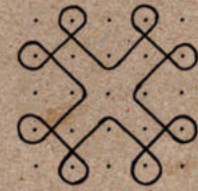


2015



KOLAM
DIARIES



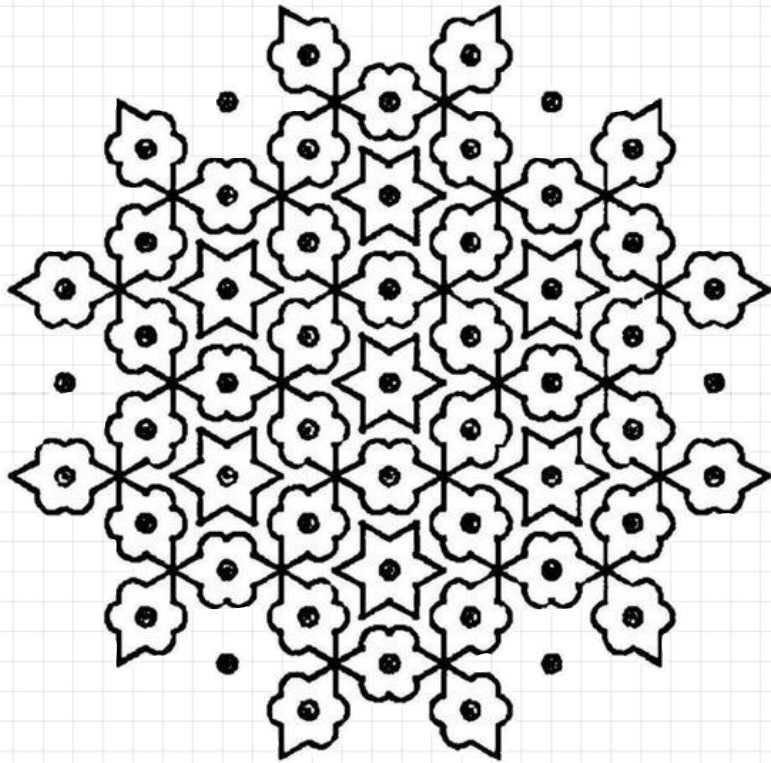
THIS BOOK, DESIGNED IN THE FORMAT OF A NOTEBOOK CONTAINS TEXT, INTERVIEWS, QUOTES, PHOTOGRAPHS, IMAGES AND SKETCHES COLLECTED AS A RESULT OF A TWO WEEK VISUAL ETHNOGRAPHY STUDY OF KOLAM (TAMIL RANGOLI) IN JAN 2015 IN VARIOUS PARTS OF CHENNAI, INDIA. THE NOTEBOOK FORMAT SEEMED TO HOLD THE FLAVOUR OF THE STUDY AS A "WORK IN PROGRESS"; MODEL AND PRESENT THE CONTENT AS A DIRECT REPRESENTATION

Shreelekha LakshmiPathy



KOLAM | THE BASIC IDEA

Traditionally, every day, before sunrise and sunset, the majority of women in Tamil Nadu, South India, perform the kolam practice as part of their domestic duties. Women draw their geometrical images, their kolams, on the streets at the entrances of their houses not just for aesthetic appeal but more importantly because of the belief in their ability to invite prosperity, exude sanctity and ward off evil forces. By drawing a kolam, women provide auspiciousness and well-being for their families, as well as the immediate environment. Therefore the kolam represents the concern for all living creatures and is an invitation to all, especially deities like Lakshmi, the Goddess of Prosperity. Drawn in front of the house, its balanced appearance transforms the ordinary space into a ritual and sacred space, making the house into a home and affecting the mood in the surrounding community as it materialises the rhythms of life. The quality of the kolam embodies the skill, energy, knowledge and spiritual qualities of the maker and also interweaves gender identities to its objects.



KOLAM | THE VARIED NAMES

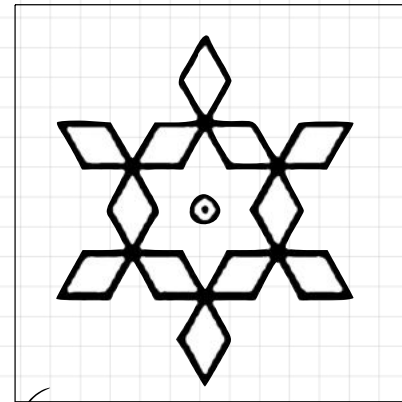
Kolam is considered an auspicious form of TAMILIAN tradition. Kolam is a very attractive method of design formation around simple elements such as loops and dots. Kolams are drawn in front of the deities in pooja rooms and in front of houses. The proportional, geometric designs vary in different parts of India.

Kolam is called :
hase in Karnataka,
muggulu in Andhra Pradesh,
alpana in Assam and Bengal,
rangoli in Maharashtra and Gujarat, and
chowkpurna in Uttar Pradesh.



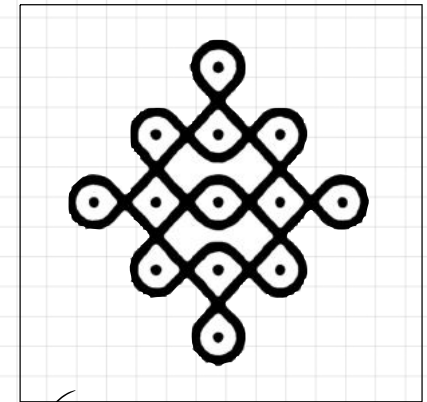
KOLAM | HISTORY

The custom of drawing kolam was once believed to be very ancient. However, research has suggested that the practice of drawing designs on the floor dates back only six hundred years. References to kolam have been found in Tamil literary works such as the 16th century madurai meenakshiammai kuram and in the 17th century Thiru kutraala kuravanji. Both these literary works include information as to how to prepare a surface before drawing in front of Lord Ganesh. In literary works, it has been mentioned that people in ancient days used kumkum (red powder), sandalwood, and punugu (an excretion of the civet cat) to smooth the floor. References to kolam have not been seen in any traveler's account or in ancient paintings. However, some of the geometric designs used in creating kolam have found to be carved on the walls of ancient temple gopurams (towers).



→ LINE KOLAM

The free hand drawing of lines, making geometrical patterns.



→ DOT KOLAM

The dots are placed in a specific sequence and the lines are drawn joining the dots, revealing design patterns.

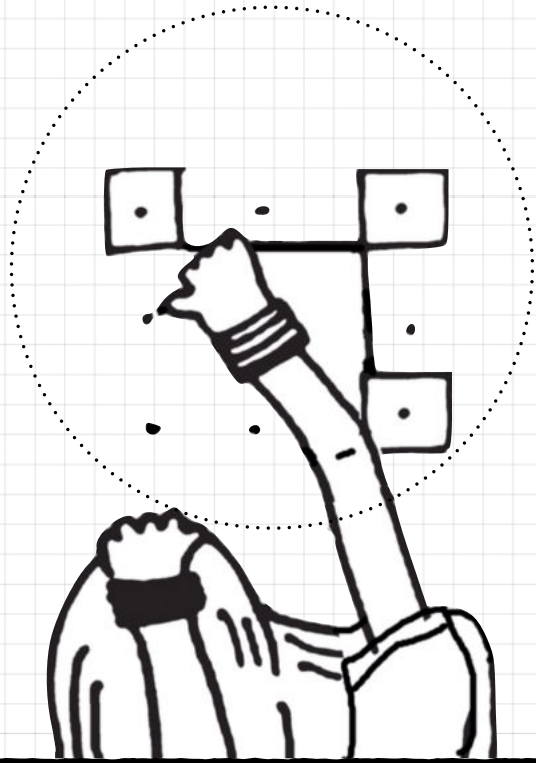
KOLAM | VARIETIES

The number of pulli (dots) may range from 4 to 10s.

There are two varieties in pulli kolam:

- (1) The dots are joined with straight lines to make the decorative pattern, and
- (2) twisted chains are formed around the dots by linking one loop with another, creating intertwined patterns.

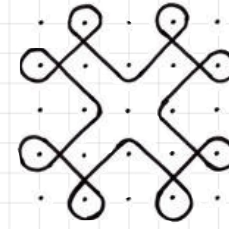
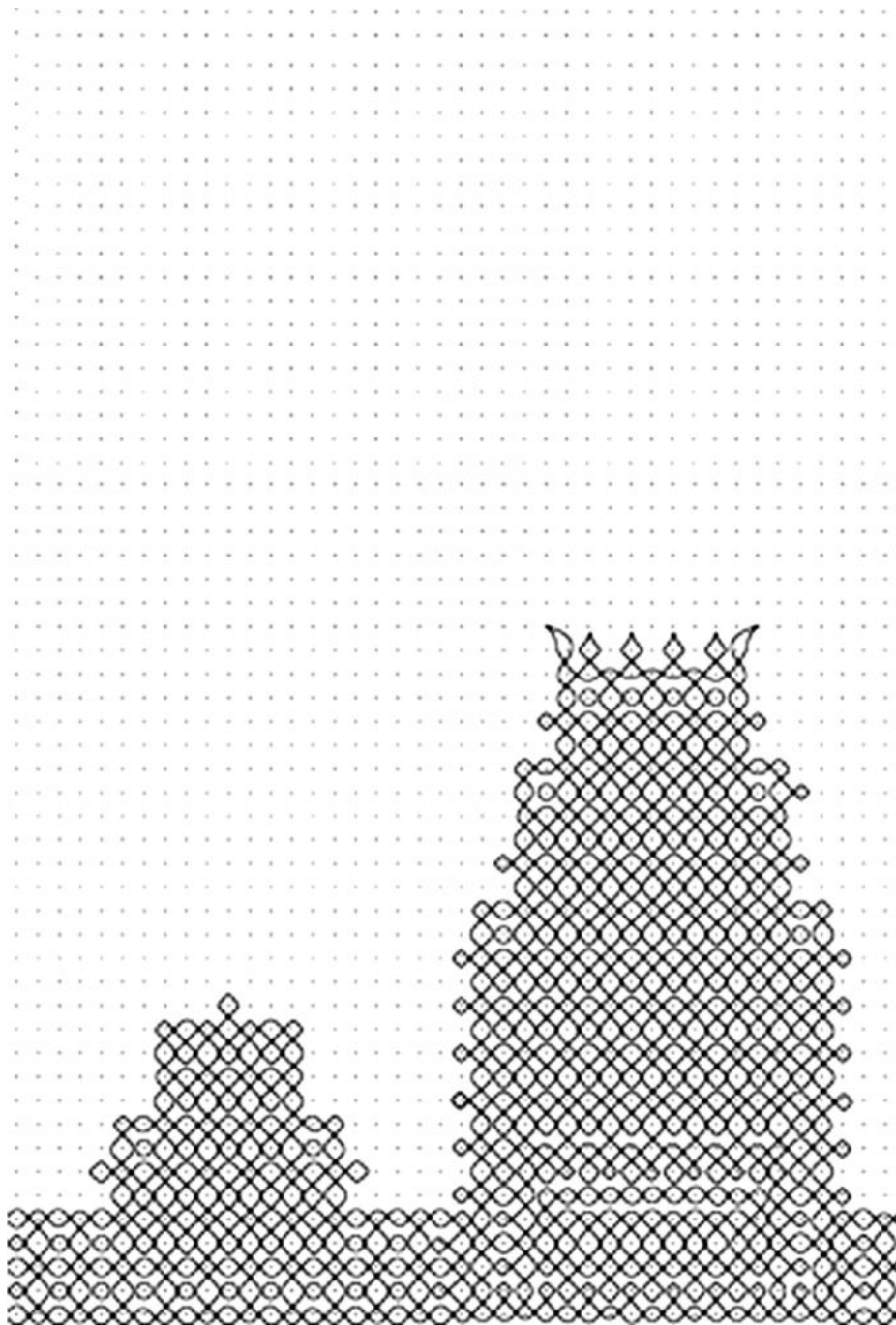
The second form is also called kambai kolam, neli kolam, sikkuv kolam, and chikkuv kolam.



