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Published by Anonymous on Jan. 01, 2008

July/August/September, 2007

Krishna's Painters

Meet India's masterful minions of beatific fine art

Desmond Lazaro, Goa

The pichhvai painting tradition is intimately connected with the Pushti Marg sect of Vaisnavism and the small temple town of Nathdwara in southern Rajasthan, a site central to the sect's devotional practices. There Lord Krishna is worshiped in His child form as Sri Nathji by thousands of devotees each day.

Pichhvai means "at the back " in Hindi and names the large cloth paintings that hang behind Sri Nathji for the worship. Often several meters in height and length, these are made with the exacting techniques of Indian miniature painting, passed on from father to son and master to apprentice over the last several hundred years.

I am myself a Pichhvai and miniature painter, having apprenticed for over twelve years to the Jaipur Master Banu Ved Pal Sharma. With his blessings, I wrote a book, *Methods, Materials and Symbolism in the Pichhvai Painting Tradition of Rajasthan*, documenting how these magnificent images are made. The book illustrated many of the craft secrets, from pigment preparation to the differing techniques of painting and the inherent symbolism that all the techniques involve. The book was an attempt to preserve the traditional skills and knowledge of my craft, which in recent times has gradually eroded as the social fabric of modern India is stretched beyond recognition.

My book, no doubt, would inform future generations of this divine tradition, but no one would learn to paint Pichhvai from it, nor would it do much to help the struggling artists. I decided then to take a more activist approach, and in 2006 founded the Traditional Arts Trust in New Delhi, a charity that would support Pichhvai and miniature painters and prevent further erosion of this knowledge base. Shri Rajeev Sethi--Chairman of the Asian Heritage Foundation, godfather and friend to many traditional artists--kindly offered to help. He suggested creating an exhibition of newly commissioned Pichhvai paintings in a contemporary style and selected older paintings in traditional style to document the state and potential of the craft. With funding from the Poddar Foundation, a dozen Pichhvai painting studios were selected and art commissioned from each.

In late 2006, I visited these studios, all located in three towns in Rajasthan: Nathdwara, Bhilwara and Udaipur, where the most renowned Pichhvai artists continue to live and work. We decided to commission contemporary paintings rather than the traditional subjects. The reason was to give the artists the chance to innovate, a blank canvas so to speak, and challenge the misconception that they cannot make new and interesting works--stagnation often means neglect rather than a lack of ability.

It is true that the current artistic community ranges from the sincere and dedicated practitioner to the commercial "hack " who produces for the tourist trade, with various categories in between. However, there are those who can be considered authentic in their spiritual, cultural, social and livelihood attainments. They tend to be scattered, isolated families who have managed to practice their craft under enormous social and economic pressure.

Their world is held together by the sutra (literally, thread) of the guru-shishya parampara--the traditional system of passing on skills and knowledge through oral rather than written means, from one generation to the next, master to pupil, often father to son or uncle to nephew. Each has adapted and transmitted their craft in a unique way, challenging our notions of modernity and offering a glimpse of the guru-shishya system in today's India.

My photographer friend, Thomas Kelly, whose work appears frequently in Hinduism Today, suggested the magazine might like to report on Pichhvai and on our efforts to transition the craft into modern times. The suggestion was received by the editors with enthusiasm and in April, 2007, Thomas and I spent a week together

visiting, interviewing and photographing the artists and their work. I was in particular checking up on their progress with the commissioned pieces, but wanted also to document their normal work, understand their economic conditions and the state of transference of the art from the current generation to the next.

The photographs accompanying this article include most of the dozen artists commissioned for the exhibition and are both of their commissioned piece in a contemporary style and of other examples produced by their studios, giving a good indication of the wide range of subjects covered in Pichhvai. Our narration, which begins here, focuses on four families who until recently would have remained anonymous: Revashankar Sharma, Lalit and Kapil Sharma, Ramesh and Daivendra Jangir and Badrilal Chitrakala Soni. Their stories show us how a traditional craft comes to terms with the contemporary world and how the guru-shishya path prevails.

The Udaipur artists

We started with the busy tourist city of Udaipur, forty-two kilometers south of Nathdwara. It was the 16th century capital of Mewar and is famed for its Lake Palace. I arrive at the house of Revashankar Sharma just as the sun is setting. As ever, he comes to greet us with that wonderful smile of his, though even this cannot hide his fragile state of health. For the exhibition, we commissioned him to do a series of drawings. He is unable to work at the Pichhvai scale--which means pasting the cloth to the floor or board and working on hand and knees for hours at a stretch. But from him we get a glimpse into the artist's world.

