

RAJASTHAN'S RICH CULTURAL TRADITIONS OF FOLK PAINTINGS

AVINASH PAREEK*

INTRODUCTION

Rajasthan has the rich traditions of practicing folk paintings since time immemorial. These paintings are as diverse as its culture. The folk paintings in Rajasthan are purely handmade. They bring to the forefront the talent of the Rajasthani painters. The folk paintings of Rajasthan deal with pictorial depictions of popular gods, goddesses, human portraits, common customs and rituals,

and the elements related to nature. Some of the folk paintings of Rajasthan such as Sanjhya, Phad painting, and miniature painting are popular all over the world. Folk arts were once the integral part of the common folk's life and they expressed the aesthetic and entertainment aspect of the rural folk.



ART: ITS ORIGIN

Art is the manifestation of creativity. This is quite clear from the words of Umrao Singh 'The art has originated from the sense of aesthetics that has led man towards the creativity. Consequently the culture was nurtured.'¹ Thus folk paintings can enable a person to be familiar with the cultural aspect. 'Art is the soul of any culture.'² Besides, they were also the manifestation of social, religious, economic life of the common folk. The folk paintings of Rajasthan have the bearing on the whole Indian folk art, to say the least. 'The

folk art of Rajasthan is capable of giving a lead to the whole Indian folk art.'³ The folk paintings of Rajasthan have a wide range of variety to offer. 'The range of topics in Rajasthan available in the form of paintings is so vast that these paintings present a whole world covering city, forest, creature, huts, palaces, forts, wars, vegetation, festival, women, sex, meeting, parting, separation etc.'⁴

TRADITION OF FOLK PAINTINGS

The folk paintings are viewed 'sacred' and as such

* Dean, Faculty of Arts & Social Sciences, IASE (D) University, GVM, SardarShahr (Raj.)

E-mail Id: avinash.pareek12@gmail.com

they qualify as 'auspicious art'. The underlying idea behind these paintings and drawings is to bring auspiciousness into the house and the life of the family and community. The terms used in Vernacular are *mangalkamna* (wishing auspiciousness) and '*shubhlabh*' (gaining auspiciousness). The act of drawing or painting is referred to as *mangalkarya* or *shubhkarya* i.e auspicious act. Such a view is mainly reflected in the painting concerning religion, ethical and moral values. 'Unfortunately the real contribution of Rajasthan in the field of painting vis-a vis Indian painting has gone unnoticed.'⁵ Highlighting the tradition of folk paintings Mulk Raj Anand has remarked 'The purpose is... to invoke the magic of the primitive consciousness, traditionally handed down from mother to daughter. And it seems to be the attempt at contact with the mysterious spirit world from which the Gods are supposed to descend down to earth to help mortals.... to give more wealth, avert death and disease'.⁶ It is why there was a practice of gifting the portraits even by the queens to the kings. 'Sometimes the Rani's gifted portraits to their sovereign husband and father. To cite a few: Vikawat rani, wife of Maharaja Jagat Singh gifted 27 paintings to the court between 1804-06.....'⁷ The paintings were considered to be indispensable so much so that even a widow who was expected to lead a very simple life otherwise was also expected to have paintings in her house. 'Even if you are a widow, you must have a painting (mandana) on the wall of your home.' (Ho tu chahein raand, suni bheent ne maand.)⁸

PAINTINGS' MOTIFS

The Rajasthan folk painting tradition has got the motifs in the shape of Dots, squares, vertical and horizontal lines, human and animal figures both abstract and illustrative are visible in rock shelters and caves. They are also visible on the seals and amulets of the Indus valley. There are references to folk paintings in the early classical

texts. The *Vishnudharmottara Purana*, an ancient treatise of painting has mentioned '*dhulichitra* (made with powder colours) and *rasa chitras* (made with wet colours)'.⁹ The conceptual world of this art form has some processes involved here. When the artist demarcates a specific area on the floor or the wall, he purifies it with cow-dung and clay, paints it red or white with ochre or chalk; locates a centre in this demarcated and purified area and puts a vermilion dot, the *bindu* in the centre. This *bindu* expands into myriad forms and shapes through intersecting lines moving outwards. Ritualistic or decorative, representational or symbolic, wall painting or floor painting, in each case the process begins with this demarcation of space into a square or triangle, rectangle or circle at the centre of which stands the *bindu*; put there with cow-dung or *geru*, dry powder or wet colours. Classification and nomenclature is essential to structurally organize such a vast multiplicity of forms, however, it is equally important to go beyond the nomenclature to understand that which binds all these forms into one unifying whole. Highlighting the metaphysical basis of Indian arts Kapila Vatsayayan said thus, 'In the context of the arts that essence of life is the realization of beauty in perfect form, where a perfect concord exists between viewer and the viewed. The artist shares this vision and it is this which gives him a whole view totally different from what is understood as the 'descriptively representational'.¹⁰ The artist in India must in some way realize a complete self – identification with the psychical internalization of sense perceptions. Reality assumes a different meaning and the 'perfect form' is the model of his inner vision to which he then seeks to give expression through visual or aural forms.'¹¹

