

# The Calligraphic Essence in the Paintings of KCS Paniker's Words and Symbols Series

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## Abstract

In India, diversity in culture and languages has rich history in the art of calligraphy; its reflections can be seen in various art practices in India. KCS Paniker is an important artist in 20<sup>th</sup> century Indian art especially in south Indian art scene who created a new visual aesthetics by using language in his paintings. He is a pioneer in madras art movement that influence largely in south Indian art world in post colonial period. The words and symbols series is his most well known painting started in 1963 which is considering a significant shift in his art practice in that he developed with local, indigenous motifs and geometrical symbols, astrological elements, calligraphic effects, tantric diagrams and through bringing regional aesthetics into new way of abstraction. This research paper conceptually analyzes the calligraphic essence in the series of words and symbol paintings by KCS Paniker.

**Keywords:** KCS Paniker, Calligraphy, Indian art, Malayalam language

## Introduction

Calligraphy simply means beautiful writing, this art form closely associated with writing tradition and the letterforms of languages. We in Indian diversity in languages and scripts have rich calligraphy history but after the printing technology popularized, the art of calligraphy faded in India but didn't stop fully it has presence in the culture in various forms like sign boards, title designing, invitation cards and many other different ways. In the contemporary time the art of calligraphy is more experimental with new insightful meanings and individual practices in various languages in India, artist like Acut Palav on devnagri, Kumar Dagar on Arabic and Persian scripts, Narayana Battathiri on Malayalam etc.



**Figure 1: Malayalam calligraphy solo exhibition of artist Narayana Bhattathiri, Durbar hall art gallery, kerala**

The contemporary calligraphy practice can be defined as the art of giving form to sign in an expressive, harmonious, and skillful manner (Mediaville). It is also a backdrop for Indian contemporary calligraphy art scene, which seeks innovative possibilities and undergoes new experiments, while simultaneously incorporating modern sensibilities and traditional calligraphy, and forming new perspective on it. A letter form has its own visual aesthetics and it has long past to reach a unique visual form from the writing history. Indian artist used letter forms with calligraphic effects in to their painting in various conceptual making. Akhilesh, R.N Tagor, KCS Paniker, Jyothi Batt, Chitravanu Mazumdar, Baiju Parthan have used calligraphy as an art form (Jangid). In that KCS Paniker have unique identity in his use of letter forms in his paintings especially the Malayalam writings into his abstract paintings. The old writing style from Malayalam manuscripts and its visual essence could see in words and symbol series. The art world is divided into three main phases in the paintings styles of KCS Paniker, who began his artistic carrier in 1930 and constantly experimented. The first phase is consider is the Kerala landscapes in water color medium that he continued to till 1950s the second phase that started the figurative centered subjects and the last phase started with painting fruit seller in 1963. It was the first painting from the words and symbols series of works in that he continued rest of his life with more experiments.



**Figure 2: the painting fruit seller**

In the 1950s and 60s, when Indian painting was highly influenced by western art, Paniker sought to find unique Indian pictorial language, visual expression, style, and technique (shekhar). Although his early art reflects elements of cultural and regional influences, it is evident that his full potential by the time he reaches in the words and symbols series. He brings the old writing style of Malayalam scripts into his paintings as part of his quiet for a sense of regional identity. Even while promoting a sense of south

Indian identity, Paniker has deep connection with Kerala throughout, and his connection to Kerala culture, land and to the Malayalam language is clearly visible in his paintings. Paniker saw the Malayalam language and letters with new perspective, has importance in the contemporary Malayalam calligraphy culture. Malayalam language does not have a traditional stylized calligraphy, but the presence of Malayalam calligraphy can be seen in the reading culture in Kerala in various forms like title of literary works, movie titles, sign board, and road side writings and even today in the digital Malayalam calligraphy in the digital platforms. This study is important in such context, when the art of calligraphy is becoming more popular in Kerala art scene under the initiatives of Malayalam calligrapher Narayana Battathiri.

