

Pictorial Analysis of South Indian Kalamkari with Special Reference to the Ancient Indian Aesthetics (Iconography and Shadanga)

Dr. Pragya Pathak¹, Prof. Dr. Ritu Johri²

¹Assistant Professor (Guest Faculty), Dept. of Fine Arts & Painting, Jai Narain Vyas University, Jodhpur, Rajasthan

²HOD, Dept. of Fine Arts & Painting, Jai Narain Vyas University, Jodhpur, Rajasthan

Abstract:

This study explores Kalamkari paintings as a distinctive extension of Indian temple art, focusing on their structural features, narrative traditions, and integration of ancient Indian aesthetic principles. Historically, Kalamkari functioned in both devotional and performative contexts, portraying Hindu narratives through large textile hangings imbued with iconographic conventions. The study highlights the synthesis of folk and classical elements and examines how artists invoked spiritual and aesthetic frameworks to situate Kalamkari within the broader tradition of temple mural painting. Through an analysis of iconography, rhythmic line work, and colour symbolism, the paper demonstrates how Kalamkari embodies Rasa and Bhāva, reflecting dynamic Hindu religious sensibilities. While partially conforming to canonical iconographic prescriptions, Kalamkari emphasizes metaphorical and expressive freedom, underscoring its role as both a sacred artistic language and a living cultural heritage. This synthesis positions Kalamkari as a significant medium for preserving religious narratives and temple aesthetics in a portable, richly symbolic textile form.

Keywords: Kalamkari, Indian Aesthetics, Iconography, Temple-arts, Shadanga

1. INTRODUCTION

Temples in India functioned not only as spiritual centres but also as hubs of art, literature, and performance. Sculptures, paintings, and architectures were seen as integral in Vāstu Shāstra, fostering deep interconnections with poetry, music, and dance. Temple murals, particularly flourishing during the Vijayanagara period in south India, served devotional, narrative, and historical purposes, depicting epics, saints, and social life. Kalamkari painting emerged as a portable extension of this mural tradition, decorating sanctums and aiding spiritual storytelling. These large fabric panels are intricately painted using a pen-like bamboo tool called a Kalam, and natural vegetable dyes. They typically depict scenes and figures from Hindu mythology and epics such as the Rāmāyana, Mahābhārata, various Purānās and local legends, showing gods and local protagonists in vivid gestures and colors. The art style is notable for its detailed outlines, vibrant yet natural colors, elaborate borders, and distinct iconographical precision, reflecting the rich spiritual and cultural heritage of the temple tradition. The temple hangings are not only artistic masterpieces but also important carriers of religious storytelling and community identity in Hindu temple culture. Main centres of Kalamkari in South India, are Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu. According

to Padma Shri Gurappa Chetty, in the context of religious scribes, there are mainly three styles: Palakollu, Srikalahasti, and Golconda (Andhra Pradesh). Although Masulipatnam is also a style, it is primarily based on the production of goods for the market. Thanjavur and Kumabkonam both were significant centers in past times (Tamil Nadu), but today only Thanjavur is remained for temple art activities.

2. FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY

Points for research methodology for this paper would involve:

- This methodology integrates empirical observation, textual study, and interdisciplinary analysis to comprehensively explore Kalamkari as temple art and cultural heritage.
- Qualitative and historical analysis focusing on Kalamkari textiles and related temple murals, examining iconography, narrative, style, and symbolism.
- Primary data collection through field visits to museums, temples, and workshops to document Kalamkari works. Formal and informal Interviews with artists and scholars.
- Secondary source review of scholarly literature on Kalamkari, temple murals, Hindu iconography, and Indian Aesthetics. Use of visual documentation and ethical citation throughout.
- Detailed iconographic and formal analysis comparing Kalamkari's figures, mudrās, colors, and composition with traditional temple imagery, applying Śaḍaṅga principles.
- Comparative analysis of Kalamkari and temple mural art for continuities and shifts in style and function.

3. GAP ANALYSIS AND REVIEW LITERATURE

Kalamkari paintings have been examined from multiple perspectives over time, primarily as a traditional art form. Scholarly discussions have often emphasized their commercial dimensions, such as decorative designs, technical processes of dyeing, and the narrativity of folk arts. However, unlike many other schools of traditional Indian painting, the South Indian temple hangings executed in the Kalamkari present a distinctive iconographic influence in their visual program (including story telling). Despite this uniqueness, they have received comparatively limited scholarly attention. The temple-hanging tradition is deeply embedded within the conceptual framework of Indian aesthetics, particularly the theory of Śaḍaṅga (the six limbs of painting), which provides the foundational principles for visual representation in classical Indian art. Yet, this connection between Kalamkari temple hangings and the aesthetic canons of Śaḍaṅga remains underexplored. A critical examination of these works through the lens of Indian aesthetic philosophy highlights not only their artistic merit but also their role as carriers of indigenous systems of religious thought, spirituality, and philosophical inquiry. Reconsidering Kalamkari temple hangings within this broader intellectual and cultural context is essential for reviving their legacy. Such an approach situates these textiles as reflections of India's deep-rooted knowledge traditions and underscores their enduring significance in the continuum of cultural heritage.