The first two ink-on-paper drawings he shows me, entitled Sanjhi (sunset) and Morkuti (peacock dance), are exquisite. He has a deft touch, first with pencil and then over the top with a brush. The hand may be fragile but the line is assured.

The Revashankar family has wielded the brush for a long time. Ghasiram, 1869-1931, one of the most renowned artist of the Pichhvai tradition, is the granduncle. The Pichhvai painters of Nathdwara tradition belong to two brahmin castes, Jangir and Adi Gaur. Ghasiram was the first Jangir to be appointed head of painting for the Nathdwara Temple.

My heart leaps when he brings out Ghasiram's original sketchbook. They are full of extraordinary drawings. Revashankar explains that Ghasiram's forte was drawing from memory rather than direct observation. It is typical of traditional practice, which aims to know what something is, as well as how it looks. He flips through the pages of the book to illustrate. Each is packed with animals--elephants, tigers, monkeys and horses--all rendered with a simple unbroken line.

The line, he explains, is the key to the craft. "We use a unique brush made from squirrel's hair, whose tufts on the tail--from which the brushes are made--naturally grow to a point, so all the hairs converge at the tip. This allows the artist to move it in any direction and retain an even line." To demonstrate, he takes my notebook and makes two drawings of a horse's head. The first--a Western method--is made of ropey lines that eventually make up the contour of the head. The second, a single line, renders the head in one swift stroke (see photograph above). His point is that in the first the ropey lines "find " the head and in the second there is no finding to be done, the artist knows--from memory--where the contours lie.

As I leave, I am reminded of the old craftsman saying: hathi, haath aur ghoda, "elephant, hand and horse." Only a master can draw each freehand. The elephant gives flow of the line, the horse the strength within the line, and through the hand, the sensitivity that is a line.

The following morning I meet Lalit Prasad Sharma. He lives not far from Revashankar, closer to the Lake Palace, in a modern suburban house. His house is a work in progress, as consecutive generations add a room here, an extension there, creating an architectural jigsaw puzzle. Lalit's addition is the second floor, complete with his large, well-lit, custom-built studio. The surroundings tell that life has been good, for he is both a Pichhvai painter and a recognized contemporary artist who has managed to transverse the illusory line that divides the two.

Lalit is originally from the Jangir caste of Nathdwara. He can trace his lineage back--painting-by-painting--for more than five generations. His great-great grandfather, Chatarbhuji, painted the Bankiyaji Ka Devara frescos in Sanvar, as well as the Moti Mahal in Nathdwara (ca 1845-78). Great-grandfather Narayanji (1860-1933) made stock-in-trade iconic miniature and Pichhvai paintings in the Nathdwara style. Grandfather Bhuralal is noted for his work at Jhalawar--near present-day Kota--in the court of Maharaj Rana Bhavani Singh around 1920.

Lalit's father, Ghanashyam (1924-2002) broke with Nathdwara traditions both by teaching at Udaipur College and with his sensitive, European-style watercolors of local people. Lalit continues this inherited penchant for experimentation, a trait reflected in his studio.

The room is divided into two sections--couch, television and DVD player on one side and his workspace on the other. Rows of tidy filing cabinets line the walls, each shackled with untidy books grappling for air, hemming in his workspace, leaving just enough room to reach for that quick reference. On any visit, Lalit inevitably rummages through this lost ark of papers for some painting, drawing or other, which he never quite finds. His charm is that he looks nevertheless.

The walls are no better. They are festooned with paintings, mainly large oil canvases in various states of completion. He is an artist who likes to live with his work. Drawings, prints, miniature paintings and abstract designs cover every inch of wall. The room resonates in a cacophony of images, "things " that draw--and feed--his attention for days, nights, even weeks, before and after the main event--painting.

His painting straddles the two different styles and techniques, Pichhvai on cloth and oil on canvas. He began to experiment early in his career, "After completing my graduation with a master's degree in drawing and painting from Udaipur College, I worked as a miniaturist, on cloth and paper with natural pigments. I moved to this new medium of canvas and oil paint." Such a move between genres often produces a pastiche, a soulless imitation. Lalit avoids this pitfall by anchoring his oil technique to his traditional training. He renders trees, foliage, architecture and figures in exactly the same manner as he would in a Pichhvai. Only the medium--oil paint--changes.

