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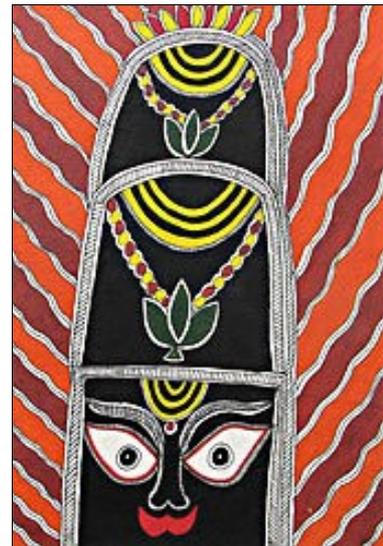


**Folk Art Paintings  
a Reflection of the True Ethos of India**

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The subject of Indian folk paintings is as diverse as the Indian cultural milieu itself. Indian folk art painting includes a brilliant battery of calendar and wall paintings, oil, canvas and cloth paintings, cave paintings, miniatures and so on. The most famous types of Indian folk art paintings hence include various ancient Indian art forms such as Madhubani, Phad, Kalamkari, Orissa Paata, Warli paintings and so on.

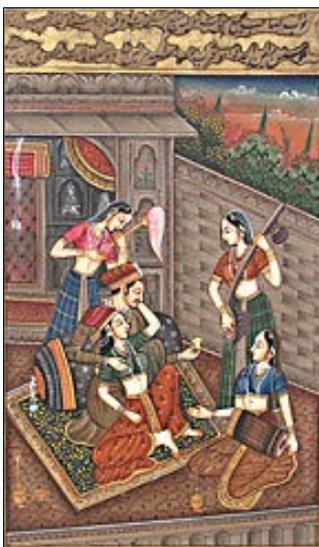
Indian folk art paintings usually deal with pictorial depictions of popular Hindu deities such as Rama, Krishna, Shiva, Durga, Lakshmi and Saraswati. Additionally, we can also find Madhubani paintings of the sun, the moon and even some plants and flowers used in daily rituals, such as tulusi (basil) and so on. Many paintings also depict daily village life, common customs and rituals, birds, animals and the elements of nature. Folk paintings are very fetching and a visual treat, as they employ vibrant and natural colors and papers, clothes, leaves, earthen pots, mud walls and so on, as their canvas to paint on.



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**MADHUBANI SHIVA LINGA**

## The evolution of Indian folk art paintings



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**MUGHAL PAINTING DEPICTING  
THE EMPEROR WITH HIS  
COURTESANS**

It was only during the 20th century that Indian folk art slowly emerged as a subject of study and appreciation. Before this era, only Mughal painting was appreciated in India. In the year 1916, Ananda Coomaraswamy established Rajasthani and Pahari paintings as a form of art. Of course, they lacked the refinement of Mughal Art. Yet, their charm was undeniably there and that marked the beginning of the emergence of Indian folk art at a global level.

Initially, the study of folk painting was restricted to Bengal. Gradually, more and more Indian states realized the value of their own art and came out with their collections. Each region used the materials readily available to them and this resulted in tremendous diversity and variety in this form of art, while also being clubbed as one, "Indian" folk art.

Gujarat and southern Rajasthan were well-known for their miniatures. Western India mostly used angular lines, bright and bold colors and full profiles. Paintings from the Rajput and Central Indian centres, used more individualistic styles, the composition being simple, though more direct. Likewise, each region presented its own unique folk art in its own unique way,

thereby creating a brilliant kaleidoscope of colors and designs in its paintings. Let us now delve deeper in detail into the study of some of the most major types of Indian Folk Art.

## Madhubani Painting

Madhubani painting is also known as Godhna, Maithali and Chaitra figure painting. As a folk art, this type of painting originates from the villages of Madhubani and Mithila in Bihar. The rural women of Mithila, it is believed, used to carve out their imaginations on the walls, floors and doors of their mud houses. They believed that God would then visit their houses and bless them with prosperity and plenty. These later came to be known as Madhubani Paintings. Today, the style of Madhubani paintings has changed completely.

### History of Madhubani painting

Madhubani painting had initially been a traditional rural art, only meant to serve as home decor in the houses of the villagers. But ever since the massive devastation of the Bihar famine during the year 1964-65, people of Madhubani were forced to move from agriculture and other form of livelihood to Maithili paintings. This is when the villagers moved from painting on walls to painting on satin, sarees, dupattas and so on.