KOLAM | WOMEN

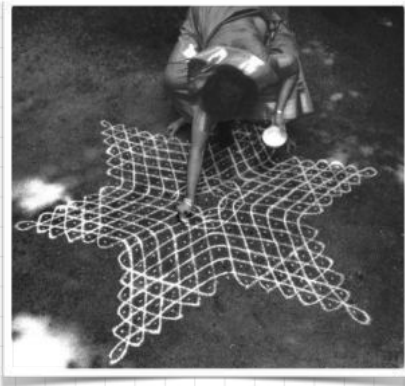
In South India, Kolam drawing is practiced by women of all ages. Girls learn this art from childhood, taught by their mothers and grandmothers.

In rural areas, a bride is judged on her talent for creating Kolam, as this skill is believed to demonstrate her discipline, grace, concentration, and dexterity.

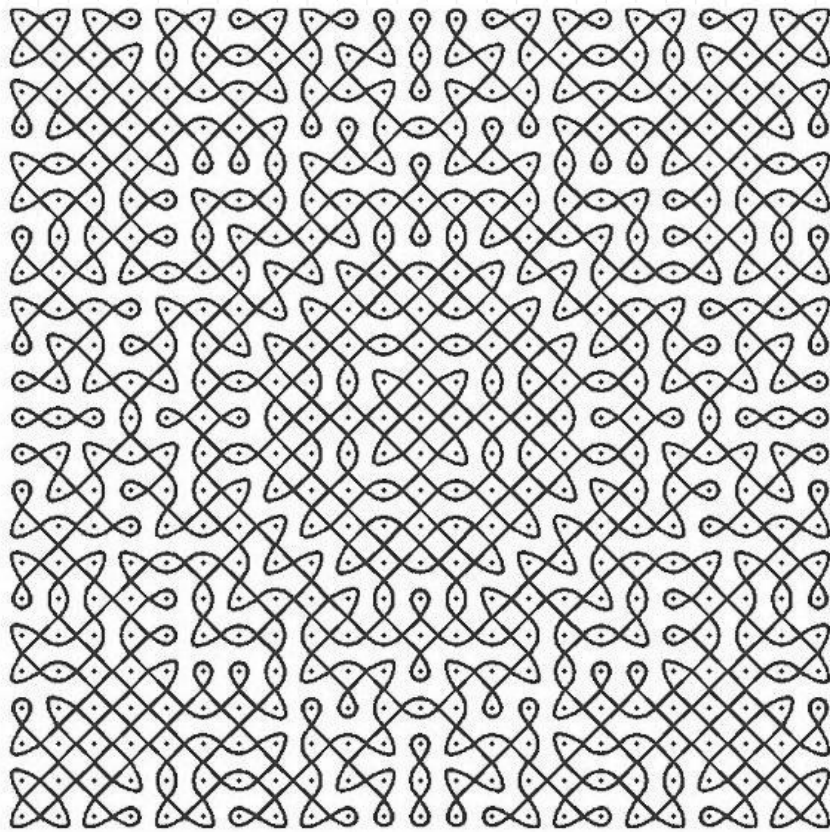


THINGS TO DO

- cover the kolam contest, mylapore festival.....
- Talk to a temple priest.....
- visit connemera library, Egmore.....
- Take a stroll at dawn.....
- cover the patterns on a single street.....
- kolam books and stickers.....
- kapaleshwarar temple, mylapore.....
- cover wedding kolams at Nishanti's wedding.....
- get people to sketch on this book.....
- learn to make draw kolams.....



/ Ammamma makes
one for the evening



/ Ammamma's favourite
diamond carpet kolam
23 x 23 grid

1 / JAN EIGHT

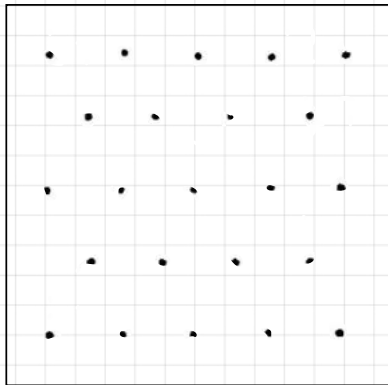
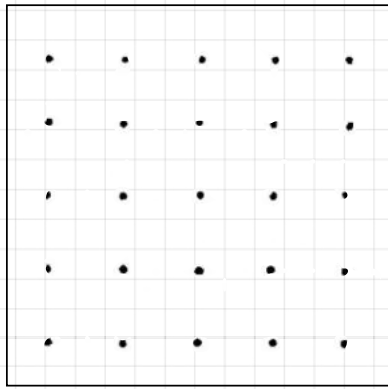
C-45b, 5th cross street, Periyar Nagar, Chennai

4.30pm

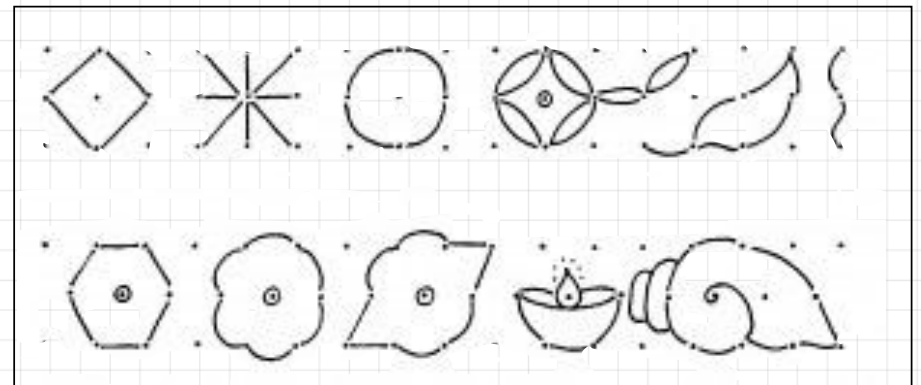
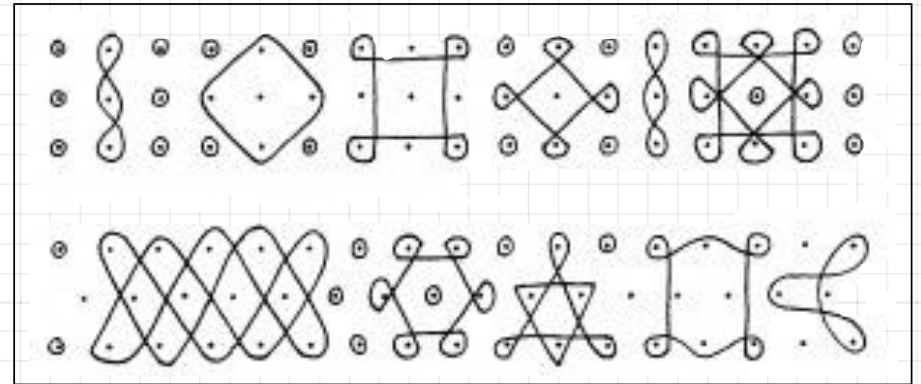
Ammamma (Grandmother) :

"I used to make very elaborate kolams, almost everyday, but now because of my knee-pain, I make quick simple ones so I don't have to stand for long. Your mom was better at it than her sisters, she was quick too, she used to come up with her own variations. You remember manjula paati (grandma), the one who stays in the 6th cross street, she used to call your mom for making kolams during the festivities. She was a master in sikku kolams that's why she is able to sort out difficult situations that arise at home but nowadays your mom does not have time for these."

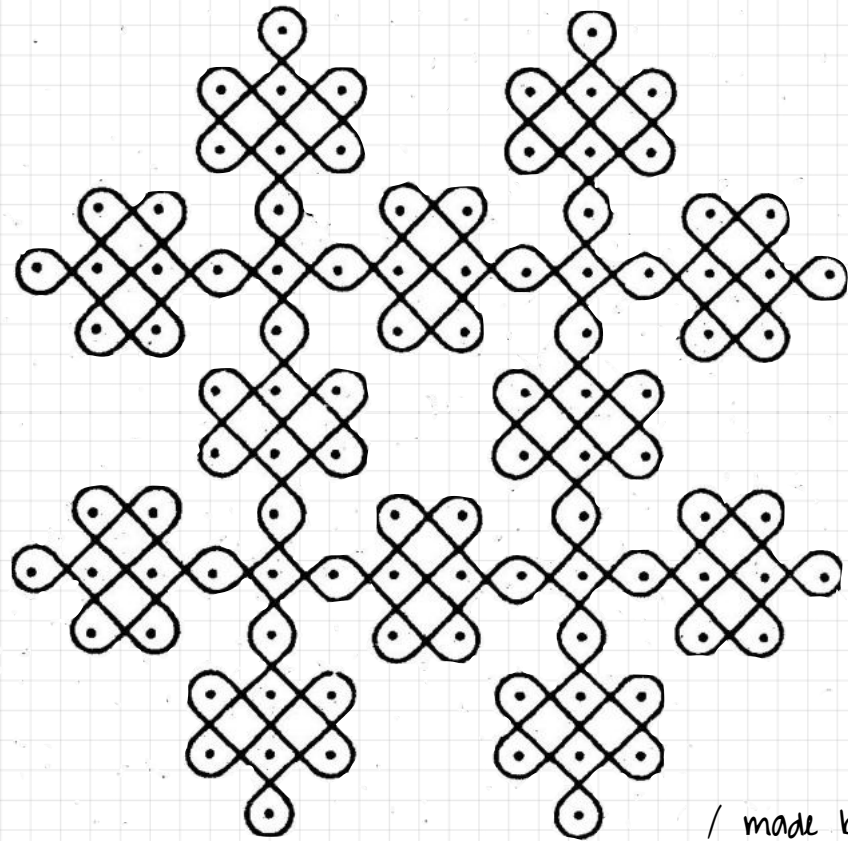
HOW TO DRAW A KOLAM



There are two types of Kolam : one with dots and one with lines. The one with dots can be either face to face or in alternate rows. These dots form the background for pictures of birds, animals, flowers or gods.



In order to draw a picture, you can join the dots with a straight line or a curve. You can also draw around them with a single and continuous line or several lines crossing over one another.



