अभिनवधारा
ABHINAVDHARA
International Journal of Innovation in Indic Studies
ISSN: 2583-5149
SPECIAL EDITION -2, VOL- 2
SEPTEMBER 2026
www.ijiis-org.com
SHRIJANSHODH 2026: International Conference on Indian Knowledge Systems, Art, Design, Wellness, and Cultural Heritage Date: 29-30 August 2026
SRIJANSHODH2026-27

Traditional Indian Visual Language and Symbolism: Specifically in the Context of Mural Paintings of the World's Oldest City, Kashi

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Abstract

Indian visual language has defined the art, philosophy, and culture of this region for centuries. In Indian art, numerous symbols are use as a form of visual language. The presented research paper is an analytical study of the traditional murals as symbols of Kashi, widely considered the oldest city in the world. The depiction of traditional symbols on the walls of Kashi, ancient buildings, ruins, ghats, and alleys gives its art a unique place globally. Such artwork and numerous visual symbols were primarily created on exterior walls, the purpose of which was to convey spiritual, religious, and auspicious meanings awakens and flows. Through this study, I discovered the current status of these arts today, the changes that have occurred in their meaning and significance, and the extent of their decline and growth. Even in the modern digital age, where we use graphics and icons as a form of symbolic visual language, the study of ancient Indian symbolism helps us understand how visual cues and symbol-like signs leave a profound impact on the human mind. Additionally, ancient texts, research literature, field observations, and visual analysis have also formed the basis of this work. The mural art of Kashi, encompassing the Indian knowledge tradition, folk cultures, and religious beliefs are living documents of continuity, which remain alive through artistic symbols. The colors, lines, shapes, forms of deities, swastika, kalash (sacred pitcher), trishul (trident), and other traditional symbols used in these paintings act as a visual dialogue of Indian cultural philosophy. This research paper analyzes the symbolic meanings and the characteristics of the visual language mural of Kashi paintings, thereby developing a comprehensive understanding of the traditional expression of Indian art. It is a confluence of art and philosophy that retains its significance across areas".

Keywords – Visual Language, Kashi, Mural, Digital Age, Tradition

1.Introduction

Mural Painting- work of art, prepare on the wall. The ground coated with an exceedingly thin layer of lime plaster over which paintings were drawn on wet plaster is called Fresco Bunno method. The other method of painting is known as Tempera or Fresco Secco where work done on drt plaster or wall. In this research paper I describe about traditional mural wall painting of Kashi. Kashi (Varanasi or Banaras) is one of the world's oldest continuously inhabited cities and occupies a unique position in the cultural and spiritual history of India. Revered as the sacred abode of Lord Shiva, the city has functioned for centuries as a centre of pilgrimage, philosophy, education, ritual practices, music, literature, and

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visual arts. Its sacred geography, shaped by the River Ganga, temples, ghats, monasteries, and pilgrimage circuits, has created a cultural landscape where religion and artistic expression are inseparable.

Traditional mural painting in Kashi is not merely decorative but serves as a visual language communicating religious beliefs, philosophical ideas, social values, and collective memory. The walls of temples, ghats, monasteries, palaces, and residential courtyards even common old houses are adorned with symbolic motifs such as the lotus, kalasha, swastika, trident, sacred animals, floral patterns, and narratives from Hindu mythology. These visual elements derive their meanings from Indian philosophical concepts, Puranic literature, ritual traditions, and indigenous aesthetic principles. Through colours, composition, iconography, and spatial organization, mural paintings transform architectural surfaces into sacred spaces that reinforce devotional experience and cultural identity.