### **Literature review**

#### **KCS Paniker(1911-1977) notes, chronology, bibliography: John Clark, The Asian Modern, 2008-2013**

This is an important primary and secondary data from Asian art cave collection that includes the notes and art writings of KCS Paniker wrote in different publications and other artist, art historians written about the artist and his paintings. KCS wrote in the series of articles name Chitram Ezhuth in 1979, KCS Paniker states that he had great attention to the art of south Indian calligraphy traditions and also mention the calligraphic quality and the calligraphic freedom in the tradition. As a visual artist he created new perspective and readings to look into the language and the letterforms. The different writers who were featured in his writings like Herbert, Ludwig Golscheider, and T.S Eliot, their ideas he used to making more stronger conceptualization of regional identity and search and. These reflections can be seen in the words and symbol series. This data also includes the chronology of artist, which helps to analyze the timescale of KCS Paniker major art events and journey.

#### **KCS Paniker Kalayam Kaalavum, editor: sathyapal, Kerala Lalithkala Academi, 2011**

KCS Paniker is very important artist leading the modernity in painting in Kerala. This book is a collection of articles by various Kerala art historians and thinkers, and critique and also the KCS student artist NKP Muttukoya. The idea put forward by the editor Sathyapal, is that KCS Paniker the master who keeps various doors to find various new perspectives must be re-read not only in the art same time in the landscape of socio-political context. This book discuss about the ideas of KCS Paniker and his art practice in the different context social, political, cultural, historical, KCS own writings, national and south Indian art scene of that time, and many aspects.

#### **Framing the regional modern: K.C.S Paniker and the madras art movement, Ashrafi S. Bhagat, Kerala Lalithkala Academy, 2011**

This book is detailed study on K.C.S Paniker's art and aesthetics and his ideas in the context of south Indian art seen. Specially focus to framing the regional modernity through the madras art movement and its pioneer of KCS Paniker. In The chapter two also discusses about the words and symbols series, which is relevant area in this concerned research topic.

#### **Artistic relations: Mapping KCS Paniker's constellations: Rebecca Brown, American institute of Indian studies, 2023**

In this conference Rebecca detail discusses the artistic relations with other artist from the madras art movement and finding the influences and inspirations and the correlations and also discussing the important western artist Paul Klee's highly influences into the KCS Panikers's visual language specially the works from words and symbols.



## Research Methodology

This research employs a qualitative research method to explore the calligraphic essence in the paintings of KCS Paniker. The methodology involves the following way.

A comprehensively reviewed academic journals, articles, books are closely related this research area. That includes different studies on KCS Paniker helps to find the research gap. Both primary and secondary data collected for this study. Various online sources used to get art talks and discussions and documentaries about concerned artist. Data collected on the basis of identified areas such as Malayalam language and calligraphic elements, cultural regional context, south Indian modernism in the field of paintings in the basis of KCS Paniker. Qualitative analysis use to the collected literature to identify the findings in the concerned area in a way how the KCS Paniker and his art works specially the words and symbols series defined by the other scholars in various perspective. The findings emerged from this study are interpreted in a broader Indian calligraphic context and offering new insights.

