

PEEK DISTRICT

Pichvai, devotional textiles that hang behind idols of Krishna, are typically glimpsed only for a moment in Indian temples. This July, however, a showcase in London exalts and updates the artform – and is sure to leave more than a fleeting impression

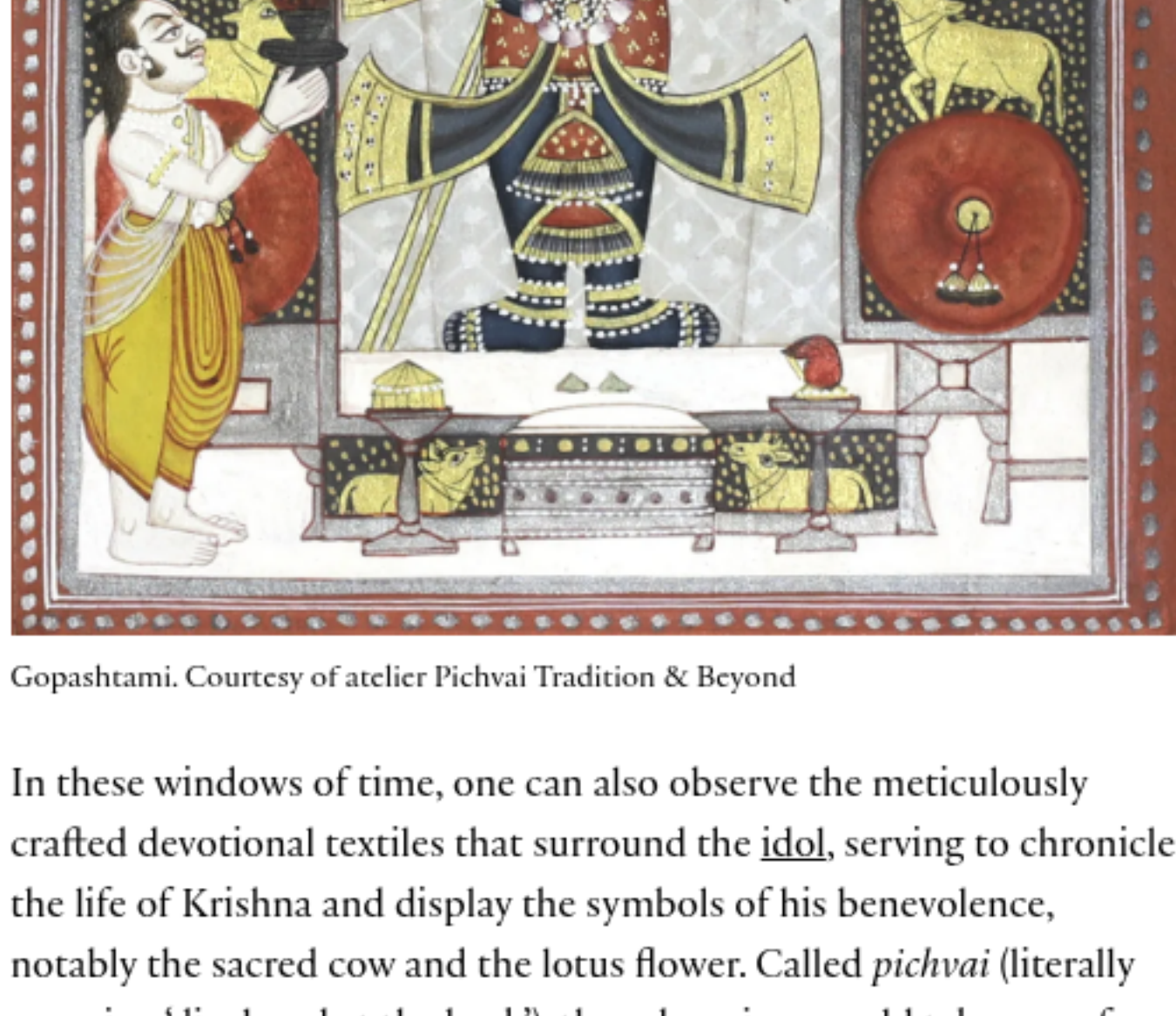


By Holly E J Black
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Gopashtami, 24K Gold-Silver and Natural Color on basil. Courtesy of atelier Pichvai Tradition & Beyond

