

FROM SACRED SCROLLS TO GLOBAL CANVASES: RECONTEXTUALIZING THE VISUAL LANGUAGE OF RAGHURAJPUR PATTACHITRA IN A GLOBAL ERA

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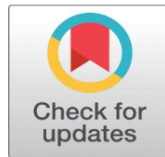
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ABSTRACT

Raghurajpur Pattachitra stands as a significant embodiment of India's living folk art traditions, rooted deeply in religious devotion, ritual practice, and mythological storytelling. Originating as sacred painted scrolls used by chitrakars in association with the Jagannath cult of Odisha, Pattachitra historically functioned as a visual medium for oral narration and ritual communication. These scrolls were not merely aesthetic objects but carried profound cultural, spiritual, and performative meanings within localized community contexts. Over time, however, the socio-cultural landscape surrounding this art form has undergone notable transformation, particularly under the influences of globalization, tourism, expanding art markets, and changing systems of patronage.

This paper explores the evolving visual language of Raghurajpur Pattachitra by tracing its journey from ritual-based sacred scrolls to globally circulated artistic artifacts. It examines how traditional iconography, narrative structures, and compositional frameworks have been adapted to suit contemporary formats such as framed paintings, souvenirs, and international exhibitions, while still retaining essential stylistic and symbolic features. Through visual and contextual analysis, the study highlights shifts in themes, materials, scale, color usage, and aesthetic sensibilities that reflect both continuity and change within the tradition. At the same time, the paper critically engages with debates surrounding authenticity, commercialization, and cultural sustainability. Rather than viewing market adaptation as cultural dilution, the study argues that these transformations reveal the resilience and adaptive strength of Pattachitra as a living artistic tradition. The artisans of Raghurajpur negotiate tradition and innovation by responding to global audiences while consciously preserving inherited visual codes, mythological narratives, and ritual associations. In doing so, Pattachitra participates in a broader global dialogue, where indigenous art forms assert relevance without abandoning cultural roots. By situating Raghurajpur Pattachitra within the larger framework of pluralism, continuity, and global interaction in Indian art, this paper contributes to contemporary discussions on how traditional visual cultures survive, transform, and thrive in a globalized world. The study ultimately emphasizes that the evolving nature of Pattachitra does not signify cultural erosion but affirms the dynamic continuity of Indian folk art traditions in the present era.

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Keywords: Raghurajpur, Pattachitra, Folk Art, Visual Language, Globalization, Cultural Sustainability

1. INTRODUCTION

Raghurajpur Pattachitra stands as a significant embodiment of India's living folk art traditions, rooted deeply in religious devotion, ritual practice, and mythological storytelling. Originating as sacred painted scrolls used by chitrakars in association with the Jagannath cult of Odisha, Pattachitra historically functioned as a visual medium for oral narration and ritual communication. These scrolls were not merely aesthetic objects but carried profound cultural, spiritual, and performative meanings within localized community contexts. Over time, however, the socio-cultural landscape surrounding this art form has undergone notable transformation, particularly under the influences of globalization, tourism, expanding art markets, and changing systems of patronage.

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Through visual and contextual analysis, the study highlights shifts in themes, materials, scale, color usage, and aesthetic sensibilities that reflect both continuity and change within the tradition.

At the same time, the paper critically engages with debates surrounding authenticity, commercialization, and cultural sustainability. Rather than viewing market adaptation as cultural dilution, the study argues that these transformations reveal the resilience and adaptive strength of Pattachitra as a living artistic tradition. The artisans of Raghurajpur negotiate tradition and innovation by responding to global audiences while consciously preserving inherited visual codes, mythological narratives, and ritual associations. In doing so, Pattachitra participates in a broader global dialogue, where indigenous art forms assert relevance without abandoning cultural roots. By situating Raghurajpur Pattachitra within the larger framework of pluralism, continuity, and global interaction in Indian art, this paper contributes to contemporary discussions on how traditional visual cultures survive, transform, and thrive in a globalized world. The study ultimately emphasizes that the evolving nature of Pattachitra does not signify cultural erosion but affirms the dynamic continuity of Indian folk art traditions in the present era.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholarship on Indian folk art has emphasized the ritual foundations and symbolic vocabulary of regional painting traditions (Archer, 1973; Jain, 1998). Studies on Jagannath cult practices highlight the religious significance of painted substitutes during ritual intervals (Mishra, 1986). Recent research situates Pattachitra within globalization frameworks, analyzing artisan livelihoods and policy challenges (Kanungo, Sethi, & Biswal, 2020).

