

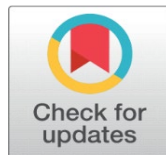
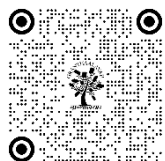


## WARLI PAINTING: AESTHETICS OF INDIGENOUS ART FORM OF INDIA

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**Received** 22 June 2022  
**Accepted** 21 August 2022  
**Published** 29 August 2022

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**DOI**  
[10.29121/shodhkosh.v3.i2.2022.156](https://doi.org/10.29121/shodhkosh.v3.i2.2022.156)

**Funding:** This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

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### ABSTRACT

This article delineates Warli paintings and its characteristics. Warli art was first discovered in early seventies. No record found about the exact origins of this tribe and its roots. It may belong to 10th century AD., when man learn to build the walls of the house. Warli art is a vivid expression of daily and social life of the tribe named as Warli of Maharashtra. Their art is entwined with their life and rustic magic, rituals, God and goddesses, harvest seasons, marriage scenes painted on the prepared walls of their homes, later they shifted to canvas, paper, cloth etc. as per the demand. Primarily this art form is painted by women only later men also joined. It's a pure and unadulterated art form. Warli painting is simple and comprised of geometric forms and relegated the academic rules like proportions, perspective. Tarpa dance and Caukat are the most striking features of Warli art. In the early 70's Artist Bhaskar Kulakarni came to Warli tribe and taught them, how to make their paintings more substantial and influenced many contemporary artists and achieved international fame.

**Keywords:** Suvasini, Silhouette, Geometric, Rituals, Tarpa, Caukat, Contemporary

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Art is the manifestation of human mind and it's a deep-rooted human urge which records each frame of his life and emotions. Paintings on walls are evident from the cave wall painting by caveman from prehistoric age. In the subsequent ages, as the civilization flourished, they moved to huts and the painted on the walls too connected to their life. There are around 645 distinct tribes in India. Constitution of India has recognized under the schedule 5 of the constitution. Hence tribes are recognized as the schedule tribes. 92% percent of tribal community lives in forests, dry areas, hill areas mainly depend on agriculture and minor forest produce [Rani and Agarwal \(2019\)](#).

Generally Indian tribes live in forest, acute poverty in the companions, faith in nature worship, rustic magic, illiteracy, and backwardness. Tribal art has evolved on its own technique. It is deeply rooted in the traditional believed in God and spirits. Their art portrays their pure life and unadulterated form.

The word Warli is derived from the word “*Warala*” which means a piece of land or field. Warli tribe is found in the northern outskirts of Mumbai (Thane District) in western India and also extends to the borders of Gujarat State. The origin of Warli is still unknown and no records found in clear. But the historians and art historians believed that they are belonged to the 10<sup>th</sup> Century A.D. According to researchers, that the tribal’s are the propagators of tradition which has originated in the Neolithic period 3000 B.C to 2500 B.C [Sharma \(2015\)](#). These paintings are similar to those between 10,000BC to 500 BC in the rock shelters of Bhimbetka in Madhya Pradesh. However, their art form is exposed to the society in seventies only.

The Tribe is group of families bearing common believes, terrority, speak same language which has no script and observes certain customs in an undisturbed area. As the developed society, there will be no special class of artists in tribal communities. every person young or old, irrespective of gender is associated with art, which is intertwined with rituals, beliefs, gods, goddesses are imaginary which are varied from region to region with common characteristics in expression of style. The physical, sociological, geographical backgrounds play pivotal role in their art that appears as common in entire art of tribal communities across India.

## 2. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- 1) To Study the significance and concept of indigenous Warli Art.
- 2) To study the pictorial language of Warli Art such line, colour and organization of space, inclusion of elements and simplification.
- 3) To study the aesthetics of Warli painting and its relation to the Warli tribe.
- 4) To study the changes that occurred influenced the indigenous art towards contemporary.

