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INTERVIEW



By Pooja Singhal

Of Pichwai Arts and Aesthetic





TAKE on Art (ToA) “राग, भोग, शृंगार” evokes aesthetic, devotional, and sensual dimensions of Pichwai painting. How did you conceptualise this triadic framing, and what new interpretive lens does it offer for understanding the tradition today?

Pooja Singhal (PS): ‘राग, भोग, शृंगार’ emerged from years of living with the Pichwai tradition, as a living, breathing language of devotion. These three words capture the richness of the experience: Raag is the music, setting the mood, lending emotional depth to the worship of Shrinathji; Bhog refers to the ritualistic sacred food offerings, in sync with the act of giving and receiving; and Shringar evokes beauty, ornamentation, the celebration of divine love.

By presenting pichwai artworks framed in this tradition, I hope to move beyond a purely visual or historical interpretation and offer a more embodied, nuanced understanding, where devotion, sensuality, and aesthetics coexist. It opens up a contemporary lens through which Pichwai can be seen as a vibrant, evolving art form that continues to resonate across spiritual, cultural, and artistic contexts.

Our forthcoming exhibition in the UK draws from this very framing, titled Feast, Melody & Adornment, offering an English reflection of Bhog, Raag, Shringar and inviting new audiences to engage with the tradition through these universal human experiences.



ToA: As a collector and curator deeply involved with the Pichwai tradition, how do you balance scholarly rigor with visual spectacle, especially in a contemporary gallery setting like Mall Galleries?



PS: As someone who has spent years immersed in the Pichwai tradition, as an observer in my early youth, to being a collector and curator, I see no contradiction between scholarly rigour and visual spectacle – I believe they can powerfully coexist. Pichwai art, by its very nature, is rich in symbolism, ritual context, and historical depth, apart from being visually arresting, designed to awe and to transport.

My approach has always been to honour the integrity of the tradition through careful research, collaboration with artists and historians, and a deep sensitivity to its cultural roots.

This also includes ensuring the continued use of authentic natural pigments, each hand-mixed and historically rooted, to preserve the materiality and luminosity that define Pichwai paintings.

At the same time, when presenting these works in contemporary spaces, such as the India Art Fair, Kochi Biennale, and at Famous Studios in Mumbai, I think carefully about how to create an immersive experience, one that allows viewers to appreciate the craftsmanship as well as to feel the emotional and spiritual resonance that sits at the heart of Pichwai.

Mall Galleries, a distinguished venue under the Federation of British Artists, offers precisely the kind of environment where this balance can flourish. Renowned for fostering artistic excellence through exhibitions and mentorship, it provides an ideal setting for my vision of revitalising Pichwai for global audiences, preserving, yet reimagining tradition in ways that are both rooted and resonant today.



ToA: Pichwai is often viewed through a devotional or ritualistic lens. In curating this exhibition, how do you re-situate the works within a broader art historical and aesthetic framework without dislocating them from their spiritual origins?

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PS: Pichwai has traditionally been viewed through a devotional or ritualistic lens, and rightly so, given its origins in temple culture and its role in acts of worship. What has always struck me is how profoundly aesthetic these works are, how meticulously composed, and how rich in symbolism and storytelling.

In curating this exhibition, my intention has never been to strip the works of their spiritual essence, but rather to expand the lens through which they are viewed. By presenting them within a broader art historical and aesthetic context, I hope to reveal their layered sophistication—the geometry, the colour theory, the evolving iconography—all of which place Pichwai firmly within the canon of great art traditions, not just devotional practice.

At the same time, I take great care to ensure that the spiritual core remains intact. This comes through not only in the subject matter and the use of traditional materials like hand-mixed natural pigments, but also in how the exhibition is designed—allowing space for quiet reflection, for atmosphere, for the feeling of darshan to translate even in a gallery setting.

It is not about dislocating the works from their origins, but rather about offering a wider frame—one that respects their sacred roots while making space for aesthetic and intellectual engagement.



ToA: Could you elaborate on the specific materials, techniques, or iconographic nuances that visitors should pay close attention to in this exhibition? Are there rare or regionally distinct works being presented?