The challenge presented to him with our commissioned piece for the exhibition was going back to the Pichhvai technique with his contemporary imagery. The result is a massive (nine-foot by six-foot) landscape with a temple placed at the center (see photo, page 23). The symmetrical composition and flat color field are typical of the miniature sensibility and have become a hallmark of his work.

Pigments and processes

I asked Lalit what the difference is for him between oil and canvas and Pichhvai painting. He said that it was one of color. Oil color is very bright. Traditional color, by which these artists mean pigment or stone color, is very soft.

Pigment colors are prepared by hand with a pestle and mortar, worlds away from squeezing a tube. The raw mineral stone is placed inside the mortar and crushed until powder forms. After each day's grinding, the mortar is filled with clean water, the color remains as particles in suspension--floating in the water, which is drained into a separate container. The residual sediment, which stays at the bottom of the mortar, is thrown away. A pigment color could take up to one month to prepare, grinding by hand for long hours. It is a time of contemplation for the artist, when the composition, geometry, drawing, the application of colors and the final details are all planned out.

Lalit pulls out his collection of traditional colors, many of which were given to him by his father, Ghanashyam. The guru-shishya transmission is not only about the passing of skills and knowledge, but also materials, which are prized possessions. They are as much a family secret as the actual skills themselves, especially today, when the complex technology of making colors has virtually disappeared. Traditionally, there are four-principle pigment sources: mineral, earths, alchemical and organic.

Minerals are mainly semiprecious stones such as malachite (a bright green) and lapis lazuli (bright blue) that are extracted from the earth. "Earths " are surface deposits, known as ferruginous colors, These are iron oxides, for example ramraj, yellow ochre. They are the earliest form of color, dating back to the Stone Age cave paintings. Alchemical colors are processed by requiring some kind of chemical reaction. One alchemical color is derived from verdigris, which is the bluish-green patina formed on copper or bronze as it tarnishes. "Indian yellow " is another alchemical color, produced by very different method which begins with feeding a cow mango leaves and collecting the urine, which is a natural alkali. It is precipitated into a pigment with a certain type of flower--the artisans consider it a sacred gift from the cow. Organic colors are made from plant sources, such as indigo, a dark blue dye obtained from the indigo plant; or from insects, such as red lac; or from animals. The chemistry of these pigments is extremely complex. They are stored dry until mixed with gum arabic for application.

After they are applied, these colors are burnished with an agate stone. This pushes

the pigment into the paper or cloth, making it flat and shiny. The shinier the surface, the more light it will reflect and therefore appear--as Lalit says-- "softer." The whole method sets up this process, called "stone color, " not after the origin of the pigment, but the burnishing stone. After the cloth is pasted to a board and the under drawing is rendered in ink--as illustrated with Shyam Sharma drawings on page 26--the colors are applied in blocks, using the ink line as a guide. The burnishing action actually heats the colors. For miniatures, the paper is placed face down on a marble slab and rubbed on the back. But for the large Pichhvai, where the cloth is pasted or starched to a marble floor, grease-proof paper is placed over the top to protect the image from being scratched. Either way, the colors fuse at the edge forming an unbroken surface. This makes the brush move freely over the painting allowing whispers of paint to be seen, so the artist is able to make extremely fine transitions of tone and line.

Sadly today, few artists use mineral color. The majority use synthetic poster or powder color often manufactured in Calcutta, which is one of the reasons for the decline in the craft. The difference between synthetic and mineral color is profound. Synthetic colors separate the method from the material, whereas with mineral colors the method is born of the material. Synthetic colors produce synthetic paintings, which appear dull and lifeless. Mineral colors are by nature luminous. They are the physical embodiment of light, symbolic of the inner, spiritual dimension of the craft.

Enter the digital age

Kapil, Lalit's son, 28, wears the same air of confidence and the look of yesterday as his father, although he is a product of today's India. Versed in miniature and Pichhvai painting--the family business--he rejected a traditional apprenticeship. He instead opted to study graphic design at the National Institute of Design in Ahmedabad. He now lives in Mumbai where he concentrates on animation and spends much time shuttling back and forth to Udaipur. Whenever I visit Lalit, Kapil is usually in the background. Unlike the typical guru-shishya family, where respect is a form of distance, these two are more like friends, shadowing each other's lives. If Lalit roots through his bookshelf to find something, you can be sure Kapil will actually find it; they are a duo.

