



Journal of International Women's Studies

Volume 18

Issue 1 *Empowering Future Generations of Women and Girls: Empowering Humanity: Select Proceedings from the Second World Conference on Women's Studies, Colombo, Sri Lanka*

Article 6

Nov-2016

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Rani, Pallavi; Udaya Kumar, D.; Tudu, Saheb Ram; and Bora, Shilpi (2016). Rural Women Artists: A Visual Analysis of the Mural Art Forms of Santhal Pargana, Jharkhand, India. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 18(1), 73-86.
Available at: <http://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol18/iss1/6>

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Rural Women Artists: A Visual Analysis of the Mural Art Forms of Santhal Pargana, Jharkhand, India

By Pallavi Rani¹, D. Udaya Kumar, Saheb Ram Tudu and Shilpi Bora

Abstract

Women are the pioneers of traditional mural art practices in rural India. Warli art, Gond art, and Madhubani paintings are examples of their artworks. The women belonging to the Santhal region in eastern India, are highly skilled in rich rural vernacular art. Murals are generally created by them during local festivals and marriage ceremonies. The women of six districts that comprise the Santhal Pargana² (Dumka, Godda, Deoghar, Jamtara, Pakur and Sahibganj), decorate their mud houses during these occasions with visual borders and motifs.

A pilot study was carried out with the women artists to research these murals. The framework for the visual analysis is based on distinct symmetry operations such as translation, rotation, reflection, and glide reflection. This paper examines the various artistic expressions of the rural women of Santhal Pargana.

Keywords: Mural art, rural women artists, motifs, Walari art, Gond art, Madhubani paintings

Introduction

The relationship among women, art, and society is a valuable framework for examining the changing social circumstances of Indian women artists. The cultural legacy of women artists and their visual art practices are now being accepted as an intellectual contribution in the world of art. Exposure on global platforms are motivating rural women to lead women artists from similar socio-economic backgrounds in the field of art practices.

Indian art history has documented the artistic skills of rural women as house decorators. The tradition of house decoration is still prevalent in rural India in the form of painted walls, floors, and other handicrafts. Each decorated house reveals the cultural aspects of its own community, place and technique. Gond, Warli, Saura and Pithora mural paintings are known for their community art practices and Madhubani, Sanjhi, Mandana and Lippan mural arts are known for their place and technique.

The cultural diversity of rural Jharkhand makes an interesting study in the fields of Cultural Studies and Women's Studies. The six districts of Jharkhand Deoghar, Dumka, Godda, Pakur, Jamtara, and Shahibganj, comprise the administrative division of Santhal Pargana. The mixed population of this area works on a single mural layout and technique annually. Generally, the local festivals, marriage ceremonies, and other occasions are celebrated in the villages with annual house repairing processes and the decorations. Nature is the main inspiration behind mural art. Rituals,

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² Santhal Pargana is one of the divisions or commissionaires of Jharkhand state. The word Santhal Pargana is comprised of two words: "Santhal" (a major tribe of India) and "Pargana", and Pargana word means "district".

myths, male-dominated art work (wood carving and pottery-making), and influences from other house decorations help these women artists to create lively paintings.

This paper examines the painted mud houses of each district by the women artist for their approach, purpose, technique, layout, and design elements. This paper also discusses the lacuna of studies of the visual characteristics of the rural mural art of Jharkhand, which have not yet been documented. The aim of this paper is to study the artistic expressions (art forms) of rural women and the visual elements of rural mural art. The study focuses the social conditions, cultural significance and their reflections in the rural mural art of Jharkhand.

