

**Indian Institute of Technology Kanpur**

**National Programme on Technology Enhanced Learning (NPTEL)**

**Course Title**

**Visual Perception and Art: A survey across the cultures.**

**Lecture – 08**

**Folk art**

**by**

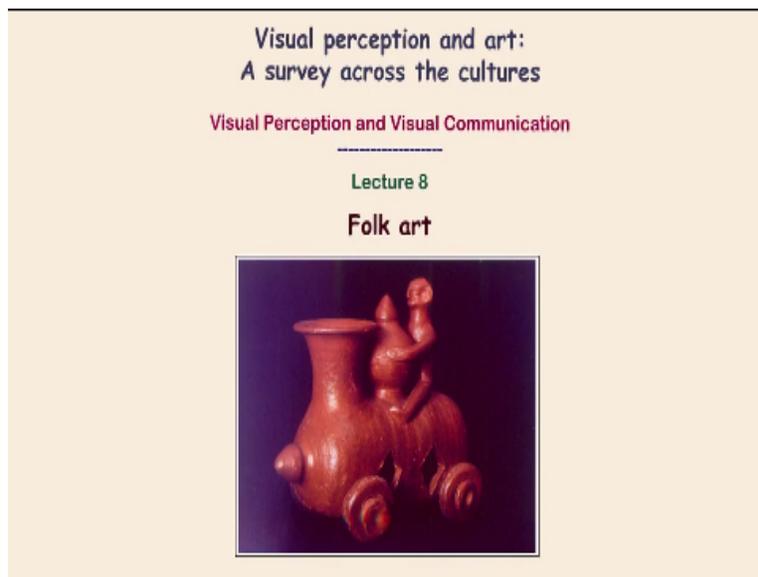
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Hello viewers welcome to MOOCs online course on visual perception and art a survey across the cultures.

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This is the eighth lecture in this course and in this lectures we will focus on folk art in order to understand certain peculiar visual perceptions, folk artists engaged in.

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Simplicity, directness and clarity of forms --  
these are the hallmarks of folk art objects.  
Be it a terracotta figure, or a painting on the wall or scroll  
painting on cloth -- they invariably have the mark of a strong  
connection between the form and the life and the environment.



Whenever you look at any folk art particularly in India you are surely going to notice a couple of characteristic features which are very common to almost any folk art produced anywhere in India those features are simplicity, directness, and clarity of forms. Now these are considered to be the hallmarks of folk art objects be it in a terracotta or a painting on the wall or a scroll painting painted on cloth or paper these folk art forms invariably have the mark of a strong connection between the form and the life and environment.

Hence in order to understand the visual perception involved in the production of folk art we need to take into account the fact that the immediate life and environment around that is the rural settings to live in the customs they follow, the natural environments they live in for so many years these elements do play a crucial role in shaping the visual perception of the folk artists and by the same token these visual experiences and these visual sensibilities inform the folk art they produce almost in every case, in every form, in every material.

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Art of the folk / rural life stems from the immediate environment and the earthy life. Their visual perception is informed with keen observation and intimate knowledge about the objects.



Women painting the walls of their houses.

Art of the folk or art of the rural life stems from the immediate environment and the earthy life, this is a very well-known fact. In folk art in do not find a single objector a single element or a single motif which is not connected to their life or to the environment, or to their geography the setting or to their traditions or belief systems, so their visual perception to is definitely characterized by this connection between the people and their lives, between the people and their environment.

So the folk art itself is very well connected with the life and the environment hence the visual perception is informed with keen observation and intimate knowledge about the objects, so this is also very interesting that there is this factor of keen observation and intimate knowledge about the life various kind of creatures, animals and birds and everything that they deal with that they live within their daily life.

If that is true then why it is so that intent art objects these objects these life is not depicted realistically again a certain kind of visual perception plays a very crucial role in deciding for them or by them the kind of visual communication or visual language they will be using in order to convey what they want to convey. Let us see some examples.

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The visual perception involved in the folk art traditions needs to be understood in terms of the close proximity with their life and immediate surrounding.



