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## Nirmal Naqqashi Art Of Telangana: Inspiring Innovative Design Concepts

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### ABSTRACT

Its enduring appeal lies in the vivid hues that leave lasting visual impressions in our minds. The Naqqashi art form, supported by the Deccani Sultanates in Peninsular India since the sixteenth century, stands as a testament to this legacy. This study was undertaken with the objective of documenting the origin and evolution of Nirmal art—a unique, wood-based hand painting tradition of Telangana—and exploring its adaptation onto textile products. Data concerning the historical background and current status of this art form was collected from selected artisans who continue to practice it today. These artisans employ the tempora technique, using natural coloring materials on surfaces prepared from Ponniki wood, which is sourced from local forests. Over time, the art form has seen minimal alterations in terms of motifs, tools, techniques, and production processes. This consistency has allowed for the integration of contemporary design ideas while preserving the traditional values and aesthetics that define Nirmal art.

**Keywords:** Hand painting, Naqqashi, quintessence, Tempora, Deccani style, Nirmal arts.

### INTRODUCTION

In Telangana, the Naqqash community of artisans has contributed richly to this legacy by creating intricate paintings inspired by Hindu epics such as the *Ramayana* and Mahabharata. Telangana boasts a vibrant artistic heritage, with a wide variety of art forms that are distinct in style, concept, expression, and thematic elements. The present study adopts a descriptive and exploratory research approach, aiming to document the origin, historical evolution, motifs, and techniques associated with the traditional Nirmal arts and crafts. This research not only preserves a fading art form but also provides a platform for its revival through innovative applications and product development. Despite its cultural significance, limited scholarly research has been conducted on Nirmal painting. Therefore, this study seeks to fill that gap by evaluating its current status and proposing strategies for its enhancement and sustainability.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

The present research study focused on two selected locations: Hyderabad in Ranga Reddy District and Nirmal city in Nirmal District, both situated in the newly formed state of Telangana. The selection of these sites was based on the presence and settlement patterns of Nirmal artisans in these areas. A total of fifty artisans currently engaged in the craft were identified for the study—thirty of whom reside in Nirmal city, while the remaining twenty, originally from Nirmal and nearby areas, have relocated to Hyderabad due to various circumstances. An inferential approach was employed to gather both primary and secondary data. Primary data collection involved personal interviews, checklists, questionnaires, and direct observation. Secondary data was sourced from both online and offline materials that were relevant and accessible for the purpose of the research. The data was initially collected by observation method. Every single detail of the painting process was observed and noted down for documentation purpose. The raw materials used, motifs employed, colours used were keenly observed and noted down. The information was collected from the local people, leaders, Nirmal art lovers and artisans through interview technique. Each individual was interviewed about the awareness, technical know-how and religious and cultural significance and personal preferences for this enchanting Nirmal art.

