

WHAT IS PATTACHITRA?



Pattachitra is one of Odisha's oldest and most celebrated traditional art forms. The word is derived from two Sanskrit terms: Patta, meaning cloth or canvas, and Chitra, meaning picture or painting. Originating from temple traditions, this art form developed as a visual medium for storytelling, preserving myths, legends, and religious narratives through intricate lines, vibrant colours, and detailed compositions.

Deeply connected to the culture of Lord Jagannath, Pattachitra primarily depicts stories from Hindu mythology, including the Ramayana, Mahabharata, Krishna Leela, and the Dashavatara of Vishnu. These paintings were not merely decorative objects; they

served as visual narratives that allowed devotees and travellers to experience sacred stories through imagery. Each composition is carefully arranged to guide the viewer through a sequence of events, transforming painting into a form of storytelling.

For generations, families of artists have preserved and passed down this tradition, ensuring that both technique and cultural knowledge continue to survive. Although contemporary artists experiment with new themes, materials, and formats, the essence of Pattachitra remains unchanged. It continues to bridge the past and the present, carrying centuries of artistic heritage while adapting to the evolving world around it.



The goddess of prosperity, abundance, and well-being, Maa Lakshmi symbolizes not only material wealth but also harmony, wisdom, and the flourishing of life. In Pattachitra, she is often portrayed seated upon a lotus, representing purity, grace, and the enduring connection between devotion and prosperity.



// Within every line lies a prayer, within every colour a memory. Pattachitra is not merely painted it is inherited, preserved, and passed from one generation to the next. //

THE PLACE



Raghurajpur is a heritage crafts village near Puri, Odisha, and is widely known as the home of Pattachitra painting. Generations of artists have preserved traditional crafts here, making art a part of everyday life. With its painted homes, workshops, and rich cultural heritage, the village continues to attract visitors and art lovers from around the world.



" Every house is a workshop, every wall a canvas,
and every street carries a story. **"**

HISTORY

From Temple Walls to Living Tradition

Pattachitra traces its roots to the Jagannath culture of Puri and the traditions surrounding the temple. During certain periods when devotees could not see the deities directly, painted images were used as a visual representation for worship. Over time, these sacred images evolved into a rich storytelling tradition that depicted episodes from the Ramayana, Mahabharata, Krishna Leela, and the Dashavatara of Vishnu.

In its early days, artists worked with simple handmade tools, including sharpened twigs that served as brushes. As techniques developed through generations, the art became more refined while preserving its original purpose: telling stories through images and keeping cultural traditions alive.



Lord Jagannath played a significant role in the development of Pattachitra. The tradition grew alongside the rituals and cultural practices associated with the Jagannath Temple in Puri. Even today, many themes, symbols, and stories found in Pattachitra remain closely connected to Jagannath culture and Odisha's devotional heritage.



THE ARTIST



Prasanta Maharana is a Pattachitra and Talapatra artist from Nayakapatna, a craft village near Raghurajpur in Odisha. Growing up in a family of artisans, he developed an early interest in traditional painting and later trained under his guru in Raghurajpur.

After completing five years of painting training and two years of Talapatra training, he built a strong foundation in the craft.

Today, at the age of 37, he lives and works in Raghurajpur, carrying forward a tradition passed down through generations.

With over twenty-five years of experience, he has participated in exhibitions, workshops, and demonstrations across India and beyond. His work combines traditional knowledge with contemporary ideas while preserving the heritage of Pattachitra.

The “**Dashavatara**”, or ten incarnations of Lord Vishnu, is a central theme in Pattachitra. The avatars **Matsya, Kurma, Varaha, Narasimha, Vamana, Parashurama, Rama, Balarama, Buddha, and Kalki** symbolize the preservation of cosmic order across different ages. Rich in symbolism and storytelling, the Dashavatara remains one of the most enduring subjects in the Pattachitra tradition.



THE MAKING OF PATTACHITRA

Every Pattachitra begins with preparation. The canvas is made by joining layers of cloth with a natural adhesive and coating it with chalk powder to create a smooth surface. Once the canvas is ready, the artist sketches the composition using traditional proportions that have been passed down through generations.

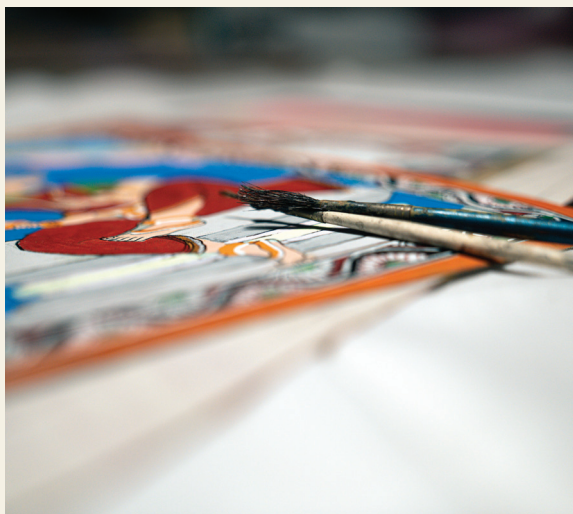
Colours are then applied one layer at a time, followed by black outlining, jewellery work, decorative motifs, and fine detailing. The final stage is known as Sankhapata, where delicate white highlights bring the painting to life. From start to finish, the process demands patience, precision, and a deep understanding of the story being told.

