

# INDIAN FOLK ART

## “Impact on Contemporary Fashion- A study”

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### INTRODUCTION

It is universally accepted that art and culture is the mirror of society. Even during stone ages, uncivilized people used cave drawings to express and communicate their experiences and thoughts. Art is a way of life. In contrast to fine art, folk art is purely utilitarian and decorative rather than completely aesthetic.

India is a land of art and craft and Folk Art is the art of everyday. It is an expression of people that connects them to their roots and culture. India is always been known as the land that portrayed cultural and traditional vibrancy through its conventional arts and crafts.

Every region in India has its own traditional and cultural identities and pattern of art and craft which is known as folk art. These folk arts are very ethnic, simple yet colorful and vibrant enough to speak volumes about the country's rich heritage. Most of the folk arts are surviving as they passed from generation to generation with minor changes as per the prevalent rituals and surroundings.

Indian Folk art was developed centuries back by the woman folk of rural regions, who wanted to decorate their houses to welcome the positivity and blessings of Gods and Goddess and ward off ill omen and negative energies. The Folk artists beautify common household objects and the surroundings of their abode like floor, walls, courtyard, etc. There are numerous kinds of folk arts like painting, sculpture, handicrafts, puppetry, embroidery, toys and floor decoration etc.

Unfortunately some folk arts are dying as the people are not aware of most of them as they are too vast and diverse. Many of these art forms are getting disappeared and are on the verge of extinction like Puppetry, Parsi embroidery, Naga handicraft, Roghan paintings and Patola sarees etc. These art forms must be restored before they die completely.

Among these, some are very popular and well known arts, for example, Kolam, Rangoli and Alpana is floor decoration while Phulkari and Kantha are embroidery on cloth, for toys of Chanpatna, Madhubani, warli, Kalamkari are famous painting styles. These are made by rural artisans without any formal training, and most of these designs are taken forward by generation after generation.

In current scenario, few Folk arts like Warli, Madhubani, Kantha, Chikankai & Kalamkari etc. apparently have a great potential in the international market because of its traditional aesthetics, distinctive colorful, religious mystical motifs and most important is the modernization adaptation of colors and motifs.

The Indian folk art motifs are as diverse as Indian culture itself, but one may still be acquainted with the reappearing symbols of deities, flora and fauna, courtly life and customs among other images which have often been produced by folk artists. To attract the world audiences, original folk art motifs transforms into the stylized form which often get resurfaced through print on various merchandize and commodities.

One of India's foremost fashion designers Ritu Kumar has developed a unique style of her own, reflecting the Indian tradition of craftsmanship on a contemporary canvas. Since she had an art history and musicology background, her understanding of ancient motifs, designs and incorporating them into the contemporary canvas has created a new dimensions. Through her designs, Ritu Kumar maintains a perfect balance between traditionalism and modernity.

Some time back, these art forms have been on the decline, but thanks to rising interest of people in local arts and culture, they have been thriving again. Today, many designers are inspired by charm of our traditional folk art and craft style.

Here are some of the best known folk art forms that are flourishing today with a well-established global market for their artifacts.

## Warli Art of Maharashtra

The Warli folk art was originated in 2500 and 3000 BCE by warli tribes inhabiting the mountains and the coastal regions of Maharashtra and Gujraat. The warli paintings are traditionally done in white over brown background. The white pigment is rice mixed with water is used over the cow-dung plastered mud walls. Unlike most other art forms, Warli artist does not experiment with variety of colors. Everything about it is earthy and soothing.

Warli paintings depict a variety of scenes from wedding rituals, hunting, fishing, and farming to festivals and dances, and geometric patterns of flowers, trees, and animals, using nothing more than lines, dots, circles and triangles.



Original Warli paintings of Maharashtra

The Warli paintings were traditionally made by females in the family to celebrate a wedding and these paintings are associated with fertility and prosperity in the family. These paintings depict daily social life, common village rituals and religious practices.

The Warli folk art is now globally recognized due to its adaptation in fashion garments, accessories and other artifacts of home decorations. The beautiful geometric patterns on elements of nature like flowers and leaves, wedding rituals, hunting scenes and other everyday activities are quite popular among fashion designers and home décor brands. As a gesture of appreciation, there is a special section in the museum of Australia, dedicated for this art.

It would be surprising if such a beautiful art form is missing from the innovations by the fashion industry. Warli art has a charm of being on the lines of intricate village art that could be adapted to Indian fashion. While sarees with Warli prints have a unique aesthetic appeal, other garments also use this unique art style on dresses, kurtis, pallazzos and other fashion accessories.

