

tribes india



Shop for the Tribal Cause

Palm Leaf Painting



Most ancient manuscripts in India are found etched on palm leaf. To this day palm leaf documents and horoscopes are found in peoples homes. In Orissa even till the Mughal period, when paper was easily available, manuscripts were written on palm leaf.

Today, instead of manuscripts, the artists are making paintings and black line drawings on palm leaf. The *talapatra* paintings consist of linear engravings used to illustrate stories.

Though it has similarities to the pata-chitra, palm leaf art has developed its own rules and conventions and stands out as a distinct school.

More recently, Munda tribal artists of Orissa



have also taken up this craft. They call it *talapatra khudai* (palm leaf etching) which better describes this intricate and unique art, said to have been handed down by the *chitrakaars* (artists)

dedicated to Lord Jagannath, the presiding deity of Orissa.

The fan-like plant grows in abundance so the tribals do not have to travel far for their raw material. The sap green leaves grew to a height of three feet and they are cut at an appropriate time, when not too old. Rows of the same size leaves are collected into bundles and put away for four days. They assume the pleated form and after drying in the sun acquire the yellow green shade. They can be stored for years and are usually put out in the sun for a while before being used.

Depending on the length required, the leaves are first trimmed and then sewn together. It is the centerpiece of the leaf that is used. Dried for four or five days it is then soaked in water for two days. When dry, etching is done with a special tool called *Nekhani*. This is a long needle 6-7 inches long with an intricate head to provide some balance, as the artist holds the pin barely an inch from the base. When the drawing is complete, a rag is dipped in a black ink and rubbed over the palm leaf. The ink is made from the soot of kerosene oil lamp and gum. This is smeared over the etching and wiped over with a cloth. What emerges is the black etching-with figures and symbols in



perfect size. The black colour settles into the etched lines. Any excess black colour is removed by washing the leaf with water.

The palm leaf painters at times use commercial colour. But there is no transgression on the black colour and the green-yellow palm leaf.

The etchings usually tell an elaborate story with plots within plots stretching across the pleated palm leaf, which at times go to over three feet in length. The most popular stories are those from mythology with of course Lord Jagannath, an eternal favorite. Varied incidents from the life of Krishna or Jagannath are depicted, with the eternal lovers Krishna and Radha as a central theme. Another popular legend is the miraculous escape of Vasudeva from prison with baby Krishna in his arms.

Palm leaf painting consists of rows of circles which highlight the main illustrations. Painted circular discs, again cut out of palm leaf, are stitched over each circle. A running serpentine design frames the entire picture.



The artist works from panel to panel, for days together, creating in his own vision the pages of the great Indian epics.

Rameswar Munda Belongs to a Munda tribal family of artists, a few of them national award winners. While the rest are *talapatra* artists, Brahmanand excels in patachitra. The origin of this vibrant colorful art can be traced to the 8th century and is regarded as one of the first forms of indigenous painting. Painting is done on cloth, prepared by the artists with a mix of chalk and gum made from tamarind seeds, to give the surface a leathery finish. The artists work on this with colors made from earth and other natural pigments. Considerably influenced by the chitrakaars of the Jagannath temple, the patachitras invariably focus on the story of their special deity. The annual chariot festival or *Rath yatra* of Puri, where Jagannath, with his siblings Balaram and Subhadra are taken out in a ceremonial chariot, finds expression in a riot of exuberant colors red, yellow, blue, saffron on canvas.

The dramatic patachitra is quite the antithesis of the *talapatra* with its understated brilliance. The fact that both are the creations of the same tribe, or rather the same family, speaks volumes for the versatile skill of tribal artists.

Shop at Trifed's Tribes India outlets for genuine palm leaf paintings and patachitras.

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