The previous study of literature firmly establishes Kalamkari painting as an extension and portable form of Indian temple mural art deeply embedded in the South Indian religious, cultural, and aesthetic traditions. This rich synthesis of storytelling, spiritual symbolism, and artistic mastery situates Kalamkari as a vibrant medium preserving and communicating Hindu iconography and temple aesthetics. These scholarly contributions provide a multi-dimensional understanding of Kalamkari's significance as temple art and its enduring cultural legacy. Scholars like Anna L. Dallapiccola, Lotika Varadrajana, Shakuntala Ramani,

Ananad Coomaraswamy, T. A. Gopinatha Rao, Jaya Appaswami, Kapila Vatsyayana, Ritu Johari and many more are the base of study in the paper.

4. OBJECTIVES

The objectives of the study are as follows;

- To study the historical evolution and temple origins of Kalamkari painting.
- To analyze the narrative and structural features of Kalamkari as an extension of temple sculpture and mural traditions.
- To explore the application of Indian aesthetic principles like Śaḍaṅga in Kalamkari art.
- To examine iconographic elements such as mudrās, postures, and symbolic motifs in Kalamkari in relation to Hindu religious art.

5. DATA ANALYSIS

5.1 STRUCTURAL FEATURES OF KALAMKARI

There are some significant points to elaborate the core features of Kalamkari temple hangings, given below;

5.1.1 Multifunctional Religious Cloths: Kalamkari textiles were produced in diverse forms, temple scrolls, Thombai (cylindrical canopies), banners, and flags, tailored to ritual and festive contexts (large-format works, sometimes up to 30 feet)

5.1.2 Narrative Illustration (Drishtānta Nirūpaṇa): The essence of Kalamkari lies in its narrative quality. Depictions of particular deities, along with episodes from the Rāmāyana and Mahābhārata, transform cloth into a visual scripture. Artists composed sequential episodes across panels, with borders framing the story. Even when incomplete, audiences could interpret omitted parts due to their oral familiarity (oral tradition) with epics.

5.1.3 Structure of Narrative Depiction: The cloth was generally divided into horizontal registers, with a central square or circular panel emphasizing the chief deity or episode. Surrounding scenes unfolded in sequence, sometimes focusing on a single episode or divine form. This structural clarity made the art accessible yet symbolically layered.

5.1.4 Inscriptions (Sulekha): Inscriptions in Tamil and Telugu, often placed along borders or within panels, served to label deities or clarify episodes. This practice, rooted in earlier mural traditions of South Indian temples, enhanced the didactic function of Kalamkari, guiding viewers toward significant narrative moments.

5.1.5 Symbolic Language: Bodily Gestures of deities (mudrās) and their symbolic attributes played a vital role in communicating meaning (e.g. the body postures, hand and leg gestures, mounts, hand holding objects). Inspired by Ajanta and further murals traditions, such speaking hands, gave life to the painted figures.

5.1.6 Artistic Invocation and Tradition: Every major Kalamkari work traditionally began with the depiction of the artist worshipping Ganesha, acknowledging the divine source of inspiration. As storytellers, artists drew upon epics and puranas, condensing them into visual form. Their creativity allowed one legend to be interpreted in multiple imaginative ways, resonating with Coomaraswamy's observation that tradition itself is a language of expression.

5.2 AESTHETICAL ANALYSIS OF KALAMKARI

Aesthetical analysis of Kalamkari temple hangings, can be divided into below points;

5.2.1 Fusion of Classical and Folk Elements: Temple Kalamkari represents a blend of classical refinement and folk vitality. While rooted in temple rituals and symbolic iconography, it also evolved as a popular storytelling medium in villages. Its dual nature, sacred yet accessible, allowed it to flourish in both sanctums and domestic devotional contexts.

5.2.2 Narrative and Performance Traditions: Narrative storytelling lies at the heart of Kalamkari. Closely linked to Rāmāyana and Mahābhārata traditions described by the scholars, it coexisted with music, dance, and theatre, creating picture-stories for communal and ritual use. Rituals of Goddesses like Gangammā, Mathammā and others further embedded Kalamkari into local performance culture.

5.2.3 Classical Refinement and Patronage: According to Shakuntala Ramani, earlier Kalamkari paintings leaned towards folk elements, while later works, influenced by temple and royal patronage, acquired greater classical sophistication. Examples in museums Salar Jung of Hyderabad (Figure 1), and modern contemporary style of recent times (Figure 2), demonstrate this shift through iconographic precision and symbolic depth.

5.2.4 Tradition, Symbolism, and Continuity: Ritu Johri highlights that folk and classical strands in Indian art are not separate but interactive. Folk motifs embody lived culture, while classical systems codify and refine them. Kalamkari exemplifies this balance, where motifs—lotus, conch, peacock, or Tree of Life, carry both spiritual symbolism and decorative appeal, ensuring continuity with innovation.

5.2.5 Cross-Cultural Influences: During the Deccan Sultanate, Indo-Persian aesthetics left a visible imprint on Kalamkari. Islamic block-printing techniques, arches, pillars, and cypress trees merged with Hindu symbolic imagery. This synthesis enriched kalamkari's vocabulary, producing a broader pan-Indian style that bridged multiple traditions.

6. ṢAḌAṄGA IN KALAMKARI

Just as in the murals of Ajanta (and further South Indian temple-murals), temple Kalamkari paintings reveal a deep religious orientation and a wide thematic range. Yet, unlike the contemplative serenity of Buddhist art, Kalamkari traditions embody the vibrant dynamism of the Hindu pantheon, infused with *rasa* and *bhāva*. To appreciate this fully, it is essential first to understand the Indian aesthetic concepts of Ṣaḍaṅga (the six limbs of painting). The Ṣaḍaṅga theory articulates six fundamental principles of art: Rūpbheda (differentiation of forms), Pramāṇa (proportion), Bhāva (expression), Lāvaṇya-Yojana (graceful composition), Sādṛishya (semblance), and Varṇikā-bhaṅga (the appropriate use of brush and colour).

