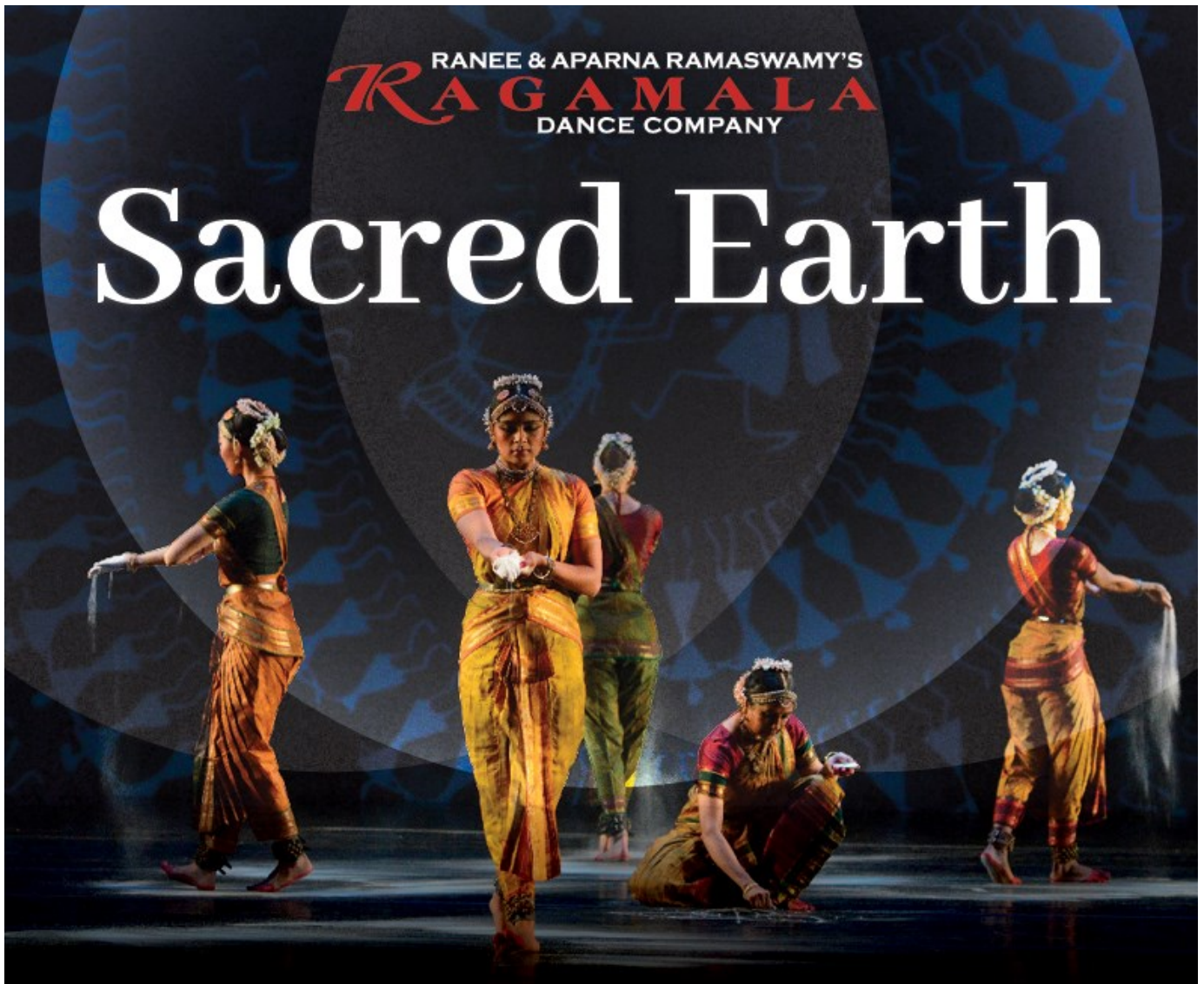


# Study Guide



PITTSBURGH CULTURAL TRUST ARTS EDUCATION DEPARTMENT  
803 Liberty Ave | Pittsburgh, PA 15222

Telephone 412-456-2696  
[TrustArts.org/education](http://TrustArts.org/education)

# Show Description

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*Sacred Earth* explores the interconnectedness between human emotions and the environments that shape them. Performed with live music, the dancers create a sacred space to honor the **divinity** in the natural world and the **sustenance** we derive from it. Inspired by the philosophies behind the **ephemeral** arts of **kolam** and **Warli** painting and the Tamil Sangam literature of India, *Sacred Earth* is co-Artistic Directors Ranees and Aparna Ramaswamy's singular vision of the beautiful, fragile relationship between nature and man.