Research Design and Procedure

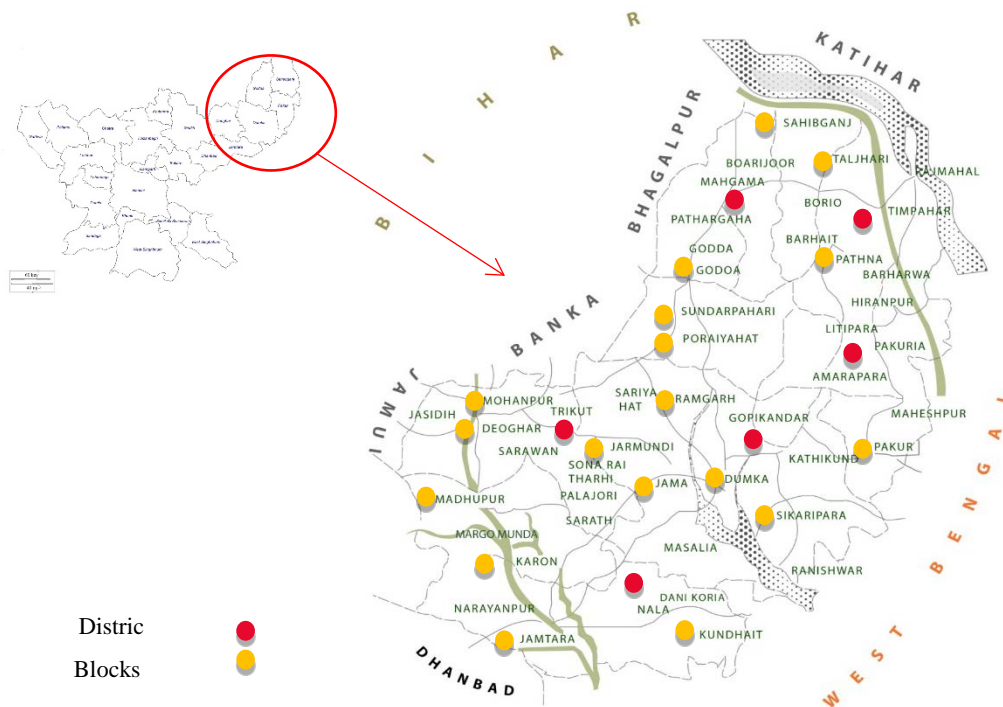
We pursued an ethnographic research method. Initially, a pilot study was carried out in six districts of Santhal Pargana. Afterwards, we conducted intensive research in certain areas (selected blocks indicated in fig.1). More than two blocks were selected and three villages of each block were visited for the research. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the participants, which clarified existing questions regarding their art forms. We then sorted and analysed the art forms by symmetric operation³. The raw data was broken down into units of practical meaning that led to a clearer understanding of the motives behind the said practice. Field notes were thoroughly studied along with collected narratives.

Data Sources and Methodology

Data were collected from both primary and secondary sources. The primary data were collected from field visits, semi-structured interviews, photography, and video recordings. The secondary data were collected from libraries and the Internet. We interviewed the participants who included 24 women artists ranging from 10-50 years. Most were housewives, along with a few young female students from a mid-socio-economic background. Four participants from each districts of Santhal Pargana were selected. Among them, ten women belonged to the Santhal community. Most of the research data was gathered on site (from village houses, schools, museums, and NGOs) through observation, photography, interviews, and audio and video recording.

³ Symmetry operation is relevant to two dimensional designs and their classification: rotation, reflection, translation, glide reflection.

Figure 1: Locations of rural mural art practices of Santhal Pargana, Jharkhand



Discussion

Rural women artists and their artwork

The tradition of creating murals in the Santhal Pargana was started by women artists from the Adivasi communities such as Santhal, Oraon, Sauria Paharia, Munda, and Ghatwar. Gradually, this method of decorating their houses was adopted by pastoral and agricultural castes (Dhanuk, Kahar, Koir, and Kurmi), trading and industrial castes (Bania, Hajjam, Kumhar, Tanti, Teli, Barhi, Lohar, and Dosadh) and high castes (Bhumihars, Rajputs) as well. Most of the women artists of this area are housewives who are involved in all household chores. During their free time, these women also make brooms, dolls, wall-hangings, and embroidery work for their domestic use (fig. 2). According to Vidyarathi & Rai (1976), the arts and crafts of Adivasi communities are introduced in three ways: ritualistic, utilitarian and individualistic. Drawing from his work, we concur that the mural arts and crafts of this area are also nurtured in all three aspects. The tradition of mural making is practiced during different local festivals such as Sohrai (harvest festivals) which is held in the month of Pus (December-January), Baha (flower festival) in the month of Phalgun (February-March), Sarhul (held in February), Bandana (held in October), Diwali (held in October-November), Durga Puja (held in September-October), Christmas (held in December) as ritualistic art. The women and girls start repairing their mud houses ten days before the festivals and make traditional designs on the external and internal walls of the houses, floors and pillars, according to their cultural endowment.

Traditional arts including dance, music, and visual art are included, since the celebrations identify the culture and ethnicity of each group (Day, 2015). In addition, the mud dwellings of

some villages are ornamented by particular communities with borders and motifs while some houses are only painted.