6.1 Rūpbheda and Form Differentiation: Within the Ṣaḍaṅga system, alongside rūpbheda, the expression of *bhāva* has always been of prime importance. Every form must embody its essential truth. The Viṣṇudharmottara Purāṇa stresses the accurate and precise representation of figures (with *pramāna*), ensuring they correspond to the intended subject. The Śilpa Śāstras prescribe rules for both animate and inanimate forms, including postures, gestures, bodily inclinations, and various *mudrās*. Accuracy here signifies precision in line drawing, since line was considered the most effective medium for delineating form. Both form and colour constitute the basis of rūpbheda (Johri, 2020). Temple Kalamkari painting exemplifies this principle: every figure, whether animate or inanimate, is rendered in its natural disposition, through posture, gesture, inclination, dance gestures, or bodily expression. Supplementary motifs, trees, flora & fauna, and others, extend the narrative and enrich the central depiction.

6.2 Rhythmic Vitality in Scholarly Interpretation: In Kalamkari, the free-flowing line drawn with a pen forms the very foundation of composition. These renderings exhibit linear rhythm, often circular and ornamental, constituting a structural and symbolic core. The circularity and rhythm of line in Kalamkari are not merely aesthetic but also philosophical and spiritual. In Indian aesthetics, line is understood as Chaitanya (living energy of flux) not static, but ever in motion. The following scholarly observations are noteworthy;

- Kapila Vatsyayan linked the continuity and circularity of line with Indian concepts such as the Kālacakra, Nritya, Maṇḍala, and the Nāṭya Śāstra, interpreting them as metaphors of impermanence and vitality (Vatsyayan, 1997).
- B. N. Goswamy highlighted stylistic features of Kalamkari in its pronounced linearity, rhythmic curves, and flat perspective, reminiscent of classical mural traditions such as Ajanta, where rasa and bhāva underpinned the aesthetic vision (Goswamy, 2010).
- Ananda Coomaraswamy emphasized that curved lines in Indian art convey both visual delight and spiritual elevation, forming a cornerstone of its aesthetic. For Coomaraswamy, line and form represent not mere visual reality but symbols of unseen forces, Prāṇa and divine movement ((Coomaraswamy, 1918).
- Stella Kramrisch observed that the Indian artist was less concerned with anatomical realism than with the inner life force, with flowing and circular lines evoking vitality (Kramrisch, 1946).
- Heinrich Zimmer interpreted the dynamism of line and circular forms as symbolic of the cosmic cycle of time, birth, death, and rebirth—the rhythm of existence itself (Zimmer, 1951).

6.3 Bhāva and Lāvaṇya: Within this framework, bhāva signifies the emotive essence that animates form, while Lāvaṇya-Yojana ensures aesthetic grace beyond the limits of realism. Sādrishya (semblance) does not imply an exact replication of empirical reality but rather an experienced reality. Drawing on Leonardo da Vinci, Ananda Coomaraswamy argued that a figure is admired for its kinetic form infused with inner emotional expression (Coomaraswamy, 1918, p.68). Kalamkari exemplifies this through diverse mudrās, bodily movements, and nuanced gestures. The rhythmic lines of dancing figures frequently symbolize the flux of life itself.

Ritu Johri further emphasizes the interrelationship of rhythm and form underscoring that Kāla (time) underlies this flow. Both dance and painting embody temporal rhythm, Tāla in music and sculpture corresponds to pramāṇa (measured proportion, based on tāla and aṅgula). Flowing linear compositions in painting and sculpture thus visualize the eternal current of time, as reflected in sources ranging from the Sāṅkhya Sūtra and Yoga Vāsiṣṭha to the Mahābhārata and Upaniṣads. Even static figures in Indian art—Yakṣiṇīs, Nāginīs, Apsarās, Gandharvas, and Kinnaras, are imbued with bodily grace that suggests movement or dance, extending beyond the prescriptions of Bharata’s Nāṭya Śāstra (Johri, 2020).

6.4 Varṇikā-bhaṅga: In Kalamkari paintings, the principle of Varṇikā-Bhaṅga—mastery over pictorial materials—is embodied in the seamless, unbroken flow of lines. These lines, free of abrupt turns, awkward angles, or visible corrections, function like the effortless song of a storyteller, carrying mood (bhāva) with spontaneity.

The vegetable-based palette of Kalamkari imparts a soft luminosity. Dark tones such as madder red and indigo blue are layered to produce depth; while stippling (Bindujā) or fine line-work (Patravartanā) enrich otherwise empty backgrounds, techniques prescribed in the Citrasūtra of the Viṣṇudharmottara Purāṇa. Outer black contours are often softened with inner red or brown outlines, lending gentleness (Ramani, 2007). These associations to the spiritual vision of Indian religion. Each shade denotes a specific quality:

red for energy and fertility, white and yellow for sattvic purity and divinity, blue for cosmic vastness and Viṣṇu, green (a mixture of blue and yellow) for Hanumān, and black for demons and subterranean realms (Vatsyayan, 1997).