Now slow painting what in Bengal is known as Alcona what in the entire North India is known as rangoli or in South India is known as Kolam or bugunku and said it has different names actually is not the same everywhere in India A, B there are two kinds of floor decorations found in India as a part of their ritual as a part of the different ceremonies and occasions observed by not only the folk people but also the rural people Indian people in general.

One kind of Alcona or rangoli and particularly in kolam and bugunku we find is that it is very geometric having abstract geometric patterns. On the other hand you find floral decorations that is decorative derived from the natural settings the geographical surrounding from nature directly. Yet, none of these floor decorations try to copy or imitate or emulate the nature they try to derive something some elements from their direct observation. But they come up with a solution which is entirely graphic and pictorial in their own terms.

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Rituals and religious ceremonies play an important role in shaping the folk art. Their visual perception regarding it thus gets influenced by these rituals and their functions.



Now in order to do that you definitely need a very strong visual perception about pattern about geometry not in an abstract way but the kind of pattern and geometry you see in real life particularly in nature. The second very important aspect about folk art which informs the visual perception in a very significant way is the ritualistic aspects of folk art and folk life, rituals and religious ceremonies do play an important role in shaping the folk art their visual perception regarding this thus gets influenced by these rituals and their functions.

Hence when the potters or the clay doll makers know that the terracotta horses with long leg and elongated shape bodies that they are making will be ultimately kept deep inside the forest under the trees in very, very dense forest. Perhaps, the visual perception that guides the very making of these terracotta figures has something to do with this ultimate setting, ultimate destiny of this terracotta horses.

Now when you look at this terracotta horses here in this photograph obviously you find them very well kind of blend and it is going very well with the forest setting they have become part of this forest very dense forest. But when you look at this terracotta figures in an isolated space separately they do look very stylized very artificial but when you see them inside the forest they do not look as if they are over stylized or artificial.

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At the same time a close relation with subjects make their art very intimate and tangible. They never look like forms from outside this world.



I mean when you look at this whole group of deep brown terracotta horses lying in an absolutely natural setting then their forms, their shapes they are anatomy even their color do not look as if it is a constructed reality they cease to exist as art and they begin to live a new life, the life and which the natural setting. So on the one hand they are visual language the visual style is definitely not a direct imitation of the real life.

But on the other hand when you look at this terracotta horses up close when you look at the details the forms their bodies and the shapes despite having a slightly artistic form or stylized shape in their bodies these terracotta horses also very strongly carry the sense of the real form of a real horse, so this close relation with the subjects make their art very intimate and tangible. Often folk art in many cases look definitely not very natural they look not exactly artificial but they do look fabricated as if a different visual world has been created to embody the ideas in the concept.

Yes, once again to some extent it is true but to a great extent it is also true that the intimate and close connection between these art objects and the natural real setting is never lost, it comes back again and again so the reference to the real life.

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The figures often directly resemble the person crafting it !



The reference to the natural life is always there so strong and with so much of passion that you come across this kind of wooden figures made by the tribal artists from Uttar Pradesh in a way that this figures almost completely resemble and reflect the look and the appearance of the man who is crafting it, he could have made the figure of a man who looks different from him but it does a figure who looks like him, in fact in many of these indigenous communities, folk communities we have seen God images of gods and goddesses look exactly like the people who will be worshipping them.

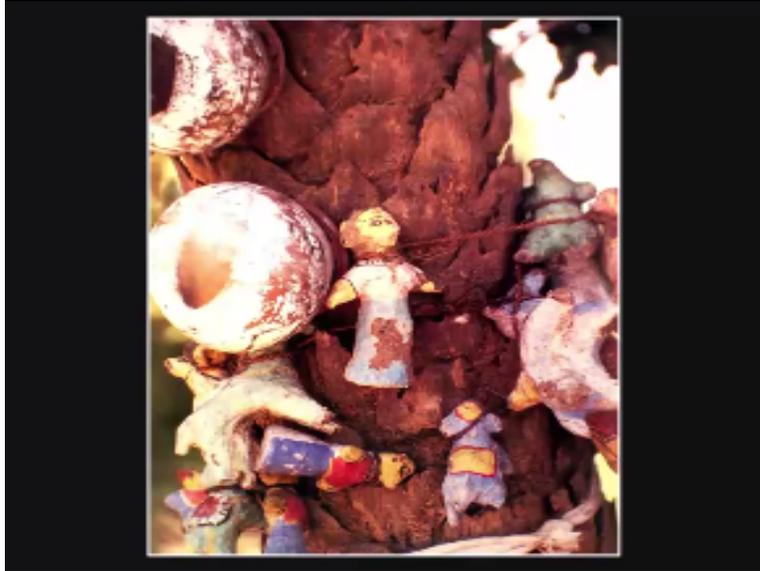
So the image of the worshiper and the image of the worshiped comes really close to each other, so here we see a different kind of visual perception is working very silently trying to create a bond between the worshipper and the worshiped in terms of their appearance. I am talking about this closeness I am talking about this intimate relationship which informs the visual perception of the folk art forms.