## THE ORIGIN OF NIRMAL PAINTINGS ART

The origins of Nirmal art and craft can be traced back to the 14th century, during the reign of the Kakatiya dynasty. Initially, the art form encompassed a limited range of products, including devotional paintings, wall murals, decorative panels, and room partitions. The central themes of these artworks were drawn from mythology, religious epics, and folk narratives. Nirmal artisans were renowned for creating life-sized, realistic portraits that captured vivid expressions and dramatic presentation. Their works often brought to life various characters from epics and folklore, appealing equally to royal patrons and the common people. The early paintings were crafted using natural pigments and dyes extracted from herbs and minerals, typically applied on walls and wooden surfaces. From the 16th century onwards, the Deccani Sultanates of peninsular India began to admire and patronize this craft, which came to be known as Naqqashi. The term "Naqqashi" is believed to have originated from the Telugu word "Nagishi", meaning ornamental or variegated sculpture art (telugudictionary.org, 2020). Nirmal town, located in the northern part of Telangana (formerly part of Adilabad District), holds a legendary status in both regional and global handicraft traditions. The term Naqqash also refers to the artisan community settled in this region. It is believed that the Naqqashi and Jhingar artist families were brought to Nirmal from Rajasthan in the 17th century by Nimma Naidu, a local *khiladar* and chieftain (Venkateswarlu, 2015). He named the settlement "Nimmala," which eventually evolved into "Nirmal." Nirmal is especially famous for its handcrafted wooden toys, paintings, and furniture. The art of lacquered woodwork and intricate painting has been passed down through generations. The Naqqashi Nirmal style represents a sophisticated fusion of indigenous and foreign aesthetic traditions. During the Mughal era, this unique art form captured the attention of emperors. According to local legends documented in the *Imperial Gazetteers of India* (1908), the Nizam of Hyderabad once visited Nirmal and was so impressed by a beautifully crafted banana bud that released golden petals upon opening, that he became a patron of the craft. A major contribution to the popularization of Nirmal art among the general public is attributed to Lady Hyder Ali, who is said to have brought Nirmal artisans to Hyderabad about five centuries ago (Dadiga, 2017). The motifs used in Nirmal paintings are inspired by the frescos of Ajanta and Ellora, Kangra and Mughal miniature styles, often depicting floral, faunal, and natural themes. Traditional Nirmal paintings use herbal, mineral, and gem-based colors. The base is typically made of *ponniki*, a soft wood, treated with layers of pipal clay, fine muslin cloth, and tamarind seed paste. Initially, the artists focused on mythological subjects, gradually expanding to include birds, animals, and trees as motifs (Commissioner-Handicrafts, Southern Regional Office, Chennai, 2009–2010). A distinctive aspect of Nirmal art is that its core techniques and stylistic principles have remained relatively unchanged over centuries. However, the craft is now facing a crisis. Many artisans are abandoning their ancestral profession due

to dwindling demand and limited market opportunities. The rise of modern digital and automated printing technologies has posed a significant threat to the survival of this traditional handmade art form.

## BACK GROUND OF STUDY

The wood used in crafting Nirmal articles is traditionally sourced from the "thella poliki", "ponika", or "ponnikki" tree—terms in Telugu referring to *Govotia rottleriformis*, a synonym of *Givotia moluccana* (L.) Sreem. This is a dioecious tree species that grows up to 20 meters in height, characterized by its smooth brown bark that peels off in thick scales. The wood of this tree is notably softer, more pliable, and flexible than that of many other conventional timber sources, making it highly suitable for intricate carving. Belonging to the Euphorbiaceae family, this species is commonly known as the White Catamaran Tree, and is typically found in the forests of central and peninsular India. Its lightweight and workable nature makes it ideal for producing carved items such as toys and decorative figures. Additionally, the seeds of this plant yield a valuable lubricating oil, often used in fine machinery. As of now, its conservation status is listed as Not Evaluated (NE) on the IUCN scale (India Biodiversity Portal, 2020). The soft texture and light weight of poniki wood provide a significant advantage to artisans, allowing them to create a wide variety of delicate paintings, toys, and craftworks with precision and ease.

## RAW MATERIALS USED IN NIRMAL PAINTING ART

The artisans have inherited this skill of painting art that is put into practice from generations. The three main aspects that go into the making of these paintings were base wood, design and colour (Natural colour).

## COLOUR (NATURAL) SOURCE

The colours used in Nirmal art are traditionally derived from natural sources such as herbs, vegetables, fruits, and mineral deposits. These include four main types of pigments: vegetable, earth, lake, and metallic pigments. *Vegetable pigments* are extracted from various plant materials, while *earth pigments* are sourced from naturally coloured soils and stones found in specific regions. *Lake pigments* originate from mineral-rich deposits that accumulate in stagnant or flowing water bodies. These natural pigments contribute to the distinct richness and durability of colours in Nirmal artworks, reflecting the deep connection between the craft and its ecological roots. Metallic pigments such as gold, silver, copper, and bronze are commonly employed in Nirmal paintings for decorative embellishments. These metals are used in combination with natural binders, gums, fixatives, and mordants to enhance adhesion and longevity. Each pigment, depending on its nature, is prepared using specific formulations to achieve the desired hue, tint, or shade.

