

WARLI ART REPRESENTS THE TRIBAL HERITAGE OF MAHARASHTRA

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ABSTRACT

Warli paintings are a traditional folk art form from India with ancient origins. They showcase the diverse nature of Indian art and provide insights into the life and communication of earlier times. These paintings are distinct from other Indian folk and tribal art forms due to their simplicity and soft style. Unlike mythological or sensual themes, Warli art focuses on everyday life and societal events of the Warli tribe, the largest tribe located on the outskirts of Mumbai, Maharashtra.

This art form, discovered in the 1970s, resembles prehistoric cave paintings in its style and execution. It is believed to date back to the 10th century A.D., although exact records of its origins are unavailable. Traditionally, Warli paintings adorned the walls of village homes, serving as a medium to convey legends and stories.

The goal of this exploration is to understand the history and elements of Warli art better, to incorporate its aesthetic into interior design. By studying these paintings, one can draw inspiration for designing interior elements that reflect the unique beauty of Warli art.

Keywords: Warli Painting, Traditional Folk Art, Tribal Culture, Interior Decor.

INTRODUCTION

Warli art is more than just a simple tribal painting; it is a window into the lives, traditions, and spiritual beliefs of the Warli tribe, one of the largest and most ancient indigenous communities of Maharashtra. Nestled in the Sahyadri hills of Palghar and Thane districts, this tribe has carried forward a distinct artistic legacy that has survived for thousands of years. Though its visual style is minimalistic—often consisting of white, rudimentary figures painted on earthy backgrounds—Warli art is a deeply symbolic and narrative-driven tradition, depicting stories of life, nature, and customs that define the tribe's identity.

While Warli art was formally recognized by scholars and the wider art community only in the 20th century, its roots extend far into history, possibly as early as 2500 BCE, during the Neolithic period. The geometric patterns, human figures, and symbolic scenes etched onto walls bear a striking resemblance to prehistoric cave paintings, such as those found in Bhimbetka, Madhya Pradesh. This strong resemblance suggests that Warli art has always been an integral part of human expression, evolving alongside early civilizations.

One fascinating aspect of Warli culture is the absence of a written language. Instead of recording their stories, traditions, or religious beliefs in text, the Warli people developed their unique art form as a primary means of communication. Their homes became canvases, covered with depictions of everyday life—farming, hunting, festivities, and rituals—all painted in white using rice paste. This contrast of white against the deep brown of the mud walls created a striking visual effect, making each artwork feel alive.

Unlike contemporary paintings meant for aesthetic appreciation, traditional Warli paintings held profound spiritual and cultural significance. Historically, women were the primary creators of these artworks, painting intricate scenes on walls during important occasions like marriages, harvest celebrations, and religious ceremonies. The paintings were not merely decorative; they carried divine and ceremonial meaning.

A particularly sacred motif in Warli art is the Chauk or Devchauk, a square structure representing a divine space. This pattern was drawn to invoke Goddess Palghat, the deity associated with fertility, protection, and prosperity. Surrounding the sacred symbols, the paintings would often depict images of people engaging in communal activities—dancing, singing, harvesting—highlighting the tribe's deep sense of unity and harmony with nature.



Picture 1.1: Traditional Warli Art

Among the most iconic representations in Warli art is the Tarpa Dance. In this ritual, villagers gather in a circular formation, moving rhythmically to the sound of the Tarpa, a trumpet-like musical instrument played at the center. The circular dance symbolizes collective joy and togetherness, which are at the heart of Warli culture.

For centuries, Warli art remained largely hidden within tribal communities, passed down through generations without much external influence. It was only in the 1970s that the world began to take notice, thanks to Jivya Soma Mashe, a revolutionary Warli artist who broke away from tradition. Mashe transformed Warli paintings from mere ritualistic depictions into continuous artistic practice, bringing them onto paper and canvas. His works were celebrated nationally and internationally, placing Warli art firmly in the global artistic landscape.

Today, Warli paintings have transcended their original tribal boundaries. They adorn urban murals, fashion designs, museum exhibits, and educational spaces. Yet, despite this widespread recognition, there is an ongoing effort to preserve the authenticity of Warli art. Many cultural institutions collaborate with tribal artists to ensure that commercialization does not strip the tradition of its original meaning.

Warli art stands as one of India's most ancient and distinctive tribal art forms, deeply interwoven with the daily life, traditions, and spiritual worldview of the Warli tribe. This indigenous community

resides in Maharashtra, particularly in the districts of Palghar, Thane, and Nashik, where their simple yet profound artistic legacy continues to thrive. The name Warli itself is a testament to the tribe's identity, embodying their close connection with nature and the philosophy of harmonious coexistence that is at the heart of their artistic expressions.

Warli paintings are much more than mere decorative works; they are a visual storytelling medium, conveying the tribe's beliefs, customs, and way of life through an intricate language of symbols and shapes. The distinctive elements of Warli paintings are based on simple geometric forms, each inspired by natural elements:

Circle – Represents the sun and moon, symbolizing the eternal cycle of life and cosmic balance.

Triangle – Drawn to resemble mountains and pointed trees, reflecting the landscape that surrounds the Warli settlements.

Square – A sacred enclosure that represents ritual spaces; it is most commonly used in depictions of ceremonies and communal gatherings.

Despite its uncomplicated design, Warli art captures the essence of tribal existence, beautifully illustrating scenes of farming, hunting, fishing, festivals, village life, and social interactions. The paintings are traditionally created using white pigment, obtained from rice flour, mixed with water and natural gum, and applied onto a backdrop of reddish-brown mud walls—a signature style that has become synonymous with Warli art.