## 3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The present study mainly based upon the primary sources such as my observation at tribal areas, and interaction with tribal painters in several collaborative workshops as faculty in fine arts, and field visits. The secondary sources are the Research publications, Documentaries journals, articles

## 4. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Though the most part of this article based on the observations of the author as the painter and also aided some books for review as follows. The research paper by [Rani and Agarwal \(2019\)](#), Tribes in India: Their Social and Economic development through Art [Rani and Agarwal \(2019\)](#), Journal of Commerce and Trade has given details on tribes. In Tribal Folk Art of India by Ekta Sharma described the overview of Folk and tribal art of India and discussed in detail. K. Surya Prakash Goud in his “*Documentation of Warli paintings*” sponsored by Resource Centre for Traditional Paintings has describes in their Project in details of the Warli paintings. They have explained each and every element and decorative motifs in painting has been emphasized and described for better understanding to a common man and unfolded

the aesthetics of Warli Painting. In “*Visual world of Warli*” by Roma Singh, Ravi Poovaih of IIT Bombay has done a meticulous study into four chapters. In all chapters were loaded with vital information on art and painters of warli. The entire worked categorized such as origins of Warli Paintings, Categories of Warli paintings, Process of Warli Paintings and trick and tips as the final chapter provided valid information of this art form and its survival. Also, some more information helped to this paper.

## 5. THEME

Warli people have to face many problems and illness. They always follow some traditional rituals to overcome the illness and witchcrafts etc. in order to find the remedy for those problems, they draw pictures to please their gods and goddesses Goud (2004) Chiefly they have developed this culture to have harmony with God. These paintings will be cultural heritage of Warli tribe executed mainly on walls of the homes of Warli tribe during the occasion of harvest seasons and marriages. These paintings are practicing by women transfer from mother to daughter as a custom, later men also joined in later times. They use brown clay and rice paste for their paintings on walls. Unlike other traditions, the Warli painters do not depict any themes form mythology but the scenes from their life and immediate surroundings. Figure 1

Figure 1



Figure 1 Elements of Warli art from the painting of Minakshi Vasudev (Warli Painter), Maharashtra.

Source Picture by Minakshi Vasudev

Themes of Warli paintings are basically, 1. Gods and Goddesses 2. Harvesting Seasons 3. Animals 4. Rites and rituals. Warli paintings are narrative paintings which require performance gestures and moments and little facial expressions. Most of the human figures will be depicted in dialogue with each other, scenes from social life such as hunting, gatherings, fishing, farming, forest activities, his immediate surroundings and his beliefs on their deities. Warli tribe women and men adorned their walls with harvest scenes, weddings, and births as they are predominantly farmers whose life is associated with monsoon cycle. As their life closely linked with nature, they worship it in different forms like sun, moon, God of thunders, wind, rain, and etc. After First rice cycles they worship of God of rain. The paintings depict the human and animals amidst a festive atmosphere. A group of women dance around a person playing musical instrument “tarpa”. Men and women are depicted as engaged in harvest scenes, cultivating, hunting and many more activities. Spiral formations of men and women and concentric circular (spiral) design in Warli paintings are symbolic of Tarpa dance (Figure 2) for Warlies, the life is best represented by a circle which doesn’t have beginning and starting. In every painting we may observe nearly three to five varieties of trees. They paint trees with more stylization but without losing its characters. Peacock is common bird which

appears in whole Warli Painting. Sun is always represented as radiant with scintillating dots of line as the rays, painted at the left top corners of the surface. Every human figure always shown as dynamic in a movement or action orientation. It unfolds their daily life from morning to evening pertaining to agriculture and other activities. Even the depiction of flying birds also tells their innate dynamism.

**Figure 2**



**Figure 2** Tarpa Dance by Minakshi Vasu Dev (Warli Painter) at National workshop (2022).  
**Source** Picture by Minakshi Vasudev

*Caukat* is the most striking feature of Warli art. *Caukat* is a dazzling square consists of triangles, diagonals, polygons and other geometric shapes and patterns (Figure 3). It is always rendered in the centre space of the painting. Within this *caukat* goddess named Palaghat Goddess (the Goddess of trees and plants) which also treated as symbol for creative energy. The literal meaning of Palaghat is a pot over flowering with plants. Marriage rituals do not take place without painting of Palaghat goddess. It is believed these goddesses will protect bride and bride groom from evil spirits and bless with fertility. Each and every element inscribed in *caukat* drawing is connected to their life and geography and immediate surroundings. A married woman called as "*suvasini*" has to do paintings. The process of painting is one of most important ceremony done in one day prior to the marriage.

**Figure 3**



**Figure 3** A Marriage Painting by Minakshi Vasudev (Warli painter) Acrylics on canvass (2022).  
**Source** Picture by Minakshi Vasudev

## 6. TECHNIQUE

The Tribal painting is simplistic in character with human figures made of triangle and stick like legs and variety of flora and fauna in geometric shapes. Warli paintings are practiced from generation after generation and no formal training to tribe. The old traditional painting method, they simply paint on mud and cow dung surface, or coated with geru (red mud) first and then with rice paste for paintings. Still, they follow same method of painting on walls but when it comes to paint on canvasses, clay pots, paper, cloth the procedure varies. These paintings are simplistic but full of life and chewed bamboo sticks are used as brushes for painting.