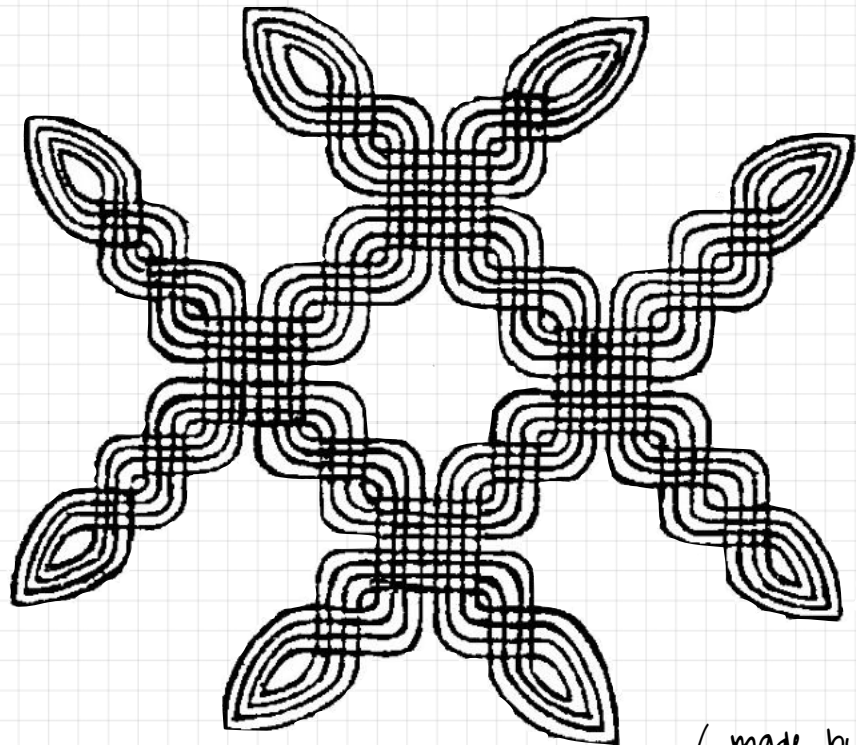
/ made by
Amma

SIKKU KOLAM

Kolam made by a single continuous line or several lines running around dots are called sikkukolam and exist to my knowledge only in Tamil-Nadu. They distinguish themselves from other kolam by their entangled lines. Certain local beliefs see in these uninterrupted delineations an efficient charm against malevolent forces and evil eye. Temple sculptures formed by a unique or several never-ending lines which crisscross themselves develop sometimes into complex and recurring patterns.

The meeting points of the entwined lines are knots. During certain rituals in India, the sacrificial area is surrounded by one or several ropes to prevent the entry of evil influences. Actors and dancers wear almost permanently a talisman made of several threads tied at regular intervals to ward off evil eye. Knots display mixed messages, they represent constraints, complications or union of two beings, a social link or a cosmic link. The sikkukolam directory includes nose ornaments, arm rings, crowns, thrones or ritual objects as rose water sprinkler, vases for melted butter and representation of oil lamps. We find also depictions of palanquins, temple chariot, cradles etc.

I have heard women say that drawing too many sikkukolam leads to family conflicts and conversely women capable of mastering the intricacies of a sikkukolam will be able to sort out difficult situations when they arise at home.



/ made by
Ambuja mami

PADI KOLAM

The line kolam are drawn using parallel lines which cross over at right angles or diagonally. They may start from a dot or a square and form basic structures such a square, a circle, a cross with diagonals, a swastika or two superimposed triangles. To enlarge a padi kolam, we add a series of parallels lines from which new lines join the preceding ones. Around the design, lotuses, conches or other ornamental motives complete the kolam.

These patterns are more abstract and celebrate the upstrokes and downstrokes of Hindu philosophical speculations. Undeniably, the outlines organised around the centre draw the eyes towards the heart of the drawing. Like a yantra or a mandala, negative powers are prevented from entering by the very presence of four stylized gates facing the cardinal directions. The centre of a padi kolam is never left blank and we find one or several dots, diagonal lines, the sun and the moon, a pentagon or a star hexagon.



/ Sundari Auntie
making an
elaborate Kolam

2 / JAN NINE

C-457, 5th cross street, Periyar Nagar, Chennai
7.00am

maybe she saw me photographing my ammamma's Kolam or maybe she just felt like it, Sundari Auntie (my grandmother's neighbour) has drawn the most elaborate Kolam in the street today.

me : Hello Auntie, Good morning! It looks beautiful, what's the occasion?

Sundari Auntie : Nothing Kanna, I just woke up a little early today, so had more time.

me : Oh nice, can I take a photo of it?

Sundari Auntie : Sure! Wait wait, ~~s~~arranges her saree, hair and continues to draw, hmm, ready, now click.

Kolam is a form of self Expression to the Tamil women. A Kolam enables women take care of their family and immediate environment and articulate specific Tamil values, like collectivism and altruism. Performing their Kolam, as part of their domestic duties, enables women to re-articulate their identities and reinvent themselves through these 'performativities'.

KOLAM | SELF EXPRESSION



/ Mylapore
Kolam Contest

3 / JAN NINE

Kolam Contest, Mylapore Festival
North mada Street, Mylapore
4.00pm

This event sees over 100 participants every year and draws people from across the city. They turn North mada Street's east end into a carpet of puli-kolams and the fantastic wins prizes and certificates.

What began as a simple competition with Puli Kolam (2001) has now transformed into one of the most sought-after cultural fests of the city. With 79 registered participants, the contest began at North mada Street with hands methodically moving to create a flow of patterns. In less than 45 minutes, the empty road looked like a grand carpet of embossed kolams.

THE GRAND CARPET OF DOTS



/ at the Kolam contest

4 / JAN NINE

Mylapore Kolam Contest,
North Mada Street, Mylapore
4.00pm

Guna Lakshmi
WINNER,

me : congratulations !

Guna Lakshmi : I was nervous initially, but, once I started designing, there was a flow.

me : What interests you in Kolam?

Guna Lakshmi : Kolam is a language by itself. There is no limit and restriction for these dot and line drawings. Imagination is the only promoter. Actually, my husband gifted me this camera phone for our anniversary last year, anywhere I see a good Kolam, I take a photo of it in my phone and go home and try to redo it. Its like solving a puzzle!

CROSSWORD OR PUZZLE



/ R. Govindarajan
making his Kolam

5 / JAN NINE

mylapore kolam contest,
North mada Street, mylapore
5.00pm

R. Govindarajan has travelled from the middle East just to participate in a kolam contest in mylapore. For this 61-year-old, designing kolam is another form of artistic expression. And his interest was kindled as a child.

me: Wow, you make kolams with such ease!

Govindarajan : Thankyou. I was the only male participant surrounded by 100 women. People were surprised to see me make kolams.

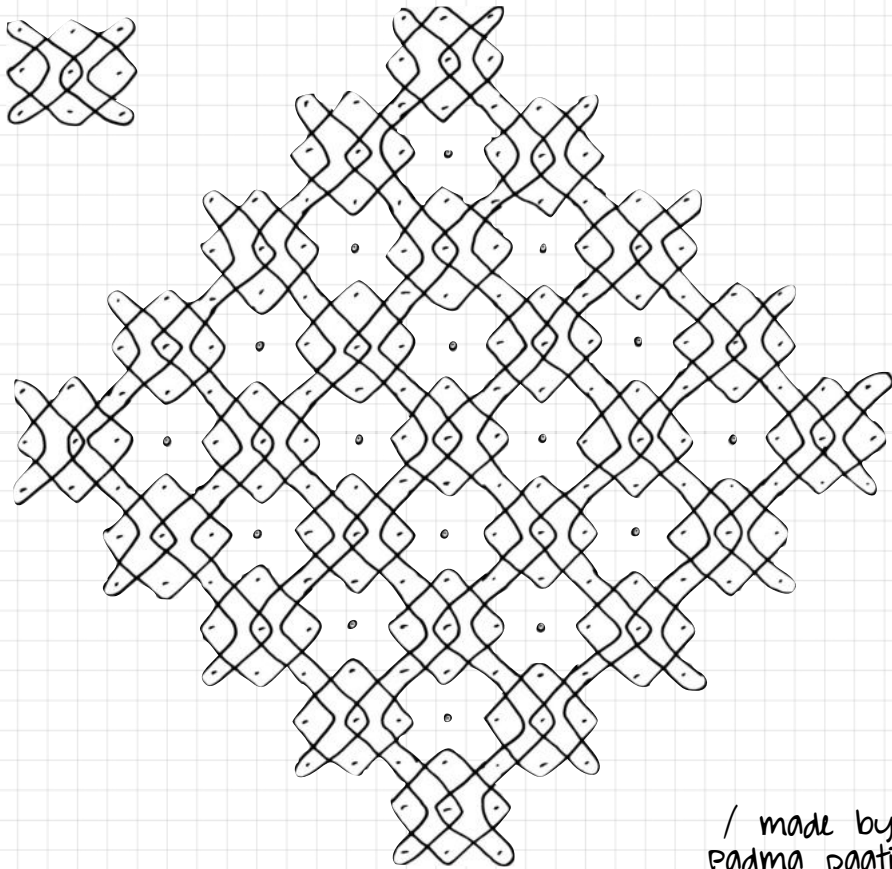
me : Why do we hardly see men doing this?

Govindarajan : Because they don't see it as art, they consider it as a women thing. In my family, I was the only boy who loved to make kolams. It was encouragement from parents and siblings that enabled me to make it a part of my life

me: Why kolam?

Govindarajan : I guess I was always interested in fine arts, I do oil paintings. Kolam can teach a person a lesson in patience. In the end, a well-executed design can also give one a sense of accomplishment and satisfaction.

KOLAM AND MEN



/ made by
Padma paati

6 / JAN NINE

Leo's Filter Coffee Shop
South Mada Street, Mylapore
6.00pm

Padma Paati, ss, one of the judges in the Kolam contest, considers Kolam to be Threshold cues.

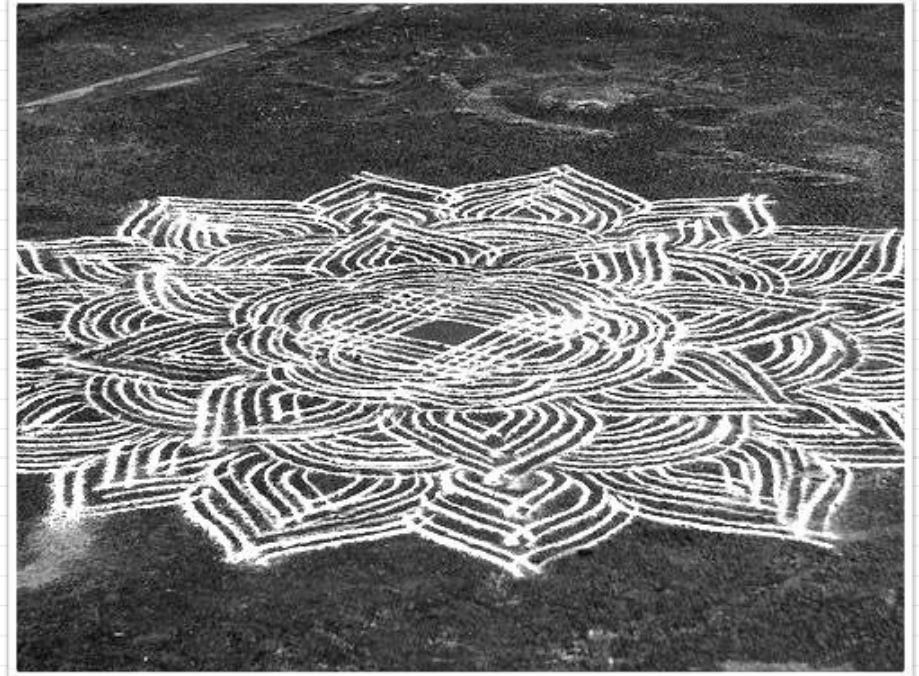
"In the time before phones and telegraphs, Kolam was the way we found what happened in the house, if there was a huge vishesham (special) Kolams and there was no wedding planned that day, then we may guess that the girl of the house has come of age or a baby has been born. If someone dies, then one should not put the Kolam. It represents the capriciousness of life and it helps to attract neighbours and strangers to assist those in need. The Kolam acts as a visual cue at the threshold and conveys what to expect and how to behave."