These paintings are carried out on many mediums such as cloth, canvas and handmade paper. As mentioned above, Madhubani paintings mainly deal with images of the most popular Hindu deities as also with other Hindu sacred symbolisms and various aspects of nature as well. One can also get to see royal court scenes and various Hindu social events (such as thread ceremony, marriage and so on) being depicted in Madhubani paintings. Predominantly, Madhubani paintings deal with the following categories:

- Traditional
- Tattoo
- Monochrome
- Animals and Birds
- Contemporary



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**MADHUBANI PAINTING ON  
WOOLLEN SHAWL**

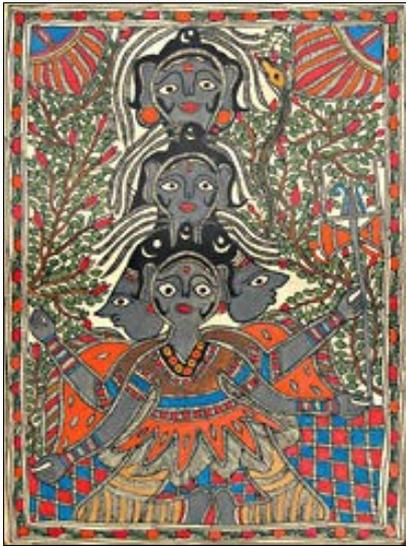
### Madhubani painting technique

Madhubani painting is a highly skillful art, which strictly adheres to ancient, time-tested techniques. This art employs the use of simple raw materials easily available in rural areas, such as bamboo sticks and cotton.

The cotton is first wrapped around a bamboo stick. This serves as a brush. This brush is then dipped in various colors and is applied on to the fabric. There is no shading work used here. The outline is given with double lines and the gaps between these two lines are filled with cross or straight lines. Colors are not used for these lines.

Madhubani paintings use natural colors taken from vegetable colors. Black is gotten by blending soot and cow dung. The color yellow comes from a mixture of lime, milk of banyan leaves, turmeric and pollen. Red comes from the juice of the Kusam flower or from red sandalwood, while white is gotten from rice powder and so on.

## Style of Madhubani painting



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**MADHUBANI PAINTING DEPICTING  
PANCHMUKHI SHIVA**

Madhubani paintings are typically characterized by bold colors, traditional geometric patterns, floral patterns, double line outlines, surreal figures showing bulging eyes and improbably long noses of deities and so on.

Madhubani is exclusively feminine school of folk painting. Traditionally, this style of painting was passed down from generation to generation in the far reaches of the Mithila Region, mainly by women. Even today, Madhubani artisans prepare the traditional paste of cow dung and mud to apply on their canvases, so as to give it a more authentic look and also to help the fabric better absorb color.

Madhubani paintings are easily discernible from their unique style. Using bright colors and vivid descriptions, it can be easily understood and appreciated by just about anyone who lays their eyes on them. Madhubani paintings have created a niche for themselves in the world of art. Hanging one such painting in your house would lend a certain exotic elegance to the look of the room as such.

## Kalamkari Painting

Kalamkari is yet another ancient and ethnic folk art, made on painted and printed fabrics. The term, "Kalamkari", comes from the Persian language and literally means "pen craftsmanship". Kalamkari evolved and flourished during the Mughal rule and was patronized by the Golconda Sultanate. This art form is hand painted and block printed by means of using natural vegetable dyes.

In Andhra Pradesh, the art of Kalamkari is involved with two very ancient cities, Masulipatnam and Srikalahasti.

### The Masulipatnam style of Kalamkari

This style comes with a clear Persian influence and is done with intricate and delicate forms and motifs. The most commonly featuring designs here are flowers, trees, creepers, colorful leaf designs and so on. Thanks to the Dutch influence, Kalamkari art later evolved and is now undertaken on bed covers, curtains and garments as well.



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**KALAMKARI SARASWATI**

### The Srikalahasti style of Kalamkari

This particular style of Kalamkari work shows a heavy influence of Indian temples. The main subjects of paintings here are scrolls and wall hangings, narratives and figurines from epics being painted, such as characters from Ramayana, Mahabharata, the Puranas and so on. The most popular depictions include those of deities such as Rama, Krishna,

Shiva and Parvathi, Durga, Brahma, Ganesha, Lakshmi and so on.