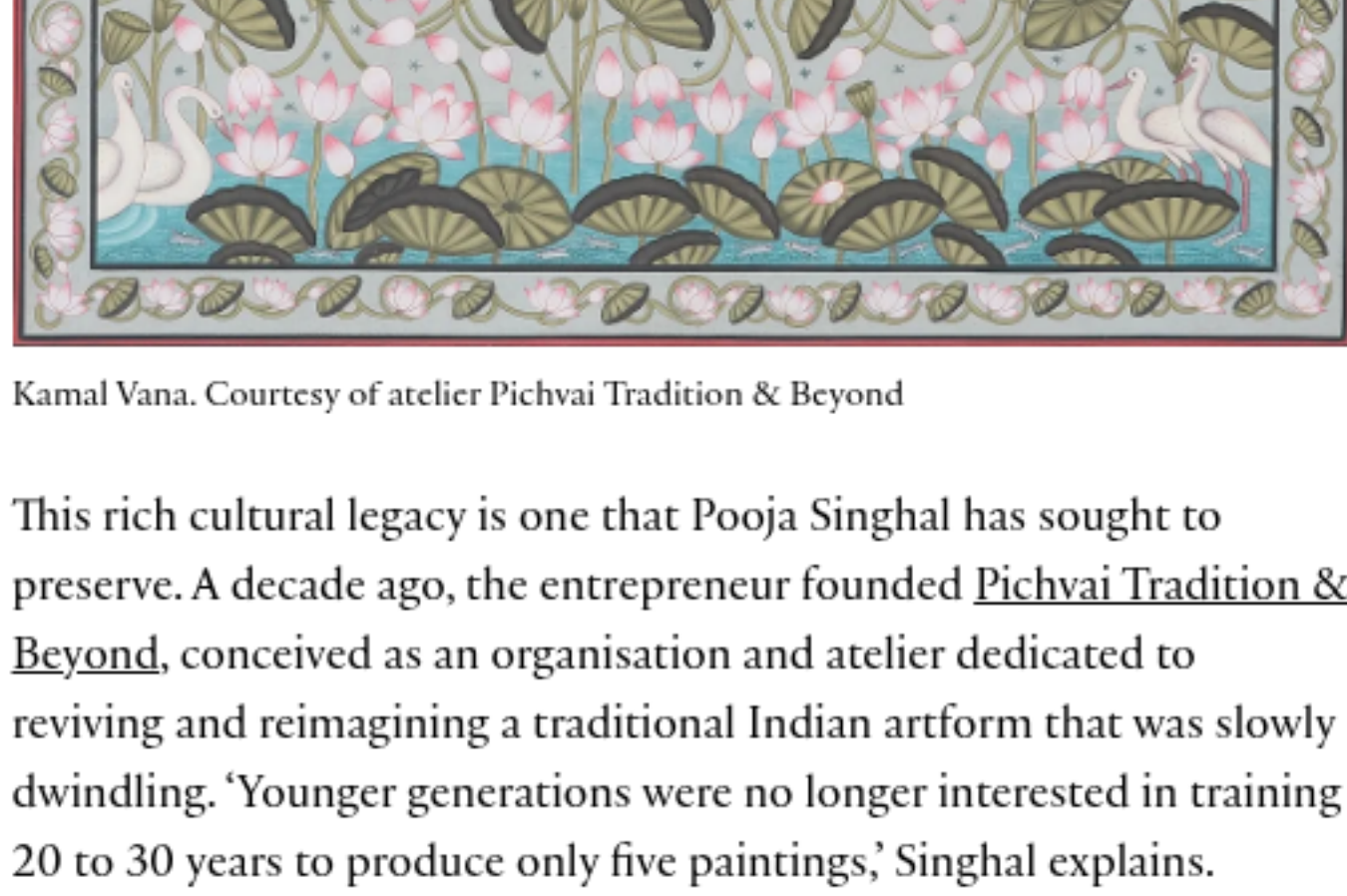
For over 400 years, members of the Hindu Pushtimarg sect have made the pilgrimage to the temple at Nathdwara in Udaipur, to catch sight of Shrinathji. This cherubic incarnation of Lord Krishna is kept largely hidden, apart from during eight select moments per day, when the doors to the shrine are opened to allow a brief *darshan* (sacred glimpse) of the statue carved from black marble.