(Fig:1 Door/Dwara Painting), Source: https://share.google/3iqgvJhnLvE76m5

The history of mural painting in Kashi reflects the city's long-standing interaction between religion, society, and artistic innovation. Although ancient mural traditions in India can be traced to sites such as Ajanta, the mural heritage of Kashi developed through continuous patronage by temple authorities, royal families, merchant communities, monasteries, and local artisans. During the medieval and early modern periods, the construction of temples, havelis, dharamshalas, and riverfront architecture created new opportunities for mural decoration. These paintings incorporated influences from regional folk traditions, aesthetics, Mughal decorative elements, and later colonial encounters while retaining a distinctly sacred visual vocabulary rooted in Indian symbolism. Contemporary murals in Kashi continue this tradition by adapting classical iconography to urban public art, heritage conservation initiatives, and cultural tourism.

In recent decades, rapid urbanisation, commercialization, environmental degradation, and changing artistic practices have posed significant challenges to the preservation of traditional mural heritage. Nevertheless, renewed interest in cultural conservation, heritage tourism, and public art has revived attention towards the visual traditions of Kashi. This research investigates the traditional Indian visual language and symbolism embedded in the mural paintings of Kashi with particular emphasis on their contemporary relevance. It examines the philosophical meanings of major visual symbols, analyses their relationship with the sacred cultural landscape of the city, and explores how these symbolic traditions continue to inspire present-day artistic practices. By integrating perspectives from art history, religious studies, cultural geography, and heritage conservation, the study seeks to demonstrate that

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Kashi's mural paintings constitute an enduring visual archive of India's civilizational knowledge and continue to shape contemporary understandings of cultural heritage.

2. Literature Review: Concept of Traditional Indian Visual Language

Traditional Indian visual language refers to a structured system of artistic communication in which forms, colours, motifs, gestures, and compositions convey philosophical, religious, and cultural meanings. Unlike Western naturalistic representation, Indian visual art emphasizes symbolic expression and spiritual experience over realism. Every visual element whether a lotus, mandala, trident, or sacred colour functions as a sign that communicates metaphysical ideas and cultural values rooted in Indian traditions. This visual language has evolved through sacred texts, temple architecture, mural paintings, sculpture, and manuscript illustrations, creating a continuous artistic tradition that remains relevant in contemporary Indian art (Coomaraswamy, 1934; Kramrisch, 1953).

2.1 Symbolism in Indian Art

Symbolism is one of the defining characteristics of Indian visual culture. Natural forms, geometric patterns, divine attributes, and colours are employed to express abstract philosophical concepts. For example, the **lotus** symbolizes purity and spiritual awakening, the **trident (Trishula)** represents the three cosmic powers, the **kalasha** signifies prosperity and fertility, while colours such as saffron, white, blue, and red communicate renunciation, purity, infinity, and divine energy respectively. These symbols transcend decorative purposes and function as visual representations of religious and cultural beliefs (Coomaraswamy, 1934; Zimmer, 1946).

2.3 Philosophical Foundations: Rasa, Dhvani, and Satyam-Shivam-Sundaram

The philosophical foundation of Indian visual language integrates aesthetic, spiritual, and ethical values. **Rasa** emphasizes emotional and spiritual realization through artistic experience. **Dhvani**, developed by Ānandavardhana, highlights suggestion or implied meaning, where artworks communicate ideas beyond literal representation. The principle of **Satyam–Shivam–Sundaram** (Truth–Auspiciousness–Beauty) reflects the Indian belief that true beauty is inseparable from truth and spiritual well-being. Consequently, Indian mural paintings are designed not only for visual appreciation but also as mediums of contemplation, devotion, and moral instruction (Ānandavardhana, trans. Ingalls et al., 1990; Coomaraswamy, 1934).

3. Research Methodology

The study is qualitative and based on the Primary data collection during the field visits in kashi through observations, interviews, and participation. I have presented this research paper after gathering information on the subject through primary and secondary sources, hoping to contribute new insights to the art community.

