



## **THE ARTISTRY OF MURAL PAINTINGS - EXPLORING CULTURAL NARRATIVES AND CONNECTIONS TO BHARATANATYAM.**

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### **Abstract**

Mural painting is a form of art that involves painting directly on walls, ceilings, or other large permanent surfaces. This art form has a deep history, evolving across cultures to reflect social, religious, and political themes. The murals of Lepakshi in Andhra Pradesh, India, stand as remarkable examples of the Vijayanagara style of art. These paintings illustrate scenes from Indian mythology, blending intricate detail with vibrant colours, showcasing the zenith of mural artistry during the 16th century. This paper explores the historical development of mural painting, focusing on the Lepakshi murals, their techniques, themes, and cultural significance, while also drawing comparisons to other notable murals in India and abroad. Additionally, the paper delves into the connection between these murals and Bharatanatyam, highlighting how both art forms encapsulate narrative storytelling and aesthetic excellence.

**Keywords:** Mural painting, Lepakshi, Vijayanagara Empire, Indian art, fresco, cultural heritage, mythology, temple murals, Ajanta, Ellora, Sistine Chapel, Natya, Bharatanatyam.

### **Introduction**

Mural painting, as an art form, has been practiced globally since prehistoric times, with the earliest examples found in caves. Over centuries, murals transitioned from cave walls to monumental architecture, embodying cultural, spiritual, and political narratives. In India, mural art has been integral to its architectural heritage, adorning temples, palaces, and public spaces. Among the most celebrated examples are the murals of Lepakshi, located in Andhra Pradesh. These 16th-century paintings reflect the aesthetic and spiritual essence of the Vijayanagara Empire, illustrating mythological tales and religious iconography with extraordinary craftsmanship. Additionally, India's mural traditions extend to the celebrated Ajanta and Ellora caves in Maharashtra, the exquisite Kerala murals, and the dynamic Shekhawati frescoes of

Rajasthan. Globally, mural painting has flourished in regions such as Europe, with the Sistine Chapel being a quintessential example of Renaissance artistry. This paper also examines how Lepakshi murals connect to Bharatanatyam, reflecting shared narrative structures and expressive elements.

### **Historical Background of Mural Painting**

The origin of mural painting dates back to the Paleolithic era, with notable examples found in the Lascaux Caves in France and Bhimbetka rock shelters in India. These early works were symbolic, depicting hunting scenes and abstract patterns. As civilizations advanced, murals evolved to become more narrative, portraying religious and social themes. In India, the tradition of mural painting flourished during the Mauryan period, gaining prominence in Ajanta and Ellora caves (2nd century BCE to 6th century CE). Techniques like fresco-secco (painting on dry plaster) were developed, allowing for intricate detailing and vibrant coloration.

The advent of Hindu temple architecture saw a shift in mural themes, focusing on mythological epics, gods, and celestial beings. Regional styles emerged, each with distinct characteristics, such as the Pahari murals in the north, Kerala murals in the south, and Shekhawati frescoes in Rajasthan. Globally, the Renaissance period saw the apex of mural painting in Europe, epitomized by Michelangelo's frescoes in the Sistine Chapel (1508–1512). Other significant examples include Diego Rivera's murals in Mexico, which highlight social and political themes.

### **Lepakshi Mural Paintings**

The Lepakshi temple, also known as Veerabhadra Temple, is a treasure trove of Vijayanagara art and architecture. Built around 1530 CE by Virupanna and Viranna, the temple is renowned for its extensive mural paintings. These murals, executed on the ceilings and walls, depict episodes from the Ramayana, Mahabharata, and Puranas, along with intricate floral and geometric designs.

### **Techniques and Materials**

The Lepakshi murals were created using the fresco-secco technique, where pigments were applied on a dry lime-plastered surface. Natural colours derived from minerals, plants, and shells were used, providing longevity and vibrancy to the artwork. The artists employed fine brushes made of animal hair to achieve detailed expressions and delicate strokes.