Gopashtami. Courtesy of atelier Pichvai Tradition & Beyond

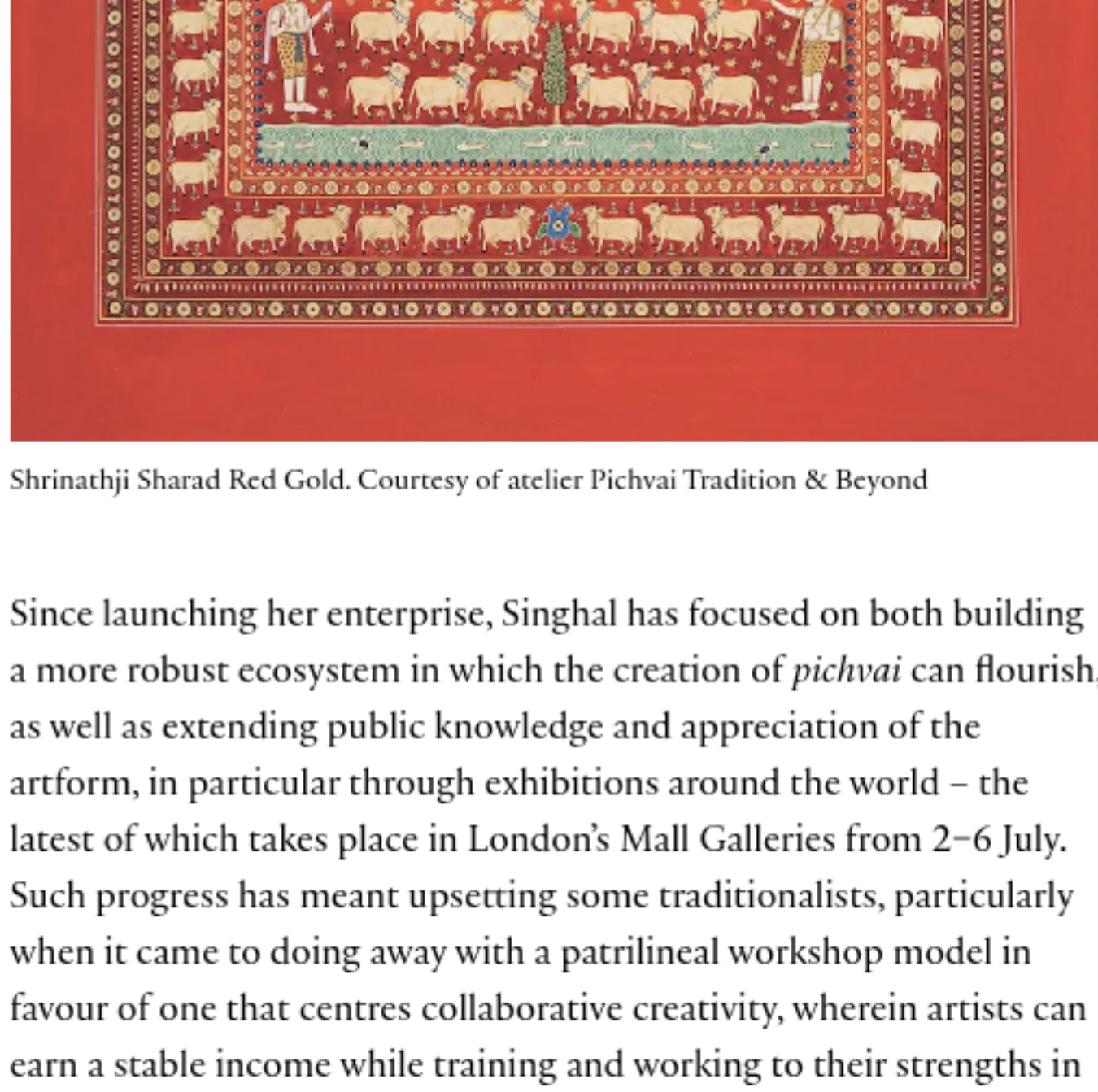
In these windows of time, one can also observe the meticulously crafted devotional textiles that surround the idol, serving to chronicle the life of Krishna and display the symbols of his benevolence, notably the sacred cow and the lotus flower. Called *pichvai* (literally meaning 'displayed at the back'), these hangings could take years for a master craftsman to complete, though this did not stop many from capitalising on the appetite for this particular form of devotional art.