A medium-sized Pattachitra can take four to five days to complete, with artists spending several hours each day refining every detail. Each stage builds upon the previous one, transforming a blank surface into a carefully crafted visual narrative.



From preparing colours and brushes to outlining, detailing, and finishing, each step plays an essential role in the creation of a Pattachitra.



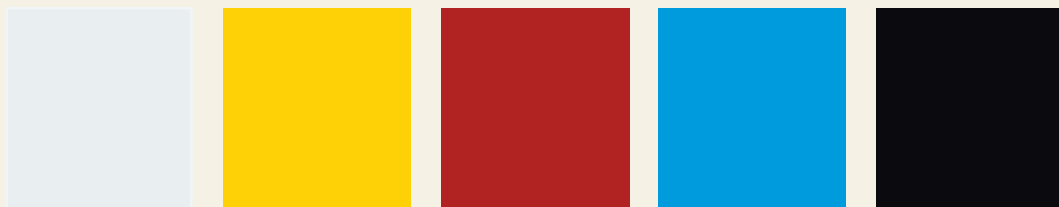


THE CANVAS



Every Pattachitra begins with a blank surface, but its purpose is far greater than simply holding colour. The canvas becomes a space where stories, traditions, and imagination come together. Through careful preparation and patient craftsmanship, it is transformed into a visual narrative that carries centuries of cultural memory.

COLOUR PALETTE

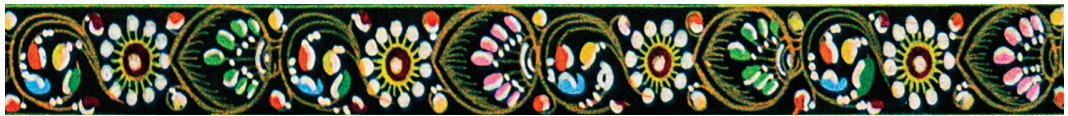


The traditional Pattachitra palette is built around five primary colours: white, yellow, red, blue, and black. These colours are traditionally prepared from natural sources such as conch shell, Haritala stone, mineral pigments, lamp soot, and natural gum. Together, they create the vibrant and distinctive visual language that defines Pattachitra painting.

THE COLOUR

Blue holds a special place in Pattachitra because it is closely associated with Lord Krishna, one of the most frequently depicted figures in the tradition. According to Hindu mythology, Krishna's blue complexion symbolizes the vastness of the sky and the depth of the ocean, representing a presence that is limitless and eternal. Artists often use blue not only to identify Krishna but also to create a sense of peace, devotion, and spiritual energy within the painting.

In many Pattachitra narratives, Krishna appears as a guide, protector, and storyteller. Whether portraying his childhood adventures, his bond with Radha, or scenes from larger mythological epics, the colour blue becomes a visual reminder of his divine nature. Through colour, the artist transforms a painted figure into a living story that continues to resonate across generations.



Krishna remains one of the most beloved subjects in Pattachitra painting. His stories offer artists a rich world of emotions, relationships, and adventures to explore. From his playful childhood in Gokul to his role as a guide and protector, each episode provides an opportunity to transform mythology into visual storytelling. Through colour, gesture, and symbolism, artists bring these timeless narratives to life while preserving them for future generations.

The deep blue background in this painting creates a sense of calm while drawing attention to the figures at its centre. Combined with intricate ornamentation, delicate linework, and carefully balanced colours, it gives the composition both depth and harmony. In Pattachitra, colour is never used merely for decoration; it helps shape the atmosphere of the story and guides the viewer through the narrative unfolding within the painting.



THE BLACK

In Pattachitra, black is often used to create contrast, depth, and visual definition. Beyond its formal role, it can also evoke themes of mystery, power, conflict, and transformation. Within mythological narratives, darkness does not simply represent evil. Instead, it often reflects the inner struggles, desires, and choices that shape a person's destiny. Through line, detail, and symbolism, artists use contrast to reveal both the strengths and weaknesses that exist within every character.

Ravana remains one of the most complex figures in Indian mythology. Renowned for his intelligence, scholarship, and devotion to Lord Shiva, he was a ruler of immense knowledge and power. Ancient texts describe him as a master of the Vedas, music, astronomy, and warfare, qualities that made him one of the most formidable characters in the Ramayana. Yet his story serves as a reminder that wisdom alone is not enough. When pride, ambition, and the desire for control overpower humility, even the greatest strengths can become the source of one's downfall.