## Technique of Kalamkari painting

Kalamkari work goes through a long-winding process of treatment on the fabric, including resist-dyeing and hand printing. Here, the fabric is treated extensively both before and after the dyeing process. The colors change depending on the treatment of cloth and quality of the mordant used. Each and every step of this process is painstakingly done and the artisan has to strictly adhere to perfection. Seventeen long stages later, the fabric is ready for use.

The cotton fabric first gets its glossiness by immersing it for an hour in a mixture of resin (myrabalam) and cow milk. Contours are then drawn with a pointed bamboo stick, soaked in a mixture of jaggery and water. Then come the vegetable dyes. After each application of color, the fabric is washed. Thus, each fabric can undergo up to 20 washings. Various effects are obtained by using cow dung, seeds, plants and crushed flowers.

## History and evolution of Kalamkari painting



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**KALAMKARI PAINTING DEPICTING GANESHA**

This Indian folk painting art is 3000 years old and the legacy has been handed down from generation to generation. Kalamkari art was the staple livelihood of many families in Andhra Pradesh.

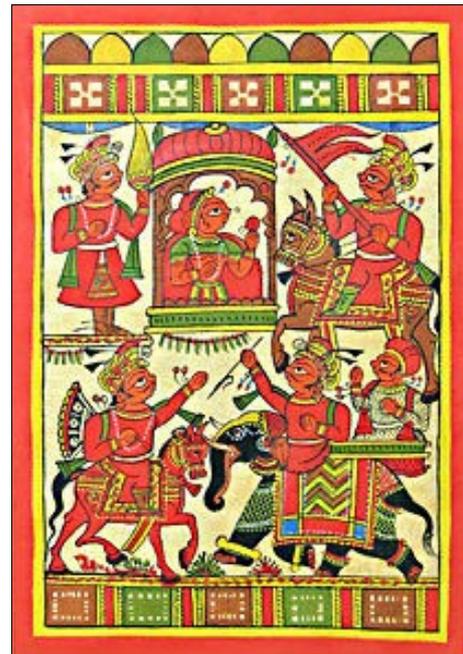
In the middle ages, groups of singers, musicians and painters, called chitrakattis, would travel from village to

village, narrating great stories from Hindu mythology. With time, they started illustrating their accounts on large bolts of canvas painted on the spot, using rudimentary means and dyes extracted from plants. This marked the birth of Kalamkari art. By and by, Kalamkari started featuring in the large panels of temples too.

Then there was a sudden and steep decline in Kalamkari for a while, after which it was revived during the British Raj in India. In the year 1957, Kamaladevi Chattopadyaya helped establish a government-run Kalamkari training center so as to train the next new generation of artists in Kalamkari. At the present time, there is a clear upsurge in interest in the art form by designers, NGOs and entrepreneurs living and working in nearby cities. A range of products are now created using Kalamkari cloth and are available for sale at craft exhibitions, small boutiques and even from the artists themselves. Kalamkari paintings now enjoy flourishing trade on a global scale. The J.J.School of Art in Mumbai, India, is now experimenting with this art form on Silk Ikat and Pochampally Silks.

## Phad Painting

Phad painting, a beautiful, vivacious form of Indian folk art, has now become acknowledged on a global scale. Phad paintings are in fact, the most famous form of painting in Rajasthan. Phad paintings are characterized by their own unique styles and patterns. They are especially appreciated as they use vibrant colors and quaint historical themes, the life and times of valorous heroes and so on. The unique style and use of themes of Phad paintings are responsible for making them the most sought after paintings in the world of art and culture. The most popular heroes of Phad paintings include Prithviraj Chauhan, Goga Chauhan, Amar Singh Rathore, Papuji and so on.



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**PHAD PAINTING**

## Technique of Phad painting



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**PHAD PAINTING**

Phad painting is usually done on Khadi fabric. Most popular themes also include scenes from everyday rural life, the daily life of artisans and farmers, flora and fauna, animals and birds and so on. The smaller version of the phada is known as phadake. This form of folk art painting uses natural earthen colors mixed with water, gum and indigo, in a certain measure, to get the required colors.