Kolam is a silent but a very visible announcement, letting people know what is or what is not happening in the house.

COMMUNICATION



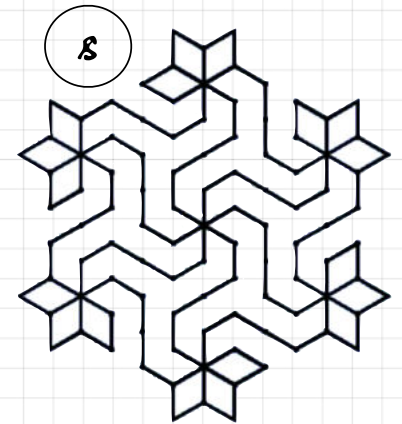
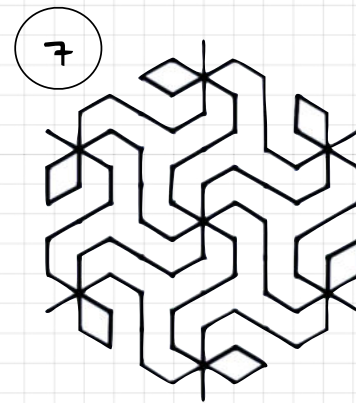
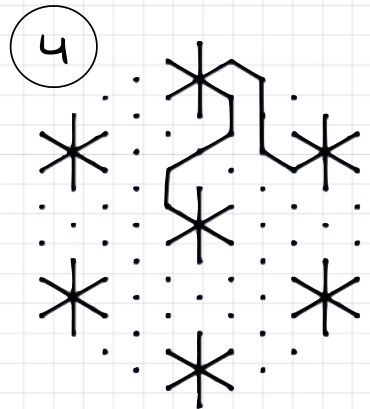
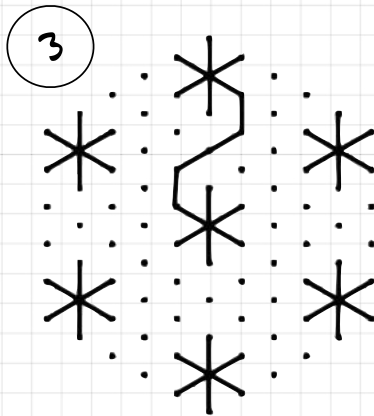
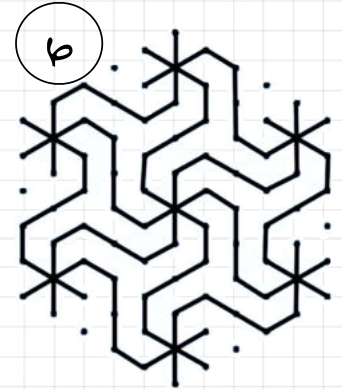
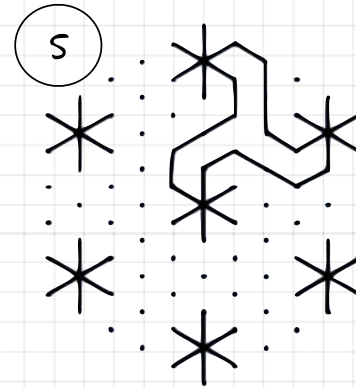
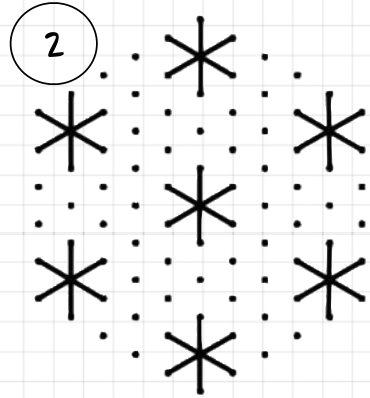
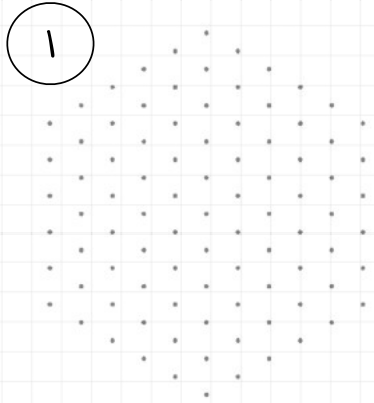
/ contest
in progress

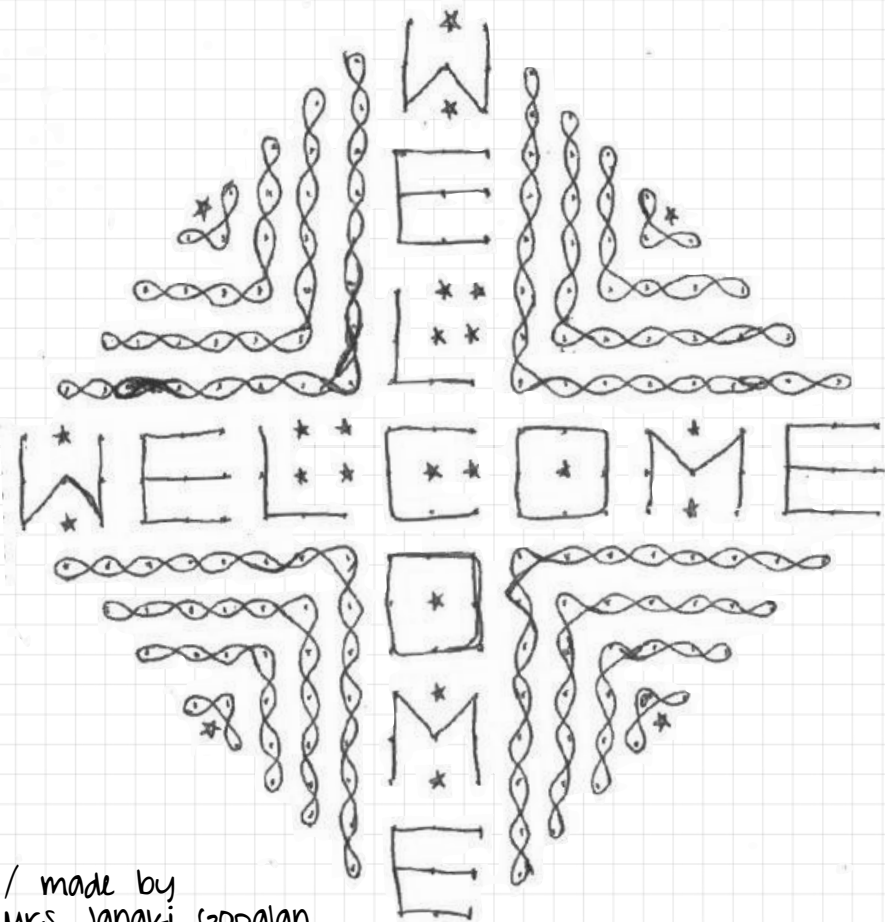


/ at the Kolam contest

DRAWING A KOLAM

S-I-I-S, zig zag dots





/ made by
Mrs. Janaki Gopalan

7 / JAN NINE

Leo's Filter coffee Shop
South mada Street, mylapore
6.00pm

Janaki Gopalan, 50, a participant in the contest.

"Its presence is equivalent to announcing that a household is open or closed to the world, a cultural category that sends off a capacious sense of hospitality, specifically, the willingness and the ability to feed a stranger. Telegraphing receptivity and hospitality, the presence of the Kolam indicates the ability of the household to serve as a welcoming, 'feeding' host to strangers, visitors and guests."

WELCOME



8 / JAN TEN

Kapaleshwarer Temple

Mylapore

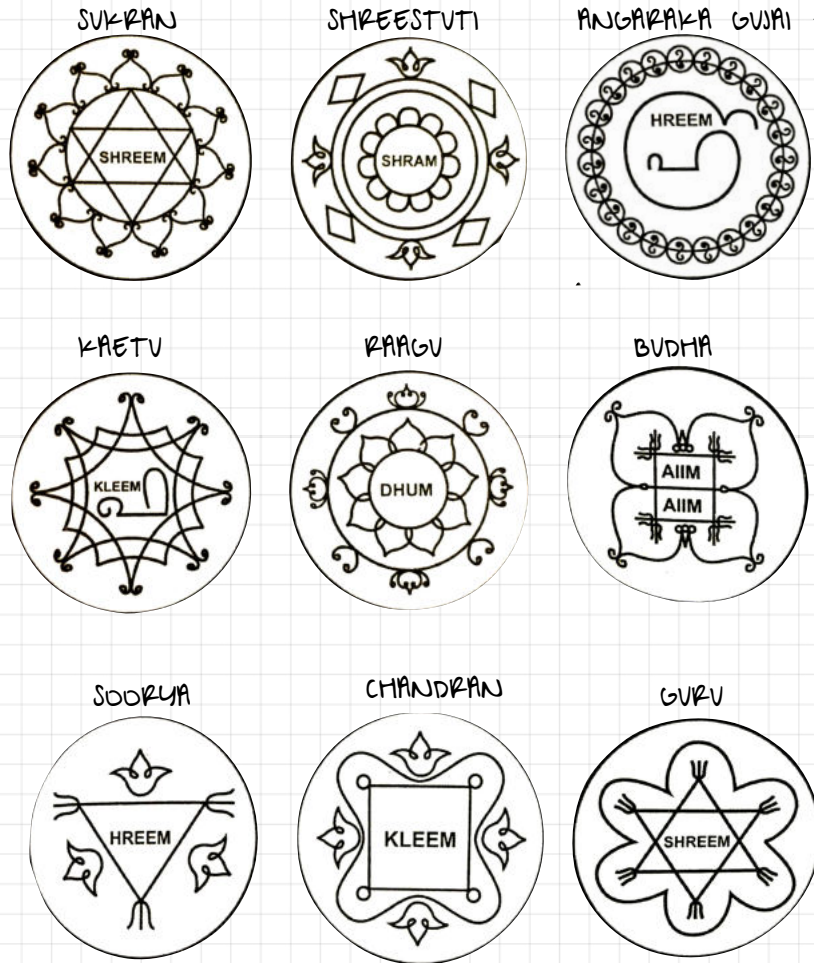
8.00 am

Mr. Annajay Natarajan, 60, a priest at the temple:

"The auspicious power travels from the women's hands through the kolam and upward into the bodies of those passing through its energy field, as they step over, around, or through the kolam. This capacity is especially significant during the moments of women's ritual life-cycle ceremonies, articulating how and why the household may be seen as open. At particularly important life-cycle ceremonies, an overflow of generosity is imagined, required and enacted. It is through the capacity of generosity that auspiciousness is generated."

