



From Ritual to Retail: How Warli Art Became the Unofficial Graphic Design of Indian Apparel

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ABSTRACT:

Background: This review examines the transformation of Warli art, a traditional folk art from the Warli tribe in Maharashtra, India, from its ritualistic origins to its pervasive use in contemporary Indian apparel. Historically, Warli art, characterized by geometric shapes on earthen walls, served as a vital medium for cultural expression and spiritual communication.

Methods: This paper synthesizes existing literature to analyze the factors driving the evolution of Warli art and its multifaceted implications in the apparel industry.

Results: The late 20th century marked a pivotal shift as Warli art gained mainstream recognition, facilitated by artists like Jivya Soma Mashe. This increased visibility led to its adoption by the Indian fashion industry, where Warli motifs now adorn a wide range of clothing. This commercialization offers economic opportunities and broadens cultural awareness. However, it also raises ethical concerns regarding potential cultural appropriation and the need for equitable involvement of the Warli community.

Conclusion: The journey of Warli art from a deeply embedded ritualistic practice to its current role as a prevalent graphic design in Indian apparel reveals a complex interplay of cultural appreciation and commercial adaptation. Critical examination of ethical considerations is essential to ensure respect for its origins and the fair treatment of the Warli community, as this art is used in the modern world.

KEYWORDS: Warli art, Indian apparel, Tribal art, Cultural commodification, Graphic design

INTRODUCTION

Warli art, a traditional folk-art originating from the Warli tribe residing in the Western Ghats of India, predominantly in the state of Maharashtra, presents a compelling case study in cultural evolution and adaptation ¹. With roots potentially stretching back to the period of 2500-3000 BCE, evidenced by its stylistic similarities to prehistoric cave paintings, this art form boasts a rich history deeply intertwined with the social, spiritual, and communicative fabric of the Warli community ¹. Characterized by its distinctive visual language comprising basic geometric shapes such as circles, triangles, and squares, rendered in white pigment against an earthen-hued backdrop, Warli painting traditionally adorned the walls of tribal homes, utilizing rice paste as the primary medium ¹. The enduring nature of these core elements underscores the profound cultural significance this art form holds within the Warli community,

serving not merely as decoration but as a fundamental aspect of their identity and a means of transmitting cultural heritage across generations ¹.

Figure 1.: Photograph of traditional Warli painting on a mud wall in a tribal home.^{16,17}



In contemporary India, however, Warli motifs have transcended their traditional context to achieve widespread visibility on a diverse range of apparel, from ethnic wear to casual clothing ⁵. This transformation marks a significant shift from a localized art form rooted in ritualistic practices to a ubiquitous graphic design element within the commercial retail sector. The movement of Warli art from the intimate sphere of tribal homes to the expansive domain of commercial fashion signifies a notable change in its function and the audience reaches ⁵. This paper aims to explore this remarkable evolution, analyzing the various factors that facilitated this transition and examining the multifaceted implications of Warli art's journey from ritualistic expression to its current status as the unofficial graphic design of Indian apparel, drawing upon existing scholarly literature to provide a comprehensive review of this cultural phenomenon.

METHODOLOGY

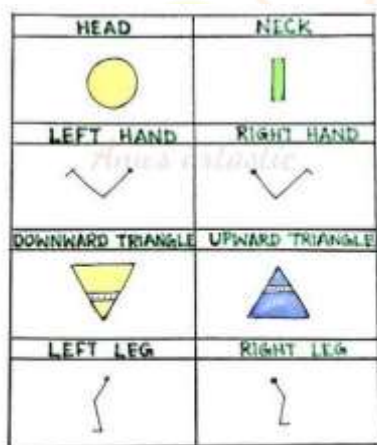
This review paper adopts a methodology centered on the synthesis and critical analysis of information derived from the provided scholarly articles, book chapters, and other relevant sources. The primary approach involves a thorough examination of each source to identify key themes, arguments, and empirical findings pertinent to Warli art, Indian textiles, and the broader phenomenon of cultural commodification. Special attention is paid to understanding the historical context, cultural significance, and socio-economic dimensions that have shaped the trajectory of Warli art and its subsequent adoption within the apparel industry. The identified themes and insights gleaned from this literature will then be integrated to construct a coherent narrative elucidating the evolution of Warli art. The central objective of this synthesis is to address the research question of how Warli art has transitioned to become the "unofficial graphic design of Indian apparel." Throughout this process, all provided references will be compulsorily cited within the text to ensure proper attribution and maintain academic rigor.

REVIEW

The origins of Warli art are deeply embedded in the cultural and spiritual life of the Warli tribe, with its practice predating its recognition by the outside world ¹. Archaeological research suggests a connection to ancient rock paintings in the Western Ghats region, dating back approximately 4500 to 5000 years ¹. The term "Warli" itself is derived from "Warla," signifying a piece of land, reflecting the tribe's agrarian roots and their profound connection to the natural environment ⁷. Traditionally, Warli art held significant ritualistic importance, serving as an integral component of various ceremonies, festivals, and social events ¹. These paintings were not merely decorative; they functioned as a medium for storytelling, transmitting myths, legends, and cultural knowledge from one generation to the next ¹. Initially, Warli art was an intrinsic element of the Warli community's social, spiritual, and communicative framework, not intended for consumption beyond the tribal sphere. Its creation was intrinsically linked to specific events and belief systems within the tribe, fulfilling functional roles in cultural transmission and symbolic purposes in representing daily life and spiritual connections ¹.



