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Kapu Rajaiah The Quintessential Emblem of Telangana's Indigenous Folk Art Tradition

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents an in-depth biographical and cultural study of Dr. Kapu Rajaiah (1925–2012), a pioneering figure in Telangana folk painting whose life and work embody the spirit, aesthetics, and socio-cultural narratives of rural India. Drawing from archival sources, personal reflections, institutional records, and visual analysis, the study traces Rajaiah's artistic evolution—from early wash techniques to tempera and oil mediums—while emphasizing his unwavering commitment to folk themes and indigenous expression.

The paper explores Rajaiah's stylistic philosophy, his resistance to abstraction, and his belief in art as a vehicle for cultural preservation. It documents his portrayals of vanishing occupational communities, ritual performances, and regional festivals such as Bonalu and Bathukamma, positioning his oeuvre as a visual ethnography of Telangana's lived traditions. Rajaiah's institutional contributions, national recognitions, and pedagogical legacy are also examined, alongside his poetic work Kunchepadalu and his role in shaping future generations of artists.

Through a synthesis of textual and visual sources, the paper argues that Kapu Rajaiah's art transcends decorative function, serving instead as a cultural archive and a timeless testament to the folk soul. His canvases not only reflect the vibrancy of Telangana's rural life but also assert the enduring relevance of regional art in India's national and global cultural discourse.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

QUANTITATIVE & QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS

DATA AND SOURCES OF DATA

This research is based on both quantitative and qualitative analysis. Data has been collected from scholarly books, exhibition catalogues, monographs, archival records, and contemporary studies on Indian folk painting, with a specific focus on Telangana visual traditions. Selected artworks of Dr. Kapu Rajaiah have been analysed to understand stylistic evolution, thematic consistency, and cultural symbolism. The extracted insights have been interpreted to highlight the role of folk painting in preserving regional identity and documenting socio-cultural narratives.

The primary data for this study consists of published monographs, curated collections, and firsthand documentation of Rajaiah's paintings across public institutions and private archives. Secondary data is derived from:

- ❖ Research books on Indian sculpture, folk painting, and visual ethnography
- ❖ Journal articles focusing on traditional art pedagogy, regional aesthetics, and cultural preservation
- ❖ Historical records documenting the evolution of Telangana folk art and its institutional recognition
- ❖ Exhibition catalogues, museum archives, and workshop documentation from Lalit Kala Akademi and regional art councils

Key sources include works by Chandrasekhar (1978), Rajaiah (1981), Sunkara (2021), Sharma (2012), Emani (2012), and other contemporary scholars in art history and cultural studies. The official digital archive www.kapurajaiah.org has also been consulted for visual references and biographical validation.

MAIN CONTENT

A Brush with Tradition: The Timeless Folk Vision of Kapu Rajaiah

IMAGE 1

KAPU RAJAIAH PHOTOGRAPH



Renowned as a synonym for Telangana's traditional folk painting, artist Kapu Rajaiah was born on April 6, 1925, in Siddipet, Medak district, to Bhoolakshmi and Raghavulu. In 1943, he enrolled at the Central School of Arts and Crafts in Hyderabad. Renting a modest room behind the school, he sustained himself by cooking his own meals while pursuing his studies. He completed the three-year course in 1946, earning an Intermediate Certificate in Arts. With unwavering dedication, he continued for two more years and obtained a Diploma in Painting. His mentors included Principal Khan Bahadur Syed Ahmad and artist Ziladdin. Rajaiah later pursued further studies at the prestigious J.J. School of Arts in Mumbai. Over a span of fourteen years, he earned acclaim for meticulously recreating the murals of the Ajanta caves, establishing himself as a masterful painter of national repute.