Phad painting is generally known to be a sort of scroll painting. These paintings use various shades of the same color to arrive at the desired effect. The main themes of the Phad paintings depict major Hindu deities and their legends, as also tales of maharajas and their kingdoms. Here, the outlines are drawn in blocks and are then filled with colors.

The other speciality of Phad painting is the two-dimensional character of the figures and the arrangement of the entire picture neatly being arranged in sections.

Phad Paintings use bold and vibrant colors. The colors employed are generally vegetable dyes and are used in a fixed order starting from orange-yellow to brown, bold greens and blues, red and black. The effect this creates, gives the onlooker a feeling of transcending time and actually entering the realm of the story being narrated through the means of the canvas.

## The Bhopas - an integral aspect of Phad painting

The paintings, once done, are usually transported from place to place by the artisans,

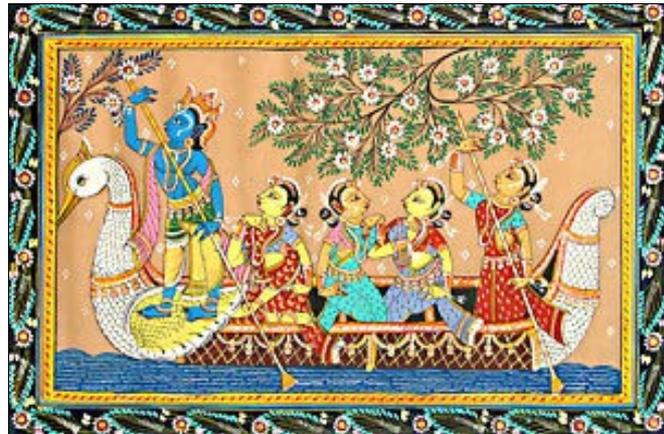
accompanied by traditional singers, who narrate and sing the theme depicted on the scrolls. These singers are known as Bhopas.

The legend of the valiant warrior, Papuji Rathod, is a favourite with Phad painting. It is believed that Pabuji Rathod was born of the union of a mortal and an apsara. Hence, blessed with divine powers, Papuji led his bands of Thoris or Bhils on many battles and returned triumphant. He largely fought these battles to protect the cattle of the Charan community. His compassion earned him the status of a veritable God. In return for his good deeds, the Charan Community gifted him with a magical Black Mare. The complete legend of Pabuji comprises 52 Panwaras or couplets and these panwaras are performed by the Bhopas.

## Orissa Paata Painting

Orissa is an Indian state that is steeped in culture and in various arts, including dance, music, architecture, and painting. Among the painting traditions, the devotional art of the Paata paintings or patachitra on cloth, is a very popular style that centers around the worship of Lord Jagannath, a manifestation of Sri Krishna.

Orissa is very famous for its Patachitras. This type of folk art painting includes wall paintings, palm-leaf etching, manuscript painting and painting on cloth, both cotton and silk. Chitrakar painters in and around Puri have been practising this living art form for ages. The main area where the chitrakars live is called the Chitrakar Sahe village, in Raghurajpur district. The art of Pata painting on cloth can be traced right back to the very development of the shrine of Lord Jagannath at Puri in Orissa.



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**ORISSA PAATA PAINTING DEPICTING KRISHNA IN A BOAT RIDE**

## Chitrakars



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**ORISSA PAATA PAINTING DEPICTING JAGANNATH, BALARAM AND SUBHADRA**

deities - Jagannath, Balaram and Subhadra, at the time when those deities are considered "inauspicious" and "unfit" for viewing by the faithful.

The artists who paint patachitras are known as chitrakaras. Often, it is one whole family that is engaged in this craft, headed by the master chitrakar of the family. Sometimes, this master also operates a studio which trains other junior artists working under him. The chitrakaras usually live in the vicinities of temples, such as the Jagannath temple in Puri and also in the village of Raghurajpur, just outside Puri.

Besides painting these patachitras, the chitrakaras have other duties as well, such as painting anasara patis. This are paintings, which temporarily replace the main images of the three

The chitrakaras also have to paint on the cars, or chariots, on which Jagannath, Balabhadra, and Subhadra ride during the annual ratha yatra (car) festival each summer. During this particular festival, the main deity, Jagannath, rides a 45-foot high car. They ride from the Jagannath temple, along Puri's wide Grand Road to the Gundica temple about three kilometers away, and then back again.

