

A TIME FOR CHANGE

Chuvarchithram - The traditional Kerala mural

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Kerala has a rich tradition of ancient murals. The state holds the second place in having the largest collection of archaeologically important mural sites, the first being Rajasthan. The tradition of painting on walls began in Kerala with the pre-historic rock paintings found in the *Anjanad* valley of *Idukki* district which have been dated archeologically from upper Paleolithic period to the early historic period. From these simplistic rock paintings a highly evolved art form developed with strictly governed principals and rules for composition such as proportion, pose and background.

Just as the paintings of *Ajanta* are considered unique for their colour and form, the murals of Kerala stand out for their emphasis on beauty, clarity and symmetry. No other mural tradition has been able to match the linear accuracy of Kerala murals. It is a distinctive school of painting that recreates the grandeur, grace, ecstasy, agony and joy of the human drama in the grand manner of the great Indian tradition of wall paintings. The roots of the extant mural tradition of Kerala could be traced as far back as the seventh and eighth century A.D. The emphasis on drama, gestures and use of elaborate costume parallel *Kathakali*, *Koodiyattom* and other classical theatrical art forms of Kerala.

Using familiar iconographic symbols, a single large complex picture most often narrated a story from the epics or the *Puranas*. The stylized depictions of gods and goddesses were not just fanciful representation but were drawn from their descriptions in the invocatory verses or 'dhyana shlokas'. The backdrops of these paintings were transformed by highly stylized flora, fauna and other aspects of Nature. The artists had the creative skill to fill every available space with as many details as possible. It is interesting to note that the style and colour of these large scale pictorial depictions of Hindu mythology rendered in the temples and palaces of monarchs and wealthy patrons were later adapted by the Syrian Christian church of Kerala to bring alive the life of the savior to the newly converted.

According to ancient texts there were three broad qualities assigned to superhuman, human and sub human beings., pictorial characterization of all characters were rendered through this system of the *gunas*. Even colour was symbolically used, for the characters, following the triple division of all reality into *satva* or balanced; *rajas* or active; and *tamas* or inert. These murals, which have mostly survived intact for centuries, have been painted entirely with natural colours made of mineral and vegetable dyes, extracted from leaves, roots, earth and stones. The vivid saffron-reds, brilliant ochre's, sap greens, ivory white, gem blue and soot black from the artists palette capture and dramatise the inescapable green , brown and blue of a land drenched in myth and mystique.

The resilience of its organic paint can be seen as an analogy for the ongoing communication of the iconography of this art form with the common malayalee. Like its mother tongue Malayalam, Kerala's very own visual language also evolved with the economic, social, religious and cultural life of Kerala. It may sound clichéd to say that in the mega leveling of every thing different to conform to the global standard we definitely have a few lessons to learn from our history. The mural art of Kerala is invaluable for understanding the state's art and cultural tradition that was not averse to incorporating the best of the diverse cultural and aesthetic influences that it came into contact with from overseas trade connections and from across the border even as it enriched itself it retained its unique cultural identity.

In the annals of Indian art history Kerala murals remained relatively anonymous as it was confined to the walls of palaces and temples. There it rested complaisantly on its highly refined aesthetics derived from hereditary skills which seldom broke new ground unless it came into some outside contact. As its patronage dwindled, toward the middle of the 19th, it failed to keep up with the changing world both in Kerala and outside. The decadence of this tradition began in the late 18th century and gained momentum with the Mysore invasion (1766-1782) of Malabar and the take over of the Travancore temple trusts by the British Resident (1811). A final blow was inflicted when prints of Raja Ravi Varma's (1848-1906) painting became publicly available and gained popularity among the masses. The days of the stationary mural were over and paintings were on the move from the printing press to the family pooja room.

REINVENTING TRADITION

Mural art in the 21st century

To reinvent tradition one must also take an active interest in the conservation of the keystone of that tradition. The visionary zeal of Sri Mammyiyur Krishnan Kutty Nair breathed new life into this dying art as he brought murals out of temples and palaces and took them directly to the public through his students. His novel idea to transfer mural paintings from walls to asbestos sheets helped to retain the original technique while speeding up the process for change. He envisioned a revival where tradition and modernity could meaningfully interact to produce a new genre responsive to contemporary sensibilities.

What follows is the first group show of paintings on canvas done by nine artists who are the leading practitioners of the neo- mural style today. These artists belong to the first batch of students who trained in the traditional Kerala mural style under the *Gurushishya parampara* at the Guruvayoor Institute. The skill that they developed as students of the traditional system is equivalent in rigor to the skill that other contemporary artists have gained from a western academic art school regimen. In their daunting task of bridging the past and the present they retain the style, colour scheme, and pattern that give Kerala murals its distinctive identity even as they follow their own creative individuality by not sticking to the prescribed texts. What we see here is not a mechanical fusion of the old form with a new content, as critics claim, but an organic rebirth resulting from a meaningful intercourse between traditional iconography and themes that express the world of the artist in his time. They are essentially gazing at the new world with new eyes looking through the collective conscience and memories of past generations. Is that not what every generation does to renew itself, to keep in step with the times even while not losing touch with its roots?

CHITRAKAAR

The Artists' Task

The Mammyiyur Krishnan Kutty Nair Trust was set up in 2005, by students belonging to the first batch that passed out from the Guruvayoor Mural Institute. In homage to their guru, these nine artists banded together after 16 years of search and self discovery, in the hope that they could keep alive the priceless national treasure which was handed down to them by their Guru. They have opted to become career artists as well as teachers in leading art institutions and smaller art groups where they hope to pass on the skill their teacher generously transferred to them.

THE EXHIBITION

SITA-Bhoomi Putri and other stories

Sita, Bhoomi putri, Ravana putri, King Janaka's daughter, wife of Rama. The stories about her fill an epic in which she is the heroine, no less in stature than her great husband. To replenish the creative source of these nine artists the curator suggested Sita as the protagonist. Each artist came back with different visual

interpretations of stories/episodes from various periods of her life. In these 27 paintings we see sensitively rendered facets of a woman of substance who is part of our collective Indian psyche as consummate daughter, wife and mother. The story of her life is universal and contemporary in relevance; she is every woman. Here is the story of an ancient goddess conveyed through the ancient style of the Kerala Mural tradition, but retold with a difference, by the modern muralist, for his generation.

The theme of the show does not rest complacently or romantically on the mythology of Sita. The plight of Sita is also the plight of our planet. Sita loved unconditionally, forgave readily and was the epitome of patience. Sita inherited these qualities from her mother Bhoomidevi or Mother Earth. When she could no longer bear the cruelty of her fate she begged her mother to take her back into her womb leaving behind her husband and sons never to return. Now its time for her mother to react to all the callous treatment we humans are meting out against her. We need to act collectively and keep her from leaving, before she decides she's had enoughThis exhibition with a cause has a message for all who care to listen. Awaken to the cry of Gaia, the earth spirit, before it's too late.

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