

Introduction to Indian Art – An Appreciation
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Module – 05
Folk Traditions 2: (playfulness in folk art)
Lecture: W3 - L5

Welcome viewers to the MOOCs online course on Introduction to Indian Art and Appreciation. Well, this is the last and 5th module of the 3rd week which is on stylistic variations. Since last module that is from the 4th module we were trying to look at completely different traditions different from the main stream art that is the folk art traditions of India. In the first part that is on the previous module, 4th module we discussed the deep relationships that exists between art and ritual, art and life, art and environment, art and material in the context of folk art.

We have seen how folk traditions have been successful in not only making art an essential part of all the rituals and ceremonies that they performed, but also an essential part of their everyday life. As a result we have discussed that it becomes extremely difficult to make any strong distinction or discrimination between art as an aesthetic object and art as a functional object in the domain of folk art, it is all mixed-up. They all share similar concerns whether it is a utility object or aesthetic object. In fact, there no such discrimination actually exists in the real folk art.

Today in this module we will be discussing another apparently very simple, but a very interesting and a very significant aspect of folk art that is playfulness. Now why playfulness? Does that mean that playfulness does not exist in the other traditions of art? Does that mean that there is no playfulness in Ajanta, no playfulness in Ellora, no playfulness in Mughal or Rajput painting they are all damn serious and they do not allow any playfulness to play any role in the formation of their art. Well this is not exactly the case. Of course, playfulness as an element can be present in any art traditions.

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The world of folk art, before anything else, is a world of variety. From functional objects, to ceremonial decorations, from daily life utility products to ritualistic objects or paintings, from reverential iconic images to narrative paintings -- everywhere one notices an endless variety of forms, shapes, elements, colors and of course content.

Folk art is less restrictive and more playful than the mainstream high art -- patronized and thus supervised by kings and other authorities like religious heads etc.

But what we are trying to discuss here, is playfulness not simply as a visual element or a pictorial element, but playfulness as a driving force. Do you get the point? It is very interesting. I mean after all the world of folk art is full of varieties that we have already seen and we got a glimpse in the last module. From functional objects to ceremonial decorations from daily life utility products to ritualistic objects and paintings from reverential iconic serious quote unquote images narrative paintings everywhere one notices an endless variety of fonts, shapes, elements, colors and of course content.

So, the variations one comes across, when one study folk art is simply mind boggling. The range of stylistic shapes, fonts, colors, configurations is enormous. This variation according to our understanding this variation is possible; this variation remains to be a persistent feature because of this aspect called playfulness. Here playfulness does not really refer only to an element of fun or wimps, but an element of freedom. So, folk art is less restrictive and more playful than the main stream high art.

In fact, patronized and thus supervised by kings and other authorities like religious etc. I mean this kind of patronizations have made the high stream, the main stream high art little more restrictive, little more canonical, little more a kind of faithful to their main canons main textual prescriptions. Compared to that folk art seems to be having a free space to express themselves, to execute new ideas, new fonts, new shapes, and also to be a little irrelevant, to be a little unfaithful quote unquote if needed.

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So the variety in diversity is evident in the huge range of objects that come under the domain of folk art. Even this cluster of four simple images some this light, there is a mask chow dance mask from Bengal below a pretty may be two centuries old terracotta elephant from UP, then again a terracotta horse relatively new made inmid 20 century in Madhya Pradesh and then a paper Mache doll, a kind of doll made out of paper pulp colored and painted doll and this is from Bihar.

I mean, already you can see a ray of course, I am not showing you the paintings I am not showing you then, I have shown let us say the wall paintings and the floor paintings in the last module, but I am not showing you the folk paintings done on the paper. I am not showing you the beautiful kind of range of exciting range of a tapestry fabric and textiles that you have in the real (Refer Time: 06:38) folk art when you count on all these things.

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And the entire range of course, you find folk art as a something that you really value having a very good range of aesthetic ideas. So, this is how we arrive at the idea of playfulness. Playfulness as the main driving force behind the variety of folk art; so playfulness is an essential driving force in any folk art and in this context the term playfulness does not suggest random or whimsical creativity, but rather a mindful and alert ability to play with forms, very interesting. Please note, this particular point that playfulness does not suggest random or whimsical creativity.

