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OUT OF THE GOD-BOX THINKING

IN THE SHADOWS

Karnataka, Kerala and Andhra Pradesh have their own shadow puppet tradition, with each state adding their own touch to it. 'Togalu Gombeyaata' is a puppet show that's unique to Karnataka. The puppets used in this form are made of deer or goat skin leather. Once dried, the leather is cut into appropriate shapes and coloured using organic dyes. The head and limbs are then joined so that they can be moved easily.

At Art Pitara, expert artisans will conduct workshops on everything from calligraphy to making leather puppets, terracotta tiles and masks



WEEKEND

ot planning to travel or take swimming classes this summer? Well, then get glue and colours on your hands, or learn to tell stories at Art Pitara, the one event you won't regret stepping out for during Delhi's least favourite

season of the year. On from May 26 until June 25 and organised by the NGO Happy Hands and the Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage (INTACH), Art Pitara will open with workshops conducted by master artisans on everything from making leather puppets and terracotta tiles to creating masks, among other folk arts.

You can take lessons in Urdu and English calligraphy too and learn to create shadow puppets like they do in Karnataka or make brightly painted wooden Rajasthani kaavad or "god boxes", the portable shrines that open to reveal tales hidden within. You can also learn about the traditional art of Cherial or mask-making from artists from Andhra Pradesh.

"The idea behind the initiative is to bring people, especially youngsters, closer to our rich cultural heritage and at the same time, to give them a first-hand experience of the effort and imagination that goes into making such pieces. So next time, don't haggle over ₹100 when buying a painting," says Medhavi Gandhi, founder of Happy Hands Foundation.

Each of the craftspeople participating in Art Pitara has been instrumental in preserving these priceless traditions just by continuing to practise them. Some forms

have been a medium for performers and bards to tell stories from the Ramayana, the Mahabharata and the life of Krishna. Lately, the communities who have been traditional practitioners have also been using them as a tool for social welfare and to share their own stories.

Dwarika Prasad, a kaavad artist from Chittorgarh's Bassi village, where the form emerged, reveals that a lot may have changed about the oral traditions of storytelling but an evening with the bhats, traditional story-tellers, is still a favourite pastime for many. "The design of the box is specified by the bhats, who sometimes give their own twist to the tale by adding the face of whoever pays them an extra ₹100 for the occasion," he says.

Puppeteering too continues to find an audience. "I make the puppets; I write the story and sing to earn my living," says Gunduraju, an award-winning puppeteer who, for the last 50 years, has been running shows in 58 villages of Karnataka. "I can't imagine myself doing anything else," he adds. Still, times are tough, and the increasing popularity of mass media like television means these traditions, which have no assistance from the government, are struggling to survive.

More's the reason why you should enrol for these workshops. Anyone above the age of seven can register. If you aren't the crafty sort, give yourself over to the pleasures of shopping. There's plenty, from tribal tote bags to paintings, made by the masters that will be on sale. Remember, NOT to bargain.



PHOTO: ALEXANDRA MOSKOVCHUK

FIND YOUR WAY HERE

Where: INTACH, Lodhi Road

When: May 26 to June 25

For registration: www.artpitara.wordpress.com

Fee: ₹1,200 - ₹2,500

TELLING STORIES

It is believed that the kaavad storytelling tradition originated some 400 years ago. A kaavad is a portable wooden temple that has visual narratives on multiple panels that are hinged together. These panels are opened and closed like doors during the storytelling. The visuals mainly comprise of gods, goddesses, saints and local heroes. These boxes are also used to depict modern themes.



NATURE'S CALL

Gond tribals form one of central India's largest indigenous communities. Their art is an expression of their everyday lives and in their paintings, the tribe creates signature patterns that are given texture with geometrical motifs. Fantasy that pivots on wildlife features prominently.

FACE BEHIND THE MASK

The Nakash artisans of Cherial village, some 100 km from Hyderabad in Andhra Pradesh, entertained people through their scrolls and masks. Each mask is made using tamarind seed paste and sawdust powder and is painted to represent different characters. The storytellers use the toys to depict mythological characters and sing related stories. After the storytelling session, they would also sell toys. Miniature Cherial paintings have recently found their way into art galleries.



DIFFERENT STROKES

It is a practice that spans thousands of years and many cultures. Whether it's the lanes of Old Delhi, opposite the Red Fort, where classical Urdu can still be heard or the areas dominated by Devnagari exquisite calligraphy draws gasps everywhere. Calligraphers continue to hold their own despite the threat from technology and the tradition of letters, once used for religious or auspicious purposes, has now emerged as an art form that is appreciated from Beckham to Bundelkhand.

I HAVE THOUSANDS OF PUPPETS. SOME OF THEM - PASSED ON TO ME BY MY ANCESTORS - ARE 300 YEARS OLD. I HAVE GIVEN SOME PIECES TO MUSEUMS HERE AND ABROAD.

GUNDURAJU, puppeteer from Karnataka