IMAGE 2

KAPU RAJAIAH ART WORK



Kapu Rajaiah's artistic trajectory was subtly shaped by the modernist impulses of distinguished Indian painters such as K.K. Hebbar, N.S. Bendre, and M.F. Husain. He frequently acknowledged his engagement with their oeuvres and appreciated their pursuit of distinctive stylistic vocabularies. Nevertheless, Rajaiah consistently identified Jamini Roy and Hebbar as his principal artistic lodestars. His creative evolution is marked by discernible phases: the formative stage reveals a deep affinity with the mural traditions of the Ajanta caves, while the subsequent phase reflects the nuanced influence of Deccani miniature aesthetics, particularly those associated with the Nakashi school. At national exhibitions convened under the auspices of the Lalit Kala Akademi in New Delhi, Rajaiah's works often commanded the attention of jurors, surpassing contemporaneous entries in both aesthetic sophistication and thematic depth.

IMAGE 3

KAPU RAJAIAH SCHOOL DAYS PHOTOGRAPH



Throughout both his formative years and his distinguished career as an artist, Kapu Rajaiah received numerous accolades and honors from various institutions. He was conferred the titles of Kalapravina in 1993, Kala Vibhushana in 1997, and the prestigious Hamsa Award in 2000. His works were frequently exhibited at esteemed venues such as the National Gallery of Modern Art in New Delhi, the Salar Jung Museum, and the Andhra Pradesh Lalit Kala Akademi. Several of his paintings remain part of these collections to this day. In 1988, he was awarded a Senior Fellowship by the Government of India, and in 1992, he received a Distinguished Award in Painting from Telugu University. In 1963, Rajaiah founded the Lalit Kala Samithi, a pivotal institution for the promotion of visual arts. His painting *Mugguru Maguvulu* (Three Women) stands as a testament to his unparalleled dedication, artistic finesse, and creative singularity. Many acclaimed artists have likened his brushwork to the vibrant arrangement of flowers in a Bathukamma festival, praising the lyrical beauty and cultural depth of his pictorial style.

Kapu Rajaiah, a painter deeply rooted in the pride of ancient cultural traditions, exhibited minimal inclination toward modernity or transient fashions. This ideological disposition made urban life in Hyderabad somewhat discomfiting for him. Consequently, he chose Siddipet-his birthplace and childhood home-as the enduring canvas of his life and art. Rajaiah held a profound conviction that living and working as an artist and educator on his native soil offered unmatched creative comfort and emotional resonance. Immersed in a personal universe shaped by tradition, mythology, belief, and imagination, he remained content within the cultural landscape of Siddipet. Echoing Kandinsky's philosophy that 'to create a work of art is to create a world,' Rajaiah often remarked that he continuously experienced the world around him while simultaneously generating new worlds through his art. He believed that his artistic universe was ever-renewing, perpetually evolving.

IMAGE 4**KAPU RAJAIAH ART WORK**

Kapu Rajaiah's artistic universe was inextricably bound to the ethos of folk tradition. Consequently, among modern-generation artists, he was widely regarded as a staunch traditionalist-a label he embraced with pride. 'I am indeed a traditionalist, and I welcome that recognition. After all, modernity itself emerges from tradition and remains embedded within it. Traditional art is timeless; it shall never perish,' he would often assert with clarity and conviction. For Rajaiah, painting was not merely a vocation but the very breath and aspiration of his existence. Every moment of his life was oriented toward the act of creation. Even his meals were completed within five minutes-a testament to his urgency to return to his brush and canvas. Such was his immersion in the artistic process that his paintings radiated a vitality and immediacy acknowledged even by contemporary artists. They concurred that Rajaiah's works possessed a rare, living presence-an extension of the artist's own inseparable bond with his craft.