Further throwing light on the two important motifs in Rajasthan arts - the square and the circle she remarked 'they provide the "beginning of an elaborate grammar of form", where square is symbolic of "enclosed space signifying perfect order" and circle is the "continuum of time".

Together they signify 'coming together of opposites and an unbroken continuum'. The *bindu* is the centre "the unmanifest, the state of rest, the centre which in turns creates many, the manifest, which is in constant state of flux though within the area of the circle. Thus there emerges the all important principles of motion or movement on the substratum of rest, or stillness of the unchanging centre"¹²

The speculative thought that got crystalized in Vedas and Upanishads started with that dot and that line which was put on the canvas of time by the primitive man, which slowly evolved into an image of homeopathic and sympathetic magic and then expanded into a ritual diagram, a *yantra*, a *mandala*, the powerful seat of meditation.

GEOMETRIC DESIGNS & MOTIFS

Many Geometric designs as visible in the *Mandanas* of Rajasthan reflect the designs of alters of *vedic yagna*. As many of them are similar with the designs of the *vastupurasha mandala* and can find parallels in ground plans of temples. Remarking on Rajasthani *Mandanas* M.K.Pal has referred to *Mandanas* that are composed of architectural motifs. Among these he has delineated *TapkiKe Mandanas*, where a certain number of points are plotted in such a way as to make an actual graph. There are two ways of joining these dots resulting in a square or a rectangle in one case and a triangle and a rhombus in another. He has observed referring to different patterns in *Mandanas* '...as it appears, the *jali* patterns appearing in the *Mandanas* have common features of *jali* patterns widely used in Indian Architecture. For example, a *Mandana* of seven *Tapakis* is nothing but *Java Chevans* very often used in architecture for *jali* purpose. *Kheras* are also such *Mandana* designs which appear to have been used on the architectural plans in the past... Changa or Dapha... might have been related to town planning...'¹³ *Mandanas* depicting

sarvatobhadra, swastika, chaturmukha, dandka etc. also display architectural connections.'¹⁴

Dots, lines, triangles, squares, quadrangles, hexagons, octagons, polygons, circles, spirals are some of the basic geometric forms used in folk paintings. Seemingly complex structures are in fact made of these simple forms, "which are harmonized with similar or different simple patterns... The salient features of the design are multiplication, proportion, symmetry and centering."¹⁵

Highlighting the mystery of geometric figurative motifs Pupul Jayakar remarks, 'Paintings emerge to propitiate the dark forces. Geometric diagrams drawn in white, black and somber red... Pure and immense, energy charged colours seen by the silent eye of meditation in the darkness and space of the within.... Forms, concentrated circles, lapping and over lapping squares, lotuses, angles and triangles emerge, creating visual illusions, expanding and contracting, ascending and descending, projecting in their eternal movement the complex labyrinths, the sounds and spaces of the cosmos and of human consciousness'.¹⁶

SOME PROMINENT GEOMETRIC DESIGNS

Chauk : One of the basic square designs in folk painting; drawn with the help of a dot, *swastika*, square, and a triangle. *Bindu* is at centre of *chauk*, which develops into a *swastika*; four lines in the form of a square encircle the *swastika*, at the outward corners of these lines are drawn four *purnakumbhas* (pots of auspiciousness).

Panchkon (Pentagon): Symbol of five elements – earth, water, fire, air and sky.

Bindu (dot): It is the energy centre of the cosmos; the seed of creation from which arise all forms; the seat of three gods Brahma, Vishnu and Mahesh; the abstract form of the goddess; the sky; the supreme reality, from which the manifest forms emanate and in which everything merges.

Swastika: It signifies Four directions; the movement of Sun; in *swastika* reside all gods; it also represents four arms of Vishnu. *Swastika* contracts into a *bindu*: it is considered the most auspicious of all symbols.

