

**From Mud Walls to Global Canvases:  
The Evolution of Gond Art in Contemporary India**

**By**

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**Abstract**

Gondwana tribal art, also known as Gond art, originates from the indigenous Gond communities of Central India, Madhya Pradesh, and represents one of the most significant visual traditions historically practised on the mud walls and floors of village homes. The Gond are one of India's largest tribal communities, with a population of approximately 12 million people. The word "Gond" derives from the Dravidian word *Kond*, meaning "green mountain." Each mark is deliberate and symbolic, functioning as part ritual, part blessing, and part visual language passed down through generations.

The Gond tribe included farmers, hunters, and Pardhans, who were storytellers and singers, keeping the tribe's history alive through songs. The Pardhans would narrate stories through songs, and the painters would turn those stories into pictures. This close connection between song and painting is why modern Gond art, when displayed in galleries, still feels like it's telling a story or carrying a ceremonial significance.

**Keywords**

Gond art, tribal art, folk art, Adivasi identity, oral tradition, nature motifs, Vibrant colours, Tree of Life, symbolic storytelling, Jangarh Kalam, bhittichitra, digna.

**Folk Art**

This art is also practised in Chhattisgarh, Andhra Pradesh, and Odisha and is deeply embedded in ritual, cosmology, and everyday life. Rooted in animistic belief systems, Gond paintings reflect a worldview in which nature is not merely observed but inhabited by the artists. The intricate dots, rhythmic lines, and vibrant colours not only serve a decorative

purpose but also act as a medium for storytelling and spiritual invocation. Gond art, a community-based folk art emerging from rural tribal settings, is passed down through generations via oral tradition and plays functional roles in rituals and festivals.



**Image 1: Gond Artwork**

### **Traditional Forms**

While Gond art has evolved across canvases and global platforms, its traditional roots lie in two key forms: Digna and Bhattichitra. In the late twentieth century, pioneers like Jangarh Singh Shyam helped translate these traditional motifs from walls and floors onto paper and canvas, bringing the art form to global audiences.

**Digna** consists of geometric patterns such as circles, triangles, and dots, often forming elaborate interlocking designs. These are traditionally created by Gond women using a paste made from lime and chalk.

**Bhattichitra**, painted on the walls of homes, depict animals, plants, trees, and mythological narratives. These are more figurative than digna, though equally ornate and detailed. Traditional bhattichitra used natural pigments such as charcoal, coloured soil, plant sap, and

cow dung, mixed with water or gum to create a palette. Red was obtained from hibiscus flowers, and yellow from local gravel.

### Motifs

Another defining feature of Gond painting is the near elimination of empty space, reflecting a philosophy in which life is understood as continuous and deeply interconnected. The themes and motifs of Gond art are deeply rooted in nature, particularly flora and fauna, with recurring depictions of deer, peacocks, snakes, birds, fish, and tigers.

A central motif in Gond art is the **Tree of Life**, symbolizing sustenance, continuity, and a connection between humans and nature. Mythology and folklore are also significant themes, with artists depicting Gond legends such as **Jhitku Mitki** and Hindu deities like **Lord Shiva** and **Ganesha**. Scenes of everyday life, such as farming, fishing, and community celebrations, are commonly portrayed. Beyond storytelling, Gond paintings often carry symbolic meanings, expressing protection, good fortune, and reverence for nature. In contemporary works, artists also incorporate modern elements like cars, planes, and telephones.



**Image 2: Tree of Life motif in Gond Art  
– a student interpretation by Viara Jain (11-yr-old).**

## Artists

Several contemporary artists have played a crucial role in bringing Gond art to national and international attention while preserving its traditional spirit. These individual artists interpret traditional motifs differently.

**Jangarh Singh Shyam** was a pioneering Gond artist from the **Pardhan** community who developed the distinctive “**Jangarh Kalam**” style, translating traditional wall and floor motifs onto paper and canvas. His work combined ritualistic symbolism with contemporary artistic expression, making Gond narratives accessible to wider audiences. The impact was swift and remarkable.

Through his innovation, Shyam transformed a local, community-based art form into a contemporary practice. He was also a recipient of the prestigious Shilpguru Award, India’s highest honour for traditional art. His work gained international recognition and was exhibited in galleries across Paris, Tokyo, and New York. Notably, his painting “*Landscape with Spider*” fetched \$31,250 at Sotheby's New York auction, a commercial success for an Adivasi artist. Unfortunately, Jangarh passed away at 39, but his legacy continues through his students, who are flourishing as Gond artists worldwide.

**Bhajju Shyam**, born in 1971, received global recognition for his ideas and refined painting style. His visual narratives often depict mythic landscapes populated with birds, animals, and ancestral entities that reflect Gond cosmology, while retaining the intricate dot and line technique characteristic of the tradition. He also received the Padma Shri award in 2018.

**Durga Bai Vyam**, an award-winning Gond artist and Padma Shri recipient (2022), brings her community’s spiritual world to life. In 2018, she expanded traditional Gond wall art into contemporary graphic narratives on marine plywood. Her work portrays goddesses, male deities, and nature—rivers, bamboo, animals, and festivals—highlighting the harmony between faith, daily life, and the natural world. Bamboo, used in Bada Dev’s instrument and the flute, features prominently, symbolizing the connection between humans, gods, and nature.

**Ram Singh Urveti**, born in 1970, is one of the leading painters who started painting around the same time as Jangarh Singh Shyam. His works are exhibited in India and abroad, and

have received several awards. His books include the co-authored “The Night Life of Trees” and “Sun and Moon,” among others. His painting themes include tribal life, rituals, myth and folklore. The patterns he employs are inspired by the necklace that Pardhan Gond used to wear.

Gond art is widely used today in home décor items like wall hangings, cushion covers, table runners, and lampshades, adding colour and character to living spaces. It also appears in contemporary fashion on sarees, bags, scarves, and jewellery. Traditionally, Gond designs were seen as tattoos on the body, patterns on pottery, and carvings on doors, reflecting a seamless blend of cultural rituals and evolving artistic expression.

There is no end to the charm of Gond art. With its vivid colours, intricate dots and lines, and symbolic depictions of animals, trees, and spirits, Gond art continues to captivate audiences worldwide while maintaining a profound connection to nature and animism. Its reach has grown worldwide, from Indian galleries to Japanese handmade books, including Tara Books’ ‘The Night Life of Trees’ and ‘Creation.’

## Conclusion

Despite increasing recognition, Gond artists continue to face challenges in the global art market, where mainstream and commercial art forms often dominate visibility and demand. The growing influence of digital media and mass-produced designs also threatens the survival of traditional artistic practices that rely on handmade techniques and cultural transmission. Limited access to resources, training, and sustainable markets further affects many artists within the community. Yet Gond art endures as a powerful expression of Adivasi identity, demonstrating how indigenous traditions can evolve without losing their cultural essence.

## Reference

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### **About the Author**

Sheela Iyer is a B.Com graduate from Swami Vivekananda College and holds a Diploma in Materials Management from Welingkar's Institute of Management Development & Research, Mumbai, India. She worked in the logistics industry for 16 years, serving as the Customer Service Head (PAN India).

She enjoys listening to music, watching comedy shows and theatre, and reading books across different genres. A passionate writer, she composes poetry in both English and Hindi and loves connecting with people through her words. She has contributed to several anthologies, and her work has been widely appreciated on social media. She also writes on various platforms and has received numerous accolades for her writing.

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