Figure 2: Involvement of rural women in various artistic pursuits in rural areas of Santhal Pargana, Jharkhand



Visual aspects of rural mural art

Mural art forms of Santhal Pargana are mainly dominated by borders and motifs. Women artists draw natural forms inspired from native habitats such as forest ecology as well as depicting village livelihoods in children's books. These well-executed visual elements justify the purposes of decoration, salutation, protection, and religious identity of mural-making tradition.

The mud houses of all six districts of Santhal Pargana have homogeneous characteristics. Birds, animal and flower motifs are regular in selected regions. Some remarkable motifs exist in Deoghar, Dumka, Godda and Sahebganj districts. Some motifs of Deoghar district murals are identified as totaka art. In this art, geometrical human figurines are painted. The figures are either single or in a group along with weapons, created with the idea of repelling evil spirits. These protective figures are painted on the external walls of the houses and the main wall with the entrance to the house, using cow dung paste. Apart from borders and motifs, religious symbols of Christianity are also prevalent in Dumka, Godda, and Sahebganj districts. Salutation words such as 'Welcome' are painted effectively in Latin and Ol-Chiki⁴ script (which are written by the educated member/s of their family) on the upper-middle part of the main door (door head).

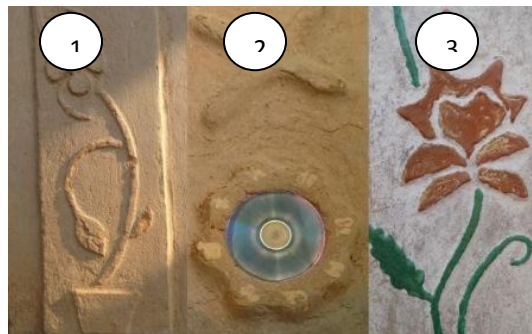
⁴Santhali script

Mural making process

The mud houses of Santhal Pargana are decorated using the mud mural technique. Both the preparation of the walls and the process of decoration are equally essential in this method. The entire technique is divided into two balanced phases. In the first phase, mud walls are prepared with the mixture of murum mati (clay), fibres of jute, hemp, and husk, while cow dung paste is used to plaster the freshly prepared muddy wall. And wooden tools, brooms, and fingers are used to apply plaster to the walls.

In the second phase, women apply clay in certain shapes and patterns when the walls are about to be completely dry. Knives, wooden spatulas, and fingers are utilized to shape the visual elements. In some houses of Santhal Pargana, murals comprised of pieces of mirrors, pieces of bangles, broken shells, and Digital Compact Disks (or CDs), which are fixed on the clay itself. Different types of textures are applied at the same time where applicable. Background colours made of Khariya (Zinc Oxide) and Dudhi mati (white clay) are used as a primer on completely dried wall plaster. In the end, motifs and borders are painted using organic and synthetic colours (fig.3). Mud house owners who do not repair their walls annually, apply a few layers of plaster on existing mud walls, and create murals on them after a few hours.