Vrita (Circle): It depicts both space and time; in a *mandala*, it forms the cosmogram. In its centre there lies the *bindu*, the unmanifest form from which all forms take their origin.

Chakra (wheel): It symbolizes time and movement; associated with Vishnu and Krishna as their disc-weapon. The lotus form in the folk painting evolves from *chakra*. It also symbolizes days, fortnights, months, seasons and years.

Vertical line: It symbolizes goddess. Lines are symbolic of movement and progression.

Vertical line between two dots: It denotes Shiva

Trikon (Triangle): The triangle emerges the *bindu*. It is symbolic of three *gunas* (*satva*, *rajas* and *tamas*); the three dimensions of time, past, present and future; the feminine and the masculine principles; symbolizes Shiva when facing upward; in reverse position it is Shakti; represents the trinity Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva; three *shaktis* (Lakshmi, Saraswati and Kali); the three worlds heaven, earth and the nether land also the form of Kundalini in Tantra.

Chaturbhuj/ Chaturkon (quadrangle): It is the Symbol of order, stability. Its expansion of *bindu* stabilizes in the square; the time moves within the square; also a symbol of earth and sky, represents territory of a specific deity.

Ashtakon (Octagon): It symbolizes the protection.

Shatkon (Hexagram): It is the union of feminine and masculine principles; in its highly evolved form it appears at *shrichakra*, the *yantra* of

supreme goddess in her creative aspect, it symbolizes the universe and its divine cause.

Vertical line between two dots: It denotes Shiva

Wavy line: It denotes Water.

Sarvotobhadra: Protection, auspiciousness, four faced temple.

Besides these geometric designs, there are some images which recur in the paintings are:

Fish: It represents sexual desire and is a symbol of fertility, prosperity and good luck.

Peacock: It signifies love and beauty. It is the vehicle of Kartikeya and Saraswati.

Parrot: It is the vehicle of Kamdeva, deity of love and sex. Parrot symbolizes sensual desires; also appears as brother to young maidens. An important part of marriage decoration.

Lotus: It is the most recurring motif in folk paintings; it is infused with multilevel symbolism; it is the seat of the goddess; symbolizes space; signifies auspiciousness.

Elephant: Symbol of power, strength, energy, wealth, abundance and knowledge. It is associated with Indra, the vedic deity.

Horse: Again it is a symbol of power, energy, wealth and abundance. It also represents movement, desire and passion. It is a vehicle of Sun, Moon, Venus and Jupiter. It is a symbol of royal power.

Bull: It is the vehicle of Shiva; associated with agricultural activities; symbolizes power and forces of procreation and reproduction.

Snake: A snake is a folk deity; it is linked with water bodies; it represents time. It also symbolises fertility.

POPULAR FOLK PAINTINGS OF RAJASTHAN

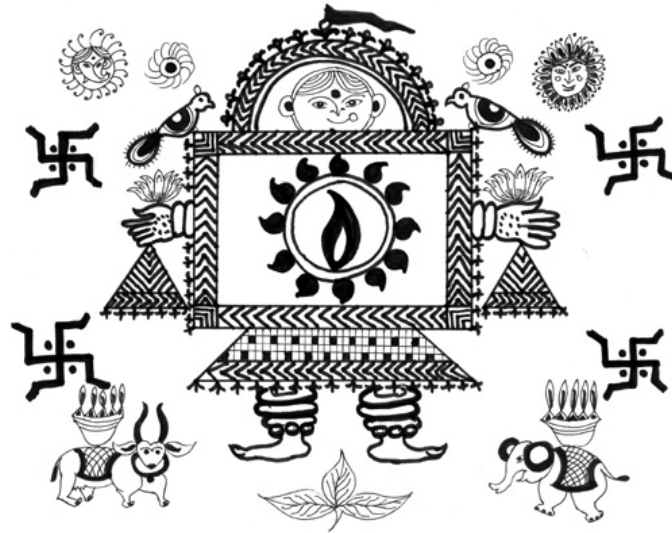


Sanjhi in Rajasthan is 'called by various names such as Sanjhuli, Sinjhi, Sanjha Ke Hanji, Hanjhya etc.'¹⁷