6.5 Ornamentation and Surface Design: Ornamentation constitutes another defining feature of Indian art. In Kalamkari, dense surface decoration offsets the absence of shadow or perspective. From Ajanta murals to early temple paintings, geometric borders, floral patterns, and animal motifs have served as integral elements. Much like modern art's deliberate stylization, Kalamkari privileges rasa over literal realism, accentuating selected features to evoke spiritual significance. As a ritual art associated with temple practice, Kalamkari fulfilled a shamanic function where symbolism was integral to Hindu iconography (Ramani, 2007).

6.6 Symbolism: Vasudev Sharan Agrawala noted that many symbolic motifs in Indian art derive from the Vedic worldview. In Kalamkari, elaborately adorned figures exhibit typological variations and recurrent motifs (description further given). Different sorts of Body postures (Bhangimās) Hand gestures (Hasta mudrās), foot positions (Pāda mudrās), and iconic attributes can be seen in Kalamkari as per literary descriptions.

Through its incorporation of the Śaḍaṅga principles—Rūpbheda, Pramāṇa, Bhāva, Lāvaṇya, Sādrishya, and Varṇikā-Bhaṅga, temple Kalamkari emerges not merely as narrative art but as an aesthetic, spiritual, and symbolic vision. In this sense, it resonates with the mural traditions of Ajanta while simultaneously anticipating aspects of modernist artistic sensibilities.

7. ICONOGRAPHICAL PARALLELS IN KALAMKARI

Kalamkari artists adopt iconographic elements with freedom, borrowing from canonical traditions but rarely reproducing them in strict detail. While textual injunctions prescribe exact attributes, gestures, and attendant figures, Kalamkari simplifies and stylizes these forms, emphasizing symbolic resonance rather than rigid conformity. Kalamkari thus reflects partial conformity, absorbing scriptural iconography but reworking it into fluid, dance-like, and decorative forms. The emphasis lies on metaphorical essence, serenity, dynamism, majesty, or cosmic balance, rather than literal textual accuracy.

7.1 Bhangimā (Bodily Postures): Standing: Abhaṅga (serenity), Samabhaṅga (balance/order), Tribhaṅga (grace/beauty), Atibhaṅga (fierce dynamism).

7.2 Pāda Mudrā (Foot Stances): Samapāda (stability), Vaiṣṇavapāda (divine movement), Vaiśākḥapāda (authority), Āliḍha/Pratyāliḍha (combat readiness), Maṅḍala (concentrated power).

7.3 Āsana (Seated Postures): Lalitāsana (ease/grace), Padmāsana (meditation/purity), Sukhāsana (tranquility), Vīrāsana (valor/discipline), Pralambapādāsana (royal majesty), Udarabandhāsana (ascetic control), Ardha Pariyaṅkāsana (cosmic repose).

7.4 Hasta Mudrās (Hand gestures): Hasta mudrās (hand gestures) are an essential part of Indian classical traditions—dance, sculpture, iconography, and ritual—described in texts like the Nāṭyaśāstra and Abhinaya Darpana. They are broadly classified as Asaṃyukta hastas (single-hand gestures) and Saṃyukta hastas (double-hand gestures), symbolizing emotions, concepts, and divine attributes.

7.4.1 Asaṃyukta Hasta (Single hand): Asaṃyukta hastas are given below; (Figure 3)

- Abhaya Hasta – Fearlessness, protection, blessing
- Varada Hasta – Boon-giving, generosity, compassion
- Vitarka / Vyākhyāna Hasta – Teaching, reasoning, dialogue

- Jñāna Hasta – Wisdom, meditation, spiritual insight
- Bhūmisparśa Hasta – Earth as witness, Buddha’s enlightenment
- Vismaya Hasta – Wonder, awe
- Sūchī Mudrā – Pointing, truth, warning
- Kaṭaka Hasta – Holding flowers/objects; adornment, feminine grace
- Kartari Hasta – Separation, conflict; holding weapons
- Muṣṭi Hasta – Fist, strength, force, wielding weapon
- Kapitta Hasta – Holding objects; devotion, divine energy
- Śikhara Hasta – Raised thumb; authority, weapon holding
- Modaka Hasta – Ganesha’s sweet offering; bliss, fulfilment
- Katyāvalambita Hasta – Hand on waist; modesty, ease, grace
- Danda Hasta – Straight arm; steadiness, discipline
- Gaja Hasta – Elephant-trunk form; vitality, force
- Lola Hasta – Gentle sway; grace, femininity
- Patākā Hasta – Flag-like; denial, worship, nature symbols

7.4.2 Saṃyukta Hasta (Double hand): Saṃyukta hastas are given below;

- Namaskāra Hasta – Greeting, respect, devotion
- Dhyāna Hasta – Meditation, inner peace
- Anjali Hasta – Prayer, surrender, offering
- Natarāja Hasta – Cosmic dance, rhythm, divine power

7.5 Other Attributes: Mounts, Weapons, Auxiliary symbols, Costumes & Accessories

7.5.1 Vāhana (Mounts or Vehicles)

- Saraswatī: Swan, Peacock
- Viṣṇu: Garuda (half man and half Eagle bird), other association with Shesh Naga (multi hooded serpent)
- Ganesha: Mouse, Lion, mystical beings
- Śiva: Nandi Bull, other association with Vāsuki serpent
- Lakṣmī: Owl, Swan, Peacock
- Durgā, Kalī: Lion, Tiger
- Kūrma/Yamunā: Turtle
- Gangā: Crocodile
- Indra: Airāvata Elephant
- Kārtikeya (Murugan): Peacock
- Kalī: Jackal
- Bhairava: Dog
- Kṛṣṇa: Cow, Chariot
- Rāma: Pushpaka Vimāna (fantastic aeroplane), Chariot
- Sūrya: Horse
- Matsya avatāra: Fish
- Other Goddesses: Fantastic creatures like Yālī

