

Centre Medallion Composition in Kalamkari Tray Covers

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The seventeenth century rectangular hanging created in Coromandel coast that reached the museum of France is a significant example of *kalamkari*. It is preserved in the French city of Mulhouse at the Musée de l'impression sur étoffes de Mulhouse.¹ This hand painted *kalamkari* is decorated with vibrant colours and bold line work with an amazing composition.² Most fascinating design of the hanging illustrates centre medallion, hybrid bird, animal, lots of vegetation and architectural patterns. The design and composition of this *kalamkari* pose some questions like, its functional uses,³ who the artists were, who designed it, from where they took inspiration, who were the patrons, where it was created, was the creation centre different from the export centre, how it reached France, etc. Here is an attempt to understand the design, composition, its concept, its philosophy and the artistic expression, but before that, a quick look of the Mulhouse *kalamkari*.

The Mulhouse *kalamkari* is an amazing work of art having attractive design, unusual size and interesting composition (Fig.1). The centre medallion is in oval shape, which is full of vegetation pattern with projected pointed floral end on two sides. It is within the square frame, which illustrates lot of vegetation almost like a forest with various hybrids, mythical birds and animals in between. Row of narrow and broad borders depicts small flower *buties*, foliage pattern arranged in architectural panels, corner floral motifs, rock with flower-pattern, big size flower motifs of different types along with butterflies on two sides. Finally, the narrow plain red border balances the entire composition very well and makes it very attractive. It appears that artist has taken inspiration from Mughal monuments of Northern India for designing the floral border and its architectural panel type arrangement.⁴ Depiction of hybrid birds and animals,



Fig.1 : Hand painted and printed canopy/hanging, 17th century, South India
Mulhouse at the Musée de l'impression sur étoffes de Mulhouse, France

where figures are made with different animal figurine, remind the concept of 'Navgunjar'. Subject 'Navgunjar' is often portrayed in the traditional paintings of eastern, southern and western India. Artistic depiction is found in the paintings of sixteenth century onwards and became very popular by the eighteenth century.⁵ The Epic *Mahabharata* mentions that 'Navagunjar' is a creature composed of nine different animals.⁶ This *kalamkari* opens several aspects to be looked upon in detail as mentioned above; however, here is an attempt to look at the centre medallion in detail, its concept, style, variations and that too, in the context of three small hand painted tray coverings housed in the National Museum (NM) collection. There are some similarities and some differences in the NM coverings and Mulhouse *kalamkari*. This will be discussed further, but first let us get introduced to the NM's tray coverings.

Beautifully painted three small coverings (Figs.2, 3, 4) illustrate the attractive floral composition that belongs to the last quarter of 19th century.⁷ The size of all the three rectangular coverings with cotton-base are the same.⁸ The centre design on all the three has been composed in such a way that these coverings can be used from any side, which indicates that these could be tray covers. On the other hand, the usual coverlets are square in size and the main pattern remains on one side only.⁹ All the three coverings have similar colour palette, design and composition. Colours used for decorating these coverings are mainly red, black and green with black colour outline on the off-white background. The composition of covering illustrates floral patterned circular medallion in centre, which dominates the pattern and covers a large space. *Konia* (corner) motifs and interesting elongated six floral plants have been placed in between the centre. All the four *konia* motifs and tip of six floral plants leads to the centre medallion (Fig.5). Design of this elongated floral plant starts from small rock. Such depiction is common in tree of life compositions, where three pineapple fruits are placed on the top, flowers/leaves in the middle and a



Fig.2 : Tray cover, last quarter of 18th century, South India, cotton, hand painted and printed
National Museum, New Delhi, Acc.no. 48.7/47



Fig.3 : Tray cover, last quarter of 18th century, South India, cotton, hand painted and printed
National Museum, New Delhi, Acc.no. 48.7/55



Fig.4 : Tray cover, last quarter of 18th century, South India, cotton, hand painted and printed
National Museum, New Delhi, Acc.no. 60.327



