

# Pictures from the past

Warli paintings have a basic graphic vocabulary of circles, triangles and squares, which become the building blocks for an art form that has remained almost unchanged through the ages.

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▲ Above and right: Everyday activities are charmingly depicted in these finely detailed paintings. Facing page: This acrylic on canvas is artist Meenakshi Matai's take on the age-old art.

Culture expresses itself in many ways, one of which is in the art of its people. Indian culture, as it is seen today, is an eclectic mix of people and traditions, what with the country being a melting pot of civilisations for thousands of years. The earliest known art form in India is tribal art. While each tribal art form has its own history and influences, there is one that by virtue of its inherent simplicity, commands attention – the unique art of the Warli tribe from Western India.

Warli art was first discovered by the modern world in the '70s and was accepted and appreciated widely among people. The style of Warli art is reflective of a folk and ethnic culture hitherto unknown to Indians. Unlike other traditions such as Madhubani that illustrate mythical tales or those that depict sensuality such as the art forms from Eastern India, Warli paintings deal with the relatively mundane happenings of daily life.

A distinctive feature of Warli art is that it is stark. With brown mud backgrounds and drawings in white, the paintings bring an element of freshness to the day-to-day events they symbolise. Compared to other traditions that use colours abundantly, Warli paintings appear simple with the judicious use of the colour white obtained from ground rice flour.

#### Inspired by nature

The Warlis are from the western region of India, primarily Thane in Maharashtra, where the tribe resides. It is more or less certain that the Warlis have followed a tradition rooted in the Bronze age, before 3,300 BC, when paintings were done on cave walls. It is also assumed to be the period when the early humans discovered agriculture and nature's seemingly unlimited output. The abundant facets of nature that they came across were compared to a mother's capacity to hold life in her womb. This belief has been so deeply entrenched that even future generations felt its unrelenting impressions.

“Prominently featured in Warli art are the *laganache chitra*, the paintings of wedding rituals and ceremonies. These paintings are indispensable and sacrosanct.”

Warli paintings vividly depict the influence of changing seasons. The internal walls of the Warli's mud houses are covered with paintings, usually done by the women (it is only of late that the men have also started painting). Warli art can be best understood through the eyes of the tribe: their religious habits, traditions and folklore. The Warli pay homage to various forms of nature—the sun, the moon, the gods of thunder, lightning, wind and rain. With these paintings, they convey and reinforce their bond with nature. Which deities they worship, and when, also depends on the turn of seasons.

The Warlis' perception about life being a recurring cycle is best represented in their paintings with circular patterns that seem to have no beginning or end. Also, death for the tribe marks the beginning of a new journey and not an end. This belief is represented in the curved and circular patterns their paintings take. This approach to their paintings lends a sense of objectivity that is essential as it gives a keen observer an abstract panoramic view of life. It reinforces the traditional idea that life and death are not ends in themselves, but in fact a continuous process of evolution.

A prominent feature of Warli art is the painting of wedding rituals, known as *laganache chitra*. These paintings are indispensable and sacrosanct. Weddings can never take place without them. The

## Artwork

► Clockwise from right: Warli art can now be seen on home decor products like coasters; Another ritual depicted by the use of paint; An empty tissue box can also be a work of art! A beautifully decorated set of coffee tables.



paintings usually comprise trees, birds, animals and humans. Spread over a wide canvas, the paintings exhibit a flowing, harmonised pattern.

Warli art forms an important link between the tribals and the outside world. If the tribe, to this day, prefers to stay detached from the outside world, it is mainly because of the brutal experiences they have had each time they have come in contact with it. The Thane district, despite its rugged appearance, was ruled over by various monarchs—Hindus, Muslims, the Portuguese and lastly the British. None of them were able to give the Warlis anything except taxation.

### Geometry as art

Warli paintings reflect the tribe's abundant reverence for nature and their simple lifestyle. The Warlis also draw inspiration from regular events in their lives, which make the paintings very easy for the viewer to relate to.

Human figures in the paintings are small, yet represented with utmost clarity. They are triangular in shape and their limbs are symbolised by thin line drawings. Geometrical design is many a time the basis of the paintings. The paintings are a representation of various events, which look beautiful when the baseline is drawn. On a plain brown background, the paintings look almost three dimensional, making them come alive.

The most renowned of all the traditional Warli paintings is the marriage *chauk*



or square, drawn during weddings. The walls of the kitchen become the canvas for the women as they consider the kitchen walls to be the most sacred in the house. The women are called *savasini* or women who are married and whose husbands are still alive. The centre of attraction of the painting is Goddess Palaghata. The term Palaghata means that the Goddess is, in essence, a teeming pot of plants and fertility. Her presence in wedding ceremonies is a must. Dotted trees form the border of the *chauk* and enclose the



▲ Above: An artist hard at work in an effort to keep the art form alive for generations to come.  
Top: Warli art on objects of everyday use add a quirkiness to daily life.

whole painting as if shading the goddess and those participating in the ceremony. Apart from the main *chauk*, there is also a supplementary *chauki* dedicated entirely to the God Pancairiya. This is called the *deva chauk* and is believed to be for the protection of the whole family.

#### The tradition continues

People admire Warli paintings because they give us an insight to the daily activities of the Warlis. Today, Warli paintings have become ubiquitous and are more popular than ever before. In their more modern interpretations, they adorn a range of products such as garments, home linen, cutlery and in a classic example of tradition-meeting-modernity, even cellphone covers!

Despite the challenges of maintaining traditions in our transient and fast-paced world, the Warli paintings are a reminder of the rich tribal culture that continues to thrive in our country.



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