The Non-Canonical Arts of Tribal Peoples, Women, and Artisans

Before we enter the colonial and modern periods, it would be useful to explore the rich mine of tribal art (the hunting-gathering communities), women's art, and the arts of everyday use. There is a curious silence in Indian art history about these groups 'hidden from history'. Their arts, as part of social rituals, have an ephemeral character and are therefore considered to be merely functional and appropriately the preserve of anthropologists. The view of the applied arts as being inferior to the fine arts has been an implicit assumption of Indian art history grounded in the Renaissance hierarchy of the arts. However, such an evaluation is also prevalent in Indian society, which itself is a reflection of the social position of these groups. Yet they have produced an enormous variety of arts, and in order to appreciate these so-called minor arts, which do not conform to the canon, we need to turn to the artists, their intentions, and the aims of those for whom their art was created.

The fine arts of sculpture and painting are primarily concerned with image-making, dominated by a clear narrative content. On the other hand, the decorative arts are primarily engaged in creating abstract symmetrical patterns. As E. H. Gombrich points out, there is an essential difference between the perception of meaning that governs the visual arts and the sense of balance, order, and symmetry that is paramount in decoration. Rhythm and structure, animation, and stylization are the elements that rule decoration, the individual motifs forming an integral part of an overall order. In short, the decorative arts are ruled by the tension between an innate sense of order and creative ingenuity. Our own appreciation of Indian decorative arts can be anchored on this insight.
Tribal art

Neolithic hunter-gatherers have existed in India since prehistoric times. Although they had faced pressure to conform from the dominant Hindu society over millennia, until the colonial period many of these groups were able to preserve their own artistic traditions. Their lifestyle began to be threatened from the nineteenth century, in part because land was increasingly exploited for economic ends and hunter-gatherers were categorized as "tribes" as part of an overall Raj strategy of political control. In the 1940s, the anthropologist Verrier Elwin drew our attention to the rich but disappearing art of tribal India. He regretted the loss of their artistic tradition under the impact of the modern age. A special feature of the art of the Uraons, Gonds, Murias, and Sauras of Bihar is the use of their body as a "site" for decoration. They dress their hair with beads, they adorn themselves with bangles, armlets, and bracelets. Good women in particular show off their heavy silver headdresses, while cowrie shell ornaments enjoy universal popularity among tribal women. Wooden ceremonial masks are an indispensable element in dance dramas, such as the Chho masks of Purulia on the Bihar-Bengal border. The Santhal tribes of Bengal and Bihar show artistic skill in their marriage letters of wood, ornately carved with social scenes, while the Sauras of Chhotanagpur commemorate the dead with pictures painted with rice paste.4

Tribal peoples practise wall paintings, a custom they share with Hindu village communities. Among the Warli tribe of Maharashtra, the women paint the inner, darkest walls of the wedding chamber with bright pigments of red ochre and white rice paste. These nuptial paintings follow a complex process, accompanied by symbolic rites. Their main subject is Patalghata, the Warli goddess of fertility. The humiliation of the black naked goddess at the hands of the Vedic god Indra is a constant theme among the Warlis, a mythical expression of their defeat by Brahmanical religion. Imagined as a stocky, square diagrammatic figure without human features, she is ritually unveiled during the wedding.5 Warli men and women also produce secular paintings, such as the cokkat, a pictogram centring on the square, which stands for the four corners of the earth. The square is enclosed by geometric shapes and natural scenery rendered in the neolithic rock art style.

A striking genre of sculpture mediates between tribal and village cultures, namely the wooden effigies of spirits (bhuta) in the coastal regions of Karnataka in South India. In a "carnivalesque" ritual conducted by low-ranking Brahmin priests, caste distinctions are temporarily obliterated and the Hindu pantheon subverted. The bhutas are totemic, semi-divine creatures, and occasionally even the god Siva is imagined as a bhuta. As with the nature spirits the yaksus, whose origins are non-Vedic, the bhutas need to be propitiated in order to deflect their demonic wrath. Hereditary artists carve the bhuta sculptures with an array of tools on untreated jack-wood [103].6

