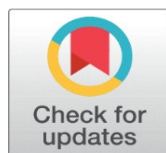


# EMERGING TRENDS IN CHUARCHITRARANGAL - TRADITIONAL MURAL ART OF KERALA

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## DOI

[10.29121/shodhkosh.v5.iICETDA24.2024.1337](https://doi.org/10.29121/shodhkosh.v5.iICETDA24.2024.1337)

**Funding:** This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

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## ABSTRACT

The south Indian state of Kerala is home to charismatic murals painted between 9th and 18th century CE and are proudly known as Chuarchitrarantal. These paintings adorn the walls of Shrikovil – the sanctum sanctorum of Hindu temples all over Kerala that narrates stories of God and Goddesses. Kerala murals have largest collection of secco, based on ancient Indian mythological stories.

This study aims to identify, analyse and document the emerging trends in Kerala Mural Paintings. Also, it will make an effort to forecast the future trends. Primary data of renowned artists and secondary data of ancient murals will be referred for the study. 7 temples which hold the best condition murals will be included in the research.

The medieval era (9th to 12th century CE) saw the height of this art. The entry of European art into academia in the 19th century, hampered the local art and Kerala murals began to face a significant decrease. Because of the realistic finish of European painting and the use of new convenient oil paints, local traditional art styles were no longer recognized and respected. The Kerala mural tradition had already faded into history by the end of the 1900s.

Currently Kerala has a decent number of professional muralists who work extensively in conventional and contemporary methods. This art is being revived steadily. New generation artists are experimenting to keep up with the pace and preferences of new world. Getting inspired from various genres, creating novel styles yet keeping the conventional value intact has become a major trend in Kerala mural art.

**Keywords:** Emerging Trends in Chuarchitrarantal- Traditional Mural Paintings of Kerala

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Kerala holds the greatest treasure of hundreds of mural paintings painted between 9<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century CE. This art is proudly known as 'Chuarchitrarantal' in native language and 'Kerala Mural Paintings' nationally. These murals adorn the walls of Shrikovil- the sanctum sanctorum of Hindu temples all over Kerala narrating stories of God and Goddesses. The largest collection of Kerala murals coincides with emergence of the Bhakti movement between 15<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century CE (Dr. M. Nambirajan and Dr. S. Suresh) The medieval era (9<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> century CE) saw the height of this art. The entry of European art into academia in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, hampered the local art and Kerala murals began to face a significant decrease. Because of the realistic finish of European painting and the use of new convenient oil paints, local traditional art styles were no longer recognized and respected. The Kerala mural tradition had already faded into history by the end of the 1900s. (Dr. M. Nambirajan and Dr. S. Suresh) Rise of 20<sup>th</sup> century marked new beginning for Kerala murals with commissioned restoration of existing murals. (telephonic interview with ASI Thrissur artist Suresh on 17/2/2023). Kerala Murals which stood neglected for quit sometime and are now again started gaining value.

Chuarchitrarantal are yet to be researched in depth. Although few empirical research studied about its history, material preparation, methods of execution, illustration styles, iconography along with digital photographic documentation of

existing murals. This paper focuses on the unexplored aspect of current social status of this art and styles developed by new generation artists.

## 2. MURAL TRADITION

Murals are any expression done on a permanent surface using any permanent medium. Humans are blessed with this supernatural ability of expression. Mankind gradually developed this ability and discovered various ways to express his thoughts. He learned through experience that most efficient way of transferring information was through paintings. Cave paintings can be found all over the globe as human wandered from place to place. The most ancient cave paintings were done during the upper palaeolithic period, which was during the last ice age i.e. 40,000 to 10,000 BCE. By this time homo sapiens had migrated from Africa to Asia to Europe and therefore cave art sites can be found all over the globe. These single or dual coloured cave paintings evolved along with humans and took form of more defined, composed and thought over artworks which were executed in various mediums. The Mesopotamia and Indus valley civilisations show figurative paintings. Ancient Egyptian civilisation had more stylised two-dimensional symbolic murals. The ancient Greek culture murals were most intricately detailed and had developed the fresco technique for mural art.

India also has a rich treasure of murals. Indian murals are distinct from other mural styles as they showcase use of brilliant colours, complex patterns and themes with religious significance. Ajanta caves are the oldest site of cave paintings discovered till date. Ajanta frescos date between 2<sup>nd</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> century CE. Every ruling dynasty in the Indian subcontinent commissioned mural paintings to be done on temple walls. Each dynasty had its unique style of illustration. Kerala murals stand out amongst all other mural styles because of its brilliance artistry, high detailing and use of texture for rendering. Kerala's murals follow fresco-secco technique. In this technique the wall to be painted is treated with limewater and various other natural ingredients. Motifs are drawn and painted with natural pigments only when the wall is completely dried after the treatment. Kerala Murals are considered the finest among various murals found worldwide. They have largest collection of secco, based on ancient Indian mythological stories.