Lake pigments, known for their slow drying properties, are treated accordingly: darker shades are often blended with linseed oil, while lighter hues are mixed with oils derived from poppy seeds, clove, or almonds. The choice of pigment and its treatment is influenced by seasonal conditions, the type and source of the pigment, and the required visual effect. To expedite drying, pigments may be processed with drying oils, natural gums, metallic compounds, or mordants. In some cases, substances like honey, sugar, molasses, starch, or glycerin have been used either individually or in combination (Isacco and Darrah, 1993). One of the key ingredients in both frame restoration and pigment fixation is derived from the Tamarind tree (*Tamarindus indica*), a leguminous species from the Fabaceae family. Its seeds and gum are particularly valued in the craft: the seeds are used to repair broken or damaged frame edges, while the gum aids in pigment fixation. Tamarind fruit, widely used in culinary and medicinal applications, contains tartaric acid, glucose, calcium, and other active compounds. Tamarind kernel powder is especially prized for its high water absorption, viscosity, and binding properties, making it suitable as a thickening agent in textile sizing and even as a metal polish (Thombare et al., 2014).

## TOOLS USED FOR PAINTING

The tools and materials used in Nirmal painting include tracing paper, dotting pins, colour mixing palettes, drawing pencils, erasers, tracing chalk powder, pigment grinding stones (also known as mullers), and water for mixing pigments. A variety of brushes were utilized depending on the stage of the artwork—ranging from broad brushes for background coverage to filling brushes and fine-tipped brushes for intricate detailing. For fine detailing, brushes made from animal hair were preferred, with squirrel hair brushes being especially valued for their precision and smooth stroke. In certain cases, the most delicate lines and outlines were achieved using single-strand hair brushes, demonstrating the high level of craftsmanship involved. In addition to conventional tools, natural implements such as palm leaves, tamarind tree twigs, bird feathers, and bamboo twigs were also employed in the painting process. To control the spread of paint and maintain clean outlines, a water-soluble resist was used—made by combining tamarind seed gum and gum arabic. This resist technique effectively prevented colour from bleeding into undesired areas of the artwork, ensuring precision in the final composition.

## TECHNIQUE OF NAQQASHI NIRMAL PAINTING

The traditional preparation process of Nirmal art begins with raw wood sourced from the Ponniki tree (*Givotia moluccana*) being cut into blocks of the required dimensions. Commonly used frame sizes include 8 x 11 inches, 12 x 17 inches, 17 x 24 inches, and 30 x 24 inches. Large wooden logs are first cut into smaller pieces using wood-cutting machines in sawmills. An essential part of the preparation involves the application of a specially formulated lye known locally as “Chintha Lappam.” This mixture is made using sawdust powder from Ponniki wood—a byproduct generated during frame cutting—combined with a boiled extract of tamarind seed powder mixed in water. The resulting solution is then blended with white or pipe clay to achieve the desired consistency. The colloquial term for this mixture is “Chintha Lappam” or wood lye. Multiple coats of this lappam are applied to the wooden frame to fill in surface irregularities, smooth out ridges and depressions, and create a uniform base suitable for painting. Additionally, Ponniki wood dust is rubbed onto the board’s surface to further refine its texture. This lappam mixture not only ensures a smooth finish but also serves a functional purpose—it absorbs excess moisture from the wood, thereby enhancing the durability and longevity of the artwork.

## PREPARATION OF THE BACKGROUND COLOUR

The background colours used for the Nirmal art include black, white, red, brown. The prominent colour for background used was black in major occasions. After applying lappam, black paint is coated for the background. The frame is cleaned linseed or cotton seed oil is varnished to give a gloss.

## NAQQASHI WORK OF TRACING

A distinctive feature of Nirmal painting lies in its unique sketching and design transfer process. The selected design is first drawn or traced onto a transparent drawing sheet or traditionally on fine muslin cloth. This sheet is then perforated along the outlines of the design using a safety pin or dotting tools, creating tiny holes that follow the contours of the image. During the transfer stage, chalk powder is dabbed or rubbed over the perforated sheet, allowing the powder to pass through the holes and imprint the design onto the wooden surface. This initial chalk impression is then carefully reinforced by hand using a pen or fine brush, ensuring the design remains visible throughout the painting process. These markings are temporary and naturally fade or are wiped away in later stages of work. Traditionally, parchment paper or fine muslin cloth was employed for tracing purposes; however, in more recent times, these have been replaced by modern tracing and drawing sheets for greater convenience and durability. Nirmal paintings are traditionally executed using the tempera technique, one of the oldest known methods of painting. In this technique, pigments are mixed with water and combined with natural