## Creators/Directors/Choreographers

Ranees Ramaswamy and Aparna Ramaswamy

## Original Artwork

Anil Chaitya Vangad (**Warli**)

Ranees Ramaswamy (**Kolam**)

## Original Compositions

Prema Ramamurthy

## Development of Score

Ranees Ramaswamy and Aparna Ramaswamy  
with Preethy Mahesh, C.K. Vasudevan,  
Sakthivel Muruganatham, Ramanathan Kalaiarasan,  
Lalit Subramanian, Anjna Swaminathan,  
Rajna Swaminathan

## Dancers

Aparna Ramaswamy, Ranees Ramaswamy,  
Tamara Nadel, Jessica Fiala, Chaitra Chandrashekar,  
Sri Guntipally

## Musicians

Lalit Subramanian (vocal), Kasi Aysola  
(nattuvangam), Rohan Krishnamurthy (mridangam),  
Sruti Sarathy (violin)

## Light Design

Jeff Bartlett

## Video Projection Design

Perimeter Productions

## Lighting Supervisor/Production Manager

Mary Shabatura

## Sound Engineer

Maury Jensen

For translations of the poetry featured in  
*Sacred Earth*, please visit Ragamala's website  
and follow the "Poetry of Sacred Earth" link at  
[www.ragamaladance.org/sacred-earth](http://www.ragamaladance.org/sacred-earth)  
or scan here:



# Background

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Our original dance work, *Sacred Earth*, is a **multidisciplinary** experience of dance, music, poetry, and visual art that explores the interconnectedness between human emotions and the environments that shape them. The creative **impetus** for this work comes from the grounding philosophies of two **ephemeral** folk art forms from India—**Kolam** floor drawing and **Warli** wall painting—each of which uses natural materials to engrain into human actions an awareness of the land.

Each morning, women in southeastern India undertake the silent ritual of **kolam**, making rice flour designs on the ground as mindful offerings to Mother Earth. This daily ritual creates a sacred space and becomes a link between the intimate home and the vastness of the outside world. In our family, the tradition of **kolam** has been passed down from grandmother to mother to daughter for generations.

The *Adiwashi* (Indigenous) **Warli** people of western India revere the land and live in perfect and intentional coexistence with nature. Using their everyday lives as inspiration, their dynamic wall paintings find the spiritual in the everyday. Master **Warli** artist Anil Chaitya Vangad (of Ganjad Village, India) spent six weeks in residence with Ragamala, creating large-scale original paintings as we simultaneously built the choreography—working in constant and dynamic conversation between visual art and movement.

The **Tamil Sangam poets of South India** (300 B.C.E. – 300 C.E.) saw **divinity** in the physical world. They divided nature into five landscapes, or *tinai*s: *kurinji* (mountainous region), *mullai* (forest), *neythal* (seaside), *marutham* (farmland), and *paalai* (desert). Recognizing that human activities are interwoven with all of creation, they used nature as a metaphor to examine the intricacies of human emotion.

Our dance tradition of **Bharatanatyam** provides a rich and expansive lexicon that serves as our wellspring. With a history that goes back over two millennia, the form grows within and with each practitioner. Through this language, we celebrate body and spirit, and the quest to hold the human and the natural in joyous balance.

Our original choreography for *Sacred Earth* is rooted in the **ethos** of these art forms. We find **synergy** between inner and outer landscapes, using the natural world as a metaphor to examine the intricacies of human emotion. As *Sacred Earth* builds from meditative beginnings, the performers create a sacred space to honor the **divinity** in the natural world and the **sustenance** we derive from it. We surrender to the beauty of this sacred earth that has been given to us to safeguard, cherish, and pass on to our future generations.