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Once again when you look at this terracotta horses placed inside the dense forest then you forget you tend to forget that these horses are over elongated the proportions and the shapes of these horses do not match with the proportions and the shapes of the real horses all these things do not matter at all, because they have become a part of the dense forest they reflect the spirit of the forest. In fact many of these tall elongated terracotta horses reflect visually the tall slender trees they are surrounded by.

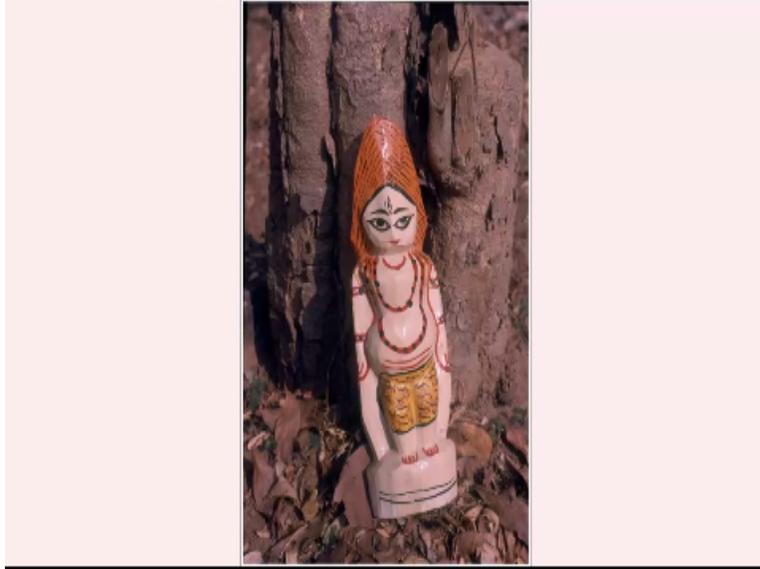
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Then it is the placement the ultimate location of many of these terracotta forms particularly this toys and dolls which are meant to be used as wish fulfilling objects like this one or the previous terracotta horses has got something to do with the way you will make them, because you know ultimately it they will not be placed inside a showcase the way we do in our drawing room, in our living rooms we will certainly have a showcase where inside the glass we will keep these objects as something very stagnant or beautiful art objects.

But in real life in the actual setting of the folk people the rural people these objects find themselves located in a most unusual but very, very natural locations like this one or this one.

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This is the image of a wooden Lord Shiva found to be lying not exactly lying very nicely placed actually right under the tree. At our homes this is not the way we are going to place the image of a Lord Shiva we are not just I mean we are not just going to leave it like that we will create a separate space to give this image of a God a different kind of shelter but for the folk people the space under the tree is also a very powerful, very auspicious, very sacred shelter to leave your image of Lord Shiva.

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So the way we look at folk art in an isolated way might give us a wrong perception regarding their visual perception. In order to study for cut properly, in order to study the visual perception involved in the making of folk art it is better if we get a chance to see them in their original settings.

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Talking about simplicity most of this or rather many of these folk art forms like this one have a stunning simplicity, white is stunning because here simplification does not necessarily mean minimization of course there is an amount of minimization certain things has been simply left out only some very, very essential things have been projected but why it is not simplification in the sense that we are when we try to make an object and when we try to go through the process of simplification with the aim of making an abstract form that is something different.

Here, though to us this particular form may look abstract but the intention behind this figure is not abstraction, the intention is expression and this is the kind of simplification we are talking about simplification with a very strong expressive character for that matter this one.