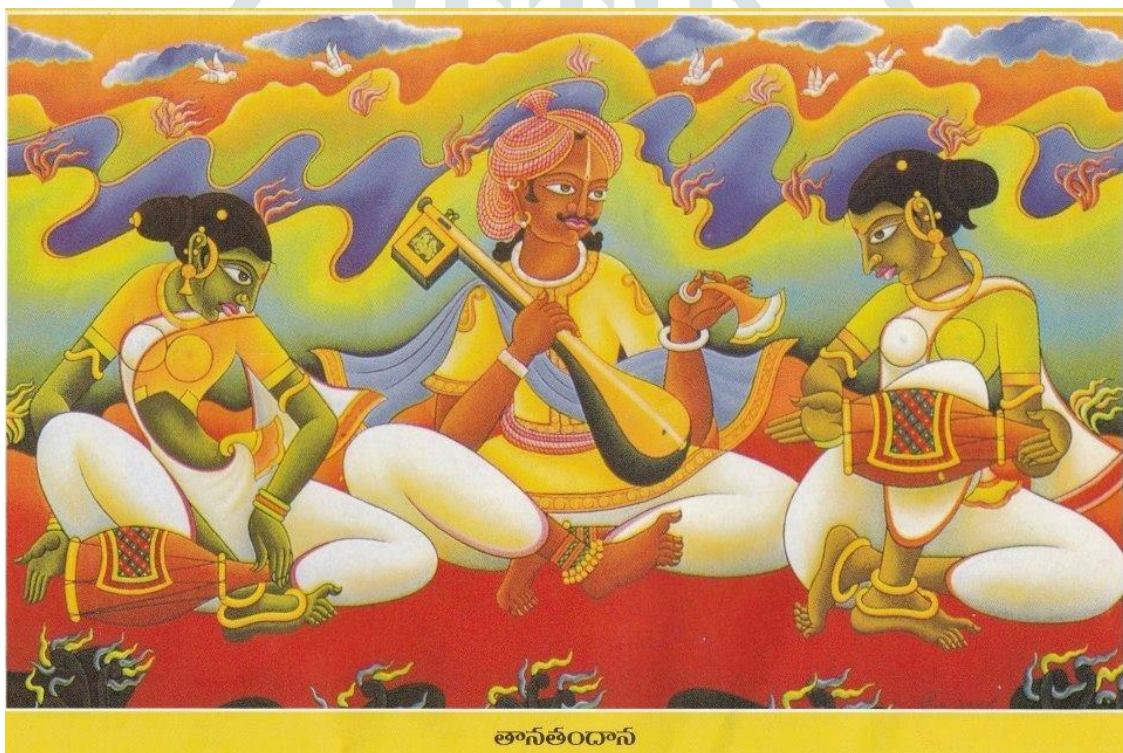
IMAGE 5**KAPU RAJAIAH ART WORK**

Kapu Rajaiah infused life into his canvases only when the subject had been fully internalized and emotionally envisioned. This deep engagement rendered his paintings remarkably organic and aesthetically resonant. He cherished living in close communion with the lifestyles of people from all castes, communities, and traditions, believing that such immersion fostered genuine human connections. His works predominantly depict collective rural life-its labor, festivals, and communal gatherings-reflecting this ethos. The emotional bond with his native soil is vividly evident in every stroke, underscoring his inseparable link to the cultural rhythms of Telangana.

Modern artistic idioms, though present, often receded before the luminous presence of his traditional style-a testament to his authenticity and artistic stature. Rajaiah never regarded painting as a personal endeavor; rather, he saw it as an extension of shared life experiences. The lives, styles, visions, techniques, dreams, and imaginations that informed his art were all rooted in collective existence. He often reminisced, 'My artistic journey began right in our village square.' He fondly spoke of the rich folk traditions of his village, where Nakashi painters, Rangoli artists, chariot decorators, doll-makers, and scroll painters thrived. 'That is why I never had to seek art elsewhere,' he would say, affirming the self-sufficiency and cultural abundance of his native environment.

IMAGE 6

KAPU RAJAIAH ART WORK



"My life in painting was never confined to a single form-it clung to me through many expressions," Kapu Rajaiah would often say. From embellishing temple walls and painting deities at village boundaries, to decorating palanquins, baskets, pots, and ceremonial arches with vibrant imagery, his artistic engagement was deeply rooted in ritual and community. He painted figures on temple chariots and sculpted Ganesh idols for Vinayaka Chavithi. These were not mere tasks-they were immersive experiences that shaped his artistic consciousness.