Fig.5 : Detail of NM's tray cover illustrating four *konia* motifs and tip of six floral plants leading to centre medallion

pair of birds, looking downwards, at the lowest portion. Such elongated floral design gives the impression of floral motif from distance, although it's a combination of fruits, flower/leaf and birds. An interesting feature of illustration of pineapple is found in Golconda *kalamkari* coverlets also. 'An ascetic holding the pineapple' is very prominently painted in one of the NM's coverlet.¹⁰ Karnataka region is the prominent area for pineapple farming. Although pineapples are grown in Tamilnadu and Kerala also, but Karnataka is well known for quantity. Moreover, pineapple is a popular fruit, which is full of nutritious values. In *kalamkaris* these vegetation patterns are within rectangular frame of double borders; broad foliage and narrow plain red, complement the entire floral composition well in the limited colour palette and it gives the perfect balance to the composition.

The big circular centre medallion in the coverings of NM is composed of intermingling of floral creeper with birds and having projected pointed stylized leaf motif on two horizontal sides (Fig.6). Attractive illustration of birds and foliage in the centre medallion shows lots of movement and the way *konia buta* and other plant pattern leads to centre *buta* represents the 'Nature' or the 'Symbol of Life'. Such illustrations remind the ceiling decoration tradition of India, which are often found from the beginning of Indian art history. This appears to be inspired from nature and embedded with spirituality.

In fact, the depiction of nature is an integral part of Indian art and the Indian artists have always taken inspiration from nature. They have carved or painted the nature in three different forms, i.e. natural, symbolic and artistic. Nature has been illustrated as decorative motifs independently since Harappan times.¹¹ Later on, the flora-fauna designs became an integral part of decoration while illustrating the main deity or any other subject. Depiction of foliage pattern coming out from *makar-mukh*, dwarf and tree (concept of *kalpa-vrikshas*) were common subjects on terracotta sealings and stone sculptures of Mauryan and Shung periods.¹² Subsequently, many animals and birds became the vehicle of several prominent Hindu, Buddhist and Jaina deities and some deities with animal or bird face became an important part of the Hindu pantheon.¹³



Fig.6 : Detail of NM's tray cover (Acc.no.60.327) illustrating centre medallion

In addition to artistic expression of different forms of nature in Indian art, it also got the prominent place in discussion among Gods and saints as mentioned in many ancient scriptures. The Epics, Puranas and most of the texts advocate that man, who live in balanced harmony with nature, always leads to peace and prosperity.¹⁴ Nature's role as a great teacher is also mentioned in ancient texts. In *Mahabharat*, Lord Krishna advise Uddhava that 'man should learn from nature'. The 7th to 29th chapters of the 11th Skandha (Canto) of *Srimad Bhagavatam* came to be known as the *Uddhava Gita*.¹⁵ With all these philosophical aspects the 'nature' got embedded in the minds of the Indians and became an integral part of Indian art right from the beginning.

The centre medallion of NM's coverings is full of life, depicting movement of birds and foliage pattern. It appears that nature loving artisans were inspired

for such executions from the ceiling decorations of Indian temples.¹⁶ A railing from Bharhut stupa (2nd century BCE) depicts lotus medallion surmounted with rows of winged lion.¹⁷ The best ceiling decorations can be noticed in the mural paintings of Ajanta, especially in caves I & II, which have attractive and colourful compositions done with fine line work. The designs portray the movement of birds, dwarf and animal figures intermingled with foliage creepers. Both these caves date back to 2nd century BCE.¹⁸ The paintings and the composition of south Indian temples have many similarities with those of Ajanta. The famous scholar Dr. Rama Sivaram from Tamilnadu observes that, 'the likeness sketching, modelling, delineation and grouping of figures are freely used to draw parallels, to show continuity and migration in the Deccan and south India'.¹⁹ Both of them in their structural and rock-cut temples reserved wall surfaces and ceilings for large scale schemes in paintings. This tradition is well followed in temple ceiling decorations during the period of Pallavas. The temples at Madurai and Kanchi also refer to the artist's capability to reproduce movement and creation. Creativity was encouraged as seen in the Pattinappalai (lines 45-50) and fully realized in the painted canopies of the palaces. Tradition continued during the Chola, Vijayanagar and Nayaka periods, where the ceilings of Brihadishvara temple at Tanjavur, Lepakshi temple at Kanchipuram and Tiruvalur temple are painted with beautiful colours.²⁰

The centre medallion occupies the important place in the rectangular or square composition of *kalamkaris*, which are made for different purposes.²¹ Medallion is usually round, as NM's tray coverings have. Sometimes these medallions are oval in shape, like the one in canopy of Mulhouse museum (Fig.7) or floor-spread housed in the museum of Holland.²² The round medallion composition is very common in many Indian textiles, viz. moon-shawl of Kashmir²³ or the brocade *chaukora odhani* (square head-covering) of Banaras, Uttar Pradesh,²⁴ etc. *Kalamkaris* of southern India²⁵ have both the varieties, round and oval centre medallions.