By the 17th century, Nathdwara was home to the Lane of Painters, a creative community several hundred strong, within which humbler interpretations of *pichvai* were sold as worshipful mementoes destined for private homes and businesses, most of which were inspired by hasty sketches made in moments of *darshan*.



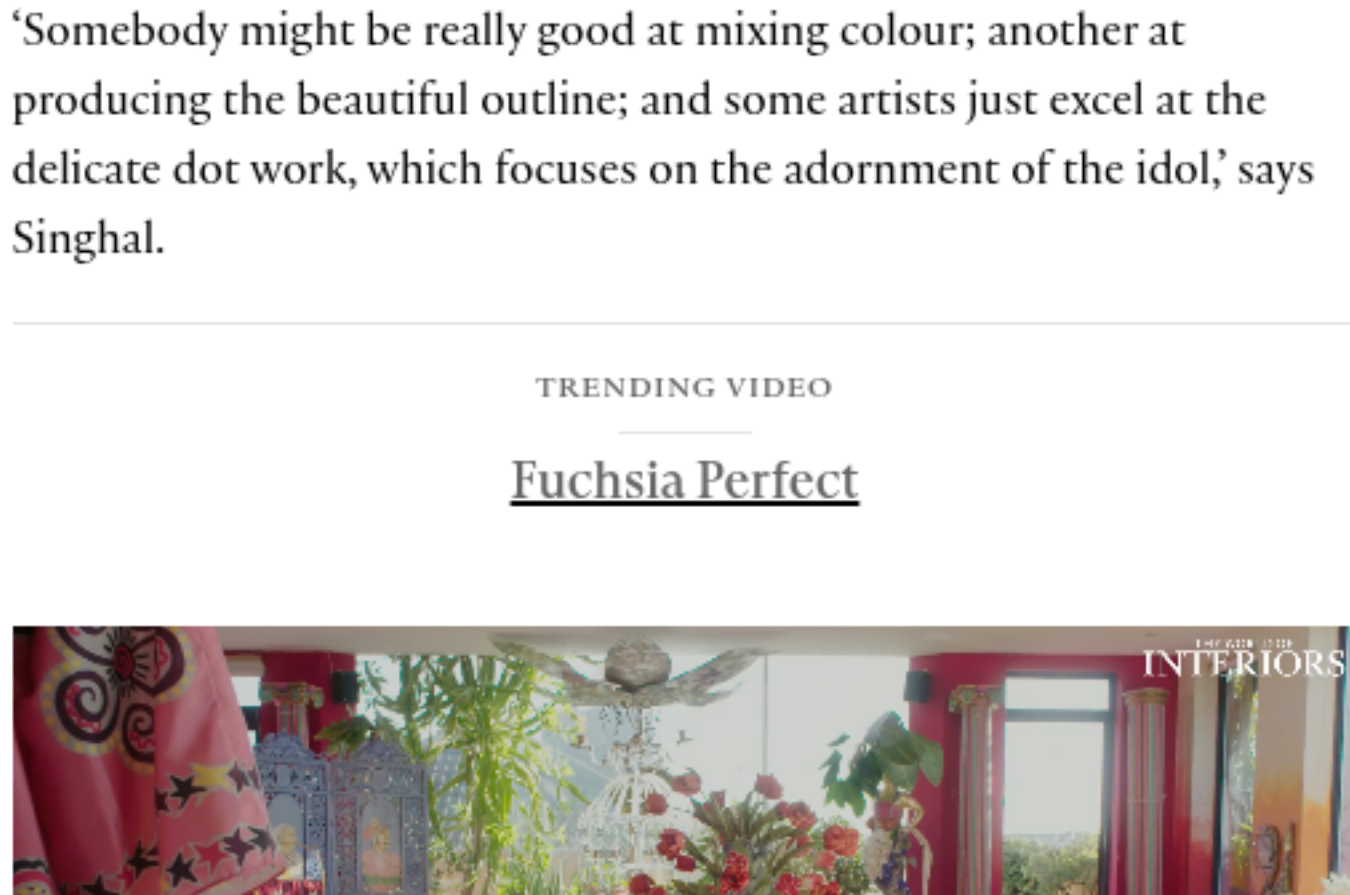
Kamal Vana. Courtesy of atelier Pichvai Tradition & Beyond

