

## PRESENTING STORIES THROUGH THE ART OF PATTACHITRA

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### ABSTRACT

Pattachitra is a beautiful and ancient painting style from eastern India, especially the states of Odisha and West Bengal. "Pattachitra" comes from the Sanskrit—patta means cloth, and Chitra means painting. So, quite literally, it means "painting on cloth." This art form is more than a thousand years old and has been passed down through generations of artists.

Pattachitra has deep roots in religion and storytelling. It originated in temple towns like Puri in Odisha, where it was closely associated with the worship of Lord Jagannath. The paintings were used to narrate stories about Hindu gods such as Vishnu, Shiva, and Krishna. These artworks were more than mere decoration—they served to educate people about mythology and spiritual beliefs.

Historians believe that Pattachitra began around the 8th century during the rule of the Kalinga dynasty. Back then, artists painted on cloth to decorate temple walls. As time went on, they also started painting on wooden boards and scrolls, which were used in various rituals and festivals. By the 15th century, when the worship of Jagannath became very popular, Pattachitra flourished. Artists, known as *Chitrakars*, created stunning visual stories based on religious themes like the *Dasavatara* (ten avatars of Vishnu), *Krishna Leela*, and *Rama Pattabhishekam*. These paintings would often be rolled out during festivals to share these stories with the community. Artists use natural materials to create their colors, from stones, plants, and other organic sources. The cloth is first treated with a mixture of chalk powder and natural gum to make it smooth and ready for painting. Then, vibrant natural pigments are used: red from minerals, black from soot, yellow from turmeric, white from ground shells, green from leaves, and blue from indigo. Sometimes, gold leaf is added to make the artwork look divine, especially in parts like crowns or halos around the gods.

The process is detailed and careful. First, the surface is prepared, then the artist outlines the design, usually based on religious stories. After that, the colours are added in layers. Each layer is dried before the next is painted, which helps in adding depth. Artists use fine brushes (traditionally made from animal hair) to draw tiny details like facial expressions, clothes, and background patterns. Gold embellishments give the painting a sacred touch. Some of the most famous Pattachitra paintings include: The Dasavatara of Vishnu, Jagannath Triad, Rama Pattabhishekam, Krishna Leela, and Gita Govinda.

**Keywords:** Pattachitra, Traditional art form, Cultural history, Spiritual significance, Storytelling, Traditional materials, Odisha, Chitkaras (Pattachitra artists).

### INTRODUCTION

Pattachitra is a traditional art form that hails from the eastern states of India, especially **Odisha** and **West Bengal**. The name "Pattachitra" comes from two Sanskrit words: "*Patta*," meaning *cloth*, and

"Chitra," meaning *painting*, so it means "cloth painting." This art has been around for over a thousand years and has been passed down through generations.

Pattachitra painting has its origins in the temple towns of Odisha, particularly around the renowned Jagannath Temple in Puri. This art form is deeply connected to religious rituals, especially the worship of Lord Jagannath, as well as other deities such as Lord Vishnu and Lord Shiva. Initially, these paintings were used to depict religious stories and mythological events, with the artwork serving as a medium to convey the tales of Hindu gods and goddesses. The location of the work can be found in and around Puri, specifically in the village of Raghurajpur in Odisha and Naya village in Midnapur, West Bengal. Raghurajpur is home to many artisans living in an area called "Chitrakar Sahe." Pattachitra art has always reflected the culture, history, and even the social and economic conditions of the times. That's why it's important to preserve and promote this traditional form of painting. This study aims to capture and document the art of Pattachitra in its original, hand-painted form, along with the changes it has undergone over the generations.

Historical evidence points to the fact that Pattachitra art can be traced back to the **8th century CE** during the rule of the Kalinga dynasty in Odisha. The paintings began as temple decorations, created on cloth to adorn the walls of temples. Over time, they expanded to wooden boards and scrolls, used in various religious ceremonies. The art form grew more intricate and detailed, with each painting telling a deeper, more elaborate story.

Pattachitra gained more recognition and evolved during the **Medieval period**, particularly around the **15th century**, when the **Jagannath cult** became more widespread in Odisha. The artists, known as **Chitrakars**, would create paintings to depict famous mythological tales like the **Dasavatara** (the ten avatars of Vishnu), **Krishna Leela**, and **Rama Pattabhishekam**. These paintings were usually done on **cloth scrolls**, which were unrolled during religious festivals and ceremonies to share the stories with the community.

For the people, Pattachitra was more than just an art form—it was a way of preserving **oral traditions** and **spiritual teachings**. The paintings, with their intricate details, vibrant colours, and rich symbolism, served as a means of passing on **moral lessons** and **spiritual knowledge**. Pattachitra is a traditional art form that follows strict rules. Every painting has to include a floral border, and artists only use natural colours—usually just one shade at a time. These rules give Pattachitra its unique and recognizable style. Charanachitras, Mankhas, and Yamapatas were old styles of painting done on long pieces of cloth—basically scrolls made of fabric. These paintings weren't just decorative; they told stories and taught lessons, often based on themes from Hindu, Jain, and Buddhist traditions. According to historian N.R. Ray, these scroll paintings were the early roots or ancestors of what we now know as Pattachitra art.