—Ranee and Aparna Ramaswamy, Creators

# Show Bios and Roles

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## RANEE RAMASWAMY

Hailed by The New York Times as “a master of abhinaya... her careful art glimmers with the strangeness of the divine,” RANEE RAMASWAMY (Co-Creator/Choreographer/Principal Dancer) is Founding Artistic Director of Ragamala Dance Company. As a dancemaker, performer, and culture bearer, Ranee’s creative vision is driven by a profound commitment to the artistic lineage imparted to her through four decades of training under legendary **Bharatanatyam** dancer/choreographer Padmabhusan **Smt. Alarmél Valli**, intertwined with a pioneering spirit of innovation and collaboration across culture and discipline.

Since immigrating to the U.S. in 1978, Ranee has been a trailblazer, working tirelessly to create a place for her culturally rooted choreographic work on the major stages of the U.S. dance landscape. Her work has been commissioned and presented by the Kennedy Center, Lincoln Center, Joyce Theater, Northrop, Walker Art Center, American Dance Festival, International Festival of Arts & Ideas, and Arts Center at NYU Abu Dhabi, among many others, and supported by the National Endowment for the Arts, National Dance Project, MAP Fund, Wallace Foundation, and Doris Duke Charitable Foundation. In September 2021, Ranee’s *Fires of Varanasi: Dance of the Eternal Pilgrim* (created in collaboration with Aparna Ramaswamy) was selected to open the Kennedy Center’s 50th Anniversary celebration with an outdoor, site-specific performance.

Ranee serves on the National Council on the Arts, appointed by President Barack Obama. Her honors include a Guggenheim Fellowship, Doris Duke Performing Artist Award, Bogliasco Foundation Fellowship (Italy),



# Show Bios and Roles

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## APARNA RAMASWAMY

Described by The New York Times as “thrillingly three-dimensional... rapturous and profound,” APARNA RAMASWAMY (Co-Creator/Choreographer/Principal Dancer) is a dancemaker, performer, and culture bearer whose work mines the artistic, philosophical, and intellectual depths of her artistic lineage, evolving ancestral and cultural knowledge in the diaspora as a catalyst for contemporary human thought. She is the life-long disciple and hand-picked protégé of legendary dancer/choreographer Padmabhusan Smt. Alarmél Valli, one of India’s greatest living masters, who has selected Aparna as the artist to carry her artistic lineage into the future.

As Executive Artistic Director of Ragamala Dance Company, Aparna has catalyzed a bold new vision for

**Bharatanatyam** in the diaspora, charting previously unimagined paths for South Asian dance in the U.S. Her work has been commissioned and presented by major festivals and cultural institutions—including the Kennedy Center, Lincoln Center, Joyce Theater, Harris Theater, Northrop, American Dance Festival, Silk Road Ensemble, Arts Center at NYU Abu Dhabi, and many others—and supported by the National Dance Project, MAP Fund, Wallace Foundation, Joyce Foundation, and Doris Duke Charitable Foundation, among others. In September 2021, Aparna’s *Fires of Varanasi: Dance of the Eternal Pilgrim* (created in collaboration with Ranee Ramaswamy) was selected to open the Kennedy Center’s 50th Anniversary celebration.

Aparna’s choreographic work ranges from emotionally spacious yet intimate solo presentations performed with live music, to large-scale, **multidisciplinary** theatrical works. Her honors include a Guggenheim Fellowship, Doris Duke Performing Artist Award, Bogliasco Foundation Residential Fellowship (Italy), Rockefeller Foundation Bellagio Center Research Fellowship (Italy), Joyce Award, four McKnight Fellowships for Dance and Choreography, and the 2022 Distinguished Alumni Achievement Award from Carleton College, among others. ([www.aparnaramaswamy.net](http://www.aparnaramaswamy.net))

# Show Bios and Roles



**SMT. PREMA RAMAMURTHY** (Composer) has been an outstanding vocalist and composer for more than four decades. She received intensive training under the great **Maestro** ‘Padmavibhushan’ Dr. Mangalampalli Balamurali Krishna, specialized in the art of ‘Pallavi singing’ from Vidwan **Sri** T. V. Gopalakrishnan, and learned the art of singing ‘Padams & Javalis’ from the veteran musician, Mrs. T. Muktha. An A-TOP Grade Artist of All India Radio and Doordarshan TV, she has won critical acclaim as a composer, and has performed in many of the top venues and festivals of India, the U.S., Europe, Asia, the Middle East, Australia, Mexico, and South Africa.

