

Traditions *in* Transition

 College of DuPage



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Cleve Carney Art Gallery
Thursday, Jan. 22 to Saturday, Feb. 21, 2015



Traditions in Transition

The traditional painters in this exhibition find themselves citizens of a changing world. While asked to contribute to the global artistic dialogue, they are grounded by an iconography gifted by heritage. Each painter strives to find a balance between the expectations and assumptions of the contemporary with the deep-rooted images known from childhood.

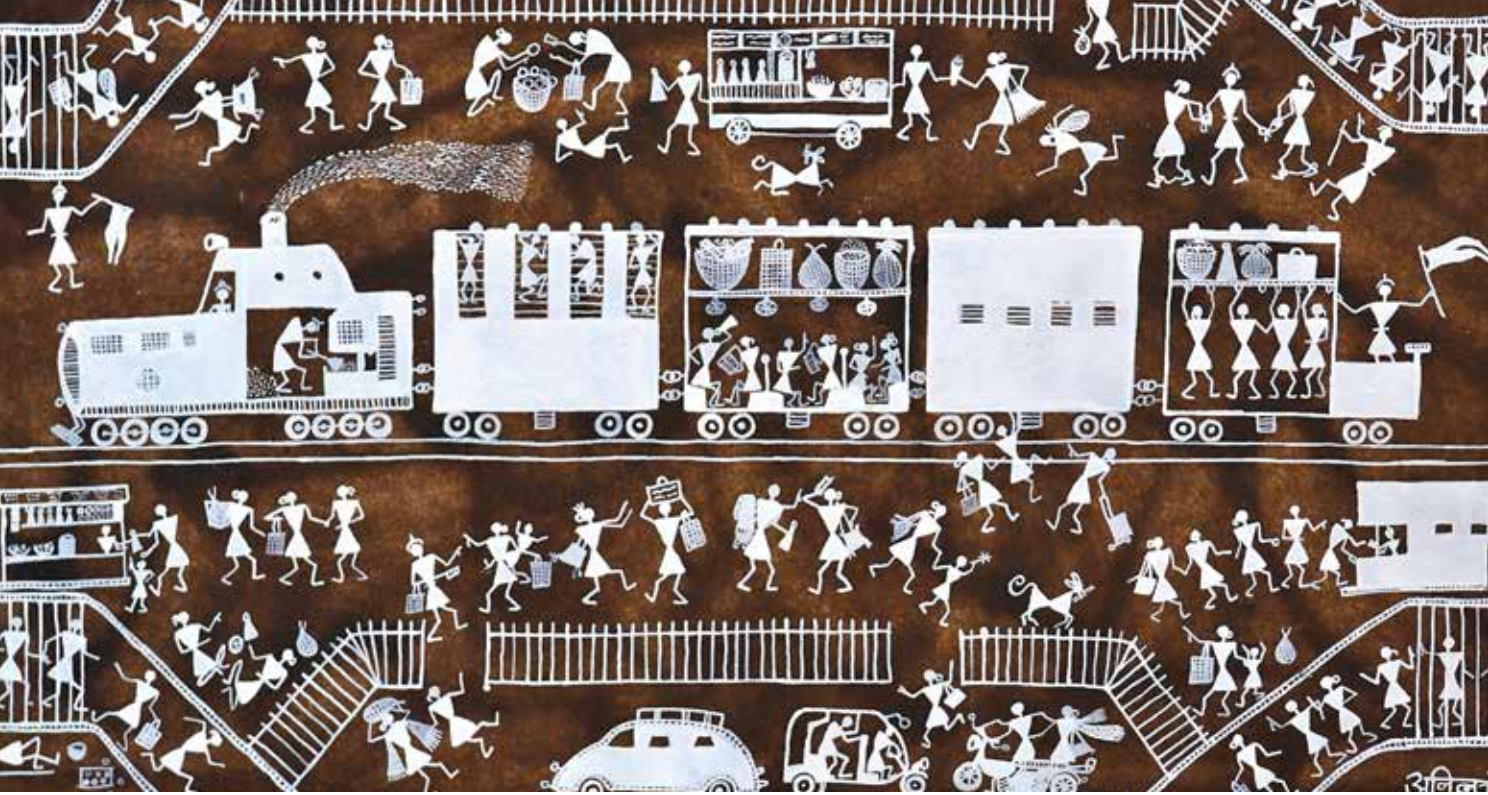
This is the first generation of Gond, Warli, Madhubani and Bengal Patachitra artists confronted by such a dichotomy. Historically, painters from their communities were often seen as “living history.” The art of these cultures was hardly known beyond their regional locations. With the exception of the Bengal Patachitra artists, who are scroll painters, Gond, Warli and Madhubani artists surfaced the walls of village homes. The images that define these places resonated with a religious focus. Although beautiful, this art transcended the decorative, reinforcing identity, ethnicity and a spiritual orientation.

