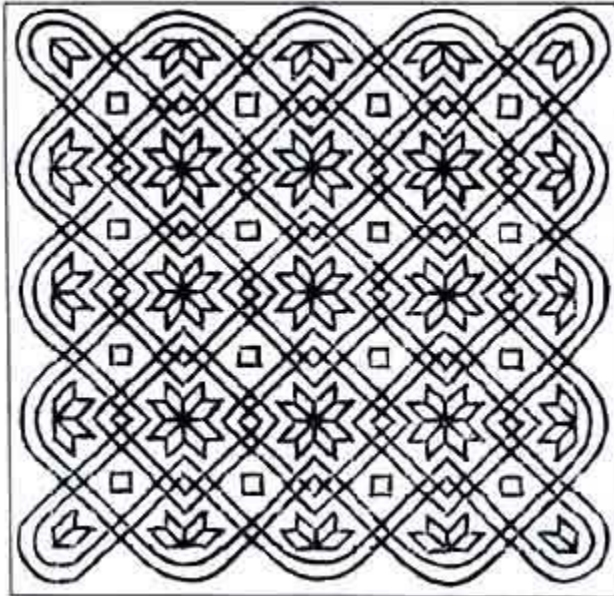


FROM THE IGNCA ARCHIVES

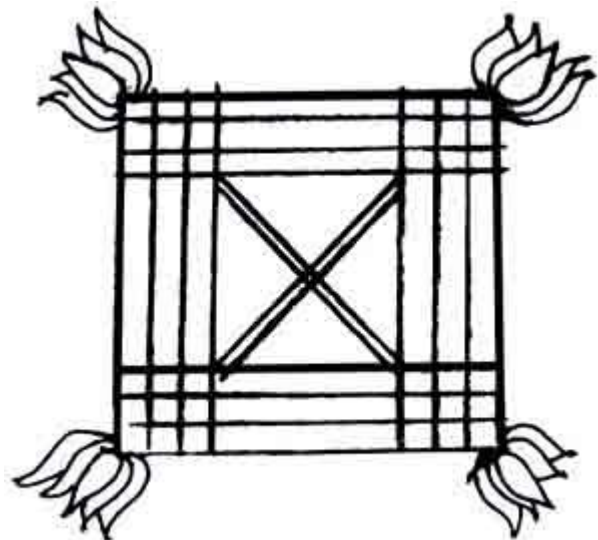
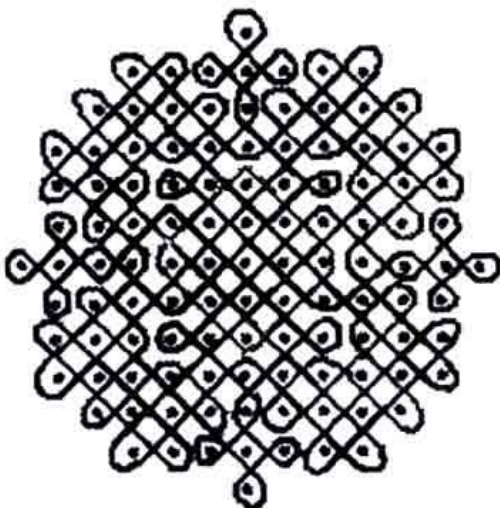
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MARTHA STRAWN COLLECTION OF PHOTOGRAPHS OF 'KOLAM'



Kolam in South India, *Chowkpurana* in Northern India. *Madana* in Rajasthan, *Aripana* in Bihar. *Alpana* in Bengal is an ancient Hindu religious floor art. The earliest Indian treatise on painting '*Chitralakshana*' mentions the legend of *Rangoli*. When the son of a King's chief priest dies, Lord Brahma, asked the king to paint the image of the boy so that He may revitalize him. *Kolam*, when filled with colour is known as *Rangoli*. It is chiefly drawn with fine rice flour. Everyday, designs are made on wet/moist ground in the threshold previously sprinkled with water (even dilute solutions of cow-dung cake that gives a darker background to the mud floor). In most houses it is done at dawn and twilight.

The most common *Kolam* design start with dots which are connected to form lines and other geometrical shapes such as swastika, *aum*, stars, squares, circles, triangles etc. These geometrical shapes must be formed in a continuous, unbroken lines.



IGNCA has in archives a collection of photographs by Martha Strawn on *Kolam*. These were taken by her during her several visits to India between 1977 and 1986. One trip, in 1984, was made under the Fulbright Senior Research Fellowship Programme. The Fulbright and subsequent research trips were to document and to interpret, through use of the photographic medium, the Indian practice of making

threshold diagram.

Martha Strawn had said she was interested in using threshold diagrams as subject matter for a project, which would further develop one of her artistic concerns. The concern was how secular object and spaces may be modified to assume sacred characteristics within a particular cultural context. She had been doing photographic work for 12 years on this line when she took these photographs shrines, Thai spirit houses, and Southern U.S. mobile homes. All of this work had been based on general cultural anthropological interests, which were transformed into formal visual terms, as were the threshold diagram photographs.

Women are primarily involved in making these magico-religious diagram. *Kolam* or threshold drawings as Ms Strawn has called them is a live practice in the entire Tamil Nadu, Parts of Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and some parts of east and northeast India. Ms. Starwn has come to the conclusion in her research that the threshold diagrams are still a pan-Indian practice, with stylistic variances identifiable by region. "I have learned much about the background and the contemporary practice of threshold diagramming. This knowledge provided a fertile basis for my selection of content and formal elements when I made the pictures" she said in her note on the exhibition of photographs by her hosted by IGNCIA in 1993.

The day-to-day *Kolam* are simple or intricate. In Tamil Nadu, girls learn to do *Kolam* from their mothers and other female relatives. *Kolam* skills are still considered a mark of grace, dexterity, discipline and concentration. Drawing the *Kolam* figures is an important part of the Tamil culture and landscape. But with their orderly and often highly symmetrical designs, which frequently group into families, *Kolam* are also expressive of mathematical ideas.

In the last few decades, *Kolam* figures have attracted the attention of computer scientists interested in describing images with picture languages. The Tamil month of "*markazhi*" (mid-December to mid-January) is particularly important when fairly large size *Kolam* are put in front of the houses, with an addtioinal decoration of yellow flowers of pumpkin. Now-a-days, *Kolam* competitions are organized and no women's magazine is complete without a regular column on *Kolam*.

- Mangalam Swaminathan