

HISTORY OF KAAVI ART

Introduction



Goa Kaavi art is a traditional mural art form associated with the cultural, architectural, and religious heritage of Goa, India. It is recognised for its distinctive reddish-brown designs created against a pale or white plaster background. The art is traditionally found on the walls, pillars, arches, and façades of temples and other heritage structures, where decorative patterns enhance the architectural beauty of the buildings. The term Kaavi is commonly associated with the reddish or ochre-like pigment used in this art form. Kaavi murals are distinguished by their contrast between red and white, intricate linework, geometric borders, floral motifs, and decorative representations. More than a form of wall decoration, Kaavi art reflects the artistic knowledge, craftsmanship, cultural practices, and religious traditions of Goan communities.

Historical origins and development

The exact date of origin of Kaavi art in Goa is difficult to establish conclusively. Its development is associated with regional building traditions, the use of lime plaster, and the long-standing practice of decorating religious and domestic architecture in the Konkan region of western India.

Over generations, local artisans developed specialised methods of preparing wall surfaces and producing decorative designs using contrasting pigments and plaster layers. These skills were transmitted through practical

experience, observation, and traditional craftsmanship. Kaavi art consequently became an identifiable part of Goa's architectural heritage.

The historical development of Kaavi art can be understood through three broad periods, although these are interpretive phases rather than firmly established chronological divisions.

Early development

In its early development, Kaavi art emerged within the wider tradition of decorative wall treatments used in the region. Locally available materials, plastering practices, and the skills of traditional builders and artisans contributed to the development of its distinctive appearance.

The art became closely associated with religious and architectural spaces. Its patterns served decorative purposes while contributing to the visual identity of the structures on which they appeared. However, the absence of a firmly established origin date means that individual murals must be dated through evidence specific to their buildings and historical contexts.

Growth through religious and architectural traditions

As architectural traditions evolved in Goa, Kaavi decoration became an important feature of selected religious and heritage buildings. Artisans applied decorative borders, repeated geometric patterns, floral forms, and other ornamental designs to architectural elements such as arches, columns, niches, and wall panels.

These designs demonstrate the relationship between artistic expression and architecture. The placement of motifs often followed the structure of the building, creating visual continuity between its decorative elements and overall form.

Goa's cultural history includes Hindu, Christian, and other regional influences, alongside connections with the wider Konkan coast. The history of Kaavi art should therefore be studied within this broader setting, while recognising that the presence and form of Kaavi decoration vary from one building and community to another.

Influence of the Portuguese period and spread to neighbouring regions

The Portuguese period in Goa, beginning in 1510, forms an important part of the historical context in which Kaavi art developed and survived. However, the precise relationship between Portuguese influence and the origins of Kaavi art remains debated among researchers. Some scholars suggest that the technique may have connections with European sgraffito, while others emphasise its regional roots and the movement of communities and artisans along the Konkan coast.

During periods of religious and political change, some Goan communities migrated to neighbouring coastal regions, including parts of present-day Karnataka and Maharashtra. The movement of communities, religious practices, and building traditions contributed to the spread of Kaavi decoration beyond Goa. Similar examples can be found in temples and other heritage structures along the Konkan coast.

Materials and traditional technique

An important aspect of Kaavi art history is its relationship with traditional construction materials. Artisans used locally available resources to create durable decorative surfaces suited to the region's humid, monsoon-influenced climate.

Traditional materials included:

- Laterite-derived red pigment: Responsible for the characteristic reddish-brown appearance.
- Lime plaster: Prepared using traditional lime, often derived from shells, to create the pale surface.
- Sand and natural binding ingredients: Used in traditional plaster preparations.
- Metal tools: Used to incise or remove portions of the surface to reveal contrasting layers.

Kaavi art is often described as a form of sgraffito, a decorative technique in which a design is produced by cutting or scraping through a surface layer to expose a contrasting layer beneath. In a common Kaavi process, the red surface is incised to reveal the white lime layer, creating the distinctive red-and-white pattern.

This technique requires considerable patience, precision, and an understanding of plaster preparation, timing, and linework. The knowledge was traditionally transmitted through hands-on practice rather than formal written instruction.

Motifs and cultural expression

The visual vocabulary of Kaavi art reflects the natural environment, religious traditions, and artistic imagination of the Konkan region. Its motifs can include:

- Floral patterns: Lotus forms, petals, and stylised flowers.
- Geometric designs: Repeated lines, chevrons, borders, and symmetrical arrangements.
- Religious imagery: Sacred symbols and mythological figures.
- Architectural ornamentation: Decorative bands and motifs designed to complement arches, columns, and wall panels.

- Nature-inspired forms: Representations associated with regional flora, fauna, and folklore.

These motifs should be studied in relation to their original architectural settings rather than treated simply as isolated patterns. Their placement, scale, and relationship with the surrounding structure contribute to their artistic and cultural meaning

Decline and loss of traditional practice

During the twentieth century, Kaavi art experienced a substantial decline. Changes in architectural preferences, the introduction of modern construction and finishing materials, the covering of older murals with paint or tiles, and the demanding nature of the technique contributed to its reduced use.

As older buildings were renovated, some examples became concealed, damaged, or lost. The decline in practising artisans also threatened the transmission of specialised knowledge to younger generations. By the late twentieth century, the tradition was considered critically endangered, with very few active practitioners reported.

This decline highlights the importance of documenting surviving murals, recording their motifs, identifying traditional materials, and understanding the construction methods associated with each site.