The story of Ravana illustrates the delicate balance between brilliance and arrogance. He was a learned king, a gifted musician, a skilled strategist, and a devoted follower of Lord Shiva. His achievements earned him admiration, respect, and authority, making him one of the most powerful rulers of his time. However, his growing pride gradually overshadowed his wisdom. Rather than using his knowledge with restraint, he allowed ambition and ego to guide his actions, ultimately leading to conflict and destruction.

Through figures like Ravana, Pattachitra explores the complexity of human nature. Characters are rarely presented as entirely good or entirely evil; instead, they embody a mixture of virtues and flaws. Ravana's legacy endures not because of his defeat alone, but because his story continues to remind us that true greatness lies not in power or knowledge, but in the wisdom to use them with humility.



SIX

The traditional Indian calendar divides the year into six seasons, each reflecting a distinct change in nature, climate, and daily life. In Pattachitra, these seasonal transitions become visual narratives that connect people, nature, and time.



Grishma (Summer) is the season of warmth, long days, and bright sunlight. Fields dry under the sun, rivers shrink, and daily life adjusts to the heat. It is a season that reflects strength, endurance, and energy.

Barsha (Monsoon) arrives with rain and renewal. The earth turns green, rivers fill again, and nature comes alive with movement and growth. It is often associated with fertility, abundance, and transformation.

Sharata (Autumn) follows the monsoon with clear skies and gentle weather. The landscape appears calm and refreshed, making it a season of beauty, balance, and celebration.



SEASONS

Hemanta (Pre-Winter) marks the transition between autumn and winter. The air becomes cooler, harvests are gathered, and nature begins to slow down. It is a season of preparation and quiet change.

Sita or Shishira (Winter) brings stillness and rest. Cooler temperatures, misty mornings, and peaceful landscapes create an atmosphere of reflection and calm. It represents a pause before the cycle begins again.

Basanta (Spring) completes the journey with new life and colour. Flowers bloom, trees regain their freshness, and nature awakens after winter. It is celebrated as a season of renewal, joy, and new beginnings.

Together, the six seasons form a continuous journey through time. Moving from renewal to reflection, they capture the rhythm of nature and the changing moods of life, a theme that has inspired Indian storytelling and art for centuries.



INTERVIEW

What is the biggest challenge facing Pattachitra artists today?

One of the biggest challenges is creating sustainable opportunities for traditional artists. Many skilled craftsmen struggle to reach buyers directly and often depend on middlemen. Younger generations are also choosing different career paths, making it increasingly important to create awareness about traditional art forms. According to Prasanta Maharana, greater support through education, workshops, and cultural programs could help preserve and promote this heritage for future generations.

The traditional stories, techniques, and foundations of Pattachitra remain unchanged, but artists continue to explore new ways of presenting them. Today, paintings are created not only on cloth but also on sarees, coconut shells, kettles, decorative objects, and other surfaces. While the medium may change, the essence of the art remains rooted in traditional craftsmanship and storytelling. This balance allows the tradition to stay relevant while preserving its identity.

What continues to inspire you after twenty-five years of practice?

For Prasanta Maharana, learning never truly ends. He believes inspiration comes from nature, conversations with fellow artists, and the continuous process of observing and improving his work. Even after decades of experience, he continues to seek new ideas, perspectives, and techniques, treating every artwork as an opportunity to learn something new.

How do you balance tradition with innovation in your work?

"*We do not simply paint figures; we paint the stories that live behind them.***"**



TALA PATRA DESIGN

(Palm Leaves)



Tala Patra Chitra, or palm-leaf engraving, is one of Odisha's oldest storytelling traditions. Long before paper became widely available, important texts, scriptures, and historical records were preserved on palm leaves. Over time, artists transformed this medium into an art form, using engraved lines to create intricate narratives inspired by mythology, folklore, and everyday life.

The process begins with carefully selected palm leaves, which are boiled with turmeric and neem leaves before being dried in sunlight. This treatment protects the material from insects and decay, allowing the artwork to survive for generations. Individual leaves are then cut, stitched together, and prepared for engraving, creating a durable surface for detailed work.

Unlike Pattachitra painting, Tala Patra artwork is created through engraving rather than brushwork. Artists use a sharp metal stylus, known as a likhana, to carve delicate lines directly into the palm leaf surface. Every pattern, figure, border, and decorative element is carefully etched by hand, requiring precision, patience, and years of practice.

Once the engraving is complete, a mixture of lamp soot and natural ingredients is rubbed into the carved lines. The excess is wiped away, leaving the engraved details visible in deep black against the natural colour of the palm leaf.

One of the most remarkable qualities of Tala Patra art is its longevity. According to the artist, a properly preserved palm-leaf artwork can survive for more than a hundred years. While painted colours may gradually fade over time, the engraved lines remain visible for generations, making Tala Patra both an artistic and historical record.

Today, this tradition continues to preserve stories, techniques, and cultural memory, connecting contemporary artists with centuries of Odisha's artistic heritage.



VISUALS