Historical Development of Murals of Kashi

3.1 Temple Murals

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Temple murals constitute the oldest and most significant form of mural painting in Kashi. Like Sankankat Mochan inside temple mural, Kashi Vishwanath temple Chaook or banaras ghat sides lane (galiya). The sacred geography of Varanasi, dominated by temples dedicated to Shiva, Vishnu, Durga, and other deities, encouraged the use of wall paintings as visual narratives of religious philosophy. Temple interiors and mandapas were traditionally decorated with scenes from the Ramayana, Mahabharata, Shiva and Bhagavata Purana, and local legends associated with Kashi. These murals served not merely as decoration but also as educational tools for pilgrims, communicating sacred stories through symbolic imagery. The iconography followed prescriptions found in the Shilpa Shastras and Vishnudharmottara Purana, emphasizing spiritual symbolism rather than naturalistic representation.

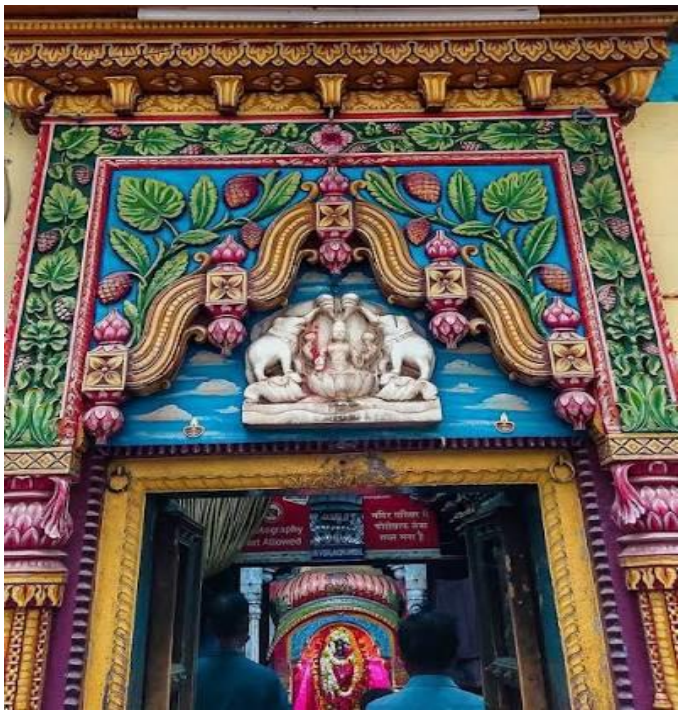


Fig:2 Vishlakshi Temple door, varanasi, Source: https://kashiarrival.com/vishalakshi-mata-temple/

3.2 Palace Murals

During the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries, the rulers of Kashi and wealthy merchant families commissioned murals in palaces (havelis), forts, and riverfront mansions like Brijrama Palace and Ramnagar Fort. The riverfront palaces (ghat architecture) became important centers for preserving mural traditions that reflected both political authority and sacred identity.

3.3 Monastic and Domestic Wall Paintings

Monasteries (mathas), ashrams, and traditional households have long preserved mural traditions in Kashi. Domestic wall paintings are commonly created during festivals such as Diwali, Dev Deepawali, Navaratri, and marriage ceremonies. These paintings include auspicious motifs such as lotus flowers, kalasha, swastika, footprints of Lakshmi, elephants, peacocks, and sacred trees. Unlike temple murals, domestic paintings emphasize prosperity, fertility, protection, and family welfare while preserving local artistic traditions transmitted across generations, particularly by women artisans.

3.4 Influence of Folk and Classical Traditions

The mural tradition of Kashi represents a synthesis of classical Indian artistic principles and regional folk traditions like kohabar, sanjhi art etc. Classical influences derive from Sanskrit treatises on iconography, temple architecture, and painting, whereas folk traditions contribute simplified forms, vibrant colours, and narrative spontaneity. Decorative patterns, floral borders, geometric motifs, and ritual symbols reflect indigenous craftsmanship while adapting elements from Mughal, and local Banarasi artistic traditions. Kohbar is a mural typically created inside home, courtyard or places of

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worship. In this mural the sun, moon, sacred tree and other figures are created using bright colours. It is typically created on special occasions such as wedding. Kashi is a prominent site for this type of mural.