By and large these medallions are filled with foliage patterns. Sometimes birds are also intermingled with stylized flower patterns as in the case of NM's tray coverings. Angels are depicted with floral creepers within the centre medallion of



Fig.7 : Detail of Mulhouse centre medallion

the floor-spread in the museum of Holland.²⁶ Such concept appears to be inspired by the stone sculptures of ancient and medieval periods, where the roundel often depicts floral-fauna pattern. Another interesting feature of medallion is to have two projected floral pointed ends or tips. These projections could be on horizontal base, like in NM's coverings, or vertical base, like in the floor-spread of Holland museum.

The outer lines of these medallions remain plain like NM's coverings. Another variety is the lobed composition, as in the case of coverlet of metropolitan museum. One of the painted table-cover depicts two lobed oval shape central medallions having pointed tip on horizontal facing. It also has corner segments and floral border and is preserved in Textile Museum, Washington DC, USA.²⁷ Prominently painted similar composition is also noticed in one of the coverlet housed in Victoria and Albert Museum, London. This coverlet illustrates an oval lobed central medallion, which has projected two ends on horizontal facing. It is

prominently filled with cross type foliage design and double projected ends.²⁸ Similar composition appears on the inner portion of the Bidari *pandan* (betel-box), base of *Kashkul* (dervish's begging bowl) (Fig.8) or on the manuscript cover. The sixteenth century Quran manuscript cover, having the seals of Shahjahan and Aurangzeb, illustrates the lobed oval medallion.²⁹

The composition of circular medallion along with *konia* pattern on corners is very common in floor-spread of Gujarat, moon-shawl of Kashmir, *zarzodi* embroidered carpets and so on.

The kind of variations in subject, designs found in different types of artifacts and *kalamkaris* show the artistic skill of artists of the southern region. With the bold line works and vibrant colours, *kalamkaris* of South India created a special niche among the hand printed categories of Indian traditional textiles in the



Fig.8 : Back portion of *kashkul*, coco-de-mer, carved nut shell, 17th century, Deccan, National Museum

seventeenth-eighteenth centuries. Golconda, the export centre, is designated to most of these beautiful *kalamkaris*, although these were produced at different centres like Sickinaikkenpat, Tanjore, Pulicat in Tamilnadu, Kalahasti, Mauslipatam in Andhra Pradesh and Srikakulam district in the border of Odisha and Andhra Pradesh. These hangings, curtains, canopies, floor-spreads and coverlets were produced for domestic and export market. The nature-loving Indian artists made many such *kalamkaris*, which were in great demand all over the world. The medallions remain the centre of attraction in most of these *kalamkaris* of Southern India.

References & Notes

1. The Museum of Printed Textiles, Mulhouse, France.
2. On the basis of subject, such flora-fauna *Kalamkaris* are one of the varieties out of three styles, other two subjects are religious narrative and composition of multiple figures.
3. Mulhouse museum records mention that it is the floor-cover/hanging; however, the centre medallion surrounded with forest, animals, birds and two side flower *butas* give the impression that it is a canopy and not a hanging or floor-spread.
4. E.B. Findly, 'Nur Jahan's Embroidery Trade and Flowers of the Taj Mahal', *Arts and Culture*, Vol-IX, No.2, 1996, pp.7-25.
5. J.P. Das, *Puri Painting*, New Delhi, 1982, pp.135-36; N.P. Ahuja, *The Body in Indian Art and Thought*, Brussels, 2013, p.175, pls.195-96. Several museums (Craft Museum, Delhi; Indian Museum, Kolkata; City Palace, Jaipur; State Museum, Odisha; Salar Jung Museum, Hyderabad; National Museum, Delhi; Metropolitan Museum, USA, etc.) have miniature paintings illustrating rock and composite animals of Persian, Deccani and Rajasthani painting schools.
6. Devdutt Pattanaik, *Indian Mythology: Tales, Symbols and Rituals from the Heart of the Subcontinent*, 2003, Inner Traditions, USA, pp.19-21.
7. There are two or three similar pieces in US museums and one is in Calico Museum, which is published by J. Irwin and M. Hall in a book on printed and painted fabric, acc.no. 71. Author is thankful to Mr. Rahul Jain for sharing this information.