Historically, Warli paintings were not merely aesthetic creations but held profound ritualistic importance. They were primarily painted during special occasions, such as marriages, harvest festivals, and religious ceremonies, where women of the community played the role of artists. One of the most recognizable motifs in Warli art is the Tarpa Dance, a depiction of human figures moving in concentric circles around a central musician playing the Tarpa, a traditional wind instrument. This mesmerizing image is a powerful symbol of unity and celebration, reflecting the communal spirit that defines Warli culture.

Interestingly, Warli art does not feature gods or deities in its paintings, unlike many traditional Indian art forms. Instead, the focus remains on nature, social interactions, and daily life, emphasizing the tribe's belief that life itself is sacred and deeply interconnected.

Over time, Warli art has expanded beyond the walls of tribal homes and evolved into a globally recognized artistic style. Today, it can be seen on canvases, textiles, home décor, public murals, and even fashion, demonstrating its ability to transcend time and adapt to modern aesthetics. However, as commercialization brings Warli art into new spaces, efforts are underway to preserve its authenticity and cultural integrity. Many government initiatives, NGOs, and individual artists are actively working to ensure that Warli art remains a living tradition, safeguarding the original techniques and symbolic significance that have defined it for centuries.

Moreover, contemporary Warli artists are now using their paintings as a medium to raise awareness about social and environmental issues, depicting themes related to education, conservation, and community welfare. By staying true to the fundamental philosophy of Warli art while addressing modern challenges, the tradition continues to evolve, proving that even the simplest of artistic expressions can carry profound cultural and social meaning.

Warli paintings depict scenes from everyday life, serving as a visual narrative of tribal existence. Some of the most common themes include:

- **Agriculture** – Sowing, ploughing, harvesting, and celebrating nature's bounty.
- **Hunting and Fishing** – Survival activities passed down through generations.
- **Festivals and Rituals** – Capturing joyous celebrations and spiritual gatherings.
- **Marriage Ceremonies** – Featuring the sacred “Lagnacha Chauk” symbol.
- **Tarpa Dance** – A beautiful depiction of unity, where villagers dance in circles around a musician playing the Tarpa, a traditional wind instrument.
- **Nature and Wildlife** – Trees, animals, birds, and rivers symbolize harmony with the environment. Even though Warli paintings use simple lines and figures, they carry profound stories, reflecting values of community, respect for nature, and spiritual harmony.

How Warli Art is Created – Tools and Techniques

The process of creating Warli art follows traditional methods:

Background – Walls made of earth, cow dung, and red mud, creating a rustic canvas.

Paint – A mix of rice flour and water, sometimes combined with natural gum for durability.

Brush – A bamboo stick, chewed at the end to create a bristle-like texture, allowing artists to make fine details.

While modern artists now paint on fabric, canvas, and paper, they continue to honor traditional methods, ensuring authenticity.

The Ritualistic and Spiritual Significance of Warli Art

Warli paintings are not merely decorative; they serve ceremonial and spiritual purposes.

Devchauk – A sacred square drawn during marriage rituals, featuring the Mother Goddess (Palghat) as a symbol of fertility and prosperity.

No Deities or Gods – Unlike other Indian folk arts, Warli does not depict Hindu gods. Instead, the divine is represented through nature and life cycles.

Themes of Protection – Many paintings symbolize fertility, prosperity, and safeguarding the community.

The transformation of Warli art into a national and global phenomenon began in the 1970s, when legendary Warli artist Jivya Soma Mashe brought these paintings beyond village walls. His works, displayed on canvas, introduced Warli art to a wider audience, earning national and international fame.

Today, Warli paintings have expanded into multiple fields, including:

Art Galleries and Museums – Showcasing Warli culture worldwide.

Textiles and Fashion – Printed on sarees, dresses, and accessories.

Interior Decor – Used in home designs, murals, and installations.

Urban Murals and Awareness Campaigns – Promoting social causes through art.

Warli Art in Contemporary Times

Warli art is no longer confined to tribal homes—it has become an expression of modern awareness, appearing in:

Social Movements – Used to promote environmental conservation, hygiene, education, and women's empowerment.

Commercial Art – Featured on bags, sarees, home décor, and accessories, blending tradition with style.

Tourism and Education – Workshops and exhibitions help spread awareness and appreciation for this ancient art form.



Picture 1.2: Festival Celebration Warli Art

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

The objective of this study is to know about the Maharashtra's tribal culture art- Warli art. From where it originated, what type of art it is, and in which fields do we get to see it? In this study, we also observe what types of themes are included in Warli art. This study also helps in understanding how Warli art reflects the lifestyle, beliefs, and traditions of the Warli tribe. Learn how Warli art has changed over time from wall paintings in villages to a recognized form of modern art.

Study the unique style, techniques, symbols, and themes used in Warli painting. Warli art helps others appreciate the deep meaning behind this simple art and supports the artists who keep it alive.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

For completing this research paper, the researcher has used Secondary Sources of data. The secondary source includes the researcher has gone through deep study from various sources like Web Links, YouTube, and Online available articles as well.

CONCLUSION

Warli art is more than just painting—it's a way of telling stories about life, nature, and community. Made with simple shapes and natural materials, it beautifully captures how the Warli tribe lives, what they believe in, and their deep connection with nature and each other. Even though this art form is ancient, it still inspires modern artists and has gained recognition worldwide. It reminds us why it's important to protect traditional art and honor India's rich cultural heritage. By learning about Warli art and sharing it, we help keep this unique tradition alive for the future.

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