

## [Lakshmi's Geometry](#)

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## Lakshmi's Geometry

The devotional house decor arts of India's women are celebrated in a fond photographic pageant, "Painted Prayers."

In the world of art scant attention, if any, has been paid to the millennia-old household arts of India's women. As you read this article, millions of girls and women are producing enchanting, intricate and meaningful art over the walls, floors and accouterments of their home. Even a cardboard shack in a slum is imbued with elevating, and supernaturally protective, beauty.

Now a coffee table-style pictorial book titled *Painted Prayers-Women's Art in Village India*, showcases this rustic religious artform. Photographed and written by Stephen P. Huyler, the book is a gilded paean to an uncelebrated heritage. The following is excerpted from the book's introduction.

Everywhere in India, Hindu women regularly paint their homes as part of religious ritual. The wall and floor decorations of Indian women are usually ephemeral, remaining hours, days or weeks before being worn off by the abrasion of activity or weather and replaced by new interpretations of design. Women throughout the subcontinent herald important occasions either by repainting their entire houses or by decorating auspicious portions of them. This ornamentation has many names, depending upon the culture in which it is found. In the western Himalayas it is called *apna* or *likhnu*, in Uttar Pradesh it is *cowka purna* or *sona rakhna*, in the Gangetic Plain to the east it is *aripan* or *alpona*, and in Orissa it is *chita*. In Western India it is known as *sathiya* and *mandana*, while in central and south India it is called *rangavalli*, *rangoli*, and *kolam*.

The synthesis of all of the components of the house is viewed as its spirit. A household in balance is believed to be in spiritual harmony and must be cared for and protected. Danger lurks outside the home, in the form of diseases, natural

calamities, accidents, violence, and the greed, manipulation, and malevolence of others. Wall and floor diagrams are often magical diagrams to prevent the intrusion of harm into the home, similar in purpose to hex signs on Pennsylvania dutch barns. The collective household spirit is most often viewed as feminine and is worshiped as the manifestation of a Goddess. Lakshmi is the pan-Indian Goddess of abundance, fertility, and prosperity, and is usually considered to be the deity that protects the home. Although there are many exceptions, most of the household painting and the decoration of walls and floors by Indian women are dedicated to Her. They are visual forms of prayer beseeching Her aid to ensure the health and prosperity of the family.

Urban growth and the dictates of architectural fashion threaten its [this art's] future. Rekha, the wife of a factory worker in Delhi, says: `When I lived in my village we had to do all those things. It was how we were trained. Now I live in this block of flats. Why should I paint my walls? We live differently now. When I go home to visit my family, then sometimes I will still make paintings with my mother. But my daughter, she does not know this thing. She does not want to learn."

Throughout India, except in eastern Orissa, the verb used to describe the ornamentation of homes is `to write,' not `to paint.' Women will say that they have written decorations on the wall or floor. They view their paintings as a means of communicating directly with the Gods. Kamala, a basket weaver in north Bihar, remarked: "First I am silent and in quiet the picture is made in my heart. Then I bring it out whole from my heart to write on the walls. It is a message from me to Ma (the Mother Goddess), my painted prayer, and when it is pure I know she will hear me."

It is possible that this tradition of ornamentation has been passed down from mother to daughter for thousands of years. In a society dominated by men, it is the inheritance and artistic expression of women through their own techniques and symbols-prayers painted or `written' from the heart.

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