## Materials and Techniques

What makes Pattachitra paintings truly unique are the materials and techniques used. Artists traditionally rely on natural pigments made from minerals, plants, and other organic sources, giving the paintings their earthy tones and rich texture. Pattachitra is a traditional art form that has been employed in some pretty unique ways over the years. Originally, artists used it to decorate Ganjifa playing cards and the chariots used in the famous Rath Yatra festival. These days, though, it's found various modern uses — like painting on masks, coconut shells, bamboo boxes, and even walls as decorative art. The

paintings are usually done on cotton or silk cloth, but before the artists start painting, they treat the fabric with a mix of chalk and natural gum to create a smooth surface ready for the artwork.

The paintings are usually framed with a focus on fine, intricate details, delicate lines, and vivid colours. Often, golden embellishments are added to the artwork, especially in religious pieces, to give them a divine and sacred feel. Patachitra used to be done only on cloth and mainly showed religious and cultural stories, but now the artists are trying out new materials and exploring different themes.

1. **Cloth (Patta):** The main surface for Pattachitra paintings is cloth. While cotton fabric is commonly used, sometimes silk is used as well. Before painting, the cloth is treated to create a smooth, flexible surface.

- The cloth is first washed and dried, then coated with a mixture of chalk powder and gum. This process ensures that the paint sticks properly and gives the surface the right texture for detailed painting.

2. **Natural Pigments:** Pattachitra paintings use natural pigments sourced from various minerals, plants, and other organic materials. These pigments are ground into powders and mixed with water to create the paints.

- **Red:** From hingul (a mineral).
- **Black:** Made from lampblack (soot).
- **Yellow:** From turmeric or ochre.
- **White:** From chalk or ground shells.
- **Green:** Made from plants.
- **Blue:** From Indigo.

3. **Gold Leaf:** Gold leaf is often used to enhance the artwork, especially in religious and mythological paintings. It's applied to highlight features like the halo around deities or embellish figures with divine elements. Gold adds a sacred and luminous quality to the art.

4. **Wooden Boards and Scrolls:** While cloth is the traditional base, Pattachitra paintings can also be created on wooden boards or scrolls. The wooden boards are prepared similarly to the cloth, with a coating of chalk and gum. Cloth scrolls are often used for longer stories or epics, which can be unrolled during religious ceremonies and festivals.

5. **Brushes:** The brushes used in Pattachitra are traditionally made from animal hair, typically from squirrels or goats. These brushes are designed to create very fine lines and detailed strokes, which are crucial for the intricate nature of Pattachitra art.

### Traditional Techniques of Pattachitra Art

1. **Preparing the Surface:** The first step in creating a Pattachitra painting is preparing the cloth. It is coated with a mixture of chalk powder and gum, which helps to create a smooth, durable surface that allows the paint to adhere properly.

2. **Sketching the Design:** Once the surface is ready, the artist sketches the outline of the design using charcoal or a light pencil. The sketches usually depict religious or mythological themes, such as gods, goddesses, or epic stories. The outline is carefully drawn since the intricate details in the final painting depend on a solid initial design.

3. **Painting with Natural Pigments:** After the outline is set, the artist mixes natural pigments with water to create the colours. These pigments are applied to the surface with fine brushes made from

animal hair. The paintings are filled with delicate details, like facial expressions, clothing patterns, and complex symbols.

4. **Layering and Detailing:** Pattachitra paintings are known for their intricate detailing. Artists layer colours carefully, allowing each layer to dry before adding more. Fine lines, especially in the eyes, jewellery, and background elements, are added with small brushes to give the painting depth and texture. The colours and designs are filled with symbolism—every element, from color choices to the positioning of figures, carries spiritual and cultural meanings.

5. **Adding Gold Leaf:** A key feature of Pattachitra is the use of gold leaf to highlight sacred aspects of the painting, such as halos around deities or crowns. This gold embellishment helps to elevate the divine nature of the art, especially in religious depictions.

6. **Finishing Touches:** Once the painting is complete, it's left to dry thoroughly. In some cases, a lacquer is applied over the painting to give it a shiny finish and to protect the artwork. For scrolls, the ends are often rolled up and attached to wooden dowels, making them easier to store and display.

### Famous paintings of pattachitra

#### 1. The Dasavatara of Vishnu (Ten Avatars of Vishnu)

In this painting, the artist depicts Lord Dasavatara of Vishnu and illustrates the ten incarnations of Lord Vishnu in order: Matsya (the fish), Kurma (the tortoise), Varaha (the boar), Narasimha (the man-lion), Vamana (the dwarf), Parashurama (the warrior with an axe), Rama (prince of Ayodhya), Kalki (the future warrior on a horse), Buddha (the enlightened one), and Krishna (the divine cowherd). Each avatar is portrayed with elaborate costumes, symbolic weapons, and a divine aura. This work is considered a classic example of Pattachitra, showcasing power and aesthetic beauty.



