

Documenting The Cultural Traditions of Rajasthan-Through The Lense of Raghav Kaneria

Paper Submission: 15/07/2020, Date of Acceptance: 26/07/2020, Date of Publication: 27/07/2020

Abstract

This article is about folk narratives through intangible heritage like wall paintings, murals, *mandanas* or *alpanas*. Sculptor artist, Raghav Kaneria tried to capture these narratives through his photography. We know him as a famous sculptor and an educationist but very few of us know about his innate passion for photography and his contribution in documenting the folk art and traditional art forms of India. He has travelled remotest areas in Gujarat, Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh to document those kind of arts which are temporal in nature, hence they fade away with time without leaving any traces. These art tell us about their local stories or beliefs. My article is based on personal interview with Raghav Kaneria and visual study of his photographic works and his interviews in articles. In this paper, I am speaking about the the floor and wall paintings of Rajasthan.

Keywords: Photography, Folk Art, Culture, Tradition, Floor Painting, Wall Painting, Raghav Kaneria, Rajasthan.

Introduction

The Vadodara based artist, Shree Raghav Kaneria is a veteran sculptor, photographer, a versatile artist, mentor and Art Educator to many since the last few decades. He taught at Vadodara's famous Art institute-The Faculty of Fine Arts for 25 years. He had mentored a number of students, artists and professionals and has valuable contributions in documenting India's vanishing folk art scene. His scrap metal sculptures and bronzes have inspired and influenced many art pupils, artists and Art lovers in the country. The cock, the bull, the calf were inspired by his village life, that became his subject matter for further exploration.

He was awarded Commonwealth Scholarship(194-67) to study at the Royal College of Art in London. While in England, he taught sculpture at the Walthamstow school of Art, London and at the Hull College of Art. He exhibited all over the world, at the Paris Biennale, the Commonwealth Art Exhibition, Expo 67 in Montrail, Belgium, Tokyo, Germany, the Muse De L'Elysee, Lausanne and so on. Raghav Kaneria was involved in Documentative photography of folk and living traditions of India since his return from U.K It was there in U.K, that he realized the importance of preserving our rich culture and traditions of India which are fast disappearing and which needs to be documented. The nostalgia he felt for rural life and culture, never left him. Like many other villages, his village too has changed beyond recognition. We cannot stop the change, yet it will be tragic, if this old lifestyles were to vanish without any record. With this in mind, since 1969, with some of his friends, he has been photographing the few remaining traces of typical rural and tribal art forms and their integral relationship with village life, particularly in the region of rural Western India. He traveled remotest areas on rented bicycle or on foot and documented these images. Some of these places were tribal zones and people were suspicious and hostile, yet he managed to document their paintings on walls, embroidery on clothes, torans and tatoos on their bodies, jewellery that they wear, the beautiful floor decorations or Alpanas that they do in front of their house.

He was troubled by the fact that can we save our culture and traditions in the face of such rapid modernization? Will we able to stop the changes and if not then how can we retain these art forms? **There is an urgent need to document all these vanishing art forms that are**



Shanta Samanta

Assistant Professor,
Faculty of Fine Arts,
M.S.University, Baroda,
Vadodara, Gujrat, India

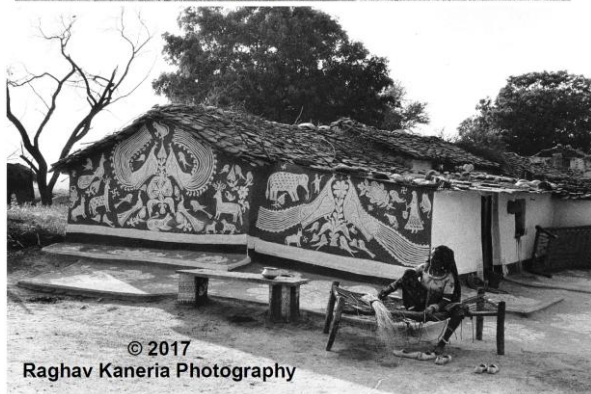
temporal in nature for our future generations.

Photography is one of the cheapest and yet most effective way of documentation.

There are some forms of Art that are more permanent in nature like-temple Art, architecture, sculptures, paintings, murals etc. But there are also other forms of arts that are temporal or ephemeral in nature, and they leave no records when they become extinct. We would only read about them in books and articles and promptly forget them. Photography helps us to keep a record of them and good photography keeps them etched(engraved) in our mind for ever.



