

## **Contemporary Lives of Cherial Paintings from Telangana India: Notes on the Relations between Fieldwork and Thesis Structures**

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In 1952, the government of India founded the All India Handicraft Board for the revival and promotion of Indian handicrafts. Reconstituted in 1981, the Board was then tasked with supporting financially both handlooms and handicrafts and with helping craftsmen adjusting to the market changes. Part of a broader tradition of Pata paintings (paintings on cloth), Cherial paintings from the Telangana region benefited from this revival. The paintings acquired the name Cherial from the only village in Telangana that still had active painters at the time that the government started showing interest. These paintings were originally scrolls that performers would carry along to local villages as a visual aid for the performance of storytelling of local caste Puranas (mythological stories). For several reasons, these performances have decreased and the production of paintings has consequently changed, influencing the materiality, iconography, meanings and environment of the paintings. Now, not only local communities are involved in commissioning works, but museums and private collectors are as well. My PhD research explores the transformation of the ongoing artistic form that is Cherial painting and questions how the material features of these paintings have adapted to various socio-political changes. The main axis under investigation is the correlation between the materiality of the paintings with their environment of production, presentation and reception. In this research note, I present fieldwork techniques and methodologies that I had to use in order to conduct the project outlined above. The painting materiality neatly subdivided the thesis into sections and I later realised that it subdivided fieldwork processes as well. For this reason, I will give a brief introduction to the nature of these paintings and then explain its relation to the collection of data. The objective is to present how one folk tradition of painting is capable of travelling through three different social spheres and more specifically how these observations were reflected through the fieldwork processes as well.

With few exceptions, all the scroll paintings for storytelling follow the same conservative materiality. The scrolls are around thirteen metres in length. The narrative is developed into registers, surrounded by a floral boarder and depicted on a red background. Seven Puranas are still narrated in the region, five in vertical format and two horizontal. One is also sometimes performed with a set of fifty-three dolls instead of a scroll, as a visual aid for the performers. The commission of a scroll for storytelling is rare and happens through a conventional process that involves three entities: a patron, storytellers and painters. The commission emanates from the community that will

further be narrated on the scroll. However, the patron does not necessarily commission a new scroll but rather a performance. In the event of a new scroll being commissioned, the storytellers will visit the painters' home and discuss the commission. Together they will go through details of the scroll's length and narrative, the disposition of figures in the register, the deadline, amongst other features. A scroll commission for performance generally takes three to five months to be completed. Due to the religious nature of the stories depicted, the scroll is also considered religious and a ceremony is performed upon delivery. The storytellers will then make payment and offerings to the painters. With regards to this category of paintings for performances most data was collected around the same region. In order to grasp a general understanding of the practice I initially planned to attend performances and interact with storytellers and patrons. Unfortunately, I quickly faced major problems in tracking the performers and there was very little cooperation from the painters in helping to contact them. Besides, the research being mainly art historical, I decided to focus on the scroll object. Most of my data was collected through contact with the painters and through previously published research that focuses on this aspect of Cherial painting.

What I would like to highlight here is not exactly the amount of data and the conclusions I drew from my time spent with the painters but rather the social context in which I had to interact in order to access this data. Working with folk paintings entails close collaboration with the local communities that relate to the practice. The local family of craftsmen from the Cherial village in Telangana had little awareness of the art historical problematic I tried to express and I had to include changes in methodology as well as anthropological considerations to the research. Questions about the materiality and style of the painting often sounded surprising and unnecessary to the artists; as would my interest in meeting storytellers. By contrast, questions on the technique and religious dimension of the paintings drew enthusiastic responses. I spent a total of eight months in the field and spread my work with the painters evenly throughout,



Scroll painting for the performance of the Katam Raju Katha  
 Painting on cloth 187 x 142 cm  
 19<sup>th</sup> c.  
 Telugu University Warangal  
 Courtesy of the author, 2014

maintaining regular interactions in order to build trust and comfort. In the course of my fieldwork and in spite of not doing anthropology *per se*, I soon realised the need to communicate in the same manner as the painters. This changed my entire way of looking at paintings, and subsequent understanding of how painters themselves see their own production. I eventually started from the context and moved onto the scroll, reversing my methodology to the insider's perspective: that of a painter's activity in painting a scroll.

With the emergence of tribal and folk art in scholarship and in the global art market, museums and institutions in India have developed an interest in Cherial paintings. This network created a new space of production for Cherial painters. Commissions for museums are mostly smaller than the usual scrolls for storytelling but definitely fine and big enough to remain sacralised pieces of art on display within gallery walls. The local caste stories are set aside for Pan-Indian mythologies like the Ramayana or the Krishna Leela, well known by the public. Finally the paintings remain essentially 'Cherial' by a narrative disposed in registers and the red background. Part of my research is to propose an overview of contemporary Cherial painting.