Women’s art

In ancient India, cultivated women, including princesses and courtesans, were expected to be accomplished in drawing and painting, and professional women painters are occasionally encountered in literature. However, since the names of even male painters are seldom recorded, it is difficult to recover any useful information about women artists. On a lower social level, women’s contribution was tacitly acknowledged. The cloth paintings (pichwais) that hang behind images in temples at Nathdwara in Rajasthan are taken to be produced by men, although their production depends upon women’s participation as cheap family labour. However, not only did a few Rajasthani women rise to be masters of their craft, but some probably worked outside on murals because of their proven skills.7

Domestic painting and women artists

The domestic art of floor painting, with variant forms in different regions, such as alpana in West Bengal, rangoli in Maharasthra, and kolam in South India, is associated with ceremonies marking rites of passage, such as birth, puberty, marriage, and death. Female rituals involving art have played a more significant role in Hindu social life than the ministrations of Brahmin priests, but the images have usually been seen as the preserve of anthropologists rather than art historians. It is also no accident that the Great Goddess is the central figure in this ritual matriarchy, for this is an activity, albeit temporary, that releases women from their subordinate status in society.8 Women teach alpana to girls to enable them to perform wish-fulfilment rituals (brata), such as obtaining suitable husbands. Part of the ceremony consists of drawing with fingers on the floor, with colours made of rice powder and other natural substances, while rites relating to life cycles or harvests are enacted. There is an emphasis on balance and symmetry as well as on abstractions based on natural forms such as leaves and flowers. Although governed by conventions, alpana demands imagination and skill, thus giving scope for individual talent.9

Other forms of art were also used to celebrate key social occasions. Ritual decorations with elaborate scenes from Hindu epics and myths on the mud walls of rural huts are more ambitious than floor painting. The best known among them are Madhubani paintings, named after the agrarian town of Madhubani in the Mithila region of Bihar, a region of considerable antiquity. Since these paintings use cheap and perishable materials that need periodic repainting, mothers need to teach their daughters the techniques of painting in order to ensure continuity [104].10
A Khobar painted on the mud wall of a hut, Madhubani region.

The walls of the nuptial chamber are painted with abstract and figurative designs, which contrast dramatically with the simply decorated rooves in Mithila villages. A young maidservant makes a proposal of marriage by symbolically offering the prospective groom a khobar painted by her. It has been suggested that the painting obliquely suggests sexual intercourse by its image of the sacred female of various ages.

Embroidery

Embroidery, needlework, and other forms of women's art have recently been brought to our notice by feminist art historians. Among domestic art, a term that belies its quality and brilliance, kanthas or embroidered and patchwork quilts, bedspreads, and other furnishings made by women of East Bengal (now Bangladesh) are especially interesting. Kanthas, the product of thrift in a poor household, are produced from discarded saris, while the embroidery on them is done with threads removed from the saris. These colourful works of great ingenuity and beauty are based on patchwork and a few simple threads—red, yellow, blue-black, and green. The embroidery reinforces the thin material in order to make it more durable.

The kantha artists developed the convention of a many-petalled lotus medallion in the centre, surrounded by floral borders and kali motifs in four corners—the kali, possibly of Mughal origin, inspired the Scottish paisley design. The kantha is an extension of the Bengali alpana in its use of the lotus derived from the symbolic mandala diagram. Its presence in domestic art suggests a residual folk memory of the widespread Tantric cults of Bengal [105].

Many of the women who produced kanthas were Muslim. They made elaborately decorated kanthas that were presented on formal occasions to mosques and were used for covering saints' tombs. Some
of the *kantha* motifs stemmed from local Bengali imagery. A whole series of conventions grew up in connection with the making of *kanthas*. While there were some differences in the motifs used by Hindu and Muslim women, the basic lotus *mandala* in the centre and a few other features were shared by them. There were also Mughal motifs blending Sufi and Buddhist-Hindu ideas, such as the tree of life. Indeed, *kanthas* are emblematic of the synthesis of Hindu and Muslim rituals and beliefs. The use of discarded garments for producing *kanthas* came to be associated with renunciation among Muslim and Hindu mystics.\(^9\)