Wall painting is the simplest medium for tribal art contains geometric shapes mostly such as birds, animals silhouette forms of simplified human figures as rendered as match sticks. They mostly appear on the walls and floors. The custom of painting on walls or floor is connected to the occasion. Every year they whitewash their huts and create new designs. The walls of the mud huts serve as background as a readymade surface for the decoration in which they combine both representational and decorative quality images. Field activities and marriage scenes are most common themes among these communities. [Figure 4](#)

**Figure 4**



**Figure 4** Warli painter Kusum Kharpade at National workshop (2022) at Yogi Vemana University, Kadapa, Andhra Pradesh.

**Source** Picture by Kusum Kharpade

## 7. CHARACTERISTICS

The documentary film on Warli painting and my interaction with tribal art in the camp organized by Lalit Kala Akademi, regional centre Chennai, the 5 day Traditional and Tribal artists workshop jointly organized at Department of Fine Arts, Yogi Vemana University, Kadapa South Central Zone Cultural center, Nagpur, Ministry of Culture, Govt. of India, and my field visits interactions with tribal artists has given extensive idea on characteristics of Warli painting.

Abstraction is the chief integral element which mean the synthesis of Geometric forms. They capture the character of the object rather than mere decoration which can be identified by the genre. Every form is symbolic, discharges their emotional values strong beliefs. These forms are often derived form the traditional conventions of their lives. The motifs are depicted with the notion of promoting fertility, to avert the diseases and to propriate the dead, fulfil the demands of the ghosts and spirits. These are very simple, lucid, more meaningful and strikes the character of the object which can be recognized even by the children with little decoration. The depiction of human figuration is very simple which is formed by the two triangles arrange in topsy-turvy or hourglass shaped with head suggested by big dot. Articulation human figuration was expressed to the most extant captured form their immediate surroundings. Not only in Warli, but also the in other tribal painting it is common. It is noticed that each panel is depicted with no repetition but with dynamism and rhythmic action in the field activities. In some places groups of people were shown in basic geometric shapes like line, circle depends on festive or ritual gatherings.

As far as concern, Images of animals, horse, bull are most common elements as to the primitive man the same too for tribe. Animals are represented with thick horizontal line bands (looks like rectangular), head and tails are attached to both ends appears as if it is in profile. It is very easy to identify the animal mostly peacocks as depicted by the sensuous line and with spontaneity and greater quality. Birds are depicted or drawn either in flying or resting poses on the trees as if they are in conversation. The forms of the snake, fish, are common in their art appears as per the empty areas on the surface. It is clearly noticed that tribal artists keenly observe nature and imitate very well to the core and without losing the basic character of any form. Depiction of the trees, though not based on the spot study, but from the memory they are rendered in stylistic way without losing their character and one can identify and can be matched with realistic tree. They appear us as if they are woven with sensuous line and dots in stylistic way in a line or continuous pattern with great rhythm, another interesting feature of Warli paintings are Sun and moon. Sun and moon images shall be arranged on the extreme top corner of the either side. Sun is depicted on the left top corner with scintillated lines all around whereas moon is surrounded with tiny dot as stars at the extreme right top corner of the surface. The placing of sun and moon on the corner in every wall unfolds that a tribe believes their lives or day runs between sun and moon.

Organization of space on wall or surface of the painting is an interesting element in Warli paintings. All the images arranged on the surface appear as if they are floating in air without gravity and spills over the surface with no horizontal line ignores perspective and proportions. Like trained artists, they don't give importance and have no knowledge in reality, rules of composition, perspective, proportions, light and shades. Positive space is to merely fill space or surface and negative space is rightly organized with filling forms of tiny dots of multiple, swirling lines. colours are prepared from natural stones or burnt sienna powder of brick powder mixed with binder. Though the human chains in celebrating rituals or dancing poses, the birds, and animals, painted in profile figuration, the semblance of the paintings seems as if we are watching below eye level. The fields are depicted slightly tilted in manner towards the viewer. Perhaps the tribal painter wishes to show the objects in comprehensive way by relegating and ignoring perspective view. In another way tribe might not be aware of such words and view but intended to show the objects in full manner. Their motive is just to paint. The stone boulders either big or small represented as a square with crossing diagonal lines. It was asked to a tribe who is painting in such a way. He replied "that This is the way he wants to represent

