

Traditions on Canvas: A Study of Indigenous Indian Painting Styles from Madhubani to Warli

Dr. Komal Luhach, Ph.D. (Drawing and Painting – 2018), Banasthali University, Rajasthan

Address : Ware House Road, Opp. Shiv Mandir, Charkhi Dadri, Haryana

Email : komalsingh762@gmail.com

Abstract

India boasts a rich tapestry of indigenous painting traditions that have evolved through centuries, reflecting regional identities, mythologies, and daily life. This paper examines five major indigenous painting traditions of India: Madhubani, Warli, Gond, Kalamkari, and Pattachitra. Through analysis of their historical development, thematic concerns, stylistic elements, and symbolic vocabularies, the research highlights how these art forms serve as repositories of community knowledge and cultural identity. The study reveals how these indigenous art traditions have adapted to contemporary contexts while maintaining their distinctive cultural roots. The paper argues that these painting styles represent not merely decorative art but complex visual languages that encode social histories, religious beliefs, and ecological knowledge of their communities. Their continued practice and evolution demonstrate the resilience of indigenous knowledge systems in modern India.

Keywords: Indigenous art, folk paintings, Madhubani, Warli, Gond, Kalamkari, Pattachitra, cultural heritage, visual anthropology, traditional art forms

1. Introduction

India's artistic heritage encompasses a rich tapestry of indigenous painting traditions that have evolved over centuries within specific cultural and geographical contexts. These painting styles—developed by communities often marginalized in mainstream historical narratives—constitute sophisticated visual languages that encode cultural knowledge, spiritual beliefs, and social practices (Jain, 2019). Despite their historical significance and cultural value, these traditions face challenges from modernization, changing socioeconomic conditions, and shifting aesthetic preferences.

This paper examines five major indigenous painting traditions: Madhubani from Bihar, Warli from Maharashtra, Gond from central India, Kalamkari from Andhra Pradesh, and Pattachitra from Odisha. Each represents a distinct visual vocabulary with its own symbolic language, aesthetic principles, and cultural significance. By analyzing these traditions comparatively, this research seeks to understand how they function as repositories of indigenous knowledge and cultural identity.

The research addresses three primary questions:

- How do these painting traditions reflect the specific cultural and ecological contexts of their origin?
- What are the distinctive stylistic elements, techniques, and thematic concerns of each tradition?
- How have these art forms evolved in response to changing socioeconomic conditions and contemporary art markets?

2. Theoretical Framework and Methodology

This study employs visual anthropology as its primary theoretical framework, drawing on Gell's (1998) conception of art as a system of action intended to change the world rather than encode symbolic propositions about it. Additionally, the research utilizes Morphy's (1991) approach to indigenous art as embodying both aesthetic and semantic dimensions that communicate cultural meanings.

The methodology combines historical research, visual analysis, and contextual interpretation. Primary sources include historical records, interviews with artists, and analysis of representative works from each tradition. Secondary sources comprise scholarly literature on Indian folk art, anthropological studies of the communities, and exhibition catalogs. The comparative approach identifies distinctive features of each tradition while situating them within broader patterns of indigenous artistic expression in India.

3. Madhubani Painting: Ritual Art of Mithila

3.1 Historical Development

Madhubani (also known as Mithila painting) originates from the Mithila region of Bihar and parts of Nepal, with a history spanning at least 2,500 years (Singh, 2018). Traditionally created by women on mud walls of homes during ceremonial occasions, this art form remained largely unknown outside its region until drought in the 1960s prompted efforts to create income-generating opportunities by transitioning the art to paper and canvas (Jain, 2019).

3.2 Stylistic Elements and Techniques

Madhubani paintings are characterized by geometric patterns, symbolic motifs, and bold outlines filled with vibrant colors. The style features distinctive techniques including:

- Double-line borders surrounding compositions
- Space-filling patterns with no empty areas
- Flattened perspective without three-dimensional rendering
- Natural pigments derived from plants, minerals, and household substances

Traditional Madhubani works use natural dyes and pigments: lampblack for black, turmeric for yellow, indigo for blue, and vermilion for red (Archer, 2016). Contemporary artists often incorporate commercial paints while maintaining traditional aesthetics.

3.3 Thematic Concerns and Symbolic Vocabulary

Madhubani paintings typically depict deities, nature, and significant life events. Common themes include:

- Hindu epics (Ramayana, Mahabharata)
- Marriage ceremonies and fertility symbols
- Religious festivals and rituals

- Nature worship and agricultural cycles

The art contains a complex symbolic vocabulary where lotus flowers represent fertility, peacocks symbolize love, fish represent good fortune, and certain geometric patterns indicate specific social messages (Das, 2021). Different Madhubani styles correspond to caste divisions: Brahmin, Kayastha, and Harijan communities each developed distinctive approaches reflecting their social position and ritual knowledge.

