

Folk and Minor Art in India
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Lecture - 41
Coexistence and Collaborations with Mainstream Art

The course is coming to an end with the focus of sustenance of a culture. A culture that we feel has to survive, gets meaning when it survives in a favorable condition. Now when we talk about this favorable condition what do you exactly mean by that; that remains a question. Is it that a traditional culture that has survived during the favorable time in past is expected to remain unchanged throughout or are we holding equal responsibility towards the sustenance of a culture by accommodating that particular culture into the present. And then only we can think of a future which is a favorable future.

So, to understand this whole phenomenon we must also study that how they are co existing; the tradition and contemporary, the amateurs and the professionals, the academics and the vernacular. How they are staying together and working together in collaboration. We will try to see that with some examples and understand whether the experiments have some potential success or is it something that can only remain as experiments and it may not have a natural flow at all.

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So, let us focus on our discussion on coexistence and collaborations with main stream art. I would like to quote J Swaminathan here, “Cultural experiences and activity in India is a multi-level phenomenon. And these levels are often mutually independent and non-interacting. It is the urban and the so called modern sense of contemporarily that appears to dominate the scene and thus to distort the real perspective”.

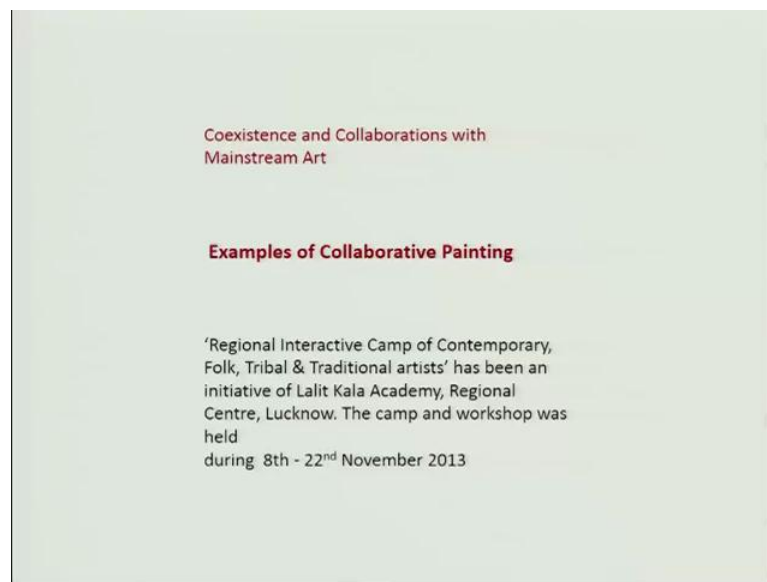
I quoted J Swaminathan and I mentioned his name earlier also in the first few lectures for a reason that he was the one who is one of the pioneers to collaborate with the folk artists. I am not going to the detail of it that there are artists that we know from the tribal art tradition they worked as habitual practice of daily life rituals that they had. A person like Swaminathan a practicing artist very successful one who belong to the communist party, he was active in social congress and all sort of political activism that was related to art. And he was the one to discover a person like Junger Shyam from the village of Gond where he practiced the Gond painting on walls. He was one to provide him with the canvas, he got him to the urban light, and he helped him to put up exhibitions that got international acclaim.

After this kind of endeavor when J Swaminathan is saying that it is a culture which is staying in multilevel and it is mutually independent. That takes us to a different reality,

where we feel that one particular habit should support the other habit. So, there is no point in thinking that it cannot independently survive. At the same time there are many other factors that need a constant support to make them sustain on their own.

As we know that a folk art tradition always survived with a trivial patronage it proves that it has a capacity of survival without any support, and that can work as a point of confidence from our part who are taking interest in folk art and culture and doing nothing more than that in fact.

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So, in this lecture I am going to give some examples of a collaborative painting that held in the regional interactive camp of contemporary folk tribal and traditional artists that has been an initiative of Lalit Kala Academy regional center Lucknow. The camp and workshop was held during 8th to 22nd November 2013.