This is how many have misunderstood the playfulness in folk art. It is not about random or whimsical creativity, but it is rather a mindful I would also add conscious ability a kind of a technical, mental and intellectual ability a capacity to play with forms, to play with shapes, to play with designs with a deep sense of freedom and joy and these last two points are extremely important freedom and joy. It is very apparent with any folk art for that matter that there is a tremendous amount of joyfulness.

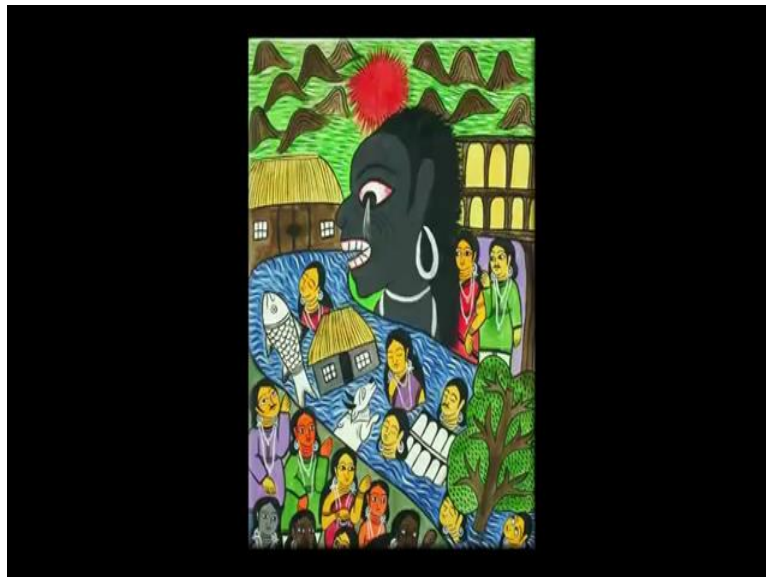
I mean people who have done that they must have snouted out to do that. They must have gone into enormous a physical strain in order to make a dhokra toy or a metal craft or a huge wall painting, but at the same time it is very evident, it is very true that all of them have enjoyed what they have done.

So, this sense of enjoyment and the sense of freedom are kind of integrated with each other. All together they create, along with that playfulness an essential the main driving

force behind the creation of any folk art. As a result playfulness becomes a visible artistic quality. So, it does not just remain as a driving force of course, it is a driving force, but at the same time it becomes a visible artistic quality in most of the folk art. The playfulness also allows the folk artists to draw from nature and their own life and surrounding most freely.

They do not have to think twice whether it is right or wrong whether it is right to show a mother hanuman a kind of cleaning the head of the baby hanuman a right on top of the roof. They do not have to really think it twice. They know that it is there and it is for them to show to depict and they do it.

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So, this sense of joy and freedom makes playfulness a very important quality in the context of folk art. Now this is one example of a folk art known as Patachitra from Bengal. Bengal Patachitra or Bengal scroll painting and though it is a very rich and very old convention of doing long vertical scroll paintings, narrative paintings which they show and when they show their scroll paintings to an audience they also sing it out. I mean they also have a composed song ready to be sung along with the painting.

Now the pictorial language of this Bengal scroll painting is such that there is enormous scope to innovate, to keep changing, to kind of create new forms, to keep adding and inventing new visual methods in devices to tell new kinds of stories or may be the same story in different ways.

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If you study this as a photo paintings from Bengal, the scroll paintings from Bengal though at the first (Refer Time: 11:00) set may look like it is all same, but this is our problem that they look same. You look at them carefully you will find that not only that they are very different from one another, but the fact that within a given frame work a pictorial convention, it is possible for the painters to explore enormous possibilities in terms of visual language. This is possible because they can effort to be a little playful with their language with their form, which many of the main stream high art people cannot effort to do.

Now, this playfulness is also evident in the way our Rangoli, Kolam, Moggu, alponas are done every day in our daily life by anybody and mostly by the women folk by the women of our family.

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Once again as I have mentioned before without having any formal training the immense variation the range of variations evident and that we come across when we notice the entire range of Alpona, Rangoli, Kolam and Moggu. There is an innovative mind not, one plenty of innovative minds working behind the new innovations otherwise there would have been repetitions, the fact that they are not repetitive.

The fact that the Moggu, and Kolams and Rangoli and Alponas keep changing from house to house, from city to city, from village to village is because the artists and the women, the men were doing those Kolams and Alponas and Rangoli they are able to play with the forms and they play it with great reverence, with great respect, with great happiness and joy and also with great faith in what they are doing.