## Results and discussion

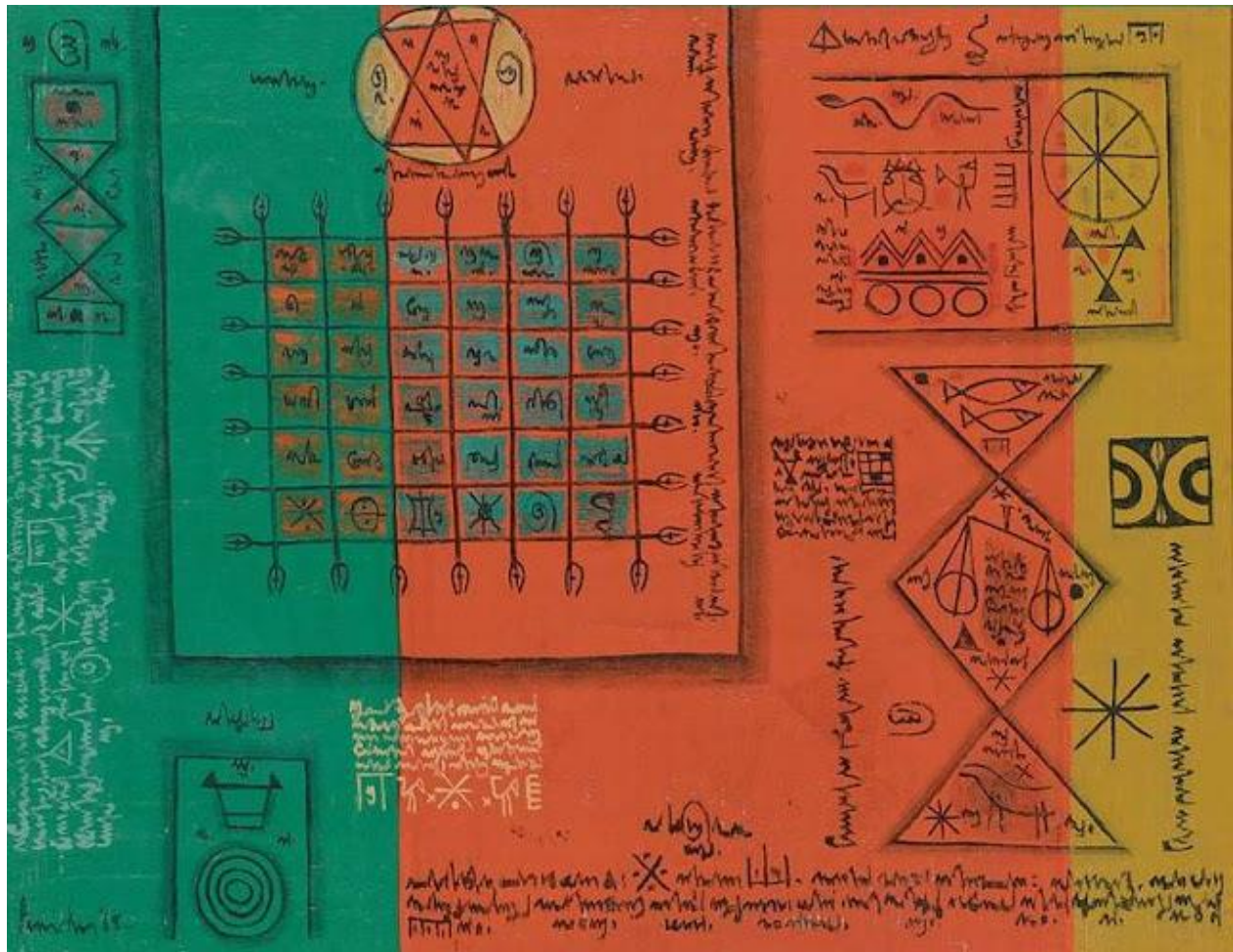
Before printing technology the art of calligraphy has rich history in India, it has multiple purpose of usage in the culture. Calligraphy holds a significant position, reflecting India's intricate tapestry of language, script, and cultural influences (Garima). Today the calligraphy in India becomes more experimental and moving forward as a visual art practice by the individuals and various calligraphic organizations by various activities. And also the calligraphic effects and the use of regional languages are using in the contemporary art practices in various methods and forms, Different way of using letterforms appearing in the paintings, sculptures, installations, textile and many more forms. KCS Paniker is the one of important artist who uses the letterforms into the paintings and created new way of visual language in the 1960s onward. Through his art practice, Paniker sought a new Indian identity by rejecting western influences, mainly the post-impressionist, surreal that he had in his works at that time.



