



# Beautiful Timeless Art: Kalamkari Painting

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## ABSTRACT

Kalamkari painting is a beautiful art form of Andhra Pradesh. Kalamkari is a type of hand-painted or block-printed cotton textile. It is more than just being a fabric used for clothing or home. It is more than textiles to an experience that culture has witnessed over centuries. This textile is supposed to be a multi-colored fabric in one of its rarest forms. Kalamkari is known to be a healing fabric, as the colours, motifs and the narration of magical forms create an aura that heals an individual physically and spiritually. Only natural dyes are used in Kalamkari, which is an ancient style of hand painting done on cotton or silk fabric with a tamarind pen. Today a stylish range of home décor products made with Kalamkari is available, namely, wall hangings, bedcovers, cushion covers, even rugs and theater backdrops, besides beautiful saris, dress materials, and stoles. The research paper is of exploratory nature. there are a very few literatures available on the history and evolution of kalamkari, there is very little information available on the current situation. Thus, the exploratory method was chosen to write the timeless beauty of traditional painting kalamkari. This research paper was started with the style, colours and techniques with the idea of bringing about innovation in Today's Kalamkari.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Kalamkari is a very important form of hand painted and printed textile from Andhra Pradesh. The word Kalamkari originated from the word kalam which means pen and kari meaning work. Kalamkari paintings were done using vegetable colours, depicting mythological scenes, floral motifs, tree of life, birds, animals etc. The artists got their inspiration from temple architectures and its surroundings, the natural beauty of mountains and natural resources of Andhra Pradesh.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

The research paper is of exploratory nature. there are a very few literatures available on the history and evolution of kalamkari, there is very little information available on the current situation. Thus, the exploratory method was chosen to write the timeless beauty of traditional painting kalamkari. This research

paper was started with the style, colours and techniques with the idea of bringing about innovation in Today's Kalamkari.

**a) Area and Objectives of the Research paper:**  
The research is conducted with the area of following objectives-

- To know the historical background of Kalamkari with different styles of Kalamkari art.
- To understand about the raw materials.
- To know the preparation of colours.
- To survey new products of Kalamkari.

**b. Review of literature:** Data have been collected from books, articles, newspapers and internet sources. The nature of collected data is qualitative. The sources which are used to write a paper, are given at the end of the paper in references heading.

## 3. HISTORY OF KALAMKARI PAINTING

The Kalamkari tradition is more than

three thousand years old. The earliest fabric samples of this craft found in "Mohenjo-Daro" excavations date back to 3000 B.C. Some samples of Madder dyed cloth with traditional Indian motifs have also been discovered in Egyptian tombs during excavation at Al Fustat near Cairo. These bear testimony not only to the antiquity of the craft but also prove that it was well developed and formed part of a flourishing export in ancient times. As an art form, it found its peak in the wealthy Middle Ages. The Mughals who patronized this craft in the Coromandel called the practitioners of this craft "qualamkars", from which the term "kalamkari" evolved.

The art of Kalamkari flourished in temple towns along the eastern coast of Andhra Pradesh. With the decline of temples and patronage from royal families the art declined as well. It was in the temple town of Kalahasti near Tirupathi that, during the 1950s, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya discovered the dying art of Kalamkari with the help of Jonnalagadda Laxamaiah and Kalappa. There were only two artists left who knew the Kalamkari tradition. From 17th century temples in Andhra Pradesh to stretched canvases in modern homes, Kalamkari is a time-honoured and widely beloved form of traditional Indian art.

The Kalamkari is now practiced by a number of small families in and around the old fishing port of Masulipatnam. The intricate designs, elaborate borders and understanding of balanced composition have made Kalamkari one of the most widely imitated styles of Indian printing.

#### 4. STYLES OF KALAMKARI PAINTING

There are two distinctive styles of kalamkari art in India - one, the 'Srikalahasti' style and the other, the Machalipatnam style of art. The block printed that is practiced in the town of Machilipatnam and the hand painted style that is largely practiced in the town of Srikalahasti. The Srikalahasti style of Kalamkari, wherein the 'kalam' or pen is used for free hand drawing of the subject, and filling in the colours is entirely hand worked.

**a) Subject matter of kalamkari Painting:** Kalamkari was first used to portray scenes from sacred texts such as the Mahabharata,

Ramayana and Bhagavatam. These paintings were often used as decorative backdrops in temples, depicting the stories of deities. Today, these subjects are still common in Kalamkari, as well as other spiritual and ancient symbols. The Tree of Life is one especially popular Kalamkari motif, deeply rooted while growing towards the sky—it connects the heavens, earth and underworld. It is also a symbol of nourishment, with many animals feeding on its leaves, living in its branches and enjoying its shade. The Islamic culture took a larger synthesis of this art form and their inherent love for natural motifs surfaced in the Kalamkari fabrics of that time. The lotus, the palm, the mango, the peacock and the elephant motifs intermingled and blended in their design.

**b) Colours of Kalamkari Painting:** Kalamkari art primarily use earthy colours like indigo, mustard, rust, black and green. Natural dyes used to paint colours in Kalamkari art is extracted for natural sources with no use of chemicals and artificial matter. For instance, craftsmen extract black colour by blending jaggery, water and iron fillings which they essentially use for outlining the sketches. While mustard or yellow is derived by boiling pomegranate peels, red hues are created from bark of madder or alginin. Likewise, blue is obtained from indigo and green is derived by mixing yellow and blue together.

