



KERALA MURAL ART AND ITS TRADITIONAL PROCEDURES TO PAINT ON WALLS BY USING NATURAL MATERIALS

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Cite This Article: Sana Ashraf T, "Kerala Mural Art and Its Traditional Procedures to Paint on Walls by Using Natural Materials", International Journal of Interdisciplinary Research in Arts and Humanities, Volume 5, Issue 2, Page Number 4-8, 2020.

Abstract:

Mural paintings are usually seen in the walls and ceilings of temples and churches. Earlier Mural forms used natural materials and vegetative colors such as herbal dyes, fruits juices, and also chemicals obtained from stones and roots etc. Five colors are majorly used red, yellow, green, black, and white. Painting brushes are prepared by taking from grass and bamboos. Wooden utensils are used to mix colors and roller stone is to grind the mudstones to make pigment paste. Wall for traditional murals is done in three stages. The brick wall is a plastered mixture of lime and clean sand, different treatments are applied to get a perfect wall for drawing. Yellow outlining is the primary step in sketching which after followed by a color filling. The complete space of art is occupied with different elements and overall painting is symmetrically presented by using components. Each character depicts the mythological stories of god and goddesses and coloration for different characters based on three symbolism. Traditional mural paintings are mostly prepared in past decades at ancient palaces and temples of Kerala. Life of mural painting art is practiced and followed by generations with the support of mural institutes.

Key Words: Kerala, Mural, Natural Materials, Lime and Clay, Symbolism & Mythological Story

Introduction:

It's been 2000 years ago Indian temples and palaces are following colorful painting artworks to attract and highlight the art and culture. Kerala mural painting art is one of the famous. 'Mural' means wall derives from the Latin word 'Murus', Mural painting means wall painting, in Kerala's traditional name, is given as 'Chuvarchithrangal'. Primarily art form brought on rock carvings. The paintings which belong to the Mesolithic age, the first painting of mural art found in marayoor rock at Idukki district, Kerala. Historians had a different opinion about this painting period but supposed to be from the upper Paleolithic to the early historic period. In those period paintings are done without any wall preparation. The paintings of the 8th century A.D. found in Tirunandikara cave walls are considered as one of the best paintings. The painting of Gajendramoksha belongs to the 18th century in Krishna Puram palace and which is an excellent one in mural painting history.

Most of the notable mural works of Kerala were done between the 15th and 19th centuries; it was influenced by ancient Dravidian rituals like Kalamezhuthu and Patayani. But mural painting got its beauty in elements, principles, sharp finishes in shapes and outlines. Mural painting is always expressed as a stream from Ajanta Ellora caves paintings. Those paintings were done between 2nd BC and 5th or 6th century A D. Buddha stories as a mostly painted mural at Ajanta caves and it got influenced by Indian subcontinents. Features like elephant and lotus are mostly seen in Buddha paintings, which we can find similar in mural paintings and other southern region paintings like Thanjavur, Iepakshi, and Badami with different styles. Kerala had a mural painting from 8th century A D, but many pictures are lost. Yet remaining paintings are protected by the archeological department of Kerala. It said that agencies protect the paintings by adopting various chemical methods and analysis and other useful methods. Some paintings are completely ruined. As per the government survey, mural paintings are in three phases. Early phase painting is seen in Tirunandikara, Kanthalloor, Padmanabhaswamy temple, Tiruvampady temple, Citral cave temple. The middle phase painting can be seen in Mattanchery palace, Vadakkumnathan temple, Thiruvancikulam, Pisarikavu, Elamkunnappuzha, Mulakkulam, Balussery, Kottayam, Tazhztangadi, Vasudevapuram, Thirkodittanam. In the late phase, paintings can be seen in Akaparambu church, Kanjoorpalli, Thiruvalla Church, Kottayam cheriya church, Chepadu church and Ankamaly church and also Christian churches of Kottakal, Pundareekapuram, Thriprayar, Panayannoorkavu, Lokanarkavu and also in Padmanabhapuram palace, Guruvayoor, Panayannarkavu, Karivelapuramalika, and Kovanithalam.

The story and features of mural painting are based upon the Vedic mythical stories. The themes of god and goddesses are prescribed to 'Dhyanaslokas'. Context is selected from mythologies, Lord Vishnu's different incarnations, lord shiva, and other gods and goddesses are commonly described in paintings. Dhyanaslokas are hymns describing the deities, it is a kind of ichnographic prescription for mural painters in Kerala. Most of the stories are inspired by epics Mahabharata and Ramayana and mythical scriptures. Spiritual, divine, and dharmic characters are depicted in shades of green. Those influenced towards power and materialistic wealth [Rajasic] is painted in shades of red to golden yellow, Evil and wicked characters are generally pointed in black, God [Tamasic] are represented using white. The human or god figures are stylized and decorated, facial expressions

or gestures are corresponding with the classical theatrical performance of Kerala such as Koodiyattam and Kathakali. Features drawn like wide-open eyes, wide and thin curvy eyebrows, elongated lips, round nose edges, long ears, round face, round breast, curvy and fleshy body with classical appearance. Most of the body features are covered with ornamentation, crowns with flower petals at hair are common in all paintings, heavy neckpiece, half-covered breast, and skirt for a female character, the dhoti for a male character. Eyes are the emphasized part of the mural face. In the 20th century due to the downfall of feudalism, much traditional art and culture got disintegrated. Later people recognized the value of mural painting and established a study center for learning mural painting with the help of Mammiyoor Krishnankutty Aashan.

