

### Conceptual Foundations of Living Traditions

There has always existed a timeless tradition of art forms practised by people living far away from urban centres, in forests, deserts, mountains and villages.

While the study of Indian art often focuses on courtly traditions or styles associated with dynasties and regions, an equally significant question arises—what about the common people? Were they not creative?

The living art traditions of India answer this by revealing a vast, continuous stream of artistic expression embedded in everyday life.

These traditions are not the outcome of formal academic training or institutional frameworks. Rather, they emerge from lived experiences and are deeply rooted in community practices.

The artists involved are often anonymous, having neither attended art schools nor received formal education. Yet, their works demonstrate remarkable skill, sensitivity and an instinctive sense of aesthetics.

These traditions highlight that creativity is not limited to elite spaces but thrives organically within communities.

India has always been a repository of indigenous knowledge systems. This knowledge is transmitted from one generation to another through practice, observation and participation rather than written documentation.

Artists inherit not only techniques but also symbolic meanings, cultural values and ritual significance associated with their art. This intergenerational continuity ensures both preservation and subtle transformation over time.

Scholars have used various terms such as folk art, tribal art, ritual art, utility art and craft to describe these practices. However, such classifications often create artificial hierarchies that undermine their artistic value.

In reality, these forms embody a seamless integration of function and aesthetics. The distinction between art and craft becomes blurred, as both involve creativity, skill and expression.

Everyday objects like pots, textiles, jewellery and even decorated walls and floors carry artistic intent alongside functional utility.

The historical continuity of these traditions can be traced back to prehistoric cave paintings and further to the artefacts of the Indus Valley Civilisation, including pottery, terracotta and bronze objects.

Throughout history, artisan communities have existed across regions, producing objects that fulfilled both practical needs and aesthetic aspirations. Their works were not merely decorative but were deeply connected to rituals, beliefs and social practices.

A key feature of these traditions is their symbolic richness. Motifs, colours and materials are carefully chosen and often carry specific meanings.

For instance, elements from nature such as birds, animals, plants, the sun and the moon frequently appear, symbolising concepts like fertility, prosperity, continuity and cosmic balance.

The use of locally available materials further reflects a harmonious relationship between humans and their environment.

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, a renewed interest in these traditions emerged. Modern artists, both in India and the West, began to look at folk and tribal art as sources of inspiration.

This marked a shift in perception, recognising these practices as significant artistic expressions rather than marginal crafts.

After Independence, India witnessed a conscious revival of the handicraft sector. These traditions were organised for commercial production while still retaining their cultural identity.

With the formation of different states and union territories, regional art forms gained visibility through state emporia and exhibitions.

Each region began to showcase its unique artistic heritage, contributing to a broader understanding of India's cultural diversity. Despite changes brought about by modernisation, these traditions continue to thrive, adapting to new contexts while preserving their core essence.

Thus, the living art traditions of India represent a dynamic continuum where art is not separate from life but is an integral part of it. They embody a holistic approach in which utility, ritual and aesthetics coexist,

reflecting the creativity and resilience of communities across centuries.



### Painting Traditions of India

The painting traditions within the living art practices of India are diverse, region-specific and deeply rooted in ritual and everyday life.

Despite variations in style and technique, they share common characteristics such as symbolic representation, community participation and a close connection with cultural practices.

One of the most well-known traditions is Mithila or Madhubani painting from Bihar. This art form derives its name from the ancient region of Mithila and is traditionally associated with women.

It is believed to have originated during the marriage of Sita to Rama, linking it to mythological narratives. These paintings are usually created on the walls of houses, particularly in spaces such as courtyards, verandahs and sacred rooms.

Mithila paintings are characterised by bright colours and dense compositions, where no space is left empty. Artists fill every part of the surface with intricate patterns and motifs drawn from nature, including birds, fish, flowers and celestial bodies.

Themes often include episodes from the Ramayana, Krishna's life and other religious narratives. The colours

are traditionally derived from natural sources such as flowers, leaves and minerals, and the paintings are executed using simple tools like bamboo twigs. The symbolic content of these paintings reflects ideas of fertility, prosperity and harmony.

Warli painting, practised by the Warli tribe of Maharashtra, presents a stark contrast in style yet shares similar cultural depth.

