

## **Pata-Chitras of Orissa**

Pata-chitras are religious folk paintings common in the state of Orissa in northeast India. Pata-chitras exhibit the strong line and brilliant color that are the two principal aspects of Orissan folk painting. The tradition of painting pata-chitras is at least a couple of hundred years old.

The artists who paint pata-chitras are called chitrakaras. Sometimes a whole family is engaged in the work of preparing pata-chitras, under the supervision of the master painter in the family. The chitrakaras typically live in the vicinities of temples, such as the famous temple to Jagannath (considered a manifestation of the god Vishnu) in Puri, a seaside pilgrimage city on the Bay of Bengal. Chitrakaras are also concentrated in the nearby village of Raghurajpur. In the cities where the chitrakaras work, pata-chitras are commonly sold to pilgrims who come to visit the Jagannath temples.

The term "pata-chitra" is a compound of two sanskrit words. Pata means "cloth" or "canvas," or a cloth with a painting on it or the painting itself. The term is used in other areas of northeast India to mean a painting, typically a folk painting. The other part of the compound, chitra, means "painting" or "picture" or "illustration." Thus pata-chitra means a picture on cloth.

In the preparation of pata-chitras, first two pieces of cotton are sized (they may be as large as 4 by 2 meters). One sheet is spread on a smooth floor and a coat of tamarind gum (prepared from powder of tamarind seeds) is evenly applied over it. The second piece is placed over the first and pressed down upon it. Then a coat of tamarind gum is applied to this surface, which will eventually be the painting surface. The bonded cloths are left in the sun to dry. When dry, a paste of chalkstone powder and tamarind gum is applied to first one side, and when it has again dried, to the other side. Then both sides are alternately polished with stones. Polishing continues until the surfaces are very smooth.

The principal colors used in pata-chitra painting are white, black, red, yellow, blue, and ochre. Natural colors only were used up through the middle of the twentieth century. Since then synthetic colors have sometimes been used along with natural colors. The medium used to apply colors to the cloth is the gum or resin prepared from the kaintha fruit. Colors in their powdered form are blended with a little water to form a paste, then are mixed with the kaintha gum. The pigmented kaintha gum is diluted from time to time with water before the pigment is applied to the surface of the cloth. The brushes used to apply the paint are prepared from plant fibers or animal hair. In recent years, these brushes are sometimes purchased from supply stores.

Pata-chitras are typically painted in a regular series of steps. First, a border is drawn around the pata. Then the outlines of the figures are drawn in white pigment. Next the background between the border and the figure or figures is painted in a solid color, and the parts of the figures are painted in solid colors, using different colors for different areas, all done in bold rather than fine brushwork. Then, increasingly fine decorations are added to the picture.

After the painting is completed, it is finished with a protective coating. A common current practice is to apply a thick coat of lacquer with a cloth. After the lacquer dries, the pata-chitra is trimmed down to the decorative border.

Because of this formulaic procedure for painting patas, it is possible for teams of painters to work on a series of patas, each painter executing one of the steps in the series, then passing the pata on to the next painter. As the preceding description of pata-chitra technique suggests, individual pata-chitras do not differ a great deal in style. These paintings generally consist of outlined figures that are filled in with solid

color and are sometimes ornamented with finely drawn details. Shading of figures and techniques of perspective are not employed. Background space is filled in with stylized forms of trees or other natural objects. Motion is implied by the poses of figures. There is not a great deal of difference in the treatment of hands, noses, lips, etc., among the different painters. Differences are more apparent in the amount of care each painter devotes to the detailed ornamentation of the pictures.

Images are often based on dhyanas. Sanskrit religious texts commonly contain passages describing a deity in a way that allows the god or goddess to be clearly imagined in meditation. Such a description is called a dhyana (meaning "meditation"). Images are also often based on mythological scenes from one or another of the Hindu epics.



Krishna lifting Mt. Govardhan



Puri temple

It is possible to categorize the subject matter of pata-chitras into six broad categories: (1) pictures of the god Jagannath; (2) episodes from the Hindu epics; (3) themes from folklore; (4) ritual themes related to the worship of various gods and goddesses; (5) animal and bird themes; and (6) erotic themes. In the early years of the 21st century, pata-chitra themes have come to include landscapes and village scenes.



Jagannath triad (L to R: Balabhadra, Subhadra, Jagannath)



Landscape

The pata-chitra tradition was in some decline in the first half of the twentieth century. But a revival occurred in the 1950s when a western lady, who was staying in Orissa as part of a Quaker project to support village improvement in rural India, took a keen interest in this art form. Her efforts to promote the painting of the chitrakaras resulted in the increased exposure of their work not only in India, but also through exhibitions in Europe and America. As the new millennium begins, the tradition is still flourishing.

## References

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