**Figure 3: Hindi letterforms in the installation work by Umesh. S, Indian art fair 2025**

The dynamic shift in the paintings of KCS Paniker started to appear from the painting name fruit seller, created in 1963 from onwards constantly experimenting such unique aesthetics that series of paintings

called words and symbols. In the first painting fruit seller he started to use letterforms, mathematical signs and symbols, very Lenoir use of lines and images and less, flat use of colors. But this initial work clearly shoes the new way of visual representations and aesthetics but in the use of letters and language in a spontaneous manner with the random arrangements in the pictorial space, in this work couldn't see the use of Malayalam writings. But onwards this new way of visual language he brings more regional flavors specially the use of Malayalam letters and writings.



**Figure 4: Different calligraphic patterns in the paintings**

In the beginning 20<sup>th</sup> century many westerners studied the area of traditional and regional cultures and elements but after the ears part of freedom struggle one nation ideas was standing in front (Menon). After the independence in India, started to be reflect the search of regional roots in various field, including visual arts. The political situation in south India related to the Tamil language (against the dominance of Hindi language) called Dravidian political struggle in 1960's is reflected to KCS Paniker think about Kerala language and its heritage. Paniker did not use the ordered character of typography of Malayalam language that circulating through printing culture, instead looking back to past and find calligraphic essence of old Malayalam manuscript writing, most are not directly readable but he had cleverly bring the calligraphic essence of manuscript old writings. By bringing the visuality of calligraphic essence of Malayalam writings into his paintings, it simultaneously marks regionalism and elevates that aesthetics to universality. He strongly engages with human figures and their emotional



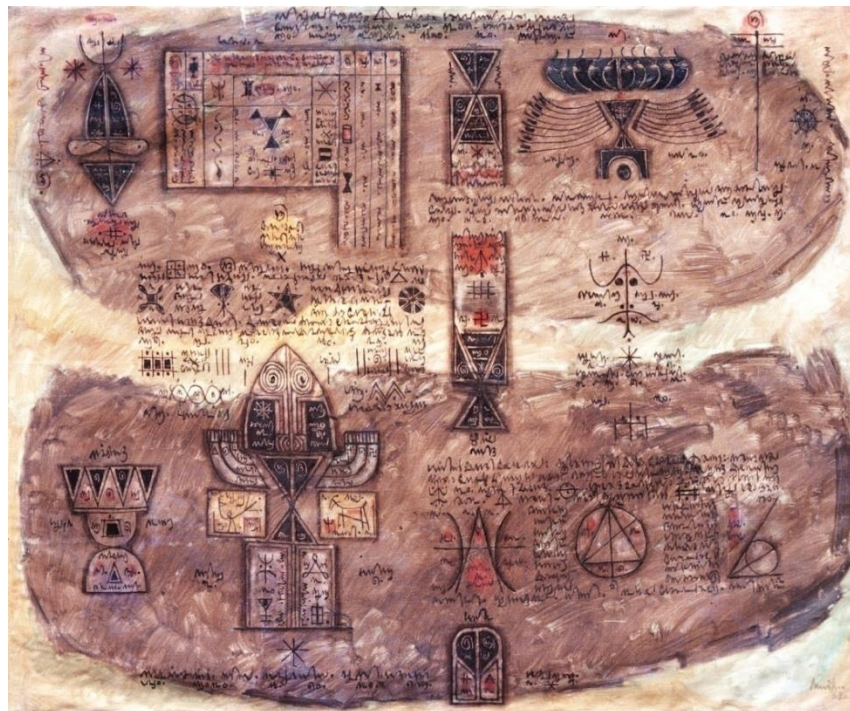
layers in various paintings before the shift of abstraction, that can be seen in the garden series (1955-62) and the mother and child series. Through his words and symbols series, he moved towards the expressive potential of the abstract as a result of his intense effort to transform human forms the material to the spiritual (Ashrafi.S.Bagat).