The participating artists were divided into two groups, and the two main categories. They are; the contemporary artists and the traditional and folk or tribal artists. These are the two categories how the selection took place.

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And I will tell the name now Mainaz Bano, Akash Kumar Seth, Mohan Lal Jat, Pramod Kumar Singh, Preeti Kahar and Nandubhai A Rathwa were amongst the contemporary artists. And the latter category had Gulab Chand Prajapati, Vishnu Narain Agarwal, Shanti Lal Joshi, Dinesh Chandra, Mohan Lal Kumhar, Mohanbhai Rathwa, Manubhai Chunilal Chitara in the other category.

Artists from both the categories were made to work together on a collaborative painting and an individual painting during the course. The artworks executed in the camp were then displayed on 22nd November 2013.

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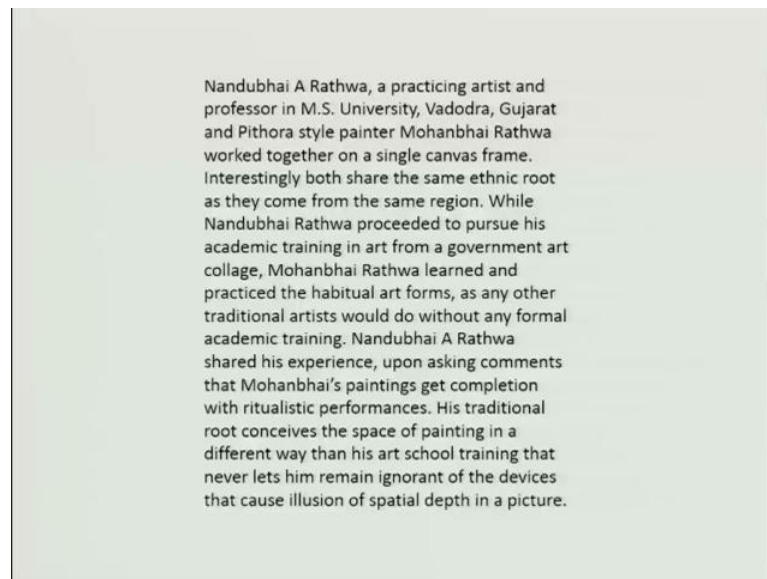


Seen in the picture is Mohanbhai Rathwa and Nandubhai A Rathwa. They are into collaboration for a painting where both of them are painting on the same canvas. This is also very interesting to see that usually that individual artists do not share their canvas with anybody, and here it is a collaboration two artists with a same communal background. In that way they are origin is same according to the interview that I conducted, they have similar surnames. But both of them they are trained in two different ways. So that was quite fascinating to see that one artist who knew his background of a habitual artist who are natural artist and then he comes to an art college to get academic training and then he gets under the academic system which is very different from the habitual art traditions laws and rules.

So one person who belong to the community, but he is not trained into the community skill, but he is familiar and extremely sensitive about the community skill because of many other factors, because of his origin, and because of this education as well. So, with that a person with a great exposure in the academia and the other one with great knowledge and skill in a traditional painting technique they are putting up their work on a same single canvas.

This is also very interesting to see that these two styles of execution are very different; apparently and also in their principle. But then these two people are there to experiment, they never felt that they are coming up with the self-expression as they usually do when they work individually. But this very significant endeavor to my opinion and let us see some more images and understand the idea.