The concept of making a painting on paper or canvas to exhibit in an urban public gallery is a relatively new idea for traditional Indian artists. In 1967 a devastating drought affected parts of northern India. Responding to the catastrophe, a government effort was

initiated encouraging women with the appropriate skills to try their hand painting on paper, which then could be sold, bringing a bit of income to their families. There was a particularly enthusiastic response to this project by the women of Madhubani. Many of these Madhubani artists were invited to exhibit their pictures internationally and represent India around the world.

This was one of the first times a traditional Indian utilitarian art form was reinvented and rebirthed for a new audience. Yet in most cases, the artists, who went from wall to paper and canvas, created pictures based on the work they had done since childhood. Without a doubt, many were innovative, but conventional and familiar images primarily themed their paintings. Rendering in this way was both a choice and what was expected of the artists. They felt passionately connected to the religious stories they illustrated and enthusiasts of their paintings saw it as their role to be stewards of culture.

The past decade has brought new expectations regarding artists working with an inherited vocabulary. No longer are they seen as exotic or vernacular. Today they find themselves part of the global conversation, often invited to take part in international exhibitions where their art is presented next to the most cutting-edge efforts. They are being



asked their point of view, not only about personal experiences, but also events taking place far beyond their home. Subjects such as politics, feminism, war and environmental degradation are now presented in the paintings of artists who never before expressed their opinions graphically on such matters. Finally, after years of second-class status in the art world, these individuals are appreciated for their wisdom and insights.

One recent event that included four Warli painters was *Made By ... Feito por Brasileiros*, curated by Marc Pottier in Sao Paulo, Brazil. Fifty artists from Brazil and 50 international artists were asked to transform an abandoned hospital in the center of the city. The building became a celebration of creativity and many visual perspectives were represented. Traveling from India, the Warli artists, who often refer to themselves as farmers, turned decrepit, crumbling rooms into

exhilarating spaces. Not only were they seen as every bit as compelling as the academically trained painters, their work amazed and inspired.

Brothers Montu and Gurupada Chitrakar, represented in this exhibition, are exceptional artists working with a traditional format while addressing current affairs. Their scroll paintings are organized in a series of consecutive frames. Like contemporary performance artists, the brothers sing the stories they illustrate. In the past, painters from their village would render traditional Hindu myths on scrolls and then travel to nearby villages to tell the stories. For the last 20 years, however, Montu and Gurupada have painted narratives about contemporary events.

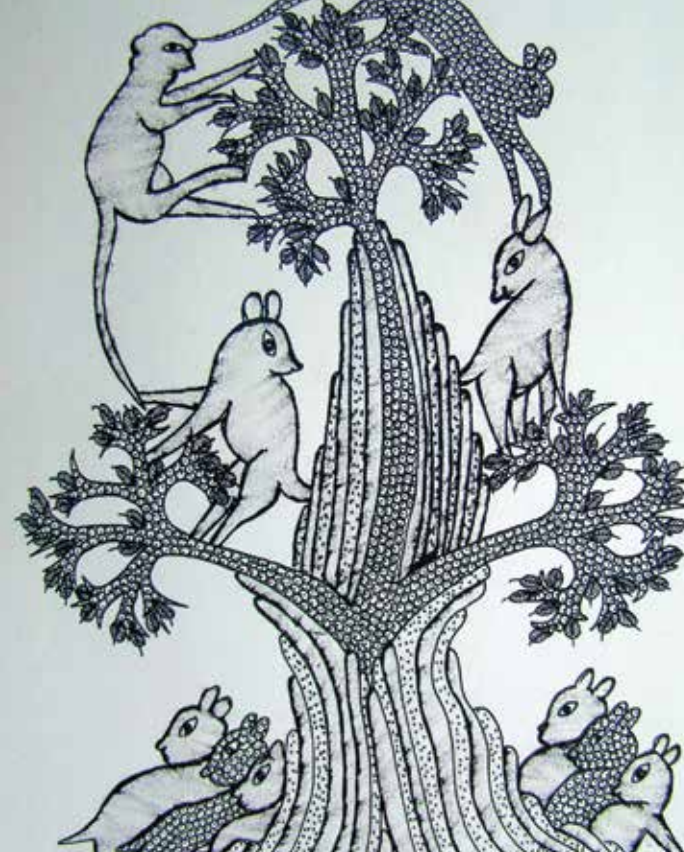
Both brothers have traveled far beyond their village in West Bengal; Gurupada to the United States and Montu to Australia.