## 3. METHOD

The research aimed at discovering the current and emerging trend in Kerala Mural Art. This Qualitative research obtained primary and secondary data from the interviews, visits observation and text analysis. 3 Seven temples (table 1) were studied to understand the aspects of Kerala murals through, high-definition photographers printing in the secondary source (A Ramchandran book, Kerala Murals ASI book). These temples were selected on the bases of century and visual condition of the murals. Work of five professional muralist (table 2) of various generation were studied through their social media accounts to obtain a clear comparison between their illustration style. To get deeper insights focus groups were also observed again through their social media accounts and commercial websites.

**Table 1**

Sr. no	Century (of Murals)	Temple name	Location
1	15 <sup>th</sup> century	Kaliamballi Devi Temple	
2	Early 16 <sup>th</sup> century	Thriparyar Rama Temple	
3	16 <sup>th</sup> , 17 <sup>th</sup> and 18 <sup>th</sup> century	Mattanchery Palace	
5	16 <sup>th</sup> century	Thodikalam Shiv Temple	
6	18 <sup>th</sup> century	Padmanabhapura, Palace	
7	19 <sup>th</sup> century	Panjali Ayyappankavu Temple	

**Table 2**

Sr. No	Artist Name	Qualification	Occupation/ Style of work
1	K.K. Warriar	Gurukul style student of temple artist C V Balan Nair	Veteran Kerala mural artist and founder member of Guruvayur Dewaswom Institute of Mural Painting, Kerala
2	Dr. Saju Thuruthil	PhD (Kerala Murals) Masters in Fine Art (M.F.A.) Five year National Diploma in Mural Painting from Guruvayur Dewaswom Institute of Mural Painting, Kerala	Well known muralist Founder of Mind and Art Gallery, Kerala. HoD Dept. of Painting Sree Sankaracharya University of Sanskrit, Kalady, Kerala

3	Prof. Krishnakumar	Five year National Diploma in Mural Painting from Guruvayur Dewaswom Institute of Mural Painting, Kerala	Principal Guruvayur Dewaswom Institute of Mural Painting, Kerala
4	Manikundan Punnakkal	Master of Fine Arts, Five year National Diploma in Mural Painting from Guruvayur Dewaswom Institute of Mural Painting, Kerala	Renowned cement relief muralist
5	Babeesh Anela	Five year National Diploma in Mural Painting from Guruvayur Dewaswom Institute of Mural Painting, Kerala Fine arts Diploma, Calicut	Renowned free lance artist

Thematic and discourse analysis of collected data was conducted and transcribed for better understanding.

#### 4. RESULT

Veteran author and artist A. Ramchandran's book Painted Abode of Gods -Mural Traditions of Kerala provides an in-depth analysis of the colours, styles, and themes of numerous mural paintings. According to him, the murals of Kerala reflect the influence of nearby mural traditions such as Paithan, kalamkari, Andhra Pradesh's leather puppets, and Nayaka painting. This is due to the fact that the commissioned artists were skilled in a variety of mural styles, having created some of the final indigenous murals in India. The development of Kerala murals is comparable to the state's Kathakali theatre. Kalamezhuttu is a ritualistic drawing done on floor in Kali temple using powdered colours. A total of five colours namely Black, red, yellow, green and white obtained from burnt husk, mixture of turmeric and lime, turmeric, dried leaves of manajdi tree and rice powder respectively are employed to create composed, symmetrical and aesthetically appealing figure of the deity. This image of Goddess Bhadrakali is erased immediately after the pooja worship. (figure ) Kalamezhuttu is the source of inspiration for the dimensions, color scheme, and religious image drawings in Kerala murals. Kerala murals have a unique style that is a result of the confluence of traditional wall painting conventions with these ritualistic paintings of indigenous heritage.

Chuarchitraranga also uses panchavarna- five colours (Black, Green, Red, yellow and white) made from locally available natural ingredients. Black is obtained from soot, Green is made from the extracts of a native plant known as Eravikkara. Red from the minerals, such as powdered turmeric and lime. Turmeric powder or finely powdered laterite stones are used to produce yellow and Lime is used to make white. The wall preparation is also a tedious process where mixture of tender coconut water, lime and natural glue is used to give several layers of wash.

Kerala murals are drawn on the outer walls of the main shrine and hence utilize the space as it is. Kerala architecture style is a bit different and so not all panels and pillars of the shrine are equal in dimension. However, murals were done in continuity without minding the shape and dimension of the wall. The themes and compositions painted seldom left any breathing space. Though continuity is generally maintained there is no set direction of painting the stories. Depending on the available space narrations flow vertically or horizontally. Independent stories frequently overlapped in one panel. (reference photo). The roundness of the figures bear similarity with the Hoysala sculptures. Depending on the illustration technique, these murals can be categorized into two groups: those that are based on Kalamezhuttu folklore and those that adhere to the wall painting customs of the Chola, Chalukya, and Hoysala eras. (A. Ramchandran 177)

Another characteristic of Kerala murals is that linear patterns are used to showcase intricate detailing and bordering the figures and forms. This linear border separates and defines the forms on painted on the same pictorial plane. This style of bordering figures with black or darker tones lines for defining the forms and rendering tonal variations are found in ancient folk arts like Madhubani, kalamkari and medieval wall paintings of Lepakshi (A. Ramchandran 55)

