



Mural Paintings in Kerala: A Historical Overview

Nimisha .P

Research scholar in History , Department of History
Kannur University, Kerala State.

Abstract: The Murals have important cultural significance and express the ethos of a group of people in a deep way. Art history is a humanistic field of inquiry that concentrates on visual culture works created to inform, express and inspire through what we see. The fields of art history embrace many different approaches to visual culture. In this study an attempt is made to understand Murals in a contextual art history seeks to understand art as one expression of complex, social ,economic, political philosophical and religious influences on culture and individual .The earliest scratchings ,carvings ,etchings and painting that produce priceless knowledge to our history .These murals hold great significance for mankind as they depicted life activities ,everyday scenery and usual religious tradition of the time ,they were created in giving as a priceless look of the diversity of our cultures during different period .The beginning of Mural painting can be traced back to the cave paintings .Over the course of time Murals have covered the interior and exteriors of many palaces ,temples, tombs ,houses of rich patrons. Temple walls became prominent medium of Mural art. The notable features of these murals are the simplicity in subject, technical excellence ,accurate thematic representations and perfect blending of colours .The Mural paintings are examples of the real talents of the artists ,which explicit their versatility.

Key Words: Murals, Cave paintings, Techniques, Cultural Value

Introduction

The concept of beauty has found expression in a variety of styles or manners of representation. The rock art represents the earliest evidence of aesthetic taste and expression of man and constitute a valuable source of visual information on the lives, beliefs and pre-occupation of the pre-historic hunting and gathering communities. It includes paintings as well as engravings made on the rock surface(Ghosh,1987;23).Murals are large scale paintings executed directly on walls, ceilings and many other typically large flat convex or concave surfaces(Sasibhushan,1987;4) .They are supposed to be olden human art form .A wide varieties of artistic forms are used in Mural painting and some incorporate the use of techniques which combines realism with dramatic sense of scale and amazing depth .A Mural is usually commissioned by a wealthy patron ,corporation ,government or institution because it obviously represent an expensive endeavour(Sasibhushan,2006;22-23)

The most ancient examples of art forms are Palaeolithic figures or figurines of people and

animals made of bone, ivory, stone and clay. The oldest example came from Australia and Western Europe(Bednaric,2007;67). Ancestors of Australian aborigines practiced both rock painting and rock engraving. In European caves, people began to paint model images about thirty thousand years ago, they produced many cave paintings in Southern France and Northern Spain .The oldest securely dated European cave paintings are found in the Chauvet cave in South Eastern France(Bednaric,2007;68) .The paintings of cows ,bulls and deer are found in the cave paintings at Lascaux in southern France .These wall paintings contain so much information that it is tempting to imaging them as records of daily life . Like all early art they probably served a greater social function perhaps they had an educational or religious use(Bhasham,1967;64-65).

The rock paintings in India were first discovered by A. Carlyle on the walls and ceilings of rock shelters in Mirzapur district (UP)in 1867-68(Chaitanya,1987;45). This rock art sites exhibits regional variations. Reflect broad uniformity in terms of subject matter, technique, style and the pigments used.Bhimbhetka is the largest centre of rock paintings in India belongs to 600 BC.Important themes here are animal hunted category with bows and arrows. Human figures are depicted in the stick like pattern. There is no depiction of agricultural and pastoral activity. most of the paintings are green and dark red. The main paintings are bison, elephants, tigers and boar(Gupta,1996;51) . Bhimbhetka, Mirzapur, Bellari(Karnataka),Marayur(Kerala),Mailambadi(Tamilnadu) are the important pre-historic rock art paintings(chaitanya,ibid;46). The Ajanta cave paintings in the sixth century (Gupta - Vakataka period) is the most important cave paintings of later ages. Ajanta bear rather a secular than a religious message (Ghosh ,1987;12-13) .The Bagh cave and the paintings found at Badami and Ellora are in Ajanta style(Gupta,1996;25). According to Vinayapitaka ,the noted courtesan of vaisali ,Anrapali employed painters to paint on the walls of her palace. There are also numerous references in pre-historic texts about the *Chitraragas* or galleries maintained by the kings and rulers(Bhasham,1967;134)

Sittanavasalin Tamil Nadu has more important in paintings. Some splendid paintings of the Chola period have been found in the Rajarajeswaratemple



at Thanjavur(Menon,2003;211-13).In south India the development *vastusastra* and art began during the period of Rashtrakuta,pallavas,Cholas,Cheras and Pandyasetc .The artistic styles of Thanjavur,Gangaikondacholapuram etc. are the evidences of great Indian artistic practices(Menon,2006;232-233) .From the olden days itself the main theme of the paintings were based on the character and themes of Puranic stories and epics .The wall paintings seen in the Thirunandikkara in *Kanyakumari* district are the examples of great Kerala art from ninth century AD to twelfth century AD(Mathpal,2008;110).