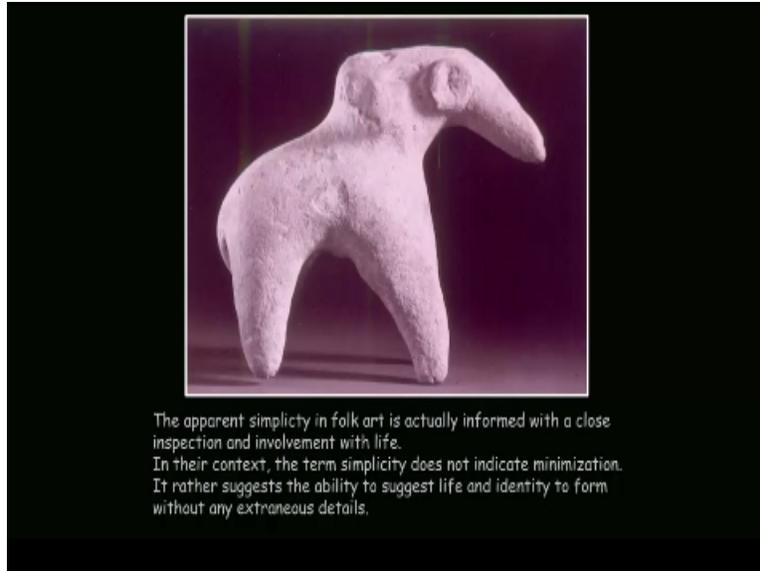
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This is the image of an elephant made in pit, now pit is something very light, very fragile it is something that does not last long yet and it is something that is also fragile because when you craft something out of it when you make a pit doll which is subject to breakage it can crack, it can break so ultimately when you finish a small little let us say doll made in pit it is the pit that is the material that has guided you towards this particular shape and folk artists are completely okay with that.

I am saying things because in the same community and perhaps the same artist would not use or would not come up with a similar shape of the elephant when he is using clay instead of pit then he has clay as his material in his hand he is obviously using it with the aim of evoking some sense of mass and volume because clay lends itself to the sense of volume but pit does not, so material guiding the form the visual form and the visual perception is accepting that process.

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The apparent simplicity in folk art is actually informed with a close inspection and involvement with life. In their context, the term simplicity does not indicate minimization. It rather suggests the ability to suggest life and identity to form without any extraneous details.

Hence, in folk art and for that matter in many other art forms the visual perception has a very strong bonding with the material with which a particular art object is being made. Hence the apparent simplicity in folk art is actually informed with a close inspection and involvement with life and definitely medium in their context, the term simplicity does not indicate minimization it rather suggests the ability to suggest life and identity to form without any extraneous details.

So you can get rid of extraneous unnecessary details and it could reach the core of the form which was actually something that many modern Western artists fans it, but they did not know how to do that many modern Western artists really wanted to reach a kind of formal stage where their sculptures would get rid of all extraneous things and reach a stage with a core idea will be visible nothing else.

But then we have this folk art forms maybe for last 5,000 years in India who were able to do that you were able to demonstrate that.

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You so look at this very, very simple forms of terracotta or clay figures made by artists who were never professional artists there were also farmers they were also working in different activities of life yet almost all of them could actually make something, paint something, do something as a part of the visual and cultural activities and this is one important aspect that I would like to share with you.

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That the visual perception in folk art forms except a few mediums like ducru art which is a metal casting medium and something is most of the folk art practices are shared by everybody that is collectively everybody in the village. If the visual perception also cannot be very individualistic the visual perception who has to be something that is collective, something that could be shared by everybody, something that could be utilized by everybody when somebody picks up a lump of clay or just picks up the brush and the cloth and start painting on the wall.

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So the simplicity that we see in this folk dolls and toys is also a strength is also a quality that ensures that everybody in the village could share this sensibility and make dolls and toys out of that sensibilities, so it is this collective spirit that characterizes the visual perception in focus to a great extent.

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You keep looking at these images and everywhere it will find all these characteristic features very, very strongly and these characteristic features are certainly the path of the visual perception simplicity clarity then this intimate connection which lies the shared sensibility the centricity that could be shared with everybody.