PS: There is so much layered detail in these works that I always encourage viewers to take their time and look closely. Every Pichwai in this exhibition and at my atelier is hand-painted using traditional materials and techniques that have been passed down through generations. The artists work with natural pigments such as stone and earth-based colours, powdered minerals, even precious metals like gold and silver leaf. The brushes are made from squirrel hair, allowing for the fine, intricate detailing that is so characteristic of the form.

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The rich iconography has recurring motifs such as the lotus, the cow, peacocks, and the figure of Shrinathji, rendered with symbolic meaning and precise visual codes. All elements such as the positioning of the deity, the garments, the seasonal settings, tie into the ritual calendar and carry significance far beyond the decorative.

This exhibition also presents my own curatorial interventions, ways of engaging with the tradition through a contemporary lens. While staying true to the spirit of Pichwai, I have introduced subtle shifts in colour palettes, forms, and framing devices, such as including architectural elements like jharokhas, traditional Rajasthani windows, reimagined as compositional structures that frame the narrative. The colours, too, while grounded in natural pigments, have been explored with a more modern sensibility with softer tonal variations, and unexpected pairings that speak a global visual language.

There are also works on display that draw from regionally specific styles such as the Deccan pichwais with gold and silver foiling, variations in linework and scale, such as in the temple maps that depict Shrinathji's haveli and the town of Nathdwara, that comprises of a maze of streets and architecture showcasing miniatures to large-scale compositions, textile patterning, or the portrayal of flora that reflect the distinct hands and histories of regions. Some pieces are rare in that they experiment with scale and composition in ways not typically seen in traditional temple settings.

The upcoming exhibition, Feast, Melody & Adornment, is a dialogue between the past and present, between ritual and art history, aimed at leaving viewers and visitors with a sense of both reverence and renewed curiosity for this tradition.



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ToA: In recent years, there has been a revivalist interest in Indian miniature and textile arts. How does your exhibition contribute to or complicate this resurgence, particularly in the diasporic or global context?

PS: In recent years, the world has witnessed a marked revival of Indian miniature painting and textile arts, driven by sustainable fashion movements, designer–artisan collaborations, and an appetite for heritage in the global diaspora. My exhibition does more than simply revive the Pichwai artform – it complicates the resurgence by positioning these works simultaneously within devotional, aesthetic, and global narratives.

On one hand, I remain committed to authenticity—showcasing natural pigments, traditional motifs, and regional nuances, touchstones that provide continuity with the past and root the exhibition in cultural and ritual significance.

On the other hand, I intervene both visually and conceptually, by introducing contemporary colour palettes, compositional devices like jharokha frames, and architectural motifs that resonate with global aesthetics (also mentioned above). This is akin to what other revivalist efforts are doing in textiles, blending tradition with sustainability and modern design, as noted in broader Indian craft revival movements .

In the diasporic and international context, this duality becomes especially meaningful. Visitors from South Asian backgrounds find recognition in the familiar iconography and ritual intimacy, while others encounter Pichwai as part of a wider art-historical trajectory alongside miniature painting dialogues.

Via my show, I am looking at reframing the revival trend. By holding heritage and innovation, forging cross-cultural connections without diluting spiritual essence, I hope to demonstrate that Pichwai remains a living, evolving tradition, capable of speaking to both rooted and global imaginations.



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ToA: How have the participating artists—many of whom inherit this tradition— responded to your curatorial direction? Are they introducing innovations in scale, pigment, or narrative?

PS: Working with artists who have inherited this tradition has been very fulfilling. They bring a generational understanding to Pichwai, yet have responded to my curatorial direction with openness and creativity, and have come together to help create a space where tradition and innovation can coexist.

Artists are exploring new scales, from large-format works to intimate miniatures and experimenting with natural pigments in softer, more contemporary palettes. Some have shifted narrative focus to elements like flora, fauna, or symbolic details that often surround the central deity, offering fresh visual perspectives.

I invite them to see tradition as a living, evolving language, one that welcomes reinterpretation while staying rooted, and the artists I work with have engaged with this vision, which is both inspiring and deeply affirming.



ToA: As a long-time collector, what first drew you to the world of Pichwai? Has your relationship to the tradition evolved over time—from devotion to curation, and from intimacy to exhibition?