AUSPICIOUS GENEROSITY





/ Navagraha Kolams:
 Kolams painted in pooja
 rooms and kitchen designed
 to please the particular
 Navagraha devata.



/ Kolam painted
 on the temple floor

9 / JAN TEN

Kapaleeshwarar Temple

mylapore

10.00 am

INTERVIEW : CHANTAL JUMEL

An avid student of kolam, Chantal Jumel found that the pictorial ritual tradition combines aesthetics with philosophy. Freelancer, researcher and writer, who is specialising in Indian visual art, Chantal Jumel's discovery of India has been through art, specifically the floor art of Kerala's 'Kalam Ezhuthu' and Tamil Nadu's Kolam.

She has lectured, conducted workshops and created kolams at many prestigious venues in France. Chantal Jumel has lived in mylapore since 2010 amidst the rich living tradition of kolam and continues to be an avid student of the art form: drawing, documenting and photographing this pictorial ritual tradition, which according to her connects her to the Hindu world view and 25 million women of Tamil Nadu who draw kolams every day. Excerpts from her interview:

What attracted you to the symbolic world of kolam?

There were so many little touches. Amar Chitra Kathas were sold down the street where I grew up in France and as a teenager I read its Tales and Legends of India, which was a gift from my mother. Herman Hesse's Siddhartha and John Renoir's very beautiful film, The River, which opens with the shot of three very beautiful Bengali women doing the alpana, - perhaps all this had a subconscious impact! I came to Kerala in 1980 to learn Mohiniyattam and while dancing in the temples, came across kalam ezhuthu. I learnt the art, which like a kolam is drawn with fingers and thumb. Alongside, I learnt the basics of kolam from a Tamil lady in Kerala. I had been fascinated by the calligraphic beauty of kolams done in the lanes leading to the Sree Padmanabhaswamy temple and also at the Meenakshi temple in Madurai. When I came to mylapore to stay, I literally entered the world of kolams.

Apart from aesthetics, what is the significance of a kolam to you?

If you value the gesture as part of a ritual the kolam is significant. I believe that a home without a kolam does not shine! I've seen, documented, photographed and even learnt to draw so many kolams: on the threshold, in the kitchen and puja room, different kolams for different days and different communities. An old lady once told me that the pullis and the cikis - the wavy lines which go around the dots - are purush and prakriti and the repetitive act of joining them every morning is like renewing yourself every day. It is like being immersed in the here and the now. And have

you observed how a woman stands at right angles while making a kolam, in the process exercising unknown muscles. A kolam is not mere decoration but encompasses a whole philosophy.

Who taught you the art of drawing kolam?

There are so many Tamil ladies who taught me both the basics and the intricacies and to whom I am deeply indebted. I went into an Iyer puja room and saw the lady make a kolam with two birds and a swastika to fend off separation. And a beautiful Hanuman represented by a mountain with a tail. I saw hridaya and aishwarya kolams, gopuram-shaped kolams, in exquisite shapes of twisted ribbons and so many 'pulli and cikka' kolams. I learnt by observing kolams featuring the hamsa, elephant, agni, kubera etc. Pongal kolams I found were rich in imagery as were the Christmas ones. Janaki Gopalan taught me double lined kolams, vaishnavite kolams and other intricate patterns. Alas, what takes them 15 minutes to do takes me a full hour.

Your impressions of mylapore and kolams during margazhi.

The streets are full of kolams. Women, including my friend Lakshmi, get up at 4 a.m. to make beautiful and huge kolams covering the entire width of the lane. By 5.30 a.m., they have all but vanished with trampling of human and animal feet, speeding cars and other vehicles. But they do create some fleeting moments of margazhi magic!

Like other traditional crafts is the kolam also dying? If so, what can be done to nurture it?

I have seen and studied kolams for the past 25 years. Kolams inside the home seem to be flourishing, but shrinking public spaces do not seem to hold much future for 'outside kolams'. Though in small towns and villages, 'public kolams' are still a way of life. I went to a small weavers' village near Kanchipuram and saw a profusion of calligraphy-like kolams in the outside space. Kolam competitions such as those organised by the annual Mylapore Festival are a wonderful way of taking the art forward. Kolam making could be taught in schools and at design institutes. Today, ethno-mathematics or teaching maths through traditional means is gaining ground worldwide.



/ Aandal preparing the ground for Kolam

10 / JAN ELEVAN

6.30 am
Perungudi

STROLL AT DAWN

The full moon is bright enough to lighten up the dusty street in Thiruvannamiyur, a residential area in the South of Chennai. At first sight the street seems to be deserted, only some street dogs are chasing each other and bark when a small boy on a bicycle passes them. But when I look closer, I see Aandal sweeping her dusty doorstep. With a broomstick made of jute, she bends her body in a position which reminds of an asana, a yoga posture, to clean the dust and dirt off her doorstep. The next step of her cleaning ritual is to pour water on the street. Putting her right hand in a metal pot, she sprinkles drops of water onto the sandy street and uses her broomstick to make sure the doorstep is moistened by sweeping the water on the sand, which discolours to a darker shade of brown. Aandal puts the semi-circular brown shell of an empty coconut, which is filled with a white colour powder, at the brick gateway on the threshold, in front of the two storey house. Her right hand disappears in the husk, putting some powder between her thumb and index finger. Again she brings her body into a position where her upper body is parallel to her legs, her head facing down towards the floor and her two feet are far apart, like an inverted V. 'The way you bend your body forward, activates the mooladara chakra in your hip region', Aandal explains,

'from head to foot all the parts are given an exercise and so it is related to yoga.' From now on we take silence, as the kolam she is drawing, is perceived as a painted prayer in which Pandal needs to concentrate to replicate the geometrical designs on the pavement in front of the house, to invoke the blessings of the Gods and Goddesses, but also to embody its rhythms and allowing herself to meditate and become introspective. Pandal uses the powder to create a pattern of dots on the wet sandy road. Without any hesitation she creates a web of lines around the dots, joining them properly so the end of the line meets its beginning. In a rhythmic pattern she moves her hands quickly but steady. Her body comes back in an upright position to contemplate the perfectly symmetrical image. Pandal walks up to the doorstep and threshold, where she draws some simple geometrical images and lines. Pandal her task is completed, by drawing her kolam Pandal has transformed the ordinary space in front of her house into a sacral space and this may provide auspiciousness and well-being for their families, as well as the immediate environment.



/ Pandal
drawing Kolam



/ Kanchana paati
preparing the ground
for Kolam



/ A newly
drawn Kolam



/ Yesterday's Kolam



/ Yesterday's Kolam

11 / JAN ELEVAN

7.00 am
Perungudi

STROLL AT DAWN

Tulsidas Uncle, ps, a passerby :

"Bhumi Devi (earth goddess) is our mother. She is everyone's source of existence. Nothing would exist without her. The entire world depends on her for sustenance and life. So, we draw the kolam first to remind ourselves of her. All day we walk on Bhumi Devi. All night we sleep on her. We spit on her. We poke her. We burden her. We do everything on her. We expect her to bear us and all the activities we do on her with endless patience. That is why we do the kolam."

BHOOMIDEVI



/ wedding kolam

12 / JAN TWELVE

9.00 am
Ashok Nagar

WEDDING KOLAMS

wedding event kolams are elaborate as well as befitting for an advantageous celebration with a beautiful kolam drawn with different color to welcome the couple home.

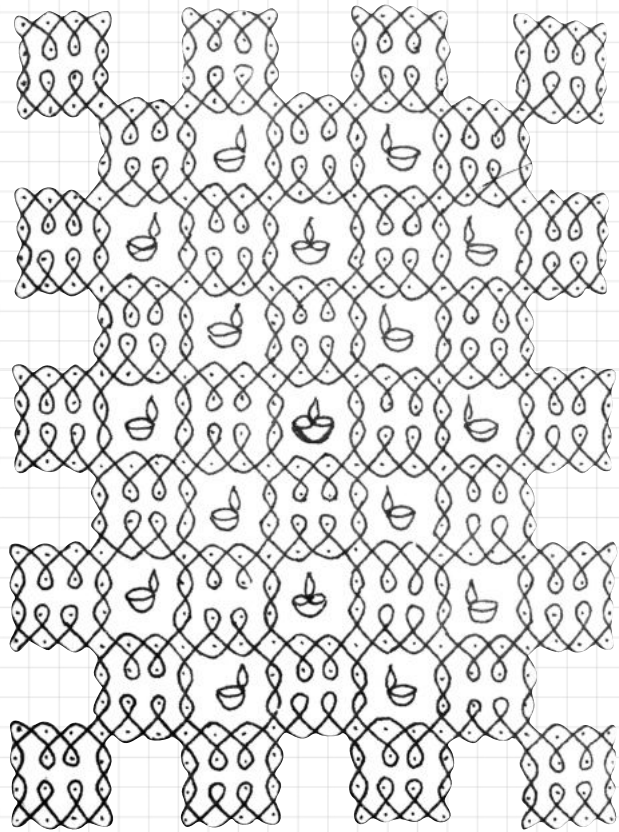
"if there is a celebration, how else will everybody know? Also its very auspicious."