7.5.2 Ayudha (Weapons)

- Feminine: Śakti (lance-like spear), Heti (thrown weapon), Gadā (mace)
- Masculine: Amkuśa (elephant goad), Pāsha (noose), Śūla (pike-shaped weapon), Vajra (thunder bolt), Khadga (sword), Damda (sceptre), Triśula (trident)
- Androgynous: Bāna (arrow), Śamkha (conch), Chakra (wheel)
- Additional: Khetaka (shield), Bhālā (spear), Dhanuś (bow), Kripāna (short sword), Khatvānga (skull-topped staff), Paraśu (axe), Vajra (thunder bolt)

7.5.3 Auxiliary Symbols

- **Musical instruments:** Śamkha (conch), Ghamtī (bell), Bansurī (flute), Damarū (hourglass drum of Śiva), Mridangam (double-headed drum), Vīna (plucked-stringed), Karātāla/Jhañjha (cymbals)
- **Implements:** Agni (Fire), Darpan (Mirror), Hala (Plough), Kamandalu (Water-pot), Kartari (Scissors and Knife), Gadā (Mace), Kalaś (Vessels), Kuśa (Grass)
- **Flora and Fauna:** Peacock, Swan, Deer, Lion, Serpent, Lotus, Coconut, Bilva (bael fruit), Āmla (Indian gooseberry)
- **Other Symbols:** Morapamkha (peacock feather for Kṛṣṇa), Akśamālā (rosery), Chauri (wisk), Dhvajā (flag) Chhatra (umbrella), Kapāla (skull), Chnadramā (crescent moon), Modaka (sweet), Pustaka (sacred Book), Yajñānopavīta (sacred thread), Ata-Pātra (rice bowl), Khakkhara (ritual-Staff), Śruka (ritual spoon), Triratna (three jewels)

7.5.4 Costumes and Accessories

- Garments: Dhoti (long rectangular drapery), Antariya (lower garment), Uttariya (upper garment often drapery like), Katibandha (belt), Udarbandha (belt like cloth piece), Simha-vastra (draped under garment)
- Head gear and Hair style: Keshabandha (tied-hair), Dhammila (tied-hair), Jata-mukuta (hair crown), Karanda (dome shaped crown), Kirīta (tall pyramidal shaped), Mauli (cloth crown), Shirashtraka (helmet)
- Earrings: Karnāvali, Makara-Kundala, Shamkha-Kundala, Sarpa-Kundala
- Necklace: Graiveyaka, Hāra, Kaustubha, Niska, Vaijayantī Mālā
- Breast ornamentation: Chhannavīra (male), Kuchābandha (female), Shrivatsa (tattoo like symbol), Yajñopavita (sacred thread)
- Waistband: Kāncīdas, Mekhalā, Katibandha, Katisūtra
- Arms/Hands: Angad or Keyur (Armllets), Kankan (Bracelets), Angulvalaya or Mudrika (finger rings), Skandhmālā (Shoulder ornament)
- Feet: Pādavalaya, Nūpur (Anklets)

8. DEITIES IN KALAMKARI (ICONOGRAPHICAL DESCRIPTION)

Kalamkari paintings depict deities and goddesses by blending classical iconographic rules with artistic freedom, especially across Vaishnava, Śaiva, and Shākta traditions.

8.1 Trimurti: The threefold aspects of Brahmā, Viṣṇu, and Śiva embody creation, preservation, and dissolution, symbolizing Sat-Chit-Ānanda.

- Brahmā: Four heads, swan vehicle, Vedas, rosary, lotus- sign of creation and wisdom.
- Viṣṇu: Four arms, Garuda, conch, discus, mace, lotus- cosmic preservation.
- Śiva: Jātā, trident, drum, fire, crescent; with Nandi- dissolution and regeneration.

8.2 Ganeśa: Revered as remover of obstacles, Ganeśa appears in serene, dancing, and tantric forms.

- Śuddha Ganeśa: Bala (child), Taruna (youth), Nritya (dance), Prasanna (blessing), etc.
- Śakti Ganeśa: Lakshmi-Ganeśa, Ucchishta, Mahā, Ūrdhva, Pingala.
- Common postures: seated (Sukhāsana, Vīrasana), dancing (tribhanga), with Riddhi and Siddhi, riding a mouse.

8.3 Viṣṇu: As preserver, Viṣṇu's Daśāvātāra is a dominant Kalamkari theme.

- **Daśāvātāra:** Matsya, Kūrma, Vārāha, Narasimha, Vāmana, Trivikrama, Paraśurāma, Rāma, Balarāma, Kṛṣṇa, Kalki.
- **Other forms:** Ananta-śāyin (reclining on serpent), Viśvarūpa (cosmic form), Lakṣmī-Nārāyaṇa, Hayagrīva (horse-headed), Vaikuṅṭhanātha (four-headed) etc.

8.4 Hanumān: Depicted as a heroic devotee of Rāma.

- **Forms:** Pancha-mukhī (five-headed), Aśta-mukhi (eight-headed), Siddha Hanumān (meditative) etc.
- **Themes:** Flying with a mountain, carrying mace, dancing, or worshipping Rāma.