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PS: My journey with the Pichwai artform began from a place of emotional resonance. I grew up surrounded by Indian textiles, objects, and stories; my mother was an avid collector, and the language of aesthetics was something I absorbed naturally. When I encountered my first Pichwai, I was struck by its layered symbolism, devotional intensity, and sheer visual intricacy. It felt like a world within a frame, spiritual, yet profoundly artistic.

What began as a personal passion evolved into a more deliberate pursuit. My collection today spans centuries, with pieces dating as far back as the 16th century. The collection includes textiles, works on paper, and more recent interpretations by contemporary artists. I've always been drawn to the diversity within the tradition, how the same iconography can take on entirely new expressions depending on region, scale, or period. My aim has been to build a collection that charts the evolution of Pichwai over the last 300 to 400 years, as a sort of cultural history.

Over time, my relationship with the tradition has deepened. From devotion to curation, and exhibiting work, the shift has been organic. Founding Pichvai Tradition & Beyond a decade ago was a natural step. I realised that while Pichwai held reverence in traditional settings, it had not yet received the contemporary engagement it deserved. Through the atelier, I work closely with artists to preserve the rigour of the form as well as to reinterpret it for today's audience.

For me, curation is storytelling, creating thoughtful conversations around heritage. Being an aesthete means holding space for both tradition and innovation through objects, research, and experience. My journey has been about commitment – to craft, to legacy, and to keeping these traditions alive.



ToA: Can you reflect on a particular work in the exhibition that holds deep personal or philosophical resonance for you, and why it became a cornerstone of this curatorial narrative?

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PS: The pichwai work in greyscale, in particular, holds a personal space for me because it was the first time there was a departure from tradition. It was a huge journey of discovery — it took a lot of thought and many iterations for us to perfect it. As one enters the show, there is a small paper miniature greyscale temple map, and that work truly encapsulates everything that came together for me, a keystone artwork. One was the miniaturisation and the finesse of that map, which I'd always seen in a large textile format, executed by miniature artists at my atelier. And rendered in greyscale, it offered an interpretation of the Pichwai artform that I could never have envisioned or imagined while growing up. That piece, in particular, holds deep personal significance for me.



ToA: This exhibition is being staged at Mall Galleries, a space known for showcasing classical and contemporary visual arts in London. What kind of dialogues do you hope to spark between global audiences and this tradition?

PS: Mall Galleries is a space that balances tradition and contemporary visual art beautifully, making it the perfect setting for this exhibition. It allows us to present Pichwai artwork as devotional art, and a living, evolving tradition that holds its own within a global artistic context.

What I really hope to spark is curiosity. For those unfamiliar with the artform, I want the detail, the colour, and the form to draw them in and then allow space for deeper engagement with its history and symbolism. And for those from the diaspora or with cultural ties to the tradition, I hope it offers a sense of recognition and pride, while also showing how the form continues to grow.

This exhibition is about conversation between local roots and global relevance. If it opens up even one person's understanding of Pichwai as something aesthetically rich, intellectually layered, and emotionally resonant, then I feel that I would term the exhibition a success.



ToA: In an era where visual storytelling is being redefined by technology, how do you envision sustaining interest in handmade traditions like Pichwai among younger or digitally native audiences?

PS: This is a question I think about often. The key lies in experience. Younger audiences are incredibly visually literate, and also value authenticity. When they encounter the tactility, precision, and symbolism of handmade Pichwai up close, it speaks to something deeper than the digital scroll.

Through curation, storytelling, and even collaborations across design and music, we can make traditions such as the Pichwai art form feel alive and relevant. An example would be how I often incorporate raag (music) and serve chhappan bhog at exhibition previews, rituals of sound and offering, all in the worship of Shrinathji. At a show at Bikaner House, renowned classical Indian singer Sonam Kalra enchanted the audience with a soulful performance of musical devotion.

It is not about resisting technology, but about using it to amplify the richness of what’s handmade. When the younger generation sees the care and time behind each work, it naturally commands attention.

Feast, Melody, Adornment, 2 Jul 2025 – 6 Jul 2025, West, East and North, Galleries, London.

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