Fig: 3, Kohabar Art, Source : https://www.reddit.com/

4. Symbolism in the Mural Paintings of Kashi

The visual language of Kashi murals is deeply rooted in Indian religious philosophy, where symbols communicate metaphysical concepts, religious and ethical values, and cosmological beliefs. Such kind of wall paintings are made before marriage or any auspicious function or festival. After painting the outer wall of the house, traditional artwork are made by calling a local folk wall painter. The entire art work done by artist directly filled by the drawing the outline of the painting with brush. These colours are made from natural pigment, after filling the colours the paintings are outlined with black colour charcoal. The main entrance door of the house the figure of lord Ganesha is made in the top middle, along the edges of that Shubh-Labh or Swatstika, Om and some more other kind of visual language, symbols are made. It is believed that by placing such figures, or pictures, idols, negative energy does not enter the house, and the Internal and External environment of the house becomes good. After the completion of their work, the painters receive money along with (akshat) Rice, betel leaf, turmeric stick, whole areca nute etc. It is considered auspicious.

Kalasha

The Kalasha (sacred vessel) represents abundance, fertility, immortality, and divine presence. Filled with water and decorated with mango leaves and a coconut, it is regarded as the symbolic seat of Lakshmi and is prominently painted during religious festivals and temple ceremonies.



Fig:4 Wall painting Kalasha, Source : https://share.google

Lotus (Padma)

The lotus symbolizes purity, spiritual awakening, creation, and divine consciousness. Although rooted in muddy waters, it blossoms untouched by impurity, making it a universal symbol of enlightenment in Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism. Lotus motifs frequently appear beneath deities and around sacred architectural elements in Kashi murals. **Reference:** Coomaraswamy (1934); Zimmer (1946).

Swastika

The Swastika is among the oldest auspicious symbols in Indian civilization. In Kashi murals, it signifies well-being, prosperity, cosmic balance, and the eternal cycle of creation. Its four arms are interpreted

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as representing the four Vedas, four directions, or four aims of human life (Purusharthas). **Reference:** Zimmer (1946).

Trishul

The Trishul is the principal emblem of Lord Shiva, the presiding deity of Kashi. It represents creation, preservation, and destruction, as well as the transcendence of the three **gunas** (Sattva, Rajas, and Tamas). In murals, it signifies spiritual power and liberation. **Reference:** Zimmer (1946).

Om (ॐ)

Om represents the primordial cosmic sound and the unity of Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva. In murals, it symbolizes divine consciousness and the origin of creation, frequently appearing at temple entrances and sacred spaces. **Reference:** Kramrisch (1953).

Nandi

Nandi the sacred bull of shiva, symbolizes the ideal devotee and acts as a mediator between worshippers and the deity. The cow represents motherhood nourishment, compassion, abundance, and sacredness in Hindu tradition. In Kashi murals, it frequently appears with Krishna or in pastoral scenes, emphasizing non-violence and prosperity. **Reference:** Zimmer (1946).



Fig: 5 Nandi or cow mural, Source: https://share.google

Ganga

The River Ganga is the central spiritual symbol of Kashi. Murals depict Ganga as divine goddess seated on a **Makara** (mythical aquatic creature), symbolizing purification, life, liberation (moksha), and eternal continuity. Ghats and ritual bathing scenes reinforce the sacred identity of the city.

Tree of Life

The Tree of Life represents fertility, continuity, regeneration, and the interconnectedness of all living beings. Its roots and branches signify the relationship between the earthly and the divine, making it a common decorative motif in temples and domestic murals. Commonly, banana, mango, and date trees are depicted in mural paintings.

5. Challenges in Preserving the Mural Heritage of Kashi

The mural heritage of Kashi (Varanasi) faces multiple challenges arising from rapid urban transformation, environmental degradation, changing socio-economic conditions, and in adequate conservation policies. Although mural paintings continue to represent the city's sacred identity and

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artistic traditions, their long-term preservation requires integrated efforts involving heritage professionals, government agencies, local communities, and artists.