This rich cultural legacy is one that Pooja Singhal has sought to preserve. A decade ago, the entrepreneur founded [Pichvai Tradition & Beyond](#), conceived as an organisation and atelier dedicated to reviving and reimagining a traditional Indian artform that was slowly dwindling. 'Younger generations were no longer interested in training 20 to 30 years to produce only five paintings,' Singhal explains. 'Patronage had also dried up, because collectors were looking elsewhere for art.'



Shrinathji Sharad Red Gold. Courtesy of atelier Pichvai Tradition & Beyond

Since launching her enterprise, Singhal has focused on both building a more robust ecosystem in which the creation of *pichvai* can flourish, as well as extending public knowledge and appreciation of the artform, in particular through exhibitions around the world – the latest of which takes place in London's Mall Galleries from 2–6 July. Such progress has meant upsetting some traditionalists, particularly when it came to doing away with a patrilineal workshop model in favour of one that centres collaborative creativity, wherein artists can earn a stable income while training and working to their strengths in a group environment.

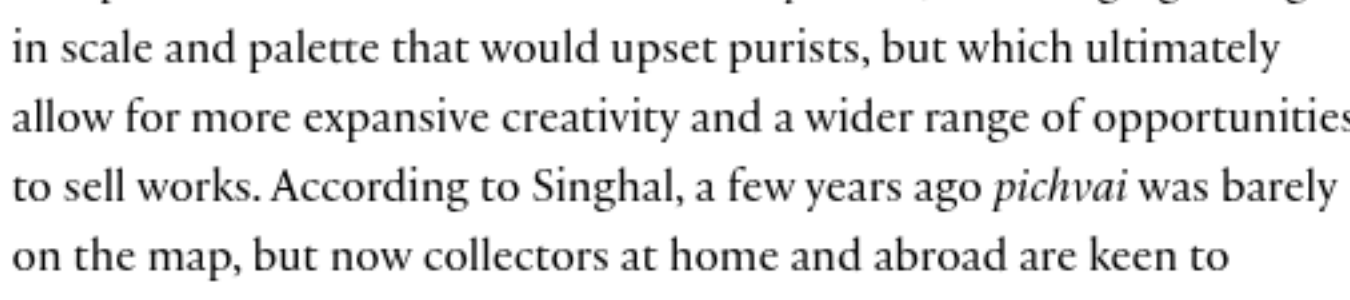


The Haveli of Shrinathji – Red. Courtesy of atelier Pichvai Tradition & Beyond

'Somebody might be really good at mixing colour; another at producing the beautiful outline; and some artists just excel at the delicate dot work, which focuses on the adornment of the idol,' says Singhal.