© 2017
Raghav Kaneria Photography



© 2017
Raghav Kaneria Photography

Raghav Kaneria who is a well known sculptor and an educationist, dedicated himself to the cause of preserving our vanishing art and culture through his photography. Through his lenses, he would capture their rituals, culture, traditions and various art forms. After coming back from these trips, he would share these visuals and experiences with his students. He would try to create awareness among our students about our rich culture and traditions and try to promote our students to look inward for inspirations for their art.

He not only has documented the art forms of India, but represented India's rich cultural heritage in the world art platform by participating in several photography competitions and winning some of the most prestigious photography competitions such as Bronze Medal of Nikon Photo Contest International, Tokyo, Japan in the year 1976 and 77, Yakult Prize of 6th and 8th Photo Contest in Asia and Pacific by UNESCO, Tokyo, Japan(1981 and 1983), A national Photo exhibition on life in India, Calcutta(1981), Sunpak Prize of 9th Photo Contest in Asia and Pacific by UNESCO, Tokyo, Japan, Okamoto Prize of 13th Photo Contest in Asia and Pacific by UNESCO, Tokyo, Japan to name a few.

He has done extensive research and documentation on ephemera/temporal art like embroidery, paintings on walls of village houses and floor alpanas, torans through photography. He has captured these momentary, fleeting artworks through his lens. These works cannot be preserved, hence we loose them forever.

He has done documentation on the following subjects:

1. Wall and floor paintings of Saurashtra and Rajasthan
2. Relief work and pottery of Kutch and Rajasthan
3. Folk images of Hanumanji
4. Terracotta of Rajasthan
5. Floor decoration of Andhra Pradesh
6. Palia(memorial stones of folk heroes and sati) of Saurashtra and Kutch

MANDANA- Wall and Floor Decorations of Rajasthan

For the women in Rajasthan, the skill of decorating their homes and hearth is a spontaneous activity. Like legends and ballads, this visually rich and highly decorative art symbolises Rajasthan's deep religiosity and joyous celebrations.

Unlike *rangavali*, which literally means creepers made with colours, the mandana are mainly geometric arrangements drawn freely without a dotted grid or any such reference.



© 2017
Raghav Kaneria Photography

Innovation The Research Concept

The Motifs and Their Beliefs

In Rajasthan, where the presence of a peacock in courtyard or on rooftop is considered auspicious, the motive is understandably popular. Perhaps it is to transform such fleeting moments into long lasting ones, that peacock motifs are painted on the walls. This motif also appears as tatoos on these women's hands and chests and also on textiles, wood block printing and embroidery, craft objects and toys and miniature paintings done by professional artists. As the wall paintings have predominance of peacocks on them, they are also called *mordiya*, meaning peacocks.

Some of the other motifs used are: wells- like five, seven or nine stepwells with number of peacocks, flower gardens, other birds and flowers, bullock carts, lamp, coconut and lotus.

Thus the women tries to make her house an inviting place for Lakshmi to enter and reside in.' An *angana* or a courtyard floor should never be left *kora* or without *mandana*' is a common sentiment which indicates the priority they give to this tradition. Mandanas are also drawn as expressions of joy.



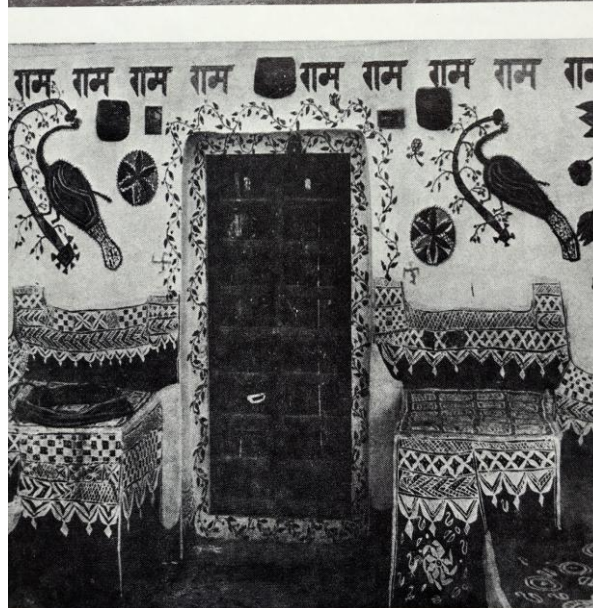
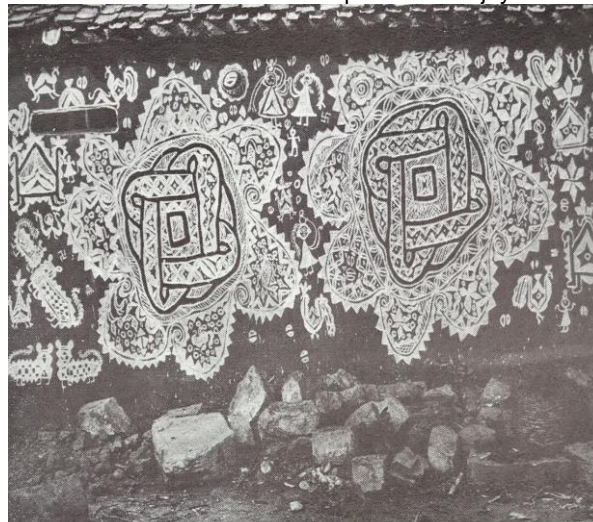
Process