6.1 Urbanisation

Rapid urbanisation is one of the greatest threats to Kashi's mural heritage. Population growth, infrastructure expansion, widening of roads, modern housing, and tourism-related construction have altered the historic urban scene of the city.

6.2 Loss of Traditional Techniques

Traditional mural painting in Kashi historically relied on natural pigments, lime plaster, mineral colours, and artisanal knowledge transmitted through hereditary craftsmen. Today, these practices are declining due to reduced patronage, industrial paints, changing building materials, and limited opportunities for apprenticeship. Younger generations often pursue alternative occupations, resulting in the gradual disappearance of specialized mural-making skills. The Government of India's documentation on Banaras mural painting also recognizes the need to preserve traditional techniques through documentation, training, and institutional support.



Fig:6 Dwarapala, Source: https://fineartamerica.com

6.3 Heritage Management

Effective heritage management remains a major challenge in Kashi. Conservation experts recommend adopting integrated heritage management approaches that combine scientific conservation, community participation, digital documentation, legal protection, and sustainable tourism. Such strategies can help balance urban development with the preservation of Kashi's unique mural heritage.

7. Literature Gap and Future Prospects of the Mural Heritage of Kashi

The future of Kashi's mural tradition depends on balancing heritage preservation with technological innovation, sustainable conservation practices, community participation, and international recognition. As one of India's most significant sacred cultural landscapes, Kashi possesses immense potential to become a global model for the preservation and revitalization of living mural traditions.

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7.1 Digital Archiving

Digital archiving has emerged as one of the most effective strategies for preserving mural heritage against deterioration, natural disasters, and urban transformation. Advanced technologies such as high-resolution photography, 3D laser scanning, photogrammetry, Geographic Information Systems (GIS), and digital databases enable accurate documentation of murals, including their iconography, pigments, inscriptions, and conservation history.

7.2 Heritage Policy

The long-term protection of Kashi's murals requires comprehensive heritage policies that integrate cultural conservation with urban planning and sustainable development. Heritage policies should provide legal protection for mural bearing historic buildings, encourage regular documentation, allocate dedicated conservation funding, and promote interdisciplinary collaboration among conservation professionals, historians, architects, and local communities. Although Kashi remains on UNESCO's Tentative List, adopting international conservation standards would significantly strengthen the preservation of its mural heritage.

7.3 Sustainable Conservation

Sustainable conservation of kashi’s traditional mural painting extends beyond physical restoration to include preventive conservation, environmental monitoring, traditional craftsmanship, and community participation. Conservation should prioritize the use of compatible materials such as lime plaster and natural pigments while respecting the authenticity and historical integrity of murals. Traditional mural symbolism continues to inspire contemporary artists who reinterpret sacred motifs through modern artistic media, public murals, digital art, installation art, and community-based cultural projects. Digital exhibitions, international conferences, collaborative conservation projects, and scholarly publications would enhance the global visibility of Kashi's mural heritage while promoting intercultural dialogue. Such recognition would contribute to both cultural diplomacy and sustainable local development through responsible heritage tourism. **Fig:7 Local Mural Artist, Source :** https://share.google



9. Conclusion

The mural paintings of Kashi represent a unique synthesis of India's artistic, religious, and philosophical traditions. Their visual language, expressed through sacred symbols such as the lotus, Om, Trishul, Kalasha, Mandalas, Nandi, and the River Ganga, embodies centuries of accumulated cultural knowledge and spiritual thought. These murals function not merely as decorative artworks but as visual

