

Kalamkari: The Timeless Art of Andhra Pradesh

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Kalamkari, an ancient Indian art form, weaves together history, culture, and craftsmanship into vibrant tapestries of color and design. *Derived from the Persian words "kalam" (pen) and "kari" (work), the term literally translates to "pen work," reflecting its essence as a hand-painted or block-printed textile tradition.* With roots stretching back over 3,000 years, Kalamkari is a testament to India's rich heritage, flourishing primarily in the southeastern state of Andhra Pradesh. This article delves into the art's origins, the places where it thrives, the weather that shapes its creation, and the techniques that define its beauty.

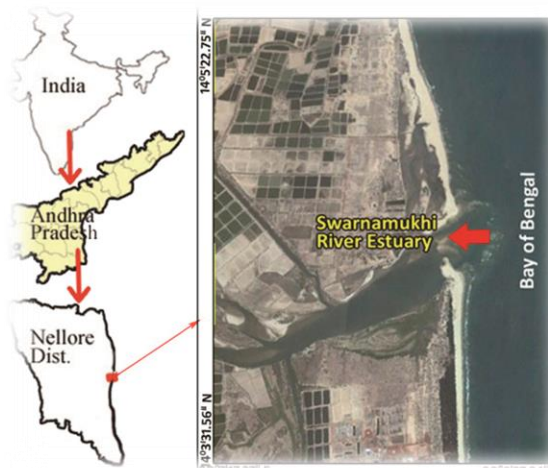


The Birthplace of Kalamkari: Andhra Pradesh

Kalamkari finds its heart in two distinct towns of Andhra Pradesh: Srikalahasti and Machilipatnam (also known as Masulipatnam). These locations, steeped in history and tradition, have nurtured this craft through centuries of patronage and evolution.

Srikalahasti

Nestled in the Chittoor district, about 80 miles north of Chennai and near the sacred temple town of Tirupati, Srikalahasti is a hub of spiritual and artistic significance. The town lies along the banks of the Swarnamukhi River, whose flowing waters play a crucial role in washing and setting the natural dyes used in Kalamkari. Known for its freehand painting style, Srikalahasti's artisans draw inspiration from Hindu mythology, crafting intricate depictions of epics like the Ramayana and Mahabharata. The proximity to



temples has imbued the art with a sacred quality, historically used for temple hangings and scrolls.

Machilipatnam

Located in the Krishna district, roughly 200 miles east of Hyderabad, Machilipatnam is a coastal town along the Coromandel Coast. Once a bustling port under the Vijayanagara Empire and later the Golconda Sultanate, it became a melting pot of cultures, influencing its Kalamkari style. Here, the art leans toward block-printing techniques, featuring Persian-inspired motifs like floral patterns, creepers, and the iconic Tree of Life. Its maritime legacy made it a key exporter of Kalamkari textiles to Europe during the colonial era.

Both towns, though distinct in their approaches, share a deep connection to Andhra Pradesh's cultural landscape, where traditions like Kuchipudi dance and handcrafted arts flourish alongside Kalamkari.

The Weather's Role in Kalamkari

influences the Kalamkari process, as this art form relies heavily on natural elements. The state experiences a tropical climate with hot summers, moderate monsoons, and mild winters—conditions that artisans have adapted to over millennia.

- **Sunlight:** The intense summer sun, with temperatures often exceeding 40°C (104°F) from March to June, is essential for drying the treated fabrics and fixing the dyes. Artisans sun-dry the cotton or silk after bleaching and mordanting, ensuring the colours adhere evenly.
- **Monsoon:** The rainy season, from June to September, brings humidity and abundant water, vital for washing the fabrics in rivers or tanks. The Swarnamukhi River in Srikalahasti, for instance, becomes a lifeline during this time, cleansing excess mordants and revealing the vivid hues of the dyes.
- **Water Quality:** The purity of local water sources enhances the vibrancy of natural dyes. Artisans note that the mineral content of river water affects colourfastness, making the



region's weather and geography integral to the craft.