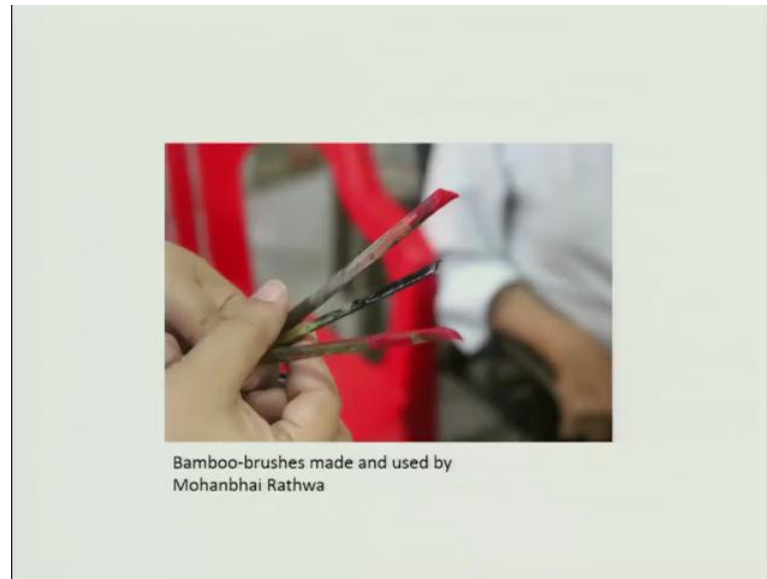
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Nandubhai A Rathwa, a practicing artist and professor in M.S. University, Vadodra, Gujarat and Pithora style painter Mohanbhai Rathwa worked together on a single canvas frame. Interestingly both share the same ethnic root as they come from the same region. While Nandubhai Rathwa proceeded to pursue his academic training in art from a government art collage. Mohanbhai Rathwa learned and practiced the habitual art forms, as any other traditional artists would do without any formal academic training.

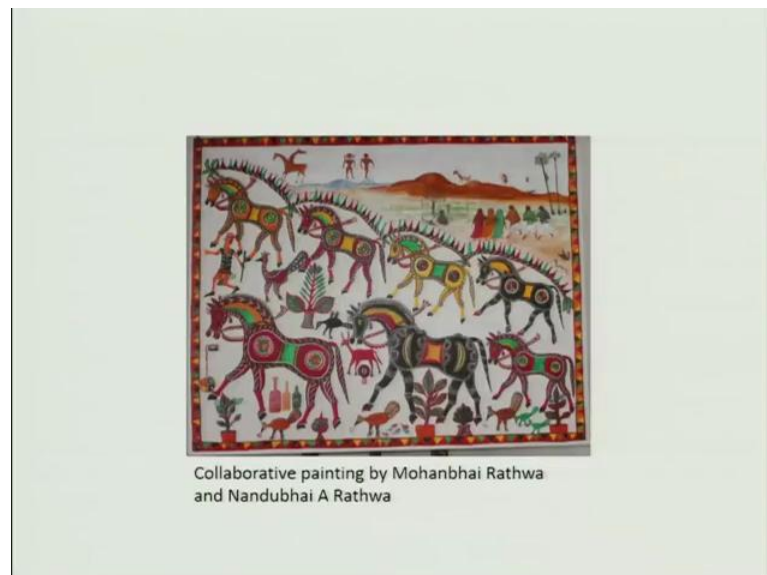
Nandubhai A Rathwa shared his experience upon asking comments that Mohanbhai's paintings get completion with ritualistic performances. His traditional root conceives the space of painting in a different way than his art school training that never lets him remain ignorant of the devices that cause illusion of spatial depth in a picture.

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The kind of handmade Bamboo-brushes that are made and used by Mohanbhai Rathwa for his paintings.

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And the collaborate painting by Mohanbhai Rathwa and Nandubhai A Rathwa where we see the clear difference between the two spaces. One has certain spatial depth and the

other part has some overlapping and scale change and that is it. So, two dimensionality and three dimensionality is a testing contrast with the same spirit. The visual representation has differences, but we see very interestingly the frame is there decorative border to hold the entire thing into a frame. So, of course this is a very interesting effort made my Lalit Kala academy and the organizers.

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There is another example where Manubhai Chitara and Promod Singh together at work.

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And then we see collaborative painting by Manubhai Chitara and Pramod Singh, this is the outcome. Manubhai Chitara is from the Matni Bachedi tradition. So, what we see in his work is again a two dimensional in linearity. And Pramod Singh on other hand try to cope up with that with his general sense of volume and color application. The space division is two dimensional with a very interesting three dimensional bent at different spaces to the use of a very cool blue with a warm red. And it is very sophisticated and its execution.