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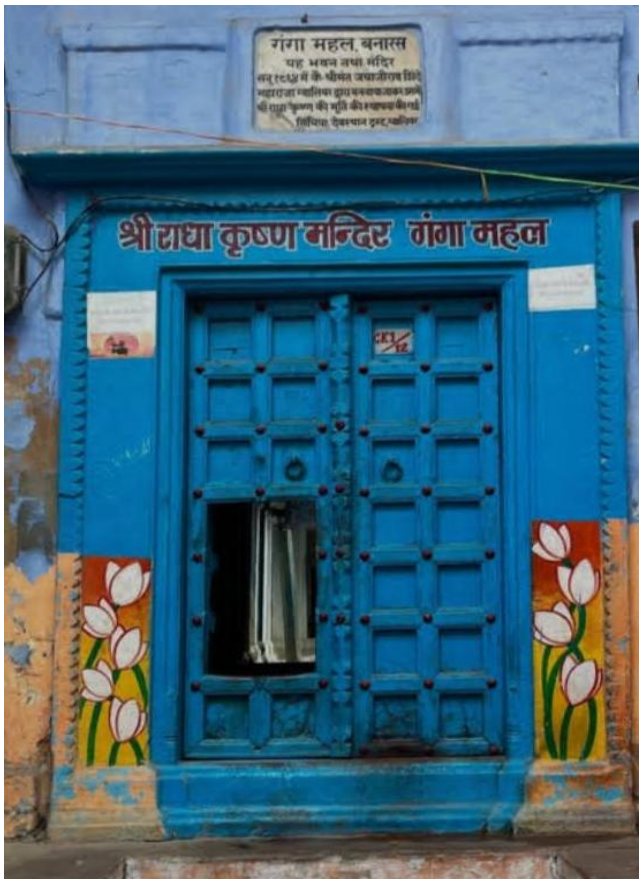
texts communicating concepts of cosmology, devotion, ethics, and cultural identity. The mural art of kashi has always played a significant role in india's visual art language and symbols. Continuous efforts must be made to ensure that government incentives and schemes reach the local artists who have been practicing this mural art from for generation.

Some photos taken by me





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International Journal of Innovation in Indic Studies
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SHRIJANSHODH 2026: International Conference on Indian Knowledge Systems, Art, Design, Wellness, and Cultural Heritage Date: 29-30 August 2026
PAPER ID - SRIJANSHODH2026-29

Representations of Radha and Krishna in Rajasthani Miniature Painting: A Comparative Analysis of the Mewar, Kishangarh, and Bundi Styles

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Abstract

The devotional love of Radha and Krishna forms one of the most enduring aesthetic and spiritual themes in North Indian art, and it found some of its richest visual expression in the courtly workshops of Rajasthan between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries. This paper undertakes a comparative study of three regional idioms of Rajasthani miniature painting Mewar, Kishangarh, and Bundi and asks how each reinterpreted the same devotional subject in line with its own political circumstances, theological affiliations, and aesthetic preferences [1], [12], [20]. Drawing on the pictorial conventions, patronage histories, and literary inheritances associated with each school, the paper argues that although the three traditions shared a common textual reservoir of Vaishnava bhakti poetry, each court translated that inheritance into a visibly distinct pictorial language: Mewar's saturated and assertively Rajput courtly idiom, Kishangarh's lyrical and idealised elongation, and Bundi's naturalistic immersion of the divine couple within landscape [4], [8], [11]. A further concern of the paper is the shared institutional context of the Pushti Marg, the devotional path founded by the theologian Vallabhacharya, which linked several Mewar ateliers to the pilgrimage centre of Nathdwara and which has rarely been examined

alongside a direct stylistic comparison of the kind attempted here. The paper concludes that regional variation in the imagery of Radha and Krishna offers a valuable lens for understanding how devotional painting was shaped as much by dynastic identity and local taste as by shared scripture.

Keywords: Radha Krishna, Indian Miniature art, Rajasthani art, Divine art

1. Introduction

Over roughly three centuries, the princely courts of Rajasthan produced one of the most

distinctive bodies of devotional painting in South Asia [1]. Within this larger tradition, few subjects recur as insistently as the love of Radha and Krishna, a theme drawn from the

Bhagavata Purana, the Gita Govinda of the twelfth-century poet Jayadeva, and later vernacular compositions such as Keshavdas's Rasikapriya [12]. Yet the visual handling of this shared