Figure 2. : Photograph of ancient rock paintings from the Western Ghats region that show stylistic similarities to Warli art. ¹⁸



BASIC SHAPES FOR DRAWING WARLI ART

Figure 3.: The basic geometric shapes – circles, triangles, and squares – that form the foundation of Warli art.²²

The artistic characteristics of Warli painting are distinctive, primarily utilizing a basic graphic vocabulary of circles, triangles, and squares ¹. These geometric shapes are imbued with symbolic meaning, with the circle often representing the sun and moon, the triangle symbolizing mountains and trees, and the square typically depicting a sacred enclosure or a piece of land ¹. Human figures are characteristically represented by two triangles joined at their tips, often with a circle for the head, engaged in scenes of everyday life, including farming, hunting, dancing (notably the Tarpa dance), and celebrating rituals ¹. A distinction is often made between ritualistic paintings, which hold deep spiritual significance and are associated with specific ceremonies like marriages, and non-ritualistic paintings, which serve a more decorative purpose, depicting scenes from daily life and festivals ³. The simplicity of Warli art's form belies the profound symbolic meaning it carries and its deep connection to the Warli worldview. The geometric shapes are not arbitrary but represent

fundamental aspects of their environment and belief systems, rendering the art a visual language rich in cultural information, where even seemingly rudimentary depictions convey layers of meaning related to fertility, nature, and community bonds ⁸. Traditionally, Warli paintings were created using locally sourced, natural materials, with a background of red mud and cow dung and a white pigment derived from rice paste, applied using brushes made from chewed bamboo sticks ¹. This reliance on natural materials further underscores the tribe's intimate relationship

with their surroundings.



Figure4. : Tarpa Dance Warli Painting by Dilip Ram Bahotha / Daily activities,^{19,21}



Figure 5: Jivya Soma Mashe at work in front of his house, 2009.

Photo by [Romain Mounier-Poulat](#) via [Wikipedia Commons](#) (CC-BY-SA-4.0).

Despite its ancient origins and rich cultural heritage, Warli art remained largely unknown outside the tribal communities until the latter part of the 20th century¹. The 1970s mark a significant turning point in the art form's history, witnessing its discovery and introduction to the mainstream art world¹. Artist Jivya Soma Mashe is widely credited with playing a pivotal role in bringing Warli art to national and international attention, moving it beyond its traditional ritualistic context and establishing it as a recognized form of artistic expression¹. This transition from a localized art form to one with broader recognition was significantly influenced by individuals who perceived its inherent artistic merit beyond its original ritualistic purpose. The efforts of artists like Jivya Soma Mashe acted as a crucial bridge, introducing Warli art to a wider audience and paving the way for its subsequent commercial adoption. The period following this initial discovery saw a gradual increase in the recognition and commercialization of Warli art¹. Exhibitions, art lovers, and cultural organizations played a vital role in promoting the art form, leading to its increasing visibility in urban markets and art galleries².

Research Through Innovation

The integration of Warli art into the Indian apparel industry represents a significant step in its journey from ritual to retail⁵. Warli motifs have been widely adopted and adapted by designers for use on a variety of clothing items, including sarees, kurtis, tops, t-shirts, and dupattas⁶. This has involved a fundamental shift from the traditional canvas of mud walls to fabric as a primary medium for the art form¹. This adaptation of Warli art to apparel involved a translation of its traditional motifs onto a new medium, often resulting in alterations to its scale, color palette, and overall context. While the core geometric elements typically remain, their application on clothing introduces new design considerations aligned with contemporary fashion trends and consumer preferences, reaching a different consumer base with potentially varying degrees of understanding of the art's original cultural significance compared to the Warli community itself. Contemporary designers and artists have often reinterpreted traditional Warli elements to align with modern aesthetics and current trends¹. This has included the use of new materials and techniques, such as acrylic paints on canvas, as well as digital adaptations of the art form¹. Furthermore, there has been a trend towards the fusion of Warli art with other Indian folk-art styles and the incorporation of modern themes into Warli-inspired designs¹.



Figure 6: Works of Jivya Soma Mashe at the exhibition *Autres Maîtres de l'Inde, créations contemporaines des Adivasi*, Musée du Quai Branly, Paris. Photo by Jean-Pierre Dalbéra (CC BY 2.0).



Figure 7.: Warli art motifs used on different types of Indian apparel, such as a saree and a Kurti.