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And also along with that a tremendous freedom of playfulness in the way they paint or sculpt or make objects like this wally painting and in these paintings like wally painting and you can also look at madhubani paintings you can look at the people of all paintings of goods rock everywhere you will see that being an artist who is entitled to use a huge amount of freedom the painters everywhere has conceived space as something very, very elastic as something that is not controlled by a specific sense of time and measurement.

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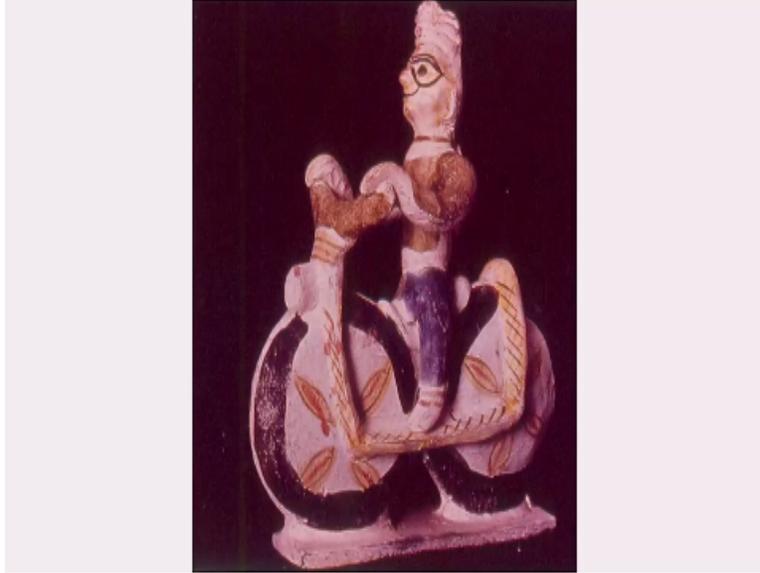


In spite of a long tradition of art and a continuity of art practice, folk art never gets stagnant. Contrary to the idea that folk art often gets trapped in a time-warp, folk art is mostly subject to change and ready to adopt the new elements in a changing life.

So this makes folk paintings also enormously free in their movement in their composition. Now there is another aspect of folk art and obviously that might have influenced the visual perception of the folk artists that is the existence of a long tradition in folk art something that has been existing for maybe hundreds or thousands of years now does that mean that you are not allowing anything contemporary, anything modern to influence your art.

So in spite of a long tradition of art and continuity of our practice folk art never gets stagnant contrary to the idea that folk art often gets trapped in a time warp focus is mostly subject to change and ready to adopt the new elements in a changing life that is why this is an example of a traditional folk art from Bangladesh where you can see mother and child on a bicycle.

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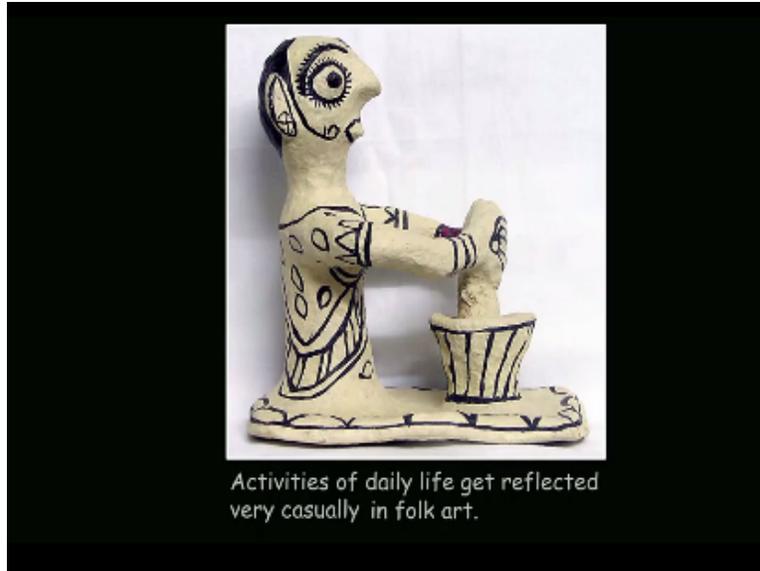
And then from the same kind of community you also say somebody is coming up with a clay doll where you see a man on a scooter so they are fast adopting they are very, very fast in adopting the new elements of life.