I had talked to them about working on a piece together when the idea of a digital Pichhvai came up. We settled on a concept called Varsha, the name given to the

rainy season Pichhvai that is hung in the Nathdwara temple during monsoon. Kapil's computerized installation work consists of a large square box with viewing holes on all four sides. The viewer then sees this continuous animated sequences made from up of motifs from Nathdwara painting, clouds, cows, trees, birds, etc, all of which emerge from a flashing bindu (the symbol of unity or wholeness), flower, bloom and then are reabsorbed back into the bindu at the end of the sequence. Over the top, a sound recording plays bhajans, devotional songs, from the haveli.

The work is at an early stage (see photo p. 23), but he applies the same rules his father did when he moved from Pichhvai to oil and canvas. The technology changes, but the motifs, images and meanings remain, rekindled by a new generation, as did his forefathers each in their turn: Chatarbhuj, Narayanji, Bhuralal and Ghanashyam.

Nathdwara--temple town

Nathdwara is about forty minutes by car from Udaipur, and we take care to arrive in time for the morning darshan at Krishna's temple. It is a gentle and spiritual scrimmage as you prod and poke through the thicket of bodies in Nij Mandir, Shri Nathji's inner sanctum. It is a small wonder that no one gets hurt, considering the number of pilgrims that pour through this rectangular room--just twenty-five feet in length and fifteen feet across. This is the spiritual source for all Pichhvai painters. It is not a temple, but a haveli, a traditional house arranged around a courtyard that is the home of the child Krishna, built on a child's scale.

I enter Nij Mandir from Rattan Chowk, the Gem Court. The shrine and Shri Nathji appear on my right side, flanked by rows of open doors that run the length of the room acting as entrance and exit, allowing the flood of devotees, myself included, to pass by quickly. Each has the same fervent look in their eyes, as we collectively huddle, jostle and fight to gain a foothold. The room is a series of sloped wooden viewing platforms, stepped at intervals like a cinema hall with chrome-plated barriers dividing women (at the front) and men (at the back).

The shrine itself is closeted by two thick silver doors, richly carved with the life stories of Krishna. They slowly open, and I spot a sindur-colored curtain that veils Shri Nathji. There is total silence as the curtain is parted by the priests, then the whole Mandir lets out a deafening cry of "Jai Krishna " as Shri Nathji comes into

view. It is 9:30am and this is shringara, the second darshan of the day. The sheer beauty of the scene transfixes me. Shri Nathji is resplendently dressed in flowing yellow gherdara jama vagha (full coat) and pagh (cap) topped with morchandrika (peacock plumage). Today is Ramnavami, birthday of Lord Rama, so the Deity is dressed specially for the occasion. Hands stretch as each devotee bathes in the smoking arati, flame offering, that is wafted over our heads. The noise subsides, giving way to prayer, whispers of supplication, personal mantras as the crowd merges into a shared sense of the Divine.

The Pichhvai behind Shri Nathji for this darshan is unusual in that it consists of small miniature paintings that run across the cloth in a storyboard recalling Ram's birth. Generally, Pichhvais fall into three broad categories: those made for festival days, like the one on display; those made for specific seasons, monsoon, summer and winter; and those that express general themes and are not necessarily bound by convention. Often the center of the Pichhvai is left blank, as this area is obscured by the Deity, Shri Nathji, a four-foot, three-inch blue-black relief stone carving in front.

According to Pushtimarg belief, Shri Nathji is a living child, a Svarupa, not a murti or consecrated statue into which the Deity is invoked temporarily through worship, but a living incarnation of the child Krishna. Like any child, He has many needs that must be attended, enshrined within the eight darshans of the day. Each one--mangala, shringara, gwala, rajabhoga, utthapan, bhog, sandhaya arti and shayana--sees Shri Nathji in the ritualized bathing, dressing, eating, in the fields with the grazing cows, bringing the cows back at dusk, and going to bed. Each and every event is depicted as it happens, so that the devotee is able to take part.

Pushtimarg history

Shri Nathji's original home was Mount Govardhan, near Mathura, in Uttar Pradesh. Vallabhacharya, the founder of the Pushtimarg sect, discovered Shri Nathji, according to the Chaurasi Vaishnavana Ki Varti, a history of the sect, in the fifteenth century. It was not until 1670 that it was moved to Nathdwara--partly due to religious persecution and partly to find new patronage. Lore has it that the bullock cart that was carrying the Deity became embedded in mud at Sinhad, near Nathdwara. This was taken as an auspicious sign, and in 1672 a Mandir was constructed.

