

ART SOUL LIFE

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AESTHETIC REFLECTIONS



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WITH REALITY**

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FROM ROOTS**

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TO BILLBOARDS**

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FRAGILE
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**BOOSTING RIVAL
ELEMENTS OF
NATURE AND URBS**

Jagannath Panda's art revolves
around complexity and contrast.



DRAWING INSPIRATION FROM ROOTS

Lakshmi Olagammai is a Chennai-based artist making art out of all things practical, says

Bindu Gopal Rao.

At the recently held Kalai – Art and Architecture Festival, curated by The Lotus Palace, Chettinad, a small pop-up store by artist Lakshmi Olagammai was a highlight. The young artist displayed not just sketches but tote bags, jigsaw puzzles, coasters, playing cards, magnets and more, each having a connection to the city.

Early days

As a child Olagammai tried everything from western dance to classical music before eventually finding her way to art. Deep down, however, she knew much earlier that art was where she truly belonged. “It all began with a chance animation and art class in middle school that sparked something in me. What started as curiosity quickly turned into conviction. By the time I reached Grade 11,



Victoria Terminus, Mumbai



I was so certain of my path that I changed schools just to take art as a graded subject. Looking back, it was one of the first decisions I made entirely in pursuit of what I loved,” she reminisces. A product of Stella Maris Chennai, attached to the University of Madras, Olagammai also completed the Creative and Cultural Businesses Programme (CCBP) at IIM Ahmedabad (IIMA), a six-month academic incubator designed specifically for entrepreneurs in creative fields like hers.

She started the Madras Design Story with her sister Kasturi Ramanathan 18 months ago as the duo decided to concentrate more on art-based giftable items that have utility value. “Through our products we get people to interact with art, have conversations around it and actually use it in day-to-day life. Art need not just be on the walls. While Madras Design Story is just one and a half year old, we had been doing a lot of this prior under the name Art by Lakshmi Olga. We decided to start a separate brand name for our product lines and keep my traditional pen-and-ink sketches under my name and hence, the split. Madras is the place that we owe a lot to – our inspirations come from here,” she avers.

While she does the design, her sister does the storytelling for every product they create, hence this name. Interestingly, they created their



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”



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”

Instagram page with this name back in 2023 when the idea of launching this business first came about. But as both have full-time jobs, it took them two years to launch officially.

Art talk

Lakshmi's primary style of illustration is pen-and-ink using a Rotring pen or a fine black pen, she works with architectural sketches in this medium. She also does a lot of other illustrations, including fabric painting and digital art. “We have six amazing jigsaw puzzles that are all rooted in Indian themes. From temple scenes to a collage of Indian stamps, our puzzles are perfect for unwinding. We have a pack of playing cards that is called the ‘Spice Deck’ – where the four suits actually represent four spices and the king, queen and jack are the people that cook with it. We pick up unique products and put our Indian twist to it. From embroidered tote bags to notebooks with covers that have beautiful illustrations on them, we even customise magnets for every event and celebration,” she explains.

One of the key places she showcases through her artwork is Chettinad, as she grew up with the architecture and learnt perspectives from the massive houses here. “I learnt how the sun's shadows played around. I learnt how to draw straight lines without needing a ruler. Since 2018, I've been sketching houses from this region – helping people document their houses and helping those settled abroad keep a piece

of home with them. Each house that I have done a commissioned sketch of, is proof of the gratitude and love I have for this region. In the last two years I ventured out to draw other buildings from around the world as well – but my base will always be Chettinad,” she affirms.

She is inspired by Indian culture and Indian architecture and admits that there is so much to still unearth. Being able to bring these cultural nuances out in her art is what gives her a sense of accomplishment.

Art intricacies

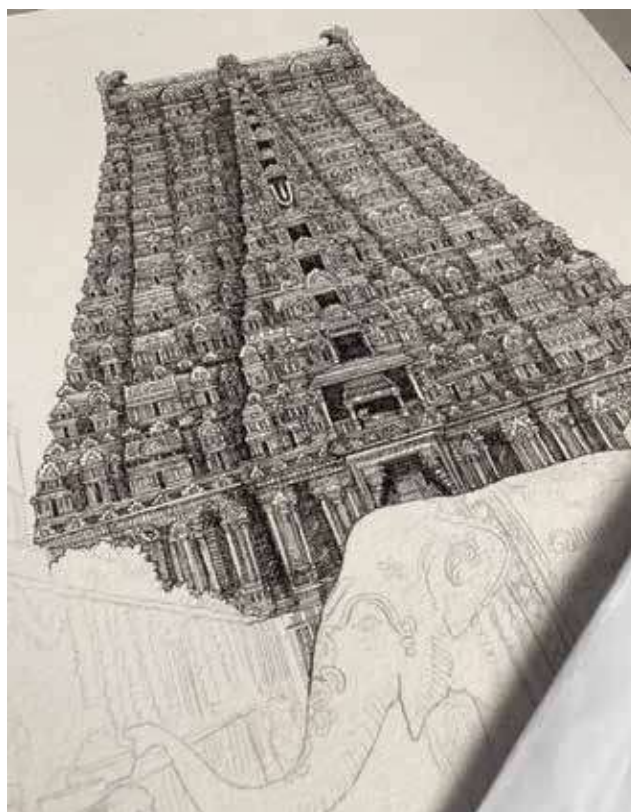
As an artist she finds it hard to recreate something that she already drew out once before. “So having to draw out the Srirangam Temple Gopuram four times or the Valavu of a specific Chettinad house thrice gave me an artist’s block. But one of the hardest sketches I’ve ever worked on was the erstwhile Victoria Terminus, now known as the Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus (CST), Mumbai. The small characters and the intricate blend of Indo-Saracenic and European styles added to the complication,” she says. Practice brings people closer to perfection, and that is true for any artist, and she says that with every work she has done, it has helped her improve and hone her craft.

As partners in the business (and off it), the sisters understand each other quite well. While her sister is an auditor and handles the marketing, accounting and vendor interactions, it helps her concentrate on the designing and creation, which works out well. “Of course, this also means that most dinner table conversations revolve around the next project or the next product that we are to launch. But it’s nice to be able to work with family,” she says. She credits her mother for being a huge inspiration, and the push to always keep herself occupied was instilled from when she was a child. “So, I always found it manageable to have a side hustle throughout my corporate career. Now that I am a full-time artist, it helps me stay grounded and manage my hours with some amount of accountability and responsibility. For every pop-up and every product launch, my mom has been there along with my sister. And now, ever since we started Madras Design Story, both our husbands have been there with us – setting up tables, delivering stock to shops, and even helping with packaging.”

Roadmap ahead

For someone who enjoys museum visits and soaking in all the art around her, she also indulges in travel

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a bit (especially solo travelling) to be able to get more inspiration. “An Italian holiday with everyday museum visits would be a good plan to work towards. But on a more serious note, my biggest dream would be to have a solo art show soon with all my mentors and family around. Also, we have been working over the past four months getting Madras Design Story’s products to a few shopfronts in Chennai, Coimbatore, and Kochi – and we are looking to onboard a few more. We have a few more new product launches that I am working towards – and to be able to get Madras Design Story to sustain organically would be the next plan,” she concludes. ■