

## **Representation of Elephant in Bengal Arts and Crafts**

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### **Introduction**

The tradition of Indian arts and crafts is rooted deeply in the lap of history. Since, Indus-Valley Civilization in 3000 BC (approx.), several forms of arts and crafts have been originated and flourished that are continuing till date in various forms. It consists of a variety of art forms, including plastic arts (e.g., pottery and sculpture), visual arts (e.g. paintings), and textile arts (e.g., woven cotton) etc. Geographically, it spans the entire Indian states since the early human settlements. The journey of the development of arts and crafts has passed through several stages involving several beliefs and traditions. Today, the age-old traditional crafts of West Bengal have been so well moulded according to the present day demands that it seems the artisans apart from their traditional skills have an expertise in the art of survival as well.

Elephant, since its first exposure with human society always found closely associated with day-to-day life. According to the Hindu beliefs, elephant named *Airavat*, is the vehicle of Lord *Indra*—the King of all the Gods and Goddesses in the Heaven. The face of Lord *Ganesa* is also the head of an elephant and elephant is honoured and worshipped in India as *Gajaraj*. Elephants with Goddess *Lakshi*—Goddess of Wealth, together known as *Gaja-Lakshi* worshipped by the Hindus. Elephant and *Gaja-Lakshmi* images are found extensively in various Indian coins like coins of Samudragupta and Tipu Sultan. In Bengal, representation of elephant motif has found in the coins of Shashanka—the King of Bengal in CE 7<sup>th</sup> Century, in form of Gaja Lakshmi, where goddess Lakshi was seated on Lotus and standing two elephants were sprinkling water on her. Since the early civilization to modern days, people symbolise elephant in their various creations in art and craft, paintings, sculptures as well as in architecture to represent power and strength with a majestic style. To portray a king thus elephant motif is always been used in various art forms. Entrance of several royal palaces adorn with welcoming elephants. In temple architecture we always found the depiction of elephant in friezes especially at the lowermost part of a temple wall to symbolise the strength of the temple, strength of the king who built it and to set a value to its viewers to be strong and powerful with majestic soberness like an elephant.

Bengal, the sub-Himalayan region is the native place for the Asian elephants popularly known as the Indian elephant. From this place elephants were migrated to adjacent locality and also shipped to different countries mainly during the period of European colonisation. Elephant till today is

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the most common animal found in large population in West Bengal along with two other endangered animals—Royal Bengal Tiger and Rhinoceros. Since, time immemorial people of Bengal are closely associated with elephants and thus the association is widely reflected in almost art creations of Bengal. West Bengal is rich in traditional art and craft and diversity of creations can be seen with unique and wide representation of elephant in almost all varieties.

West Bengal is known all over the world for its expertise in art and craft. Its skill in architectural splendours to its excellent works on woodwork, terracotta, paintings, textile are run unparalleled. Pottery, brass and copperware, embroidery, tapestry, hand looms, fine muslin, silk artistry, wood carving, cane works etc. are a few examples of handicrafts which originated at the ground level in the heartland of Bengal - the villages. Most of these handicraft produce are cottage industry in West Bengal and has been backbone of the rural economy of the State.

## Kantha

Textile always remained a source of history where social issues, nature etc. always been depicted since time immemorial with colours and threads. Kantha, though popular since last few centuries only, is a very beautiful creation and embroidered with colourful threads and that originated in West Bengal. It is basically the art of outlining decorative images with running stitch, on clothes—cotton or silk. This embroidery style is now used on saris, dhotis, kurtas, ethnic-wear for men and women, bed-linen, cushion covers, quilts and other such items. For the present craze amongst foreign tourists, Kantha stitch is best used on cotton and silk.



fig.1 Both sided Sujni Kantha with inscription made by Late Manada Sundari in 19<sup>th</sup> CE, Khulna

The above *sujni kantha* of late Manada Sundari is the rarest collection of *Kantha* in the world and now in the collection of Gurusaday Museum, Kolkata. A beautiful elephant is embroidered on this Kantha to portray the social life of Bengal during colonial period. It highlights the social position of the British in then society by depicting them seated on the elephant.

## **Baluchari**

The Baluchari style woven in silk is only confined to traditional sarees. It hails originally in Murshidabad district of West Bengal but later flourished in Bishnupur district of West Bengal. A real traditional Baluchari is said to have 17 colours in it, with small motifs sprinkled all over and its pallu is beautifully embroidered with the depiction of episodes from mythical stories, ethos, contemporary social issues etc.



fig. 2 Baluchari Saree with elephant motifs in



fig. 3 Batik Work of Shantiniketan, Birbhum, West

## **Batik Work**

Batik is an ancient art means ‘wax writing’. The wax process was brought to India by late Rathindranath Tagore, son of the famous poet Rabindranath Tagore. It is a way of decorating fabric by covering a part of it with a coat of wax and then dyeing the fabric. The waxed areas keep their original colour and when the wax is removed the contrast between the dyed and un-dyed areas makes the pattern. Through the cracks on wax the dye penetrates and leave a fascinating design that makes the art most unique. Elephant motif and its representation in batik work are profusely used to make the art more beautiful.