Of Vallabhacharya's seven sons, Vithalnath, his second, was drawn to the vernacular arts of poetry, music and--of course--painting. He established the elaborate ritual worship of Shri Nathji and encouraged what would become the Pichhvai art form. It borrowed from earlier cloth painting traditions, such as Phadchitra, a form of story painting, and Patachitra, canvas cloth painting, which depicted tales from the epic poem Mahabharata. Pichhvai artists took these crude folk styles and introduced the refinements of miniature painting. At this time the imperial Moghul courts were breaking up, and the artists formerly in their employ sought refuge in the smaller principalities. They adapted their work to the needs of the new-found bhakti movement of devotional Hinduism, of which Nathdwara became a center, and thus Pichhvai art was born.

The great historian of Indian art, A.K. Coomaraswamy called the realm of Indian miniatures, "a magic world, where all men are heroic, all women are beautiful and passionate and shy, beast both wild and tame are the friends of men and trees and flowers of conscious of the footsteps of the bridegroom as he passes by. This magic world is not unreal or fanciful, but a world of imagination and eternity, visible to all who do not refuse to see with the transfiguring eye of love."

Temple issues today

The Nathdwara temple is a major institution, employing some 500 priests and 450 administrative staff serving the needs of ten to fifteen thousand pilgrims on an average day, and up to 400,000 on festival days. Nathdwara is renowned as one of the wealthiest Krishna sects in north India. Devotees live all over the world, in Uganda, Nairobi, Los Angeles, New Jersey, Dubai, Muscat and London.

A major renovation now underway has provoked controversy among this community of devotees, and the Pichhvai artists themselves. Many believe that the construction plans by the temple board are insensitive to the original haveli design. Its architecture was specifically made at a small scale, proportionally with the size of the Deity, a child. For example, the roads narrow to pathways as devotees enter the haveli on foot. The renovation includes a huge administration building at odds with this scale.

To better cope with the ever-increasing number of devotees, the plan will widen the

existing streets. Even this, just one part of the ambitious project, has caused problems. Construction crews have already demolished old buildings which housed irreplaceable wall frescos. The prominent artist, Amit Ambalal, author of Krishna as Shri Nathaji, aired his concerns in the national press, as did the National Museum in Delhi and many of Nathdwara's senior artists, who wanted more care to be taken with such delicate works by either removing them before demolition or just letting them be.

However, some of the younger generation of artists in Nathdwara see things in a different light. They see an opportunity to clean up the town, install a modern sewage system, create better facilities for the pilgrims all of which--hopefully--will skate more opportunities for them. Dinesh Sharma, 27, son of prominent artists Ghyansham Sharma, told me, "Almost 90% of the people agree to the changes. No doubt the controversy will rage. Perhaps a review is called for, conducted in collaboration with, but independent of, the temple board who presently direct the project."

The Jangir family

We wander through the narrow lanes of Nathdwara seeking out Ramaischand Jangir's house, in Niya, on the "street of painters." He greets us at the door with a hearty smile, dressed in formal attire--white shirt and black trousers--which he immediately discards when he reaches his studio at the top of the house. Getting there through the narrow passageway and the two sets of steep stairs takes your breath away, so by the time you eject your shoes outside his studio, the sun has gripped your throat, and you gulp the offered water eagerly.

It is a tiny studio, no more than ten feet square, just enough to fit Ramaischand, his son Daivendra and his nephew Satish, the master and his two apprentices (see photo page 29). The three work here day and night, and a brief glance lets you know that they work very hard. Ramaischand earns his bread and butter in the local Nathdwara market, selling in the shops that line the streets near the Haveli. In these, pilgrims can buy all manner of Nathdwara curios, objects to adorn the family shrine back home, Deities, sacred paintings, silverwork, brocades--the list is endless. For the right price, one can buy a "full kit " for the perfect home shrine. Wood replicas of Shri Nathji painted to look like stone are extremely popular with the pilgrims.

At the end of the day, when the Haveli is closed and Shri Nathji is asleep, you see countless shopkeepers tallying up the day's take with ledgers and dexterous fingers. Among them are the art shops where the majority of Shri Nathji paintings are sold. Pichhvai's are rarely displayed, as the current demand is for paintings of Shri Nathji. They come in every conceivable size, from the miniscule to the enormous. It is here where Ramaischand has to make a living.