Chitrakaras are also expected to paint the walls of a small temple next to the Narendra reservoir during the chandana yatra (sandalwood festival), a festival during which images of Krishna, Lakshmi, and Sarasvati are rowed in boats in the reservoir. The artisans paint pedi, or dowry boxes, that are given to the bride at the time of marriage.

## Technique of Paata painting

Patachitra painting, when done on cloth, follows a traditional process of preparation of the canvas. Firstly, the base is prepared by coating the cloth with soft, white, stone powder made of chalk. A glue is then made from tamarind seeds. This mixture, while coated on the cloth, gives the fabric tensile strength and a smooth, semi-absorbent surface, which lets it easily absorb the paint.

Patachitra paintings were traditionally undertaken only by the mahapatras or maharanas, the original artiste caste in Orissa. These paintings constituted a vital art form, which was actually used for the ornamentation of Lord Jagannath in the innermost sanctum. Here, paintings on especially treated cloth or Paata of the deities were done exclusively by the temple painter. The painter used tribal and folk themes.

The main aspect about this art is that the artisan does not use a pencil or charcoal for the preliminary drawings. He first completes drawing the borders of the painting. Only then does he start making a rough sketch, directly with the brush, using light red and yellow colors. The main flat colors come next. Here, the colors used are white, red, yellow, and black. Once that is done, the artist proceeds to finish the painting with fine strokes of black brush lines, giving the effect of pen work. When the painting is completed, the fabric is held over a charcoal fire and lacquer is applied to the surface. This is done so as to make it water resistant and durable, besides giving it that wonderful shimmering finish.

## Materials used in Patachitra

The materials used by the chitrakars in patachitra are obtained from natural sources, such as from vegetables, earth, and minerals. Black is gotten from lampblack, yellow from haritali stone, and red from hingal stone. The color white is prepared from crushed, boiled, and filtered shells.

Patachitra usually deals with religious, mythological, and folk themes. Needless to say, most of the motifs revolve around tales from the Krishna Leela and Lord Jagannath. The artists have also traditionally painted playing cards or Ganjifa. Chitrapothies, a collection of painted palm leaves stacked on top of each other and held together between painted wood covers by means of a string, illustrate mythological themes.

The patachitra artists have now started experimenting with this art on other surfaces too, such as wooden boxes, ceramic bowls, tassar silk, outer shells of the coconut, wooden doors and so on. Now, they are even working planning to create painted wooden toys, using animals and birds in their motifs. The English alphabet is cut in the wood and painted in the patachitra style for sale. This is now gaining immense popularity with tourists all round the world.



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**ORISSA PAATA PAINTING ON  
PALM LEAVES STRINGED  
TOGETHER AND DEPICTING  
RADHA KRISHNA**

## Themes used in Patachitra

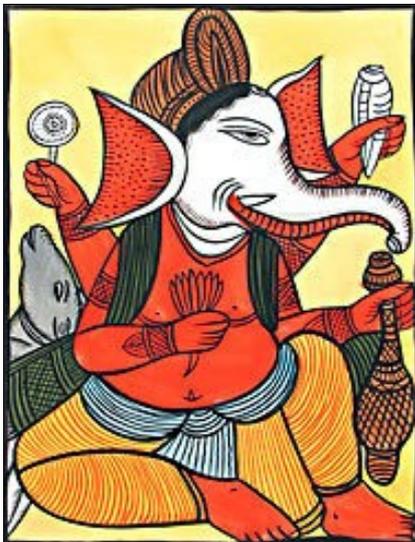
Patachitra uses many themes, but mainly, the following are the themes depicted by the artists:

- Jagannath, flanked by Balabhadra and Subhadra
- Mythological episodes taken from the Hindu epics
- Various tales and legends related to the worship of various gods and goddesses
- Quaint folklore themes
- Sometimes, even erotic themes

## Kalighat Painting

The folk art of Kalighat painting gets its name from its place of origin, Kalighat, in Kolkata, which was the erstwhile capital of India during the time of the British Raj. This type of folk art painting evolved in the 19th Century and has its roots in the several cultural upheavals of nineteenth century colonial Bengal.

