

INDIA'S ART-FILLED CANVAS

HELLO! journeys into the timeless traditions of Tanjore.
Pichwai and miniature art — symbols of centuries of creativity that
stand the test of time in India's cultural heritage



An early 20th-century rare signed *Pichwai* painting depicting the festival of Janmashtami. It belongs to Pooja Singhal, founder of Pichvai Tradition and Beyond, who has one of the finest collections of this form of art

Somewhere in the hills of Himachal Pradesh, 63-year-old Anil Raina is a reminder of the region's glorious artistic past — he's the only living descendant of the original painters from the Kangra or *Pahari* school of miniature art. He holds on to the stories of his legacy as firmly as he does the artworks in his aging steel cupboard. With a brush made of squirrel hair and paints derived from dried flowers, Anil tirelessly keeps alive the skills he's learnt from his forefathers.

Away from the humdrum of the big cities, descendants of India's heritage artists are quietly carrying forward the legacy of their families. Be it the *Pichvais* in Nathdwara's Chitrakar ki Gali, Thanjavur's Tanjore artists, or Kishangarh's miniature artists. Beyond art enthusiasts in India, they're grabbing attention the world over.

A majority of India's heritage art forms began as expressions of worship. They evolved into fine visual representations that showcase exceptional craftsmanship and artistry. Today, aeons later, heritage Indian arts are having quite a moment.

Two *Pahari* miniature paintings — one by legendary 18th-century Kangra artist Nainsukh and the other by an unknown descendant — fetched a record Rs 31 crore at an auction in Mumbai in December 2024. In March 2022, Christie's New York sold a 1775 painting from a *Ramayana* series by miniature artists from Himachal for US\$2,016,000. The record sale was not merely a marker of artistic value but of cultural endurance.

So it's fitting that Kangra miniature art — one of the many creative traditions that have enriched India's cultural vocabulary — received the GI tag in 2012.

Arguably, each art form is rooted in religion, though they have blossomed to become a symbol of India's artistic heritage. If *Pichwais* trace their 400-year-old roots to the temple walls of Nathdwara in Rajasthan — created to honour Lord Shrinathji — down South, the luminous Tanjore paintings — made using 22-karat gold foil and semi-precious stones — emerged in Tamil Nadu's Thanjavur in the late 16th century, often depicting a plethora of Hindu deities as well as scenes from mythological epics.

Ashwini Pai Bahadur, Director of Artspeaks India Heritage, believes that in the past decade, the market for heritage arts has matured tremendously.

"What was once seen as 'devotional' or 'decorative' is now recognised as collectible fine art with both emotional and investment value," she says. "A decade ago, a fine

Pichwai might have been valued in the low thousands. Today, works by master artists command multi-lakh to crore-level prices

depending on scale, lineage, and condition."

Ashish Anand, CEO and Managing Director of DAG, New Delhi, draws the focus to India's centuries-old art heritage with links way back to the Indus Valley Civilisation, the aesthetic treasures of which continue to inspire artists today.

"It's important to connect modern art practices with the efflorescence of Ajanta, the brilliance of our temple sculptures, and even the exquisiteness of the Chola bronzes," he says.

Collectors and gallerists have exhibited a number of these priceless artworks for the public to view and experience our creative heritage. If you walk into the Kiran Nadar Museum of Art (KNMA) in Delhi, for instance, you'll spot some of the country's most prized art works.

