

PICHWAI ON A NEW PATH



This traditional art form has made its way from temple walls to contemporary spaces, having found new expression in modern interiors, writes gallerist **Pooja Singhal**

Once reserved for the sanctum walls of temples in Nathdwara, Rajasthan, *Pichwai* art is now experiencing a remarkable renaissance across global galleries and curated homes. With its roots tracing back over 400 years, this devotional art form, which originated to honour Shrinathji, a cherubic incarnation of Lord Krishna, is now being reimagined for modern interiors and audiences.

Traditionally hand-painted on cloth using natural mineral-based pigments and intricate iconography, *Pichwai* paintings served as spiritual backdrops depicting scenes from the life of Shrinathji and the changing seasons. However, by the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the style began to languish.

‘As awareness grows, so does demand — *Pichwais* now appear at global fairs, on curated textiles, and across the interiors of modern homes’

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Several factors contributed to its decline, including the erosion of royal and temple patronage, the rise of cheaper printed reproductions, dwindling numbers of skilled artisans, and a lack of institutional support. Even in Nathdwara’s Chitrakaron ki Galli, once a thriving enclave of painters, the hum of activity had quietened, with fewer artists sustaining the tradition. The age-old *guru-shishya* model, passed down from father to son, had begun to fade, breaking the generational continuity that once anchored *Pichwai*.

I first sensed the dissonance during a visit to Udaipur, where my ancestral home is, when I set out to purchase a *Pichwai* for my home. There were so few artists, even fewer authentic works, and almost no documentation or curatorial framing. This made me realise just how fragile and unsupported the traditional art ecosystem had become.

Contrastingly, contemporary art was flourishing, buoyed by a growing gallery infrastructure, formalised systems of authentication and sales, and increasing visibility on international platforms such as biennales and art fairs.

While *Pichwai* art struggled to remain relevant, contemporary practices were being legitimised in ways traditional art forms were





across the interiors of modern homes, as both wall statements and storytelling devices.

I've seen it enliven wallpapered salons and frame the drawing rooms of high-design residences. Sought after by seasoned collectors and first-time buyers alike, *Pichwais* have been incorporated across the spectrum, from full murals in heritage homes or a single greyscale lotus framed above a console, emerging as statement pieces with striking versatility.

Designers are drawing from its visual vocabulary in increasingly inventive ways. Beyond interiors, the tradition is being reimaged by contemporary artists who have brought *Pichwai*-inspired imagery into the sculptural realm using repoussé techniques. Today, hand-embroidered silk panels are in vogue, and lifestyle and design brands retail home décor, such as table linen, brass trays and crockery with engraved *Pichwai* iconography. What we are witnessing is so much more than a revival — it's a growing movement.

Patrons, collectors, and designers alike are embracing *Pichwai* art in reimaged contexts and reconstructions, drawn to its layered symbolism and visual gravitas. This marks a shift, a widening of the lens through which contemporary art is understood, with a growing recognition that contemporary need not mean new — it's relevant and resonant instead.

The curated evolution of *Pichwais* is paving the way for other Indian art forms to step into the present without losing their past. ■

not. It was in this context that I founded my atelier, Pichvai Tradition & Beyond, with the singular aim of bringing the art back into cultural and visual currency. The first step was to anchor it firmly in its traditional context, but it quickly became clear that the market for conventionally rendered *Pichwais* was limited.

This led to a process of reimagining the form to engage contemporary audiences in a sustained, meaningful manner. New formats such as miniaturised works, large-scale panel compositions, and a fresh colour vocabulary, which ranged from greyscale to soft pastels, were introduced. Architectural elements like *gharokhas* (traditional arched windows) and pared-back motifs like the now-popular isolated lotuses, cows, and forms of trees, gave the art a more modern, graphic appeal.

These reinterpretations helped bring *Pichwai* style into the contemporary design conversation, with interior designers and homeowners seeking custom commissions that offered cultural texture while aligning with muted palettes and modern interiors. Through the atelier, we were also able to make the art more accessible — visually, economically and logistically — offering curated works for purchase and commissioning that felt relevant to today's spaces, sensibilities, and scale.

A turning point came with our landmark collaboration with the Gujral Foundation, known for their support of contemporary, experimental practices. For the first time, over 150 *Pichwai* works were made accessible to the public at this scale, an unprecedented moment for a traditional art form that had limited access. The scale and curatorial rigour of this project reframed how *Pichwai* paintings could be experienced, placing it firmly within the context of contemporary art and design.

This visibility laid the foundation for its formal showcase at India Art Fair, making it the first traditional Indian art form to be invited to one of Asia's leading platforms for modern creativity. Since then, *Pichwai* art has also been presented at the Kochi-Muziris Biennale, further cementing its place in the wider cultural conversation.

Together, these milestones have helped bring craft, history, and aesthetics into modern interiors and collections, demonstrating how heritage practices can find new life in today's visual culture.

In recent years, *Pichwai* has begun to make its mark on the global stage. In 2025, London's Mall Galleries hosted a landmark showcase featuring over 450 works, while across the Atlantic, the Smithsonian's National Museum of Asian Art in Washington DC presented an exhibition of rare, large-format *Pichwais*, marking the first major US showing of the tradition in decades.

These presentations signalled a growing international appetite for this intricate, devotional art form — a testament, almost an ode, to the universality of the indigenous aesthetic and spirit. As awareness grows, so does demand — the art form now appears at global fair installations, on curated textiles, and