Sources and Methodology

The proposed study is an attempt to analyse the mural painting tradition of North Malabar in the context of socio-historical perspectives, and followed multidisciplinary approach.One of the important document to be consulted on Murals of Kerala is the *Silparatna* of *Srikumara*.The 16th chapter of this book dedicated to Mural painting and this is the handbook of all expert Mural painters of Kerala. Interview method is used to collect primary information about the techniques and execution of Muralpaintings from those who are expert in the art of Mural.

Kerala Murals

Kerala Mural stand highest in India's artistic history with their technical excellence, enchanting storytelling, bold and clear strokes ,bright and beautiful colours (Mathpal,2008;72) .Only the Indian states of Rajasthan has more murals than Kerala. The origin of Mural paintings in Kerala can be traced back to the ancient rock art in pre-historic cave paintings(Sasibhushan,1987;5). These paintings helped to understanding history of the ancient culture .The tradition of painting on walls began in Kerala with the pre-historic paintings found in Anjanad valley in Idukki district .Archaeologist believed that this belonged to the upper Palaeolithic period .Rock engravings dating to Mesolithic period are *Edakkal* in Waynad and Perumkadavila in Thiruvananthapuram(Manmathan,2007;23) .The roots of the Kerala Mural tradition can be traced back to seventh and eighth century .The oldest Mural in Kerala can be traced back to seventh and eighth century (Sashibhusan 1987;63).The oldest Mural in Kerala can be discovered in rockcut cave temple at Thirunandhikkara which is now in Kanyakumari district of Tamilnadu(Ramavarma,2000;13-14).At tenth century,an inscription of Godha Ravivarman found in Nedupuran Tali temple in Thrissur district mentions the wages that paid to the mural painters.(cheriyan1999;327).

The Mural paintings in Kerala existed as a form of traditional art Paintings belonging to 14th and 15th centuries are available subsequent to this period. During the 17th and 18th centuries the art mural painting reached its zenith. But in the course of the 18th century the art of mural painting met with tremendous decline ,and during the 19th century onward this art completely disappeared from the scene(Cheriyen,1993;63-64). The legends related to Ramayana and Mahabharatha are vividly narrated on the walls of the temple and palace. In the case of churches the Mural themes are mainly based on Bible. The art activities of the Kerala people drastically influenced by the stories of Ramayana and Mahabharatha (Menon,2006;72). Temple premises especially walls were selected as the place for mural art exhibition ,many of them have been ruined but some of them still also kept intact. In the case of Kerala different fabricated, imaginary stories are speeded widely and orally and sometimes these stories are also become a theme of mural painting. The Kerala mural painting can be classified in to four categories based on their theme (menon,2006;81).

1. incidence of Ramayana.
2. Siva ,Vishnu in the form of Mohini, Parvati who stares at Siva and Ganga with Anger, Narasimha and Hiranyakasipu.
3. Vishnu in the form of Venughopal,Govardhana mountain.
4. Dancing Siva(Vilanilam,2012;532).

These paintings are repeatedly and continuously painted on the walls of the temple of Vadakkunnatha in Trissur and Padmanabha swami in Thiruvananthapuram.The traditional; floor paintings *Kalamezhuthu* and the ornamentation of kathakali shows a clear affinity towards the art of mural paintings(Nath,1960;127-29) .Concerned to the concept of beauty we can see some regional wise distinctions in mural paintings .The mural creators made their mural creation basing on the ideas and ideologies based on their day to life experience(Chaitanya,1983;53).The beautiful women characters depicted in the murals of Padmanabhapuram palace are long faced and slim body but in the case of Mattancherry palace the ladies are painted with round faces and fleshy bodies. The former belonged to *Sankini* type of ladies and later belonged to *Padmini* type of ladies. The practical approach towards paintings is in most of the cases different from the what has been depicted in the literary texts((sasibhushan,1987;76).

Compared to the Indian mural painting, we can assign a unique position in the mural painting tradition of Kerala. The Kerala mural paintings can be classified in to three stages:



The first stage: the paintings of *Thirunandhikkara, Kantalur, Padmanabha Swami temple, Thiruvambadi temple* .

The second stage:*Thiruvanchikkulam, Pisarikkavau, Mattancheri palace, Vadakkunnatha temple, Mulakkulam, Elamkunnappuzha, Balusserry*

The third stage: *Kanjoor church, Akaparambu church, Thiruvalla church, Trippayar, Thodikkalam temple, Pundarikapuram, Lokanarkavu* (Menon, 2006; 357) . Archaeological evidence indicates that Early Kerala murals and architecture came heavily under the influence of Pallava dynasty (Kumar, 2008, 17).