CELEBRATION



/ wedding kolam

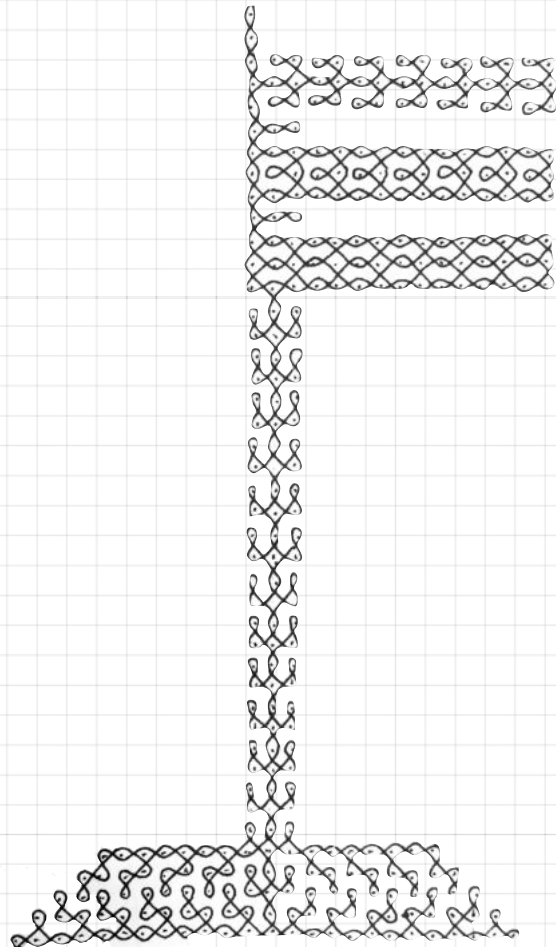




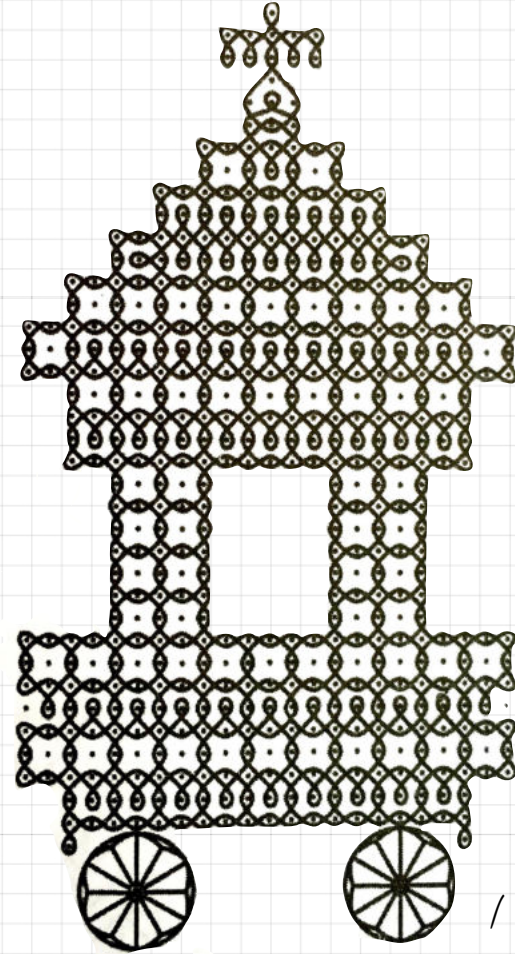
/ Diwali Kolam



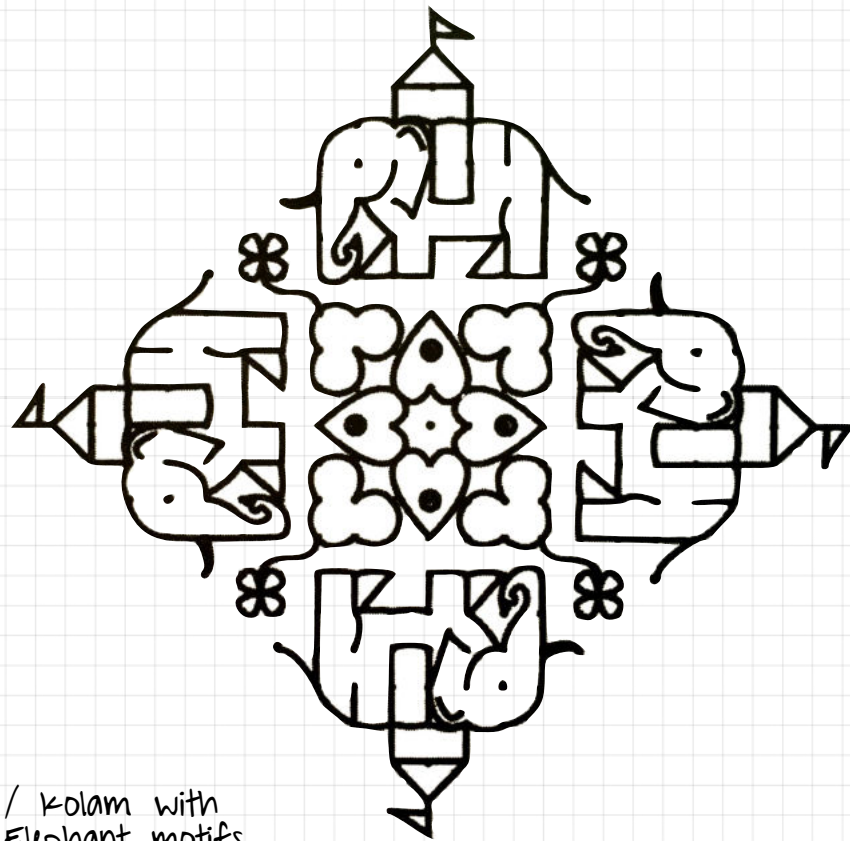
/ Pongal Kolam
drawn for Pooja



/ Republic Day Kolam



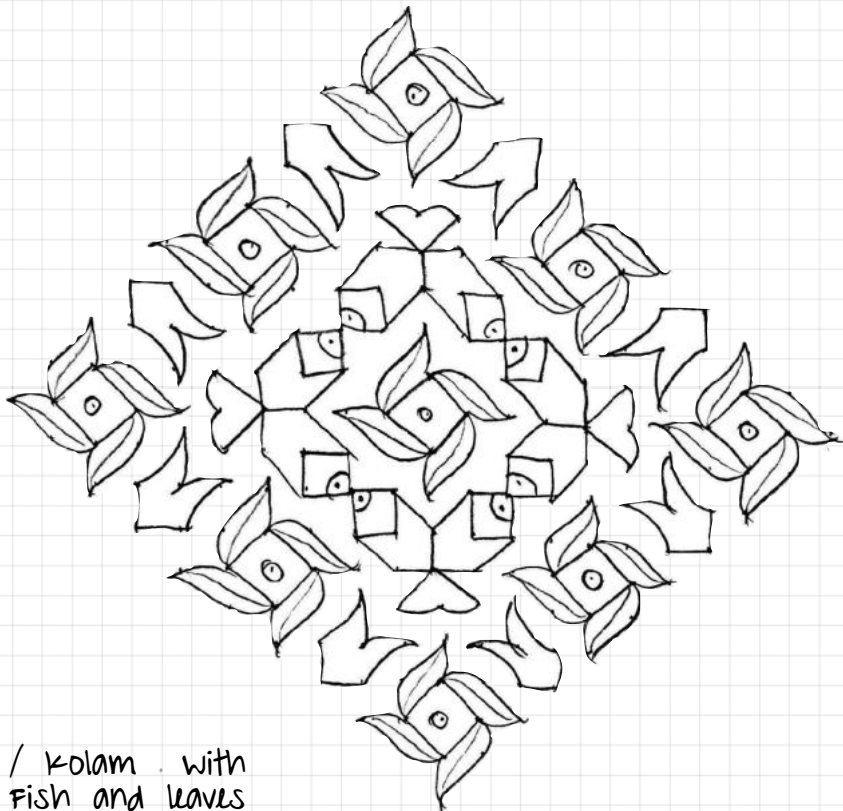
/ chariot Kolam



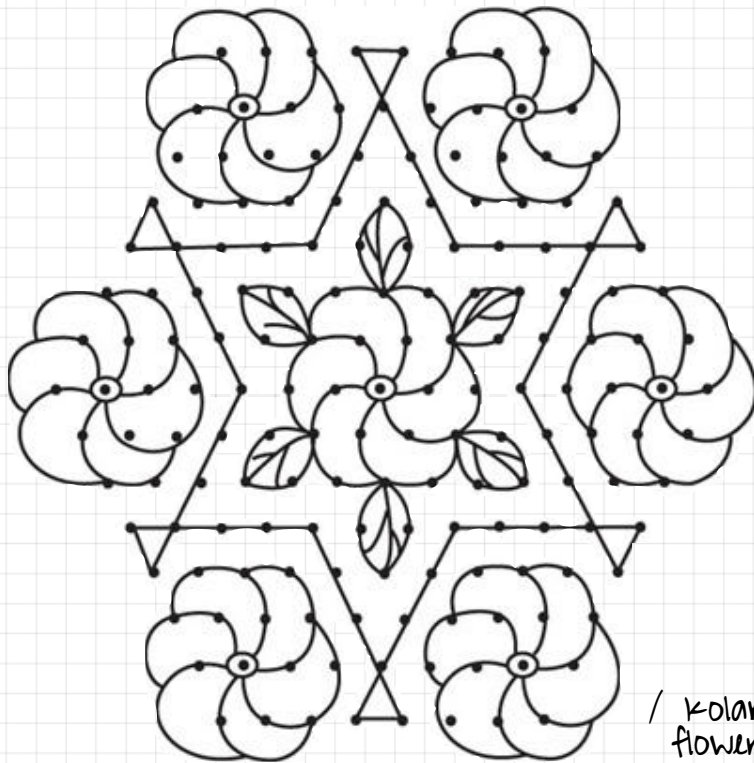
/ Kolam with
Elephant motifs

KOLAM I MOTIFS

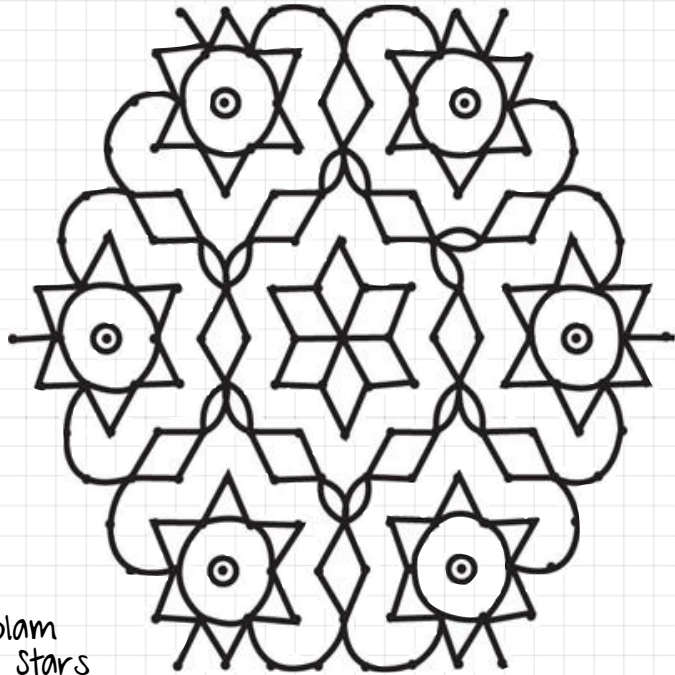
The patterns range between geometric and mathematical line drawings around a matrix of dots to free form art work and closed shapes. In the Kolam patterns, many designs derived from magical motifs, abstract designs and philosophic and religious motifs have mingled together. Motifs may include fish, birds etc which reflects the unity of man and beast. Sun, moon and other zodiac signs are also used.