This painting is related with a specific festival by the same name, which is celebrated by unmarried girls in Rajasthan. This festival is celebrated for sixteen days commencing with the full moon day in the month of *Bhadrapada* (August-September) till the new moon day in the month of *Ashwin* (September-October). This period is known in the Hindu calendar as *pitri-paksha*, i.e. a fortnight dedicated to ancestors. During this period the ancestral spirits are believed to visit their homes. It is significant to note here that only unmarried women are allowed to make *Sanjhi* and after marriage, they discontinue this practice as prescribed by the ritual. Though the narrative and songs associated with *Sanjhi* do not make any direct reference to ancestral worship, the relationship between the two is apparent. Married women who give up their ancestral lineage to join their husband's lineage are forbidden to practice *Sanjhi* in their paternal houses and take up the task of assigning this art form and the associated ritual to their daughters who worship the ancestors of their fathers. Notwithstanding many myths and songs which have been superimposed on the *Sanjhi* ritual and image, it can be safely said that in its origin it is linked with the worship of female

ancestral spirit or goddess and is chiefly associated with notions of fertility and progeny. Analyzing the folk paintings associated with *vratas* and ritual, PupuJayakar remarks: "The *VrataKathas* that today accompany these diagrams, stories that repeat identical themes lauding the value of the observance are later accretions intended to stabilize the magical diagram and to give popular world meaning to the imponderables.'¹⁸ As far as *Sanjhi* is concerned, many narratives and songs have been added. They are made integral to the *Sanjhi* image transforming her archaic form into a folk goddess, very close and dear to young girls. In Udaipur there is a tradition of making sanjhies out of flowers and the leaves of bananas.

The drawing of Sanjhi is made on walls that are first plastered with fresh cow-dung. On the surface of the wall various motifs are made in bas-relief with cow-dung. Then these motifs are decorated with flowers, colourful and bright strips of paper and *kharia*(chalk solution). A new motif is introduced in the drawing each day only to be scraped off the next day. From the thirteenth day onwards the process starts to draw up a full blown *Sanjhi* with all the motifs put together in a parallelogram with four gateways. This full blown image of *Sanjhi* is known as *kilakot*, literally meaning 'fortified dwelling'.



THAPA

It is basically a form of hand prints. *Thapa* can be seen anywhere in the country both across time and across regions. In Rajasthan this art has acquired diverse forms and multilevel symbolism. Along with the usual hand prints, some iconic representations of various gods and goddesses are drawn during festivals, and religious ceremonies. This exercise is to appease specific

deities, avert disease and evil influences. Many of these drawings are associated with specific seasons. *Thapas* are normally drawn by women with the help of *kumkum*, *sindoor*, *henna*, *ghee* and cow-dung. The main colours used for making *Thapas* of different kinds include red, yellow, green, blue, black and yellow. However, *Thapas* are normally drawn using single colour and *kumkum* is the main ingredient used in this form of drawing.

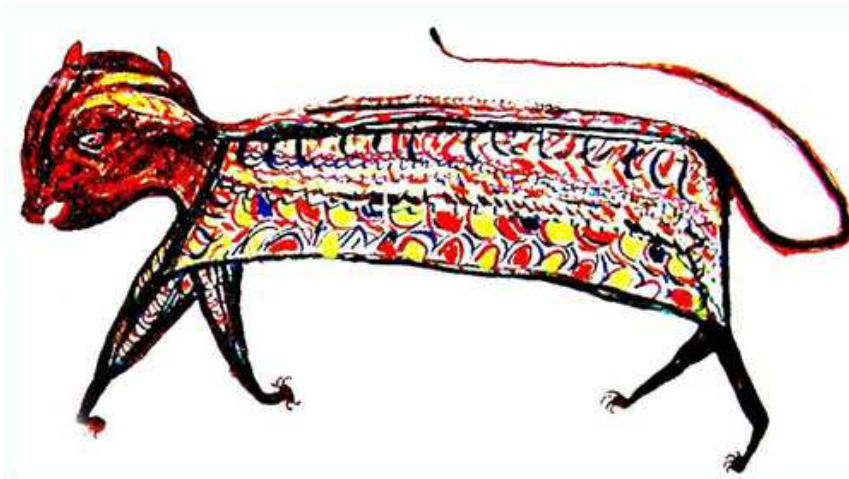


Chitravan is a form of wall painting done by professional painters mostly men, though women also draw. In the villages of Rajasthan such as Lahsora, Guras, Kustala, Unniyara, Mehandwas, Chhana, Jhirana this painting is very famous. The

artists are known *chiteras* and make these paintings during festivals and other religious and ritual ceremonies. *Chitravan* is figurative and illustrative in its composition. It draws its inspiration from religious narratives. This style is