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So, you can run through these images and see and find out for yourselves, what exactly the variations are made possible because of or due to this playfulness.

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I mean may it is possible that in one family sometimes people are more or less repeating, but at the same time given a chance one would not exactly repeat it. Within the same format one would try to add something new or deviate from the convention or do something that is totally new. So, all the possibilities are there. It is up to the person who is doing it which one to choose with which path to take.

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And these possibilities are there because, of the amount of freedom a folk artist gets in order to execute certain visual ideas.

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Within of course, a given convention same thing can be applied to this huge range of terracotta horses, terracotta elephants, and other goes all these (Refer Time: 14:24) terracotta animals Which are made as an offering to be kept under the trees in the deep remote forest.

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It is not to be kept as I mentioned in the previous module. It is not to be kept with you. I mean the artists usually they do not keep this figures with themselves. They leave it in the forest under the trees yet instead of repeating exactly the same thing they would go for variations.

Now, you can always argue whether the variations are consciously deliberately done or it is accidental? Even if the variations are the results of certain accidents the fact that they are accepting it, the fact that they are accepting that the trunk here is up to this, the fact that they are accepting, there is a kind of acceptance that here the trunk is upward, but at the same time if because of the trunk this looks like an elephant right?

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If this is an elephant then; what about this hump? Is it a mixture of two kinds of animals, we are not very sure, but the point is that all kinds of playfulness can be also seen even in this votive offerings which are pretty ritualistic. If you look at this horse very closely you will see that, here on the head there are more than two eyes there are eyes on the sides there are eyes on the top this two of course, nostrils.

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So, it all depends on from which angle you are looking at. You are looking at it from a side of course; this is the eye that is going to give you an impression if you are looking at

it from above. So, here is this pair of eyes which is going to give you the impression of eye. So, it is very interesting. So, how do you describe this animal? An animal having two pairs of eyes physically yes, but we know from the point of your offer a visual perception it is not that it has two pairs of eyes, it has one pair of eyes depending on the angle from which you are looking at it. These are very intelligent simple

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But very intelligent innovations that this folk artist keep on coming up within a given convention how you arrange a figure, how you configure a particular figurative idea is also left up to the folk artist to imagine and execute. That is why something like this which are a very common subject matter mother and child. Here it looks like this

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But with the very next one which is not terracotta, a wooden doll which depicts mother and child and probably from the color of the skin color of the child it looks like it is Krishna, because it is a blue child. It is also mother and child the previous one is also mother and child, but interestingly because of the change in the material and also change in the idea of how you are going to show this, the visual form of mother and child has changed.

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Now, for that matter look at this image. This image of Ganesh; now Ganesh as an icon is a by its nature it is quite funny, adorable, very cute to say the least, but to make it look like a very funny figure is another thing. That does not mean that there is any irreverence or disrespect over here. In fact, playfulness is such a quality in a given culture like this that even your Gods and Goddesses they do not mind being playful with you. They are not Shastri Gods and Goddesses.

They are not following the great Indian Shastri as, but they are following the playful minds of this people who are making them. It is possible also because many of these artists are not so called formally trained artists. Hence technically they are free to innovate and develop their own ideas of executing a certain form and the result is wonderful; similarly, when you look at a mask like this.

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So, you see whether it is a Rakshesha or a Ravana or it is an image of a god, what kind of God? What kind of Goddess depending on the character the visual configuration of the face and everything else about the mask will keep changing? Now this is not possible unless you have that capacity to be playful with the form. To be able to go for different kinds of lines and shapes and different kinds of a color combinations, different kinds of patterns all these things are needed to be explored very playfully by the artists in order to arrive at different kinds of faces in different masks very successfully.