Methodology:

Preparation of Natural Colors and Brushes:

Colors used for traditional painting are obtained from nature, five colors are used are is called Panjavarnas black, green, red yellow, and white which is extracted from mineral and vegetable, and also those sources are resistant to lime. Minerals like stones are collected from river banks and leaves as the vegetable source. White is nothing but a lime wall portion itself.

- **Yellow ochre [kaavimanja] and Red ochre [kaavichuvappu]:** Yellow ochre is a natural mineral consisting of silica and clay owing its color to an Ironoxy hydroxide mineral, goethite, and traces of gypsum or manganese carbonate. Red ochre also obtained from ground stones, hematite is a more reddish variety of Iron oxide and is the main ingredient of red ochre. Both have an almost similar method of extracting pigment and after collecting which is treated several times decant to remove impurities. Stones are made a paste by using traditional manual grinding stone [Ammi]. The water content is completely drained by filtering and followed pigment extraction into a paste by using cotton fabric, finally dried in the shade place. Color pigment is mixed with Neem glue, as a binding agent before applying to the wall.



Fig - 1 Red ochre pigment preparation

- **Green:** Green pigment is extracted from Indigo Ferra Tinctoria [leaves of Neelamari] which is collected, squeezed and this extract is used after drying up to be mixed with Eravikkara [Garcinia Morella] for obtaining the perfect green pigment. At the time of painting instead of Indigo Ferra, another pigment green is used Chinese blue, mixed with gum and green can be prepared.

Before applying green color, Copper Sulphate wash is used as a base on walls where the green color expected areas this to avoid the absorption of leaf juice into lime. Neem glue [kara of Aryaveppu] which is another adhesive gum added to the pigment in a careful ratio. It helps paint to stick on the wall and yellow wash also can be done.



Fig - 2 Extraction of Green Pigment

- **Black [Karupu]:** Black is a nonmineral color that is used for outlining. The pigment is collected as carbon soot. The thick cotton wick is prepared and immersed in gingelly oil [ellanna] which is filled in the lamp and flamed. Terracotta plate or vessel is placed over the lamp and after a certain period black carbon soot gets accumulated inside the vessel which is scratched out and stored. Later it mixes with water and neem glue before painting.



Fig - 3 Preparation of Black Pigment

- **Natural Brushes:** Brushes are handmade where hairs are taken from Arrowgrass or Elephant grass [Iyyampullu/ kora Pullu/Kuntalipullu]. A bunch is collected from river banks and dipped in boiled milk water, a later small bunch is dropped on the floor to assort good and soft quality hairs at the same level. Which is tied up with thread and inserted into a bamboo hollow stick used as the handle of the brush or Kamukin Thandu that is also used in place of bamboo? The tip of the hair is sharpened with a knife or blade. These types of brushes give very soft fine lines when it is wet, to make bristle it can be dipped in paint and keep for dry. Later it once washed again it retains to the same soft and fine texture. So that paint doesn't get sticks on the brush ever after wash and used again for the next day painting.

Techniques Used for Painting the Wall:

Wall Preparation:

In the ancient period lime plaster and mud plaster were used to as wall coat for mural painting in India. The colors are chosen only lime resistant and materials which are not sensitive to alkalies were only used. Wall preparation is a long process and basically, three steps are involved in the final finish. The first process is to prepare a brick or stone wall if that is already prepared then removal of coating above the brick is taken after. Clean sand and lime mixed in ratio 2:1, water solution for mixing sand and lime contain jaggery, oonjalvalli[extract of *Cissusglauca*], and juice of myrobalan. Oonjalvalli is a long climber with large leaves, it works as a glue binder, and even Kulamavu leaves [*Persea Macranta*] also used as gum in the ancient period. This mixed paste is kept for cooling up to 1 week till the time of plastering. After cooling, lime is diluted and apply on walls. First plaster coating is given roughly and thick layer to make wall smooth finish and keep dry for one day and the process of plastering is repeated until surface thickness up to ½” to 1”. The second coat of plastering is applied with a mixture of cotton about 1kg into lime and sand ratio of 1:2, Oonjalvalli also added. Cotton is used because of its high absorbency property of dyes so that the quality of color can be maintained. An also it is good in fiber strength which protects the plastering from shedding off. Cotton is crushed by using a manual grinding stone. After the coating wall remains one day for dry.

In the second stage, the wall is allowed to dry and smoothened. Boiled Kadukka water [*Chebulic Myrobalan*] is poured in lime in ratio 1:3 ratio, which is more adhesive and applied on the wall. In the third stage, it's about the wash of the wall to make more smoothen, lime, and tender coconut water are mixed in a 1:3 ratio. It is purified through a cotton cloth and applied on the wall in both vertical and horizontal directions alternatively about to 25-30 times with a brush and made the thickness of the washed wall is of Tamarind leaf. This process creates more brightness and whitish to the wall background and the same white space is used as a white pigment in painting areas. Several weeks take place to finish this process to reach the final wall and now it is ready to paint.