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And then you have somebody who is making a railway engine with a man at all who is supposedly the driver, so within the visual sensibilities and visual perception and folk art it is possible to co-op and adopt and accommodate contemporary ideas new ideas folk art does not restrain itself.

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Activities of daily life get reflected very casually in folk art.

And at the same time the activities of daily life get reflected very casually in most of the folk art.

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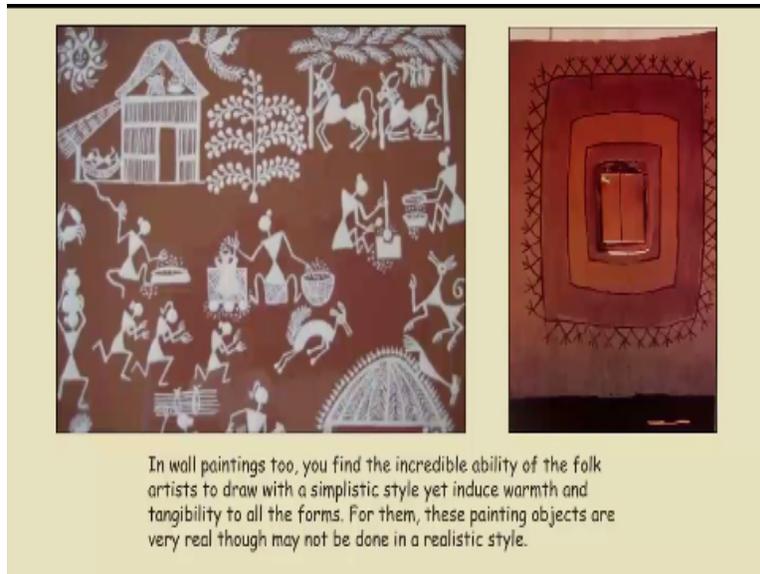
Like this or this or this one where you can see people.

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Village people, elderly people with the souls on their shoulders and sitting on their coat are keeping a very watchful eye on their grassland, on their paddy fields, on their farmlands so that their farms their crops do not get damaged by anybody who is trying to infiltrate.

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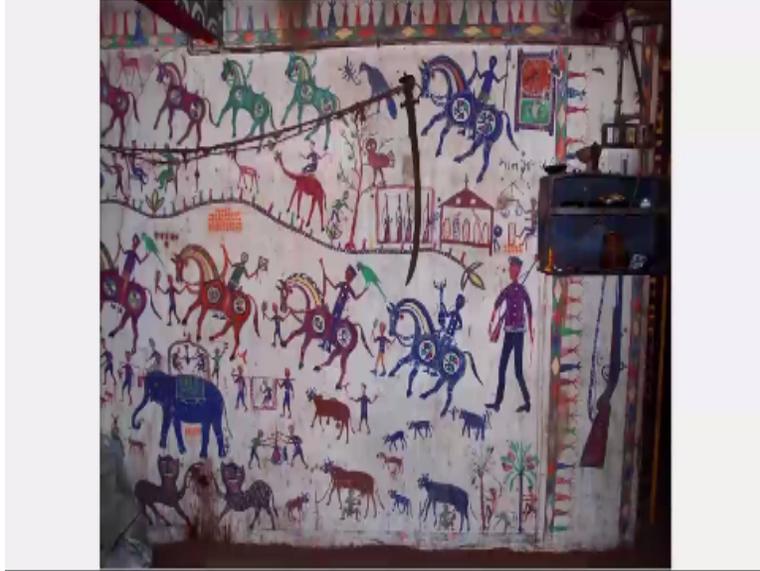
So in the wall paintings you find this incredible ability of the folk artists to draw with a simplistic style yet induce one and tangibility to all the forms, for them these paintings painting objects are very real though may not be done in a realistic style. So whether it is in worldly and any other wall paintings.

