

TECHNIQUE OF GOA KAAVI ART

Kaavi art is a traditional mural and architectural decorative art associated with Goa and the wider Konkan coast of India. Its defining feature is the use of reddish-brown laterite pigment and pale lime plaster to create intricate designs through a process known as incised plasterwork or sgraffito. Rather than relying only on conventional painting, the artisan creates the design by cutting into the red surface to reveal the contrasting white layer underneath.

The technique combines traditional material preparation, plaster application, skilled drawing, precise incising, and careful finishing. Historically, Kaavi decoration was used on temple walls, columns, arches, ceilings, and houses.

Materials used in Kaavi art

1. Laterite soil



Iron-rich red laterite soil is processed into a fine pigment that gives Kaavi art its characteristic terracotta or maroon-red appearance. The soil is sieved and ground to obtain a suitable consistency.

2. Shell lime



Traditionally, lime was prepared by burning cleaned seashells and processing the resulting material with water. After slaking and maturation, it formed lime putty for preparing the plaster layers.

3. River sand and organic additives



Clean sand and jaggery were traditionally incorporated into plaster mixtures. Historical recipes also describe other plant-derived additives, which could vary according to local practice and the desired properties of the mixture.

4. Traditional tools



Artisans use steel bodkins or pointed engraving tools, trowels, rulers, and compasses. Paper templates and perforated tracing patterns may help transfer complex motifs and maintain symmetry.

Step-by-step process of Kaavi art

Step 1: Preparation of the wall surface

The wall is cleaned and prepared to receive the plaster. Depending on the building and traditional construction method, a suitable base or rough plaster layer is applied first. Proper preparation helps the subsequent layers adhere to the surface.

Step 2: Application of the white lime-plaster layer

A pale plaster layer is prepared using traditional lime-based materials and sand. In documented traditional recipes, lime mixtures may be matured or fermented before application. This layer provides the white background that will eventually appear in the finished design.

Step 3: Preparation and application of the red Kaavi layer

Fine laterite pigment is mixed with lime putty to create a smooth red plaster mixture. This is spread over the prepared pale surface to form the coloured layer. The mixture must have an appropriate consistency for the next stage of incising.

Step 4: Drawing and incising the motifs

This is the defining stage of Kaavi art. The artisan draws or transfers the intended design and carefully incises the red layer with a pointed metal tool while the plaster is still workable. Removing the red surface reveals the pale layer beneath, creating the characteristic two-tone design.

Step 5: Detailing and refinement

The artisan refines the outlines, curves, borders, and small decorative details. Careful control of tool pressure and depth is important because the design is created by removing material rather than simply adding paint.

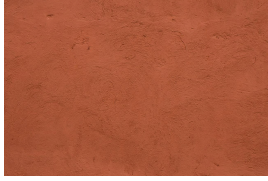
Step 6: Curing and finishing

The completed surface is allowed to set and cure under suitable conditions. Historical accounts describe controlled moistening and, in some traditions, polishing with smooth stones. Exact finishing practices vary, and conservation work should follow the requirements of the original plaster and mural.

How the Kaavi design is created

Understanding the two-layer technique

Before incising



The red Kaavi layer covers the pale plaster underneath.

After incising



The cut-away areas expose the pale layer, forming the pattern.

Common design elements

Floral and botanical motifs

Stylised flowers, lotus-like forms, leaves, and curling vines create symmetrical or repeating compositions.

Geometric motifs

Circles, triangles, chevrons, repeated bands, and other geometric elements define borders and architectural surfaces.

Figurative and narrative motifs

Some murals feature religious figures, mythological subjects, and scenes that communicate cultural or devotional narratives.

Significance of the technique

Kaavi art is notable for its distinctive combination of materials, craftsmanship, and architectural decoration. Its red-and-white contrast creates visual impact without requiring a wide range of pigments, while the incised method integrates the design directly into the plaster surface. Traditional lime-based construction also reflects adaptation to the environmental conditions of the Konkan coast.