8. Length and width of three coverings are - (a) 77x 44.5 cms, (b) 80x46 cms and (c) 81.5x46 cms.
9. John Irwin, 'Golconda Cotton Paintings of the Early Seventeenth Century', *Lalit Kala-5*, New Delhi, pp.32-34, pl.A, figs.16-20.
10. A. Pathak, 'The Textile Collection at the National Museum, New Delhi', *Heritage Conservation and Research in India*, Ed. Gabriela Krist and Tatjana Bayerova, Austria, 2010, pp.147-154, pl.1.
11. S. Satyawadi, *Proto-Historic Pottery of Indus Valley Civilization: Study of Painted Motifs*, Delhi, 1994.
12. R.R. Tripathi, *Masterpieces in the Allahabad Museum*, Allahabad, 1984, pp.51-52, fig.87.
13. P. Pal, *Divine Images Human Visions*, Canada, 1997, pp.35-40.
14. *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* have minute narration of forest, mountain, ocean, etc. The main hero of both the Epics spent long time in the forest. Many Puranas advocate for tree plantation, tree worship, etc.
15. He explains 'nature' as a great teacher, which teaches many things of life. Few important ones are - one should learn the virtue of patience from the Earth, we should be like the wind-unattached to anything in life, not sorrowing over the past or worrying about the future. Clean water purifies a place and so does a virtuous man, purifying others. Moon shrinks and is lost to sight, so will our lives wither away one day. We can learn satiation from the python; once he has eaten and is full, it does not attack a creature, even if the creature turns up close to it. Just like ocean does not show unhappiness because of lack of water from a dry river reaching to it, we should also remain calm and undisturbed by anything in life. He further says that desires could lead us to disaster. Nature is not partial to anybody as mother earth, sunlight, air, water, tree, etc. treats everybody equally.
16. R.R. Tripathi, *ibid.*, p.11, fig.14.
17. Osamu Takata and Teruo Ueno, *The Art of India*, Japan, 1976, p.124.
18. A. Ghosh, *Ajanta*, Delhi, 1987, pls.V, VIII, XVI, XXV and XLV.
19. 'Influence of Ajanta in the Deccan and South Indian Painting', *The Art of Ajanta New Perspectives*, vol.2, Delhi, 1992, pp.467-476.
20. C. Sivaramamurti, *Indian Painting*, Delhi, 1970, pp.63-78.

21. The prominent uses are coverlet, covering, floor-spread, tent, hanging, etc.
22. Fries Museum, Leecewarden, Holland, Ebeltje Harthamp-Jonxia, *Sits East-West Relates in Textile*, Uitgeverij Waanders-Zwalle, 1987, p.99, pl.76.
23. A. Pathak, *Pashmina*, New Delhi, 2003, pp.49-56.
24. Y. Agrawal, *Silk Brocades*, Delhi, 2003, p.27, pls.10 and 10a.
25. Lotika Varadrajan, *South Indian Traditions of Kalamkari*, Ahmedabad, 1982.
26. This 1650-1700 CE cotton base floor-spread's border is figurative; field is filled with repeat pattern of flora-fauna, probably done with printing block and animal figures worked in opposite direction. It appears that for decorating this floor-spread probably wooden printing blocks have been used, as evident from repeat of same animal and floral pattern alternatively.
27. M. Gittinger, *Master Dyers of the World*, US, 1982, pl.75, p.86.
28. M. Gittinger, *ibid.*, pl.102, p.111.
29. Naseem Akhtar, in *Art and Culture Around 1492*, Spain, 1992, p.281, pl.198.