu mythology on the walls of SaptaMatha temple of Panayannarkkavu.
- Ettumanoor Murals depicts the epics with imaginative panorama of a music concert by the Gods and Goddesses.
- Pundareekapuram Murals depicts the Hindu epics and also the frolics of Lord Krishna.
- Rama Temple at Triprayar represents Rama and his coronation, Vishnu, Krishna and Sita.
- Guruvayur and Aranmula Parthasarthy temples have many wall paintings.
- Marathiavolom temple in Alleppey has many paintings on Krishna.
- St. George's Orthodox Church is surrounded with Christian murals depicting scriptural stories and biblical characters.
- Mar Sabore and Afroth Churches in Akapparambu, located in the outskirts of Ernakulam, possess murals portraying various scenes from the bible.
- Attractively, St. Mary's Church at Kanjoor has battle scenes of the armies of Tipu Sultan and of the English East India Company, on the both sides of its entrance.

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For the contemporary art, the canvas is used as a primary material for drawing.



The traditional painting brush is made of elephant grass locally called 'Kuntalipullu'.



The first shade of color used in Kerala Mural is yellow.



The second shade is followed by red.

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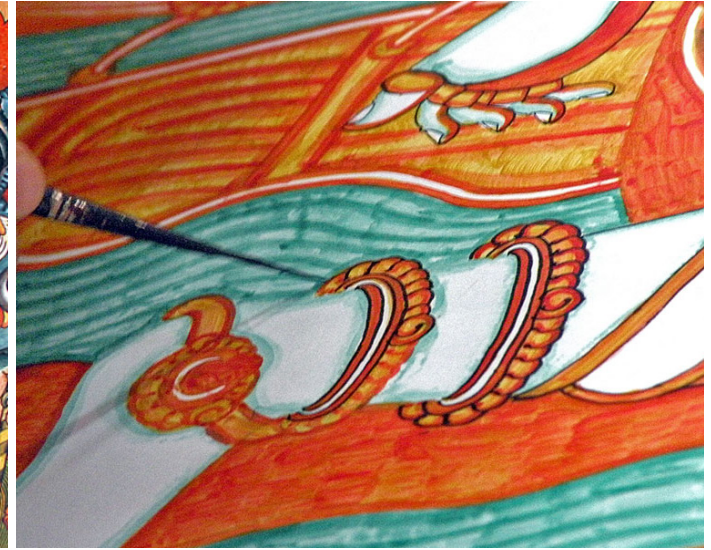
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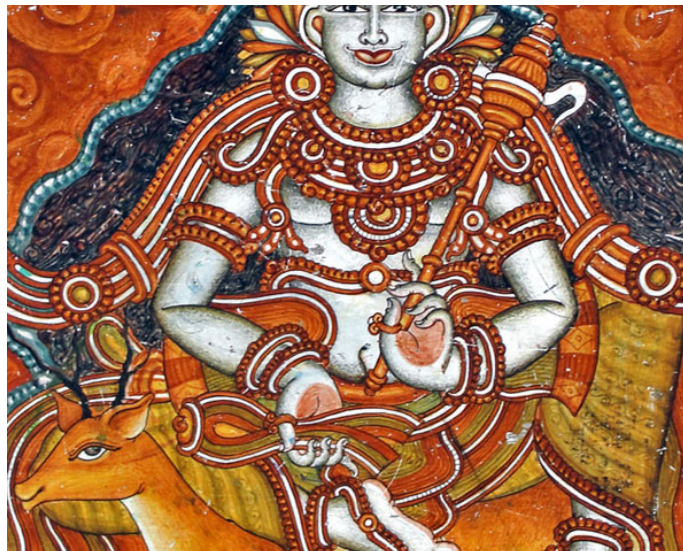
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The colors used on the human figures, depend on the characters and common qualities.



The colors are richly painted and brought to life with black outlines.



