

# Exploring the Central India Art of the Gond People: contemporary materials and cultural significance

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## Introduction

Prior to the Muslim invasions of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, the Gond people were a culturally significant tribe in central India. Today, their art and culture is being rediscovered by a local and international audience. This is due mainly to the events of exhibitions by the Gond artist Jangarh Singh Shyam's work in Paris and Japan, in 1988. Since then, other Gond artists have also had their work exhibited internationally. Despite this renewed interest in Gond art, little has been written about their work. While much is known about the people and their customs, little is known about their artworks and what motivates their style of art and the depiction of particular elements in their works. This paper begins to address this apparent gap in the literature by reviewing a recent contemporary art exhibition of Gond art at the Art Gallery of South Australia.

## Background

Between May and November 2015, the Art Gallery of South Australia hosted the exhibition *Gond Paintings from the collection of Barrie and Judith Heaven*. It was part of an expansion of the art gallery's Asian art collection. The collection includes prints, pottery, sculptures, paintings, furniture, cloth, carvings, jewellery and other mostly traditional and historically significant artefacts from the greater Asia region. There are few contemporary artworks included in the gallery's collection. Hence the Gond exhibition provides a contemporary view of a region in Asia.

Traditional Gond art includes dance, song and wall paintings. Their art is used to communicate their culture across the generations. The Gond exhibition provides a different perspective on art in Asia. In particular, the Gond art exhibition combines traditional methods with contemporary themes and materials. It provides a unique insight into the culture and art of the people of central India.

Traditional Gond art is produced by the Gond tribes of Central India and is characterised by natural pigments used to create patterns or motifs and subject matter based on the artists' traditions and beliefs [5]. The naturally sourced pigments are derived from charcoal, coloured soil, plant sap, leaves, and cow dung. These pigment sources produce the vibrant colours black, white, red, blue and yellow. These colours are used to generate

patterns and motifs of dots, lines, dashes and fish scales. The motifs have strong significance for the beliefs of the Gond people and demonstrate their relationship with their cosmic, natural, social and religious worlds [11]. It is this application of specific motifs that differentiates Gond art from other Indian tribal art such as *Bhil* art from Madhya Pradesh or *Warli* paintings from Maharashtra. *Bhil* art, by comparison, use fauna and flora as subjects in a decorative aesthetic [6] whereas, *Warli* paintings use simple geometric shapes to depict their subjects [13]. While the subject matter used in contemporary Gond art borrows from its traditions, this particular exhibition highlights the adaptation of new materials, methods, concepts and subjects. The exhibition described here is part of an international expansion of Gond art; different paintings by the same artists have been also exhibited in Mumbai and Tokyo. Most of these artworks have been presented as modern or urban contemporary art. Yet, despite the subject matter in the art works, they are still imbued with the traditional spiritual and cultural heritage of the artists [15].

The attention that Gond art is currently receiving worldwide, is largely due to the work of Jangarh Singh Shyam, who was one of the first Gond artists to be recognised internationally. Swaminathan, a mainstream artist in Madhya Pradesh, first learned of Shyam's work in the 1980s and invited him to exhibit his art in Bhopal. Jangarh was influenced by Swaminathan in the use of modern materials such as canvas and paper, oil and watercolours [2].

Following his success in India, Jangarh was then invited to take part in the *Magicians of the Earth* exhibition at the Pompidou Centre in Paris (1989) [8]. This was followed by the *Other Masters* exhibition at the Mithila Museum in Tokyo, Japan (1998), which focused on the works of five tribal artists from India. Jangarh passed away in 2001. His work has been described by the director of Gallerie Ganesha in New Delhi as revealing, "...both the animist culture of Gond tribe and one of the foundations of Indian thought" [2].

## The Gond People

There are more than 700 tribes in India [10]. The Gond people constitute a tribe identified as part of the Gond region, which was recognised prior to the division of the states following the independence of India in 1947. The Gond were prominent in Indian culture during

the 14<sup>th</sup> century, before the Muslim invasions from the north which forced them to flee to the surrounding forests of the Vindhya and Satpura region [11]. Nonetheless, the Gond are still the largest tribe in Central India, comprised of more than 4 million people. Though predominantly centred in Madhya Pradesh, they represent significant numbers in the states of Madhya Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra, Chhattisgarh and Odisha [12] (see figure 1).



**Figure 1. Map of India showing the Gond region**

The word ‘Gond’ comes from the Dravidian<sup>1</sup> expression of *kond*, meaning ‘green mountain’ [12]. Green Mountain is a reference to the Vindhya and Satpura mountain ranges where most of the Gond people reside since the 14<sup>th</sup> century (see figure 1). Recorded history of the Gond people begins in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, achieving greater significance in the 14<sup>th</sup> century due to the Gond Rajas (kings) [11].