**Figure 5: KCS Paniker working from his Cholamandal home, 1968**

The new way of abstraction that he established during 60s, largely called metaphysical abstraction. If we take out the words and symbols from this series it will visually remain as western pure abstraction. He intentionally denied such western influences and he wants to bring new abstraction for to identify as Indian abstraction. At the same time the influence of western artist Poul Klee can be seen in this series of paintings especially the use of letter forms and symbols and the linearity visual aesthetics, his western travels and his fascination with artist Poul Klee's art and how this helps him to make new alternative visual language have been constantly written. He himself written about Klee's influences in his article published in the Malayalam periodical Sameksha in 1970. In that also he mentioned how he reached into the new ideas as use of words and symbols by noticing a page of mathematic notebook of young student. In the initial works he used the Roman letters then began to adapt Malayalam script which is more close to as regional elements. With the use of Malayalam calligraphic essence he experimented different pattern making that breaking the conventional way of writing and seeing the language and the use of single letters arrangements as in the astrological charts creating the effects of metaphysical feel in the works, the use of symbols and signs in between the writings is a unique combinations to elevate the essence of metaphysical effects because the symbols are used from the Indian metaphysical traditions. The way he takes the Malayalam language into his painting is totally by its visual aesthetics of the Malayalam writings in the old manuscript writing. Old Malayalam manuscript writing is used to write more religious matters by the educated high cast people only, in the pre-modern era. The religious elements in the KCS Paniker's paintings led to him facing various criticisms after, anyway It was a

courage to take such new experiments with his paintings especially who has already created works with more current social relevant works at that time. This new way of visual language is more into the refined version of the artist who reached such point that, art is beyond the boundaries of the time.



**Figure 6: signs and symbols in between the calligraphic writings**

## Findings

- The visual appearance in the calligraphy art is makes it greatness. KCS Paniker brings the visuality of letters and writings to painting, beyond the semantic level that can be seen in contemporary calligraphic experiments today. But in the context of KCS Paniker It can be understood that bringing the calligraphic essence of the old Malayalam palm leaf writing style is based on the conceptualization of regional modernity, Paniker created a new visual language by looking back to the past and found as a powerful tool to bring the regional essence especially in use of Malayalam writing in its calligraphic visual effects.
  - In the new visual language that began with the paintings of words and symbol series, in that use of linear visual aesthetics and reducing the three dimensionality method of painting. KCS Paniker accurately conveys the linear aesthetics of the art of calligraphy through the use of Malayalam words and writings in his paintings. The Linear quality also adapted from the various traditional visual aesthetics like the Thanjavoor, Ajanta murals from the nation, and also can see the strong influence of western artist Paul Klee and his visual sensibilities. However the calligraphic essence is the key elements to elevate the linear quality in the words and symbol series.
  - By bringing the Malayalam calligraphic essence in the series of paintings titled words and symbols series, it simultaneously represents a different sense of belonging.
1. KCS reflects the heritage of Kerala, in choosing the Malayalam language as a key visual element. As it embodies the identity of the land and the people who use the Malayalam language.

2. Malayalam language is a Dravidian language family and it represents whole south India. The visual essence of Malayalam words and letters also represents the south Indian identity in the paintings of words and symbols series.
3. It can be found His idea of bringing an indianness in the paintings was completely achieving through the words and symbols series. This series of paintings is the result of a conscious effort to distance oneself from western influences and elevate Indian cultural elements, especially with the use of Malayalam calligraphic essence he created new way of abstraction in Indian painting.

## Conclusion

An important artist in the 20<sup>th</sup> century Indian art, KCS Paniker created new visual language in his painting in the way of abstraction. This words and symbols series of paintings specially highlighted the Malayalam calligraphic essence throughout the series. That is a major tool to elevate the visual essence of regional identity and it is helps to elevate the linear quality of aesthetics in the paintings. This new way of using Malayalam language by its calligraphic effects in the paintings he was breaking the boundaries of conventional way of looking language and new perspective on it.

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