To one side of the studio, the paintings of Shri Nathji are stacked one on top of the other against a crumbling wall. On the other side an airbrush machine sits ready for action, which lets you know this is a commercial studio, as it is used to quickly fill in the background areas of paintings. Before, this would have been rendered by hand, taking many days. Now it is done in a matter of minutes. Few artists who work in the local market follow the traditional methods. They take far too long and, at the end of the day, the pilgrims who buy these paintings do not know the difference. Nor do the shopkeepers care, as long as the supply of cheap paintings is met, quality is a secondary matter.

As Ramaischand changes clothes to work pants and the banyan vest typical of a painter, he smiles wilyly, for things were not always this way. He is the cousin of Lalit Prasad Sharma. Narayanji was their great grandfather. He learned painting from his father Dvarkadas, a renowned Nathdwara painter, at the age of nine. His was a traditional apprenticeship, much like the one that he has given to his son and nephew.

"We learn sketching first," he says, reaching for the copy board, a small, white painted piece of wood with a handle at one end. One side is covered in sketches--self-portraits, profiles of gopis, Nandi the bull, the head of a horse; the other side with Ganesha and various tiger sketches. "Craftsmen hardly ever keep sketchbooks," he explains. "This wooden block is the traditional paper. When it is full, another coat of white is applied. Ganesha, remover of obstacles, is the first thing we learned to paint."

Ramaischand and Daivendra have a traditional relationship. The distance between father and son is palpable. Both son Daivendra and nephew Satish remain in the background, speaking only when asked. Daivendra has had no formal schooling. His apprenticeship started and will end at home. His goal is to emulate his father's and grandfathers' work through copying. Daivendra is not free to experiment with differing media and materials, as is Lalit. He is tied to the market that dictates what

and how he paints.

To Ramaischand, like many traditional artists, innovation does not mean creating something anew each time. Take the drawing of a circle, the first thing a craftsman learns to draw. It is made with one action, in the manner of Revashankar drawing a horse's head. To do this the hand must remain steady and the breath even; it is both a meditation and a test of control. The idea is not to reinvent the circle, which, is by definition perfect. Rather it is to know and understand the nature of a circle, a description of perfection. The trick is to emulate perfection as much as possible so that it becomes instilled in the hand and heart.

Within the guru-shishya system, the copying of models, often the work of one's father, is essential part of the craft. Without such a guide, how can the apprentice learn and know what perfection is? Lessons are unplanned and simple. Sit and watch patiently for hours, days, weeks, even years, then perform the same task. The initial tasks begin with color, how to prepare, how to apply, how to burnish, then--after a year or so--the apprentice will move on to drawing and finally painting. Innovation is a long-term affair realized after many years of training , a journey that could take decades.

Ramaischand's commissioned exhibition painting had to work within these limitations. Therefore, his choice to reproduce one of his father's works was both homage and a test. The initial groundwork was done by Daivendra, with Ramaischand occasionally instructing. The first sketch, based on his grandfather's Morkuti (peacock) painting, was a loose drawing with a wash of color in the top corner, indicating how the final painting will look. It was simple and honest, so I encouraged him to reproduce it as a Pichhvai (six by nine feet), to see if it could transfer at scale. The final piece is a stark, massive ink drawing, a Pichhvai suspended, frozen mid-flow, like the first part of a sequence. With this in mind, I asked if he could make another Pichhvai same scale, same image--only this time completely finished. The two could then hang together, as one painting, a positive and negative, showing both work in progress and final execution. Ramaischand agreed, although he looked slightly bemused by the idea of making two paintings being seen as one.

Commissioning a contemporary painting is an awkward affair at best; with a traditional artist it is doubly so. Ramaischand struggled with the concept; his puzzled expression told it all. His willingness to commit and do the work to the best

of his ability is more for his son's sake. He knows their predicament. They are stuck in a rigid system, a market that does little to encourage new work. So he passes the test onto his son, knowing that Daivendra needs the exposure. It is also a lesson, which Ramaischand, as guru, must facilitate. Just as the Haveli is changing, so will the demand for painting. One day it is airbrush paintings of Shri Nathji, the next, full-scale Pichhvais. Daivendra, if he is to continue into the future, must learn to adapt his skill to the task.

