

[Living, Painting, Worshiping Art](#)

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This village's only activity is producing precious devotional marvels

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India is a land of marvels. when traveling the dusty, bumpy, sinuous roads of the countryside, one can expect the unexpected: a ragged saint with realizations too deep to fathom; a humble musician with talent and skills far beyond his simple self; or even, perhaps, a village made up entirely of artists, where every home is decorated with intricate wall paintings and people of all ages are versed in crafts almost forgotten in time.

In the state of Orissa, not far from the capital, lies Raghurajpur, a small village by the sacred Bhargabi river. A betel grove and coconut trees adorn its single road, the heart of the village, dotted by several picturesque ponds. In the middle of the street, five old temples show that here worship is the center of people's lives, their inspiration and passion.

Raghurajpur is recognized as a National Crafts Village by the state of Orissa, a title given to the few places where traditional methods and designs have not been overrun by modern production techniques and the demands of tourist trade. For centuries, Raghurajpur has been home to artisans and artists who supplied the kingdom of Puri with art--from special adornments for people's homes to the high honor of decorating the murtis of Lord Jagannath and his siblings for the amazing procession of their famous, immense chariots. With such noble artistic heritage, every inhabitant of Raghurajpur is proud of his art and of the detailed, ritualistic techniques that have been passed from father to son for generations. In this village, every single family is involved in producing some form of art.

Scholars claim that the origins of Raghurajpur can be traced back to the twelfth

century, when the vast Jagannath temple was built not far away. Following the tradition of many Indian kingdoms, everything revolved around the king and the temples. In those days a monarch would build magnificent temples to the Gods as a symbol of his power and as a way of bringing blessings and prosperity. For Jagannath temple, old instructions list 36 communities, *niyogis*, that are necessary for the temple and the royal court: metal workers, weavers, astrologers and the artists, or *chitrakars*. Even today these sets of instructions survive here, etched in dusty stacks of palm leaves, stored in the house of a famous astrologer called Banamber Nayak. His knowledge is still sought, and to this day he trains people in some of the ancient ways of the kingdom of Puri.

Such a powerful heritage is fuel for the artistry of the villagers of this serene place, where women worship on kolams drawn on the streets, children draw sitting on the doorsteps of the houses and a gentle breath of creativity is felt in the air. But tradition alone was not enough to keep Raghurajpur alive: fifty years ago, it was all very different.

As with many other aspects of Indian culture, the artists' village had been victim to the conflict between the rajas and the British rule. As the power of kings declined and religion stopped being an affair of the state, communities like Raghurajpur were orphaned, losing their very purpose for existence. Even though Puri still had (and has) its own king, still holding a ceremonial post, the ways of the past had changed, and the artists were not ready to adapt. Slowly the village went to agriculture for survival, and the cause seemed to be lost. Then, in the 1950s, a remarkable son of the land, Jagannath Mopatra (1919 -1988), decided he would work to shake off the sleepiness of their artistic souls. Mopatra devoted his life to it, becoming a spokesperson for their arts in the world. He created a Gurukula Ashram, or training center, to train students to become *chitrakars*. He traveled to Russia, Japan and Indonesia, exhibiting works from Raghurajpur. Four of his pupils won awards nationally, and he received the National Honor in Arts in 1965. Because of his relentless efforts, the artists' village once again became a place where traditional arts flourish.

Today, an artists' community and cooperative society organizes the production and creates the necessary infrastructure. Since this small settlement became a National Crafts Village, funds from the government and revenues from sales began to come. A charitable initiative from the government of distant Norway has been creating workshops for artisans in various parts of Orissa. The state government is funding basic improvements on roads, sanitation and potable water. In a very simple way, using humble buildings and modest planning, the community has established a

crafts center, a library that also functions as a documentation facility, a theater and even a visitor's center with a restaurant. Much of what is produced is sold by a cooperative society created for marketing it, making commerce possible in ways that would be beyond the reach or the knowledge of Raghurajpur's artists. Tourism is now a part of life, even though this is still a very idyllic place. The elders have expressed concern that income from tourist sales might spoil the youth, who might be more interested in the money than in the religious aspects of the sacred art. But the five temples of the Raghurajpur are very much alive, including one for Gramadevati, the village patron Deity; and in them the sound of bells and incense smells of daily worship show no sign of religious indifference.

Beyond Simple Art

The art produced in Raghurajpur has a steady clientele, especially in the artistically oriented state of Orissa. Local handicrafts are famous internationally for the antiquity of their style, the precision of details, the skill necessary to make them and the religion and spirituality that inspires them. The patti painting style is an example. "The philosophy and the themes of patti paintings has not changed," according to Lingaraj Maharana, one of the most respected artists of the village, whose family has been painting for generations. "We paint just religious themes, Gods and Goddesses only. We do this with all sincerity and devotion. This is a sacred service. We purify ourselves in many ways before painting. We fast and worship. Only then one can paint the eyes of the Divinities: the eyes are the life, jivanyas, of the icons."