ONCE DEVOTIONAL, NOW COLLECTIBLE

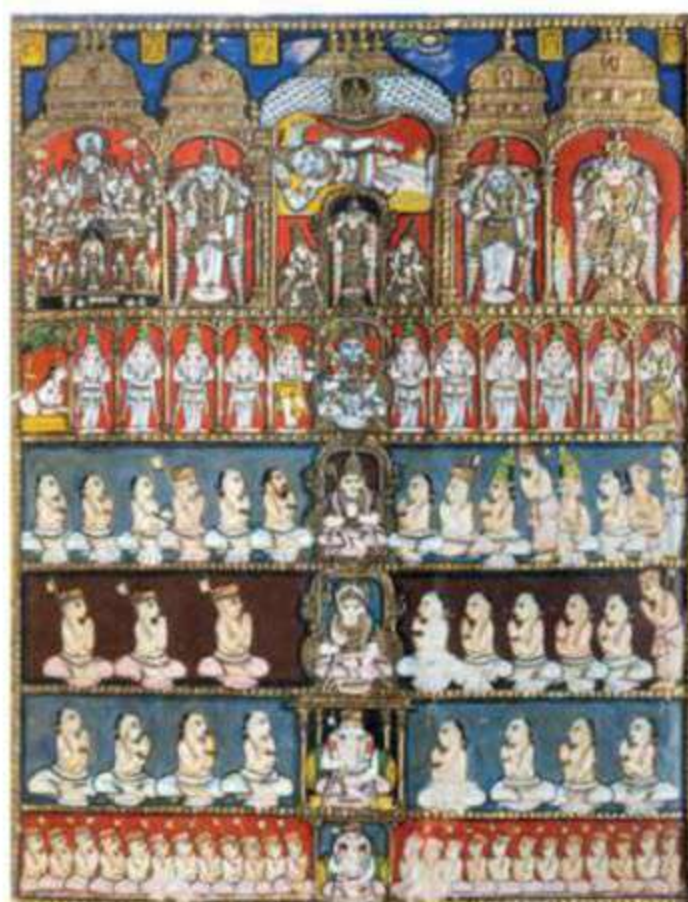
With even the largest luxury brands in the world finding inspiration from Indian culture at present, our art forms, too, are slowly but steadily finding their way back into the global canvas, with the help of galleries and museums.

A recent exhibition by senior artist Hemi Bawa in Delhi's historic Travancore Palace. Titled '*Stories... In Glass*,' the exhibition featured a section



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A Lakshmi Hayagreeva Tanjore painting from Rani Arts & Teak (above); a late 19th-century Tanjore painting from DAG's collection depicting Anantashayan Vishnu with devotees (left); an early 20th-century *Pichwai* of Chobiswaroop, or the 24 divine forms of Krishna, from Pooja Singhal's collection (top)



A Jain artwork of a temple complex from DAG's collection (above); a miniature work from Studio Kishangarh (left); a 19th-century Pahari miniature painting illustrating the Ramayana from DAG's archives (below)

Moreover, at DAG's recent exhibition, *'The Body of an Ascetic,'* connoisseurs got an opportunity to view iconic masterpieces with historical references.

BACK TO THE ROOTS

Changes and evolutions in the world notwithstanding, art lovers in the contemporary times are keen on exploring Indian works in their absolute original forms.

"In today's changing cultural landscape, there's a renewed desire to reconnect with our roots," says Princess Vaishnavi Kumari. "Indians

are becoming increasingly proud of their heritage, and that pride is reflected in the growing appreciation for traditional arts. What was once seen as nostalgic is now being valued as part of a larger cultural identity."

Vaishnavi plays a major role in this revival with Studio Kishangarh, which she founded in 2010 with the objective of bringing back the historic royal atelier.

"Kishangarh was fortunate to still have a few generational miniature artists, and the idea was to bring them together under one roof to preserve the art," adds Vaishnavi.

As the younger generations rediscover these time-honoured crafts, India's heritage arts are not just being preserved — they're being reimagined, ensuring the past continues to inspire the present. 

TEXT: REWATI RAU



on Hemi's new miniature series in glass and copper, which drew inspiration from *Pichavais* and Indian miniature traditions.

Similarly, at KNMA, there's rich history associated with the traditional art of the museum's vast collection.

"*Shatrunjaya Patas*, for instance, are large pilgrimage maps painted on cloth that visualise journeys to a sacred Jain site," says Dr. Preeti Bahadur Ramaswami, Senior Curator and Head of Indian Classical and Folk and Tribal Arts at KNMA.