Painting of the Katam Raju Katha for the Dakshina Chitra Museum in Chennai  
 Painting on cloth 146 x 250 m  
 2010  
 DakshinaChitra  
 Courtesy of the author, 2014

Museum commissions represented the largest amount of fieldwork and approaching these was a completely different task than approaching local communities. I first had to list which pieces I was looking for and where they were exhibited. At this early stage of the data collection, I realised that artists would not keep any archive of any commission. It took a great deal of patience and time to list their activities relying on the painters' memories. I had to give up on one cataloguing project due to the uncertainty of this information. My position was uncertain and the data was collected without being sure it would ever be used, depending on the accuracy of the further information I would get. This time, I had to interact with curators and present myself as an art history scholar. Part of the project was to

understand the context of commission, the intentions of the museum and perhaps establish comparison with other pieces or other places. Discussing these issues with museum staff was well received but unfortunately not always answered. Looking for other reasons would provide me with fabricated answers and most of my observations led to the conclusion that Cherial paintings for institutions rather served idiomatic representations. This sense of generalisation of the localised practice is something particularly interesting for the case of India, given its exceptional diversity of regional cultures. It highlights a need for the nation to be bound by common cultural aspects and to build homogeneity. My position as a scholar with an art historical background would allow me to gather visual material necessary for the thesis but also to cross the line between the commissions and what it means to be inside institutional walls. In this particular context, I was forced to adjust the findings to my knowledge and to enter fully the role of an art historian, sometimes even drawing conclusion from the absence of evidence.

The final and last section of my data collection concerned private commissions of Cherial paintings. These paintings are often ordered by art lovers or the urban upper classes willing to decorate their home with ethnic items, and do not follow a particular format. They are the most customised of all and the customer is free to choose the support, colours and subject. Retailers also order few of these paintings. In the case of Cherial paintings, Lepakshi is the Andhra Pradesh state emporium and orders the most commissions. Few orders by museums and other private collectors also operate through their mediation. As a retailing platform on the market place of these paintings, customers will



Painting of three women for an anonymous collector  
 Painting on canvas 76.2 x 106 cm  
 2014  
 Courtesy of the author, 2014

be able to make their first encounter with the tradition. If further interested, they can request a special commission to the manager and the latter would then contact the painters directly. The particularity of these paintings is the discretion in which the order is placed and the consequential

discretion in which information about it is given. Only very rarely did the painters actually know the exact name and contact of their commissioner. This creates of course an extra layer of information and an extra layer of distance between the painting and the reception. Neither the painters nor the retailer would deliver the customers' name and contact and I could only rarely trace the entire commission from its origin. When this was made possible, I was no longer an anthropologist or an art historian but a foreigner interested in exotic items and other ethnic decoration from India, somewhere between connoisseurship and research. Most of the time, being a consumer of local arts would show greater efficiency than any scholarly interest. Of course, this had implications on the discussion I would exchange with these commissioners as well as on my opinion towards the reasons behind such commission; somewhere between acquiring an idea of handicraft and following trends. Besides a few art historical collectors, most of the private acquisitions are decorative and had to fit a certain idea of authentic Cherial but more than this too, a certain idea of authentic handicraft, authentic folklore and rooted decoration. The finesse of the work mattered little compared to museum paintings and the subject too was relegated to a secondary importance. What remained once again is the 'Cherialness' that it carries through the red background and the register's depiction.

While a local villager from Cherial would be very knowledgeable about the temple paintings and the associated rituals, the urban middle class lady would have only romanticised views of the painting's origins. In the middle, museums elevate folklore and handicraft to the status of 'art'. In all this, the painters respond to all commissions with versatility and great efficiency; so does the researcher.

This paper tried to explain the developments that led me to adopt three different attitudes while being in the field and how these attitudes helped to reinforce my presentation of these paintings on three different layers, divided by their reception. Cherial paintings are at the same time scrolls for local community rituals, samples of Telangana art and folklore for institutions and decorative objects for collectors and individuals. Following these trends, the researcher takes the position of a participant, that of a conventional art historian scholar and that of a handicraft's buyer. None of these 'identities' have been anticipated and chosen ahead of going to the field but the research's objectives led to it. Without being strictly reduced to these three social spheres, the idea was to present the necessity to adjust to the environment of the paintings and to be flexible around the research object even in art history. More than collecting data efficiently, it allows understanding the social relations between each of the protagonists that relate to these paintings, because these relations will have an impact on their materiality and hence on their art historical evolution.