Bhilwara's master

We move on to Bhilwara, about 70 miles northeast of Nathdwara. In a ritual exchange each time I visit, Badrilal Chitrakala Soni greets me at the door of his beautifully gardened house with a bear hug. Master artists seldom show emotion, never mind outright enthusiasm. However, with Badrilal, the most senior artist of the Pichhvai tradition and miniature painting tradition in India, there is little ceremony and no pomp. Instead, you get a good, down-to-earth hug. He is a wonderful human being. Even at eighty-seven, he retains a commanding presence and an air of mischief, so the jokes fly thick and fast. "He is in good spirits," says Manish, his grandson. The Pichhvai commissioned for the exhibition seems to have given him a new lease of life--he is working again. Not that he has not worked enough already. His life is packed, a self-taught artist that has created the only living dynasty of painters in recent times. Mention the craft in Bhilwara and there is only one family, the Soni's, comprised of Badrilal's five sons: Om Prakash, Gyam Prakash (Manish's late father), Sharad, Shiv, Trilok and Badrilal's nephew, Dinesh.

I spent time with each in the last year as Dinesh and Sharad were given commissions, although the jewel in the family crown is Manish. The slim, elegant grandson, whose speech is as measured as his actions, epitomizes the guru-shishya system. Though he learned the craft, he was not intending to make it a career. "But," he states, "when my father passed away, I had to support my family. It also gave me spirit." Over the last four years, he has concentrated on painting under the watchful gaze of his grandfather. Family and duty are virtues so deeply ingrained in Manish, it is difficult to know where they stop and the young man starts. The result is a heady mix of guarded self-confidence--an intellectual with a craftsman's hand, who wields the brush like a sword. He is an accomplished artist at the age of 24, having travelled and exhibited in Europe at Switzerland's Reitberg Museum, no less.

Manish prefers, however, to remain at his grandfather's side. Badrilal is a walking university. He knows more about the craft than any other living artist. Eberhard Fischer, director of the Reitberg Museum, recently acknowledged Badrilal and my own teacher, Bannu Ved Pal Sharma of Jaipur, as the two most important miniature and Pichhvai painters in the last fifty years.

Destiny has always had an eye on Badrilal. He was named after Badrinath, the sacred pilgrimage destination above Rishikesh. His mother, Puribhen had conceived many times, but each infant had died at childbirth. When she was pregnant with Badrilal in 1919, his father, Rangilal, went on pilgrimage to Badrinath, where he vowed not to sleep in a bed, not cut his hair, to never take sugar, etc., until the child was born and his eyes would once more see the sacred Badrinath. He returned home, kept his vows and was blessed with the birth of Badrilal. Eleven years later and with very long hair, he finally returned to Badrinath to complete his vow.

Rangila was not a painter, and Badrilal began life as an antiques dealer in Bhilwara, coming to painting through an unlikely path. At the time, post India's Independence, portrait artists were common in Bhilwara, but there were few miniature painters. In the 1950s, the erstwhile rulers of the local kingdoms, now minus their lands and strapped for cash, started to sell off their royal collections of art and jewelry. The local markets were flooded with antiques and miniatures. Many found their way into international museums, igniting the world's fascination with Indian miniature painting.

Like any good antiques dealer, Badrilal began to restore old paintings and make copies for resale. He learned the technique by visiting artists all over Rajasthan. "They would tell me their secrets, " he says, "how to make color, the different schools, everything. I knew how to talk with them." He knew Ghasiram and was close friends with Narottam Narayanji (Lalit Prasad Sharma's great-grandfather), two of the leading Pichhvai artists of the day. The experience brought a wealth of knowledge and created the family dynasty that flourishes today. All his sons are painters. Their studios produce some of the finest Pichhvai and miniature paintings to be found in India.

The commissioned Pichhvai for our exhibition was given to Manish with the hope that Badrilal would be involved. The initial idea was to build upon a remarkable series of Ganesha drawings that Badrilal had completed a few years previous. They illustrate each of the one-thousand and one names of Ganesha. To my knowledge

this has never been done before. All the drawings were made directly with a pen without any preparatory sketches. It is an extraordinary example of pure invention, not only because of its mastery of line but because each drawing reflects the Sanskrit meaning of the name. Few artists today have such a scholarly command of their craft.

Inspired by this work, Manish wanted to take a few of these drawings and reproduce them in full color, as a complete Pichhvai. Badrilal, however, had other plans. He began by sketching Ganeshas in various postures. At his age the line is quite shaky, so Manish then went over the top with brush and ink--refining the original contour. Eventually, a composition was established and the first color, hinglu, a red, was applied. After some time and several questions from Manish, Badrilal observed that together the nine Ganeshas represented the nine rasas, or fundamental emotions.

The beauty of the painting is Badrilal's method of working, as he rarely conceptualizes before starting the work. He creates intuitively because he is not bound by convention, rather it moves within him. As a master, he has a lifetime of experience to fall back on and this allows him to break the rules and innovate freely.