### Gond Art

Traditional Gond Art includes dance, song and painting. Stories are passed on orally through folk song. These can be accompanied by traditional string instruments such as the *Kingri* and the *Bana*. Called *Dhemse*, the songs convey the religious history of the Gonds, their deities and mythology [4]. Stories are also communicated through folk dance. They may be performed at milestone events such as a birth or wedding

<sup>1</sup> Dravidian people speak the Dravidian languages such as Tulu, Tamil and Kannada. Residing in the Southern states of India, the oldest recorded history of the Tamil-speaking people dates to the 3<sup>rd</sup> century B.C.

and other celebrations and festivals. The Gond people imitate peacocks, bees and other animals in their dancing; this is often accompanied by a percussion instrument such as the *Dhol*. Rhythm is an important factor in their dancing. Singing often accompanies dancing where impromptu lines may be added to the songs [4]. Gond paintings are traditionally applied to the inner and outer walls of residential houses. They may depict the local flora, fauna, Gods and Goddesses [12].

Traditional Gond wall paintings use natural materials to create vibrant coloured motifs. Called *Gond Pradhan* motifs, they are comprised of fine lines, dots and dashes [5]. A central theme of their paintings is the depiction of their mystical beliefs. This is reflected in their use of images depicting: Gods and goddesses, such as Ganesha and Shakti (see figure 2); Hindu rituals and stories of supernatural entities from ancient Hindu texts (see figure 3); and a reverence of natural entities such as spiritually important trees or divine beings – birds and animals that have spiritual significance. The cow, central to the Hindu belief system, is prominent in these images.



**Figure 2: Ganesha (Kusram, 2015)**

Gond artists believe that ‘viewing a good image begets good luck’ [5]. It is this inherent belief that motivates the Gond to decorate their houses and floors with traditional motifs. Traditionally, the creation of the paintings occurs during a Hindu festival. Typical Hindu festivals when paintings are created include: *Karwa Chauth* (where a wife prays for her husband’s long life



by fasting); *Diwali* (the festival of lights which signifies the victory of Good over Evil); and, *Nag Panchami* (celebration of the harvest of crops) [12]. Gond artists use patterns or in-fills for the outlines of objects and people in their paintings. The different types of patterns used establish their signature style. These patterns manifest in the form of dots, dashes, lines or fish scales [6, 7]. Due to the lack of research in this field, it is not clear what meaning the patterns hold for the Gond people. Their paintings are used to worship nature and as a mode for seeking protection and warding off evil [12]. Principally, Gond art is used by the Gond people to pass on their stories and beliefs to future generations [14]. The way these art forms are produced also reflects the history and experiences of the artists themselves. The paintings are thought also to serve a higher purpose, connecting the past and the present, the people and the nature that surrounds them, as well as the spiritual and the physical worlds [12].



**Figure 3: Trail by fire for Vaidehi (Shyam, 2015)**

### The Gond Exhibition

The exhibition at the Art Gallery of South Australia showcased the works of 11 Gond artists. They included the works of: Hiranman Urveti, Ramesh Tekam, Dhavat Singh Uikay, Venkat Raman Singh Shyam, Bhajju Shyam, Narmada Prasad Tekam, Subhash Vyam, Balu Jivya Mashe, Prasad Singh Kusram, Rajendra Kumar Singh Shyam and Suresh Kumar Dhurve. Their works included 12 paintings (two paintings by Venkat Raman

Singh Shyam) and a wooden sculpture. The paintings use ink or acrylic on canvas. Four main themes emerge from these paintings: the *Tree of Life*, a depiction of the life-giving Mahua tree, highly revered by the Gond people; local deities, specific to the region of the artist's residence; popular deities from Hindu mythology; and, humankind's relationship with nature and technology in contemporary life.

### References to the 'Tree of life':

Narmada Prasad Tekam's *Tree of Life* depicts a Mahua tree full of birds, with a tiger prowling beneath (see figure 4). "The birds in the painting allude to the tree's life-giving powers, while the tiger suggests the spiritual significance of the subject" [1].



**Figure 4: Tree of Life (Tekam, 2015)**

Rajendra Kumar Singh Shyam's 'Tree of Life' highlights the importance of the Mahua tree in the Gond people's lives. "According to the Gond, the lives of humans and trees are intertwined and cannot be separated" [1]. The painting shows a tree full of birds and Gond women collecting the fruits of the tree while the men keep watch (see figure 5).