The commercialization of Warli art in the apparel industry presents a complex narrative with both potential benefits and inherent challenges¹. While it has undoubtedly provided economic opportunities for some Warli artists and has contributed to a greater awareness of their culture on a broader scale,

it also raises critical questions about cultural appropriation versus appreciation¹. The movement of cultural symbols and practices across different contexts, as highlighted in the study of textiles in Indian Ocean societies, often leads to a transformation in their meaning¹⁰. Commercialization can indeed empower Warli artists by generating income and recognition, but it also carries the risk of exploitation and a potential loss of control over their cultural heritage. It is crucial to consider whether the utilization of Warli art in apparel constitutes a respectful appreciation of a cultural tradition or an appropriation that disregards its original context and significance⁴. Ethical engagement with Warli art in the fashion industry necessitates a deep understanding of its cultural origins, a respect for its traditional

meanings, and a commitment to ensuring that the Warli community directly benefits from its commercial use . Moving beyond mere aesthetic adoption requires acknowledging the art's history and significance within the Warli culture and fostering collaborations or business practices that are mutually beneficial and respectful, rather than simply extracting and profiting from their cultural heritage without proper acknowledgment or compensation. Various initiatives have been undertaken to preserve the authenticity of Warli art and to support the Warli community. These include efforts by non-governmental organizations, government programs aimed at promoting traditional crafts, and educational initiatives designed to introduce Warli art to new generations.

Table 1: Evolution of Warli Art - From Ritual to Retail

Phase	Timeframe (Approximate)	Key Characteristics	Primary Context	Motivations/Functions	Potential Implications
Ancient Origins	2500-3000 BCE onwards	Geometric shapes, rice paste on mud walls	Tribal homes, rock shelters	Cultural expression, storytelling, connection to nature	Foundation of a unique artistic tradition
Traditional Ritualistic Art	Traditionally practiced until 20th century	Integral to rituals, ceremonies, and social events	Tribal homes, community spaces	Religious significance, cultural transmission, marking life events	Deeply embedded in Warli identity and worldview
Discovery and Popularization	1970s onwards	Mainstream recognition by figures like Jivya Soma Mashe	Art galleries, exhibitions, media	Artistic expressions, introduction to wider audience	Shift in perception from ritual object to art form
Adoption in Apparel	Late 20th/Early 21st century	Adaptation onto fabric with modern materials, reinterpretations for contemporary aesthetics	Fashion industry, design studios	Commercial viability, aesthetic appeal, cultural representation	Broader reach, potential for cultural exchange and economic opportunities
Contemporary Retail Presence	Present day	Widespread use as design on various apparel sold in retail stores and online platforms	Retail stores, online marketplaces, consumer wardrobes	Aesthetic appeal, fashion statement, expression of cultural affinity	Risk of cultural appropriation, need for ethical practices and benefit sharing with the Warli community

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the journey of Warli art from its ancient ritualistic beginnings within the Warli tribe to its current status as a widely recognized graphic design element in the Indian apparel market is a remarkable testament to the

dynamism of cultural traditions . This evolution encompasses its deep cultural significance within the Warli community, its discovery and subsequent popularization in the mainstream art world, its adaptation onto the canvas of fabric, and the ongoing critical discussions surrounding its commercial utilization . The term "unofficial graphic design" aptly describes its current ubiquity and visual appeal in contemporary India . While Warli motifs now function as a design element on a vast array of apparel, their origins and inherent cultural weight distinguish them from purely commercial designs lacking such deep historical and cultural roots . This transformation has had a significant cultural impact, increasing the visibility of tribal art and potentially shifting its meaning as it is encountered by new audiences in different contexts . Moving forward, it is crucial to navigate this landscape with ethical considerations at the forefront, striving for a balanced approach that both respects the rich heritage of Warli art and allows for its continued contemporary expression in a manner that benefits the originating community.



Figure 8: A visually representation of "From Ritual to Retail" theme, showing a traditional Warli painting alongside a piece of modern apparel featuring Warli art

FURTHER RECOMMENDATIONS

To further understand and ethically engage with the ongoing evolution of Warli art, several avenues for future exploration and action are recommended. Firstly, there is a need for more in-depth research into the specific socio-economic effects of the commercialization of Warli art on the Warli tribe itself . This could involve detailed studies examining income generation, shifts in traditional artistic practices within the community, and the perspectives of Warli individuals on the use of their art in the commercial market. Understanding the direct impact of commercialization on the Warli community is essential for developing ethical and sustainable practices in the industry . Secondly, exploring and establishing models for ethical and sustainable collaborations between Warli artists, designers, and the apparel industry is crucial .

This could include the implementation of fair trade practices, the establishment of royalty agreements that directly benefit the Warli community, and the fostering of partnerships that respect the cultural integrity of the art form . Thirdly, efforts should be directed towards raising consumer awareness about the origins and profound cultural

significance of Warli art . Educating consumers about the history and meaning behind the motifs can foster a greater appreciation for the art form that extends beyond its mere aesthetic appeal, potentially encouraging more responsible consumption and a demand for ethically sourced and produced Warli-inspired apparel ¹⁵.

Finally, it is imperative to continue supporting initiatives that actively work to preserve the traditional forms and contexts of Warli art within the Warli community . Ensuring the continuity of traditional Warli painting practices and their cultural significance within the tribe is vital for safeguarding this unique cultural heritage for future generations, even as its influence expands into the contemporary world .

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