**CHAITRA CHANDRASHEKAR** (Dancer) is a disciple of **Guru** Dr. Mala Shashikanth and **Guru** Vid. Asha Ravindra, and has practiced and honed the art form of **Bharatanatyam** for over two decades, performing at prestigious cultural events and competitions from a young age. She completed major levels of examinations conducted by

KSEEB (Educational Board of Karnataka) in India and attained pre-vidushi honorary title. She is currently an Apprentice with Ragamala, learning under Ranee Ramaswamy and Aparna Ramaswamy since 2020.

**JESSICA FIALA** (Dancer) began training with Ranee and Aparna Ramaswamy in 2006 and has performed with Ragamala throughout the US and in India, UK, and UAE. She holds an **interdisciplinary** master’s degree in museum studies and cultural studies from the University of Minnesota and her research has been published in the anthology *The Ruined Archive*; the journals *Diálogos com a arte*, *Public Art Journal*, and the *Journal of Somaesthetics*; and the online publication Immerse. Jessica is also a research associate at the consulting firm 8 Bridges Workshop.

**SRI GUNTIPALLY** (Dancer) has been learning **Bharatanatyam** under Ranee Ramaswamy and Aparna Ramaswamy since 2018. She is an Apprentice with Ragamala and has performed with the company at the Ordway Center for the Performing Arts. Sri graduated high school in 2021 as valedictorian at Eagle Ridge Academy, a U.S. Presidential Scholar Candidate, and National Merit Scholar. She is attending the University of Minnesota to study Human Physiology and aspires to be a dancing doctor.

# Show Bios and Roles

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**TAMARA NADEL** (Dancer) is a disciple of Raneer and Aparna Ramaswamy and a founding member of Ragamala, having performed with the company throughout the U.S, India, Russia, Taiwan, Indonesia, Japan, and U.K. Tamara has received grants and fellowships from the McKnight Foundation, Jerome Foundation, Minnesota State Arts Board, Rimón: The Minnesota Jewish Arts Council, and the Brin Fund for Jewish Arts, among others. Most recently, she was selected by the Conney Conference on Jewish Arts at UW-Madison to perform a solo choreographed for her by Raneer Ramaswamy, illuminating the synergies between Hindu and Jewish mystical traditions. Tamara is Ragamala's Director of Institutional Development and board member of Minnesota Citizens for the Arts.

**LALIT SUBRAMANIAN** (Vocal) Lalit Subramanian is a Carnatic and Hindustani Classical vocalist from Cleveland, Ohio. Originally from Pune, India, he received his initial Carnatic vocal training from **Smt.** Chitra Subramanian and **Smt.** Rajalakshmi Pichumani, and further sought training from **Sri** Neyveli Santhanagopalan, **Sri** Tiruvarur Girish, and **Smt** Alamelu Mani. He received his Hindustani training from Pandit Mahadev Pednekar of Goa and Pandit Shekhar Kumbhojkar of Pune, both disciples of Pandit Jitendra Abhisheki. Lalit is also a percussionist and has studied Tabla with Pandit Anand Godse of Pune and mridangam with his cousin **Shri** Vijay Shriram. He holds a Sangeet Visharad degree with a gold medal, and was a Yuva Wani artist with All India Radio, Pune for Hindustani vocal music. He has also sung playback for a Marathi film. He is known both as a solo performer and as an accompanist for dance. He has worked extensively on projects with well-known dancers and dance companies in the US, his work ranging from musical performance to creative work such as composing individual pieces to entire production scores. He teaches music and percussion to several students as part of his music school Madhuralaya. He is also periodically a guest lecturer of World Music at the Cleveland Institute of Music and Case Western Reserve University Music Department in Cleveland, Ohio. Lalit is a Biomedical Engineer and works for a medical device firm.