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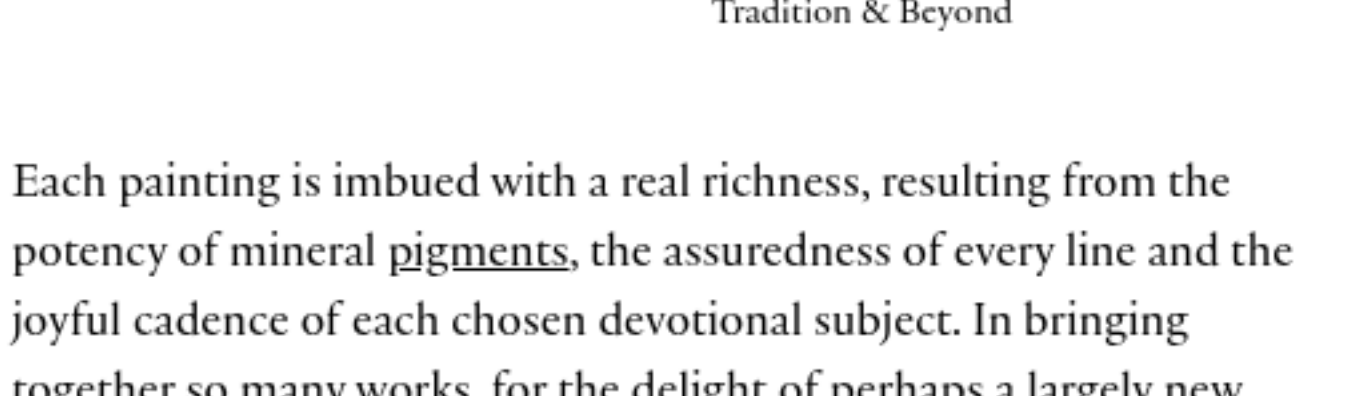
As well as updating traditional ways of working, the entrepreneur has also pushed the aesthetic boundaries of *pichvai*, encouraging changes in scale and palette that would upset purists, but which ultimately allow for more expansive creativity and a wider range of opportunities to sell works. According to Singhal, a few years ago *pichvai* was barely on the map, but now collectors at home and abroad are using social media to showcase the form's influence on them and subsequent interpretations.



Gopies Black and Gold. Courtesy of atelier Pichvai Tradition & Beyond

When faced with the many works now on show in London, it is easy to see why they are all so enamoured. Singhal's installation, comprising hundreds of examples, articulates not only the history of the practice, but its vibrant and multifaceted future. There are images gilded with 24 carat-gold, representing the cows, peacocks and foliage embedded within the sacred festival of Gopashtami. Others display detailed architectural vistas revealing a top-down view of the Shrinathji temple, or else scenes centring deific worship in varying degrees of kaleidoscopic and grayscale colours.

The noble art of repetition, in all its meditative glory, is also exultantly on show in recurrent patterns of lotus leaves and prancing bovines, the latter of which are also found against backdrops of zig-zags, fretwork and other repeat motifs.



Krishna As Govinda Zig Zag. Courtesy of atelier Pichvai Tradition & Beyond

Graded Lotus. Courtesy of atelier Pichvai Tradition & Beyond

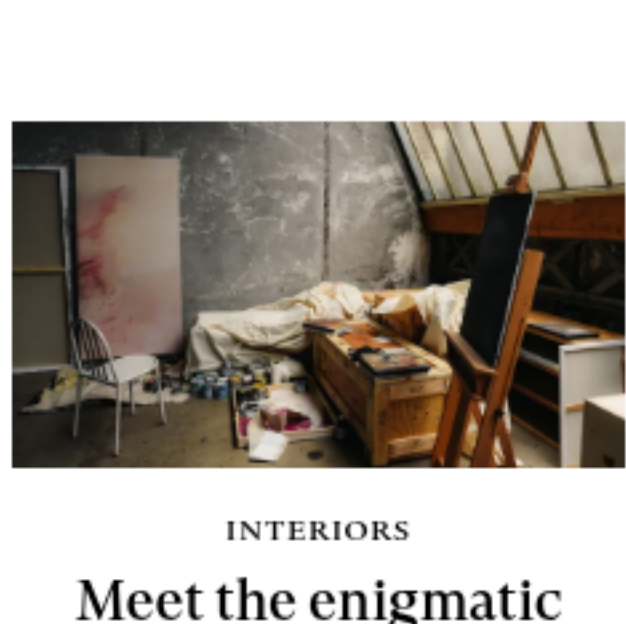
Each painting is imbued with a real richness, resulting from the potency of mineral pigments, the assuredness of every line and the joyful cadence of each chosen devotional subject. In bringing together so many works, for the delight of perhaps a largely new audience, this *pichvai* exhibition is offering viewers much more than a glimpse into a sacred world: it is debuting a vital revival.