Technique of exposition

Mural artist are not merely illustrators but excellent chemist as well. Their technical excellence prevents the reaction of the Mural paintings hundreds of years. The surface of the walls was initially made rough and it was gain arranged before painting (Mathpal, 2008; 68) . Concerned to Kerala for Mural painting the colours like orange, green, redwhite, blue, yellow, golden yellow etc. The minerals excavated from the earth, the extracts from plants, and vegetables, the powder of crushed stone etc., were either directly used or mixed with colours. The colour black is made from charcoal. The colour blue is made from the *Neela amari* plants . Green colour is extracted from different laves of the plants and this mixed with other colours (Chakrabarti, 1980; 221-22) . The surface of the wall was at first made rough and the same was arranged before painting. For this purpose, different kinds of gums were used (Sasibhushan, 2006; 74). The grass brush was used to brush the paints on the surface. Sometimes the roots of some plants were used in this connection. The brush use for painting made according to the need of the paintings. (Nath, 1960; 79-80). After the painting was finished the ,the sap of pine tree mixed with oil and with the help of a cotton cloth smeared it and the hardness and durability of the painting is assured (Chakrabarti, 1980; 225) . The chemical action and reflection of Calcium was understood during those days . The lime juice or the tender coconut were used to eliminate the concentration of calcium. Concerned to Kerala context the calcium walls were more predominant. That's why the chemical features of these factors given huge respects (Cherian, 1993; 118) . One of the peculiarities of Kerala Mural paintings is the *Pancha mala* system (five garlands), in which borders of the paintings are decorated beautifully with figures of birds , flowers , animals , vines etc. (Chaitanya , 1983 ; 76).

In Mural paintings each characters have assigned each colour according to the peculiarity of their character . The colour distribution was based on *Satwika, thamasas, rajasa* qualities. The colour green was given to *satwika* gods , red colour was given to *tamasas* gods , white colour was given to *thamasas* gods. This colour distribution was based on according to saiva and Vaishnava thoughts (Menon, 2000; 213-14) . In mural tradition *Sree Rama, Durga, Sasta* were given either green or green blue colour . *Narasimhamoorti, Varaha, Ganpathi* assumed as *Rajoguna* deities . The goddesses like *Parvati, Maya, Lakshmi, Saraswathi* etc, are painted in golden colour, *Dakshina Moorti* and Dancing Shiva was given white colour . The goddesses *Bhadra Kali* painted with cloud colour . *Brahma* and *Saraswathi* adorned with crimson colours, *Balasaraswathi* was given white colour . One of the significant factor concerned to Kerala mural paintings is the overwhelming use of light red colour. *Natya Sastra* put forwarded the view that the expression *sringaram* (romance) is expressed in *syama* (black) colour, *Haasyam* (comedy) in white colour, anger in red colour, and bluish black is given to terror, the colour yellow was given to wonder (Menon, 2003; 210-12).

In the Kerala context, some of the Christian churches are also decorated with Mural paintings. The theme of the church Mural paintings are mainly based on Biblical themes that is the birth of Jesus Christ, forbidden fruit eating of Eve, the tortures meted by Jesus Christ, Crucifixion etc. Most of the Mural paintings in Kerala can't assign a remote antiquity and the church Murals are painted till recently (vilanilam, 2012, 533-34) .

The geographical peculiarities of Kerala also represented in these paintings . One of the important factor is that these mural artist can't reveal their identity they remained as anonymous , but in the late medieval period itself they enclose their name . Comparing to Ajanta paintings the Kerala Mural paintings are extra ordinary in colours and beautiful sketch (Chaithanya, 1983; 52) . In Kerala this art was flourished with the help of political , social , communal and religious factors in a peaceful atmosphere with the help of eminent and art loving rulers (Sivamurti, 1978; 98-100). Comparing to high land and coastal area the central part are enriched with excellent Mural paintings. The bhakti movement and its impact in society is seen behind the process of extension of Mural painting in Kerala (Cherian, 1999; 274-75). In the 18th century the art of Mural painting fell a sudden depression because after the invasion of Tipu Sultan the major revenues of the temples were controlled by British officials. It resulted pathetic economic conditions of the temples. Due to this situation, the encouragement of this art became impossible. It



resulted the drastic decline of the Mural art tradition in Kerala(Cherian,1993;47-48).

