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Picturesque portrayals

Pooja Singhal's love of Pichvai paintings is not marked by any desire to preserve the art form in its pristine purity – she tells **MANJULA LAL** she would rather it takes on new avatars

Unique oeuvre (Below) The first exhibition of 400 works curated by Pooja Singhal in Delhi; (middle) New paintings commissioned and painted at the only atelier of its kind; (extreme right) Singhal, art lover and entrepreneur

Whenver art-lovers look for a Pichvai painting in Rajasthan, they aspire to find an 'original' piece from Nathdwara. Their quest often leads to them to 'antiqued' pieces painted recently but given a makeover to make them look older, at the behest of unscrupulous middlemen out to make a quick buck. "That's the mindset I

want to change," says Pooja Singhal, who is reviving the ancient art under the label 'Pichvai Tradition & Beyond'.

'Beyond' is an important word in her branding – for a crucial part of her approach to creating paintings in this 16th century genre (sometimes spelt 'Pichhwai') is innovation and sometimes de-spiritualisation. Traditional Pichvais, beloved of both devotees and art con-



noisseurs, have Lord Krishna in his Sri-nathji avatar as the centerpiece. The idol is the presiding deity at Nathdwara temple in the Aravalli hills, on the banks of the Banas river in Rajasamund district of the desert state. It is a popular place of pilgrimage, especially during Holi and Janmashtami.

In the early days of the temple, only five families of artists were allowed to paint Pichvais, that too to capture specific rituals of the Govardhan puja, in the days before photography. These depictions require painstaking work, sometimes on large canvases, and survived on royal patronage. The descendants of those five families have now scattered in the winds, so Pooja's whole endeavour is based on training artists and conjuring up new 'scenes'. "The lineage of artists is no longer of any consequence," she explains. "It's the artist who must create value."

Older pichvais are now scattered around the world, in museums of major metropolises, including Australia and Germany. Indian housewives often pick up on to put in the puja ghar at home,

but she also remembers a Swedish car salesman buying a piece out of reverence for the art, with not much understanding of the spiritual undertones. In fact, she often uses typical Mughal miniature patterns as background, but frowns at the practice of producing 'instant' paintings for tourists using spray guns and stencils. "That's a printing press, not an art form," she says.

When Pooja became fascinated with

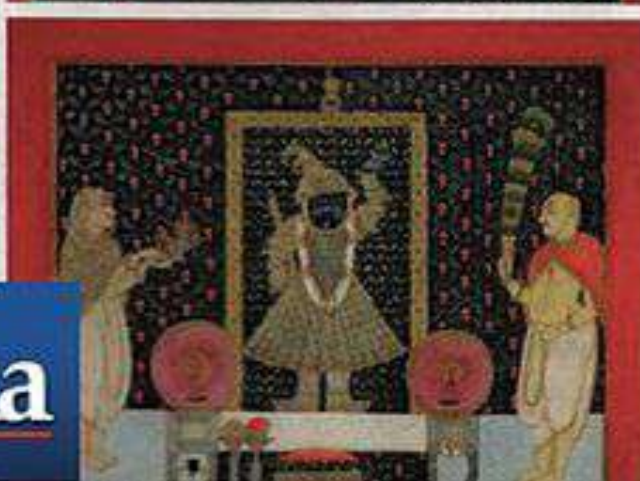
Commerce is not the driving force of the enterprise. A documentary and a book are in the making, that will expand the appreciation of this art form, preserving a legacy for future

the idea of preserving this tradition some seven years ago, her mother's collection of paintings, artefacts and jewelry were definitely an influence. Initially, she sourced works from individual artists working in their village homes.

Her first exhibition, hosted by the Gujral Foundation at an old mansion in Delhi's Jor Bagh, had no less than 400 Pichvais. She now commissions work from a loose 'team' of 30-40 artists, some of whom work at an atelier in a remote village, where space, materials and training by older artists come together in one place. In January this year, they made their presence felt in the India Art Fair at Pragati Maidan.

Belonging to the third generation of a business house in Udaipur, Pooja is clear that no art can survive without a market. But for her, commercial success is not the driving force of the enterprise. She is also involved in the making of a documentary and a book about the art, which will help expand the appreciation of this art form and leave footprints for posterity.

At her atelier, senior artists are



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expected to ideate and guide younger artists, who come from all kinds of socio-economic backgrounds. "Remuneration depends on the artist's temperament, for we are dealing with creative people," she explains. Some like to work steadily on salaries, others are paid for individual pieces. They don't get to sign their paintings, for it is a composite effort. Nor are any of the artists women, a result of the conservatism in which village communities are still steeped.

The atelier provides the materials — synthetic paint is not used, only mineral colours on handmade layered paper. There are standardised compositions, maps of the village and the celebration of Krishna's 24 avatars. "Another language I've developed with my artists is the sketching style," she reveals.

Looming on her horizon now is an exciting event — the Kochi-Muziris Biennale 2016, where they have been invited as a 'collateral' for the first time. Optimistic about the future, she says, "Response in the Indian market is quite fabulous." The day is not far when all collectors make sure they have a Pichvai in their repertoire.

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