

Rangoli: A Unique Folk Art of India

By

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Abstract

Perhaps one of the best ways that traditional Hindu women use to welcome guests to their homes are the beautiful Rangolis that they draw outside their front doors. Rangoli is an ancient folk art whose origin goes back over five thousand years. The term 'Rangoli' itself is derived from the words 'rang (meaning colour) and 'aavalli' (meaning rows of colours).

Keywords

Rangoli, India, folk art, colours

Introduction

Rangoli art is believed to have originated in Maharashtra, but it slowly spread to other parts of India. Inevitably, each region of India imparted its own characteristic flavour and style to Rangoli.

Although the Chola rulers made wide use of floor painting, Rangoli as a folk art form did not have royal patronage like many other art forms in India. It survived mainly because it was an art form that cut across all barriers of caste. Common people enjoyed it and could use it to express their creativity. The materials used in Rangoli like rice flour and natural colours were also easily and cheaply available for women, so it became very popular.

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In Maharashtra, Rangolis were done not only as a gesture of welcome at the threshold, but also to invite prosperity into the home. Festivals saw the local women make very elaborate

and colourful Rangolis. The motifs used were usually inspired by nature like flowers and creepers, peacocks, swans, the mango and the lotus. In ancient times, the colours used for drawing rangolis were all 'natural' colours obtained from the barks of different trees, from wild berries, from leaves, indigo and turmeric. Nowadays, synthetic colours are freely available at cheap rates. The stalls selling Rangoli colours are the most eye catching ones in any market place. Unlike in times gone by, when Rangoli colours were only in traditional colours of nature, modern synthetic colours boast of shades like fluorescent green and colours laced with glitter too!

In the Rangoli designs used in Maharashtra, colours are used to 'fill' up the entire picture, unlike in some other regions where 'outline' drawings are popular. Sometimes, natural powders like turmeric powder or brick powder are used to colour the design. Sometimes, however, grains, pulses and cereals in different colours like moong dhal, masoor dhal, and mustard seeds are used to colour the design. This gives the Rangoli a beautiful, raised, three-dimensional effect. In the city of Mumbai, talented wandering artists often draw large rangolis on the public pavements using coloured chalk powder. Images of Gods and Goddesses like Hanuman and Krishna are favourite themes, but contemporary themes like images of movie stars and cricket heroes are not unknown! These beautiful pictures usually attract admiring glances from passers-by, and even make them stop to drop a few coins on them, thus providing their creators a livelihood too!

In Rajasthan, the art of Rangoli is called 'Madana'. Hand drawn designs are done in chalk powder or in white lime paste, and include stars, triangles and also auspicious elephants and lotus flowers. Rangolis in Rajasthan are drawn not only at the entrances to homes, but inside the dwellings too, and the patterns are often repeated on the walls as well. The Rangoli designs of Rajasthan are amongst the most colourful in India. Dark, vividly bright shades like crimson, chocolate brown and dark blue are regularly used.

The Rangoli style practiced by the women of Bihar is called Aripan. They use white chalk powder to decorate their thresholds and their puja rooms with good luck symbols like stars, kalasa (pots) and swastikas. In North Bihar, the footprints of Goddess Lakshmi, the Goddess of Wealth, are drawn at the doorway, with toes pointing inward to indicate her entrance into the home. A style of Rangoli typical to Bihar is the 'Madhubani' style, where figures of

animals and human figures are drawn with colourful, and exaggerated features. It is interesting to note that in all parts of India, Rangoli designs are always carefully drawn in an unbroken line without any gaps in-between the lines. This is because it is believed that evil spirits will not be able to enter the home through the Rangoli when all the loose ends are tied up!

Chowkpurana is the name given to the art of floor painting in Uttar Pradesh. Floor designs drawn on the threshold are supposed to be a good omen, indicating that all is well within the home. Special festive occasions like Diwali see special designs, and like in all other parts of India, Rangoli is never done during the period of mourning after there has been a death in the family.



Image 1: Rangoli in Diwali

In the state of Kerala, Rangoli designs are exquisitely beautiful. Flowers, leaves, and flower petals are used to create Rangolis. These wonderful Rangolis are done particularly in the week of Onam, Kerala's most important festival. Keralites believe that one of their ancient kings Mahabali comes back to visit his kingdom at this time. The Rangolis are not only a welcome to him, but also a reassurance that his erstwhile kingdom is very prosperous! During Onam, the designs start out small, but with the passing of each day, grow larger and more elaborate, and colourful. In some cases, whole flowers are used to create the design, and in others only petals are used. Marigolds, jasmines, roses, and chrysanthemums are the

most popular flowers. Sometimes, grated coconut, tinted to different shades is also used, as coconuts are cheap and plentiful in Kerala. Like most Rangolis, these beautiful offerings are never swept away with a broom when they have to be removed.



Image 2: Flower Rangoli

‘Kolam’, the art of floor painting in Tamil Nadu, is the pride of the state. This ancient art, which is extremely popular and widely practiced, is passed on from generation to generation, from mother to daughter. ‘Kolams’ are always done in white, and are made with rice powder, which is used, dry, or ground to a thick paste with water. Rice powder is used because not only is rice cheap and easy to powder at home, but also because rice has always been a symbol of prosperity in India. The white powder also feeds little birds and ants throughout the day, so it is a nice way to fulfill the Hindu belief that all God’s creatures must be cared for. The colour white also stands for peace, purity and tranquility. The ladies of the house draw ‘Kolams’ early in the mornings. The area outside the doorway is washed at first. In villages, where the floors are made of mud, cow dung is mixed with the water, and then sprinkled on the threshold. This disinfects the area and clears it of small bugs. The kolam is draw freehand using the fingers. First a set of dots (pulli) are drawn on the flour, and then they are connected together in a prearranged sequence to make the final design. Some kolams are amazingly complex and intricate. Sometimes, brick powder (kavi) is used to outline the kolam to make it look more colourful. The grandest and most elaborate kolams

are seen during the Tamil month of Marghazi (December 16th to January 13th) leading up to the Pongal or harvest festival.

Like the kolams of Tamilnad, the 'alpana' or Rangoli of Bengal is also made with rice flour, ground to a paste. However, a rag is soaked in the paste and then made to trickle down the finger, tracing elaborate patterns. Many patterns indicate the endlessness of time, like the image of a king cobra, beginning at the mouth of another one, going on in circles, and representing eternity. The footprints of the Goddess Lakshmi are also regularly drawn in the 'alpana' patterns of Bengal.

Conclusion

The ancient art of Rangoli has adapted to changing times, especially when busy city folk no longer have the time to draw elaborate designs at their doorways. Waterproof sticker Rangolis are available now, as are metal templates of traditional designs. Hollow tin rollers, filled with rice flour, and dragged across the floor, produce perfectly symmetrical Rangolis too, and so are very popular. There are design sheets, books, and even Rangoli competitions in our modern cities. It is heartening to think that despite the fact that we live in a busy, ever-changing world, some of our endearing ancient folk arts, like Rangoli, embodying the very spirit of our social life, are still flourishing!

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- Pictures are taken from various free sources over the internet.

About the Author

Ms. Santhini Govindan is a widely published, award-winning author of children's literature in English. She has written more than fifty books for children, and has received two fellowships from the Government of India for research projects connected to Children's Literature in India.