The colorful representation brings a sense of glamour, tranquility and charm to the Kerala murals.



Pre-historic stories retold in the murals.

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The spiritual divine wealth is depicted in shades of green, The order of colouring is firstly yellow, red, green, blue golden yellow and red. Blue was introduced much later. and brown (mixed red and yellow).



The order of colouring is firstly yellow, red, green, blue brown (mixed red and yellow).

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Themes and Styles

The portrayal of the Hindu pantheon of gods and goddesses were drawn from their metaphors in the invocatory verses or 'dhyashlokas'. The backdrops of these paintings were greatly embellished with flora, fauna and other aspects of the nature.

Few Themes noted are:

- Anantasayanan, Lekshminarayana, Krishna with Gopis, Nataraja as Dakshinamurthi, Sastha on hunt etc.
- The common themes are of various incarnations Vishnu, Ganesha and manifestations of Siva.
- Characters and scenes from Christian mythology.
- Scene of the battle fought between the armies of Tipu Sultan and the English East India Company.

Style:

The peculiarities of Kerala Murals are the process of making the colours with indigenous colours, the order of painting the mural with limited colours and the outlines of "Ra Ra Ra" of the gods and goddesses from the Hindu pantheon are a treat to the eye.

- The peculiarity of Kerala Murals is the elaborate eye which speaks volumes.
- Shading is predominantly packed with dots depending on the shading pattern.
- Merely five colours are used; although now blue is introduced.
- The backdrop is constantly red.
- The background painted in red is coated as per the required shade and is dotted with a mix of red and brown.
- The white area is for all time retained with the background coat itself.
- Throughout the image as well as at the borders a particular design is used called "Ra Ra Ra". (An illustration of Ra Ra Ra is seen below).

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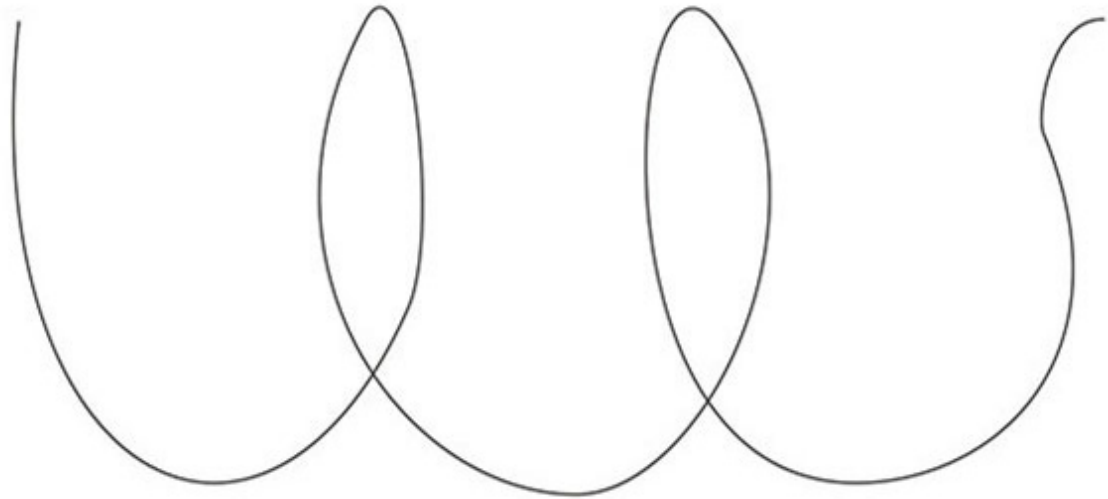
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- [Online Information Centre for Crafts](#)
- [Handmade in India](#)
- [Crafts Council of India](#)
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Contact Details

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You can get in touch with Professor Bibhudutta Baral at **[bibhudutta\[at\]nid.edu](mailto:bibhudutta[at]nid.edu)**.

You could write to the following address regarding suggestions and clarifications:

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