#### 5. TECHNIQUE OF KALAMKARI PAINTING

According to sources, Kalamkari is a tedious and time-consuming process involving a minimum of ten to twenty-four steps. Cotton cloth pieces are bought from mills and cut into pieces. These pieces are soaked in water mixed with cow-dung. Once soaked well, the water is loosely squeezed out and the cloth is laid on the floor overnight. The next morning, these pieces are washed on a stone in a pond and spread on grass and water till evening. This process is repeated the next day and then all the cloth pieces are washed and dried.

The next step involves treating the cloth with Myrobalan seeds and buffalo milk to prevent smudging of dyes when painted. After this process, the cloth is printed using natural colours as per the required design and then washed in flowing, fresh water. The artist then sketches the central figure with charcoal sticks

and traces over this outline with a finely pointed kalam dipped in the kasimi liquid. The kalam is wrapped in wool that holds the liquid, so the artist squeezes this wool to release the ink while painting. When the black outline has dried, the artist can apply a mordant with alum and begin introducing red colour to the cloth. After a few more repeats of washing and drying, the final steps are applying indigo and then yellow dyes to colour in the scene. To produce orange, yellow dye is applied onto red areas, and for green, indigo is applied to yellow areas.

This demanding procedure takes several days as the cloth and ink must fully dry between each step. But ultimately the time and effort are more than worth it, as the final colours are strong and exquisite, and the images are captivating in their depth and complexity. Kalamkari painting is truly a labour of love for art, tradition and culture, a joy that is palpable in each painting. Over the years, the tradition slowly moved away from being an exclusive hand-painted art form and was transformed into a commercial commodity.

#### 6. KALAMKARI FABRICS

Traditional Hand Painted Kalamkari was always done on hand woven cotton. But today it is being adapted on a variety of materials such as georgette, crepe, chiffon, silk etc. Even a variety of cottons such as chanderi or kota can

be used. Kalamkari is being combined with other crafts such as embroidery work, badla work, zardosi work and so on.

This is very popularly used as handspring in fabrics for dress material, sarees and ready-made salwar kameez, kurtas, etc. Kalamkari sarees showcase the fine craftsmanship of Indian artists. It is a perfect blend of elegance and heritage followed by the latest trends. The wide range of Kalamkari sarees is available with different styles and fabric. They don't get faded away with the wash, since natural dyes and colours are used. Kalamkari silk sarees with block prints are easy to wear and provides comfy to the user.

#### 7. PRESENT DAY SCENARIO

In the past decade, due to the tedious technique involved in its making, Kalamkari art was losing its shine. The emergence of high on technology machine looms and printed textiles also escalated the extinction process of this art. But it was the fashion designers of the Indian fashion industry who came together to revive this art and helped artisans practicing this art in the state of Andhra Pradesh. Thus, it is difficult to celebrate the rich history of Kalamkari without wondering about its future. Like many forms of traditional Indian art, Kalamkari is a generational art, meaning that typically a father or grandfather would train his children in the

Figure 1  
Painter Drawing and Colouring Kalamkari Painting on Cloth



Source: <https://peachmode.com/blog/kalamkari-know-all-about-the-art/>

family trade. It has been preserved and passed down for many generations in this way. However today, given the plethora of career options available to make a steady and more lucrative income, the children of most Kalamkari artists pursue careers in engineering, business or other fields. There are only about twenty remaining skilled Kalamkari artists living and working today, half of whom have won National Awards.

#### 8. INNOVATION IN TODAY'S KALAMKARI

Traditionally Kalamkari art as religious paintings, depicting Indian gods and goddesses to the process of gaining recognition during the reign of Mughal dynasty, and till today when Andhra Pradesh is the largest producer of Kalamkari; this art has come a long way.

The modern contemporary Kalamkari can be seen in home accessories and utilities. The textile and its motifs are being used in making photo-frames, key holders, place-mats, umbrellas, Oxford-type footwear, on 'jutties' (footwear worn mostly by women) teacups, bowls, serving-spoons and even coasters. The innovation in the 21st century has even produced jewellery using the textile for making

ear-hangings, neckpieces, anklets and bracelets. Bedspreads, cushion covers and panels for wall decoration including the Mata de pachedi from Gujarat, previously only used for ritual ceremonies are now available online which can enhance the décor of any home.

#### 9. CONCLUSION

Traditionally, the painting and printing is done by hand, using vegetables dyes. The colours used are very rich. As we trace the journey of Kalamkari with its long history, technique, its motifs and design we can glean that is continuing to serve both religious, decorative and utilitarian purposes. Kalamkari faces challenging times ahead because machine printing, digital printing and mass production is on the increase. Thus, kalamkari is widely used in clothing, home décor and lifestyle products today. The first thought that comes to mind when one refers to Kalamkari clothing is a dupatta, kurta or a saree. It has a certain image in the minds of youngsters. Apart from it being an expensive textile craft, there is also very little variety in terms of clothing in kalamkari available as daily wear in the market. ●

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