Figure 3: Three steps (second phase) of mud mural technique of Santhal Pargana

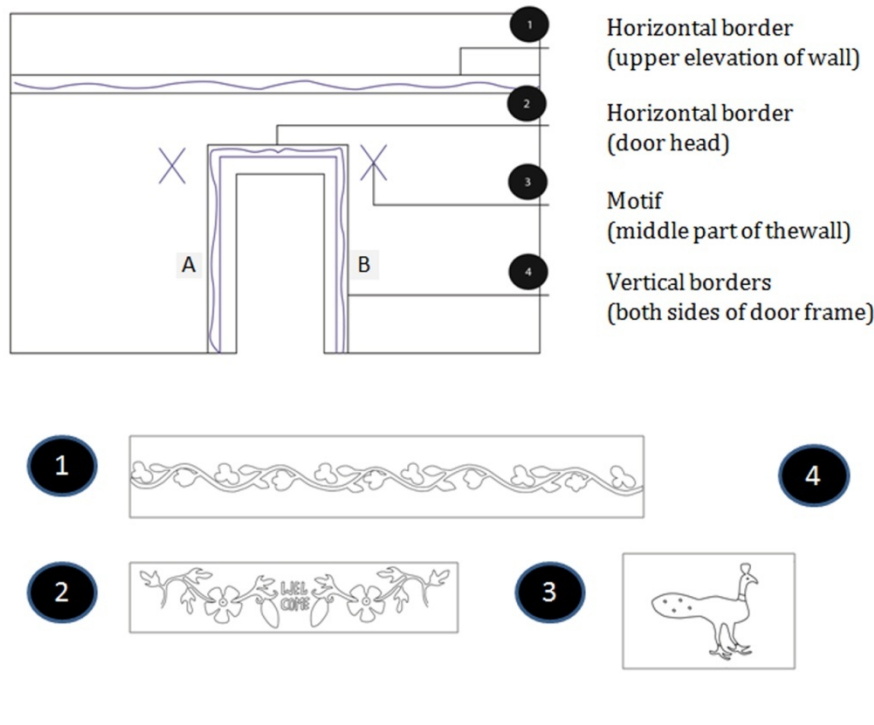


Design elements

The basic layout of the rural mural art of the Santhal region is divided in two parts: the upper part and middle to lower parts (fig.4). The upper portion of the wall is comprised of a horizontal border and motifs, in contrast to the middle, which is divided into three sections: vertical borders, horizontal borders, and motifs. The upper horizontal border carries the translations and reflections of visual forms.

The section in the middle of the wall is painted with vertical borders A and B (around both sides of the frame of the door) using images of creepers and plants. The placement of the borders creates an effect of a mirror image with a pot. The horizontal borders made on the head of the door, are comprised of a vertical reflection of motifs. Usually, these visual forms are repeated with single symmetrical motifs. Generally, a verbal form is arranged at the middle of the doorframe with an existing central single motif. The lower part of the wall supports the vertical borders A and B with specific visual elements such as pots, grass, etc.

Figure 4 Basic layout of rural mural art of Santhal Pargana



Borders

Decorative stripes on the upper, middle, and lower parts of walls are known as *baha* in the local language of the Santhal Pargana. They contain motifs in the form of translation, reflection, and rotation as a repetitive pattern. Indian scholar Agrawal (1991) draws a comparison between linguistic grammar and border patterns. She reveals that the repetition of the arrangement of motifs and alliteration (anuprash) have the same characteristics. According to Hann, (2012) the border patterns follow symmetrical characteristics, followed by a regular repeating pattern, and this repetition of motif always maintains a particular distance across the plane.

The great mathematician Andreas Spiesser has analysed the geometrical laws of pattern making (Gombrich, 1984). Drawing from his observations, the border patterns of Santhal Pargana were examined and two symmetrical border patterns⁵ and horizontal Glide reflection⁶ (TG) and Translation, Horizontal line reflection and horizontal Glide reflection (THG)] were observed.

The upper horizontal border and middle lower vertical border of rural mural art are similar to the existing frieze patterns. These borders mainly contain the translations in terms of shape and colour. The middle horizontal border establishes itself as a completely new form of frieze pattern. It is drawn with vertical reflections and is divided with single verbal motifs.

Motif

The motifs of Santhal Pargana consist of momentous design elements of visual literacy. They are mainly dominated by single and pair birds, animals, flowers, and human forms (Table 1).

⁵ A repeating unit within a regularly repeating design.

⁶ It consisting of a translation combined with a reflection about a plane parallel to the direction of the translation.

The illustrative human figures of the Deoghar district are painted with various types of expressions. A number of geometrical shapes are constituted to create a single human motif. These isolated motifs carry one fold of rotational symmetry⁷.

Birds, included parrots, peacocks, crows, and sparrows are drawn with a single 360 degree rotation or in pairs with a vertical reflection, in each of the selected districts. The motifs of Dumka, Godda and Sahibganj districts are dominated by flowers, birds, and remarkable regional symbol motifs. Regional Christian symbol motifs have led to the creation of a club of geometrical and organic forms like crosses with creepers, flowers, pots, and steps. George Lechler, (1937) discussed this unique motif, which can be observed on a runic gravestone in Gotland, Sweden as the tree of life. The regional motif of Deoghar district has one fold of rotational symmetry. In a similar fashion, Sahibganj district has bilateral symmetry in its motifs. Godda mural art is similar to the mural art form of the Dumka district. Subject, composition, colour, symmetrical operation, historical background, and uniform religious influences led to similarities in the mural art of both the districts. The asymmetrical motifs of Jamtara districts are drawn with more compound shapes. In this area, flower motifs are shown with four-fold rotational symmetry, and butterflies are separated as bilateral symmetrical motifs. The murals of Pakur and Sahibganj districts have the simplest forms of animals and birds. Fish, scorpion, bull, goat, dog, duck, peacock, sparrow and hen are drawn in one single line. The motifs of Pakur district have four fold of rotational symmetry. Odd numbers of petals like three, five, seven, and even numbers of petals like four and six are primarily used in flower motifs. Every bilateral symmetry motifs have three visual forms. Two of them vertically reflect each other, leading to a central sign. These central signs are drawn in the shape of pot, flower, animal, etc. Pot is the common motif of Santhal Pargana mural art. Motifs of borders are defined with geometrical and natural forms.