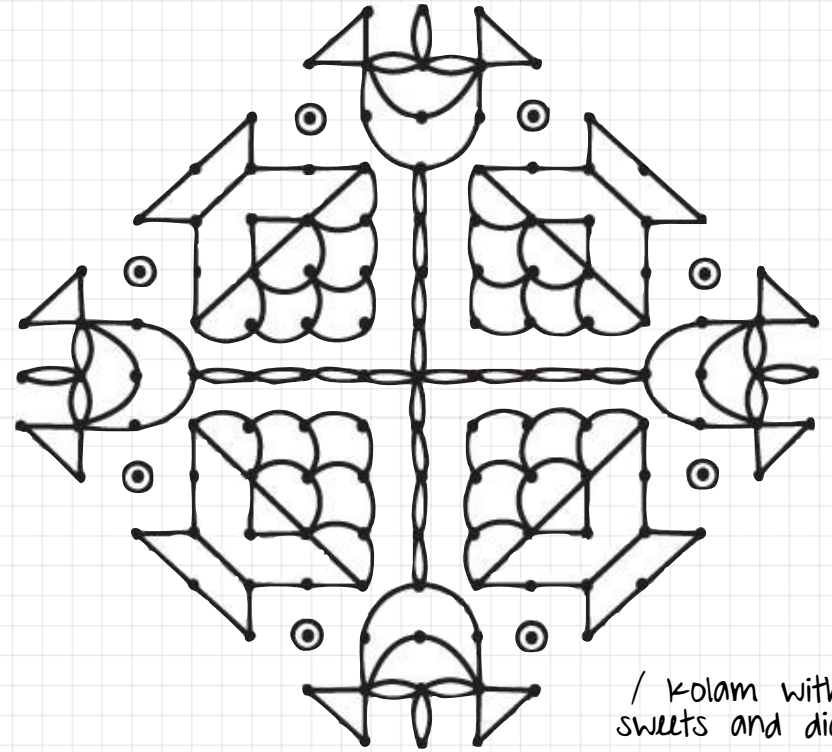
/ Kolam with Fish and leaves



/ Kolam with flower motif



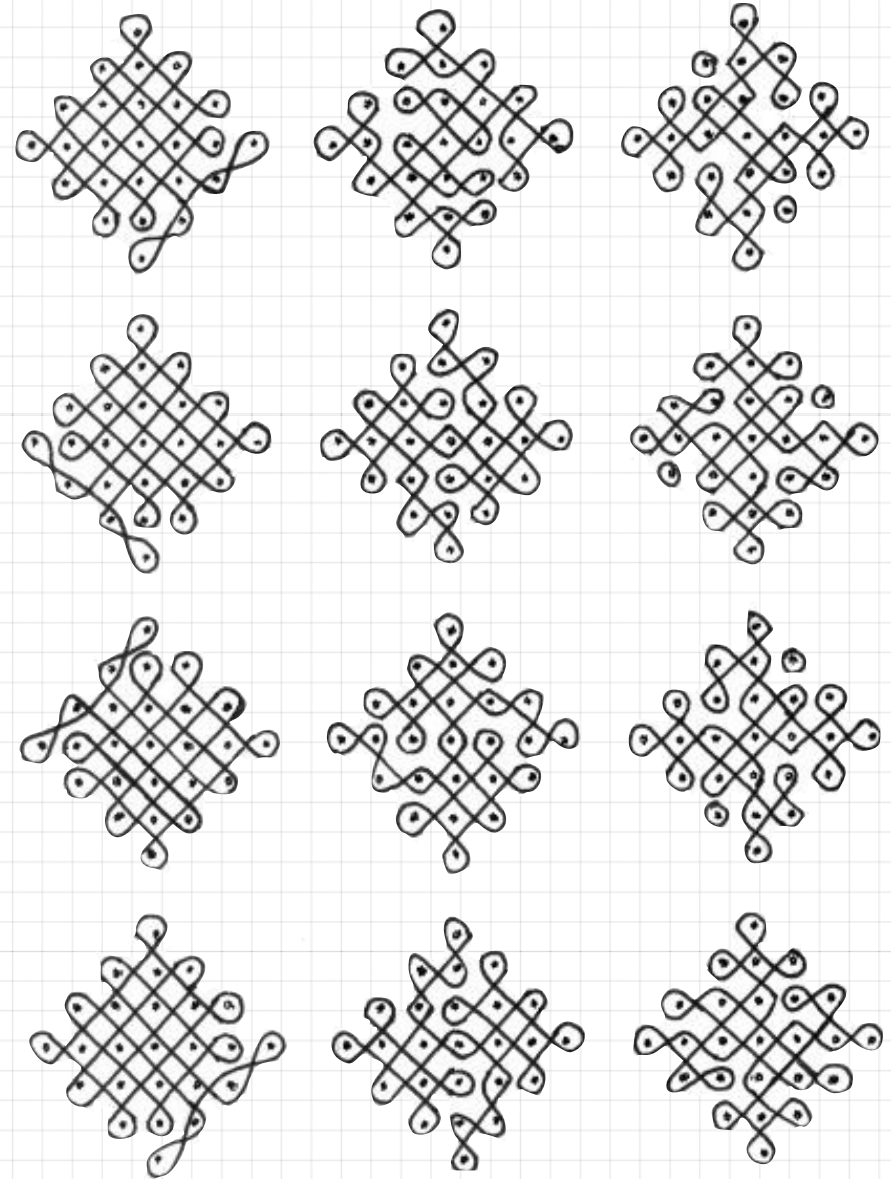
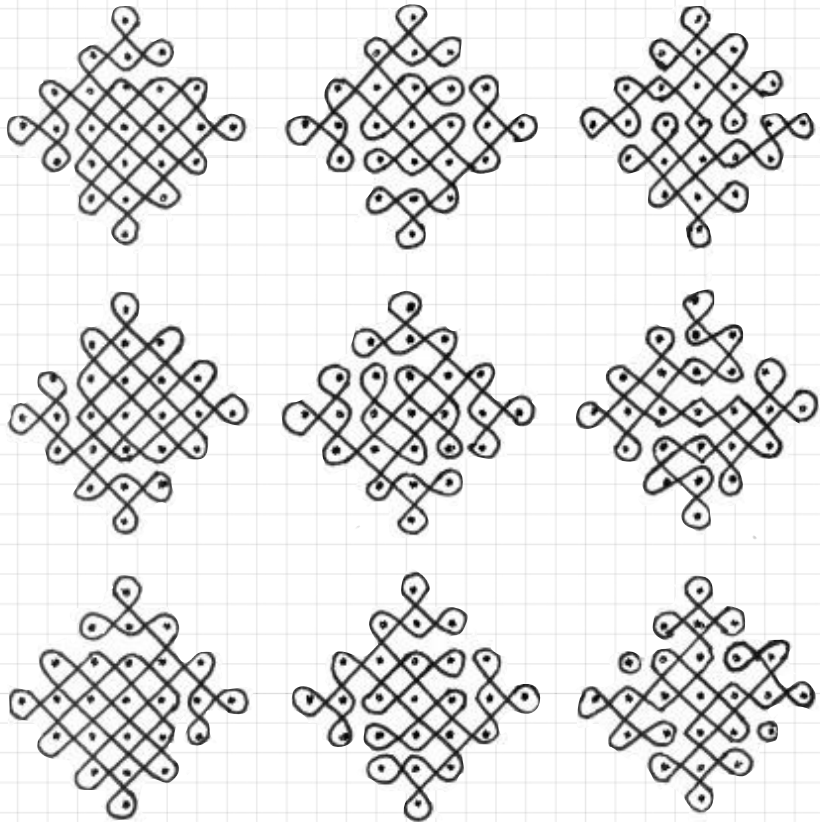
/ Kolam
with Stars



/ Kolam with
sweets and dia

KOLAM I VARIATIONS

The image shows 28 symmetrical patterns produced using the same 1-7-1 array of points. The sequence plays a major role in the variations





79

13 / JAN FIFTEEN

3.00 pm
Connemara Library, Egmore

THE KOLAM ON THE FRONT STOOP AND
THE RED DOT ON THE FOREHEAD

The Kolam is
the pottu of
the house and
the pottu is
the Kolam of
the forehead.

Vijaya Rattakudi Nagarajan as mentioned in Threshold
Designs, Forehead dots and menstruation rituals :
Exploring time and space in Tamil Kolams.

" Abounding in everyday life is the visible ritual marking of the red dot floating in the middle of Tamil women's foreheads, the pottu as it is called in Tamil, or bindi in Hindi or Sanskrit. It took to many years to realise that these two kinds of ritual designs are more intimately connected. They form a kinship with each other; they mirror and echo each other as parallel ritual expressions of complicated and nuanced concepts, such as auspiciousness and inauspiciousness, purity and pollution. The visual presence of the pottu, Kolam and other forms of ritual traces of worship indicates that a space has been initiated for ritual purification."

KOLAM | POTTU

80



/ Paper mache artifact of a young tamil girl making a Kolam sold at the exhibition.

14 / JAN SIXTEEN

4.00 pm
Valluvarkotam Exhibition, Nungambakkam

The patterns have swept into jewellery, block prints etc. Meera Pandit, who owns the label 'Mayuri' says :

"These Kolam patterns are intricate and beautiful. They represent the Tamil tradition and immediately the product becomes culturally rich"

TAMIL CULTURE



/ Bell keychains with painted Kolam patterns sold at the exhibition



/ sarees and jewellery using Kolam as motif



/ jigs for Kolams
sold at the store

15 / JAN SEVENTEEN

4.00 pm
Giri Stores, Mylapore

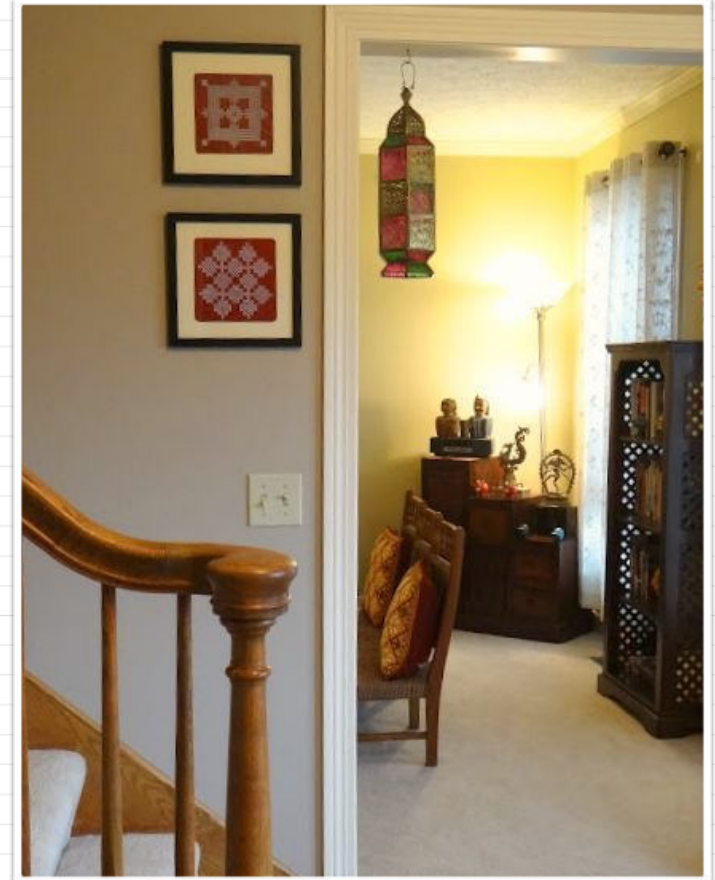
Shopkeeper at the store :

"Some people don't have time to make the Kolam but believe in the auspicious quality of the Kolams, so they come and buy these jigs so they can make it faster. Stickers are mostly used because it's a one-time thing. If some days you don't have time to make the Kolam, the sticker is still there. Also the sticker can be used in many parts inside the house also. Books many people buy. They want to learn or they have a function coming and want to make something different on their doorstep."