## **Terracotta Craft**

The terracotta craft of West Bengal is famous throughout the world, for its pastoral and rustic charm. The clay-modelled items that form a part of this craft, made with natural colours. The art was flourished during the reign of Malla rulers, in the 16th-17th century. The temple of Bishnupur stands as marvellous example of the terracotta craft of Bengal, which is in the list of declaring the World Heritage Site. West Bengal has different zones specific for the terracotta art. Among them Birbhum and Bankura districts are famous for two special kinds of Elephants crafts—elephant of Belia (Birbhum) and Bonga elephant of Bankura.

Belia elephant has semi-circular ears and the diversity in the trunks of the elephants along with the long ears reflects the influence of folk art. On the other hand Bonga elephant of Sandara (Bankura) is famous for its uniqueness. In the tribal-inhabited district of Bankura, these elephants are dedicated to the Santhal deity of Singh Bora. After making the model on a clay wheel, the artist then carved it by hand. It is then sun-dried and baked.



Belia Elephant of Birbhum



Bonga Elephant of Bankura

### **Patachitra—Scroll Painting**

Patachitra is a traditional art from eastern India and is an integral part of intangible heritage associated with the folk tradition of West Bengal especially in Bankura, Purulia, West Mednipur and Birbhum districts. Through centuries- the patachitra has been a platform where several methods of communication has converged- including visual messages, oral traditions and music- all of which helped to amalgamate, involve and portray nature, society, religion and culture coexisting through a lucid dialogue.

Scroll Painting is done on thick fabrics, with the help of natural colours. Popularly called Pat Chitra in Bengal, they vary in length and height. However, an average scroll painting is about 15 ft long. It is divided into a number of compartments, with each compartment carrying an episode of the story being narrated through Pat Chitra.



Scroll painting depicting a moral story



Elephant and Rhinoceros in Scroll painting

### **Conch Shell Crafts**

Conch shell craft is one of the most unique and most beautiful forms of handicrafts practiced in West Bengal. It is actually the art of engraving decorative motifs on the natural shells obtained from the Indian Ocean. Conch shell crafts are beautiful and delicate, apart from being considered to be

extremely auspicious in the Hindu mythology. Elephant image is very much common and popular among the conch shell crafts



Conch Shell Elephants of West Midnapur district of, West Bengal



Dokra Elephant from Bankura

### **Dokra Metal Craft**

Dokra (cire perdue, or lost wax), the metal casting art was once widespread throughout India, but is now restricted to a small number of groups of traditional artisans in widely dispersed locations. One significant location where the tribal families are still in practice is in Bikna Village and nearby Dariapur in Bankura district of West Bengal and the art named after the tribe. At present, it is one of the most popular forms of art practiced in Bengal. It is actually the art of creating figures, jewellery, idols and many other decorative pieces, made with the help of clay, wax and molten metal. The best part about Dokra metal crafts is that they are completely original and no replica of any item can ever be made. The area in West Bengal is rich in elephant population and thus representation of elephant in their wild form is very common in Dokra art.

### **Shola-pith Craft**

Sholapith is a milky-white sponge-wood, used for crafting beautiful decorative pieces. It is also known as 'herbal ivory', as it seems to look like a milky-white items made from ivory. Sholapith is popularly used to craft head-wears of bridal couples, garlands, decorative fans, animals, birds, dolls, Images of gods and Goddesses, elephant-howdahs, peacock-boats, palanquins, flowers various kinds of crowns and backdrop of Durga Pooja stages.



Shola-Pith Work of West Bengal



Elephant-piggy banks, made of leather

### Artistic Leather Craft

The leather crafts, a fine example of contemporary art and craft in West Bengal, owe their widespread popularity and development due to some innovative work done by gifted artists at Santiniketan. Rabindra Nath Tagore and his wife and the expert craftsmen came together to revive leather bag making in an innovative manner. Shantiniketan leather crafts uses embossed batik work and traditional patterns which are very different from the usual leather bags. After the final leather piece is made, it is then stitched into the desired product. Now apart from leather bags various souvenir items are prepared at Shantiniketan using leather.