8.5 Śiva: Śiva's multiplicity is richly represented as following

- Śiva-Parvati/Umā maheśwara: benign family scenes.
- Bhairava: fierce, skull-adorned, with dog companion, multiple weapons. 64 Bhairavas exist.
- Vīrabhadra: wrathful avenger of Sati's sacrifice, with sword and bow.
- Natarāja: Lord of Dance (Tāndava, Ānanda-tāndava), cosmic dancer in cremation grounds and celestial settings.

8.6 Goddesses (Devī): In ancient Hindu texts, multiple narratives describe the origins of the goddesses along with their thousands of manifestations. Sarasvatī represents sattva-guna (purity and knowledge), Lakṣmī embodies rajas-guna (prosperity and material energy), and Mahākālī conveys tamasa-guna (destruction and dissolution). Furthermore, there are nearly eighty forms of the Goddess with detailed iconographic features (Gopinatha, 1985). In Kalamkari traditions, depictions of Sarasvatī, Lakṣmī, Durgā in her various forms, Mahishāsūramardini, and Kālī are especially widespread.

- Sarasvatī (Śakti of Brahmā): Four arms; lotus, swan, rosary, vīnā and Veda (wisdom, intellect, speech and music)
- Lakṣmī (Śakti of Viṣṇu): Four arms; Lotus, owl, gestures of assurance (Abhaya) and boon-bestowing or Varada Hasta (wealth and fortune)
- Parvatī (Śakti of Śiva): Four arms; noose, goad, sugarcane and bow
- Durgā (Collective power of all Devās): Eight or ten arms with various weapons (warrior form, Lion mount)
- Kālī/Chandī/Chāmundā (Fierce form of Durga): Four or more arms, various weapons, standing or riding over Śiva)
- Mahishāsūra mardini (Form of Katyayani Durga): Eight or ten arms bearing various weapons, Lion mount

8.7 Sūrya, Navagraha, and Ashtadikpāla: In Vedic texts, the term Aditya often refers to a group of seven or eight deities, later incorporated in Puranic traditions as solar deities associated with Sūrya. Temples dedicated to Sūrya include the renowned structures at Modhera (Gujarat) and Konarak (Odisha), and also the lesser-known Suriyanarkovil in Tanjavur (Tamil Nadu). Ancient sources further record sixty-four epithets of Sūrya. As the chief of all planets (Grahas), Sūrya governs celestial influence. In temples of South India, particularly Shaiva shrines, the Navagrahas are ritually enshrined in separate mandapas

(Pillared halls). According to Nagendranath Vasu (Survey of Mayurbhanj), it was the Magas or Scythian (Persian) Brahmins who first introduced the formal worship of Surya into India. (Rao, 1985).

The nine planets (Sūrya, Chandra, Mangala/Bhauma, Budha, Brihaspati, Shukra, Shani, Rāhu, and Ketu) are not merely astronomical bodies but revered as powerful deities believed to exert profound influence over both human destiny and cosmic order. Each planet is imbued with distinct energy, qualities, and symbolic elements governing different aspects of life. Among them, Sūrya, Chandra, Mangala, Budha, Brihaspati, Shukra, and Shani are physical planets, while Rāhu and Ketu, regarded as shadow planets (Chhāya-Graha), signify the lunar and solar eclipse nodes rather than tangible celestial forms.

- Sūrya: Chariot with seven or more horse, Lotus, discus, conch
- Chandra: Chariot drawn by deer, Mace, lotus, banner
- Mangala: Ram, Trident, mace
- Budha: Lion, Sword, mace, book
- Brihaspati: Elephant, Staff, book, rosary
- Śukra: Chariot drawn by horses or crocodile, Parasol, rosary, mirror, lotus
- Śani: Crow or chariot, Bow, trident, mace, emblem of justice
- Rāhu: Lion or chariot, Sword, shield
- Ketu: Donkey or chariot, Banner, sword, serpent, symbol of liberation

8.8 Ashtadikpāla (Guardians of the Eight Directions): The Ashtadikpalas are deities presiding over and guarding the eight cardinal directions. They represent cosmological order, balance, and divine protection.

- Indra: East/Airavata (elephant), Thunderbolt (Vajra), Bow
- Agni: Southeast/Ram, Flame, Spear
- Yama: South/Buffalo, Dance-posture, Noose
- Nairriti: Southwest/Donkey or Human-form, Sword, Shield
- Varuna: West/Makara (Crocodile), Noose, Water-vessel
- Vāyu: Northwest/Deer-Banner, wind-gem (Vayugola)
- Kubera: North/Human-Mace, Pot of wealth, Jewel
- Īshana (Śiva): Northeast/Nandi (bull), Trident, drum (Damaru), fire

9. OTHER BEINGS AND SYMBOLS

Among other motifs are depictions of divine, demonic, human, as well as mythical and imaginary beings, along with the Kalpa Vriksha (Tree of Life). Description is as follows;

- **Divine beings:** These include Gods, Yakṣas, Kinnaras, Gandharvas, Apsarās and others. In paintings, they are often portrayed as moving across the sky, sometimes with wings. They may also be depicted showering flowers, in postures of salutation, or engaged in acts of worship, either seated or standing.
- **Demonic beings:** Various types of Daityas, Dānavas, Rākshasas, and Rākshasis are represented, generally with fearsome and negative attributes. Their depiction is usually context-specific, depending on the narrative.
- **Human figures:** Human forms are often illustrated in devotional gestures, such as worshippers with palms joined in salutation, women carrying offerings or garlands, musicians with their instruments, dancers, or ascetics and saints engaged in spiritual activities.