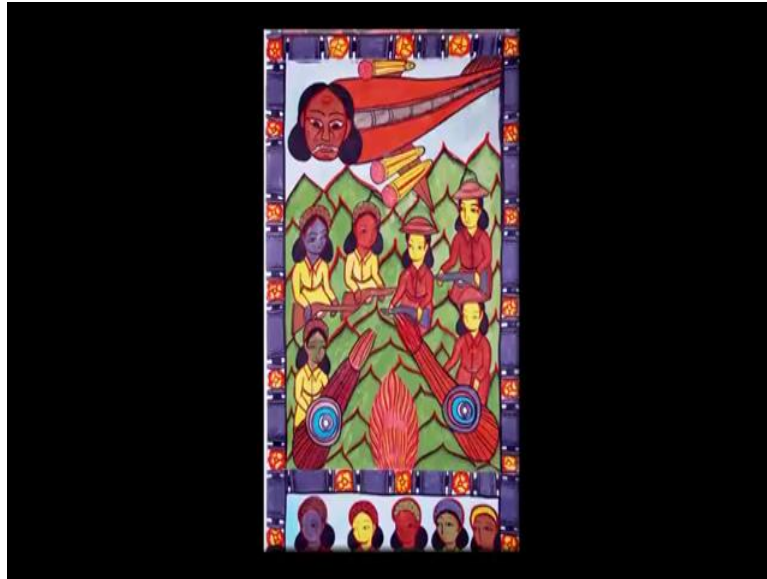
So, even in performative art you need to be very playful in order to arrive at a very convincing and a very stunning visual image.

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We have already seen that, how the whole tradition of the potter painting in Bengala kind of lends itself to creativity, creative ideas and visual innovations. So, this is a one such example known as the Ghazi pot from Bengal and because of this whole presence of this huge demon I mean look at the composition. In the same scroll painting you will find absolutely a more kind of orderly composition a more a kind of less adventures composition in another frame. See to all depends also on the subject matter, on the occasion, but you would not be able to rise on the occasion as an artist unless you are playful you have the guts you have the power to be playful with it.

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And this takes us to some incredible images of potter paintings. Image is drawn from very recent political happenings of the world. Not only even from Bengal or India, but of the world. I mean quite some years back we chanced upon some traditional potter paintings done by the traditional potuvas not done by any urban modern artist, but traditional potuvas who recite in villages, but they read in the newspapers and they also watched on the television. The tragic incident that took place at twin tower in United States of America and two aero planes exploded inside the twin towers. They crashed into the twin towers and we know that thousands of people had died and lately Osama Bin Laden was the he master minded the entire operation.

Now, this amount of information reached the potuva painters and then, they came up with some wonderful visual depictions of that event in this scroll painting. So, the scroll language of the scroll painting does not necessarily restrict the painters only to do mythological or religious or traditional subject matters. They are able to pick up something very contemporary and go about it, with all the freedom this is possible once again because

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There is a playful element not only in the way artists work, but in the way the artists mind work. It is very important to have that playful element as your driving force.

Hence the playfulness in folk art can make the artists very powerful enough to transcend the borders of a set convention and bring in new ideas and subject matters effortlessly. Yes, this is very important that you do not feel that there is. So, much of effort and they have done it so effortlessly they have done it so casually so, casually that it seems that a they have been doing this kind of subject matters may be for many years may be for decades. It does not look that they are attempting some subject matters which are very unconventional. For example, they image on the left hand is an image of a Tsunami.

So, can you believe? A traditional potter painter from Bengal is painting an image of a Tsunami. Tsunami is something that he must I do not think he has heard before is the first time. Where did he see Tsunami of course, either on television or may be acine images of Tsunami and the newspaper and that is enough for him to imagine the impact of Tsunami, to imagine or visualize Tsunami as a demon to look at Tsunami as a demon who brings in all kinds of devastations and dismantles everything, every aspect of life. I mean it is the visual impact of Tsunami that this artist is imagining.

On the right hand side you can already see the twin towers very vividly and you can already see that the two aero planes have already crashed into the buildings with great flames and the buildings have begun to explode. This is a moment they are capturing

within their given convention. So, I mean it is very interesting also to observe that usually, people would have thought earlier scholars thought that these folk art traditions despite the fact that they are wonderful art works. There is always a limitation in terms of the language.

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I mean they cannot go beyond that. There is something that restricts them, confine them to a given convention, to given language, but there are ample evidences to prove otherwise.

So, look at this one in great detail. Who would say that this particular painting is done by a painter who is steeped into a hundred trick and many hundreds years of convention of Bengal potter painting from which he has to deviate it much really speaking. So, the language itself has that potentiality that capacity to allow the painter to innovate and bring in new subject matters and explore the subject matters very successfully like this one.