**The everyday arts**

**Performance art and the pataua**

Since antiquity India has enjoyed a tradition of performance art that combines visual arts and drama. The *citra katha*, a type of rolled-up scroll painting, forms the narrative thread in performances of wandering minstrels, a tradition that spread from T'ang dynasty China (618–906 CE) to medieval Europe. Today, the paintings unfolded at bardic recitals in India are associated in Rajasthan, for instance, with the Pabuji cult, in Gujarat with the Garodas, in Andhra with the Nakkashi, and in Bengal with the village scroll painters, the *patuas*. The Rajasthani scroll paintings known as *pat* are produced by a specialist painter caste for the minstrels, who are often a husband-and-wife team. They belong to a patronage system involving painters, reciters, and wealthy sponsors of this devotional art.\(^9\)

In Bengal, however, the *patua* is both artist and reciter. The *patua* of Bengal are low-caste landless labourers who often profess a dual Hindu-Muslim identity. One of their favourite themes is the cult of Satya Pir and the Hindu god Vishnu, yet another example of Hindu-Muslim synthesis. During the colonial period, *patuas* modified their craft to include secular topics. More recently, the communist movement in West Bengal enlisted the services of scroll painters for disseminating revolutionary messages. Controversially the Indian government has sought to educate the non-literate masses in family planning and other socially useful topics through the medium of *pats*.\(^{10}\) An important variant of the *pat* or *pata* tradition is the so-called *jalpat* (magic painting) of the Santhals of Bengal (it is a misnomer and not confined to them) [106].\(^{10}\)

**Eastern design and western industry**

If the initial theme of the Great Exhibition of 1851 at the Crystal Palace in London was the triumph of European science, the exhibition turned into an object lesson in traditional decoration practised by the non-industrial societies of the East.\(^6\) Indian decorative arts drew the particular attention of critics of western industrial arts, notably Owen

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106. *Gokulchandra pata* a judicial *pata* painting?, Santhal Parganas, Bihar, c. twentieth century.

Part of the Santhal post-modem*"* castelan consists in these itinerant artist-magicians having a supply of partially completed paintings, with just the ink in the eye of the figure missing. On the death of someone in the community, the artist arrives at the deceased's dwelling. According to the Santhals, the "soul" of the departed cannot find its way in the afterworld until its sight is restored. Therefore, on payment of a fee by the family of the deceased, the artist paints the iris in the painted figure. The figures in these ovoid-shaped laya-bedazzling paintings are painted against a pale grey-green background.

Jones, William Morris, and Sir George Birdwood. In India, Birdwood declared, 'everything is hand wrought, and everything down to the cheapest toy or earthen vessel, is therefore more or less a work of art ... embodying a system of decoration founded on perfect principles, which they have learned through centuries of practice to apply with unerring truth'. Birdwood's romantic anti-industrial utopia was precipitated on the so-called village republics of India. Village craftsmen, living in a harmonious community, produced goods that had not been contaminated by the Industrial Revolution. Later, in the 1920s, partly under the impact of Mahatma Gandhi, the Indian elite 'rediscovered' the simple, rustic village folk. The nationalist pioneer in this was Gurusaday Dutt, a Bengali official in the imperial bureaucracy, whose campaigns created an intense interest in the village arts among the urban elite. These included the *kantha* and other domestic arts produced by women.\(^{11}\)

**Metalwork and jewellery**

Metalwork, not only of gold and silver but also of less precious metals, and metal casting go back to the Indus civilization. One of the most fascinating examples of early technology is the Meherauli pillar in Delhi associated with the Gupta emperor Chandragupta II (fifth century CE). Made of pure iron, it has not shown any signs of rust in all these centuries.\(^{12}\) Bronze sculptures from the Cola period and inlaid Bidriware from the eighteenth century are justly renowned. Brass,
copper, and tin were commonly used for household utensils in India. Glass making was introduced in India as early as the eighteenth century but its use was confined to glass painting. Only in the twentieth century did glass and porcelain replace metal utensils.