Theoretical contributions from cultural studies scholars argue that globalization generates hybrid cultural spaces rather than simple homogenization (Appadurai, 1996; Robertson, 1995). Bhabha's (1994) concept of cultural hybridity further explains how indigenous traditions negotiate modern identities. Within heritage discourse, Smith (2006) critiques static notions of authenticity, proposing that heritage is continuously produced through practice.

Recent empirical studies document changing material practices and artisan adaptation strategies (Vyas, 2017; Tiwari, 2023). These works collectively suggest that folk traditions must be understood as dynamic systems responsive to contemporary socio-economic realities.

3. METHODOLOGY

The research adopts a qualitative interpretative methodology combining visual analysis and contextual inquiry. Traditional ritual-based scrolls are comparatively examined alongside contemporary gallery-oriented works. Secondary academic literature, policy documents, and cultural theory provide analytical grounding.

4. HISTORICAL FOUNDATIONS

The term Pattachitra derives from the Sanskrit words patta (cloth) and chitra (image), signifying paintings executed on specially prepared cloth surfaces. The preparation process itself reflects a sophisticated artisanal methodology involving multiple layers of cotton fabric coated with chalk and natural gum adhesives. The surface is carefully polished

to create a smooth base suitable for intricate detailing. This preparation demonstrates a deep interconnection between artistic production and indigenous material knowledge systems.

Traditional pigments were derived from mineral stones, conch shells, plant extracts, and natural earth colors. These pigments were manually processed and mixed with organic binders, reinforcing ecological intimacy within artistic practice. The chromatic scheme typically includes strong reds, yellows, blues, whites, and blacks arranged in flat, vibrant fields without tonal gradation.

Stylistically, historical Pattachitra is defined by bold linear contours, ornamental density, symmetrical balance, and absence of perspectival illusion. Spatial depth is intentionally flattened, emphasizing narrative clarity over realism. Thematic focus largely centers on mythological narratives such as the Ramayana, Mahabharata, Krishna Leela, and the Dashavatara, with particular devotional emphasis on the Jagannath triad.

Importantly, these paintings operated within an oral storytelling framework. Scroll formats enabled performative narration, where visual sequences unfolded alongside recitation or song. Therefore, Pattachitra historically functioned as a multisensory cultural practice inng image-making, ritual devotion, and narrative transmission.

5. TRANSFORMATION OF MATERIALITY AND FORMAT

Contemporary Raghurajpur Pattachitra reveals significant diversification in both material and formal dimensions. While the traditional patta retains symbolic importance, artists increasingly employ alternative surfaces such as canvas, handmade paper, palm leaf engravings, wooden panels, terracotta objects, and decorative merchandise. This material expansion reflects pragmatic adaptation to market demand, portability, durability, and commercial viability.

Synthetic pigments now supplement traditional natural colors. Although some critics perceive this as a compromise of authenticity, such adaptation must be understood within the economic realities confronting artisan communities. Synthetic pigments offer brightness, cost-efficiency, and longevity, particularly for artworks intended for international circulation.

Format transformation is equally notable. Extended narrative scrolls have gradually given way to framed compositions, modular panels, and smaller collectible works. Contemporary pieces often highlight single iconic episodes rather than elaborate narrative cycles. Despite these structural modifications, core stylistic grammar linear precision, ornamental borders, iconographic discipline remains preserved. Thus, material and format shifts represent strategic evolution rather than cultural rupture.