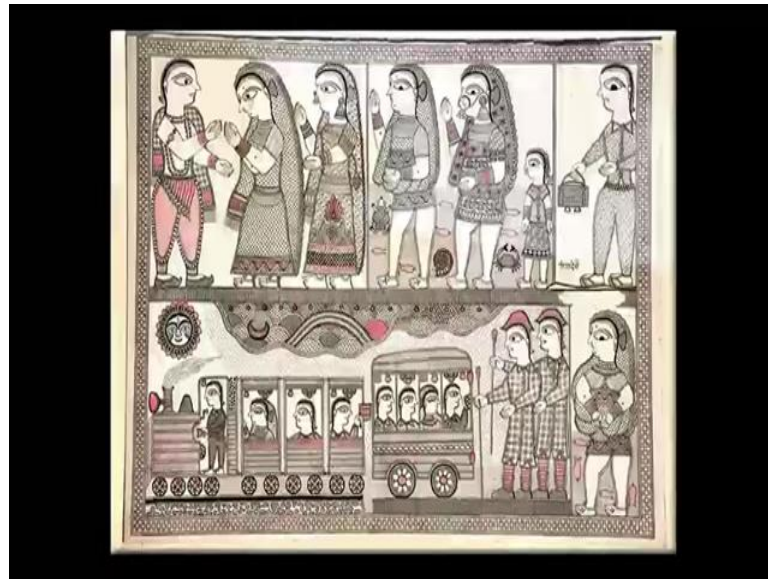
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This is also very interesting innovation. I mean there is always this challenge how do you show an aero plane because probably this particular traditional folk painter has never drawn an aero plane before. So, somehow he arrives at a visual conclusion which is a combination of a face something like an aero plane, something like an air ship and instead of the cock pit which comes at the beginning at the face of the aero plane he has put the face of Osama Bin Laden.

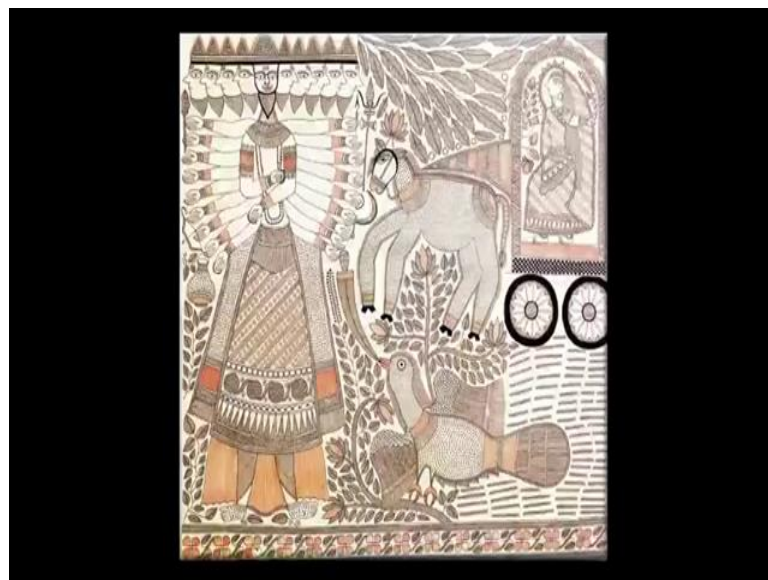
So, what a strange combination? Because he knows that the entire operation was master minded by Osama Bin Laden. So, he was imagining the plane crashing into the building for him implied that Osama Bin Laden himself is crashing into the building. So, it is a very complex thought process that this painter must have undergone and then arrived at something so stunning for us.

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So the folk art, particularly the painting conventions as well as the terracotta conventions they have the same intrinsic this built inbuilt scope to innovate to be playful with it.