Taking part in residencies, art fairs and museum exhibitions, they share their heritage as well as their worldview. In addition to crafting scrolls illustrating stories of the great Hindu myths, Montu and Gurupada have each painted works that express their thoughts on AIDS, September 11, terrorism, feminism, corruption and other complex international events.

Gond, Warli, Madhubani and Bengal Patachitra painters have a great deal to offer the art world. Their experiences bring an unexpected dimension to global art events and challenge the notion that to be relevant, one needs to be trained in an academic setting. With their paintings on canvas and paper, these traditional artists confirm that their observations and conclusions are worthy of consideration.

—**Scott Rothstein**

Scott Rothstein is an artist who writes primarily about self-taught art and artists informed by traditional culture. His own work can be seen in several American museums, including the Art Institute of Chicago; the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City; the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; and the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Rothstein has lived in Philadelphia, New York City, New Delhi and Tokyo. He is currently based in New Mexico.



Regional Styles

Gond paintings are alive with images drawn from the ancestral songs and oral traditions passed down by the Pardhans or poets of the community mainly found in the state of Madhya Pradesh and its surrounding areas. They are the largest Adivasi (tribal) community in India and are Dravidians whose origin can be traced to the pre-Aryan era. Their painting techniques, dense but intricate, are culled from other arts: They draw on the delicate stitch-lines of kantha embroidery from eastern Bihar and Bengal, on the chain-stitch of the aari tradition from surrounding states, and most importantly from decorative tattoo art and patterns adorning their bodies. The belief that seeing good images brings good fortune and luck is often a conversation in their art.

Madhubani, which literally translates into 'Forest of Honey,' is a small village in northern Bihar. Religion plays an important role in the lifestyle and tradition of the people reflected in their paintings of Hindu mythology. The majority of Madhubani paintings are by women and express their desire to please the gods and develop their own spirituality. The contemporary art of Madhubani painting was born in the early 1960s, following the terrible famine in Bihar. The All India Handicraft Board in Delhi recognized the commercial potential of this folk art and urged the villagers to paint on handmade paper to supplement their meager income and alleviate poverty. Today, Madhubani art has come a long way. The paintings have evolved into more complex forms depicting narratives that show great vitality and growth.

The **Warlis** are a tribal community, descendants of Neolithic hunter-gatherers who now live in the coastal areas of western India, mainly in the state of Gujarat and Maharashtra. Warli ritual paintings are storyboard-like narratives with geometrical figurations. Traditionally, the married women of the village paint symbolic religious images on the walls of their homes. Their understanding of the delicate balance of the universe with one and each is carefully evident in these paintings. Warli artists today have taken the conversation ahead by recognizing the social and industrial change that the community is witnessing and experiencing and are not afraid to experiment. Contemporary issues like female education and female feticide often show up along with cars, planes and ships, but always under the watchful presence of spiritual gods and goddesses.

Bengal Patachitra is one of the few genuine narrative pictorial folk arts that has made it down to the present time. This ancient tradition features single image paintings or long vertical multi-paneled scrolls known as 'pata' (paintings) or 'jorana patas' (scroll paintings). The 'chitrakars' (artists) are performers who wander from village to village, singing songs and showing the accompanying art narration on long scrolls of paper. The scrolls are done with sheets of paper sewn together and sometimes stuck on canvas or old saris. The themes are inspired by the sacred texts and also by contemporary socio-political subjects.



