

# The patron saint of 'pichvai'

mint

'Pichvai: Tradition And Beyond' returns with its largest-ever show in Mumbai this weekend

Last Published: Sat, Apr 07 2018, 04:38 AM IST



'Krishna With Gopis', Deccan (gold, silver and stone colour on cloth), size—6x8ft. Photo: Pichvai: Tradition and Beyond

The number of Indian crafts that bear the appellation “dying art form” keeps varying. And, until recently, *pichvai* had been among them. But with the launch of her platform Pichvai: Tradition And Beyond in 2015, entrepreneur-cum-art revivalist Pooja Singhal brought good tidings. The platform’s aim is “to sustain, preserve and revive the tradition of *pichvai* painting” by working with artists to make high-quality works that stay true to the traditional idiom, but still make allowances for modern aesthetics and contexts.

After showcasing at the India Art Fair and the Kochi-Muziris Biennale in the last two years, Singhal’s largest-ever show, with 400 new works, opens on 7 April at Mumbai’s Famous Studios. The industrial backdrop of the studios is a far cry from the craft’s birthplace. Originally, *pichvais* were temple hangings that covered the wall behind the main idol of Lord Shrinathji, a child manifestation of Krishna, in the temple of Nathdwara in Rajasthan, an hour’s drive from Udaipur. That gave it its Sanskrit name. *Picch* means “behind” and *vai* is “hanging”. If “hanging behind” is as prosaic as craft names come, the form more than makes up for it with its breathtaking visual splendour.

To stand in front of a traditional *pichvai* is to be, first, dwarfed by its gigantic scale and then overwhelmed by the visual information that is rich in symbolism—swirling patterns, crisscrossing grids, architecture, *gopis*, attendants, plants, animals, the moon, clouds, and miscellaneous recurring elements. The unwavering dark figure, or figures, of Lord Shrinathji would appear in different moods or *shringaras*. For many worshippers with no literacy, it was a kind of visual aid to prayer, depicting stories from Krishna’s life. Madhuvanti Ghose, a senior curator at the Art Institute of Chicago who mounted the notable 2015 exhibition *Gates Of The Lord: The Traditions Of Krishna Painting*, explains on email, “Every season has its own *shringara*, and the sect celebrates the entire year with the appropriate fabrics, colours and flowers.”

“It also became something for the pilgrims to take back home,” says Singhal. Artists would make brisk sketches outside the temple for the pilgrims. Singhal wants to show that a *pichvai*-style work can fit in anywhere, be it a classically designed home or an office. The industrial chic of Famous Studios, where they will be displayed for the first time, goes some way in decontextualizing the craft and opening it up to new ways of seeing.

Singhal runs an atelier in Udaipur which has 50-60 artists. Some come from traditional artist families, others are newcomers. Every work is the result of a collective effort by the team, so no one claims sole authorship and no work is signed. Singhal okays every design and keeps an eye on every stage—from sketching, drawing, and painting to the final embellishment. Each can take one-three months to make. Just as in traditional *pichvais*, the use of natural pigments and materials is key. They paint on handloom cloth and handmade paper called *wasli*. Where the artists of Tradition And Beyond depart from “tradition” and go “beyond” is with Singhal’s “interventions”, as she puts it.



Pooja Singhal. Photo: Ramesh Pathania/Mint

To suit modern aesthetics, Singhal looks for older compositions with fewer elements that qualify as “minimalist”, to use a modern term, and creates new designs. The final design could be a composite that is informed by the design of many *pichvais*. “A huge challenge was to get the artists to change their thought process and for me to think of new ideas and translate it for them,” she says. Apart from doing large-scale works, they also produce miniatures in the Nathdwara style.

Singhal's approach is pragmatic. “Without commerce, there is no revival,” she says, explaining that decline sets in when patronage dries up and the second-generation artists move to cities for more lucrative jobs. “I could have supported 100 artists and commissioned 100 works but there's only that much that my foundation (the Saraswati Singhal Foundation, her family's philanthropic venture) can do.”

Eventually, she says, the craft can only be revived if there is a movement with a proper marketplace and not with one-off acts of charity. In this, Tradition And Beyond has been successful. Nearly all the works in their previous shows sold out.

Singhal sounds confident about the future of *pichvai*. “For me, the revival drives the

7 APRIL 2018