Two traditions of lines are identified . The classic one show fluid brush work beneath dark coloured calligraphic thin lines. The second tradition of defining contour with lines of even thickness is characteristic of western Indian miniature paintings. (A. Ramchandran 54,55)

Kaliamballi Devi Temple was adorned with murals in 15<sup>th</sup> century CE. The paintings in this temple show unusual iconography of the presiding deity. One can notice a monochromatic colour theme using variations of yellow, Indian red and black, which is unlike to the rest vibrantly colour blocked murals. The painted wall panels are packed with figures

and forms building the story in foreground and flora fauna in the background. The borders of figures and forms are done in the classic style. (figure )

Tripayar Rama temple of Trissur was painted with murals in early 16<sup>th</sup> century CE. Murals here portray well developed style with proportionate figures and brilliant blend of colour shading. The narrated stories here also interlace each other on the same panel like in Kaliamballi devi temple. (figure)

Located in Kochi, Mattancherry Palace, popularly referred to as the Dutch Palace, features panels of varying sizes that depict around 28 distinct stories. The murals exhibit outstanding artistic skill with their flawless shading, intricately linked motifs, and use of linear borders to divide the shapes. Green coloured spiral lines make an effort to separate the overlapping stories.

The murals of the Dutch Palace are divided into three phases by artist A. Ramchandran in order to show the progression of paintings from high to low execution level.

This style bears affinity to the murals in the Tripayar Rama temple, where the emphasis is on forms and colors than subject flow or sequencing. The second phase of Mattancherry murals are those painted in the seventeenth century. This phase's illustrations are proportionately larger and adhere precisely to iconography. The arrangement makes the main image the centre of attention, drawing the eye away from smaller shapes and figures. With this approach, a scene of people taking part in the main deity's "darshan" in a temple Shrikovil is created. The larger-scale depiction of the deity is directly influenced by Kalamezhuttu. A different style of outlining made with continuous spiral line in green colour is prominently seen here.

Murals painted in 18<sup>th</sup> century form the third phase in which influence of European art can be traced easily. Use of perception and realism in murals point out the artists efforts to cope up with the changing taste of people. Flora and fauna painted in the back ground are typically European. These murals surely show fall of artistry and skills.

Todikalam Shiva Temple is located in North Kerala and has the most complex architectural structure with many pillars and unusual shaped panels painted in 16<sup>th</sup> century CE. Murals painted here have complex composition as the artists reconstructed the stories according to the available space. Illustration style is same as in Tripayar temple.

Padmanabhapuram Palace was built by King Marthanda Varma in 18<sup>th</sup> century. This palace was utilised as family shrine of Lord Vishnu. Murals painted here are simply divided into small and large painting panels. This was possible as the walls of palace had large plain surface. All the murals here have prominent outer borders; this is seen nowhere in murals of previous century. The illustration style is of inferior quality when compared to Dutch palace murals.

Panjali Ayyanppankavu Temple was decorated with murals in 19<sup>th</sup> century CE. By this time European paintings and Deccani miniature paintings had developed popularity. This popularity forced the muralists to include new elements. Trees painted in the shasta hunting scene show direct influence of miniature style. The birds and animals look more like zoological specimen rather than stylised forms, but figures still follow the mural style. As a result, extreme contrast is seen in styles which integrate well. The background of few panels is left blank in solid colours. The quality of lines and pigments is too inferior. (pg 445,446 abode)

KK Warriar was amongst the three artists who knew the authentic method of Kerala mural paintings. They were well versed with wall and pigment preparation. They had also studied the various texts written on mural execution. K.K. Warriar's all artworks are classic. They do not show any elements influence of European or Deccani style. He stuck to the indigenous style of mural paintings. Dr. Saju Thuruthil and Prof. Krishnakumar who have learned mural paintings in Gurukul style, where in strict iconography and color schemes are followed. Dr. Saju's murals show experiments with various mediums and composing single figures instead of narration. Artists now make use of new materials and tools like canvas boards, acrylic and oil colours, fine single haired brushes. Empirical observations show that artists have developed their own unique styles keeping the roots of traditional methods intact. Single figures of deities with additional complimenting elements are widely created on commercial demand. Cloud motif from Thangka paintings are used in every Kerala mural painting today. They use texturing or plain shading techniques to achieve contouring. Artists are well versed with both traditional and unique self developed methods and styles.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Present generation artists study fine arts along with Kerala Mural Art. This formal art education has developed their aesthetic scenes and made them aware of the rich tradition and history of Kerala murals. This has helped them to develop unique individual styles while keeping the traditional methods intact. Trend of painting single figures has

emerged as it is then easy to appreciate and interpret the idea or story. Old murals left no space in the background and therefore were complex to interpret. Today's liberal society allows artists to explore and draw their own imagination. Another emerging trend is to recreate the master murals in one's own style of interpretation. People have started appreciating the Kerala murals creating scope for positive developments.

### **CONFLICT OF INTERESTS**

None

### **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

None

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