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ART

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The Chitrakar trio of father and sons join brushes to improve the ancient technique of using gold leaf and gems in devotional art

Taking the devotional art of Nathdwara and the famous gold leaf and gem-studded painting of Tanjore to a new level, the dynamic Chitrakar team, Kanhai and two sons, Gobind and Krishna, has won international acclaim. Hinduism Today correspondent Rajiv Malik interviewed Kanhai and Gobind during a visit to Delhi.

On art

Kanhai: The unique thing about the paintings that we make is how we capture the beauty and grace of the Almighty. We decorate these paintings with gold and diamonds to enhance that beauty a little more. The emotion that we portray is due to the grace of God. The emotions manifest due to the grace of God. All this is beyond our control.

Gobind: In the eighteenth century the use of gold started, but only for the residences of kings and rulers, because it was very expensive. In South India this art was taken up by Tanjore painters. In North India it almost became extinct. My father revived this art fifty years ago. Then we joined him. We used

new techniques and brought it to its current height, now called Kanhai Art.

Early training

Kanhai: When I was just 14 years old, I lived at my maternal uncle's place. He used to live with the king, Maharaja Chakradhar Singh in Rajgarh in Madhya Pradesh. Nana Lal of Gujarat was the court's artist. He made portraits, which I also wanted to do, so I was sent to him to learn. He was then 82 years old. Once I spent two months at home and made a painting of Lord Krishna. When I put my painting before my guru, it was difficult for him to believe that I had made the painting. After my training, I worked in the film industry in Mumbai and Calcutta. Then, forty years ago, I had a vision of Krishna who told me to go to Vrindavan. I have lived there ever since.

Developing a style

Kanhai: In Vrindavan I made portraits. I constantly wanted to make the paintings more beautiful. I liked the paintings being made in Tanjore and, at a small scale, in Nathdwara as well. In Nathdwara, they were using gold foil on water colors. I then tried it myself and made a very large painting of Radha and Krishna. I used gold foil and precious stones, which people appreciated a lot.

Gobind: My brother Krishna and I joined my father when we were children. We tried new techniques. For example, we improved upon the embossing in areas to be decorated or

highlighted, like the headgear, the garlands and the corners of the sleeves. First they are embossed, then gold work is done and finally precious stones are placed.

Who buys the paintings?

Gobind: This art, once upon a time, was confined to the kings, the rich and the temples. People could not afford it. Today, big corporate houses, connoisseurs and lovers of Krishna and Radha buy these works.

Kanhai: Earlier the paintings were put only in the shrine rooms, but today these paintings can be seen in people's bedrooms and drawing rooms. Those who have our paintings told me that their whole family has stopped eating meat because they feel that Lord Krishna is at home. Similarly there are some who stopped drinking. When the children or father goes out, they first bow before the painting. People say that the whole atmosphere of their home has been transformed by these paintings.

On tradition

Gobind: We have never budged from the tradition and would never do so in the future. We work to revive the parts of tradition which have died. All our work has to be within the boundaries of Indian culture and heritage.

The creative impulse

Gobind: While we are studying scriptures and a feeling or emotion surfaces in our heart, we think, "Why not create a painting based on this feeling?" When such a thing happens, all three of us sit together and discuss the idea. Once everything is finalized, we draw a final sketch.

Kanhai: When we start working on a painting, He surfaces in our heart. But we have not developed the capacity to capture Him on the canvas that is before us. While we draw the painting, we keep uttering the words--"God bless me, God bless me." Sometimes emotions manifest onto the face of the painting so perfectly that we fail to understand how these emotions are drawn.

Basis in Tanjore and Nathdwara art

Gobind: Besides Tanjore and the much smaller paintings of Sri Nathji in Nathdwara, there are no other places where such paintings are made. The gold work is one similarity between our work and Tanjore, but overall there is no comparison between our work and theirs. They have a typical style with proportions that are not perfect. Our work is more like real life. Tanjore and Nathdwara artists use water colors, we use oil paint and then do the gold work. Our painting is washable. Its minimum life is one hundred years.

On the young generation

Kanhai: Today's generation has no knowledge of our heritage and culture. Our schools are neither teaching anything about culture nor imparting the right type of education. And when

the right kind of education is not given to them, then they will do whatever comes to mind.

Gobind: The younger generation lacks patience in a big way. They do not want to do any research or preparation before doing the actual painting. They just want to paint straight away. Creating a painting requires a lot of patience. You have to give deep thought as to what you are going to paint.

Kanhai: Besides my own sons, I also teach others about the art. But most of these young people learn it for just a month or two and then run away, thinking that they have become full-fledged artists.

Decline of art

Kanhai: In the past the various arts were patronized by the kings. My guruji was patronized in this way. He was given a whole village and all its profits, a spacious room, supplies, and as much time as he needed.

Gobind: If an artist is worried about how he and his family are going to have two square meals a day, then he cannot focus on the art and can never become an artist. Now the duty of the kings has fallen on the government. Because the government is not doing its job in a proper manner, the artists and art of bygone eras are vanishing. So what can an artist do? You say that the paintings are selling for lakhs of rupees [thousands of dollars] but fifty to sixty percent of this is the actual cost of these paintings. Gold and precious stone work is quite expensive. Our paintings take one to two months. There are paintings that take one year to complete. Commercialization of these paintings is not a bad thing at all. After all, it gets us revenue and they are good for the people who buy them.

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