

# FROM A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF PAINTING TRADITIONS IN ANCIENT MURALS TO CONTEMPORARY ART OF KARNATAKA

**M.C. Sudhakara**

Assistant Professor of History, Sri Siddaganga Evening College of Arts and Commerce,  
Tumkur

**A.N. Gayathri**

Assistant Professor of Sociology, Field Marshal K M Cariappa College, Madikeri

---

## ABSTRACT

The rich artistic heritage of Karnataka is exemplified by its diverse painting traditions, which have evolved over centuries under the influence of various dynasties, cultural interactions, and religious movements. This paper explores the history of painting in Karnataka, tracing its origins from the ancient murals of the Chalukyas in the 6th century to the exquisite Mysore paintings developed under the Wodeyars. Significant contributions from the Chalukyas, Hoysalas, and the Vijayanagara Empire are examined, highlighting the unique styles, techniques, and themes that emerged during each period. The influence of colonialism and the emergence of modern art in Karnataka further illustrate the state's dynamic artistic landscape. Through this exploration, the paper highlights Karnataka's pivotal role in the broader narrative of Indian art, revealing how its painting traditions continue to adapt and inspire contemporary artists.

**Keywords:** Karnataka, painting history, Chalukyas, Hoysalas, Vijayanagara Empire, Mysore paintings, cultural heritage, modern art, artistic traditions, Indian art.

## INTRODUCTION

Karnataka, a region blessed with a rich and varied cultural heritage, has a long and illustrious tradition of painting, which stands as a testament to the artistic sensibilities of its people through the ages. Among the many art forms that thrived here, painting holds a unique place, having been shaped by the political, religious, and cultural shifts that occurred over centuries. From the early cave paintings of the Chalukya dynasty to the intricate works of the Vijayanagara period and the exquisite Mysore paintings, each era has contributed distinct styles and techniques, adding layers to the region's artistic fabric. The history of painting in Karnataka reflects a continuous evolution influenced by the many rulers, patrons, and cultures that left their mark on the state.

## EARLY BEGINNINGS

The roots of Karnataka's painting tradition can be traced back to the ancient period, with some of the earliest examples found in the cave temples of Badami, constructed under the Chalukya dynasty in the 6th century AD. These caves, dedicated to Hindu deities, display murals that depict various mythological scenes and episodes from the lives of the rulers. The paintings, done in natural pigments, show a deep connection to the classical Gupta style of art, known for its refined and graceful portrayal of figures.

The Badami murals, with their fluid lines and vibrant colors, are an important starting point in the history of Karnataka's painting. As the Chalukyan empire expanded, this tradition spread to other regions such as Aihole and Pattadakal, both of which became centers of artistic activity. The paintings found in these locations exhibit a harmonious blend of local

styles with broader Indian influences, demonstrating the Chalukyas' role in laying the foundations of Karnataka's rich painting tradition.

### CHALUKYAN PERIOD

The Chalukyas of Badami, who ruled from the 6th to the 8th centuries, were known for their patronage of both architecture and painting. The Virupaksha Temple in Pattadakal, a UNESCO World Heritage site, is a prime example of Chalukyan artistic excellence. The murals found within this temple are renowned for their detailed depiction of religious themes, particularly scenes from Hindu epics like the **Ramayana** and **Mahabharata**. These murals are characterized by their intricate detailing, vibrant use of color, and their ability to convey narrative through visual storytelling.

The Chalukyan influence continued into the 10th to 12th centuries during the reign of the Western Chalukyas, with murals being created in temples in regions like Lakkundi and Gadag. During this period, the style became more refined, with the figures showing more elaborate ornamentation and a greater sense of realism. The murals from this period also began to focus more on divine figures, reflecting the religious fervor of the time.

### HOYSALA PERIOD

As the Chalukyas declined, the Hoysalas rose to prominence in Karnataka from the 11th to the 14th centuries. While the Hoysalas are more famously known for their architectural achievements, particularly the intricately carved temples at Belur and Halebidu, painting was also an integral part of their artistic expression. The remnants of murals found in the **Chennakesava Temple** at Belur and the **Hoysaleswara Temple** at Halebidu reveal an affinity for detailed narrative art, focusing on religious stories and depictions of deities.