Suresh Kumar Dhurve has used the tree of life as a motif "to which [he] continuously returns to in his art and it is often interpreted schematically as seen in *Origins of Life*" [1]. The *Origins of Life* is a painting which shows the life-giving nature of the Mahua tree and highlights the artist's belief that life itself originated from the tree (see figure 6).



In the case of these three artworks, it is clear that the *Tree of Life* is a common motif represented in different ways to highlight its significance to the Gond people. This *Tree of Life* - which is literally a tree of the Mahua genesis (*Bassia longifolia* or *latifolia* *Madhuca indica*) - occurs widely in Indian art but has a special resonance for Gond communities who revere it for its usefulness and life-giving attributes. The Mahua fruits and flowers are a source of vitamins and minerals. The fruits can be eaten raw or cooked. The pulp from the fruits and flowers is also a source of sugar used in sweet preparations [9]. The husk from the flowers is used to produce an alcoholic drink which is often consumed on festive occasions. Mahua seeds are used to make oil which is used for cooking as well as a fuel for lamps. Parts of the flower are used for preparing vegetables, such as aubergine, to enhance its flavour. The Gond Pradhans (village elders) use the tree for shade. They sit under the tree to conduct their official business related to governing the village. The village women build shrines on the tree trunks during religious festivals [4].



**Figure 5: Tree of Life (Shyam, 2015)**

Clearly, the Mahua tree plays a pivotal role in the lives of the Gond people. This is evidenced by their reverence for this tree in their art. The artists discussed above demonstrate this reverence in their paintings

where the tree is depicted as lush with foliage. It is interesting to note that only the birds in Rajendra Shyam's painting are coloured to evoke a feeling of vibrancy, brought about by the tree. Moreover, the fauna that take refuge in the tree symbolises the dependence of the Gond people on the Mahua tree – highlighted by Dhurve's reference to the *Origins of Life* in his painting.



**Figure 6: Origins of Life (Dhurve, 2015)**

### References to Local deities:

Bhajju Shyam's painting depicts the river goddess *Jalharin Devi* whose body is made up of many fishes. She is riding an alligator which is in the midst of devouring a fish. The painting also shows different fauna and flora associated with the river (see figure 7).

Hirman Urveti's painting depicts the goddess *Kankali Devi*, a local deity manifest in a form of a statue being worshipped by Gond women (see figure 8). *Kankali Devi* - a form of the goddess mother *Kali*, "is believed to have magically emerged from the earth a millennium ago. Gond people regard *Kankali Devi* as their ancestral mother and the great Kachargadh cave in Maharashtra state as among the goddess's most important sacred sites" [1].

From these two artists' work, we see the importance of local deities in the lives of the Gond people. The Gond people have long worshipped local deities related to rivers, forests and mountains. These deities are not well



known in the wider popular Indian mythology, as they may be specific to the geographical region of an artist.



**Figure 7: Jalharin Devi (Shyam, 2015)**

“Among the extensive pantheon of divine beings in Gond belief are river gods [such as *Jalharin Devi*] associated with the life-giving power of water” [1]. Bhajju Shyam's *Jalharin Devi* is one such example of a local deity that is specific to the Gond people who live on the banks of the Narmada river. The Gond people regard the river sacred as it is a source of water for drinking and irrigation. The river banks where they live are fertile areas and the waters are abundant with fish. Through Bhajju Shyam's *Jalharin Devi* he manages to “imbue the narrative of a landscape with spiritual power” [1]. Similarly, Hirman Urveti's *Kankali Devi* - a painting of a local deity considered as the Mother Goddess by the Gond people - portrays the reverence that the Gond people hold for this deity.

## References to popular Hindu deities:

Raman Shyam Singh Shyam's painting called *Adi-Shakti*, is a form of *Shiva*<sup>2</sup>. The Gonds idolise *Shiva* (see figure 9). In this painting, *Shiva* is represented as *Ardhanarishvara*, having both male and female features combined. Shyam's work embodies a primordial cosmic energy in the form of this half-male-half-female deity. The *Adi-Shakti* goddess highlights the abhorrence of wastefulness, such as children wasting their parents' hard-earned wealth [1].

Prasad Singh Kusram's painting of *Ganesha* depicts the elephant-headed god being worshipped by various birds and animals (see figure 2). This painting is a typical depiction of *Ganesha* riding a mouse, the god's preferred form of transport. According to Hindu mythology, people pray to *Ganesha* to remove all obstacles [1].