The protocol and devotion involved in these works make them special items, used in specific religious ceremonies. During a marriage, a special painting is made, a portrait of the families with the couple, bringing blessings and celebrating the new union in a work of art. In such ceremonies, even traditional items like banana leaves and the kumbha have also their individual paintings, as if to duplicate, in the world of art and creativity, what is happening in the lives of the chitrakars. Horoscopes and protective mandalas are also common. The absolute favorite, though, is a patti cloth painting of Lord Ganesha, hung on the front door of every house in the village, giving out blessings to everyone. The painting acts as a murti, receiving vibhuti and sandalwood offerings applied by the families. "Lord Ganesha is very popular. He is the destroyer of all obstacles," explains Jayakrushna Das, one of the few stone carvers in Raghurajpur.

The inhabitants of Raghurajpur see their art as something eternal, and take great pride in this. "Why should it die?" asks Jayakrushna Swain, a artisan of talapatra kodhei, palm-leaf engravings, like his father and grandfather before him. "As long as God, temples and faith are alive, the tradition will continue. We are but humble servants of God."

Though the styles and themes have stayed the same for as long as the village memory can recall, scholars see traces of a fascinating history weaved in these works. Many centuries ago, until 800 ce, Buddhism was in a crescendo in its expansion throughout India. Fueled by the conversion of King Ashoka, its influence slowly spread all over the subcontinent. There was an exchange of art between these newly converted Buddhist artists in India and established communities in places like Bhutan and Mongolia, where the doctrine was more settled and Buddhism thrives until today. Patterns, forms and mandalas went back and forth, and over the course of hundreds of years the art practiced by simple people--these artisans' ancestors--influenced and changed art in such faraway places as far as Burma, Thailand and Indonesia, where that influence can still be seen. But in India itself, as Buddhist art and teachings came into contact with the simple ways of village people, something interesting started to happen. The accepting and all-embracing traits of Hinduism began to change the Buddhist religion: Hindu Gods and stories re-arose in the paintings and the sculptures--side by side with Buddhist bodhisattvas at first. Yoga, pranayama and many Hindu concepts became part of the teachings, in a merger that later be known as Vajrayana Buddhism. Even the Buddha came to be thought as a manifestation, or avatar, of Vishnu. Over time, Hinduism fully embraced and absorbed Indian Buddhism until there was nothing left but Hinduism. This enriching exchange of cultures is displayed in full glory in the arts of Raghurajpur.

The Fading Ganjapa Game

Mukunda Maharana, 83, is the village elder of Raghurajpur. When he was a young boy, he learned patti painting from his father, Gopinath, who insisted that the family legacy should survive, no matter what. Those were difficult days for art, before the spark had been rekindled by Mukunda's uncle, Jagannath Maharana, who would later make their work internationally admired and acclaimed in festivals and exhibits. But Mukunda learned it even so, in the most traditional ways, and was initiated into the chitrakar's ritualistic procedures and techniques. Among those ancient teachings that were imparted to him, knowledge that he can today teach to others in the village, there was a very unusual one: the knowledge of how to play the game of ganjapa.

The beautifully drawn, circular ganjapa cards are sought as desirable pieces of art. Exotic, hand-made and unique, they make a fine souvenir for tourists or for export. The cards have paintings of Gods--Rama, Ganesha, Sarasvati, a North-Indian style depiction of Siva with a mustache--and of their divine mounts; painting of kings and courtiers, of Puranic characters and heroes. The game was mentioned in the memoirs of Emperor Babur, the first ruler of the Moghul empire of India, in 1527. The complex rules demand knowledge of religion, culture and folklore. Card sets can have 46, 96, 120 or 144 cards, with specific ways of playing each, and the rules can also vary depending on how many colors were used to make the card set. It is a game for the initiated and the knowledgeable, which may soon become extinct, its cards a mere relic. Only four people play it in Raghurajpur.

Even though some other people, mostly elders, play it around Orissa, each village has its own variations and house rules, and the craft's village is no exception. Like bridge or whist, all four players are necessary for each game, and if they cannot come there are no possible substitutes.

Preparing the cards is a time-consuming task. Artisans such as Mukunda create a special glue made of tamarind seeds, used to harden smooth, flat cloth. Pieces are then trimmed perfectly round and pasted together to form the cards; a fine layer of liquid chalk is applied to make them white. Only then can the artist begin to paint the many traditional cards, using paints he makes himself with colorful minerals and herbs and, in the case of black, burnt lamp wicks. Each Deity has a special color that must be used in the decorations of his card, according to the traditional rules, to aid identification. Since the card sets are hand-made, they all vary slightly; and their meaning could be lost if not for this standard coloring system. Lord Rama, for example, is always painted in green against a red background.