also known *khyalmandana*. In *Chitravan* there is an abundance of figures of gods, goddesses, animals, birds, flowers, creepers, celestial-nymphs and musical instruments. Locally available clay, mineral and vegetable colours are used. Gum and resin are used to give shine and stability to these colours. Intricate balance between figures, flowers, creepers and other decorative motifs is one of the salient features of this form. Another special trait of this art form is

the absence of any outline or an initial sketch, simple strokes of the brush gradually evolve into intricate and beautiful designs and figures. 'In the Falaudi village of Sawai Madhopur where the moments concerning the personality of Chiteri women reflecting their deeds are immortalized in the paintings.'¹⁹ 'In Sawai Madhopur and Tank of Rajasthan not only Chiteri women expressing their emotions and techniques are present but they also express their happiness creatively.'²⁰



MANDANA

'In Sawai Madhopur and Tonk of Rajasthan in which the nature of Mandanas highlighting various dimensions are present.'²¹ In Rajasthan Mandanas are very popular and it is quite apparent from the saying, 'The wife of Emperor Akbar began to worship Lord Krishna that made the Mandanas at Nathji (NathDwara) very famous. (*Syabadshahkilugai, krishan ne pujai, nathjikomandaya angano, govardhan ne sajai*)'²². The Bhil tribal painting is called as Mandana, though it is different in style and context from the Mandanas discussed earlier. 'It is generally done on the walls of the houses. These paintings start from the base of the wall.' They reach up to the height of eight to ten feet. The surface is prepared for painting by plastering the wall with black or white coloured clay and cow-dung mixture. This clay in vernacular is called garu or gar. When the wall dries up, painting is done with the help of a cotton swab or piece of cloth tied to

the twig of neem or babul tree. The colours used are chiefly white, black, blue, yellow or saffron and these are obtained from vegetables or locally available clay or stone. These paintings are figurative in design and sketch various forms of birds, animals, humans, gods, goddesses, depicting man-nature relationship. Social customs, religious beliefs and tribal worldview have their reflection in these paintings.

GOND PAINTINGS

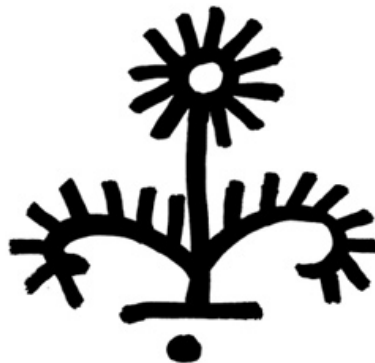
In the tribal area of Bharatpur, Sawai Madhopur and Banswara such type of paintings are very popular. They are present in inner and outer walls of the houses, windows and niches. The prominent colours used include red, yellow, blue, black and white. These paintings are based on motifs derived from the oral narratives of Gonds. Local deities, cock fight, scenes connected with forest, agriculture, marriage and other rituals find their representation in these paintings. In the Kishangarh style the colour has got the special

significance and DrAvinashPareek has rightly pointed out adding, 'Colours have got the utmost importance to contribute in the painting.'²³

PITHORA PAINTINGS

Among the tribal paintings the Pithora paintings are very popular. *Pithora* has significance of a ritual; each line or dot that finds place here is full of ritual and symbolic meanings. It is noteworthy that the process of painting is accompanied by music and singing. They form an integral part of the ritual and the painting process. *Pithora* painting is made during the ritual worship of the Bhil deity Pithora. This worship is made to procure good harvest, birth of a male progeny or as thanksgiving ceremony upon wish fulfillment. This ritual goes on for about 3 to 5 days and the whole clan and village community take part in the ritual. It is an expensive affair, so only rich members of the community undertake its organization. Though a collective affair, *Pithora* painting is mostly the work of professional painters known as *lakhindra*. Horses dominate Pithora paintings. They represent various deities and are drawn in rows. The horses

of Pithora and Pithori are painted in the centre. Motifs and characters associated with the narrative of Pithora find their place in these paintings. Raja Indi, Pithora, Pithori, DharniDharti (earth), MalwiGori, Raja Bhoj, Kajal Rani and Kali Koyal are some of the prominent characters finding place in the paintings. It is of great ritual importance to paint the characters correctly and in their proper place. The painting is worshipped at night and gods are invoked through song, music and trance. The ritual specialist known as *ojha* introduces each character in the painting and invokes his presence. During the ritual wine and goats are sacrificed. The painting is sometimes plastered over with clay and cowdung mixture after the ritual. Red, yellow, black, blue, green, purple and white are the chief colours used. Earlier colours that were prepared traditionally with locally available clay, minerals, vegetables and stones were used. These days poster colours, acrylic and oil paints are also being used. New motifs like cars, cycles, aeroplanes, motorcycle, jeep, bus, guns all find place in *Pithora* paintings, expressing the contemporary and dynamic character of folk paintings.