The fashion designers have also given this ancient art a modern twist by enhancing the ‘cool’ factor on fabrics and contemporary jewellery with stick figure drawings and symbolic motifs.





Warli motifs enhancing the beauty of Fashion apparels

The use of Warli art style was also witnessed under the Grassroot label of designer wears by Anita Dongre when she unveiled her collections at Lakme Fashion Week Winter Fest 2015

To give them a modern makeover, fashion designers, Ankur Modi and Priyanka Modi have infused them with vibrant colors such as sunshine yellow, tints and shades of red, olive along with a palette of earthy colors and dark hues such as navy blue, black etc. The patterns suit a range of occasion right from the lunch date, to semi-formal and even formal occasions, and also add variety to the festive wardrobe.

The art of Warli is every Indian fashion designer’s new fascination. From adorning the borders of colorful scarves and kurtis to embellishing the luxurious jute and silk sarees, Warli has taken over the ramp for good.



Contemporary artifacts with Warli images

Anita Dongre, Indian fashion designer patronized folk art in her brand “Global Desi” which many celebrities endorsing it.

Today, Warli art has come along a long way to be filtered into present fashion and design creations. Once a simple painting technique of a marginal Indian tribe, the Warli paintings have an international exposure by virtue of talented artists. It is indeed heartwarming to see that an ancient art style which is also our national heritage, continuing to flourish in modern times.

Besides fashion garments and accessories, Warli designs are also decorate life style products like vases, pots, mugs and executive folders etc. This would be actually the right treatment for the likes of Warli art, to be preserved and continued in present times while exploring the opportunities for its diverse adaptations.

## Madhubani Art of Bihar

Madhubani, originated in the ancient Mithilia region of India, is a famous form of folk art. This ancient folk art was composed under the regime of Raja Janak at the time of the wedding of Shri Ram and Sita ji. The paintings are usually mythological stories, flora and fauna like fish, parrot, elephant, turtle, sun, moon, bamboo tree and lotus. The vibrant colors are the most striking features of Madhubani paintings.



Original Madhubani painting

Madhubani painting is still practiced by Karpuri Devi, Dulari, and Mahalaxmi. These women live around Madhubani town to make the paintings on paper to generate income to sustain their needs. In 2012, more than 100 trees were decorated using Madhubani by Shashti Nath Jha to protect trees that were being cut down in the name of expansion and development. This venture proved to be an effective way to make the villagers aware of the importance of environmental issues like climate change and global warming.

Even though this Madhubani art has been practiced for centuries, Recently this rural art form got noticed around the world and slowly but steadily found its way onto many merchandizes from greeting cards to fabric materials. The modern day Madhubani artist now enjoys a wider spectators and increased business as fashion designers and interior decorators have used Madhubani art style to adorn wardrobes and home furnishing products too. Madhubani succeeded in making a place for itself in the international house of fame and is currently recognized world -wide. In simple words, these rustic Madhubani paintings are the mirror of true from Ranti villege in Bihar, who have made extensive efforts to keep the art form alive. Their work have been commissioned by the government of India and also found a place in the Mithila museum of Japan.

Today, Madhubani art generate interest in art lovers from different countries around the world. The contemporary and most vibrant version of Madhubani art is thriving and making waves across the world through fashion apparels, accessories like bags, jewelry and foot wares etc.



The beautiful motifs of these paintings have found their way onto silk sari borders, dupattas, kurtis and more. Madhubani remains extremely popular on the home décor front in the form of home furnishing, ethnic lamps and most importantly on wall hangings because Mithila art was originally used for decorating walls and floors of homes.

Young Indian fashion designer, Anubha Sharma, has come up with “Vibrant Madhubani” for Asian Fashion week. She took the inspiration from the eye-catching “Madhubani paintings”. It showcases the motifs in vibrant colors on the fusion wear.



Madhubani at the pinnacle

"I'm happy that the fashion week will celebrate the ethnic roots highlighting the weavers. I will introduce my work based on the Madhubani art of Bihar in sarees at the fashion show, blending the contemporary with the traditional and this will be the first time Madhubani will be showcased at a fashion show," Angmitra Paul, famous fashion designer quoted before presenting her collection in Kolkata fashion week.

### Kalamkari Of Andhra Pradesh

Literally meaning ‘drawings with a pen’, Kalamkari is of two types in India: Machilipatnam in Andhra Pradesh and Srikalahasti, which originates from Chittoor in the same state. Presently, Kalamkari art is used to enhance the look of sarees and ethnic clothing, the designs depicts anything from flora and fauna to epics such as Mahabharata or Ramayana. Kalamkari art is also heavily influenced by Persian motifs and designs.