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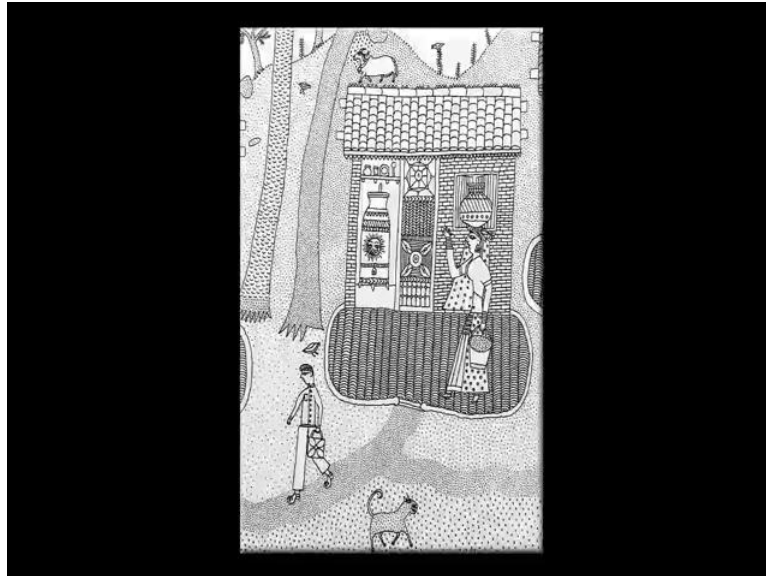
To go on adding new elements, new elements not only in terms of pictorial motives, but new elements from life, from events and elements which do not necessarily conform to the conventional or mythological or religious subject matter. They feel free to do that and the entire community accepts that this also very important. There is no (Refer Time: 27:52) as such. There is no problem; there is no issue of expanding the language and the scope of folk art and this is where playfulness plays a very significant role.

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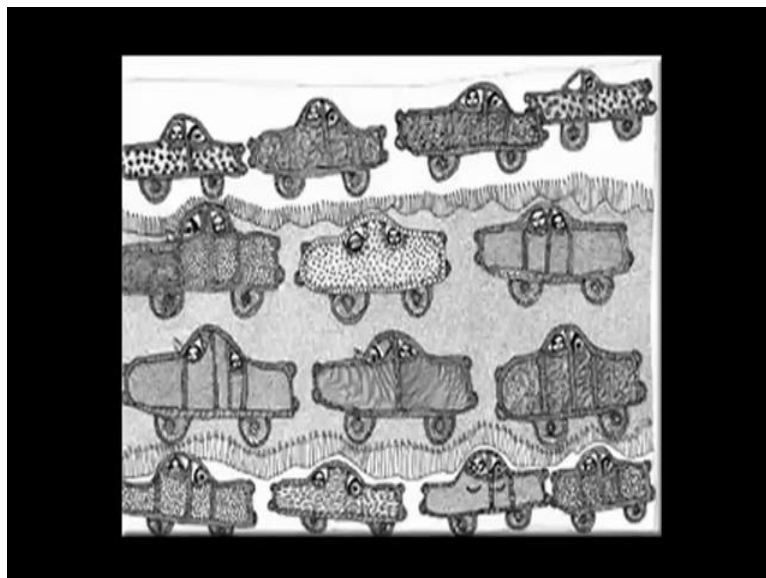
So, all these images that you are looking at are basically results of this playfulness, but the route of this pictorial language is deeply planted into folk traditions.

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But it has that ability; it has the capacity to sprout into a very modern, very contemporary, very vibrating language and expression.

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And a folk artist can even go to the extent of drawing small little cars, modern motor cars without any hesitation, without any problem successfully doing it almost using the similar kind of visual vocabulary.

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That is why some of the new age folk artists would do paintings independently. They have not given up or severed the ties with their convention using the older conventions of folk art, they are able to create something new, something novel and sometime something very contemporary also.

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Finally we will be looking at how because of this playfulness quality, because of their urge to be in touch with the reality even very unassuming figures like this. They bring in they allow contemporary and modern elements to get featured in their folk art for

example, in many clay and terracotta figures daily life subject matter is a very common thing.

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For example here you can see somebody is pounding something, the next one you will see two old people on guard sitting on a kind of caught a village caught, probably they are in the field guarding their field. So, if you are align the daily life and the daily events to come in and to feature in your subject matter

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Then it is very obvious that you will also have a terracotta mother on a bicycle, with her child. It is very interesting that in order to make really roll in real life. They have also put the kind of real wheels below the cycle, but it is basically a bicycle with the mother and child. So, we have already seen mother and child standing, mother and child sitting, now mother and child on a bicycle.

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Now, come a scooter in terracotta. You see along with the evolution of our society the art of terracotta is also evolving. It is enjoying all the freedom to accommodate modern happenings, modern elements

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Like this scooter and ultimately the railway engine, but instead of showing the driver inside the engine, he makes him seated on top of the engine. We don't again have any issue with this, we don't ask any realistic question, that why he should be on top of the engine instead of driving the engine from inside because we know that playfulness is the quality, playfulness is the driving force behind most of this art works.

Thank you.