GUDNA PAINTING

'In the body painting traditions the Gudna motifs are among the back ward men and women of Rajasthan which is gradually on decline.'²⁴ *Gudna* has reference to that style of painting, which is made by piercing the body with the help of a needle and injecting it with black colour obtained

from lamp soot. Use of *kumkum*, milk of *aak*, leaves of *bilva* plant and juice of *harsingar* flower are also used at times.

Both men and women get their bodies painted in this manner. Both tribals and non-tribals are fond of *Gudna*. *Gudnas* are not only ornamental in value but also serve as identification marks of

different tribal groups. Images of birds, animals, gods and goddesses, vertical, horizontal and diagonal lines, dots, flowers, *swastika*, sun and moon are some of the popular motifs used in *Gudna*. Married and unmarried women have specific designs of *Gudna* for different parts of the body. These designs have ritual and symbolic meanings. *Gudnas* are also drawn to ward off evil eye, gain good harvest, health and fertility.

PHAD PAINTING

It is a beautiful, vivacious form of Rajasthan folk

art. It has now become popular on a global scale. It is in fact, the most famous form of painting in Rajasthan. It is characterized by its own unique styles and patterns. It is particularly appreciated as they use vibrant colors and strange historical themes, the life and times of brave heroes and so on. The grand style and use of themes of Phad painting is accountable for making it the most sought after paintings in the world of art and culture. The most popular heroes of Phad paintings are Prithviraj Chauhan, Goga Chauhan, Amar Singh Rathore, Papuji etc.



This painting is normally done on Khadi fabric. Most popular themes are scenes from everyday rural life, the daily life of artisans and farmers, flora and fauna, animals and birds and so on. The smaller version of the phada is known as phadakye. This form of folk art painting makes use of natural earthen colors mixed with water, gum and indigo, in a certain measure, to get the required colors.

This painting is normally known to be a kind of scroll painting. Such paintings use various shades of the same color to arrive at the desired effect. The central themes of the Phad paintings reflect chief Hindu deities and their legends, as also tales

of maharajas and their kingdoms. The outlines are drawn in blocks and are then filled with colors. The other feature of Phad painting is the two-dimensional character of the figures²⁵ and the arrangement of the entire picture purely being arranged in sections.

The painter makes use of bold and vibrant colors. The colors used are generally vegetable dyes and are used in a fixed order starting from orange-yellow to brown, bold greens and blues, red and black. The effect this creates, gives the onlooker a feeling of rising beyond time and actually entering the realm of the story being narrated through the means of the canvas.

CONCLUSION

Rajasthan has a glorious tradition of folk paintings. This art has enabled it to earn a name and fame all over the world. The folk paintings in Rajasthan have evolved over the centuries. The royal as well as the common folk have contributed this art in their own way. Still various types of folk paintings can be easily seen in Jaipur, Udaipur, Jodhpur, Kota, Bikaner Awar, Bharatpur, Kishangarh, Jaisalmer, Banswara, Pratapgarh, Karauli, Jhalawar, Dungarpur, Shahpura, Tonk, Pratapgarh etc. The subject of Rajasthan folk paintings is as diverse as the Indian cultural milieu itself. Rajasthan folk art painting includes a brilliant variety and quality. The most famous types of Rajasthan folk art paintings hence include various ancient Indian art forms such as Sanjhi, Phad, Mandana, Chiteri, Gudna, Pithora, Gond paintings and so on. Rajasthan folk paintings usually deal with pictorial depictions of popular Hindu deities, ordinary items, nature etc. Additionally, we can also find Mandana paintings of the natural things including even birds, animals, human beings etc. Rajasthani folk paintings normally depict daily village life, common customs and rituals, birds, animals and the elements of nature. Folk paintings are very eye-catching and a visual treat, as they employ vibrant and natural colors and papers, clothes, leaves, earthen pots, mud walls and so on, as their canvas to paint on. At present this form of painting is witnessing certain transformation in tune with the time. But the good thing is that the paintings are very much still in vogue. However, the scale and intensity has changed.

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