Mukunda Maharana has given to the village much of what he could share, teaching the chitrakar craft. His son, Lingaraj, carrying on the family tradition, has become a master in patti paintings. His young grandson, proud to carry on the wisdom of the art techniques, is becoming a skilled artisan. The elder is enthusiastic about the present and expects a beautiful future for his family and the chitrakars: "Our works used to be demanded only for temples and religious uses, but now many people want them. Nowadays patti paintings have become smaller, except for the big festival pieces, and are more refined." But even though his skill and knowledge are highly sought after, there is one piece of lore for which he has never found an interested pupil.

"I play ganjapa cards, " says the venerable Mukunda. "I make the cards and paint them. My hands are shaking, so I don't do much. After my death the game would not be played anymore."

A Canvas of Palm Leaves

Palm-leaf writing has been a way of preserving Indian culture for thousands of years. The richness of Hindu philosophy and religion has produced uncountable manuscripts, meticulously re-copied by calligraphers every few centuries to preserve their lore. In many South Asian languages the word for palm leaf is synonymous with paper. When the scribes, sponsored by culture-loving kings, began to illustrate literary works, another form of art was created. Eventually, this became the craft of talapattra khodei, engraved illustrations on leaves sewn to form a long, larger piece of art.

The leaves can be folded in many ways, creating a canvas, a small book or often a combination of both. Any renowned jyotish (astrologer) in Orissa will only draw a horoscope on a hand-sewn spread of these leaves. Each drawing is made using a very sharp, pointed stylus on a dry leaf. Recently some artists begun using synthetic colors, but most still use the old, proven natural dyes to paint the Hindu Gods that adorn the works. Lord Siva is very common on these paintings, where he appears as the lord of yogis. Krishna and his wives are also a common theme, specially suited for the two-fold nature of an art where spirituality and sensuality often blend. True to the tradition of Orissa, where traces of Tibetan and Buddhist influence intertwine Hindu themes, the palm leaves are often decorated with mandalas surrounding scenes from the Puranas, Itihasas and even the Kama Sutra. In the beautiful leaves of talapattra khodei, the different foldings can hide or show unexpected images that are often a surprise to the uninitiated.

Patti Cloths for Lord Jagannath

The simple, unadorned, hand-woven cotton cloth carried on the shoulders of the chitrakar will serve a noble purpose. Purchased in large quantities, it looks scant and raw as he takes it down Raghurajpur's only road; but the man who holds it knows that soon a magical transformation will take place, as age-old lore and skills taught by his ancestors will transform it through his hands. This humble fabric will

soon become a beautiful painting, a channel through which the Gods will shine their blessings on people.

Patti paintings are the specialty and the pride of Raghurajpur. It all began in ancient times, with the worship of Lord Jagannath, a form of Vishnu whose name literally means "Lord of the Universe." The temple in nearby Puri is home to the original, gigantic murtis of Lord Jagannath and his siblings Baladeva and Subhadra. Once a year, on the full moon day of May-June, the Deities are taken in a ritual procession that lasts for fifteen days. Millions celebrate with fervor as majestic chariots decorated by artists from this and other villages take the Gods to a special bathing platform where abhishekam is performed. When the curtain closes as the priests attend to the murtis, it is none other than a colossal, ornate patti cloth made by the people of Raghurajpur that gives the Gods some privacy.

For days, devotees attending will see and pray to Jagannath gazing at His image painted on this patti cloth curtain, with increasing fervor as expectations build up. It will be the center of everyone's attention, the focus of everyone's eyes, until the curtain finally opens at the height of the festival amid a uproar of devotional frenzy.

During the festival, home Deities are also covered, using custom paintings ordered to exactly portray a family's home shrine.

The colors on the patti style are true to these moments and traditions. Bright, flat primary colors and clean lines flare with intensity and can be seen from far away. The canvas is specially made: a cotton cloth is treated with a paste of tamarind seeds with powdered chalk and brushed delicately until it becomes a smooth, parchment-thick surface. Natural paints are made using traditional materials, such as ground conches for white. But not all adhere to this strict code; in our changing times, the lure of commerce and the availability of synthetic materials have seduced some chitrakars.

"The use of traditional colors has given way to synthetic paint, " confirms Lingaraj Maharana. "It is also acceptable to paint on silk because it is easy to export." Paramanand Bismal, a more conservative artist, disagrees. "Some of us have started using pre-made materials, but you can see the difference. Art lovers would not want them; they are not original."

Divergent opinions signal the dynamism of Raghurajpur's art today. The only real certainties are the artists' wonderful talent and deep-rooted devotion. "We are gifted by the Lord to perform this service, " says Kailash Maharana. Indeed they are. "

Raghurajpur's handicrafts are distributed by:
Utkalika Store, State Handicrafts Museum
Eastern Tower, Market Building, Ashok Nagar,
Unit ii, Bhubaneswar, Orissa, India