Curator's Notes

Since antiquity, India has produced a rich reservoir of tribal art and folk art established by the values and traditions of the community they represent. Much of the art is composed of visual narratives immersed in ritual, belief and social customs. Religious text, oral histories and poetry have been a great source of inspiration and creative outlet for artists throughout Indian history recognizable by the stylized figures, flat renderings and repetitive motifs. These artistic styles are defined by the communities the artists belong: Madhubani, Gond, Warli and Bengal Patachitra. These artists learn skills and knowledge, both consciously and subconsciously, through cultural ceremonies and by simply living in the particular milieu in which the art form is practiced through community affiliation—passed from one generation to the other and recounted in the artists' creativity and imagination.

The artists in *Traditions in Transition* have made a conscious effort to shift the parameters of the expected norms of India's traditional regional art to a more unique, individualistic contemporary creative process—embracing attitudes different from previous generations. While working under the constraints of tradition, these artists produce works that echo new ideas and standards in four distinct styles from different parts of India. Although different in style and subject matter, all of these artists make reference to history, religious beliefs and the social customs of their communities.

While the indigenous art traditions took a beating, the advancement of academic arts moved confidently ahead, showing Western influences and ideas in composition, perspective and realism to illustrate Indian themes. However, from pre-independence (1920) to 1985, modern art of India continued to be influenced by traditional ideology.

This exhibition explores the works of India's self-taught artists alongside academically trained artists. The self-taught artists consciously opted to create works that do not mechanically reproduce the inherited idiom and imagery from the past, but reflect their personal subjectivities and contemporary predicaments. The academically trained artists express India's distinct spiritual qualities highlighting the multifaceted pictorial idiom reflecting Indian culture. In both camps they embrace new attitudes different from generations before them.

By interweaving these two groups along with the different styles derived from their tribal regions, we begin to see similarities in regard to subject matter and issues of our time, including the role of women, questions related to globalization and urbanization, and the relationship of Western ideas of modernity to artistic and societal norms in other cultures.

—**Manvee Vaid**

Manvee Vaid is a collector of Indian tribal and folk art, curator and owner of an online gallery, www.DeccanFootprints.com.



Images

Cover

Amrita Jha, *Red Carpet*, 2014, ink and acrylic on paper, 22" x 30" (Madhubani art)

Inside cover

Mangru Uike, *Deer*, 2010, ink on paper, 11" x 14" (Gond art)

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Durga Bai, *Rescue*, 2009, acrylic on canvas, 16" x 30" (Gond art)

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Anil Vangad, *Platform*, detail, 2014, cow dung and water based color on cotton, 13.5" x 29" (Warli art)

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Mantu Chitrakar, *Kalighat Cats*, detail, 2013, natural colors on paper, 11" x 14" (Bengal pat)

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Manoj Tekam, *Deer*, detail, 2014, acrylic on canvas, 31" x 19" (Gond art)

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Suresh Durve, *Monkey on a Tree*, detail, 2011, ink on paper, 10" x 14" (Gond art)

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Anil Vangad, *Tree of Life*, detail, 2012, charcoal and gouache on cotton cloth, 20" x 32" (Warli art)

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Mantu Chitrakar, *Tiger*, detail, 2013, natural colors on paper, 21.5" x 13.5" (Bengal pat)

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Anil Vangad, *Respect Women*, 2014, cow dung and water based color on cotton, 35" x 21" (Warli art)

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Bhua Devi, *Snake on a Peepal Tree*, 2006, acrylic on paper, 22" x 8" (Madhubani art)

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Bhua Devi, *Coupling Snakes*, 2006, acrylic on paper, 22" x 8" (Madhubani art)

Inside back cover

Gurupada Chitrakar, *Komolo Kamini*, detail, 2013, natural colors on paper, 22" x 28" (Bengal pat)



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Contemporary Art of India
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The Cleve Carney Art Gallery at College of DuPage would like to sincerely thank Manvee Vaid, our guest curator, for her collaboration in pulling together this publication and exhibition. The gallery also thanks the writer, Scott Rothstein, for his contribution, Tracey Ford (COD adjunct) for her generous behind-the-scenes support, and Suzanne Cahill, owner of Maison Suzanne Gallery in Westmont, IL, for loaning a Kantha quilted chair for this exhibition.

Barbara Wiesen
Director and Curator
Cleve Carney Art Gallery



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