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Seen in the picture are Mohandal Jat and Shanti Lal Joshi together at work, both experts in their corresponding areas.

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And outcome though incomplete in the finishing stage; so let us talk about the different policies and strategies of the future of sustainability and how they are planned. And then

we must go for a vision by revising it, so it is a vision through revision. A habitual culture is meant to survive naturally with in a society through its day to day costumes. In India there are ceremonial practices that have crossed the cultural margin to reach a global platform.

So, when we see a cobber from Madhubani painted today they no longer hold the local value it, has become global its spread all over and it has touched the mind of many people beyond the confined community and that is the strength of it. So, why has it reached the mind of other people? Having said that it is a community practice or the practice belongs to a particular community. But it is only because the art works are very rich in its elementary content it reached out for a larger mass.

So, the art forms are rooted to the ritualistic customs and that may not be that widely popular over the time, but the aesthetic components agelessly survived making a strong impact always. It justifies the changing purpose that keep it alive in a unfavorable social condition at times. In the presence of the numerous alternative social media and media related practice and the communication outrage that is a intervening the main favor of our lives. The narrative painting and the oration as a tradition as a regular ritualistic custom or the mode of entertainment has long lost its importance; so the narrative painting and the oration is not exclusively existing somewhere in a community or that is not the only way out to get entertained or enriched, there are many other mediums which are available now.

But when we try to disperse social message we find out many other alternative solutions for that. But this is very interesting to see that in spite of all this new editions this culture is still surviving and that is a fact. So, the condition also favors a culture to survive solely as aesthetic contribution, and that is more important. When the other purposes are lost then the strength is much more identified. We can very easily figure out that it is not only entertaining people or enriching people with contents it is neither to proliferate the religious stories not to educate people with morals and ethics, but with the simple and pure aesthetics that made it survive for so long. And with that it has come this long way till here.

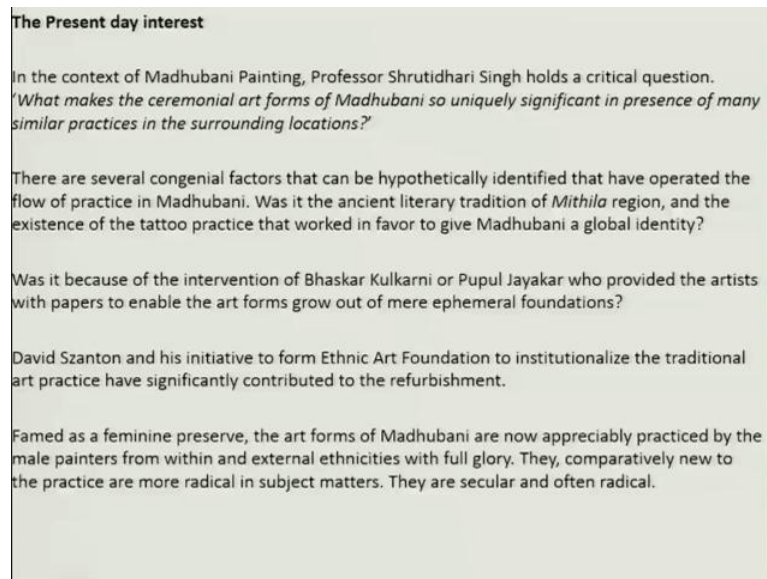
Folk art practice and its contemporary form are more bound towards placing the aesthetic legacy to a stage of culmination where the art forms demand proper critical approval. So, we cannot just favor the art work by saying that their traditional and we hold sentiment for it; that may not do any justice to the aesthetic of it. One has to be slightly harsh and brutally honest to judge them so that it gets its optimum approval and it grows in proper direction. That is how we can show respect to it to any culture in that instance.

