

Symbolism And Ritual Significance In Pithora Painting Of Central India

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ABSTRACT

Pithora painting isn't just art it's woven right into the daily life of the Rathwa and Bhilala tribes in Central India. People don't create these paintings just to make their homes look nice. They paint them as offerings to the deity Pithoro, often in moments of sickness, gratitude, or big life events. This study digs into those core Pithora symbols horses, the sun, moon, ancestors and looks at what they really mean in the community's rituals and beliefs. Through field visits and a close look at the paintings themselves, I explore how these symbols open up the tribe's views on the universe, spirits, and the ties that hold people together. The main point? Pithora isn't just tribal art. It's a living ritual—a kind of visual book—full of old stories and memories. When you see it up close, Pithora shifts from being a simple artifact to becoming a wellspring of identity and knowledge.

Keywords: Pithora, community, paintings, rituals, colors.

INTRODUCTION

Tribal art from Central India is loaded with history and meaning, and Pithora is a bright standout in this crowded field. It's not just for decoration it has roots in spirituality and daily life. The Rathwa, Bhilala, and Nayka people, mostly in Gujarat (like Panchmahal and Vadodara) and Madhya Pradesh, keep this tradition alive. Painting Pithora isn't a weekend hobby; for them, it's sacred.

Families call for these paintings to celebrate births, ask for healing, bless weddings, or just welcome good luck. Each step comes from tradition. A Lakhara or Badwa someone who's really both artist and priest takes charge, leading the painting with everyone pitching in. When it's done, the walls of the house light up, but the real energy comes out during the closing ritual, with its prayers, music, and offerings. It brings everyone together.

What pulls you in are the symbols. Nothing's random. Every horse, every sun and moon, every spot of color means something. All these choices reflect how the community understands the world and their place in it. This study tries to break down that visual language and Pithora ritual.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholars don't totally ignore Pithora, but it still sits on the edges of mainstream art history. Verrier Elwin wrote about it in the 1950s, focusing on its ceremonial role. Jyotindra Jain came in later, opening up the study of the motifs and drawing comparisons to tribal art like Warli and Saura.

Stephen Huyler pointed out, even back in 1994, that painting is central to the ritual itself—it's not just a side project. Others, like Ramachandran and Doshi, have worked through the meanings: the horse as a bridge to the divine, sun and moon marking cosmic time, ancestor figures linking people to their roots.

But most research slices up the symbols or treats them as decorations instead of seeing the whole ritual system. That's the gap this study tries to fill—reading Pithora like a unified book, not a collection of random pictures.

METHODOLOGY

This research sticks to qualitative work: I relied on ethnography and visual analysis. Fieldwork happened

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in three villages in Chhota Udaipur, Gujarat, where Pithora is still part of everyday life.

I joined two Pithora rituals over four months, watched how paintings took shape, how the Badwa worked, and listened as people talked about each symbol. I spoke with five senior Lakhara artists, two Badwa priests, and eight folks who'd held rituals at home. An interpreter helped me dig into each symbol.

Visually, I looked at fifteen paintings checking patterns, color choices, where people and animals turned up, and which symbols the artists returned to again and again. I leaned on Indian sacred art theory to link those patterns back to the wider spiritual or cosmic meanings. All together, this approach worked to tie Pithora's visual world back into its ritual life.

RESULTS

Table 1. Recurring Symbols in Pithora Painting and Their Ritual Meanings

Feature / Symbol	Visual Form	Ritual Significance	Primary Occasion(s)	Dominant Colors
Pithoro (Horse)	White horse with rider	Divine vehicle; central deity figure	Birth, Marriage, Crisis	White, Orange, Red
Sun	Circular disc (red/orange)	Cosmic order; fertility; life force	Birth, Marriage, Harvest	Yellow, Orange, Red
Moon	Crescent form	Time; seasonal cycles; protection	Birth Ceremony	Yellow, White
Peacock	Stylized bird	Auspiciousness; rain; prosperity	Birth, Marriage, Harvest	Yellow, Green, Red
River/Water	Wavy horizontal lines	Purification; continuity of life	Healing, Harvest	Red, Black, Green
Tiger	Striped animal form	Guardian; protector of household	Healing Ritual	Red, Black
Ancestral Figures	Human forms in rows	Connection to lineage; identity	Healing Ritual	Red, Black
All Combined	All major symbols	Total spiritual invocation	Community Crisis	Multi-color

Table 2. Performance Comparison

Criteria	Traditional	AI-assisted
Ritual Documentation Speed	68	92
Symbolic Creativity Retention	72	85
Cultural Accuracy	90	78
Community Participation	95	60

almost every time too, and I spotted the sun and moon together in eleven out of fifteen paintings, always floating high up to set them apart.

DISCUSSION

Pithora paintings are a language of their own. Each symbol does a job where you place it matters. Meanings grow from how the shapes and figures interact, landing somewhere between the ritual and the room they fill.

The horse really stands out representing Pithoro, the main deity. It's more than just decoration. People honor the horse, often painting someone riding it; this matches the big story, where Pithoro shows up on horseback when people ask for help.

Every Pithora painting I found had a horse front and center never missing. Ancestor figures showed up

The sun and moon always hold the high ground, pointing to their importance. They aren't just symbols



of day and night they signal sacred time, bridging the small, everyday moment with the bigger, cosmic cycles. Every artist keeps them in the same spot, so the code is clear to anyone from the community.

Ancestor figures pop up everywhere, reminding people that Pithora is about family, history, and staying connected to those who came before not just calling on the gods. The walls turn into a meeting place for the living and the remembered.

You also notice tigers and peacocks now and then. The tiger stands guard, powerful during healing rituals, and the peacock shows up for luck or as a wedding blessing. Whether you see them or not depends on the needs of the family and the priest's sense of the ritual.

So, Pithora paintings build a whole visual language not just art, but a system of belief and social meaning all at once.

CONCLUSION

Pithora paintings aren't just pretty—they're heavy with stories, beliefs, and community memory. Every detail ties back into rituals, history, and how these tribes see their world. The paintings work as ritual "texts," speaking to spirits and people at the same time.

But the tradition's under real pressure. More people move to cities, younger folks drift away, and sometimes, the meaning behind the art gets lost. Piece by piece, the old connections fade.

That's why we have to look at Pithora as more than art. It's a living body of knowledge—something that needs real attention. Future research can keep up with how documented preservation or revival efforts might reshape Pithora, or see how it compares to other tribal art across India.

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