ARTIFACT



/ Kolam stickers
sold at the store



/ Kolam as a pattern,
motif and an artifact



/ Kolam on a paper

16 / JAN EIGHTEEN

5.00 pm
Tea Kada (shop), Thiruvannamiyur

I stop by a Tea shop to have a cup of tea and biscuits. The biscuits are wrapped in a paper which has a Kolam drawing made by his wife. She says :

"It is like Time-pass, I saw this on that
*points at the house adjacent to the
shop* doorstep yesterday, so was trying
to see if I can make it.

But I think I went wrong somewhere.

I make very good sikkv Kolams.

I am trying to learn these kind ones
now"

PUZZLE



/ Amma sketching
a kolam on paper



KOLAM | WHAT THE HAND SAID

Where the hand goes,
the eye follows;
Where the eye goes,
the mind goes;
Where the mind goes,
is the heart
Where the heart is,
lies the reality of being

Bavhinia Adriana,
The mirror of the gesture: Ancient Dance Treatise





/ Drawing Kolam

KOLAM | THE STORY

The divine is invoked everywhere in India, even on the ground through drawing or painting with rice paste or vegetable and mineral based coloured powders. In Tamil-Nadu, these drawings are called kolam and bear testimony to the richness of Indian graphical patrimony as well as to the extraordinary feminine creativity. Auspiciousness is not only contained within temple walls; mountains are the abode of gods, and animals and birds their vehicles. Trees, plants, and flowers are means not only to worship them but also to symbolise their vegetal incarnations.

Tamil-Nadu, essentially rural, celebrates the sun, the cattle, and the snakes. This culture owns "totemic" trees and addresses god in the temple as if he was a king, dressing him with great pomp, pampering and feeding him, and in the evening, putting him and his queen to sleep with entertaining renditions of amorous verses. It is a society where every village offers appeasing rituals to the territory guardians, and a culture still deeply imbued with the worship of heroes to whom villagers of the past venerated by erecting memorial stones. It remains a region where the roads overlap the circuits of ancient temples where poets described human emotions according to the country's five landscapes: hills, desert trays, forests, the seaside, and fertile plains.

It is there in the southern most part of the Indian peninsula that just before sunrise, women of all communities and beliefs draw on the ground. On the earthen lanes of a village or on the carefully swept pavements of a city, female hands create with the tips of their fingers, patterns that invite the divine to protect the house and the family. With the ground as their canvas, hands as the instrument, rice paste or rice flour and coloured powders as paint, the kolam draws the viewer into a world of divine symbols and

mystical attributes. The designs vary in accordance with current events or the Hindu calendar. Their silhouettes change depending on the day, sometimes figurative, sometimes sinuous, they become linear on Tuesdays and Fridays.

It is an anonymous feminine world of powder images, which border on calligraphy, geometrical diagrams, and fine embroidery. Behind every drawing, we read the story of a woman, of a mother and her daughter, and the memory of a culture through time. The kolam is a tradition passed down the generations from mother to daughter, but each household keeps a notebook where the most difficult patterns are recorded. The girls learn by watching, and later they will create new patterns with dexterity and speed.

Because the kolam blossoms at daybreak and celebrates the Earth and the link that human beings maintain with her, I always compared it with a visual chant that resonates silently in the hearts of the passers-by like the painted prayer renewed every day, not unlike the Suprabhatam, Sanskrit hymns chanted early in the morning to awaken the gods. The graphic recurrences similar to the priest's incantations, punctuates the passing of time. By repeating motifs or lines, we try at all costs to suspend the present moment. The hand tunes the breath on the delicate weft of dust which becomes a pattern and immobilizes time.

An early hour stroll through the Tamil streets captivates the ears much before the eyes can distinguish the surrounding world. Unnoticed, objects welcome daybreak and suggest their presence by assuming a rhythmic sound form. A faint whispering of the straw brooms and the splashing of water succeed the rustles of night-insects and the croaking of crows.

In the early hours, women come out of their homes

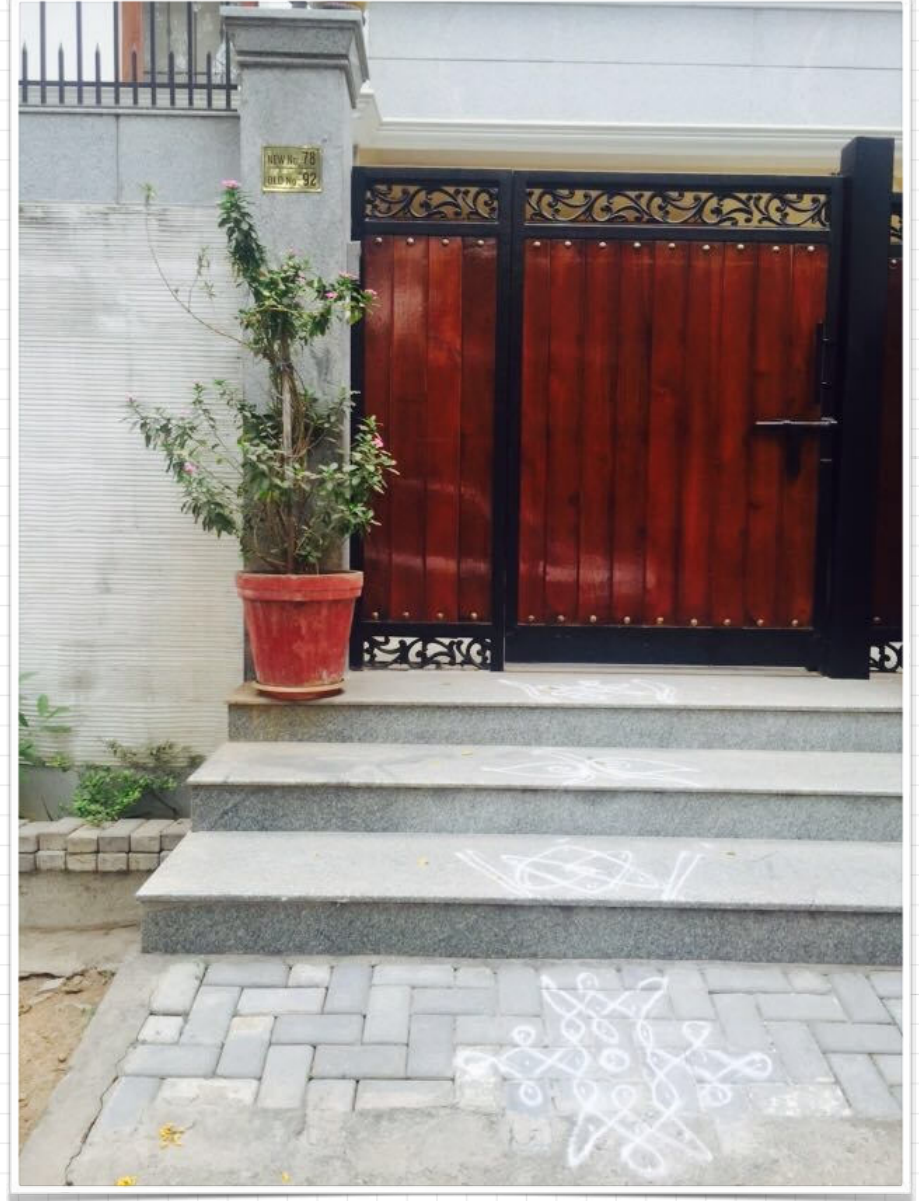
with a powder-filled container. They call out to one another and one can feel the glances which gauge the spot where they will draw. Bodies bend over at right angles; the wrist induces a slow pace to the fingers, which drop down at regular intervals, discreet rice flour or quartz powder marks called pulli in Tamil. It is on this perfectly symmetrical dotted canvas that gradually, flowers, birds, divinities, or geometrical diagrams come to life. Other women stretch out long parallel lines in a fluid and broad movement, almost as if brushing the ground. The swaying of the arms and of the whole body, the clear and wavy gesture freezes the lines that never seem to be willing to unite with the earth. When they finally land on the floor which has become powerful by the radiance of their whiteness, they elude by their modest playfulness the malevolent forces and protect the walker as well as the house members.

To me, the diagrams seem like geometric metaphors used to illustrate the idea of time in Hinduism, a periodical cycle where creation and destruction alternates rhythm of the universe and human life. How not to be fascinated by these geometrical arabesques? They are intimately linked to a life style and a culture which has always exalted the divine by drawing beauty out of disorder. The graphical exuberance akin to Tamil writing is disarming as we stroll through the streets of a city or the narrow lanes of villages at dawn.

If there is music in these lines, then it is similarly joyful and sensual. It glides under the steps of early passers-by, under the wheels of cyclists or handcarts pullers or still under those of small vans carrying away tiny grains of the rice dust as many unveiled intentions. The surrounding noise gets louder and louder as morning breaks, throbbing trucks, piercing rickshaw horns, bicycle bell ringing, sputtering mopeds, insistent calls of chai sellers, the day has begun and the busy anthill is a whirl of activity.



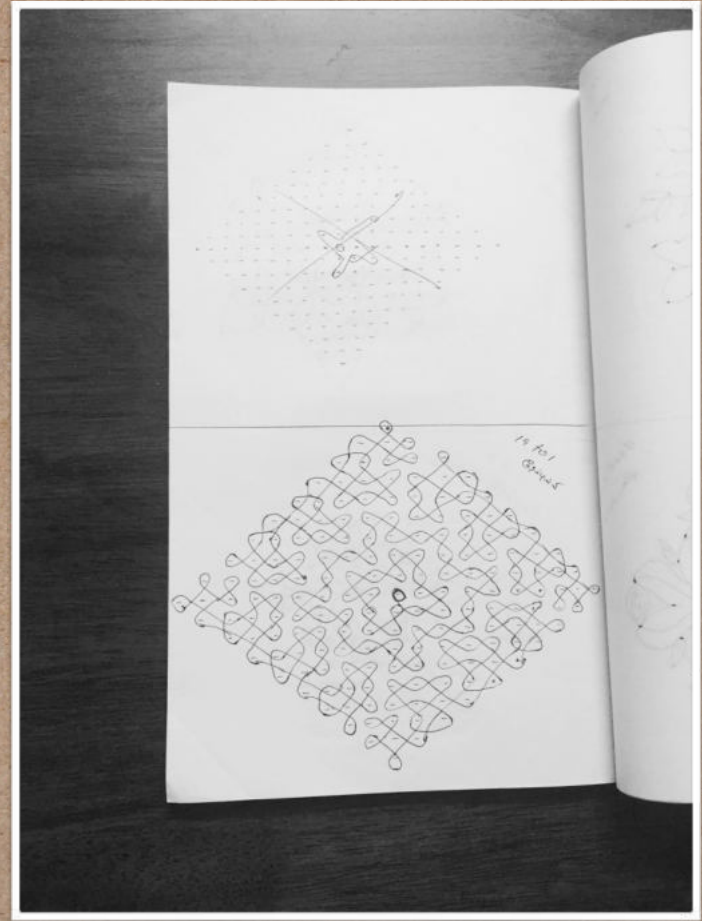
/ Drawing Kolam



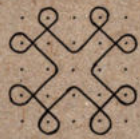
/ Kolam at multiple steps



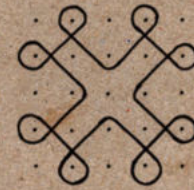
/ Kolam in front of a shrine on the compound wall



/ Amma's sketch book



2015



KOLAM
DIARIES