### **Themes, Iconography, and Stories**

The murals at Lepakshi are a confluence of religious devotion and artistic excellence. Key depictions include the coronation or the Pattabhisheka of Rama, the celestial dance of Shiva, the Nataraja,

and the divine trinity of Brahma, Vishnu, and Maheshwara. One of the most captivating stories depicted is the episode of Virabhadra's creation, where Shiva manifests a fierce form to avenge the insult to his consort Sati. Another prominent painting illustrates the celestial assembly of gods and apsaras (divine dancers), symbolizing cosmic harmony.

These narratives resonate deeply with the principles of Natya as outlined in the Natya Shastra, the ancient treatise on performing arts. The dynamic postures, expressive gestures, and intricate details seen in these murals parallel the techniques and storytelling modes of Bharatanatyam, a classical Indian dance form. For instance, the depiction of Shiva as Nataraja mirrors the Ananda Tandava, which forms a core motif in Bharatanatyam. The visual representation of hasta mudras and bhavas (the expressions) in the murals highlights their intrinsic connection to dance.

### **Connection to Bharatanatyam**

Bharatanatyam, deeply rooted in the Natya Shastra, is an amalgamation of narrative storytelling, rhythm, and expression. The murals at Lepakshi reflect similar attributes, serving as visual guides for the dramatization of mythological tales. For instance, the portrayal of Shiva's cosmic dance (Nataraja) aligns with Bharatanatyam's emphasis on conveying cosmic balance through intricate footwork, hand gestures, and facial expressions.

The apsaras and celestial beings depicted in the murals are often shown in graceful postures resembling Bharatanatyam's karanas. These connections highlight how the art forms mutually reinforce cultural narratives, creating a continuum of visual and performing arts. Additionally, the use of vibrant colours and intricate designs in the murals parallels the elaborate costumes and adornments worn by Bharatanatyam dancers, further bridging the two art forms.

### **Comparisons with Other Indian Murals**

The Ajanta murals, predating Lepakshi by nearly a millennium, depict the life of Buddha and Jataka tales with a similar focus on intricate detail and narrative depth. The Ellora caves complement this tradition with Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain themes. Kerala murals, spanning the medieval period, are notable for their vibrant use of natural pigments and depiction of Puranic stories. In northern India, the Shekhawati frescoes in Rajasthan stand out for their secular themes, showcasing daily life, local heroes, and European influences.

### **Global Context**

Globally, mural painting traditions offer fascinating parallels. Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel frescoes in Vatican City exemplify the Renaissance emphasis on humanism and biblical narratives. In Mexico, Diego Rivera's 20<sup>th</sup> century murals reflect social realism and the struggles of the working class. East Asian mural traditions, such as those in the Dunhuang caves of China, highlight Buddhist iconography with exquisite craftsmanship and delicate colour palettes.

### **Cultural Significance**

The Lepakshi murals are not merely decorative but serve as a medium for storytelling, spiritual engagement, and cultural documentation. They reflect the syncretism of art and religion during the Vijayanagara period, emphasizing devotion, morality, and cosmology. The interplay of murals with Natya and Bharatanatyam further underscores their cultural depth, as both art forms celebrate the synthesis of movement, expression, and rhythm. Similarly, murals worldwide act as mirrors of their respective societies, preserving histories, ideologies, and artistic innovation.

### **Conclusion**

Mural painting, as exemplified by the Lepakshi murals, is a testament to the enduring legacy of Indian art. These paintings encapsulate the technical brilliance and spiritual fervor of the Vijayanagara Empire, serving as a cultural bridge between the past and the present. When viewed in the broader context of Indian and global mural traditions, they underscore the universal appeal and adaptability of this art form. The connection between murals and performing arts like Bharatanatyam further enriches their significance. Preserving such heritage is vital for understanding and appreciating the artistic and historical continuum of humanity.

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