The design begins with a simple central motif in red ochre, followed by patterns of freely made lines and dots known as *bharat* and *chiran* on all sides. *Mandana* literally means to put down on floors with the tip of a finger. A swab made with a piece of cloth or a turf of hair is dipped in liquid pigment made of white clay or lime dissolved in water and gently pressed on between fingers and thumb. As the liquid pigment trickles down to the floor, the tip of the finger is used to draw the lines or dots.

Apart from courtyards, floors of the verandah and other rooms, steps, parapets, watersheds and stoves are re plastered during Diwali. The caressing touch of women's hands gives life to each surface, transforming the uneven edges into rhythmically rounded forms.

Most of the motifs on the floors are geometric arrangements and floral whereas most of the motifs drawn on walls represent animated subjects and have flowing lines. The floor diagram is referred to as *sathia*, the vernacular term for swastika in Gujarat and sometimes in Rajasthan.

These decorations are done generally on festive occasions like Diwali, Holi, Makara-sankranti, ritual ceremonies like birth and marriages. They plaster their walls and floors with a mortar made with clay and cowdung. Walls are then whitewashed and decorated with drawings, on areas defined by coats of cowdung plaster mixed with geru or red ochre, a kind of clay containing iron. Drawings are made with white clay known as *Khadia* mitti or with lime and are based mostly on animals, birds and plant motifs.



Innovation The Research Concept



Impact of these works

According to Raghav Kaneria- "India has rich art traditions which are very quickly vanishing under very heavy stress of urbanization, industrialization and other socio-economic and political forces. I am trying to record as much as possible before it vanishes for ever. As a result of my work, I have studied how the traditional artists are working in their natural surroundings and have learnt their methods and techniques and have collected many original works of art and over 35,000(thirty five thousand)black and white photographs and over two thousand colour slides which help me to make my students aware of our art heritage and hoping that one day it will help them to come out of Western influences on art."

Aim of the Study

There is a growing awareness about preserving the Intangible Cultural Heritage all over the world. India is culturally so rich and diverse, so it becomes our responsibility to create awareness about such temporal art that disappears without leaving any trace. The aim of this paper is to create awareness so

that people starts seeing these art with understanding and compassion and contribute in their own ways to preserve these art as much as possible. Local art reflect local bio-diversity. They create a social cohesion which might also lead to economic prosperity. Raghav Kaneria has done extensive research and documentation on ephemeral/temporal art like embroidery, paintings on walls of village houses and floor alpanas, torans through his photography. Photography helps us to keep a record of them and good photography keeps them etched(engraved) in our mind for ever.

Conclusion

Dr.Mulk Raj Anand has eloquently expressed that creating art forms is a self rewarding activity that frees a village woman 'from the routine continuum, through a kinetic impulse which drives her hand... At the root of all these expressions may be sheer exuberance, the alliance with the life force itself, love and fusion with others in absorption of shared experiences and values, which comes through millions of forms.

References

1. "Women's Ritual Art of India: Views from Three Photographers" published by Gallery 181, Iowa State University, Iowa, U.S. 1995
2. Gallery 181. (1995). *Women's Ritual Art of India: Views from three photographers.*
3. "Prize winners of 13th Photo Contest-In Asia and the Pacific 1988". *People and their dwellings* published by Asian Cultural Centre for UNESCO, Tokyo, Japan
4. Appaswamy, Jaya. *An Introduction to Modern Indian Sculpture*, Publisher Indian Council For Cultural Relation, New Delhi, 1970.
5. Sheikh, Gulammohammad,. *Contemporary Art in Baroda*, Tulika Publication, 1997
7. Kaneria, Raghav. *The India Magazine: of her people and culture*, A photographer's portfolio, Publisher Tata Press Ltd, September 1987.
8. Bhatt, Jyoti. *The India Magazine: of her people and culture*, *The wall and floor decorations*, Publisher Tata Press Ltd, June 1992.