



LEFT: KRISHNA AS GOVINDA ZIG ZAG  
RIGHT TOP: MOR  
RIGHT BELOW: CHANDRAMA KA SHRINGAR  
IMAGES: COURTESY OF ATELIER PICHVAI TRADITION & BEYOND

# INTO INDIA

Displaying more than 400 hand-painted works, an exhibition at Mall Galleries is the first of its kind to bring pichvais to London on a major scale. For curator Pooja Singhal, it marks a major milestone in revitalising the sacred art form

WORDS WILL MOFFITT



**T**he cows face each other in rows of three, their noses almost touching, their bodies dotted with red handprints and their heads adorned with regal, feathered caps. Black and white zigzags criss-cross behind them. In one panel they run vertically in a strip of black and tangerine. In other works, robed figures worship and serve a blue-faced deity; a majestic bird spreads its khaki-shaded wings, unveiling pink patterns; and an ancient cityscape is mapped out in granular detail.

Welcome to the world of pichvais, ornate, hand-painted textiles traditionally hung behind the idol of Shrinathji, a cherubic incarnation of the Indian deity Lord Krishna. Deriving from the Sanskrit words pichh (back) and vai (hanging), these artworks have served as religious tapestries, hanging in Hindu temples – most commonly in the city of Nathdwara in Udaipur, a site of pilgrimage for centuries – and serving as visual relics or sacred mementos.

Despite being familiar in India, pichvais are mostly unknown to western eyes. A few high-profile institutions such as the V&A have antique pichvais in their collections and have given them brief moments in the spotlight, but no London exhibition has displayed them on a grand scale.

However, next month a show at Mall Galleries will feature more than 400 of the hand-painted works from the past 100 years, allowing visitors to explore the historical significance of the 400-year-old art form.

Titled *Feast, Melody and Adornment*, the show has been organised and curated by Pooja Singhal, an Indian businesswoman and philanthropist who has made it her calling to revitalise and champion the art form.

Singhal, who grew up in a culturally appreciative family – her mother was a dedicated collector of traditional artworks – has spent the best part of 16 years reviving the pichvai craft.

“When I started the revival, India was in the throes of minimalism and contemporary art was fashionable,” Singhal tells me. “I grew up with this tradition. But at the time we were all about concrete and steel and white and black. At that point, I didn’t know if people like me still resonated with the traditional stuff.”

Not only had Indian audiences become less enamoured with the traditional pichvai medium, but the quality of the craft itself had been diluted. As commercialisation took over, patronage declined as rich royal families stopped

commissioning work as regularly. Where artisans once worked patiently in a meticulous, time-consuming fashion, mass production birthed the age of pichvai kitsch: hundreds upon hundreds of works produced with stencils that regurgitated clichéd motifs and used cheaper materials to the detriment of more elaborate, nuanced storytelling.

“The [classic] mineral colours were so beautiful that they kept the aesthetic very balanced. Now, the minute you substitute mineral colours with chemical colours, the aesthetic is almost jarring, and that’s what started to happen,” Singhal explains. “As the materials changed, the look became terrible. They wanted to make cheaper things.”

Unable to find solitary artists making the same quality of works, Singhal started her own atelier, assembling talented artisans under one roof. By controlling and encouraging the use of traditional materials and practices, while ensuring her artists have “a stability of income and an ability to sustain themselves”, Singhal has given the historic pichvai craft a new lease of life.

Attention-grabbing exhibitions in India have also helped to engage a new generation of collectors and supporters. To promote the art form, Singhal has led exhibits and talks at the India Art Fair and Kochi-Muziris Biennale, and even presented India’s largest pichvai exhibition, containing more than 400 works, in Mumbai.

To excite a new generation of pichvai enthusiasts, Singhal has also started to commission works that utilise a more sleek, modern palette and stray beyond purely religious iconography. Some of these contemporary pichvais are more minimalist in style, focusing on lotus motifs and chevron prints.

“I’ve taken the old compositions and changed the aesthetic to move it forward, to secure a larger group of patrons. The compositions being painted are static, but they’re not repetitive,” Singhal says.

“I don’t know how many beautiful compositions exist of one festival, there may be 20 ways in which it was painted. This show has 350 works on the walls, and we have about 300 works we are bringing in storage. That’s the depth and width of this art form. Repetition was never the issue. The issue was quality.”

*Feast, Melody and Adornment* will run from July 2-6 at Mall Galleries, The Mall

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