### History of Kalighat painting



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**KALIGHAT PAINTING  
DEPICTING GANESHA**

Till the 19th Century, the only acknowledged form of painting in Bengal was the traditional scroll painting art, very popular in the rural areas. These paintings were done on cloth or patas and depicted traditional images of popular Hindu deities and scenes from epics like Tulsidas' Rama charita manas and so on. The artistes were common villager folk and they would travel from place to place with their scroll paintings, singing the scenes from the epics depicted in the paintings during village gatherings and festivals. These artists, called patuas or 'painters on cloth' were said to be half Hindu and half Muslim and also actively practised Islam.

The British were actually the main patrons of the art form. They set up several institutions to train Indian artists in European style of painting. The Calcutta School of Art was one such school and attracted the patuas to the city. Initially, they were concentrated only around the temple at Kalighat where there was a demand for religious art. By and by, they also started to learn from the newer techniques and discovered that these could help them increase their earnings. They started creating

new forms of art and the Kalighat painting was born.

### Materials used in Kalighat painting

Kalighat painters used material easily and cheaply available to them, such as brushes made from calf and squirrel hair, cheaply priced watercolors. The artisans also painted on inexpensive mill papers. Likewise, low-priced color pigments were applied in transparent tones. This created a different genre of folk art painting that vastly differed from the traditional of Indian tempera. The artistically shaded contours and articulated gesture and movement gave the painted figures a plaque-like effect on a neutral unpainted ground.

The Kalighat style of painting is also characterized by formal and linear economy, meaningful gestures, and quality brushwork and flawless rhythmic strokes. The drawings are bold and attractive, while at the same time, also maintaining simplicity of technique.

## Themes used by Kalighat folk art

Kalighat painting used many strong social themes and focused on creating awareness in society. This folk art was the first of its kind in the Indian subcontinent that expressed subaltern sentiment and also addressed customers directly. Kalighat paintings started with religious undertones too, just like all other forms of Indian folk art painting. Hindu deities, such as Durga, Kali, Ram-Sita, Rukmini-Krishna and so on, featured in most of the initial paintings. With time, social sentiments came to be expressed in the medium of paper and color.

The painters were keen observers of life, with a different kind of humour. The wealthy zamindars (landowners) ravishing wine and women, sloppy babus spending their day and night at questionable locales, a priest or Vaishnav "Guru" living with unchaste women - these were some of the themes depicted by these artists. They had a moralizing intent and would draw the caricatures in such a way as would repel ordinary people from such activities. The Babus' slavery to these women also subtly depicted the then changing facet and eroding values of Indian society.



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**KALIGHAT PAINTING  
DEPICTING A WEALTHY  
ZAMINDAR OR LANDLORD**

Yet another popular theme depicted was something every Bengali held dear - the legend of Chaitanya Mahaprabhu and his disciples.

The artists' paintings also depicted different professions and costumes as well. Even contemporary events like crime were the subject of many paintings. The artists also portrayed famous figures during the pre-Independence Era, thus playing a major role during the Independence movement. They also painted heroic characters like Tipu Sultan and Rani Lakshmibai.

## Renaissance of Kalighat painting

Interestingly, scholars and critics alike had neglected the art Kalighat painting for many years on end. In India, the ancient Sanskrit texts had generally served as the yardstick for judging the merit of art forms. The written word was considered far more important than pictorial expressions. Since Kalighat art had lacked the authority of the sacred text, the rural and folk visual forms of the Kalighat Paintings were considered to be some sort of inferior expression, unworthy of so-called scholarly attention.

Kalighat painting started getting its deserved acknowledgement and appreciation only in the twentieth century. Indian art was, at the time, facing a serious threat from the aggressively invasive western culture. Thus the preservation of traditional Indian art became a prime concern. Local traditions suddenly assumed supreme importance and there was an acute need for protecting, documenting and reviving rural art. This finally led to a renaissance of Kalighat Painting. Since then, this folk art form has been recognized as a brilliantly inventive aesthetic movement, and has received significant international attention as well.



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**JAMINI ROY PAINTING  
DEPICTING GANESHA AND PARVATI**

This onward trend of Kalighat painting continued till the early part of the twentieth century and then, these paintings also featured in museums and private collections. The charm of the Kalighat paintings lies in the fact that they could be easily understood and interpreted by all, while also capturing the essence of daily life. To date, these paintings continue to influence even modern artistes like the late Jamini Roy, in their work.