Although many of these murals have faded over time, they provide insight into the Hoysala painting style, which emphasized intricate patterns and elaborate iconography. The Hoysalas were instrumental in developing a regional style that would influence later periods, particularly in their detailed portrayal of mythological narratives, which became a hallmark of Karnataka's art in the following centuries.

### VIJAYANAGARA EMPIRE

The Vijayanagara Empire, which rose to power in the 14th century and lasted until the 17th century, marked a golden age for art and culture in Karnataka. Under the patronage of the Vijayanagara rulers, painting flourished as part of a larger cultural renaissance. The **Vijayanagara School of Art** is best known for its murals, frescoes, and manuscript paintings, which can still be seen in temples and royal structures across the region.

The murals in the **Virupaksha Temple** in Hampi, the empire's capital, are among the best-preserved examples of Vijayanagara painting. These vibrant frescoes depict scenes from the **Ramayana**, **Mahabharata**, and other religious stories, as well as royal processions and court life. The Vijayanagara style is characterized by its bold outlines, strong use of color, and dynamic compositions. The figures are often depicted in motion, creating a sense of energy and movement that distinguishes these murals from the more static compositions of earlier periods.

The Vijayanagara period also saw the production of **miniature paintings**, often done on palm leaf manuscripts. These miniatures, used to illustrate religious texts, are noted for their intricate detailing and vibrant use of color, showing the high level of artistic skill that flourished under Vijayanagara rule.

## MYSORE PAINTINGS

After the fall of the Vijayanagara Empire, the Wodeyars of Mysore came to power and developed their own distinct style of painting, known as **Mysore painting**. This style, which reached its height in the 17th and 18th centuries, is characterized by its delicate lines, muted colors, and intricate detailing. One of the most distinctive features of Mysore paintings is the **gesso technique**, where a paste made from gold foil and other materials is used to create raised surfaces, giving the paintings a three-dimensional effect.

Mysore paintings are predominantly religious in nature, with most works depicting scenes from Hindu mythology. The deities **Krishna**, **Rama**, and **Lakshmi** are popular subjects, and these paintings were often commissioned for use in temples and private worship. The Wodeyars, as patrons of the arts, played a crucial role in preserving and promoting this tradition, ensuring that Mysore painting became one of Karnataka's most significant contributions to Indian art.

## INFLUENCE OF COLONIALISM AND MODERN ART

The British colonial period brought about significant changes in the art world, and Karnataka was no exception. With the arrival of European artists and techniques, traditional Indian painting styles began to incorporate new elements such as perspective, realism, and shading. However, local artists managed to retain the essential themes and motifs of Karnataka's painting tradition, blending the old with the new.

The establishment of **art schools in Mysore and Bangalore** during the 19th and 20th centuries helped formalize the training of artists and paved the way for the emergence of a modern art movement in Karnataka. Artists such as **K.K. Hebbar** and **Yusuf Arakkal** became prominent figures in Indian modern art, combining the traditional themes of Karnataka with modernist techniques. Their work reflects a deep engagement with both the past and the present, demonstrating how Karnataka's painting tradition continues to evolve and inspire new generations of artists.

## MODERN ART IN KARNATAKA

The development of modern art in Karnataka, which started in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, marked a significant shift from traditional artistic practices. This era was shaped by two key influences: the long-standing heritage of Karnataka's painting traditions and the arrival of European artistic techniques during British colonial rule. The colonial period introduced Karnataka artists to Western concepts such as realism, the use of perspective, and techniques like shading, all of which were relatively new in the Indian art landscape. However, despite these European influences, the artists retained strong connections to their own cultural roots, incorporating motifs and themes drawn from Karnataka's rich tradition of murals and miniature paintings, including the famous Mysore and Vijayanagara styles.

