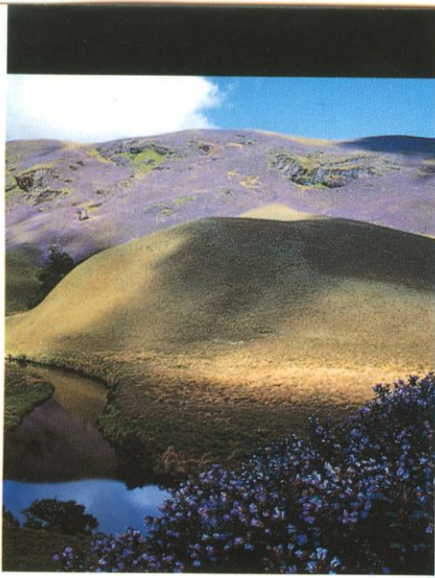


स्वागत SWAGAT

अप्रैल APRIL 1995

विमान में पढ़ने के लिए
FOR INFLIGHT READING





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Pretty Woman

The Shutter Paintings of Kerala

Text and Photographs:
Nibal Matbur

Wow! That was a nice looking woman and elegantly dressed too! Further down the road my eye caught yet another pretty face. Quite obviously they were painted, larger-than-life, to catch attention and they certainly grabbed mine!

"You like them?" Dinesh, my friend from Fort Cochin asked. "You can't ignore them. They are absolutely brilliant," I replied. "Then wait till you see these!" Dinesh turned into Mahatma Gandhi road. He slowed down allowing me to take in the scene. We were driving past four of the most stunning faces I had seen—all painted on the shutters of shops!

Cruising around with a local friend in his car one Sunday morning in downtown Ernakulam, I discovered the fact that most jewellery stores in Kerala have the faces of women painted on their shutters. Of course one gets to see the visuals only when the shops are shuttered down!

I saw these paintings everywhere I went in Kerala, in big cities and small towns. At first I found it amusing but later, as I travelled up and down this beautiful coastal State, I developed a genuine admiration for the art and the artists that enlivened even the most drab space with such beautiful splashes

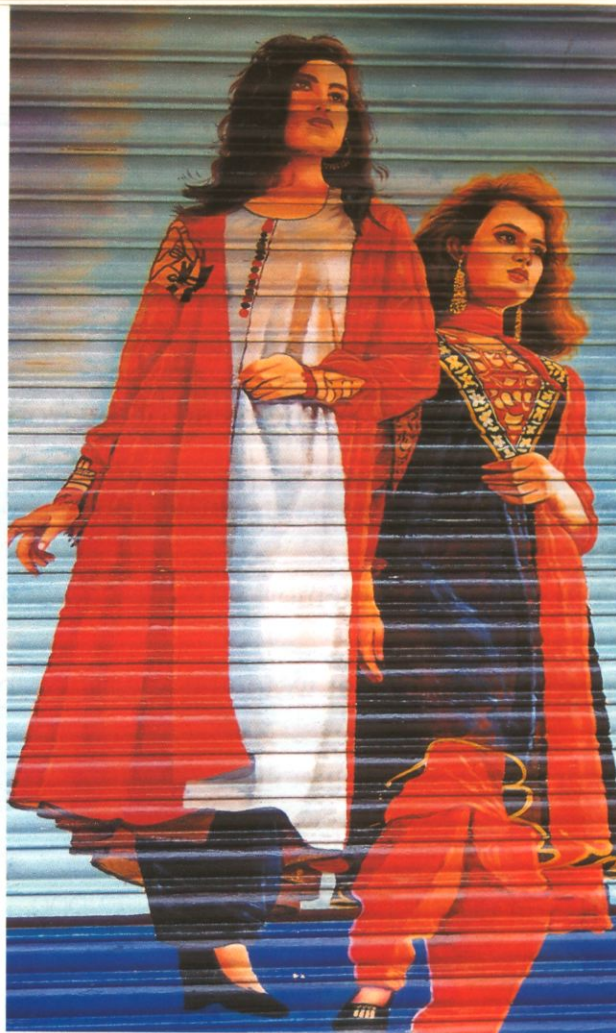


of colour.