Original Kalamkari painting

In the time of Green revolution, Kalamkari emerged as the perfect craft because it avoided the use of artificial chemicals and still produces beautifully colored fabrics. The unique feature of the Kalamkari art is that it makes use of only natural colors or vegetable dyes.

Today, women across the globe can shop for a range of different Kalamkari printed apparels including kurtas, sarees and dupattas in gorgeous designs and vibrant colors! Neeta Lulla, the well known fashion designer patronized this beautiful art.

A French couple is actively curating several Kalamkari and related handloom products made in Krishna district to introduce them to an international arena of textiles. Andre Mage and Catherine Baillaud through Help India, are relentlessly on the job with a mission to make Kalamkari get on the top of the global list.

About few decades ago, Indian fashion designers gradually began to experiment with handlooms, some of them specifically with Kalamkari art. Today there are number of well-known fashion designers who have worked extensively with Kalamkaris are Sabyasachi Mukharjee, Neeta Lulla and Gaurang Shah. Most popular Actress Vidya Balan, who is known for the lovely traditional sarees that she flaunts was spotted on several occasions in gorgeous sarees with Kalamkari patchwork created by Sabyasachi. She has also wore hand-painted Kalamkari sarees and kurtas created by Gaurang Shah.



Models showcasing Kalamkari fashion on ramp

There are runway collections at fashion weeks devoted exclusively to this art form too. In 2011, designer Neeta Lulla created a bridal collection exclusively dedicated to Kalamkari art after she fell in love with this art form during a visit to Hyderabad.

This art has been a favorite value addition technique with many designers from the south too. Shashikant Naidu has worked almost exclusively with it. For the Lakme Fashion Week Winter 2014, Shashikant Naidu's collection featured exclusive sarees and apparel in Kalamkari with actress Shriya Saran walking the ramp as his showstopper. Lakme Fashion Week even has a Textiles Day devoted exclusively to handlooms and Kalamkari art is one of the most popular choice for many fashion designers who love to mix this art form with their exclusively designed ensembles.

Thanks to our celebrities, who willingly come forward sporting these breathtakingly beautiful garments on runways and red carpets all over the world. Today, the Kalamkari has a new lease of life and an image makeover.

Today, most of the work comes from fashion houses for grass root artisans and business is booming. The fashion it's not just women, even men who love ethnic look, love to pair off their Sherwanis and Jodhpuri jackets with a Kalamkari Stoles.



## Tanjore Art of Tamilnadu

Tanjore Art evolved from the Thanjavur district of Tamil Nadu in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The main feature of Tanjavore paintings is the adornment of gold, precious and semi-precious stones. The composition usually are traditional, depicting religious figures, contains two dimensional figures. However, the breathtaking depiction of the subjects and the detailed adornment of ornaments, clothes and architecture make the paintings spectacular.



Original Tanjore painting

Tanjore Painting is the only painting to have Emboss technique on it. That is, the painting has areas that are elevated from the surface. The other unique feature is the Real Gold Foil used to stick on the embossed designed areas - 22 carat gold foil is used. Tanjore paintings never fade as it is made of real gold.

In today's scenario, breathtakingly beautiful jewelry is being produced taking inspiration from Tanjore motifs. Vandana Srivastav, a well-known jewelry designer is famous for exquisite pieces of jewelry inspired from Tanjore paintings. There is global market for these contemporary jewelry pieces and paintings. C. Kondiah Raju and his students also continue to produce the modern versions of the art form.



Handmade jewelry depicting Tanjore Art

## Kantha embroidery of Bengal

Bengal has a delightful folk tradition of embroidery known as Kantha. Kantha embroidery is perhaps the oldest forms of embroidery as it can be traced back to the first and second A.D. The thought behind this needlework was to reuse old clothes and materials and turn them into usable stuff. This is what makes kantha embroidery as one of the most valued piece of art.

Originaly, Kantha Quilts were made of Cotton. It had few layers of old sarees stitched together with delicate fine running stitches known as Kantha by artisans in India. These quilts are admired due to their indigenous Kantha work.



Original Kantha quilts

The Motifs and designs are derived from things we see on day to day basis like tree, wheel, fishes, moon, swastika and lotus etc. But now with modern-day designers, experiments in designs are also being done. Now we can see cave art, Egyptian murals, Hindu mythology and even pop art being illustrated through this fine stitch work of kantha.

