

Encountering the Living Tradition of Pattachitra

Whap! The sound of wet fabric snapping flat against cement punctuates a sunny November morning in Bhubaneswar. I am standing on a red half moon of concrete in the garden at Utsha Foundation. With me are master Pattachitra artists Narahari Bhoi and Dwijabar Das. They have traveled here from nearby Jagannathpur village to teach me the art of making *patta*. I am joined by Utsha staff. Together we observe as the artists begin to work, layering several meters of wet saree fabric on the concrete pad. They smooth the fabric methodically, pressing out air bubbles and tugging the edges of each layer into alignment.

When I first encountered the Odisha tradition of Pattachitra painting, I was struck by its characteristic bold, flat colors and exuberant decorative qualities. Although its origin dates back hundreds of years, Pattachitra craft is still practiced widely in Odisha today. Like much Indian traditional painting, its imagery centers on episodes from Hindu mythology and folklore; Lord Jagananth is of particular importance and his tales feature in many conventional compositions. Though an ancient practice, something about the aesthetic of Pattachitra struck me as oddly contemporary, and I wanted to learn more about its making.

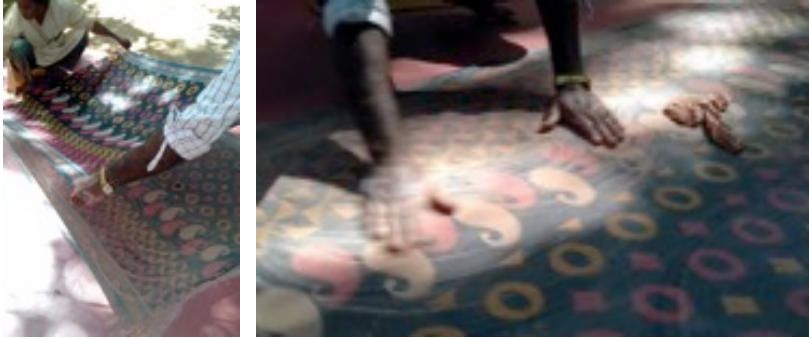


Pattachitra painting featuring Lord Jagannath imagery by the workshop of Narahari Bhoi

Next comes the mud. Nearby, water has been heating in a metal pot. It's time to make the magical gesso-like mixture that will be applied to the saree cloth, transforming it into the leather-like *patta* surface. I watch intently, notebook and pencil in hand, trying not to miss a beat. Das adds a fine white powder of ground tamarind seed to the hot water. After some soaking and stirring, the mixture congeals into a milky glue. He grabs a 5-gallon bucket, tosses in handfuls of the tamarind glue and a roughly equal amount of rose-colored stone powder, adds water, and blends by hand to create a pale slurry. Bits of glue rise to the surface like tapioca strands. Das squishes the globules through his fingers, adding more powder, then water, mixing again. Occasionally he lets a fist-full run through his fingers, testing the viscosity, until the concoction begins to resemble fine earthenware slip.

Hoisting the bucket of slurry, we return to our saree cloth, which has been wicking moisture in the warm sun. Working quickly, Das and Bhoi spread handfuls of the rose-colored slurry across the patterned cloth. As I watch their hands spreading in even, confident circular motions, I recognize the expert ease of their movements. I have seen this quality in other makers: effortless, graceful exactness that makes a hard-won technique appear as child's play. It's a quality that comes with decades of experience,

and it is beautiful to watch. I think of Malcom Gladwell's *10,000 hours* rule. I think of *Karate Kid*. Wax on, wax off.



Narahari Bhoi and Dwijabar Das preparing saree fabric for patta

As with many Indian traditions, Pattachitra holds sacred the concept of *parampara*, or teacher-student lineage. Artists study for many years with a master painter in order to gain proficiency in their craft. While in Odisha I visited Raghurajpur, a nearby craft village where Pattachitra techniques are taught and practiced widely. Raghurajpur is unique among craft villages, having been developed by INTACH in 2000 as a heritage craft village. It has since become a destination for increasing numbers of Indian and foreign tourists.