## Warli Art

The Warlis or Varlis, as they are also known, form part of a Scheduled Tribe in India. These simple rural folk live in the talukas or districts of Thane, Nasik and Dhule in the state of Maharashtra, the Valsad District of Gujarat, and the union territories of Dadra and Nagar Haveli and Daman and Diu. These people stick by a set of their own beliefs, customs and traditions and also speak an unwritten Varli language, which is a quaint mix of Sanskrit, Marathi and Gujarati. The word Warli is derived from warla, meaning "piece of land" or "field".

There are some records of the Warli painting tradition dating right back to 2500 or 3000 BCE. In fact, their mural paintings are similar to those done in the Rock Shelters of Bhimbetka, Madhya Pradesh, between 500 and 10,000 BCE.

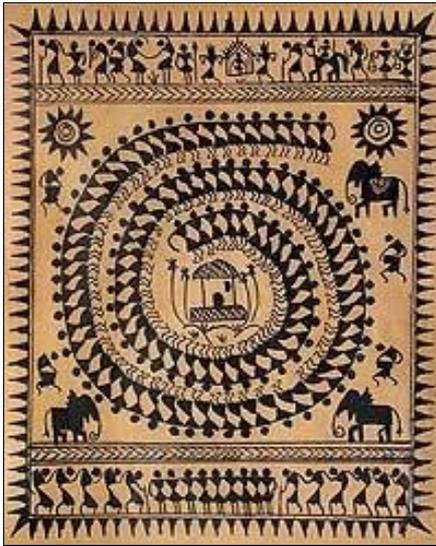


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**WARLI PAINTING  
DEPICTING VILLAGE LIFE**

Warli art is extremely spare and rudimentary, using limited vocabulary: a circle, a triangle and a square. It is said that the circle and triangle come from their own observation of nature. The circle, to the Warlis, represents the sun and the moon and the triangle is derived from mountains and pointed trees. Only the square seems to be a human invention, possibly indicating a sacred enclosure or a piece of land. So the central motive in each ritual painting is the square, the chauk or chaukat. Inside this square is the Palaghata or the Mother Goddess. She embodies fertility. The concept of male gods is almost absent among the Warli tribe. They are sometimes even related to spirits which take human shape.

## Popular themes in Warli art



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**WARLI PAINTING**

The most popular theme of this ritual painting heritage revolves around hunting; fishing and farming; festivals and social functions; types of dances; and trees and animals. Additional themes, such as men and women gathering around a bonfire on a cold night, shepherds accompanying sheep in the fields and so on, are also depicted in Warli art. Human and animal bodies are represented in the form of stick figures, by way of two triangles joined at the tip; the upper triangle depicting the trunk and the lower triangle, the pelvis. This kind of approach, surprisingly depicting equilibrium, symbolizes the balance of the universe. Besides, it also creates a certain effect of animating the bodies.

Warli paintings are usually done inside huts. The walls are made of a mixture of branches, earth and cow dung, which creates a natural red-ochre background for the wall paintings. The Warli use only the color white for their paintings. This white color is a mixture of rice paste and water with gum as a binding agent. A bamboo stick, chipped off at one end, makes for a fine

paintbrush. The wall paintings are done only during special occasions such as harvests, weddings and births.

## Technique of Warli painting

Warli art follows a specific technique, which is as follows:

- First, a design is chosen.
- This is then traced out on the tracing paper, after which it is copied onto the cloth or paper using a carbon sheet.
- If it is a cloth, metallic colors are used and it is let to dry well. The cloth is then ironed on the reverse.
- In case of using paper, poster colors are used and it is left to dry.
- Outlines are drawn using white color and left to dry for a period of 24 hours.

## Evolution of Warli art in the present scenario

Like every folk art, Warli has also evolved through the ages. Warli painting was the preserve of the womenfolk until the late 1970s, but after that, things took a radical turn and it is now a very popular art not only India, but abroad as well. Now, Warli art is treated as part of home décor and Warli paintings have an international appeal and demand too. Nowadays, Warli art has evolved and is also being painted on paper, vases, mugs, bedsheets and apparel.



[Buy this Painting on a Vase](#)

**WARLI PAINTING  
ON A VASE**

This article was written by **Saipriya Viswanathan**. Saipriya is a teacher/performer of Bharata Natyam, Carnatic vocal music and Carnatic Veena. She is a recipient of several awards for both dance and music, including the Sur Mani and Singar Mani titles. She is a recipient Govt. of India Merit Scholarship for dance and is a diploma holder in Carnatic vocal music.

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