fixatives and binding agents to form a paint medium. This method, which dates back to the first century AD, continues to be practiced today. Once the design is traced onto the prepared surface, the painting process begins with the application of colour to broad and major areas, following the predetermined colour scheme. The finer details are then meticulously worked out with precision and patience. In depictions of human figures, the body parts, clothing, and skin tones are usually painted first, while facial features and hair are handled separately with additional care to ensure expression and depth. In the final stage, the artwork is enhanced with the application of metallic pigments such as gold, silver, copper, and bronze. These elements add a bejeweled, luxurious appearance, bringing a vivid, lifelike quality to the figures and enhancing the overall visual impact of the painting. The colour palette traditionally used in Nirmal art is both rich and distinctive, featuring shades such as earthy browns, bottle greens, glowing reds, striking blacks and yellows, and especially golden hues used to embellish mythological characters and epic scenes. These colours lend a unique identity and visual richness to Nirmal paintings, distinguishing them as masterworks of artistic heritage (Development Commissioner - Handicrafts, Ministry of Textiles, 2001).

## **MOTIFS USED:**

The motifs in use during 14th to 16th century was drawn from historical and mythological narratives and were purely art objects. These include idols of King, Queen, Minister, Natraj, Laxmi, Saraswathi, Hanuman, Mahalakshmi, Mangala harathulu, Gopala Krishna, Radha Krishna, Santhoshi matha, Gondu goddess, Dandi maramma, Vaddera Amma, Sagada Parvathi, Yellamma, Pochamma, Nagaraja and many more (Government of Andhra Pradesh, Director of handcrafts and handlooms textile report, 1985)[3]. The seventeenth century saw a new horizon of this art form. The designs adopted by the Nirmal workers are mostly traditional and derived from different sources Ajanta Frescoes, temple friezes, art schools, Persian art, Nizam art, Mughal paintings, Kangra and Pahari miniature paintings, Raja Ravi Verma paintings, folk, mythological characters, ancient forts, historical monuments, Ganjfa playing cards, etc. The collected motifs were classified into various theme categories based on source of inspiration and method of usage by the researcher. The theme categories are mentioned as follows,

### **1 .Mythological:**

Motifs that were created based on mythological stories like Ramayana (Rama, Sita, Pattabhishekam, vimochanam, Lakhmana, Seethapaharna, Life Hanuma), Jathayu saviour-Anjaneya Sanjeevini, Bhagavadgitha (Krishna, Arjuna, subhadra), Geethopadesam, Rukmini kalyanam, Mahabharatam and the war scenes, Ganjfa card designs, etc

### **2.Religious:**

Ganesha, Shiva-Parvathi, Balaji, Govindam. Venkatesa charitam, Ayyappa swamy, Sai Baba, Veera Bala Ayyappan, Maa Shakthi, Durga, Bhavani, Lakshmi devi, Mohini avatar, Mother Earth, Fire as god, Lord Krishna, Radha-Krishna, Rukmini Kalyanam, Brindavanam, Gopika Krishna, Different religious symbols, etc. Historical: Royal forts, temples, palaces, Inspirations from Ajantha and Ellora caves, Kangra and Miniature paintings, Ajantha school art works, Gauthama Budha, Nala Damayathi, Royal court scenes, Nizam, Nawab and Deccani styles, Portraits of rulers, kings, popular personalities like Ashoka Chakravarthy, Sri Krishna Devaraya, Kakathiya, Cholas at different historical timelines, Popular female characters like Shakunthala, Menaka-Viswamitra,

### 3. Emotional and Narrative Themes:

Nirmal folk art vividly expresses a range of human emotions such as joy, happiness, sorrow, love, passion, romance, and the longing associated with separation. It frequently incorporates scenes from folklore and literature, such as *Panchatantra* stories and other entertainment-driven themes. Distinctive motifs include *Banjara* figures, Nizam-era figurines, rangoli patterns, and depictions of village and rural life.