Designer sisters Mona Lamba and Pali Sachdev created buzz at the Punjab International Fashion Week. Inspired by the traditional 'Kantha', they created garments with its unconventional mix of silhouettes, motifs, textile and colours. The collection was perfect for the women of today. They formed their fashion label 'Monapali' way back in 1987, and declared their love for rich traditional weaves of kantha. Their creations are mostly based on vibrant Indian textiles, natural hues and craftsmanship.

They were instrumental in reviving Kantha, folk tribal motifs and have made them as part of our urban couture culture. The duo designers believe they have lasted this long because of their confidence in the ingenious art of Bengal and constant innovation in their designing.





Vibrant fashion with Kantha embroidery

Kantha embroidery has been around for ages. Now this folk art is not only confined to India but also getting global exposures through Indian designer outlets. Tarun Tahiliani, a famous Indian fashion designer has opened several outlets of his Kantha embroidered garments in London, Paris and Washington. The Tarun Tahiliani clothes are an eclectic mix of designs inspired from the ethnic cultural roots of India and his signature style is an unconventional mix of mediums, be it in textures, textiles, designs, print or embroidery.

Apart from clothing, Kantha jewelry is also made in India by a group of women. Along with the Kantha fabrics that have a distinctive straight-line pattern to them, these artisans make unique jewelry from recycled materials that are full of color and style, and are sustainable in nature.

Promoting innovative fashion, Kolkata based, Maheejaa is using Kantha designs and motifs in a unique way - by using leather. Maheejaa Bags aims to revive the traditional Bengal Kantha craft in its range of leather bags. The brand not only creates stylish products but is also helping rural Bengal Kantha artisans get recognition in the fashion world around the globe.



Leather bag decorated with Kantha embroidery by Maheejaa

Earlier it was very difficult to keep the art alive with rapid urbanization and lack of recognition of Kantha artisans but now situation is improving.

With global exposure, Kantha embroidery has become favorite amongst those who love taking fashion and style along with tradition to levels beyond the ordinary.

## Phulkari embroidery of Punjab

Phulkari is one of the oldest embroidery techniques started in the ancient India, it means making floral art of a cloth or a fabric. Since many decades, this embroidery is practiced by folk women in Punjab. The embroidery is done with floss-silk upon the coarse cotton cloth in darning stitches worked from the back of the fabric. Basic motifs of Phulkari designs are geometric. Squares, triangles and zig-zag lines are composed all over the space. Gold and hues of red are the predominant colors. For the uninitiated, phulkari is threadwork that uses linear intricate flower-like patterns. The finished piece of cloth is known as bagh (or garden) and worn by women with great pride.



Original Phulkari patterns

Phulkari became popular in Europe and American markets in the 19th century. Big fashion designers like Manish Malhotra and Ritu Beri have introduced this beautiful art work to the fashion world. They have showcased their collection based on Phulkari to fashion weeks of the various fashion destinations.

While phulkari is deeply entrenched in the cultural fabric of Punjab, it can be translated into a contemporary wardrobe with ease. In Punjab and Haryana belt, Phulkari dupattas are traditionally part of every girl's bridal trousseau, and were crafted by the bride's female relatives. Traditionally, each piece is unique through motifs inspired by flora and fauna. It is a tedious job and takes an average of more than three months to complete an outfit. The manner in which the colours flow together through the thread-work is only achieved by a fine eye and steady hands of ladies. Each phulkari ensemble is thus a coveted 'limited edition piece.'



Traditional Phulkari embroidery in contemporary fashion



This textile art, so vibrant and playful, requires an almost monastic sense of discipline. I have seen multiple international designers and brands looking to India for inspiration, and amongst them, I feel Alexander McQueen and Karl Lagerfeld will do justice to the art of *phulkari*, if they ever decide to work with it. Now Phulkari is moved forwards from clothes to furnishing like sofa covers, cushion covers and curtains.

One of the biggest advantages about the ensemble made with this beautiful art is that they can team up with any western garment and will not affect your look and style, only enhance your appearance. For those fashion enthusiasts, who want to try out something different, they can go for fusion look with one of the Phulkari piece to wear. This will add a very new look and will merge easily with your jeans or other western outfits.

## Chikankari of Lucknow

Chikan, in the literal sense means 'embroidery'. This traditional embroidery is one of Lucknow's most ancient and widely acclaimed folk art form. In 17<sup>th</sup> century, The Mughals introduced this Persian craft in India. The Mughal Empress Noor Jahan, was known as a talented embroiderer with a particular fondness for Chikankari embroidery.

