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CULTURE

## An expansive exhibition takes 400 hand-painted, contemporary pichvais to London

In its biggest showcase yet, Pooja Singhal's *Pichvai: Tradition & Beyond* looks to the future with works that will appeal to the 21st century art collector.

By Neerja Deodhar

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Courtesy of atelier Pichvai: Tradition & Beyond

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“Colourful, textured, and composed of many layers and elements—and yet all of it comes together seamlessly in a pichvai. The first of these artworks were crafted to be hung inside temples, behind the idol. Over time, folk manifestations of these paintings emerged, such as the Kota style, which depicted Shrinathji (Lord Krishna) and the happenings of the temple. The works that pilgrims would take back with them became decorative textiles that reinforced their spiritual belief,” says philanthropist Pooja Singhal.



Courtesy of atelier Pichvai:  
Tradition & Beyond



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As Pichvai: Tradition & Beyond—the atelier she set up in Udaipur—turns ten years old, it embarks on the first ever large-scale exhibition of the painting style in London. राग, भोग, श्रृंगार - Feast, Melody and Adornment, which is being programmed at Mall Galleries, brings forth over 500 works of which many re-imagine and contemporise pichvais. This has been the thrust of Singhal's work as a leader who has brought together artists, trader families and graphic designers.

The display of a few old works that date back to half a century will help put into context the evolution of this art form, says Singhal, which originated in Rajasthan's temple town of Nathdwara. Working out of the chitrakaron ki gali located behind the famed Shrinathji Temple, hereditary artists have been practising the pichvai painting style since the 17th century.

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An aesthetic tradition of the Pushti Marg sect founded by Vallabhacharya, these textile paintings are instantly recognisable for their depiction of a cherubic, seven-year-old incarnation of Krishna, as well as motifs such as lotuses and cows. “The typical pichvai features a number of scenes, from the central composition, which could depict subjects such as the chhapan bhog (an elaborate meal comprising dishes that are offered to the divine), to the 24 ‘boxes’ around it which depict associated festivals,” Singhal explains.

The exhibition’s title, at once poetic and purposeful, is tied to the Pushti Marg way of worship, of which chanting mantras and performing havans are not a part. “Believers worship Shrinathji through music, food offerings and by adorning him in different attires. He has eight, distinct shringars in a day... devotees sing in the sanctum—and the paintings reflect these practices,” Singhal explains. This makes them a suitable introduction for those who are new to the art form, she adds.

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As per custom, work on pichvai paintings was undertaken by father-son duos, while the women of the household took care of grinding, mixing and perfecting the colours—a laborious process. One reason why the tradition faded away was that sons had to spend two decades in training before they could begin to paint by themselves. The long wait to earn an income from art, coupled with the decline in patronage, meant that fewer artists were incentivised to continue in their ancestors' footsteps.

At the atelier, tradition joins hands with necessary modernity. Occasionally, a graphic designer will imagine an idea digitally, which is then sketched out by the pichvai artists. Where emerald and ruby dust were integral to the making of colours, the atelier relied on mineral colours found in the nearby region. The initiative taught Singhal a great deal about the intangible intergenerational knowledge that was crucial to the art form in the past, from the creation of the colour yellow from cow urine, to the use of paint brushes fashioned from squirrel tail hair.

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She regards her work as being a journey rather than a mission. At first, there was no end goal except to bring the painting style back for India in a manner that was respectful to its roots. To this end, she envisioned an atelier where different artists could come together to collaborate. “It was a decision driven by necessity, as it was not possible for one single artist to deliver a painting where the balance, colour and other aspects were just right. The idea was to find artists who could perform each step expertly—from grinding colour, to sketching, to gold leafing,” she explains, adding that she contributes to this joint effort with ideas.

The question of patronage is at the heart of Singhal’s efforts at Pichvai: Tradition & Beyond. “Traditional art forms like pichvai have also not commanded the price that modern and contemporary works or even antiques do in the art market. For one, they’re not signed artworks. They’re also seen as multiple editions of similarly painted subjects,” she laments. “True revival—the sort that has consequences for the artists themselves—will only take place if patronage is a reality.”

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Rather naturally, Singhal began to think and ideate like the art collector she is, asking vital questions about how the atelier's output could be made appealing—and aspirational—to today's audience. She teamed up with stakeholders in the art landscape, such as the Gujral Foundation, to bring pichvais to a contemporary context. Inclusive decisions, such as the absorption of out-of-work Mughal miniature artists into the atelier, have paid off, too. "Potential patrons spoke about how large artworks were difficult to fit into the modern home. We asked the Mughal miniaturists to transform larger artworks into smaller versions—a task their skillsets were well-suited for. And thus were born our 'Nathdwara miniatures,'" Singhal says.

Contemporising the painting style may not have been Singhal's first impulse, but in marrying artist realities and patron tastes, it is a goal she has achieved. It's why, in London, attendees will witness how pichvais can be steeped in tradition—or, a greyscale colour palette.

राग, भोग, श्रृंगार - Feast, Melody and Adornment is on view from 2 to 6 July 2025