Apart from its socio-cultural and anthropological acclaim the art forms have always been competent enough to conquer the global art scenario. The analytical appreciation of the artistic expression is there for recommended to judge its proficiency. The sustainability of culture adequately requires means of preservation of knowledge; that is intrinsically related to it. At the same time it needs the right tolerance, the right capacity to accept positive change that stimulates the flow of that natural fabrication. Mindful analysis and critical appreciation justify the change and theme and ways of execution and led the culture survive by evolving and adjusting to the need of time.

This is very important to realize that if the time is changing then the subject matters, the execution everything can change. And also artists from outside the community if they at all realize this particular art form, the style, the style of execution it has the potential to help their artistic expression to be executed. Then they should be welcome so it may not survive within the periphery of a cultural community or particular ethnicity or sect or clan or in a small tribe. But it may survive in a different form.

So, we cannot say that if it does not survive into a community or a community remain the same overtimes that you know it is suggestive of the death of the culture, rather if the culture survives in a very rigid and constrained condition then we feel that that is more artificial and that is not survival at all.

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So, let us talk about the present day interests. In the context of Madhubani painting, Professor Shrutidhari Singh holds a critical question. What makes the ceremonial art forms of Madhubani so uniquely significant in presence of many similar practices in the surrounding locations? There are several congenial factors that can be hypothetically identified that have operated the flow of practice in Madhubani. Was it the ancient literary tradition of Mithila region, and the existence of the tattoo practice that worked in favor to give Madhubani a global identity? Was it because of the intervention of Bhaskar Kulkarni or Pupul Jayakar who provided the artists with papers to enable the art forms grow out of mere ephemeral foundations?

David Szanton and his initiative to form Ethnic Art Foundation to institutionalize the traditional art practice have significantly contributed to the refurbishment of the culture. Famed as a feminine preserve the art forms of Madhubani are now appreciably practiced by the male painters from within and external ethnicities with full glory. They comparatively new to the practice are more radical in subject matters they are secular and often very radical.

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The life of the practice if depends on the customs and rituals of the society, will always be at risk of extinction in the age of cross-cultural and cross media influence. A tradition in those cases requires proper preservation in the form of proper archiving.

Naya village, Midnapur, West Bengal is in the process of turning to a cultural hub for the tourists and art lovers. The artists are conscious about the tradition and willing to add new elements to their expression to maintain the soulfulness of the tradition. Nayagram is turning to an attractive spot for cultural tourism. People visit *Naya* view the art forms with their context.

In Raghurajpur and Srikalahasti the practice emerged as a temple tradition and shares connection to the temple in terms of the themes and motifs. But the art has come a long way to achieve a worldwide recognition for the distinctive style, refined skill and vivid execution.

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The present-day interest stands on its historical and museological value. There are collectors who are instrumental in knowledge preservation to realize the cultural value of folk art specimens.

The conservationists focuses on the preservation of the art forms as living traditions within the changing society.

Both are important for the cultural scene of the country. At the same time the existence of tradition in contemporary should not be a cultural imposition on a society.

The conservationists appear with complex intentions causing the need of folk art to be duly justified as a natural occurrence to a society.

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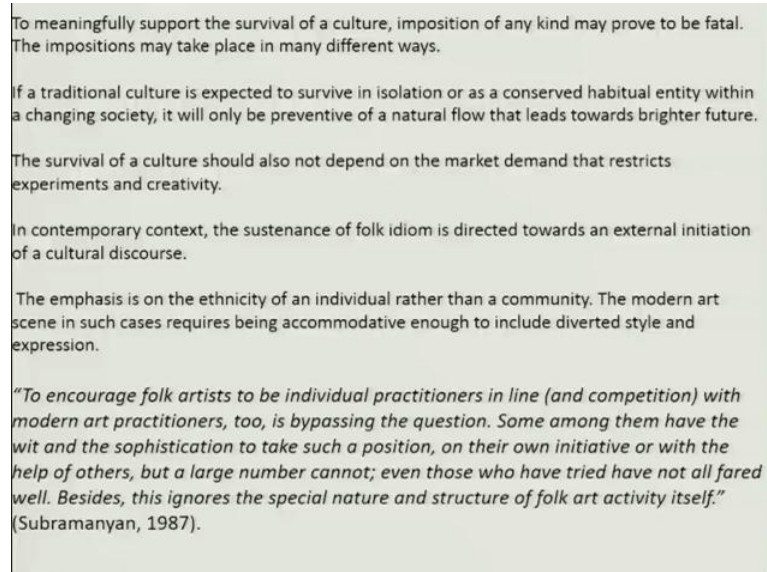
“To nourish pockets of folk culture as specialized reservations in a changing society is hardly realistic even if well-intentioned; such attains in other parts of the world have hardly succeeded. If at all, they have turned out to be ridiculous caricatures of what was intended.” K. G. Subramanyan.