**KASI AYSOLA** (Nattuvangam) is a dance artist based in the United States. Kasi is a performer, choreographer and nattuvangam artist whose foundational training in **Bharata Natyam** was under celebrated **Guru** Viji Prakash and Mythili Prakash. He had the great fortune to train in Kuchipudi under late **Guru** Vempati Ravi Shankar and Yamini Saripalli. He co-founded Prakriti Dance, an innovative dance company, in 2014, with the intention to explore the human experience through the idiom of Indian performing traditions. He serves as the Artistic Director of Prakriti Dance developing and touring original dance works.

# Show Bios and Roles

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Indian-American percussionist, composer, and educator **DR. ROHAN KRISHNAMURTHY** (Mridangam) is one of the leading voices of Indian classical and cross-genre music in the South Asian diaspora. Acclaimed a "musical ambassador" by The Times of India, he received mridangam training from the esteemed Indian **guru, Sri. Guruvayur Dorai**, tabla with Pandit Swapan Chaudhuri at the Ali Akbar College of Music, and drum set with Alan Hall at the California Jazz Conservatory. Distinguished as a soloist, composer, and collaborator, Rohan performed with legendary Indian classical musicians and Grammy Award-winning global artists. Rohan holds a Ph.D. in musicology from the Eastman School of Music and directs the RohanRhythm Percussion Studio. Rohan is the recipient of prestigious international awards and grants including recent commissions from the San Francisco Arts Commission, Zellerbach Foundation, and Goethe Institute (Germany). He has taught at renowned institutions and his patented RohanRhythm drum tuning system is available worldwide. ([www.RohanRhythm.com](http://www.RohanRhythm.com))

**SRUTI SARATHY** (Violin) is a leading Carnatic violinist, singer, and composer. A rare artist who possesses both mastery in the rigorous classical form as well as a boundary-pushing musical vision, she animates the stage in diverse contexts across the globe, from the *sabhas* of Chennai to music festivals in San Francisco. Sruti began her training as a prodigious three-year old under **Guru Anuradha Sridhar** of the Lalgudi family of musicians. Sruti regularly performs with top Carnatic musicians, and has received awards three years in a row for her performances at the prestigious Madras Music Academy. Her independent work has been supported by institutions such as Fulbright, the Creative Work Fund, and InterMusic SF. A Bay Area native and Stanford University alumnus, Sruti is also a versatile composer for Carnatic, crossover, film/theater, and experimental new music contexts. Sruti's inimitable style and sound bring out the voice of the Indian violin in a contemporary and imaginative way. ([www.srutisarathy.com](http://www.srutisarathy.com))

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## Additional Context

*The creation of Sacred Earth was made possible in part with funds provided by the National Endowment for the Arts, the National Dance Project of the New England Foundation for the Arts (with lead funding from the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation and additional funding from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, the Community Connections Fund of the MetLife Foundation, and the Boeing Company Charitable Trust), and generous support from members of Ragamala's Rasika Circle.*

*Additional support for Ragamala's 2022-23 season comes from comes from the Wallace Foundation; The McKnight Foundation; the Shubert Foundation; The Bob and Kathie Goodale Legacy Foundation; the voters of Minnesota through a grant from the Minnesota State Arts Board, thanks to a legislative appropriation from the arts and cultural heritage fund; and generous support from Friends of Ragamala.*



# Additional Context

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## Bharatanatyam



**Bharatanatyam** is an important classical dance from Tamil Nadu in Southern India. It is considered the mother of many other Indian classical dance forms. It originated nearly 3000 years ago from the *Natyashastra*, an ancient Sanskrit treatise on theatre written by Bharata, a mythic priest. Traditionally the **Bharatanatyam** is a solo dance performed only by women; it started in Hindu temples as a way to share stories and worship. Though it flourished throughout Southern India, it wasn't performed on a public stage until the 20th

century. Today, **Bharatanatyam** encompasses religious and non-religious themes and is performed by male and female soloists and ensembles. "**Bharatanatyam** is an old dance language, but when we use it, it's to express new ideas and new things -- just like people use English every day," said Aparna Ramaswamy, creator of Sacred Earth.