The subjects of Murals were derived from religious texts. The picture of gods and goddesses are portrayed from the descriptions in the verse or *Dhyana slokas* and scenes from Ramayana, Mahabharatha etc.(Ramavarma,2000;122). The Thiruvananthapuram *Kanthaloor* temple Murals are the oldest example of temple frescoes in Kerala. Ramayana Murals at *Mattancheri* palace, Siva temple at *Thodikkalam* in *Kannur*, *Vadakkunnatha* temple in *Trissur* are the other important centres of Mural paintings. The paintings at *Panayannarkavu*, *Padmanabhapuram* palace and *Krishnapuram* palace are more important. In Kerala context, the art of Mural painting reached its climax during 17th and 18th centuries(sasibhushan,2006;103-105). But in the 18th century the history of paintings is seen disrupted to a certain extent. This tradition is completely disappeared. It presumes that the social structure in those days boycotted these artists and they seek some other jobs for livelihood. Miniature paintings and oil painting artist taken in to their position. The paintings of Raja Ravi Varma (1848-1906) and K.C.S.Panikkar were get predominant position(sasibhushan,1987;98-101). In 1970 a fire broke out in *Guruvayur* temple most of the mural paintings inside the temple were hardly destroyed. Temple authorities decided to renovate the Murals, but they realised that only three veteran artist of Mural painting existed in the realm. This incident awakened *Guruvayur* Devaswam and they urging the revival of this art tradition(Vilanilam,2012;563-65). Simultaneously the temple authorities opened an Institute of Mural painting and now it offers five year courses and other diploma courses inside the temple premises.

References

- Ajith, Kumar. N. (2008). *Kerala Samskaram*. Thiruvananthapuram: Cultural Publication Department.
- Bednaric, G. Robert. (2007). *Rock Art Science: The scientific Study of Paleo -Art*. New Dehi: Aryan Books International.
- Bhasham, A. L. (1967). *The Wonder That Was India*. London: Replica Press Pvt.Ltd.
- Chakrabarti, Jayanta. (1980). *Techniques in Indian mural Paintings*. Calcutta: K.P. Bagchi & Co.
- Chaitanya, Krishna. (1983). *Arts of India*. New Delhi: Abhinav Publication.
- Chaitanya, Krishna. (1999). *Kerala*. New Delhi: National Book Trust.
- Cherian, P.J. (1993). *Perspectives on Kerala history*. Government of Kerala: Keralagazetteers Department.
- Cherian, P.J. (1999). *Essays on The Cultural formation of Kerala*. (Ed.). Thiruvananthapuram: Department of Cultural Publication.
- Gosh, A. (1987). *Ajanta Murals :An Album of Eighty Five Reproductions in Colours*. New Delhi: archaeological Survey of India.
- Gupta, S.P. (1996). *Elements of Indian Art*. New Dehi: DK. Print Work Limited.
- Manmathan, M.R. (2007). *Archaeology in Kerala :Past and Present*. Kozhikode: Farook College Publication Division.

Conclusion

Among the main centres of Mural paintings of India, Kerala claims a significant position with large number of pictures on the walls of the walls of temples, palaces, and churches. Kerala is the store house of hundreds of enchanting Murals tradition but unfortunately most of the mural paintings were vanished/damaged. Due to the unfavourable climatic condition the paintings were wet and got ruined. Above all most of the Mural paintings were damaged due to improper method of conservation, neglect, vandalism, water seepage, sunlight etc. Unfortunately, several Murals have been vanished forever. Murals from the past especially those that express the religious, social, and political views of the period have intrinsic artistic and cultural value. They also play a vital role as a material evidence for the construction and reconstruction of the history. Unfortunately, Murals are more vulnerable than any other art forms to damage from natural as well as human sources. Huge Mural paintings once found only on the walls of the temple and palaces, now adorn five star hotels lobbies and the houses of the rich and famous persons. Art forms are usually motivated by aesthetic value but now others purchase art form as a status symbol. This traditional art forms are now taught to the students who have real interest in it. The extant Mural paintings are well protected by the Archaeological Department of Kerala and other governmental agencies by using various chemical methods. For want of proper protection and conservation some of the paintings are completely ruined. A new generation who have earnest love of art and understands the importance of mural paintings has come up.



- Mathpal, Yesodar. (2008). *Art in Kerala*. New Delhi: Indira Gandhi National Centre for Art.
- Menon, Vijaya Kumar. (2006). *A Brief Survey of Art Scenario of Kerala*. Karyavattom: Kerala Cultural Department.
- Menon, Vijayakumar. (2003). *Bharathiya Kala Charitram*. Kottayam: Kerala Sahitya Academy.
- Rama Varma, K. T. (2000). *Chitrakala Noottandukaliloode*. Kottayam: Sahitya Pravarthaka Sahakarana Sangham.
- Nath, Ravindra. (1960). *Chitrakala oru Samagra Padanam*. Thiruvananthapuram: Rekha Publications.
- Sasibhushan, M. G. (2006). *Keralathile Chumar Chitrangal*. Thiruvananthapuram: State Institute of Languages.
- Sasibhushan, M. G. (1987). *Murals of Kerala*. Thiruvananthapuram: Department of Public Relations.
- Vilanilam, J. V. (2012). *An Introduction to Kerala Studies*. USA: IISAC