This is very important to see that when we feel that the art work finds its actual meaning when it is attached to its actual context. To simply it is more like the painter from a village painting sitting there on the wall or taking a paper by sitting in the same surrounding and creating the art work and the viewer goes there and sees the artists at work. Once in a while it is ok, but if we just make it the only alternative, then it can only

create during cultural pockets and they will survive in isolation. And that is the risk factor, that within the natural flow of the culture and modernity the kind life that we are leading living today we cannot live those air tight chambers untouched. And do not let the people live normal untimed bound life.

So, creating cultural pocket may look very interesting for the tourists, but finally it is the life of the human beings who are the artists and they are free to choose their profession they are free to behave the way they feel like. So, it does not really depend on how much revenue it generates or how profitable it can be. So it totally becomes a question of a larger argument from that point onwards.

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If a traditional culture is expected to survive in isolation or as a conserved habitual entity within a changing society, it will only be preventive of a natural flow that leads towards brighter future.

The survival of a culture should also not depend on the market demand that restricts experiments and creativity.

In contemporary context, the sustenance of folk idiom is directed towards an external initiation of a cultural discourse.

The emphasis is on the ethnicity of an individual rather than a community. The modern art scene in such cases requires being accommodative enough to include diverted style and expression.

"To encourage folk artists to be individual practitioners in line (and competition) with modern art practitioners, too, is bypassing the question. Some among them have the wit and the sophistication to take such a position, on their own initiative or with the help of others, but a large number cannot; even those who have tried have not all fared well. Besides, this ignores the special nature and structure of folk art activity itself."
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A quote from K. G. Subramanyam “To encourage folk artists to be individual practitioners in line and competition with modern art practitioners, too, is bypassing the question. Some among them have the wit and the sophistication to take such a position, on their own initiative or with the help of others, but a large number cannot. Even those who have tried have not all fared well. Besides, this ignores the special nature and structure of folk art activity itself.”

So, with this we are going to move to our next topic on the alternative contexts when the contexts are changed. We see the art works in a gallery in a museum space, in the wall of a drawing room, in a public space, in a public wall as outdoor sculptures and there must be many other contexts where we place the particular art work that was once connected to a particular ritual that belong to a specific community or even now that is connected to that, but we as viewers separate them from its existing context and see and realize its relevance very very sensitively.

And then we see it very relevantly into a different context which is equally fitted suitable for that particular art work. It makes the entire thought process a little jumbled up and then we try to find out the right direction that with the changing content and with the changing context when it just goes parallel together. The content is no longer the same the context is no longer, the same the elements are partially same. And moreover what is constant then when we say that it is not totally lost; that means, we are holding something we are holding the brand identity of a particular culture, of a particular visual culture which is a something which is connected to a tradition.

So apparently in their appearance, in their outer look they are still holding the characteristic the visual identity of a particular culture that is indicative of its cultural root. But in the change of context or in the change of content in the kind of freedom that is enriching for the tradition we are also facing a whole lot of complex questions here.

So, from here we are moving to the alternative context the place of folk art in the contemporary life style; how we can accommodate folk art into the daily life style, how the folk artists will accommodate folk art in their lives, and then our discussion will direct towards the conclusion very slowly but steadily.