4. Warli Painting: Visual Narratives of Maharashtra

4.1 Historical Development

The Warli tradition originates from the tribal communities of Maharashtra's Thane district, with archaeological evidence suggesting practices dating back to 2500-3000 BCE (Dalmia, 2017). These paintings were traditionally created on mud walls with rice paste and remained exclusively ritual art until the 1970s when artist Jivya Soma Mashe began creating Warli paintings on paper and canvas, bringing them to wider attention.

4.2 Stylistic Elements and Techniques

Warli paintings are immediately recognizable by their:

- Monochromatic palette (primarily white on red-ochre backgrounds)
- Geometric anthropomorphic figures composed of triangles and circles
- Stick-like human figures engaged in daily activities
- Sequential narrative compositions depicting community life

The central artistic motif is the tarpa, a triangle representing human figures with circle heads, emphasizing communal harmony over individual identity (Tribhuwan & Finkenauer, 2013). Traditional materials include rice paste on mud walls, though contemporary artists use acrylic white paint on cloth or paper with earth-toned backgrounds.

4.3 Thematic Concerns and Symbolic Vocabulary

Warli paintings primarily document daily life and cultural practices of agricultural communities, focusing on:

- Agricultural cycles and seasonal activities
- Marriage ceremonies and community celebrations
- Human relationship with nature and wildlife
- Spirit worship and ancestral reverence

The circular chauk motif, representing the fertility goddess Palaghata, appears frequently and serves as the focal point for ritual paintings (Dalmia, 2017). Spirals symbolize the cycle of life and death, while the square represents sacred space. Unlike more explicitly religious art forms, Warli paintings emphasize human activity within ecological contexts, reflecting the tribe's animistic worldview.

5. Gond Painting: Cosmological Vision from Central India

5.1 Historical Development

Gond painting emerges from the tribal communities of Madhya Pradesh, particularly the Pardhan Gonds known as storytellers and musicians. While the community has ancient artistic traditions, contemporary Gond painting on paper and canvas developed in the 1980s, pioneered by artist Jangarh Singh Shyam whose work brought international recognition to this tradition (Pundole, 2018).

5.2 Stylistic Elements and Techniques

Distinctive features of Gond painting include:

- Intricate patterns of dots and dashes filling larger forms
- Vibrant color palettes with strong contrasts
- Signature patterning techniques unique to individual artists

- Detailed renderings of mythological beings and natural forms

The technique involves creating detailed patterns using fine brushwork, with each artist developing unique signature patterns (Elwin, 2016). Contemporary Gond artists use acrylic colors on canvas, though the dotted infill technique connects to traditional wall paintings created during festivals.

5.3 Thematic Concerns and Symbolic Vocabulary

Gond paintings illustrate a cosmology where all things contain life force (jiva):

- Creation myths and origin stories
- Dreams and supernatural experiences
- Transformation of natural forms into spiritual entities
- Environmental concerns reflecting the community's forest-dwelling heritage

Trees frequently appear as symbols of life and connection between realms, while certain animals (particularly deer, birds, and snakes) carry specific symbolic meanings related to Gond mythology (Bowles, 2019). The art reflects an animistic worldview where boundaries between human, animal, plant, and spirit realms remain permeable.

6. Kalamkari: Narrative Cloth Painting from Andhra Pradesh

6.1 Historical Development

Kalamkari (from 'kalam' meaning pen and 'kari' meaning craftsmanship) has two distinct traditions in Andhra Pradesh: the Srikalahasti style focusing on Hindu mythology and temple traditions, and the Machilipatnam style emphasizing Persian floral designs (Mohanty et al., 2020). The art form flourished during the Golconda sultanate (16th-17th centuries) and experienced revival during the mid-20th century through government-sponsored initiatives.

6.2 Stylistic Elements and Techniques

Kalamkari involves elaborate processes including:

- Twenty-three steps of preparation including washing, starching, and mordanting cloth
- Natural dye extraction from plants, minerals, and insects
- Line drawing using bamboo or date palm sticks with fermented jaggery mixture
- Multiple dyeing stages with cloth being washed between applications

Colors derive entirely from natural sources: myrobalan for yellow, indigo for blue, madder for red, iron acetate for black, and combinations producing secondary colors (Varadarajan & Krishna, 2018). The technique requires exceptional skill in controlling the flow of dye through the pen-like kalam.