**Figure 8: Kankali Devi (Urveti, 2015)**

Both *Shiva* and *Ganesha* are popular idols of worship in mainstream Hinduism. Popular Hindu gods and goddesses are revered and prayed to with the belief that each grants wishes of a different nature. While *Ganesha* is the remover of obstacles, *Shiva* is the divine male and grants soul-mates and offspring [3]. These gods are popular in Hindu worship; hence it is not surprising that they appear in these paintings.

<sup>2</sup> *Shiva* is the Divine male in Hindu mythology. *Shiva* has many forms such as *Ardhanarishvara*, a combination of male and female attributes and *Nataraj*, the cosmic dancer. *Shiva* is also represented in Hindu temples as a phallus called *Shiva Lingam*



## References to humankind's relationship with technology:

Subhash Vyam's work *Tiger and Aeroplane* shows a tiger, cow and birds gazing up at an aeroplane passing overhead in the sky (see figure 10). This is not the first time an aeroplane has been depicted in a Gond painting. As mentioned earlier, Jangarh Singh Shyam (1962-2001) is credited with including the first depiction of an aeroplane in a Gond painting. He did this to describe to his family his experiences on a trip to Japan [1]. Here we see a distinctly contemporary element appear in otherwise traditional Gond art.

Other contemporary Gond art also includes depictions of modern technology. Venkat Raman Singh Shyam's untitled work (see figure 11) shows an aeroplane, an auto-mobile, modern buildings and skyscrapers and an electric transmission tower with the backdrop of a tree and a river [7].



**Figure 9: Adi-Shakti (Shyam, 2015)**

In the current study, Vyam's painting depicts humankind's relationship with technology in an interesting juxtaposition of traditional art form and modern subject. As most Gond people are now living in an increasingly urbanised world, it is perhaps not surprising that the subject and methodology of their paintings reflect this modernisation. For example, instead of using natural colours to paint on walls, since the 1980s paintings are increasingly being produced using water,

oil and acrylic colours on either canvas or paper instead of a wall [12]. Nonetheless, Vyam's painting, whilst contemporary, still adheres to the traditional form of Gond painting.

## Discussion

It is evident from the paintings reviewed in this exhibition that it is common for Gond artists to use signature styles and patterns in their paintings to distinguish their work from other Gond artists. While Dhurve, Rajendra Shyam and Tekam all include depictions of the Mahua tree in their paintings their approaches to the subject matter differ. Dhurve's signature pattern includes fish scales and drops of water which are used as in-fills in his painting. Shyam's painting is dominated by lines and dashes. Tekam's colourful painting is full of very fine lines which distinguishes it from the other two paintings. Both Bhajju Shyam's and Urveti's artworks of local deities are characterised by their use of bold colours and patterns. Urveti uses dots, dashes and fish scales to create distinct textures in his artwork while Bhajju Shyam uses straight lines and dashes to emphasise the fauna and flora depicted. Kusram's uses dashes to form a cross-hatch pattern in his artwork. Raman Shyam uses dots to in-fill the outlines of key elements in his painting. Vyam uses a style comprised of waves and fish scales to distinguish his work. While these artists can be distinguished by their use of highly stylised patterns, as mentioned earlier, it is not clear what meaning can be ascribed to these patterns. It would be interesting to investigate this further. The authors of this paper plan to interview these artists to explore these and other questions raised about their work.

## Conclusion

Through their art, Gond artists depict their beliefs and experiences related to their religion and world-view. They use recurring motifs in their paintings to highlight their beliefs. The paintings reviewed in the current exhibition reveal motifs specific to the Gond artists, such as: the Mahua tree, local deities, popular Hindu deities and an emergent technological world view. This emergent view has led these Gond artists to eschew many traditional materials in favour of more modern materials and transcribe their art from the walls of their houses to canvases and paper. This new style of painting, which is an amalgamation of traditional art form and contemporary subjects, are achieving a renewed popularity, in India and internationally. Despite this, there remain few literary reviews of Gond art, its motivations and production. Until recently, the work of Gond artists has been largely overlooked due to their remoteness and socio-economic conditions which prevented them from being more mobile. This prevailed until the 1980s when the Gond artist Jangarh Singh Shyam was sponsored to exhibit his work at galleries in Paris and Japan. Since then, there have been attempts by



the Indian government to preserve and promote Gond art more generally. This, and the few exhibitions recently produced, have gone some way in providing Gond art with an international audience. The exhibition review here was the latest in the expansion of Gond art internationally.



Figure 10: Tiger and Aeroplane (Vyam, 2015)



Figure 11: Untitled (Shyam, 2015)

## References

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