

Visual Voices of Kerala's Politics: A Study of Hand-Painted Letterforms and Typeface Development

KID: 20240319

Malayalam hand-painted political graffiti is a vast yet understudied aspect of Kerala's visual culture. This project undertook an extensive field study to document and analyze the letterforms used in political graffiti across urban centers in eight districts of Kerala. The research focused on the typographic diversity, stylistic evolution, and socio-political significance of these graffiti, revealing unique patterns that reflect Kerala's political history and artistic traditions, in addition to categorizing the letterforms and generating six type families.

Research and Documentation

The study involved an extensive photographic survey of political graffiti (Figure. 1) and it was observed that graffiti primarily serves as a tool for political communication, used for electoral campaigns, trade union announcements, and ideological slogans. These days, they tend more towards showcasing the names of political candidates and announcing and drawing attention to political gatherings/meetings. Through typographic analysis, the graffiti was categorized into three primary styles (with further subcategories):

- Monolinear – Simple, uniform stroke widths or have equal weight across their anatomy.
- Modulated – Formulaically varying stroke widths often achieved using a tool, in some cases, simulates the usage of a tool.
- Ornamental – Highly stylized forms, incorporating bold flourishes and artistic elements

Further, Kerala's graffiti exhibits a regional hierarchy in letterform preferences, with certain districts favoring decorative approaches while others heralding functional and practical methods. With the rise of digital political campaigns, hand-painted graffiti has been experiencing a steady decline, with some districts witnessing drastic reductions in its presence.



Figure1: Some letterforms documented during the study

Interviews with Artisans

To understand the artistic process and evolution of this craft, interviews were conducted with graffiti artists across generations.



Veteran artisans corroborate the decline in hand-painted political graffiti, largely due to the rise of digital flex printing and the disappearance of the apprenticeship system. Despite these challenges, artisans continue to create hand-painted works, balancing political messaging, personal artistic expression, and commercial viability. The research highlighted their role as cultural historians, preserving Kerala's evolving visual language through their work.



Figure.2: Explorations using the type families.

Typeface Development

A significant outcome of this research was the development of six type families, directly inspired by the documented graffiti. These typefaces were designed by extracting core stylistic elements from different graffiti samples and adapting them for digital use. The outputs incorporate mono-weight and modulated forms, hand-drafting (scanned, digitally hand-drawn) and digital techniques (boolean operations), creative usage of typographic features such as counters, inlines/outlines, loops, serifs and shadows. (Figure. 2,3)

The typefaces serve both as a tribute to Kerala's political graffiti culture and the project as a whole, serves as a step toward preserving this fading art form in the digital age. They hold potential applications in graphic design and academic research on Malayalam typography and visual culture.

This project, through its documentation, analysis, and typeface creation, ensures that the legacy of Malayalam political graffiti is preserved while opening new pathways for future design explorations.

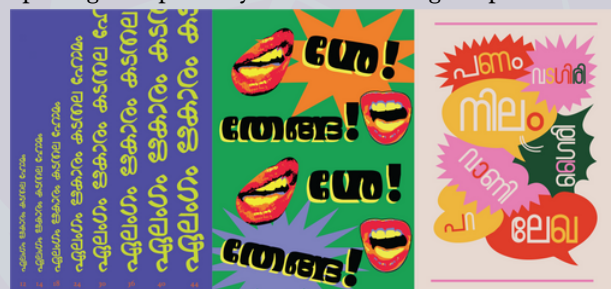


Figure3: Explorations using the type families

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