Painting Methods:

- **Lekhya karma** [drawing with crayon]: This is the first drawing used by pencil so that redrawing also can be done if changes required by easy erasing. An efficient artist can draw by his imagination. Pictures are drawn of familiar articles and figures were painted in teamwork which is preferred for doing high volumes. To correct modes and proportions, a central balance line called *Brahmasuthra* and two lateral lines called *Pakshasuthra* are drawn on the postures with divisions once a basic pencil drawing completed then crayons are used to draw roughly above it, the line can be erased accordingly by cloth.
- **Rekha karma** [line drawing with brush]: This is another stage of line drawing upon the initial lines using a naturally made brush with red ochre color.
- **Varnakarma** [Application of colors]: Coloring the human figures depend on the role of characters, tints of paint are applied in the beginning and for color separation, and dark shade color is used against light color and vice versa.
- **Vartana karma** [Shading]: To assign ups and down or formal distinctions was the purpose of shading, there are three types of shading
 - *Pathra Vartana* - Lines in form of leaves
 - *Harika Vartana* – Stumping
 - *Vindu Vartana* – Dots
- **Lekha karma** [Final outlining]: After applying paints the picture is given a black outline to enhance the curve shape, features of characters and elements. Red color can strengthen if suggested. The black outline is given very thin and narrow as final detailing.
- **Drika karma** [Finishing Touches]: In the final stage artist make sure any retouches or richness of paint to be added or not and conclude the work process.

Influence of Traditional Mural Painting in Modern Art and Craftsmanship Using Synthetic Colors:

For protecting the paintings, the archeological department advised recreating the work with acrylic colors. Oil paints are not advisable because it cannot be removed easily by acid wash and also acrylic coloring is a very easy method to paint, time consumption, dries quickly, water-resistant, and availability of raw material in the market. Later retouch also can be given upon it for retaining the art. In present temples, resorts, tourist



Fig - 4 Natural handmade brush



Fig - 5 Line drawing by using brush

places, etc..Mostly we find mural painting with an acrylic application that gives brighter, glossy texture on the wall and other materials.

Kerala mural painting had influenced other craftsmanship widely, in the ancient period mural painting lived only on walls. Whereas now this typical traditional art with the support of synthetic paint made birth to many artists in craftsmen ship. Previously counts of mural artists were very less in Kerala, presently we find enormous artists doing mural works. Modernization had influenced this art form which shifted the platform of walls to others like textiles and crafts. The most attractive and unique parts are features, elements, limited color combinations, and story narration. Even though many concepts we see in mural painting, mostly adapted and commonly seen character is lord Krishna. Present generation artists, collaborate traditional touch of features with contemporary or abstract form, and recreate unique modernism in mural painting. Amural painting artist K.R.Babu who is very famous and three times winner of Lalitha Kala Academy for portraying his modernized mural painting. He says that “Art is a platform where changes always noted when recreation happens through traditional touch”. Through modernized paintings, he narrated many beautiful features with the touch of mural elements.



Fig - 7 Mural painting on wall done with acrylic colors by artist K. R. Babu and team



Fig - 9 Mural painting on garment by using fabric paint

Figure 8: Mural painting on textile and crafts by artist Usha Chandran Punnath

Kerala Kala Grammam Craftsmanship Center's is very famous in Kerala where many artisans' works are showcased like mural painting on terracotta vessels, coconut husks, shilpakar clay jewelry's, textiles, wooden accessories, etc and this creativity are always appreciated in the market. This idea generation encouraged many housewife ladies to give potential in learning mural painting and to start-up freelance. Usha Chandran Punnath, a housewife mural painting artisan who is an expert in executing her mural modernism in textile and crafts. She says that “Interest and patience are more important for mural artists. While doing a painting I keep myself away from other jobs and it takes me to the other level of mental relief”. In her work, home furnishes are highlighted with the beautiful transformation of mural features to natural motifs.

Conclusion:

Ancient art forms have not died in the modern world, the new generation artistes never forget to maintain aesthetic parentage skills. This wonder full vitality and intensity of art retained as a heritage of Kerala. In the 20th century, Guruvayoor and Aranmula Devaswom Board launched a study center for learning mural painting under Mammiyoor Krishnan Kutty Nair Aashan. This followed the Gurukula learning pattern and still,

this center is working. Later many institutes started teaching mural painting like Sree Shankaracharya College at Kalady, etc. These institutes are giving birth to many talented young artists to retain the sole of mural painting in upcoming platforms. Mural painting had survived many centuries only on account of its long-lasting lime wall, natural pigment colors, unique features, limited color combinations which always noted its aesthetics excellence of durability. Learning ability count, strength had increased from past Gurukula pattern to online learning pattern. It proved that with proper guidance, interest, passion, and patience which can retain any traditional art forever.

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