**Bharatanatyam** is made up of three main components— *nritta*, or technical dance, with a sophisticated base vocabulary used to build intricate combinations and rhythmic patterns that does not convey any specific meaning; *nritya*, or expressional dance, using facial expressions, highly stylized gestures, postures and body language to convey any mood; and *natya*, or dramatic storytelling.

## Kolams

**Kolams** are intricate sand paintings made by women in southern India outside their homes. These designs are traditionally created as symbols of gratitude towards Mother Earth each morning. They also serve as a form of communication regarding the well-being of a family, with larger **kolams** indicating significant events like upcoming weddings. The prolonged absence of these rice-flour paintings could indicate illness or a more serious problem. The daily tradition is typically passed down from mother to daughter, but the practice has also been adopted by men and boys. The patterns in **kolams** typically consist of **geometric shapes** and mathematical line drawings created around a matrix of dots. Many designs are inspired by magical motifs and abstract designs as well as philosophy, religion, nature, and more.

# Supplemental Activities

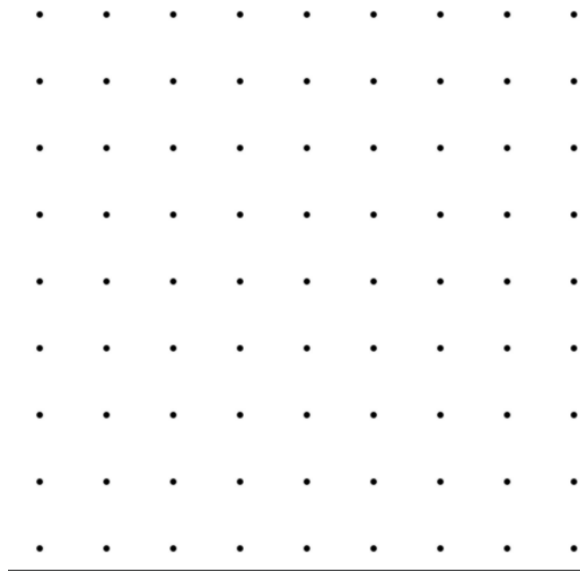
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## Supplies

- One plain sheet of paper
- Ruler
- Pencil
- Your favorite coloring tool (crayon, marker, pen, or pencil)

## Make Your Own Kolam

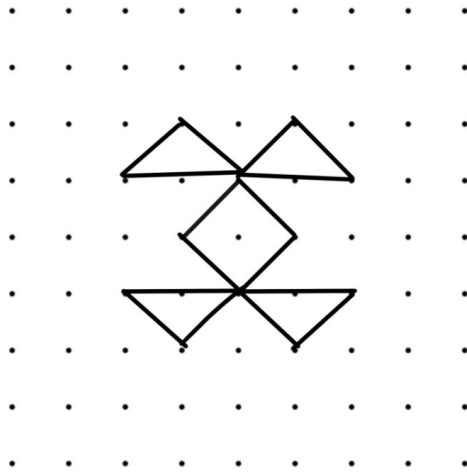
1. Research images of *kolams* to be inspired by the creators and their works.
2. Place your ruler on top of your paper and carefully create a dot grid. Be sure the dots are equal distance apart (about 1 inch apart is a great place to start). Repeat this process until you have a grid large enough for your design.



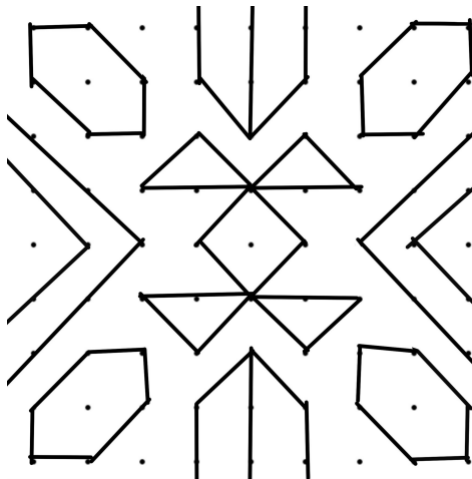
3. Join the dots one by one with your pencil to form interesting shapes. Most *kolams* are made with simple **geometric shapes** and are generally **symmetrical**.

