

Rangoli: Traditions of the Threshold

by Amanda Dargan, PhD

Every morning in front of her home in Flushing, Queens, New York City, Samantha Mukkhavilli uses a paste of rice flour and water to decorate the steps leading to her home with *rangoli* designs, an ancient floor-painting tradition from her native India. In India and among Indians in America, *rangoli* designs are painted in front of the threshold of the home, as well as other thresholds separating sacred from secular, such as in front of the holy altar in the temple or around a baby's cradle before the traditional naming ceremony.

Rangoli is the name used for these designs in Andhra Pradesh, Ms. Mukkhavilli's home state, but the tradition has different names and designs in other states. The patterns and materials also vary from family to family.



Samantha Mukkhavilli draws rangoli at the entrance to her home.

Photo by Audrey Gottlieb

The art and tradition of creating *rangoli* passes from mother to daughter, although in America few women, unlike Ms. Mukkhavilli, have time to paint the designs every day. Since the designs are ephemeral, walked on throughout the day and swept

away at the end of the day or the end of a ceremony, the knowledge of the designs and techniques resides with these practitioners rather than in museums or books.

According to Ms. Mukkhavilli, the designs honor and protect the home, offer flour and seeds to the birds and other animals, and create something beautiful to welcome the gods as well as visitors to the home. For her daily

designs, Ms. Mukkhavilli uses a paste made of flour and water, but for special holidays she uses colored powders, flower petals, and seeds. She recalls that in India families visit from house to house during festivals to see the elaborate designs.

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Lesson Ideas

Use the traditional art of *rangoli* to introduce the idea of thresholds, both physical and ritual, as part of a study of rites of passage and the concept of liminality. Some folklorists and anthropologists call these ritual thresholds liminal states, a time marked with symbols and intense meaning. Threshold traditions offer a concrete form for exploring how rites of passage help practitioners make a transition between two states, such as secular to sacred, outside to inside, child to adult or fully-participating member of the community, unmarried to married, and so on.

1. Introduce the tradition of Indian *rangoli* and ask students to think about their own threshold traditions. You may want to divide these traditions into categories:

- Threshold customs associated with religious holidays and other seasonal events, such as red paper envelopes outside Chinese homes during the New Year season, garlands of onions and crosses drawn in candle smoke on the doors of Greek Orthodox homes

during Easter week, wreaths on the doors of Christian homes during the Christmas season

- Objects and amulets to protect the home from the dirt and bad influences of the world outside the home, such as statues of lions to protect the entrance, door mats to keep the dirt from the outside from entering the home, *mezuzahs* outside Jewish homes, evil-eye amulets, and protective colors of paint
- Threshold customs associated with rites of passage, such as ceremonies to protect and bless the entrance to a new home, the wedding custom of the groom carrying the bride across the threshold of their new home, storks or balloons outside a house announcing a baby's birth

What do these customs and symbols reveal about the families who live within? How are they similar to and different from each other? Who is responsible, like Ms. Mukkhavilli, for maintaining the custom? Is the custom associated with a ritual, such as a blessing for the home or a religious procession or festival?

2. Assign students to observe and document threshold amulets and decorations on the entranceways to homes, religious institutions, and businesses in their communities.

3. Move from a discussion of physical thresholds to ritual thresholds, or liminal states, such as the threshold between life and death, unmarried and married, an unnamed and a named child, a child and an adult, a student and a graduate. Discuss the customs that mark these transitions. How are they different from and similar to the customs associated with entranceway thresholds? What ideas about these stages of life do these rituals reveal? What examples of liminality can students share from their own lives or from literature?

4. Have students create a group art piece or installation that incorporates the threshold customs and symbols from the class and their research or individual pieces that incorporate customs from their own lives and family and religious traditions.