Picture 1.1: The Dasavatara of Vishnu

#### 2. Jagannath Triad (Jagannath, Balabhadra, Subhadra)

This traditional Pattachitra painting represents Lord Jagannath (a form of Krishna), his elder brother Balabhadra, and their sister Subhadra. It is a devotional artwork that holds both artistic beauty and spiritual depth. Jagannath is painted in black; Balabhadra (also called Balarama) is painted in white, and Subhadra, their sister, is painted in yellow or red. And features are the absence of hands and legs,



reflecting their original wooden idols in Puri. The artists use natural pigment: black from soot, white from shells, red from stones, yellow from turmeric, and green from leaves.



Picture 1.2 Jagannath Triad

### 3. Rama Pattabhishekam

**“Rama Pattabhishekam”** shows a powerful moment from the Ramayana—when Lord Rama finally returns to Ayodhya after 14 years in exile and is crowned king. In the painting, Rama sits at the centre, calm and royal, painted in blue and dressed in elegant clothes, holding his famous bow, Kodanda. Right beside him is Sita, glowing with grace and devotion, adorned in beautiful jewellery that reflects her strength and love. Rama’s brothers—Lakshmana, Bharata, and Shatrughna—stand close by, showing their respect and loyalty by holding fans or royal weapons. Their humble postures highlight their deep admiration for Rama. The style of the painting is very traditional. It doesn’t use shading or depth like modern art. Instead, everything is outlined in bold black lines and filled with bright, earthy colours made from natural materials like crushed conch shells, plant-based dyes, and soot. Every little space in the painting is thoughtfully filled with patterns, floral borders, and tiny details, making it look like a beautiful, sacred tapestry full of meaning and devotion.



Picture1.3 Rama Pattabhishekam

### 4. Krishna Leela (The Life of Krishna)

These paintings beautifully bring to life the playful and divine moments from Lord Krishna’s childhood, like when he steals butter, dances joyfully with the gopis, lifts the mighty Govardhan hill,

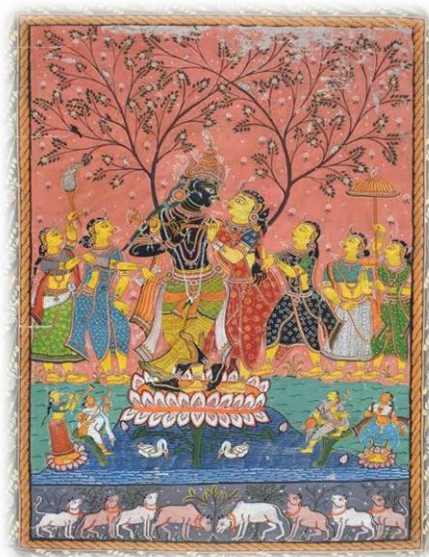
or plays his flute under the shade of a kadamba tree. Krishna is almost always shown in a striking shade of blue, with big, expressive eyes and graceful, flowing movements. The colors are bright and full of life, just like the stories they tell.



Picture 1.4 Krishna Leela

### 5. Gita Govinda (by Jayadeva)

This beautiful love story between Radha and Krishna is more than just poetry—it's a profoundly spiritual and artistic expression. In Pattachitra paintings, artists bring these emotions to life through intricate and colourful scenes. One can feel Radha's longing, Krishna's playful nature, and their deep, divine love. It's not merely a romantic tale; it represents the soul's profound desire to connect with something higher. At the centre of the painting, observe Krishna playing his flute, depicted in a rich shade of blue, glowing with magical charm. Radha typically sits nearby, lovingly gazing at him, sitting beside him, or searching for him in a moment of yearning. These paintings are created in the traditional Pattachitra style—hand-painted on cloth using natural colours made from crushed conch shells for white, lamp soot for black, and minerals and plants for reds, yellows, and greens. The borders are always adorned with delicate floral designs and patterns, making the entire piece feel sacred, vibrant, and full of life.



Picture 1.5 Gita Govinda

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In this study, we take a closer look at how Pattachitra began, how it has changed over time, the techniques artists use, and what it means culturally and spiritually. For data collection, researchers have used secondary sources such as books, research papers, internet sources, theses, and others.

## PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The goal of this research is to take a closer look at the rich history and evolution of Pattachitra art. It aims to understand how deeply spiritual and religious beliefs shape its themes and stories. This study also explores how Pattachitra has helped preserve Indian mythology and folklore over the centuries. It highlights the traditional, eco-friendly materials and techniques used by the artists. The research also focuses on how this art form is closely connected to temple rituals, especially in Puri.

## CONCLUSION

Pattachitra isn't just a style of painting—it's a living tradition that brings together faith, culture, history, and storytelling in every detailed stroke. It's closely tied to the religious life of people in Odisha and West Bengal and continues to reflect their beliefs, values, and way of life. These paintings aren't just beautiful; they tell stories of gods and goddesses, keep old myths alive, and are used in rituals. In that way, they're not just art but a meaningful part of the community's spiritual and cultural identity.

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