He closely observed how local artisans worked with natural pigments like lime, red earth, and indigo. As a child, he was captivated by the Nakashi paintings on Marwadi homes and began sketching inspired by them. In his backyard, he built miniature temples and towers with clay bricks. Alongside other children, he enacted *Bhagavatam*, performed dramas, shadow puppetry, and *Harikatha*. These early experiences instilled in him a lifelong desire to create a masterwork-one that could narrate stories through scrolls and images.

Rajaiah often said, “That’s why I keep revisiting my own paintings-scrutinizing them, identifying their flaws. I want to create something that will preserve my name.” His pursuit was not of fame, but of permanence-an enduring legacy etched in color and form.

IMAGE 7

KALABHAVAN ESTABLISHED BY KAPU RAJAIAH



We envisioned the establishment of Kalabhavans-art centers-across Telangana, Coastal Andhra, and Rayalaseema under the auspices of the Lalit Kala Akademi. I initiated the first such center in Siddipet, where I trained numerous aspiring artists. Many of them, including Yasala Balayya, Balaratnam, Gaurishankar, and Kadarla Sheshayya, went on to become accomplished drawing instructors and professional artists. Even though the academies were eventually dissolved, I take solace in having fulfilled my share of service. As a teacher, I feel immense satisfaction in having mentored individuals of exceptional talent.

IMAGE 8

KAPU RAJAIAH ART WORK



I was deeply influenced by traditional narratives such as the Pandava stories, Oggu Katha, and street performances of Bhagavata. The realism embedded in theatrical backdrops captivated me profoundly. I also contributed to the decoration of Muharram processions and festival chariots. This is how my artistic journey began-rooted in the vibrant visual culture of my surroundings. Inspired by the Nakashi artists’ depictions of tigers, elephants, and peacocks, I gradually evolved a style that was uniquely mine.

Rajaiah often spoke of this journey with reverence, framing it as both a personal evolution and a service to the goddess of art herself.

Kapu Rajaiah's innate artistic talent-shaped by his keen observation of his surroundings, people, and everyday life-was first recognized by Kubera and Nimbagiri. These two mentors not only identified his potential but also facilitated his admission into the School of Arts and Crafts by arranging for him to sit the drawing examination. Rajaiah often fondly recalled them as his first gurus, acknowledging their pivotal role in his journey and sharing their influence with others. After completing his diploma in Hyderabad, Rajaiah began his career as a drawing teacher, serving for four years in Sangareddy before dedicating the next thirty-three years to Siddipet. There, he chose Kalabhavan as his principal workspace and devoted his life to the advancement of visual arts. His artistic brilliance and contributions were first publicly recognized in the 1950s by the eminent art critic and former editor of Illustrated Weekly, A.S. Raman, who praised Rajaiah's work for its originality and cultural depth.

IMAGE 9

KAPU RAJAIAH ART WORK



Kapu Rajaiah's international recognition was catalyzed by the publication of his painting *Bonalu* on the cover of the British art journal *Studio London*, accompanied by an introductory essay by renowned art critic A.S. Raman. In his tribute, Raman wrote: 'Rajaiah seeks an eternal, universal beauty-untouched by time and place, impervious to worldly forces. He discovers this timeless aesthetic in the folk forms and native traditions that surround him. His life is deeply intertwined with mythology, belief systems, and the richness of folk culture. If one were to synthesize all these elements into a singular artistic identity, it would be Rajaiah himself. What captivates me most in his paintings is the soul that belongs uniquely to the folk.' From that moment onward, Rajaiah was acknowledged as an international artist.

As Raman affirmed, Rajaiah was a consummate painter. He had little interest in commodifying art for profit. His most expensive work, *Risky Life*, sold for ₹70,000, yet he maintained that he never created for money. His focus remained steadfastly on producing art that could withstand the test of time and attain enduring relevance. Rajaiah often emphasized that individuality is vital for every human being-and even more so for an artist. This belief guided his life and practice.