One can stroll the main village lane of Raghurajpur and pass numerous small workshops. Artists sit in doorways hawking their colorful wares. In addition to paintings, they sell brightly colored papier-mache objects painted in Pattachitra style: strands of ornate birds, miniature temples with working doors and tiny Jagannath families inside. Upon entering a workshop, scores of paintings will be unfurled at one's feet – Krishnas, Jagannaths, Trees of Life, in every size and color combination one can imagine. Many of the works are on tussar silk, a convenient ready-made alternative to the labor-intensive *patta*.



Papier-Maché birds in a Raghurajpur workshop

With modernization and a budding tourist market, recent Pattachitra painting exhibits some changes in style and, occasionally, I am told, quality. One example of this is pigments. Traditional Pattachitra uses natural colors, hand ground and mixed with gums. But with the increasing availability of modern materials, some artists are exploring readymade options. In one artist's workshop I was shown a small painting with bright vermillion shapes. The artist pointed to the vermillion with a furrowed brow. "Color is not good", he explained. Apparently, new pigments had been used which were producing inferior results.

The aesthetic of recent paintings has also shifted somewhat. Unlike the subdued hues of older works, new Pattachitra paintings boast high saturation and strong contrast, favoring bubblegum pinks and hotel pool blues. In one artist's workshop I leafed through a stack of older patta paintings on tussar. The artist pulled two large pieces aside, explaining that these were the work of an old master. Very expert work, I was told. Indeed, a difference was perceptible in the quality of color, line, and composition. A sense of restraint prevailed; colors tended toward neutrals, red-oranges and peaches; negative space dominated; line work was thin, varied, and lyrical.

Once our saree fabric has been coated thoroughly, Das announces it's time for a break. "Finished?" I ask. "No, not finished," Das replies. "Must dry. Then more layers." While we wait, we sit back on the red concrete sipping chai. Narahari Bhoi asks for my sketchbook. I watch as he takes a stubby pencil in hand. Before beginning to draw, he lightly whisks his fingers to his forehead, eyes closed. It's a subtle gesture, but it piques my curiosity. It's an invocation, he explains, a ritual to bring god's blessing to his craft and a dedication of his craft to god. For Pattachitra artists, then, the act of making an image is more than an expression of creativity; it is an expression of devotion, a prayer.

While I sit baffled, pondering this contrast between the Pattachitra artist's self-conception and that of the western 'tortured genius' trope, Bhoi begins to draw. Fine, curving lines unroll from his hand like strands of silk. A peacock. A fish. A woman's profile. He fills page after page; as he works, he chats and jokes with us. He sings songs in Oriya and recites mantras in Sanskrit. Periodically he looks up at us from his work; his smile is huge, his eyes gleam through his wire-rims. There is a hint of mischief in his expression. His hair is long. When I visit him in his Jagannathpur workshop a week later, his head has been shaved. I come to learn that his guru has passed away. A rite of mourning has been completed.



Narahari Bhoi sketching Krishna at Utsha Foundation

The cloth is flipped, coated twice more, and left to dry overnight. The next day, we return to inspect our work. "Finished?" "Almost. Now we cut, then polish." With ruler and pencil Das plots out a small oblong on the now-rigid cloth. He cuts it free with a blade, producing a painting-sized rectangle. From their supplies two flat-bottomed stones are produced. Das takes the *patta* piece and begins polishing it with the first stone, then the second. Small circular movements begin to produce a leathery sheen. He hands the cloth to me to feel; the chalky, porous surface has been transformed into a dense, fine-grained skin.

Finally, the *patta* is ready for painting. As a last touch, Das lightly pencils a border, creating a space for an image. Beneath the smooth surface hints of saree pattern are visible. I try to remember this pattern, what it looked like yesterday before it was transformed into a newly blank canvas. I think of the Italian word *pentimenti*. I think of *palimpsest*. Finished? Finished.