

Name of the Element; Kolam: Ritualistic Threshold Drawings and Designs of Tamil Nadu, India

Community/ies: Women of all communities in South India

Region: Kolam is practised in Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and Kerala. It is also practised by South Indian people settled in other states of India.

Brief Description: Kolam is a ritualistic design drawn at the threshold of households and temples. It is drawn everyday at dawn and dusk by women in South India who inherit this tradition from their elders. Kolam is believed to be a labyrinth to ensnare harmful spirits and prevent them from causing harm. Kolam marks festivals, seasons and important events in a woman's life such as birth, first menstruation and marriage. Kolam indicates a sphere of 'positive vibes' generated by a feminine energy that influences both the interior domestic space and the outside world. Kolam is a free-hand drawing with symmetrical and neat geometrical patterns.

The drawings are very conceptual and a huge repertoire of designs is stored in the cultural memory of the people. Kolam is laid on a mathematical dotted grid. It is produced either by nonlinear lines interlaced in endless knots around dots, or by lines connecting dots in a decorative design. Kolam, with its mathematical abstraction, geometric shapes and repetitive units, accommodates floral motifs, birds, animals, butterflies, intertwined snakes etc. The deceptively simple domestic art of Kolam is as intricate and conceptual as the jacquard weave or the Islamic tile design. Comparisons are also drawn with Roman floor mosaics and Celtic interlaces.