This synergy between art and environment underscores Kalamkari's eco-friendly ethos, as it depends on nature's rhythms rather than synthetic interventions.



The Art of Kalamkari: Techniques and Styles

Kalamkari is a labour-intensive craft, involving up to 23 meticulous steps, from preparing the fabric to applying the final dye. Two primary styles define its execution: the Srikalahasti style and the Machilipatnam style.

- **Srikalahasti Style:** This method is entirely hand-painted, using a bamboo or date palm pen (kalam) wrapped with wool or cotton to hold the dye. Artisans begin by treating the fabric with a solution of cow dung and bleach to remove starch, followed by a soak in buffalo milk and myrobalan (a fruit resin) to prevent smudging. Designs are sketched freehand, often depicting mythological narratives, deities, or nature-inspired motifs like peacocks and lotuses. Natural dyes—indigo for blue, madder root for red, pomegranate peel for yellow—are applied layer by layer, with each colour fixed through washing and sun-drying. The result is a richly detailed, storytelling textile.



- **Machilipatnam Style:** In contrast, this style blends block-printing with hand-painting. Artisans carve intricate designs into teakwood blocks, which are then dipped in dye and pressed onto the fabric. The outlines and main patterns emerge from the blocks, while finer details are added with a kalam. Influenced by Persian aesthetics due to historical trade ties, this style features geometric and floral patterns, often in a monochromatic or earthy palette.

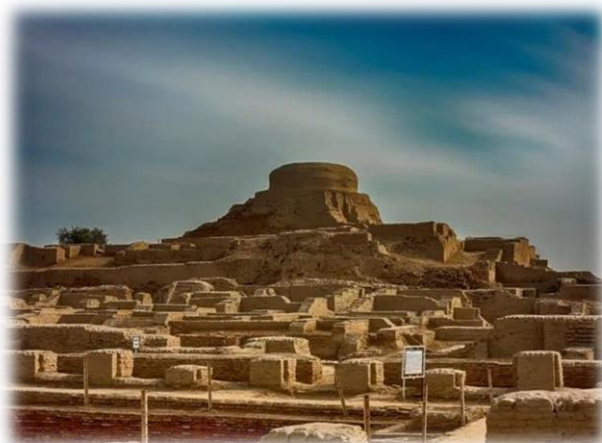
The process is faster than Srikalahasti's but equally precise, catering to both local and export markets.

Both techniques rely exclusively on natural dyes extracted from plants, roots, and minerals, ensuring sustainability and a unique, earthy colour palette of reds, blues, yellows, and blacks.



A Legacy Through Time

Kalamkari's history traces back to ancient India, with evidence of painted textiles found in the Indus Valley Civilization. It gained prominence during the Mughal era, when rulers patronized the craft, calling its practitioners "Qalamkars." The British later popularized it as "chintz" in the 18th century, exporting it to Europe for furnishings and garments. Despite a decline in the early 20th century, efforts by figures like Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay revived it post-independence, establishing training centres and promoting its cultural value.



Today, Kalamkari thrives as both a traditional craft and a contemporary fashion statement. Sarees, dupattas, and home décor items adorned with its designs are prized for their elegance and heritage. Yet, challenges persist—competition from machine-made imitations and a shrinking pool of skilled artisans threaten its future. Still, its resurgence in sustainable fashion and global appreciation keeps the art alive.

Conclusion

Kalamkari is more than a textile; it's a narrative woven into fabric, connecting past and present through the hands of Andhra Pradesh's artisans. From the sunlit riverbanks of Srikalahasti to the coastal workshops of Machilipatnam, it embodies a harmony of place, weather, and creativity. As you drape a Kalamkari saree or admire a hand-painted panel, you hold a piece of India's soul—a timeless art that continues to enchant the world.



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