

Rajasthani Pars

Pars, from the desert regions of Rajasthan, relate the epic tales of *Devanarayan* and *Pabuji*, folk heroes worshipped by the region's cattle and camel herders. The scrolls, some more than twenty feet in length, tell stories that take up to thirty nights to perform. Reflecting the culture of the region, the stories tell of the origins of the camel, of great battles, and of sacred births.

Pars are painted by members of the *Joshi* lineage, and performed by professional singer/storytellers called "*bhopa*." Handspun, hand woven cloth provides the backdrop for the images depicted on a *par*. Before painting begins, the fabric is starched and burnished so that it will not absorb pigments. Organic pigments are hand ground from plants and minerals and mixed with water and vegetable gum. After the fabric surface is prepared, the entire content of a *par* is sketched in light yellow pigment. Next, the successive application of colors—from light to dark—begins.

During a performance, *pars* are fully unrolled and set up on frames as temporary shrines to the gods. The lead singer/storyteller wears a special costume resembling the clothing of the main characters in the *par*. An assistant holds a lamp to illuminate the section of the *par* being told. *Par* performances are often a part of rural festival celebrations. They may also be commissioned by families or individuals seeking to rid their households of trouble, or thanking a deity for a favor received.

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Folk Arts Program Castellani Art Museum
Narrative Paintings from India
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CASTELLANI ART MUSEUM
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Detail from *patas* by Yakub Chitrakar, *The Burning of Lanka*, c. 1999. Photography: Keystone Productions.
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Narrative Paintings from India

This exhibition presents the long history and ongoing evolution of traditional paintings from three regions of India: *Mithila*, from an ancient cultural region in northern Bihar, *patas* from Bengal, and *pars* from Rajasthan. Curated by Dr. Susan Snow Wadley, Ford Maxwell Professor of South Asian Studies at Syracuse University, our current exhibition draws on research completed for “Beneath the Banyan Tree: Ritual, Remembrance and Storytelling in Performed Indian Folk Arts,” which debuted at Syracuse University’s Lowe Gallery in fall 2002.

Historically, *Mithila* paintings have been made by women and are inspired by Hindu mythology. The paintings serve to consecrate and protect the home, and are frequently a part of life cycle and festival celebrations. *Patras*, painted scrolls, were traditionally created by professional, male storytellers to enhance the performance of epic tales. Today, *patas* are also made by women, and often document contemporary historical events and help to raise awareness of social issues like the spread of HIV/AIDS. *Pars* are large scrolls, up to thirty-five feet long, produced by a lineage of painters for itinerate singer-storytellers called *bhopa*. *Pars* depict the epics of Devanarayan and Pabuji, folk heroes worshipped in the desert region of Rajasthan.

The three styles of paintings included here reflect stories and artistic traditions that are thousands of years old, yet they continue to evolve—offering commentary on recent historic events and responding to the rapidly changing world in the 21st century.

Mithila Paintings

The women of the *Mithila* region of northern Bihar have been decorating the walls of their houses and courtyards for generations. In this region, a sharp contrast is drawn between ritual, consecrated space and the everyday world—which is believed to be inhabited by spirits intent on creating chaos. To separate their households from the dangers of the everyday world, women fill their walls with auspicious designs and images of gods and goddesses, thus providing protection for their families. Especially elaborate Mithila paintings play a central role in weddings and festivals.

About forty years ago, when a famine struck the region, government officials began encouraging women to transfer their paintings to paper. The paintings were sold in India’s urban markets and abroad. More recently, men have begun painting in the styles traditionally used by women as they seek to benefit from this new source of income.

As *Mithila* paintings move from women’s households to the marketplace, esoteric designs meant to create protection and auspiciousness are often replaced with depictions of popular gods and goddesses. Some contemporary artists have shifted to modern themes, such as the unequal distribution of household labor as seen in the painting “Wife and Husband” by Vanita Jha.

Bengali Patas

Story scrolls from Bengal are made by artist/performers, or *patuas*, who move from village to village showing their scrolls and singing the songs that they have composed to match their drawings. The scrolls are made on rectangular pieces of paper stitched together to provide the artist the space that he needs for his full story. Those intended for use in performance are usually backed with pieces of cloth.

Scholars believe that the tradition of *patua*, “picture show men,” may date back as far as the 6th century B.C. in various regions of India. Even today, the watercolors used to create Bengali *patas* are made from organic materials gathered from the artist’s environment: the leaves of a local broad bean make green; extract of betel leaves provide yellow, orange, and brown; and the burnt clay from inside kitchen ovens are used for darker earth tones.

Traditionally, *patas* have been used to tell three main types of stories: those derived from the Hindu epics of Ramayana and Mahabharata; tales connected to local cults, particularly those devoted to the goddess *Manasa*—who rules over poisons and snakes; and retellings of actual historic events, especially disasters like floods, murders, and drownings.

Nowadays, government agencies often hire the *patua* to depict messages intended to educate, such as the HIV scroll in this exhibition. Women are increasingly found as painters of *patas* as men shift to other jobs.