- **Imaginary and mythical creatures:** These are composite beings that embody multiple animal forms and are represented with symbolic intent. Examples include Hayagriva (an incarnation of Viṣṇu), Kamadhenu, or Yāli.
- **Uchchaihshravā:** The seven-headed divine horse that emerged from the churning of the ocean (Samudra-Manthana).
- **Kāmadhenu:** The celestial cow, also born of the ocean churning, symbolizing fulfilment of wishes, prosperity, and motherhood.
- **Airāvata:** The four-tusked white elephant, another product of the ocean churning, and the vehicle of Indra. It signifies sovereignty, majesty, and Indra's imperial power.
- **Yāli:** In South Indian temple architecture, especially within the Dravidian tradition, the Yāli is revered as a symbol of strength, protection, and beauty. Frequently carved upon temple pillars, gateways, and toranas, the Yāli serves as both a guardian and an emblem of valour. It is sometimes depicted alongside or as a vehicle of deities. The Yāli is an imaginative hybrid creature combining the physical features of various animals such as lion, elephant, horse, serpent, and bird. It is primarily regarded as the guardian of temples. (Figure 4)
- **Kīrtimukha:** In Indian art and architecture, Kīrtimukha is regarded as a highly significant ornamental motif. It is essentially a facial design motif, frequently found on temples, toranas, gopurams, sculptural pillars, and atop divine images. Its appearance is fierce, terrifying, and leonine, with wide glaring eyes, bared teeth, and a gaping mouth. Often, it is shown devouring its own body. Symbolically, it embodies self-restraint, the destruction of ego, and the annihilation of evil tendencies. Within temple architecture, it is also regarded as an auspicious emblem signifying protection and well-being.
- **Kalpa Vriksha:** Within Indian culture and mythology, the Kalpa Vriksha or Kalpataru is considered a divine and wish-fulfilling tree. Like the celestial cow Kamadhenu, it is believed to grant all desires. According to the Purānas, it emerged during the cosmic churning of the ocean (Samudra-Manthana) and was thereafter established in heaven by the gods. Any wish made beneath this tree is said to be fulfilled, making it a symbol of prosperity, affluence, and complete well-being. Unlike ordinary trees of the natural world, the Kalpa Vriksha is conceived as a celestial or imagined tree. It is commonly represented in mythological literature, sculpture, painting, and folklore. Within temple architecture, it is often carved on pillars and toranas, surrounded by animals, birds, and human figures. In Kalamkari painted textiles too, the motif of the wish-fulfilling tree is highly popular, both as a central standalone theme and incorporated within larger compositions.

10. CONCLUSION

Kalamkari painting stands as a significant artistic tradition that bridges the sacred visual culture of South Indian temples with the mobility and intimacy of textile art. Emerging from the ritual and performative environments of temple culture, particularly during and after the Vijayanagara period, Kalamkari developed as a medium capable of translating monumental mural narratives into portable pictorial forms. Through its expansive narrative compositions, iconographic clarity, and symbolic richness, Kalamkari not only preserved Hindu mythological stories but also enabled their dissemination beyond temple walls, reaching domestic, performative, and other communal as well as secular spaces.

A defining strength of Kalamkari lies in its sophisticated visual language, which harmoniously integrates folk expressiveness with classical aesthetic principles. While its narrative vitality reflects popular religious imagination and storytelling traditions, its compositional order, rhythmic line work, and symbolic

structuring demonstrate a conscious engagement with classical norms of Indian aesthetics. The application of the Śaḍaṅga principles, such as Rūpabheda, Pramāṇa, Bhāva, and Lāvaṅya-Yojanam, Sādrishya and Varinkā Bhanga, is evident in the treatment of form, proportion, emotional expression, and overall visual harmony. These principles enable Kalamkari to transcend mere illustration, transforming it into a contemplative and emotive visual experience rooted in rasa theory.

Iconography plays a central role in reinforcing Kalamkari's sacred function. Deities are rendered with identifiable attributes, mounts, postures, and hasta mudrās, ensuring adherence to traditional iconographic conventions while allowing stylistic flexibility. This balance between prescription and creative interpretation reflects Kalamkari's adaptive nature, enabling it to respond to changing socio-cultural contexts without losing its symbolic integrity. The use of natural dyes, narrative registers, and flowing contours further enhances the spiritual resonance of the painted cloths, reinforcing their role as visual equivalents of sacred texts.

Moreover, Kalamkari's interaction with cross-cultural influences, through trade networks, regional patronage, and evolving ritual practices, highlights its openness and resilience as a living tradition. Rather than remaining static, Kalamkari has continually reinterpreted religious themes, aesthetic values, and material practices, ensuring its relevance across historical periods.