protuberant and depressions on the boulders. I felt astonished that how cleverly form is captured in tribal painting. My communication with Warli tribe women artists Minakshi Vasudev, Kusum Kharpade, during the national workshop, I have discussed the reason for filling the empty space with tiny dots or delicate and sensuous swirling lines, asked her that why they were placing dots in empty areas?. *"If they wouldn't, it doesn't appear as nice seems to be incomplete and they don't want to see anything empty on the surface"* (Smt. Menakshi Vasudev and Kusum of Warli Village, Maharashtra, Personal communication, February 20, 2022). The same attitude and trait are observed in every painting. The same is also seen in Soara paintings. Then it was understood they sought a kind of visual balance in painting which can be termed by contemporary artists as "aesthetic" and well balanced.

## 8. LATER DEVELOPMENTS

In 1966 during severe drought, the All-India Handicrafts Board has sent artist Bhaskar Kulakarni to Mithla to encourage women to paint the same motifs on paper that they painted on walls and floors previously thus enabling them to sell their artwork to increase augments their family income [Singh and Poovaih \(2012\)](#). In the early 70's he came to Warli tribe and taught them also how to make their paintings more substantial. He taught them to paint on canvasses, clothes, paper, and other material and to use paint brushes instead of using twigs to paint, which gave their painting crisper and firmer look. He introduced synthetic colours to their paintings which made it more durable and brighter. Instead of using rice paste, he made them to use poster colours and fabric colours. Many Contemporary artists were inspired towards tribal art forms in their artistic process. To adopt modernity, simplification of form, tribal figuration has given clues to the abstraction. The same happened in the case of Paul Gaugin and Pablo Picasso. Jamini Roy is the best example to draw the inspiration from tribal art. Artists like Ramkinker Baij, J.Swaminadhan, Madhavi Pharekh are prominent painters who adopted the character of Tribal Paintings. [Figure 5.](#)

**Figure 5**



**Figure 5** Warli Artist Meenakshi Vasudev at Tribal Workshop (2022) at Yogi Vemana University, Kadapa, Andhra Pradesh.

**Source** Picture by Mr. Ch. Appalachari

As the world is become global village, the external influence and culture is intruded into their culture too, as their undisturbed areas were sunken, changed as villages and had connection with city culture too has influenced the character of their art. It is not a mistake, change is inevitable, one has to agree for it. A kind of dialogue evolved with mechanical world started shown its impact and appeared in the paintings. Images like scooter, train, lorry, cars appearing in their wall paintings. The art lovers and collectors are also encouraging their pure and innocent expressions loaded with emotional charge and deeply connected to the tradition and sometimes playful drawings from their immediate surroundings, invited to their galleries and working studios for workshops with synthetic material. Now their expression not only limited to their huts but also adorned the wall of the corporate offices and houses of rich and workshops. But at the same time traders, middlemen and skilled artists have interfered from non-tribal community has begun to exploit their native and indigenous art form. They started using the same elements for making commercialization and deprived the tribe. The inability to speak and write is also hindered the progress of Warli artists which was taken advantage by the middlemen. Slowly natural colours are replaced by the synthetic colours to obtain lucid quality on different surfaces as the part of commercialization.

## **9. CONCLUSION**

India has several art forms that reflect country's heritage and tradition. Warli painting is one amongst them. Over the years as the growing contact with mainstream culture, the commercial values increased rather than their customs, the art is also taken over by men of Warli. Their art is centered with flora and fauna and their immediate surroundings and day to day activities their lives. Not only on canvasses, but their art also appearing on house holding articles such as wall hangings, lampshades, table clothes, tea mugs, etc. The originality of the Warli art must be preserved and promoted. It should be preserved through documentation like slides, short movies, artists, and artisans should work together and exhibition in museums and private art galleries. Fortunately, Indian government and other voluntary organizations are taking efforts to preserve and promote these paintings. Commercialization became important for the survival of Tribal Art. However due to globalization, to some extent causing to the tribe from an undisturbed atmosphere, the number of artists is dwindling, neglected. And many other practicing artists are also taking this art for their livelihood as well galleries and interior decorators for commercial purpose. Somewhere Warli painter are also encouraged to paint on canvasses and other surfaces like paper and public walls as commission works for their livelihood. Synthetic material replaced the natural clays for browns and rice paste for a while, paper, and canvasses preplaced walls. One should understand and agree the sanctity and validity to the painting comes to those paintings when painted by tribe only.

## **CONFLICT OF INTERESTS**

None.

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

None.



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