As I sit and watch Badrilal and Manish working together, I see the guru-shishya parampara in action. The transmission is tangible, as the young man becomes the hand of the elder. Badrilal starts and Manish finishes, two hands make one line. A line that belongs to neither, they find it together. This, I realize, is the essence of the parampara, the teaching lineage. This is the shared moment, intimate and real, the exchange from one human heart to the next, as the master becomes the pupil and the pupil becomes the master.

The common thread between all these artists is this shared experience between guru and shishya, whether it is Kapil and Lalit, Ramaischand and Daivendra or Manish and Badrilal. They each know that this is the sutra--the sacred thread--that binds them to each other, to their craft and to their forefathers. They struggle to survive because the thread is so fragile. They can protect it in the only manner they know how--painting.

Conclusion

Over the last nine months in reaching out to these masters, I see so much dignity amidst adversity, people sustaining their tradition, come what may. As I leave Bhilwara, I wonder how we in India and the wider international community may also help? What is actually being done to support these artists--and countless others--at national, regional and local levels?

For instance, in Nathdwara, I did not see in the reconstruction plans any indication of what the temple board intended to do for local artists. Similarly, at the national level there is little or no clear government policy intended to tackle the consumer-producer problem, the relationship between the production activity in the villages and towns and consumption at the national and international level. No organized and accountable body has been formed to address the issue.

India is fast becoming an economic tour de force, a global brand with India.com as the new mantra of the global business community. Issues of identity, contemporary and traditional, inform every facet of life as many ask what it actually means to be Indian. Unfortunately, history gives cultural credence, and therefore value, to an art form but cares little for its means of production and even less for those who produce.

These artists participated in our commissioned painting project because all felt neglected and forgotten by the new India. In offering them commissions, we gave hope and acknowledged that their beliefs are also ours. We drew attention to the cause, the artist, rather than the effect, the painting. Our intention was not only to preserve this skill and knowledge base, but actually recognize it for what is really is, nothing less than the true spiritual fabric of the nation upon which all questions of "identity " are actually measured.

Finding answers to these questions is now more important than ever, and this may only happen if we bring these people, these traditions into the fold and listen to their stories. Surely, we should also try to protect this precious thread, for it is the backbone of India's arts and crafts. Without this, we risk losing so much of what it is to be Indian and more importantly, what it is to be human.

About the Author

Desmond Lazaro was born and raised in Leeds, England, but now resides permanently in India where he divides his time between Goa and New Delhi. He could be called a generational Indian repatriate, one who traces his family's wanderlust to his great grandfather's departure from Bangalore, India, in the late nineteenth century to Burma.

Desmond recounts, "As a railway man, he, like many others, was sent to Burma to build the railways. If India was the jewel in the crown, then Burma was the ruby, and the Empire hurried to make itself a transport system that could carry these treasures away with greater speed. A generation later, my grandfather, a railway engineer, continued to live in Insein district of northern Yangon, better known as the 'Railway Lines,' a Catholic neighborhood set aside for railway staff. My father, following the military coup and imminent civil war, severed ties with Burma and her railways when he fled to England in 1958."

At age 20, Desmond earned a degree in fine arts, specializing in oil painting. He recounts, "While doing my initial degree in the UK, I was fascinated with Indian painting, particularly Indian miniature. As an oil painter, I used to make ten-foot canvases of Krishna and Radha."

Following graduation, he won the Commonwealth Scholarship to study painting at Baroda University in India. He had grown up with the stories of Burma, of a family past which seemed "out of reach to me growing up in northern England." Now came his opportunity to reconnect.

He recounts, "At the end of my first year in Baroda, I was desperately trying to deal with the reality of India, which was not the India of my dreams or paintings. My tutor's wife, the Indian artist Neelima Sheik, learned of my fascination with Indian miniatures. She suggested I visit the Jaipuri miniaturist, Master Bannu Ved Pal Sharma. Neelima had learnt the technique of miniature painting from Master Bannuji many years earlier. On her advice I went to Jaipur, initially to learn the technique for a few weeks. Twelve years later I am still learning."

Today Desmond is 39 years old, and married to French fashion designer Agathe Gerin-Lazaro, who has lived in India for over 12 years. They have two boys, Emile, 5, and Felix, 3. His ambitious life's goal is nothing less than the preservation and

advancement of the Pichhvai painting tradition. He may be reached at
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