IMAGE 10**KAPU RAJAIAH ART WORK**

Kapu Rajaiah maintained a deliberate distance from those who self-identified as torchbearers of modern art, especially from those who claimed that creative energy belonged exclusively to modernist expression. He firmly believed that art is born from folk traditions and flourishes through lived experiences, local conditions, and communal narratives. For this reason, he held immense reverence for the society that had educated him. Whenever someone proclaimed themselves a 'creator,' Rajaiah would quietly move past them-without critique, but with resolute conviction.

He upheld the principle that art unknown to the folk is unlikely to be truly known by the modernist. Preserving culture and traditional modes of expression was his unwavering ideal. He often asserted that sculpture and painting are the primary conduits through which future generations can access their cultural heritage. 'I am merely doing my part through painting,' he would say with humility. In the presence of such an artist, one could only bow in respect-for his works radiated a depth and dignity that commanded reverence. Rajaiah's paintings were not just visually compelling; they embodied the soul of a civilization.

IMAGE 11**KAPU RAJAIAH ART WORK**

Kapu Rajaiah's early paintings were firmly rooted in traditional idioms. He initially worked in the wash technique, later becoming enamored with the stylistic methods of Nakashi artists, which led him to adopt tempera colors. As time progressed, he transitioned to oil paints to ensure greater durability and resilience against the passage of time. While he had no objection to incorporating modern technological advancements into his artistic practice, he remained unwavering in his conviction that artistic thought and expression must adhere to traditional frameworks.

With the rise of abstract painting on the national stage during the 1960s, Rajaiah was certainly exposed to its influence. However, he never succumbed to its trends. Fully aware of his own artistic distinctiveness, he stood firm and solitary in his vision. Rajaiah often questioned himself: 'Why should I attempt abstraction?' His inner response was resolute-art, in his view, could never be truly abstract. Even a single line or a dot of color on canvas inevitably assumes form. For him, abstraction was devoid of meaning. This belief remained unchanged throughout his life. He would often remark that, unlike music, painting resists pure abstraction. To believe in the existence or validity of abstract painting, he said, was a delusion-'like chasing the horn of a rabbit.

Toward the end of the 1960s, Kapu Rajaiah began experimenting with paintings that bore a resemblance to abstract art, inspired by a lofty spiritual impulse. Through the formlessness of his chosen deity, he achieved a sense of inner harmony. One day, his daughter Vijayalakshmi shared a dream in which she had a vision of Lord Venkateswara and requested her father to paint the deity. Rajaiah responded by conceptualizing the Seven-Hilled Lord as a central motif and exhibited a series of paintings titled God of Seven Hills in Tirupati. In these works, the deity was rendered with symbolic proportions and compositional balance, aligning with what art discourse refers to as Tantric painting. Rajaiah frequently combined realistic observation with symbolic interpretation, producing several works in this genre. Art critic A.S. Raman described these paintings as offering 'refined goals for Indian art and distinct aspirations for modern painting.' Rajaiah, however, humbly stated, 'I did not pursue Tantric art extensively. I eventually returned to the folk idiom, where I found true fulfillment.' His return to folk aesthetics was not a retreat but a reaffirmation of his artistic identity.

IMAGE 12

KAPU RAJAIAH ART WORK



From 1985 onward, Kapu Rajaiah began to incorporate realist elements into his paintings. Works such as *Waiting*, *Neeru Meeru*, *Mother and Child*, *Music Flute*, and *Araku Valley* garnered widespread acclaim and significantly enhanced his reputation. His lifelong aspiration was to create a masterwork—an enduring piece that would resonate across generations, even after his passing. To realize this vision, Rajaiah devoted hours each day to meticulously reviewing his own paintings, identifying flaws, and

refining his technique. His style remained perpetually evolving, yet deeply anchored in cultural authenticity.

Rajaiah's paintings serve as vivid testimonies to rural life and the belief systems of village communities. His titles themselves evoke the imagery they represent, often rendering the viewing of the artwork almost redundant. His line drawings, too, require no introduction. Festivals, rituals, and communal gatherings in his art mirror the collective ethos of Indian society. In the broader arc of cultural development, such celebrations and lifestyles hold a vital place. The Indian populace, with its unity in diversity, reflects this uniqueness at every step. Diverse artistic forms continue to play a crucial role in preserving national cultural values.