Jewellery in India served not only as an adornment but also as talismans. Personal jewellery was associated with each stage of an individual’s life, signifying, as we have seen, the importance of ornament in all aspects of ancient Indian culture. Hindu property law, which did not allow women to own property, sought to protect a married woman by allowing her to keep her personal jewellery, to which her husband could lay no claim. Gold and silversmiths in India use a wide variety of techniques, such as punching, engraving, enamelling, inlaying, and silver filigree techniques to create an enormous range of personal ornaments and all the regions of India. Some of the earliest recorded cases of women’s personal jewellery are seen in the bronze girl from Mohenjo Daro or the yakshi at Sanchi [1, 5]. The Mughals brought to India the advanced *kundan* technique of setting precious stones in gold. Some of the most spectacular inlaid jewellery comes from Tamilnadu [107].

Textiles
India was the largest exporter of textiles before the industrial age. Especially between 1600 and 1800, its textiles became renowned from Europe to China. In India there is an astonishing variety of spun, woven, and embroidered fabrics and costumes in response to the social and ritual demands of each tribe, caste, or community. Among the range of cotton textiles, muslins from Bengal and printed cottons from western and southern India are justly famous. However, equally varied are silk fabrics, whose cultivation was introduced from China. Woollen garments, a type known as cashmire in the West, were the specialty of temperate areas such as Kashmir.

Muslin, a gauze-like, diaphanous fabric, named ‘woven air’ because of its delicate quality, is produced in East Bengal (present Bangladesh) and was mentioned as an export commodity as early as the first century CE. In 1776, when Bengal was incorporated into the Mughal empire, the emperor and his court came to prize muslins. The fine *jamdani* variety of muslin, enhanced with hand-embroidered work (chikan), began to be produced in Mughal workshops in Bengal by Muslim weavers. *Jamdani* is easily recognizable by its blue-black patterns and silver designs on a fine field of cotton, further reinforced with sprays of paisley (*kalaa*) flowers. Muslin is produced from a particular variety of fine, soft cotton, which is grown around Dhaka, making it the major product of the region. Dhaka emerged as a prosperous town in the Mughal period thanks to its lucrative cotton trade with South-East Asia. When the East India Company founded its settlement in Bengal in the late seventeenth century, it began exporting muslin to Europe. During the British Raj, with the advent of cheap textiles mass-produced by Lancashire mills, handloom weavers gradually lost their livelihood. [3]

Gujarati and Rajasthani printed fabrics, which sport brilliant colour combinations, were eventually superseded with the invention of synthetic dyes in the nineteenth century. Until then, India had led the market in dyed, block-printed, and painted fabrics. We have seen, for instance, that inexpensive Gujarati textiles were found in graves in Fostat in Egypt. India’s pre-eminence in this field can be explained by its invention of an efficient dyeing process, the so-called mordant or ‘resist’ dyeing. While this technique is popular in Gujarat and Rajasthan, *palampores*—printed bedspreads decorated with the ‘tree of life’ motif—were produced on the Coromandel coast by stencilling and hand-painting processes. [3]

Indian printed textiles, known in the West as ‘chintz’ or ‘calico’, played a crucial part in colonial trade, gradually overtaking the export of spices, which had initially been the motive behind European expansion. The English East India Company, founded in 1600, set up factories in India to export Indian textiles to Europe, of both coarse
and fine quality, based on designs sent from Britain to be copied by Indian weavers [108]. As colonial trade expanded, the production of chintz shifted from Gujarat on the west coast to Coromandel on the east. The variety, irregularity, and free-flowing naturalism of Indian printed fabrics, imported in ever larger quantities from the seventeenth century as furnishings and wall hangings, helped liberate European taste from the abstract regularity of classical design. Much admired for their brilliant, washable colours and their lightness, by the eighteenth century even the middle classes could afford them. Samuel Pepys presented a chintz to his wife when she was decorating her study. Such was its popularity among those who could afford it that English weavers staged riots, eventually forcing its import to be banned. However, it continued to be smuggled into Britain.

Meanwhile, folk and popular art continue to flourish in the subcontinent in other forms, taking into account modern developments, a striking example of which is the modern rickshaw art of Bangladesh [109].