Shape

Geometrical and organic shapes are building blocks of mural art of Santhal Pargana. Both shapes are equally used in the creation of motifs and borders.

These shapes focus on leaves and parts of flowers (pointed and rounded tips, petal, stalk, blade, and stem), parts of birds (crown, wing, tail, beak, and toe) and parts of animals (horn, ear, tail, leg). Geometrical and organic shapes are presents with intricate details in Table 2.

Triangle shapes are common in the mural art of each district. While the Deoghar region has the maximum numbers of pointed tip shapes, Pakur in Sahibganj, has the least. Round tip shapes are found in all the six districts. The murals at Deoghar have variations in C and S curve shapes. The C curves in this region are either flat or not pointed. The curves in Dumka and Godda have similar features. The Jamtara, Pakur, and Sahibganj districts have finite S curve motifs.

⁷ It rotates by 360 degrees for constituent parts to coincide.

Table 1: Visual analysis of motifs of Santhal Pargana

Selected Districts	Rotational symmetry motifs		Bylateral symmetry motifs (Vertical reflection)
	Asymmetrical motifs (360 degree rotation)	Two fold rotational motif & Four fold rotational motif	
Deoghar			
Dumka			
Godda			
Jamtara			
Pakur			
Sahibganj			

Table 2: Visual analysis of shapes of rural murals of Santhal Pargana



































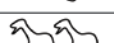



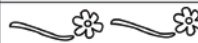
Selected Districts	Shapes with Pointed Tips	Shapes with Round Tips	C and S curves	Cutting and Removing Prts of Shapes
Deoghar				
Dumka				
Godda				
Jamtara				
Pakud				
Sahibganj				

Motif formations are exposed in the front projection in each district. In the villages of Jamtara and Godda, a few flowers and leaf drawings are imitated in side angles. External shapes of flowers, birds, and animals are formed to extract and cut some specific structure. Internal shapes of motifs are created to remove the unrequited segments of visual form. In Deoghar murals, midrib of leaves and central parts of flowers are removed to create the internal shape. In Dumka district, texture and coiling are the special visual elements that are used to form new internal shapes of motifs. In Godda district, regional symbols are created by counter space of leaf motifs. In Pakur and Sahebganj murals, the shapes of eyes of animals and body texture are carved with respect to negative and positive space. In all the six districts of Santhal Pargana, separate processes are used to create each and every organic and geometrical shape.

Form

Woung, (2010) explains in his book *Principles of Form and Design* that everything with shape, size, colour, and texture that occupies space, marks position and indicates direction can be called form. Consequently, the visual analyses of the forms of Santhal Pargana are recorded as natural, geometric and abstract forms. The study of natural forms focuses on branching, fanning, affinity, unity, spiral, and undulation processes. Deoghar and Sahibganj murals consist of alternating pattern repetitions of creepers and plants. Bilateral branch pattern are used in Dumka, Godda, Jamtara, and Pakur murals. Some motifs of Dumka, Godda, and Pakur have 360 degree rotation from one central point and a large open centre (see Table 3).

Table 3: Study of natural forms of rural mural art of Santhal Pargana

Selected Districts	Branching		Fanning		Spiral and Undulations		Affinity and Unity		Singular and Plural forms
Deoghar									 
Dumka									 
Godda									 
Jamtara									 
Pakud									 
Sahibganj									 

The women artists add slight curls in these natural forms in one or more directions. Dumka murals have some spiral forms which precede to swirls on the C curve. All five districts have extremely narrow and wide undulation in forms. Though the design elements are not repeated strictly, in some motifs they are used progressively to confirm an overall shape and structure. Some flowers petals drawings are combined with each other to establish a natural form. The rose flower motif of Dumka, Godda, and Jamtara is an example of this form of unity.