The Telangana region, with its centuries-old, richly layered customs and practices, possesses a distinct cultural identity. Dr. Kapu Rajaiah masterfully captured this evolutionary cultural landscape through his radiant paintings-visual symphonies akin to chromatic rainbows. Revered as the Brahma of folk painting, he earned global recognition for his contributions. His oeuvre also includes numerous depictions of vanishing occupational traditions among Telangana's regional communities, further cementing his legacy as a chronicler of cultural memory.

IMAGE 13

KAPU RAJAIAH ART WORK



Among the culturally significant shrines of Telangana, Komuravelli holds a prominent place. Here, Oggu priests play a central role in narrating the legend of Mallanna through the traditional Oggu Katha, performed in front of the temple using scroll backdrops. This form of storytelling enjoys deep reverence among folk communities. Kapu Rajaiah immortalized this scene in his paintings, capturing its ritualistic and narrative essence. One of the vanishing nomadic tribes, the Sharada Kandru, also found representation in Rajaiah's work. Considered a precursor to Burrakatha, the Sharada Kandru narratives often center on Telangana's resistance movements. The veena they use is called 'Sharada', and their puppets are referred to as 'Dimikit'. Their name derives from the instrument itself, as their stories are sung with the Sharada. These itinerant bards, spread across Telangana, sing heroic ballads specific to each region-such as Kondalrayana's tale in Karimnagar, Panduga Sayanna and Mir Saab's stories in Mahbubnagar, and valorous accounts of resistance against the Razakars. Even today, the sagas of Arutla Ramachandra Reddy and Regikunta Ram Reddy continue to inspire the people of Telangana.

Rajaiah's artistic legacy also includes evocative portrayals of occupational communities such as the Golla Kuruma, Padmasali, Kummari, and Koya-rendering their labor-intensive lives with dignity and permanence. His paintings preserve the fading narratives and visuals once common in Telangana's villages, offering future generations a cultural inheritance. Whether one speaks of Telangana's culture, lifestyle, traditions, Bonalu, or Bathukamma, it is Rajaiah's folk paintings that first come to mind-an assertion that carries no exaggeration. Folk painting, as Rajaiah practiced it, involves depicting the sounds, professions, people, and lifestyles of the surrounding world using locally sourced materials-earth pigments, leaves, charcoal, and clay. In both Telugu-speaking states, the first generation of folk painters includes K. Srinivasulu, Antyakula Paidiraju, and Kapu Rajaiah. Today, artists like Thota Narasimham and Trailer Srinivas continue to uphold this tradition, albeit in smaller numbers.

IMAGE 14

KAPU RAJAIAH ART WORK



Kapu Rajaiah's name is synonymous with Telangana painting; indeed, his art is so deeply entwined with the region's culture, traditions, and lifestyle that to speak of Telangana folk art is to invoke Rajaiah himself. His paintings are cherished across social strata-from common villagers to seasoned artists and connoisseurs. Rajaiah's artistic journey unfolded in three distinct phases. In his early years, like many of his contemporaries, he worked in the wash technique on paper. From 1960 onward, he adopted tempera colors, and by 1970, he transitioned to oil paints. Regardless of the medium, Rajaiah never abandoned his cultural roots. While the materials evolved, the essence-his themes, expressions, and stylistic nuances-remained firmly grounded in folk tradition.

Even as he moved from watercolors to oils, he continued to favor primary hues, preserving the vibrancy, grace, softness, and organic texture that defined his palette. His paintings notably lack chiaroscuro; instead, they rely on flat tones and symbolic clarity. His depictions of wedding ceremonies, for instance, stand as exemplary evidence of his meticulous observation and ethnographic sensitivity. Rajaiah often acknowledged that his inspiration stemmed from Pat painting traditions. His extensive travels through rural Telangana and close engagement with village life endowed his works with a rare authenticity. Viewing his paintings evokes the lived experience of a Telangana village-its rhythms, rituals, and emotional landscape.

