

Sri Kalahasti is known for its centuries-old textile art, Kalamkari, which was once in danger of vanishing completely. **ISABEL PUTINJA** traces its journey from the sacred sanctums of South India's temples to the catwalks of the country's most prominent fashion shows



Fabric OF THE EARTH

ISABEL PUTINJA: GAURANG SHAH



Opening spread, clockwise from top left: The deep blue sari by designer Gaurang Shah is a natural colour from the indigo plant; Kalamkari designs featured prominently in Gaurang Shah's spring/summer collection; inspired by nature, Jonnalagadda Niranjan's artistic work has been exhibited at art galleries and exhibitions across India and abroad



nestled between two hills on the banks of the sacred Swarnamukhi river, Sri Kalahasti's 10th-century Sri Kalahasteeswara Temple in the South Indian state of Andhra Pradesh is an obligatory stop for pilgrims on their way to or from nearby Tirumala, one of Hinduism's holiest sites. But Sri Kalahasti is also the home of Kalamkari, a traditional textile art created with natural vegetable dyes in rich, earthy colours. Using a fine, pen-like instrument made of bamboo called a *kalam* (hence the name Kalamkari), artisans draw figures depicting gods and goddesses and stories from Hindu mythology, as well as floral and nature motifs, on natural fabrics. While another style of Kalamkari from the town of Masulipatnam (about 400km from Sri Kalahasti) uses a block printing technique, the Kalamkari art particular to Sri Kalahasti is drawn freehand.



CORBIS, GETTY IMAGES; ISABEL PUTINIA



COLOURFUL LEGACY

Kalamkari was wildly popular in 17th- and 18th-century Europe, where it was known as "chintz". The demand for this highly prized decorated cloth was much greater than its supply. By the mid-18th century, imports of Indian textiles were prohibited to protect domestic markets in Europe, and with the onset of the industrial revolution, machine-made textiles decorated with chemical dyes replaced imports from India.

The history of this ancient textile tradition spans more than 3,000 years and has its origins in South India's temples. Like the beautifully painted murals on their ceilings and walls, richly decorated cloth banners were hung inside temple sanctums and used to adorn temple chariots during religious processions.

With the curtailment on export to Europe under the British, this textile art experienced a severe decline and was in danger of disappearing altogether. It was freedom fighter Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay who took up the cause of saving India's handicraft traditions, establishing the All India Handicrafts Board and opening a Kalamkari training centre in Sri Kalahasti in 1957, under the guidance of local artisans.

CLOSE TO NATURE

Kalamkari is closely connected to the natural elements. The traditional process is a lengthy and meticulous one, and entirely handmade from start to finish. It is eco-friendly and sustainable: the cloth is handspun cotton, while the tools and vegetable dyes are made from sticks, roots, berries, nuts, leaves and flowers. Cow and sheep dung (to dissolve starch and oil in the cloth) and milk (to prevent the dyes from spreading) are also utilised in the processing. Unsurprisingly, the textiles have a pungent, earthy smell, which reveals their deep roots in nature.



A NEW GENERATION OF ARTISTS

On our way to local Kalamkari artist Jonnalagadda Niranjan's rural workshop, we leave the bustling temple town and pass through verdant fields, trees heavy with mangoes and even drive through a gushing stream. Yards of colourful cloth dry in the fields.

Like many Indian art traditions, Kalamkari is passed down from one generation to the next. Niranjan is a fourth-generation Kalamkari artist, and his daughter, J. Gowthami, who is completing her studies in textile design, is the fifth generation in a long lineage of renowned artisans who have all contributed to the preservation of this art. The masterpieces of his grandfather, J. Lakshmaiah, hang in London's Victoria and Albert Museum, and his father, J. Gurappa Chetty, received the prestigious title Padma Shri from the Indian government.

"Until the 1950s, Kalamkari was kept in the family and community," explains Niranjan. "But when the training centre opened, anyone who had the interest to learn was welcome to receive training." He estimates that there are more than 2,000 Kalamkari artists in Sri Kalahasti today, but few come from the traditional artisan families. "I have personally

This spread, clockwise from centre: Kalamkari was once the domain of male artisans, but has now been passed on to women; the intricate motifs and designs can be drawn freehand or created by block printing technique; Hindu gods preside over Kalamkari's elaborate process

trained 60 to 70 women who come from local tribal communities. Training runs for a year for which they're paid a daily wage, and after this they are offered a job in my workshop. Tribal women show more interest in learning the art because they can make a good living with this craft."

In the workshop, long tables stretch along the length of the room where the women artists are busy filling in the colours on the borders of handloom saris destined for a high-end Indian boutique. In one corner sits a small makeshift shrine to the Hindu gods Ganesh and Krishna, because in India, art is worship.

CHANGING ETHOS

While artisans in Sri Kalahasti still create the beautiful wall hangings, which are still popular today, Kalamkari's intricate designs and motifs are also used to decorate garments, table and bed linens, accessories like handbags, even jewellery.

Some artisans even work closely with India's top designers to create designs according to their needs. "There can be a gap between the artisans' tradition and what the modern customer wants to buy," explains Sanhita Kandpal, head of apparel design at Caravan Craft, a Bangalore-based design store that works with artisan communities across India to revitalise the traditional handicraft sector. "Kalamkari designs can be very 'busy' so we use them in a more fashion-aligned way while keeping true to the technique and essence. Our customers appreciate the crafting tradition, time and skill involved, and understand the difference between 'handicraft' and 'handcrafted'."



FASHION CHARGE

The textile art's rich colours and striking motifs are also a permanent fixture on the runways of India's biggest fashion shows, with the country's top designers like Ritu Kumar, Asmita Marwa, Sashikant Naidu and Gaurang Shah regularly incorporating Kalamkari designs in their collections. "It complements and blends well with natural fabrics," says Hyderabad-based fashion designer Gaurang Shah, whose spring/summer collection at Mumbai's Lakme Fashion Week in March featured many stunning fabrics made of traditional weaves paired with Kalamkari.

"It is actually very adaptable – I use it for salwaar suits (traditional tunic sets), dupattas

(long scarves), menswear and combine it with different fabrics, not only khadi (handspun cotton) but also silks like muga and tussar. I've been using Kalamkari designs in my collections for over 11 years. They always get a fabulous response because they are perennially popular."

This ancient textile art is an example of one of India's many handicraft traditions that has escaped extinction, adapting with the times, taking on new contemporary forms with each generation. Kalamkari continues as a living tradition that's not about to fade away.

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ISABEL PUTINJA

Part of the lengthy and elaborate fabric-making process requires rinsing the dyed cloth under running water to avoid uneven patches from forming. Thanks to the natural, eco-friendly dyes, the water can be reused to water the fields

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