### 4. Wedding Themes:

A prominent category in Nirmal art revolves around traditional wedding ceremonies. These works illustrate various aspects of a marriage, including pre- and post-wedding preparations, mandap (wedding canopy) setups, bridal and groom processions, and associated rituals and ceremonies.

### 5. Inspirational Art:

Inspired by classical and mythological stories, these paintings often recreate scenes made famous by renowned artists like Raja Ravi Varma. Notable examples include:

- *Seetha Vanvas*
- *Hamsa Damayanthi Samvad*
- *Priyadarshika*
- *Padmini*
- *Vasanthasena*
- *Shakuntala-Sakhi*
- *Yashoda-Krishna*
- *Mohini*
- *Woman Holding a Fruit*

### 6. Natural Sceneries:

Nature is another recurring theme, with artwork featuring scenic landscapes such as waterfalls, rivers, oceans, skies in varying hues, and other natural settings.

### 7. Flora and Fauna:

The beauty of nature is captured through floral and botanical motifs including flowers, twigs, creepers, fruits, leaves, trees, plants, and vegetables. The animal world is represented through depictions of elephants, swans, koel birds, peacocks, cows, parrots, and deer.

## 8. Contemporary Styles:

These include stylized and modern adaptations of traditional designs. Contemporary versions reflect evolving artistic sensibilities and often feature abstract or updated visual languages .

## 9. Customized Motifs:

Custom-designed motifs are created based on client preferences and specific requirements, making the artwork more personalized.

## CURRENT STATUS OF NIRMAL ART

Traditionally, Nirmal paintings were created using natural, plant-based pigments and dye extracts applied on walls and *Ponniki* wood. Over time, *Ponniki* wood was gradually replaced by other materials such as seasoned teakwood, rosewood, and even artificial mediums like plywood and cardboard frames.

With the advent of modern materials, the use of natural colors declined. Artists began using synthetic and nitrocellulose-based paints, Duco colors, acrylics, and oil paints. Similarly, *Chinthalappam*—the traditional base material—was replaced by chemical-based alternatives like NC putti and *lappam* putti. Natural binders and varnishes also gave way to artificial adhesives and synthetic coatings.

Despite these material transformations, recent years have witnessed a revival movement aimed at reintroducing eco-friendly practices. There is a renewed interest in using vegetable dyes and sustainable colors, while still relying on the traditional hereditary techniques passed down through generations.

The themes and motifs in contemporary Nirmal art continue to draw inspiration from mythology, history, nature, flora and fauna, birds, animals, village life, marriage rituals, royal processions, and folk traditions. Additionally, elements from other regional crafts and design styles have been incorporated, enriching the diversity of the art form while introducing certain deviations from its original structure.

A significant milestone in the development of Nirmal art was the establishment of a cooperative society in Nirmal village in 1955. This initiative supported artisans, promoted the craft, and provided training opportunities for newcomers. As a result, many skilled artists have emerged and received recognition at both the state and national levels.

## Notable Nirmal Artists:

- Eruva Anantha Rao – Honored with multiple national and international awards.
- Thota Laxmi Narayana
- Nampalli Rajasekhar
- Bhusani Bhaskara Varma
- Padma Rao Varma
- Narsingam Racharla Lambaiah – Recipient of the National Master Craftsman Award in 1990, presented by then-President Giani Zail Singh.
- N. Rajasekhara Varma – Received the State Award in 2014 for excellence in Nirmal art.

- Rajendra Kumar Naqqash – A senior artist actively involved in training the younger generation through *Shilparamam*, the crafts village in Hyderabad.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