# Supplemental Activities

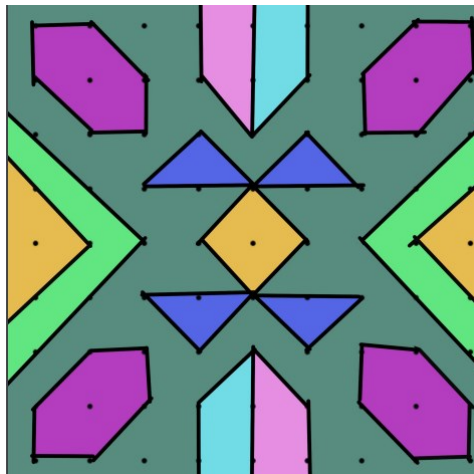
## Make Your Own Kolam Cont.



4. Repeat throughout your grid until you have a design you enjoy.



5. Add color to your design.



# Vocabulary

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**Bharatanatyam** - a traditional dance from Tamil Nadu in southern India, originally danced by women to express Hindu stories and devotions (*Find more information on page 9*)

**Divinity** - the study of religion.; something of the divine, or relating to god(s) and religion

**Ephemeral** - lasting for a very short time

**Ethos** - the guiding beliefs or ideals that characterize a community, nation, or ideology

**Geometric shapes** - closed figures created using points, line segments, circles, and curves

**Guru** - a spiritual teacher, especially one who imparts initiation; an influential teacher or popular expert

**Impetus** - a driving force; an incentive

**Kolam** - traditional decorative art from Tamil Nadu in southern India that is drawn by using rice flour as per age-old conventions (*Find more information on page 9*)

**Maestro** - a distinguished musician, especially a conductor of classical music; a distinguished figure

**Multidisciplinary / Interdisciplinary**- combining or involving several academic disciplines or professional specializations in an approach to a topic or problem

**Shrimati (Smt.)** - a respectful title used when referring to an adult woman (similar to “Mrs.” in English)

**Sri/Shri** - a respectful title used when referring to an adult man (similar to “Mr.” in English)

**Sustenance** - nourishment; food and drink regarded as a source of strength

**Symmetrical** - when an object looks the exact same on one side as the other.

**Synergy** - an interaction or cooperation giving rise to a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts

**Warli** - an indigenous tribe of western India

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## Pre and Post Show Discussion Questions

1. Sacred Earth showcases dance styles and folk art deeply intertwined with Indian culture and the Hindu religion. Can you identify any artistic traditions associated with your cultural heritage, religion, or background?
2. The practice of creating a **Kolam** is a daily ritual, or routine, that fosters a connection between individuals, families, and the natural world. Do you engage in any rituals that help cultivate a sense of harmony with your surroundings? If not, how could you create your own meaningful ritual?
3. The Ragamala Dance Company is led by a mother and her two daughters, all united by their passion for dance. Does your family possess a shared artistic interest or passion that spans across generations? How do you share in it together?



# School Day Matinees

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## Sacred Earth

Thursday, March 21, 2024 — Grades 5-12

## Dog Man the Musical

Monday, April 15, 2024 — Grades 1-6

2024-2025 SCHOOL DAY MATINEES COMING SOON!

Scan for more information



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# Professional Development Workshops

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## The Art of Up-Cycling

Saturday, March 9, 2024—for K-12 Educators

ACT 48 Credit Available

## Dancing and Social Emotional Learning

Saturday, April 13, 2024—for PreK-2 Educators

ACT 48 and PQAS Credit Available

## What is an Ally?

Saturday, May 11, 2024—for K-12 Educators

ACT 48 Credit Available

Scan for more information



*All workshops held in the  
Trust Arts Education Center  
805/807 Liberty Ave.  
Light breakfast provided*