Artists like **K.K. Hebbar** and **Yusuf Arakkal** played pivotal roles in defining modern art in Karnataka. Hebbar, known for his deep attachment to rural Karnataka, was famous for his depiction of everyday life, particularly the lives of villagers and folklore. His works reflect a simplicity in form but are deeply emotional, often capturing the essence of India's rural heartland. Hebbar's art seamlessly blended tradition with modernist sensibilities, maintaining a balance between cultural identity and contemporary techniques.

**Yusuf Arakkal**, another significant figure, was a modernist painter whose works frequently tackled social issues such as poverty, urban alienation, and human suffering. Arakkal's art, while modern in technique and presentation, was often introspective, drawing attention to the struggles of marginalized communities. He managed to incorporate elements of both Western

modernism and Indian traditionalism, using these influences to comment on societal conditions, thereby adding depth and context to Karnataka's modern art movement.

## CONTEMPORARY ART IN KARNATAKA

Contemporary art in Karnataka is vibrant and dynamic, reflecting the globalized world in which it operates while staying true to the state's rich cultural heritage. Today, Karnataka's artists are exploring a vast range of styles and mediums, from painting and sculpture to installations, video art, and digital media. Contemporary works are characterized by their diversity of themes, often addressing social issues such as globalization, identity, and cultural memory, alongside personal explorations of self-expression.

One key feature of contemporary art in Karnataka is its fusion of tradition with innovation. Many artists draw on Karnataka's historical art forms, such as the Mysore paintings or Chitrakathi traditions, reinterpreting them in a modern context. This blend of old and new allows artists to explore complex themes like the intersection of the global and the local, the past and the present.

Artists today also engage with new technologies and mediums. The rise of digital art forms, including video installations, digital painting, and interactive media, marks a shift in how art is both created and experienced. Installations, particularly those that engage with environmental issues or urban development, have become more common, often exhibited in spaces like the Karnataka Chitrakala Parishath and Venkatappa Art Gallery. These works encourage viewers to rethink their relationship with the natural and built environment.

## VENKATAPPA ART GALLERY

The **Venkatappa Art Gallery**, located in the heart of Bengaluru, stands as a cornerstone of Karnataka's artistic landscape. Named after the renowned artist **K. Venkatappa**, whose legacy includes contributions to traditional and modern Indian art, the gallery has become a hub for the state's artists and art lovers. It showcases a permanent collection of Venkatappa's works, which range from delicate watercolors and pencil sketches to sculptures. His art, particularly his landscapes, are noted for their attention to detail and capture the essence of Karnataka's natural beauty.

Over time, Venkatappa Art Gallery has evolved to include a broader array of exhibitions, spanning both modern and contemporary works. It has provided a platform for emerging and established artists alike to showcase their talents. The gallery frequently hosts solo and group exhibitions, allowing contemporary artists to engage with themes such as urbanization, identity, and the role of tradition in the modern world. It has also become a site for artistic collaborations and experimental works, with artists pushing the boundaries of traditional mediums, often combining painting, sculpture, and digital technology in innovative ways.

The gallery's commitment to promoting diverse artistic voices has made it a critical space for artistic discourse in Karnataka. Recent exhibitions have focused on the intersection of heritage and modernity, exploring how Karnataka's artistic legacy continues to influence contemporary practices.

## KARNATAKA CHITRAKALA PARISHATH

The **Karnataka Chitrakala Parishath (KCP)** is one of the most significant art institutions in Karnataka. Founded in 1960, KCP has grown into a centre for art education and cultural exchange. The institution plays a dual role: it is both an art school that trains new generations of artists and a gallery that exhibits works from various regions and traditions. KCP's galleries offer a wide array of exhibitions, from classical Indian art forms like Tanjore and

Mysore paintings to contemporary artworks that explore modern themes through cutting-edge techniques.

One of KCP's most celebrated events is the **Chitra Santhe**, an annual art fair that draws artists and visitors from across the country. This event provides a platform for emerging artists to showcase their work alongside established names, offering a space where traditional crafts meet contemporary innovations.