These paintings are usually created by married women during important occasions such as marriages and harvest festivals. The central motif often features the mother goddess Palaghat, symbolising fertility.

Warli paintings are executed using rice flour on mud walls, creating a striking contrast against the earthy background. The compositions include scenes from daily life such as farming, hunting, dancing and communal activities. Despite their simplicity, the geometric forms and rhythmic patterns convey a dynamic sense of movement and life. These paintings also serve ritualistic purposes, believed to bring prosperity and protect the community.

Gond painting, originating from the Gond community of Madhya Pradesh, reflects a deep reverence for nature. Traditionally executed on walls, these paintings have evolved into contemporary forms on paper and canvas.

They depict animals, plants and mythological figures, often rendered with intricate patterns and vibrant colours. The use of geometry and stylisation gives these works a distinctive visual language.

Pithoro painting, created by the Rathva Bhils of Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh, is another significant tradition. These large wall paintings are made during special or thanksgiving occasions.

They feature rows of horse-riding deities arranged in a structured composition. The upper section represents celestial realms, while the lower section depicts earthly life, including processions and everyday activities. These paintings serve as visual representations of cosmology and belief systems.

The Pata painting tradition, found in regions like West Bengal and Odisha, combines visual art with performance. In Bengal, patuas create scroll paintings and narrate stories through songs while displaying them. This tradition highlights the integration of visual and oral storytelling.

In Odisha, Patachitra paintings are closely associated with the Jagannath temple and depict religious themes. The process involves preparing the surface with natural materials and applying organic colours, followed by a lacquer finish.

Phad paintings of Rajasthan are long scrolls that narrate the stories of local deities and heroes. These are used by itinerant bards known as bhopas, who perform the stories through song and narration.

The paintings thus function as both visual and performative mediums, preserving oral traditions and community histories.

Overall, these painting traditions illustrate how art functions as a medium of storytelling, ritual expression and social communication. They are not static artefacts but living practices that continue to evolve while maintaining their cultural significance.

This technique, known as the lost-wax or cire perdue method, involves an elaborate process of creating metal sculptures.

Artisans, known as ghadwa, begin by making a core mould using clay and rice husk. This is followed by layering and detailing using resin or wax, which is shaped into intricate designs.

The mould is then covered with multiple layers of clay and heated in a furnace. As the wax melts and flows out, molten metal is poured into the cavity, taking the shape of the design.

Once cooled, the outer clay layer is broken to reveal the final metal object. Traditionally, these artisans produced everyday items such as utensils and jewellery, as well as ritual objects and votive offerings.

Over time, with changing demands, they have adapted to create decorative and contemporary forms.



Terracotta is another widespread sculptural medium found across India. Made from locally available clay, terracotta objects are shaped either by hand or on a potter's wheel and then fired to enhance durability.

These objects often serve ritual purposes and are offered to local deities during festivals.

Terracotta forms include images of gods and goddesses, animals, birds and various symbolic figures. Despite regional variations in style, there is a remarkable similarity in their themes and functions.

This reflects a shared cultural framework where art is closely tied to belief systems and community practices.

Both Dhokra and terracotta traditions demonstrate the integration of material, technique and cultural meaning. They are not merely decorative but serve functional and symbolic purposes.

The use of local materials and traditional methods also highlights a sustainable approach to art-making, rooted in ecological awareness.

A common feature across all living art traditions is their collective nature. These practices are not individualistic but are embedded within community life.

They involve participation, shared knowledge and continuity through generations. Whether in painting or

### Sculptural Traditions and Cultural Synthesis

In addition to painting, sculptural traditions form an essential part of India's living art practices. These traditions primarily involve materials such as clay, metal and stone, and are closely linked with rituals, daily life and community needs.

One of the most prominent metal traditions is Dhokra casting, practised in regions like Bastar, Odisha, Madhya Pradesh and West Bengal.

sculpture, the emphasis is on preserving cultural identity while adapting to changing contexts.

Despite the pressures of modernisation and industrialisation, these traditions have shown remarkable resilience.

They continue to evolve, incorporating new materials and responding to market demands without losing their core essence. This adaptability ensures their survival and relevance in contemporary times.