Various line styles are used in these murals. Agrawal, (1991) discussed different types of line Ludhakti (more rhythmic curve lines), Lahardar (wave lines), Kanguredar (engrailed and invected) as Gomutrica rekha (cow shape lines). Lines are marked as C and S curves in all the six districts.

The rural mural art of Santhal pargana are represented in three forms: singular, plural, and compound. Birds, flowers, and animals are drawn in a singular form. Repetition of singular forms emerge as plural forms such as in the translation and reflection of birds and animals. The compound forms of these areas consist of different entities, for example two animals with one flower, two flowers with one bird, one pot with one flowers, and one bird. The natural forms of these murals have been studied with reference to natural forces. The forms are represented with internal and external variations. New forms are created by carving plain mud into artistic shapes. The forms are covered with either a texture or pattern. Variations of external shapes are defined by corners and edges, but none of the internal and external forms are similar in design. In all the districts, the outer and inner forms are different. The Santhal Pargana mural is a stable form based

on an element of written language, as a verbal form. The murals use Santhali and English alphabets, to welcome guests.

Texture

Textures are generally applied in various geometrical and organic shapes on plain mud walls of Santhal Pargana. Fingers are used to draw groups of lines. Clay walls are textured with the help of *Dudhi mati* (fig.5). Light colour strokes on light background give a smooth finish to the wall patterns. These textures are also used as background to the motifs, to give a heavy look to the whole wall. Gauri Bharat (2015) mentions the similarities of strokes on walls and floor plastering processes in rural areas of the Singhbhum region. The same geometrical strokes (from the upper part of the wall to the lower part) are found in these murals. The pattern of overlapping the strokes (on each other) creates different arrangements of visual forms. Textures are also placed, using relief technique in motifs such as peacock feathers, flower petals, and pots.

Figure 5: Variations in texture application in Santhal Pargana mural art



Colour

Red and green are the basic colours of Santhal Pargana rural mural art. Rural women give first priority to these colours while painting any motif or border patterns. The murals of Deoghar district are painted with two primary colours, yellow and red, and one single secondary colour. Godda murals use all three primary and secondary colours. Pakur murals use the maximum numbers of intermediate colours, while Deoghar and Sahibganj use limited intermediate colours. Green and red are used as complementary colours in all the six districts. Shades and tints of blue are used in Dumka and Pakur districts. Godda and Jamtara districts use motifs in shades of green (Table 4).

Table 4: Visual analysis of colours of Santhal Pargana murals

Selected Districts	Primary	Secondary	Intermediate	Complementary	Shade & Tint	
Deoghar						
Dumka						
Godda						
Jamtara						
Pakur						
Sahibganj						

Conclusion

This paper aims to bring wider awareness to the rural women artists of Santhal Pargana, Jharkhand, who have taken the responsibility of preserving their cultural heritage, on their own shoulders. Critical visual analysis of existing mural art has been introduced to analyse design elements with symmetrical operation. Various visual forms are created with reference to local habitat in each districts, but the method of working are similar across the districts. The mural art forms of each selected district are mainly dominated by the motifs and borders in curved shapes, which resemble the letters C and S in the Latin alphabet. These art forms are two-dimensional designs which are self- contained compositions. In all the three forms (singular, plural and compound), compound forms produce more intricate designs but interestingly, these forms also project some perspective drawings. Structural characteristics of different shapes are determined to identify environmental forces such as branching, fanning, spiral, undulation, unity, and affinity. Motifs are presented as representational forms and some ornamentation in border patterns are recognised as non- representational forms. Horizontal borders on door heads introduce a new framework to the practice with central motifs (with rotational characteristics) and reflection (vertical, horizontal and glide).

The results of this description and analysis of the visual elements of this art form contribute to building awareness of the links between art form and cultural identity of Sathal Pargana of Jharkhand. The study offers insights into the extraordinary variation that constitutes the traditional world of art, composed by the self-taught women artists of Sathal Pargana. Unfortunately, this artistic heritage is slowly vanishing due to the replacement of mud with concrete in the

construction of homes. Since these art forms are not commercial, younger generations are not keen to become involved in their practice. To preserve this art form, design guidelines are very important. It is also possible that they may be useful in the transformation of this traditional art practice into a commercial art form, maintaining their true essence. Further, the commodification of traditional art forms is becoming an increasingly common global practice in cultural heritage movements. While the process is fraught with the potential for exploitation, publicity is nonetheless one of the first steps in moving the art form and the artists to an international platform with the potential to protect local knowledge and practices.

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