### Bengal Paintings

West Bengal is rich in its own style of paintings like Murshidabad Paintings of CE 18<sup>th</sup>, Kalighat Paintings of CE 19<sup>th</sup> and Bengal School of Paintings since early CE 20<sup>th</sup>. Many famous artists of Bengal like Jamini Roy, Abanindranath Tagore, Nandalal Bose, Ramkinkar Baij and many others contributed significantly and paintings of Bengal got recognition through their creations throughout the world. Out of the various masterpieces of paintings of great painters, elephant everywhere succeeded to manage its position in the theme of creations.



Demon and Composite elephant  
–Murshidabad, 18<sup>th</sup> CE



Painting of Jamini Roy



Painting of Abanindranath Tagore

### Jute Work

Jute, the ‘golden fibre’ has traditionally been woven and knotted and braided by women of West Bengal, often for domestic storage. Jute as a fabric was much popular in ancient times. Today, West Bengal is not only a major producer of jute goods ranging from plush jute-blended carpets, to decorative tapestries, garden pot hangings, decorative hand bags, bedspreads and more. In 50 villages of the Kaliaganj area in West Dinajpur, the process of colouring, weaving of jute on single looms goes on, as the world outside turns once again to this wonderful natural fibre.



Elephant made of Jute fibre



Horn made elephant

### Horn Work

Horn is commonly used raw material for craftsmen. The horn though hard, softens to become pliable when heated and oiled. The most common item is the comb which is made in a wide range. Small size ornamental pins, jewellerys, flowers, animals, birds etc. are made of horn. Apart from these items toy furniture, buttons, trays, cigarette cases, little boxes, ash trays, pen stands, lamp etc. are also made from horn. Small motif of elephant as a locket of a necklace is shown in the above. Though this crafts are extensively made by the artists of Odisha—the neighbouring state of West Bengal, artists of the adjoining districts of West Bengal are also engaged with this art tradition.

### Mat Making

Reed mats are unique art work of Bengal. This mat is woven on a simple bamboo frame loom. The warp is cotton thread and the weft are thin, soft reeds but the designs are ignited by the weaver’s imagination and often become a rare marvel. The *shitalpati* is another kind of mat found in Bengal, Assam and Tripura. These are woven with flat strips in check, twill or zigzag designs, sometimes incorporating stylised human and animal forms.



Shitalpati (cool mat) beautifully designed with different motifs including an elephant motif



Gaja Lakshmi motif on the sweet meet mould of CE 19<sup>th</sup>. Now in Gurusaday Museum, Kolkata

### Sweet meet mould of West Bengal

Midnapur district of West Bengal is an important traditional region for stoneware and the main centre is Simulpal. The practising craftsmen are Karga, Bhumif and Karmakar. The stone here though called potstone, is actually phyllite. Somewhere, it is reddish and greenish but greyish and blackish in another. Moulds have been used for a very long time in Bengal to decorate the eatables like sweetmeat, dried mango-paste etc. Intricately carved with elaborate designs in stone, the moulds reflect the fancy of the rural folk for the ornamentation, even things that have very short life and thereby reflect their aesthetic taste and preferences.

### Wooden craft

Though Indian handicrafts are around 5000 years old, references of wood carving are found from the Vedic age, some 1500 BC. A sculpture, figure or figurine may be formed out of working wood by means of a cutting or carving tool. Commonly used wood for carving includes chestnut, walnut, mahogany and teak. Hardwoods have a longer life and lust. Softer wood is easier to carve. Natural oils of walnut and linseed are used to polish the complete pieces to protect them from lust and moisture. In West Bengal artists commonly carved on teak and chestnut wood. Out of the wooden crafts made in West Bengal, elephant always found in common.



Wooden elephant



Rod Puppet



## **Puppet**

Puppetry in West Bengal is called Putul Naach. Putul is a word that describes both a doll and a puppet in Bengali while Naach means Dance. There are references to puppetry in the medieval folk ballads of undivided Bengal. Traditional forms of puppetry found in West Bengal are rod (Dang), glove (Beni or Bene) and string (Taar or Shuto).

Both rod and glove puppets are indigenous to Bengal while string puppetry was an import. While shadow puppetry does not exist in Bengal, there is a very unique and rare form practiced among some Santal communities of West Bengal and Jharkhand, the Chadar Badar or Chadar Bandni.

Handicraft has always been a very basic activity of human society for craft are an integral part of our life. In fact they are found to be more cohesive in human relationship than even language. It is an expression of the human spirit in material form, which gives delight to mankind, as any of what are termed fine art. Elephant, believed to be a good omen when seen in dream always remain close to human heart both for children and to adult to play with or to decorate home. It is such a preferred theme that any artist want to craft beautifully and thus representation of elephant in every art form is widely evident in West Bengal.

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