In recent years, KCP has expanded its focus to include modern art forms, particularly digital and multimedia works. Installations, video art, and performance pieces have become more prominent, reflecting the growing interest in interdisciplinary approaches to art. This reflects a broader trend in the art world, where traditional boundaries between artistic mediums are becoming increasingly blurred. KCP's willingness to embrace these new forms ensures that it remains at the cutting edge of the Indian art scene while still honoring the rich traditions of Karnataka's artistic heritage.

## RECENT DEVELOPMENTS IN ART FORMS

Karnataka's art scene has undergone a series of exciting developments in recent years, with artists increasingly turning to new forms of expression and experimentation.

**Digital and Multimedia Art:** One of the most significant shifts in Karnataka's art world has been the rise of digital and multimedia art. Artists are now using digital tools such as virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR) to create immersive art experiences. These new media allow for interactive installations where viewers can engage with the art in real-time, transforming passive spectatorship into active participation.

**Environmental Art:** Another important development has been the rise of environmental art. Many contemporary artists in Karnataka are using their work to comment on environmental issues such as deforestation, pollution, and climate change. These works often use recycled or natural materials to create installations that highlight the impact of human activity on the environment. This type of art not only makes a statement but also encourages viewers to reflect on their own relationship with the natural world.

**Public Art Initiatives:** Public art has gained momentum as a way to democratize art by taking it out of galleries and placing it in everyday spaces. Across Karnataka, murals, sculptures, and installations are appearing in urban areas, transforming the visual landscape of cities like Bengaluru. These public works often carry social or political messages, engaging the community in discussions about identity, history, and social justice.

**Performance Art:** Performance art has emerged as a powerful medium in Karnataka, with artists using their bodies and live actions to challenge social norms and explore complex issues such as gender, identity, and power. Performance art creates a direct and often emotional connection between the artist and the audience, making it an effective tool for addressing contemporary social issues.

## CONCLUSION

The history of painting in Karnataka is a rich and diverse tapestry that reflects the state's long-standing commitment to artistic excellence. From the ancient murals of Badami to the vibrant frescoes of Vijayanagara and the intricate Mysore paintings, each period has contributed new styles, techniques, and themes to the tradition. Today, Karnataka's painting heritage remains a vital part of India's cultural legacy, as modern and contemporary artists continue to draw inspiration from these traditions. As Karnataka's painting history continues



to evolve, it adapts to new contexts while preserving the unique artistic identity that has made it a cornerstone of Indian art.

## REFERENCES

1. Bagodi, Mallikarjun C. "Surpur Painting: Regional Art Style of Karnataka." International Education & Research Journal (IERJ), Vol. 9, No. 9 (Sept 2023).
2. Devaraj, D. V. & Patil, Channabasappa S.(1996). 'Art and Architecture in Karnataka'. Bangalore: Directorate of Archaeology and Museums, Karnataka, 1996
3. Gawani, P. B. (2017). 'A Study About the Paintings in the Museums of Karnataka' (Kannada). Bangalore: Directorate of Archaeology & Museums, Karnataka, 2017.
4. Kulkarni, H. Raghavendra. (2022). 'Chitramantapa: Wall Paintings at Mysore. Delhi: Agam Kala Prakashan,
5. Rao, S. R., & Sastry, B. V. K. (1980). ' Traditional Paintings of Karnataka'. Bengaluru: Karnataka Chitrakala Parishath.
6. Shekar, Veena. (2010)Historical Paintings of Srirangapatna: A Stylistic Study. Bangalore: Herman Publishing House, 2010.
7. Sunder, Sumithra. (2021). When Modern meets Contemporary: Venkatappa Art Gallery and Informal Art Education in Bangalore. 'Artha'. Journal of Social Sciences, 38
8. A History of Karnataka Art. (2017). *Indian Art History Journal*, 11(1), 34-49.
9. Mysore Paintings: The Golden Era of Art in Karnataka. (2018). *Journal of Indian Art History*, 5(2), 55-72.
10. The Impact of Colonialism on Art Forms in Karnataka. (2019). *Journal of Cultural Studies*, 13(1), 102-116.