"It has become an 'industry identity' for most gold and jewellery shops to commission these paintings," said Anthony, proprietor of a well-known gem store. "However this is a very recent trend," he added. "There were not so many shops before. The boom took place in the last couple of years when the Gold Control Act was lifted. Add to this the wealth coming from the Gulf which employs a large Malayalee workforce. Not only do these people remit money but they also bring in a lot of gold each time they come home."

The Malayalee is essentially a conservative at heart and considers gold the best investment. This trait quite naturally, accounts for a preponderance of jewellery stores all over the State. High Road in Trichur is reputed to have more than 100 jewellery shops in one single street alone. And almost all of them have visuals of women painted on their shutters!

I sat discussing the subject with Ranjit Thampy, my friend at Folklore Advertising, Cochin. Ranjit told me quite authoritatively that Kerala produced the best hoarding painters in the coun-



try. Though I was no expert on the subject, I couldn't have agreed with him more when it came to the art of portraiture, especially in the examples of shutter paintings I had seen. To me these paintings were like Andy Warhol's Marilyn Monroe—an intrinsic part of Kerala's pop culture. One could also, I suppose, variously describe them as symbols of contemporary Kerala kitsch!

Kamala Das laughed when I told her what I felt about these 'pretty women' from Kerala. Then turning serious she lectured me at length on the typical Kerala woman who was not only mentally liberated but far from being hidden away, was up front, walking hand in hand with her male counterpart.

Some of the paintings I had seen lived up to that image, showing a very confident and westernised woman. The faces were also vaguely familiar—models from various advertising campaigns, faces that register in the subconscious. Others looked like film starlets—a Sridevi or a Madhuri Dixit—usually rendered in electric colours. I also saw many paintings that were done with great care and thought for light. But of course, most images were executed in flat, bright colours simply projecting the image of a gentle, demure woman.

"The jewellery business is a delicate affair that demands a soft sell. People here start to buy gold and jewellery as soon as a girl is born in order to prepare for her wedding," said George and John Jacob of Alukka's Jewellery in Calicut. Kerala is well-known for its exquisite filigree work in gold. And judging from some of the paintings I had seen, brides bedecked in gold looked gorgeous.

But where were the painters of these pretty women? I wanted to meet a real artist at work. I tried contacting many advertising and publicity agencies in Cochin but was informed that I was already late for the season. Usually these paintings are commissioned a month or two before the *Onam* festival. I was late as most of the visuals were done and over with. Try next year, I was informed.

Then one night, on the bus back to the hotel in Ernakulam, I saw a young, bearded man painting on the closed shutters of a shop. It was just the encounter I was looking for so I got off the bus at the next stop and walked

back to where he was working.

It was around midnight and there was a soft drizzle. The street was empty.

Although a bit intrigued, M.B. Shanavas, the artist, was happy to talk to me about himself and his art. He told me that at 25, he was a full time painter employed by a publicity company.

was always given a photograph, a print or even a page torn from the pages of a film/fashion magazine, to copy by his agency. Of course, he added, the client always specified what extras were to be added to the visual—a necklace, an earring or a *bindi*. Given these parametres, Shanavas said he was free



Although he had been "painting from the very beginning," it was at the age of 19 that he decided to do a diploma course in art in his hometown Alwaye, "to learn the technique." Though, he said, he preferred oils, he could also handle the watercolour and enamel medium. Besides painting shutters he did all kinds of other jobs that came to him in the course of his employment.

Shanavas told me that he usually took two to three days to finish a painting, working from eight in the morning to five in the evening. The image to be painted on the shutter was not a product of his imagination. He

to translate the image from the piece of paper onto his 12 x 15 space on the shutter.

Was it difficult for him to paint on the curving surfaces of these shutters? I asked him. It appeared that the surface presented no problem for Shanavas. The only real need he expressed was his longing to do some work of his own—very different to what he was currently doing.

And so I left him to his work and his dreams with a promise that one day I would do a story in praise of the shutter painters of Kerala.