'Feast, Melody and Adornment: The Art of Pichvai' runs from 2–6 July at the Mall Galleries, London. For more information, visit [pichvaitraditionandbeyond.com](#)

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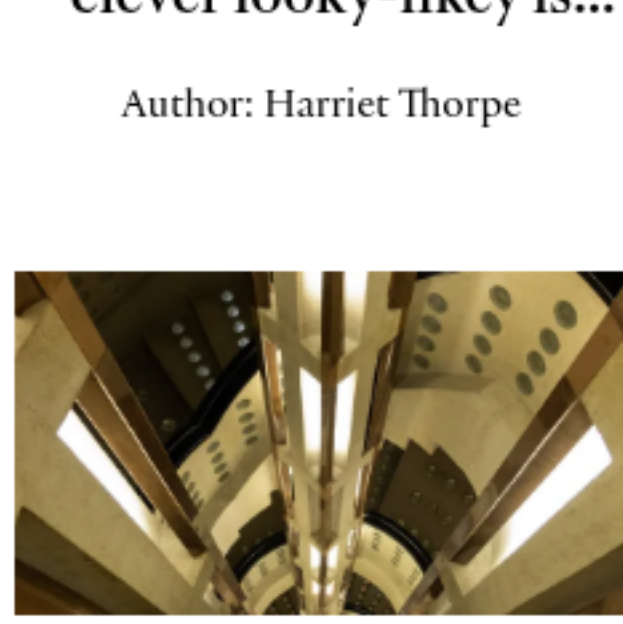
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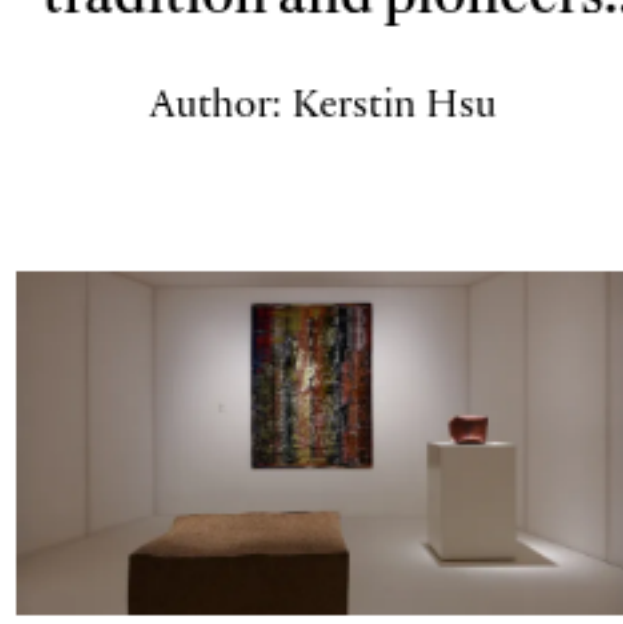
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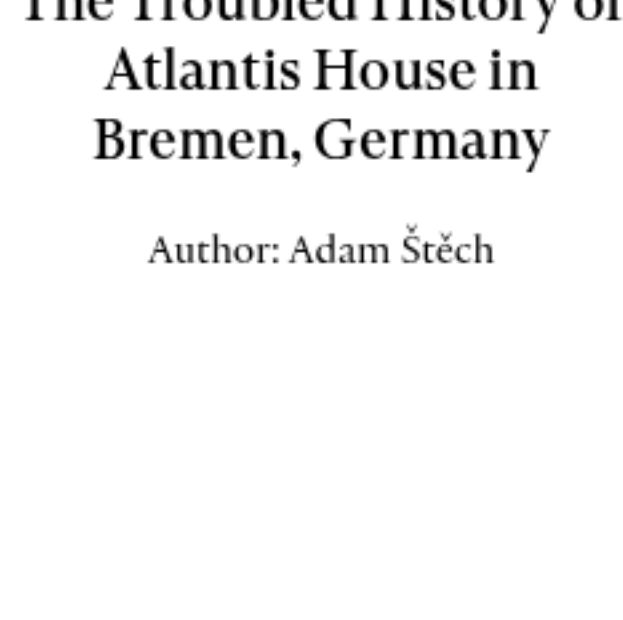
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