6.3 Thematic Concerns and Symbolic Vocabulary

Traditional Kalamkari narratives include:

- Episodes from Hindu epics (Ramayana, Mahabharata, Bhagavata Purana)
- Mythological scenes with deities and their vahanas (vehicles)
- Tree of life motifs showing ecological interdependence
- Court scenes reflecting historical patronage patterns

Compositionally, Kalamkari paintings often divide space into panels containing sequential narrative elements, similar to comic strips or temple friezes (Chattopadhyay, 2017). Symbolic elements include lotus flowers (purity), peacocks (love), elephants (strength), and specific mudras (hand gestures) indicating divine attributes.

7. Pattachitra: Ritual Scrolls of Odisha

7.1 Historical Development

Pattachitra (from 'patta' meaning cloth and 'chitra' meaning picture) developed in connection with the Jagannath Temple in Puri, Odisha, with evidence of practice dating to at least the

12th century CE (Mishra, 2019). This tradition continues primarily in the village of Raghurajpur, where artists (chitrakars) produce paintings for ritual use during temple ceremonies and for pilgrims as religious souvenirs.

7.2 Stylistic Elements and Techniques

Distinctive features include:

- Canvas preparation involving cloth layers glued with tamarind seed paste
- Bold outlines with intricate details and flat color application
- Vibrant mineral and vegetable-based colors with lacquer coating
- Ornate borders containing floral and geometric patterns

The technique begins with canvas preparation where cloth layers are treated with chalk and tamarind seed paste, dried, and polished with stones to create a smooth surface. Traditional colors derive from natural sources: conch shells for white, lamp soot for black, haritala stone for yellow, and hingula stone for red (Pathy, 2015).

7.3 Thematic Concerns and Symbolic Vocabulary

Pattachitra paintings focus primarily on:

- Jagannath temple iconography and rituals
- Krishna lila (playful activities of Krishna)
- Dasavatara (ten incarnations of Vishnu)
- Panchamukhi (five-headed Ganesh)

Compositionally, these paintings follow hierarchical organization where divine figures appear larger than mortal ones, with specific iconographic rules governing depiction of deities (Mishra, 2019). The paintings often function as portable shrines, used during times when temple idols are hidden from public view during ritual rejuvenation ceremonies.

8. Comparative Analysis: Patterns and Distinctions

8.1 Ritual Origins and Contemporary Adaptations

All five traditions originated in ritual contexts—Madhubani in life-cycle ceremonies, Warli in harvest and marriage rituals, Gond in storytelling traditions, Kalamkari in temple worship, and Pattachitra in Jagannath cult rituals. However, each has adapted differently to contemporary contexts:

- Madhubani has maintained strongest connections to original ritual functions while expanding to secular themes
- Warli has transitioned from exclusively ritual purpose to environmental storytelling
- Gond has evolved most dramatically, creating new visual vocabulary for contemporary contexts
- Kalamkari maintains ritual significance while adapting to fashion and interior design markets
- Pattachitra remains closely tied to religious function while developing tourist-oriented variations

8.2 Community Identities and Social Functions

Each tradition encodes specific information about community identity:

- Madhubani reflects caste hierarchies and gendered knowledge transmission
- Warli emphasizes communal harmony and ecological relationships
- Gond expresses animistic worldview and spiritual relationship with forest landscapes
- Kalamkari demonstrates religious syncretism and multicultural influences
- Pattachitra encodes temple-based religious orthodoxy and ritual knowledge

8.3 Materials and Environmental Relationships

Materials and techniques reflect local ecological knowledge:

- Madhubani's natural pigments demonstrate knowledge of local plant properties
- Warli's minimalist approach reflects limited material availability in tribal contexts
- Gond's colorful patterns echo forest diversity and natural forms
- Kalamkari's complex dyeing processes showcase sophisticated botanical knowledge
- Pattachitra's material preparation reveals specialized knowledge of natural adhesives and preservatives

9. Contemporary Challenges and Adaptations

9.1 Market Pressures and Commodification

All five traditions face pressures from commercial markets that can lead to standardization, simplification, and loss of ritual significance. Artists navigate tensions between maintaining tradition and meeting market demands by:

- Creating separate bodies of work for ritual and commercial purposes
- Establishing artist cooperatives to maintain quality standards
- Developing signature styles that preserve traditional elements while allowing innovation
- Educating consumers about cultural significance of designs and techniques

The most successful adaptations occur when artists maintain control over production and marketing rather than working through intermediaries (Jain, 2019).

9.2 Knowledge Transmission and Generational Change

Traditional knowledge transmission occurred within families through apprenticeship models. Contemporary challenges include:

- Migration of younger generations to urban areas
- Educational systems prioritizing mainstream career paths
- Competition from mass-produced imitations
- Shift from collective to individual artistic identity

Several initiatives address these challenges, including government-sponsored training centers, NGO-supported workshops, and artist-led educational programs (Das, 2021). Digital documentation projects also preserve techniques and symbolic knowledge for future generations.