6. GLOBALIZATION AND ARTISTIC AGENCY

Globalization has significantly reshaped the socio-economic positioning of Pattachitra artists. Participation in national craft fairs, international exhibitions, museum collaborations, and digital marketplaces has expanded the visibility of Raghurajpur artisans beyond localized devotional networks. However, globalization operates not as a force of uniform homogenization but as a negotiated cultural space. Cao-wat et al. (2026)

Contemporary chitrakars increasingly embody multiple roles: ritual practitioner, entrepreneur, cultural ambassador, and heritage custodian. They actively reinterpret iconographic systems to engage audiences unfamiliar with complex Hindu mythological frameworks. Selective adaptation such as simplifying compositions or introducing contemporary themes enables accessibility without abandoning inherited visual codes.

Rather than passive recipients of market pressure, artisans demonstrate strategic agency. They consciously preserve defining stylistic markers including facial stylization, decorative framing, chromatic symbolism, and narrative sequencing to maintain authenticity and recognizability. Globalization thus becomes dialogic rather than destructive, enabling regional traditions to articulate themselves within transnational cultural circuits.

7. NARRATIVE CONTINUITY AND CULTURAL SUSTAINABILITY

Despite diversification in material and circulation contexts, narrative continuity remains central to the identity of Raghurajpur Pattachitra. Mythological storytelling continues to structure the visual field, preserving links with devotional memory and symbolic cosmology. Narrative logic organized through hierarchical placement of figures, ornamental framing, and symbolic color coding ensures interpretive coherence across generations.

Cultural sustainability in this context does not imply rigid preservation. Instead, it involves safeguarding core symbolic frameworks while permitting contextual responsiveness. Elongated eyes, profile facial construction, floral ornamentation, and symmetrical compositional balance remain persistent visual anchors.

Intergenerational transmission within chitrakar families reinforces sustainability. Skills are acquired through apprenticeship, observation, and embodied practice rather than solely through institutional education. Simultaneously, exposure to craft development programs and educational workshops expands awareness of contemporary artistic discourse. This dual structure hereditary continuity combined with adaptive learning ensures dynamic cultural survival.

8. TRADITIONAL VS CONTEMPORARY VISUAL LANGUAGE

The following table presents a structured comparison between traditional ritual-based Pattachitra and its contemporary global adaptations. This analytical model strengthens the interpretative framework by identifying material, thematic, and structural transformations.

Table 1

Table 1 Demonstrates That While Material and Contextual Shifts Are Evident, Core Narrative Structures and Symbolic Continuity Remain Intact. The Transformation Reflects Adaptive Resilience Rather Than Rupture.

Visual Elements	Traditional Raghurajpur Pattachitra	Contemporary Global Adaptation
Material Base	Hand-prepared cloth (patta) using natural adhesives	Canvas, paper, palm leaf, wood panels, commercial surfaces
Pigments	Natural mineral and organic pigments	Combination of natural and synthetic pigments
Primary Function	Ritual substitute and devotional storytelling	Gallery display, commercial sale, exhibition circulation
Themes	Mythological narratives (Jagannath, Krishna Leela, Dashavatara)	Mythology plus social, environmental, and contemporary themes
Composition	Dense narrative sequencing, flat spatial organization	Flexible layouts, simplified compositions for visual clarity
Patronage System	Temple-based and community-centered patronage	Tourism-driven, state-supported, and global art markets
Artistic Identity	Hereditary chitrakar lineage	Artist-entrepreneur balancing heritage and innovation
Purpose of Ornamentation	Symbolic and sacred embellishment	Aesthetic enhancement with market appeal consideration

9. CONCLUSION

The transition of Raghurajpur Pattachitra from sacred scrolls to globally circulating canvases encapsulates a broader narrative of transformation within indigenous art traditions. What once functioned primarily as a ritual substitute embedded in temple culture now participates in international craft economies and global visual dialogues.

This transformation should not be interpreted as cultural dilution. Instead, it reflects adaptive negotiation shaped by economic necessity, cultural exchange, and artistic agency. Core visual grammar linearity, ornamentation, iconographic precision, and narrative coherence remains remarkably intact.

The case of Raghurajpur Pattachitra demonstrates that tradition survives not by resisting change but by integrating it selectively. The movement from sacred scrolls to global canvases represents expansion rather than displacement. It affirms that indigenous visual languages can engage global modernity while preserving symbolic depth and historical continuity.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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