IMAGE 15**KAPU RAJAIAH ART WORK**

Kapu Rajaiah created over twenty paintings dedicated to Lord Venkateswara, reflecting his deep spiritual engagement. His acclaimed work *Risky Life* earned him a national award, further cementing his stature in Indian art. He actively participated in numerous art workshops organized by the Central Lalit Kala Akademi, the State Lalit Kala Akademi, the Department of Culture, All India Traditional Painting Forums, and the South Zone Cultural Centre. His contributions extended far beyond Telangana, reaching regions such as Visakhapatnam, Anakapalli, Rajahmundry, Vijayawada, and Vellatur, where he consistently encouraged emerging artists. Twice elected as a member of the General Council of the Central Lalit Kala Akademi, Rajaiah offered significant support to the Visakha Chitrakala Parishad. He played a key role in its revival and in securing grants for the publication of seminal works such as *Chitrakala Ratnalu*, *Chitrakala Charitra*, and monographs on artists like Vaddadi Papayya and Damerla Rama Rao. He also facilitated workshops in culturally significant locations including Simhachalam, Bheemunipatnam, and Konark. Rajaiah authored and published a poetry collection titled *Kunchepadalu*, adding a literary dimension to his creative legacy. In 2013, his life story was included as a lesson under the title *Inspirational Figures* in the Telugu textbook for Grade 9. The Andhra Pradesh Lalit Kala Akademi published a monograph on his artistic journey in 1978. In 2019, a statue honoring him was installed in Siddipet. His contributions to the field of painting have been recognized through countless honors and awards from regional, national, and international institutions.

In 1966, the Government of Andhra Pradesh honored Kapu Rajaiah with a copper plaque (Tamrapatra). In 1975, he was conferred the title *Chitrakala Prapurna*, and in 2000, he received the prestigious *Hamsa Award*. In 1993, Jawaharlal Nehru Technological University awarded him an honorary doctorate, and Telugu University presented him with a distinguished honor. The All India Fine Arts and Crafts Society, New Delhi, conferred upon him the title *Kala Vibhushana*. In 2003, the State Lalit Kala Akademi recognized him as *Chitrakala Sarvabhauma*. In 2010, he received the *Rajiv Pratibha Puraskar*. Rajaiah's paintings have been displayed in the old Parliament building, the National Gallery of Modern Art in New Delhi, the Central and State Lalit Kala Akademis, the Salar Jung Museum, the Mysore Museum, the State Archaeology Guest House, and even at the palace of the Maharaja of Indore. His work shines at the Kolkata Art Academy and is housed in numerous prestigious institutions across India and abroad.

The Central and State Departments of Culture have preserved his paintings on themes such as Bathukamma, Bonalu, Street Bhagavata, Kolatam, Pallubanda, Gruhini, Ramadootha, Ellamma Jogi, Mayaledi, Geeta Parishrama, Komuravelli, Nagapanchami, Gopikrishna, Uduta Bhakti, Panitanam, Rama Parajayam, Kartikeya, Sandani Puja, Patapatrasayi, Annadata, Dobhighat, Vadderalu, Kalasham, Nagakanya, Mrugashira, Kamadhenuvu, Jeevatma Towards Paramatma, Return from Tirupati, Vishwashakti, and Shivalingam. Preserving these works ensures that Telangana's cultural heritage is passed on to future generations. Kapu Rajaiah, the legendary folk painter who introduced the intellectual and aesthetic richness of Telangana's art to the world, passed away on August 20, 2012, at the age of 87.

Conclusion

Dr. Kapu Rajaiah's art stands as a vibrant testament to the soul of Telangana—where pigment meets tradition, and canvas becomes culture. His lifelong dedication to folk themes transformed everyday rural life into enduring visual heritage. Through color, form, and narrative, he preserved vanishing voices and rituals for future generations. Rajaiah's legacy continues to inspire, reminding us that true art is not just seen—it is lived, remembered, and revered.

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