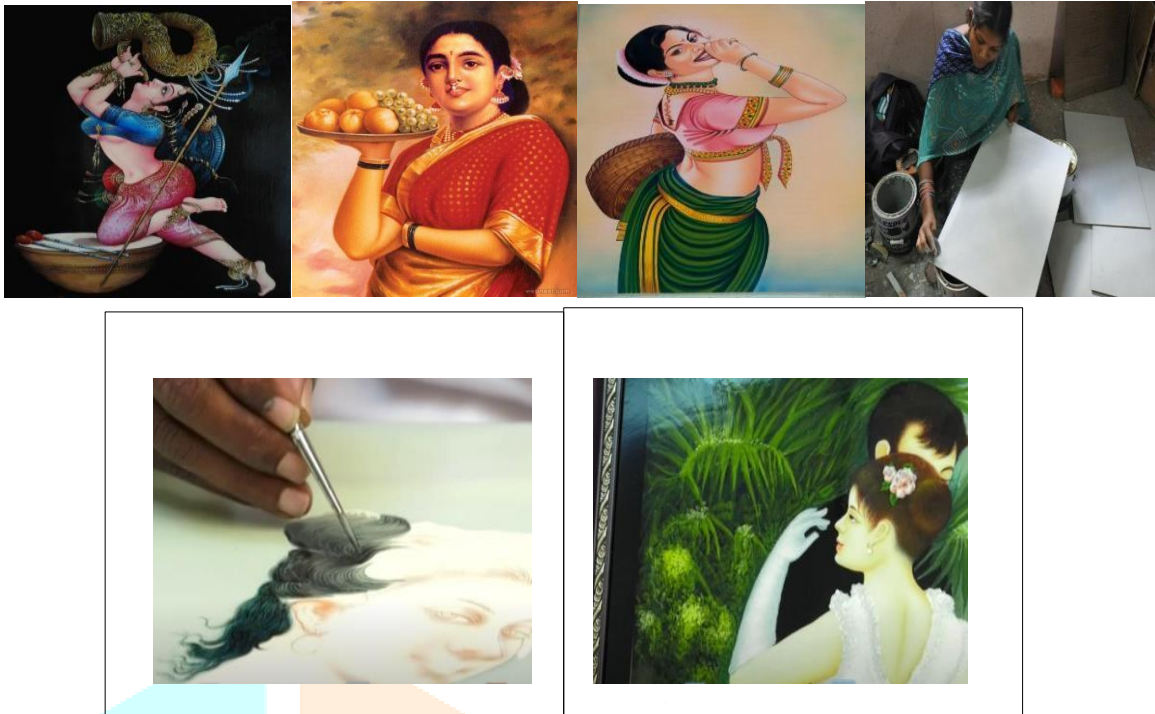
The historical origins of the Nirmal craft remain sparsely documented. However, Nirmal town, located in the northern region of Telangana, holds a distinguished legacy in both regional and global spheres of art and craft. Over the centuries—from the 14th century to the present day—the Nirmal craft, particularly the *Naqqashi* style, has received considerable patronage from various royal dynasties including Hindu rulers, the Mughals, Nizams, Nawabs, and support from government bodies, non-governmental organizations, associations, and private entrepreneurs. Initially, the artisans primarily depicted mythological figures and drew inspiration from nature—illustrating birds, animals, and trees in their creations (Development Commissioner-Handicrafts, Southern Regional Office, Chennai, 2009–2010).

One of the most remarkable aspects of Nirmal art is the preservation of its core techniques over time. Despite the passage of centuries, the foundational methods of this artistic tradition have seen minimal alteration. However, in recent years, the art form has been facing significant challenges. A major concern is the declining demand and reduced sales, which have led to deteriorating working conditions for the artisans. Consequently, many artists are abandoning their ancestral profession in search of more financially stable alternatives. The perception that other careers offer better economic returns is becoming increasingly widespread, especially among younger generations. Youth engagement in Nirmal painting has sharply declined, as the art demands high levels of patience, skill, and time—qualities that are less appealing in today's fast-paced, profit-driven world. The passion to continue this hereditary and skill-intensive *Naqqashi* tradition is waning. Additionally, the rise of automated digital printing has presented stiff competition to traditional hand-crafted art forms. Compounding this issue is the scarcity and high cost of raw materials essential for Nirmal paintings. The lack of reliable suppliers and limited availability of natural resources have further impeded the practice and sustainability of this unique craft (Rao, 2012).



Sl No.	Hue	Component used
1.	white	Indian tin oxide, calcium white, Lime stone, Lead white
2.	Black	kaolin, qasim solution of kalamkari, ivory, almond
3.	Indigo blue	Indigo stones/ leaves
4.	Flesh colour	burnt amber or sienna
5.	The Indian Red	Alizarin, Sappan wood, Ratanjoth, vermilion mixed with china clay base
6.	Yellow	red ochre, clay, turmeric, safflower





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