

SMART ART

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Gond is the new Madhubani

If this was supposed to be the decade when tribal or folk art found its sweet spot among the pantheon of contemporary masters, then it has been a huge let-down so far. We haven't progressed to even paying lip service to the Gond artists who are driving the current trend for the primitive. We may know the names of some of these artists but precious else about them. What shapes their thinking and content? Have they had formal training or is it a skill they learn from one generation to the next? Sadly, we still only trot them out as outlandish flag-bearers when it suits our needs, but they are rarely part of public discourse or panel discussions. For all the talk about a parallel stream of art, they remain mere craftsmen, their work to be haggled over so that dealers make the bulk of the yield.

Over the last years, values have stiffened — for the collector. Middlemen who spotted an opportunity now do bulk deals with these artists, tying them down to a supply line that they control and hock to gallery owners and collectors. The artists are kept in the background, portrayed as reticent, though it is merely a ploy to starve them of the limelight. A few decades back, Madhubani artists had occupied the same rung, but have been replaced in recent years by their Gond peers.





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Art has constantly had to reconcile with profit and patronage, and it is certainly true that there are more Gond artists today than a few decades back, when Jangarh Singh Shyam became a role model for them — even though he committed suicide in Tokyo. But just as Madhubani and Warli have been passed over as fads in the past, there is the risk that Gond art could go down that same road — one more instance that we see them as a current fancy but with no role to play in the cultural vocabulary of the nation.

India has the innate ability not to engage with its strengths. Its miniature school of paintings was one of the finest artistic outputs of the world, something it could truly liken to the Renaissance (in equivalence, if not scale), yet we frittered it away under an academic style of education that relegated it to a state of craft — yes, again — overlooking the brilliant concepts on the epics, the seasons, the musical intonations that were created in different ateliers. Imagine equating Rembrandt or Leonardo da Vinci to provincial craftsmanship.

Under the Raj, this could have been blamed on the British, but we have done scarce else post Independence to resurrect miniature artists to prominence, relegating them to copying earlier masters sans any hint of originality. This is because miniature art is neither taught nor counted as a tradition in the halls of academia. Opportunities to use the style and give it a contemporary context have not been applied — the new generation of contemporary artists give it the same short shrift as their predecessors, and the artists themselves have no means to step up to join the debates around contemporary issues of which they need to be a part if their style of painting has to have any relevance in the 21st century.

Gond artists have that opportunity now, they are popular — even if as a mere token — and there is appreciation for their ability to adapt to modern custom. Can young Gond artists not be brought into classrooms and workshops so they can continue to conform to their own style but give their subjects a modern connect for greater relevance instead of being relegated to an exotic idiom of which they are merely a pastiche?

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