In that era, Chikan embroidery was done with white threads and the fabrics used were mostly white Muslin or Mulmul as they were best suited for the warm and humid climate of India. Over time, more vibrant colors have been incorporated including pastels and fluorescents. The new fabrics introduced were Silk, Chiffon, Georgette, Voile, Khadi, Organza and Cotton fabrics.



Chikankari embroidery

Presently, to meet global requirements, Chikan embroidery is also done with colored and silk threads. To give a rich look, many innovations like additional embellishments like Mukaish, Kamdani, Badla, sequin, bead and mirror work has been incorporated.

All over the globe, Chikan embroidery is known as Lucknowi Chikan and Lucknow is emerged as a hub of the Chikankari industry. This folk art which was done indigenously by women, has become a multi billion industry today.

The simple and intricate handwork on the garments provides it a very subtle, classy feel. The main essence of the garment is a simple design like floral patterns or Paisley motifs as well as their stylized versions to keep up with fashion trends. Some modern motifs are now added to make the garments look trendy but it still remains a simple and affordable choice for all.

There is a huge variety of garments that come adorned with this Chikan kari work, for men as well as women. This includes everything from long and short Kurtas, Stoles, Tunics, Sarees, Anarkalis, Palazzos and Capri pants to a range of accessories such as shoes, bags, belts and home furnishing like lamp shades, table linen, cushion covers and curtains.



Chikankari adorns Home furnishing

Lucknow Chikan embroidery has reached its golden years in the period of Mughals and Nawabs was followed by a major downfall in later years during the British Raaj.

Only during the free India, Chikan begin to re-emerge with the same popularity it had before. With-in no time it became commercialized. The Bollywood Film fraternity, celebrities and fashion designers played a big role in nationally restoring the respect and appreciation Chikan work always deserved.

Few decades back, new fabric blends and machine embroidery was introduced to cut production costs. Then, with the start of booming Indian fashion, fashion design houses began to add crystal, Mukaish and Zardozi elements to Chikan garments for a more opulent aesthetic for the world market.

Ustad Faiyaaz Khan and Hasan Mirza Saheb are two of the most renowned Chikan artisans of Lucknow and have tutored the intricacies of Chikankari to many students under them.



Breathtakingly beautiful motifs of Chikankari



Presently, the chikan kari industry boast of approx. 5 lakh karigar and Uttar Pradesh as one of the biggest artisan cluster of India. “SEWA Lucknow”, under the phenomenal leadership of Ms Runa Bannerjee is involved in uplifting of ckikankari to the international market. Ace fashion designer Muzzafar Ali and his designer lable “Kotwara Collection” is well known name in global arena.

Chikankari has witnessed many ups and down through- out its illustrious journey. But undoubtedly, due to continuous expansion and innovations, the variety of Lucknow Chikankari today is emerged as more bountiful than ever before. It is greatly in demand by the general masses, elite classes and celebrities in Bollywood and Hollywood alike. And the demand for Chikan kari merchandize is continuously growing globally.

## Conclusion

These ethnic art forms continue to be practiced in different parts of the country and have inspired various modern art forms because of their own peculiarities and brilliance. They have been experimented and adapted to the modern world, because of the presence of a different cultural scenario and various technological advancements.

Many NGOs, government organizations and fashion designers are inspired by the ethnic flavor and simplicity of these folk art and have tried to implement them into today’s society. Through exhibitions and fairs organized by Indian Government across the globe on massive scale, social media and Internet revolution, these artistic pieces come in contact with elite population and general masses all over the world.

In India, many Art Foundations are working to uplift these folk and tribal arts. Some of them are like Indian foundation for Art, Devi art foundation, Sanskriti Museum, Art restoration foundation etc.

Fashion has played a major role in not only bringing many folk arts to limelight but also has ultimately made the ethnic art live, thus enhancing the shelf value of these arts. The artisans are also benefitted by these ventures. Besides various colleges of Art, many fashion designing colleges have also introduced the study of these art and crafts. Fashion and fine arts are involved jointly in uplifting and popularizing these folk arts of India.

Today, e-commerce has paved the way for the globalization as new entrepreneurs are tying up with these artisans to set up an on line store and share the revenue. Mojarto Art, and Craftsvilla.com are on line portals involved in this venture. On line Fashion sites like Myntra.com, Shein.com and Limeroad.com are also involved in providing desired merchandize all over.

To bring folk art forward, modernization and commercialization are the key words. We have to include these arts in our daily life through clothing, jewelery and for decorating our houses, only then, in true sense we will do the justice with these folk art and artisans. Very soon our ethnic art of each Indian region will be accepted and flourished globally.

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