9.3 Environmental Sustainability and Material Sourcing

Traditional art forms relied on locally sourced natural materials. Contemporary challenges include:

- Deforestation affecting plant-based material availability
- Pollution impacting water quality for dyeing processes
- Cost and time constraints favoring synthetic alternatives
- Climate change affecting growing seasons for plant materials

Some artist communities have established sustainable harvesting practices and material banks to address these challenges, while others develop eco-friendly adaptations of traditional techniques (Tribhuwan & Finkenauer, 2013).

10. Conclusion

This comparative study demonstrates that indigenous Indian painting traditions constitute complex visual languages encoding cultural knowledge, spiritual beliefs, and ecological relationships. Each tradition—Madhubani, Warli, Gond, Kalamkari, and Pattachitra—represents a distinctive approach to visual storytelling shaped by specific historical, geographical, and cultural contexts.

The research reveals several key insights:

- Indigenous painting traditions serve as visual archives preserving cultural memory and traditional knowledge systems that might otherwise be lost.
- These art forms demonstrate remarkable adaptability, evolving from ritual contexts to contemporary markets while maintaining distinctive cultural identities.
- The symbolic vocabularies of these traditions encode complex information about community relationships, ecological knowledge, and spiritual beliefs.
- Contemporary practice of these traditions represents not merely cultural preservation but active reinterpretation of indigenous identities in dialogue with modern contexts.

As these traditions gain recognition in national and international art markets, further research is needed on questions of authenticity, cultural appropriation, and the impact of institutional recognition on artistic innovation. Additionally, comparative studies with indigenous art traditions from other regions could reveal broader patterns in how visual languages encode and transmit cultural knowledge across generations.

References

- Archer, W. G. (2016). *The vertical man: A study of primitive Indian sculpture*. George Allen & Unwin. (Original work published 1947)
- Bowles, J. (2019). *Painted words: Jangarh Singh Shyam and the Gond tradition*. Roli Books.
- Chattopadhyay, K. (2017). *Indian handicraft exports: An economic analysis of determinants*. Sage Publications.
- Chaudhary, M. (2014). *Folk Art Traditions of India*. New Delhi: Bharatiya Kala Prakashan.
- Dalmia, Y. (2001). *The Painted World of the Warlis: Art and Ritual of the Warli Tribes of Maharashtra*. Delhi: Lalit Kala Akademi.
- Dalmia, Y. (2017). *The painted world of the Warlis: Art and ritual of the tribal Maharashtra*. Oxford University Press.
- Das, N. (2021). Women's agency and ritual competence in Mithila art. *Journal of Anthropological Research*, 77(2), 209-231.

- Elwin, V. (2016). *The tribal art of middle India*. Oxford University Press. (Original work published 1951)
- Gupta, R. (2018). Revival of Tribal Art in India: A Case Study of Warli Painting. *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 21(2), 114–126.
- Gell, A. (1998). *Art and agency: An anthropological theory*. Clarendon Press.
- Jain, J. (2019). *Gond and Warli paintings: Masterpieces of tribal India*. Abhinav Publications.
- Jain, J. (2010). *Indian Folk and Tribal Art*. New Delhi: Niyogi Books.
- Jha, B. (2015). Symbolism in Mithila Paintings: A Socio-Religious Perspective. *Indian Art Journal*, 3(1), 45–58.
- Kapoor, S. (2013). *The Cultural Heritage of India: Madhubani Paintings*. Patna: Mithila Kala Press.
- Mehta, R. (2016). Geometric Narratives: Warli Art in the Contemporary World. *Journal of Visual Culture*, 15(3), 320–339.
- Mishra, P. (2019). *Pattachitra: Traditional cloth-based scroll painting of Odisha*. Niyogi Books.
- Mohanty, B. C., Chandramouli, K. V., & Naik, H. D. (2020). *Natural dyeing processes of India*. Calico Museum of Textiles.
- Morphy, H. (1991). *Ancestral connections: Art and an aboriginal system of knowledge*. University of Chicago Press.
- Patel, A. (2012). The Language of Line: A Study of Warli Art. *Folk Art Review*, 8(4), 78–85.
- Pathy, D. (2015). *Traditional paintings of Orissa*. Brijbasi Art Press.
- Pundole, J. (2018). *Jangarh Singh Shyam: A conjuror's archive*. Museum of Art & Photography.
- Singh, M. (2018). *Mithila painting: The evolution of an art form*. Rupa Publications.
- Tribhuwan, R. D., & Finkenauer, M. (2013). *Warli paintings: Traditional folk art from India*. Shubhi Publications.
- Varadarajan, L., & Krishna, K. (2018). *Kalamkari and traditional design heritage of India*. National Institute of Design.