In conclusion, Kalamkari painting occupies a distinguished position within Indian art history as a medium that sustains temple aesthetics, religious narratives, and cultural memory through textile expression. Its synthesis of narrative depth, aesthetic discipline, and devotional purpose affirms Kalamkari as not merely an artistic craft but a dynamic cultural continuum, one that embodies spiritual expression, artistic excellence, and the enduring legacy of Indian visual traditions.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. Coomaraswamy, A. K. (1927). *The dance of Śiva: Fourteen Indian essays*. Sunwise Turn.
2. Kramrisch, S. (1941). *Indian sculpture*. Harvard University Press.
3. Zimmer, H. (1946). *Myths and symbols in Indian art and civilization*. Pantheon.
4. Soundara Rajan, K. V. (1952). *Art of South India: Andhra Pradesh*. Publications Division.
5. Coomaraswamy, A. K. (1955). *History of Indian and Indonesian art*. Munshiram Manoharlal.
6. Jayakar, P. (1968). *The earth mother: An introduction to the rural religious art of India*. National Museum.
7. Banerjea, J. N. (1968). *The development of Hindu iconography*. University of Calcutta.
8. Chattopadhyay, K. (1971). *Indian handicrafts*. Indian Council for Cultural Relations.
9. Kramrisch, S. (1972). *The Hindu temple*. Motilal Banarsidass.
10. Rao, T. A. G. (1985). *Elements of Hindu iconography*. Motilal Banarsidass.
11. Sivaramamurti, C. (1977). *Indian sculpture*. Allied Publishers.
12. Appaswamy, J. (1980). *Temple paintings of Tamil Nadu*. National Museum.
13. Boner, A. (1983). *Principles of composition in Hindu sculpture: Cave temple period*. Brill.
14. Varadarajan, L. (1983). *South Indian tradition of Kalamkari*. Crafts Council of India.
15. Chattopadhyay, K. (Ed.). (1987). *Indian embroidery*. Wiley Eastern.
16. Vatsyayan, K. (1987). *The square and the circle of Indian arts*. Abhinav Publications.
17. Srinivasan, D. (Ed.). (1991). *Many heads, arms and eyes: Origin, meaning and forms of multiplicity in Indian art*. Brill.
18. Nagaswamy, R. (1992). *Sutradhāra: South Indian temple art*. Tamil Arts Academy.

19. Deva, K. (1993). Temples of India (Vol. 2). Aryan Books International.
20. Pramod, K. (1993). Kalamkari paintings. Publications Division.
21. Nagaswamy, R. (1999). Masterpieces of South Indian bronzes. Archaeological Survey of India.
22. Krishnamurthy, N. (1999). Kalamkari of Andhra Pradesh. State Handicrafts Development Corporation.
23. Chishti, R. K., & Jain, R. (2000). Handcrafted Indian textiles: Tradition and beyond. Lustre Press/Roli Books.
24. Dallapiccola, A. L. (2001). Dictionary of Hindu lore and legend. Thames & Hudson.
25. Varadarajan, L. (2003). South Indian painted textiles. Mapin Publications.
26. Dhamija, J. (2006). Indian folk arts and crafts. National Book Trust.
27. Michell, G. (Ed.). (2006). The Penguin guide to the monuments of India (2 vols.). Penguin.
28. Gupta, S. P., & Asthana, S. P. (2007). Museum studies in Indian art collections. D. K. Printworld.
29. Ramani, S. (2007). Kalamkari and traditional design heritage of India. Wisdom Tree.
30. Shukla, R. N. (2010). Kalamkari: Painted textiles of Andhra. Rupa & Co.
31. Dallapiccola, A. L. (2012). Indian iconography: A brief introduction to Hindu, Buddhist and Jaina traditions. Routledge.
32. Dallapiccola, A. L., & Crill, R. (2015). Kalamkari temple hangings. Mapin Publishing.
33. Ramachandran, A. (2016). Painted cloths of India: Kalamkari, Patachitra, Phad, Pachedi. Lalit Kala Akademi.
34. Johri, R. (2020). Bhāratīya kalā samīkṣā. Rajasthan Hindi Granth Academy.
35. Garimella, A. (2021). Beyond textiles: South Indian Kalamkari and painted cloth. Marg Foundation.

PICTURE SOURCE

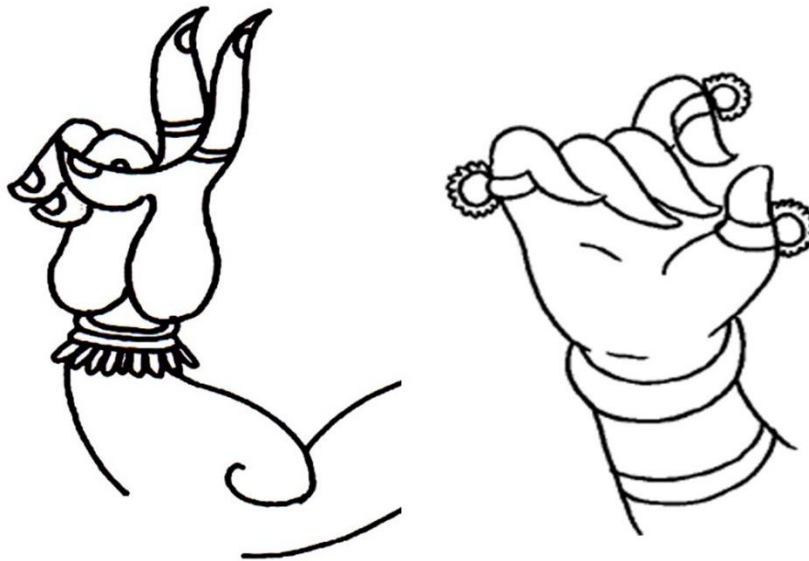
1. <http://www.indianculture.gov.in/artefacts-museums/kalamkari>
2. <https://www.exoticindiaart.com/product/paintings/dancing-lord-ganesha-kalamkari-painting-dde343/>
3. Author's own drawing
4. <https://in.pinterest.com/santhinig/the-mythical-yali/>



Picture 1: Vishnu in Vaikuntha, Salar jang Museum, Hyderabad



Picture 2: Dancing Ganesha, Exotic india



Picture 3: Hand Gestures of Kartari and Kataka



Picture 4: Yali