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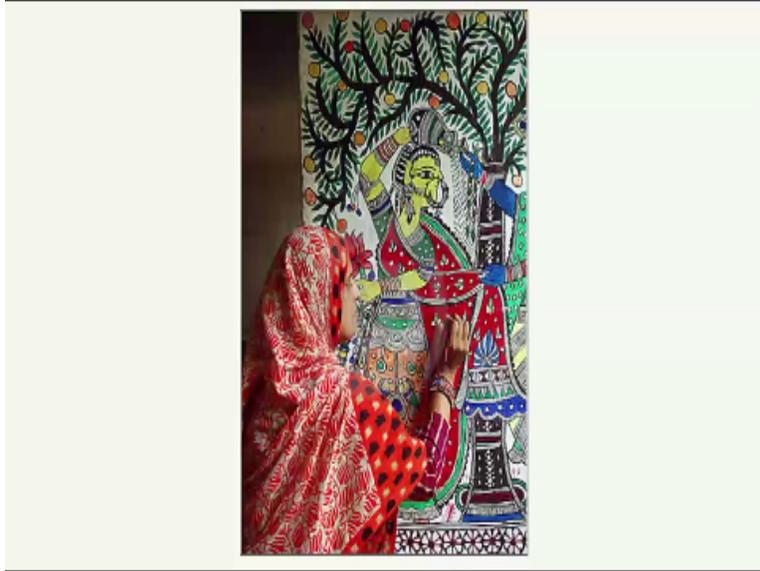
The objects may have a very symbolic value and not immediately realistic or naturalistic path for them particularly for the people who are making it and people who are part of this art and culture nothing is unnatural, nothing is non realistic.

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Even a small little object which looks very non realistic to us does not seem to be non realistic to the people who paint in to the people who see it in that village in that community, so it is a visual perception which informs not only the first visual sensitivity of the person who is painting them but also the visual sensibility of the people who are looking at this painting.

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They all share the similar kind of visual sensibility, so if you tell this movement that what you are painting here like particularly this figures of Radha Bahubali you can see partially the blue skin arms and limbs belonging to Krishna. Now if you ask her why are you drawing her in a very stylized way I am sure she is going to be very, very be used with your question because she does not think that she is stylizing Radha, she is painting and drawing radha the way she thinks she would look beautiful, gorgeous and absolutely appropriate to uphold the spirit of Vaishnavism.

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Similarly if you think these animals and creatures are not exactly very faithful in terms of a very convincing, in terms of the realistic appearance again you are getting wrong, because you are these people and you will find that none of these creatures none of these animals actually look unreal to them. So what kind of visual perception not that they do not know these animals perhaps they know this animal, they see these animals, they encounter these animals more than we do.

Yet, they are not at all bothered with this idea they do not in fact agree to this idea that these animals and creatures look unreal or non realistic.

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Or this plants and flowers look decorative or like a pattern for them it is a real, it is very much a real flower real plant.

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Not just the visual forms, their perception has a similar affinity with the environment and culture in their performance traditions as well. When you listen to a folk music, for example, even if you are not familiar with the language, you can feel the space and the ambience unmistakably.

So lastly I would like to suggest that in a situation like this in a folk art situation in a folk life situation, visual perception or for that matter any perception cannot be seen in isolation or cannot be seen in a detached way or in alienation to each other. So in order to understand the visual perception of a particular community in a particular village try to see at least hear or know about other kinds of perceptions.

For example their musical perception, for example the kind of songs to sing or the odor literature they share then you will be able to feel a connect between the strong, wild, lines and colors that you see in the folk art with the very strong loud and at the same time very beautiful voice in which they sing their songs and also the melodies.

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Not just the visual forms, their perception has a similar affinity with the environment and culture in their performance traditions as well. When you listen to a folk music, for example, even if you are not familiar with the language, you can feel the space and the ambience unmistakably.

So it is not just the visual forms but the perception has a similar affinity with the environment and culture any kind of perception culture in the performance traditions as well so when you listen to a folk music for example even if you are not familiar with the language you can still feel the space and the ambience unmistakably and I have a demonstration here right after this lecture you will watch along with an audio a small little video clip of an ordinary woman of a very, very remote village in Bangladesh singing a song on a particular location.

If you do not follow Bangladesh does not matter you can still feel the pain er of the music the melody and also will be able to fill the perceptual world the encounter they leave they adopt and absorb every day, please watch the video now. Thank you.

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