

Un-Touched by Hand: Rogan Art and the Paradox of Contactless Craftmanship

Ishika Parihar 1st, Nirantara Hada 2nd
1st Student, 2nd Assistant Professor
Institute of Design, Sage University, Indore, India

Abstract

Rogan Art represents a rare and highly specialized form of textile surface embellishment originating from the Kutch region of Gujarat, India. Traditionally practiced by a limited number of artisan families, the craft involves the application of castor oil-based pigment paste onto fabric using a metal stylus, without direct contact between hand and cloth. While Rogan Art has gained renewed visibility through cultural preservation efforts and global exhibitions, its sustainability narrative remains underexplored in structured academic terms. Unlike industrial textile processes, Rogan production operates at minimal scale, relies on bio-based raw materials, and generates negligible waste. However, its long-term viability is constrained not by environmental concerns but by issues of skill transmission, market integration, and economic sustainability. This paper examines Rogan Art through the lens of sustainability, not as an industrial system requiring correction, but as a heritage practice requiring strategic reinforcement. By analyzing material composition, process characteristics, and socio-economic context, the study positions Rogan Art within broader discussions of circular systems and sustainable design. The findings suggest that while Rogan Art inherently aligns with ecological principles, its survival depends on adaptive integration into contemporary markets without compromising artisanal integrity.

Keywords: Rogan Art, Sustainable craft, Circular design, Artisan economy, Cultural heritage

1. Introduction

Rogan Art occupies a unique position within India's textile traditions. Unlike woven or printed textiles, Rogan is a **freehand surface application technique**, where patterns are created using a viscous paint derived primarily from castor oil. The craft is historically associated with the village of Nirona in the Kutch district, where it has been preserved across generations within a small community of artisans.

In recent decades, increased global interest in handcrafted textiles has brought renewed attention to Rogan Art. Cultural recognition, including high-profile exhibitions and state-level promotion, has contributed to its visibility. However, unlike industrial textile sectors, Rogan Art has not undergone large-scale commercialization. Its production remains **labor-intensive, low-volume, and skill-dependent**.

This context shifts the sustainability discussion. The challenge is not environmental damage from overproduction, but rather economic fragility and knowledge continuity. Understanding Rogan Art through a sustainability framework therefore requires moving beyond conventional metrics of emissions and resource use and instead examining how traditional practices can remain viable in a rapidly modernizing market environment.

2. Material and Process Characteristics

2.1 Bio-based Composition and Low Material Footprint

The primary medium used in Rogan Art is a paste made by heating and polymerizing castor oil, which is then mixed with natural or synthetic pigments to achieve desired colors. Compared to synthetic textile coatings, this formulation has a significantly lower environmental footprint, particularly in terms of raw material origin.

The process:

- Does not rely on petrochemical-heavy inputs in its traditional form
- Generates minimal chemical waste
- Requires negligible water compared to dyeing or printing

From a lifecycle perspective, Rogan Art aligns closely with low-impact material systems, especially when natural pigments are used.

2.2 Manual Precision and Energy Minimalism

Unlike industrial textile processes that depend on mechanized systems, Rogan Art is executed entirely by hand. The artisan uses a stylus to draw fine threads of paint onto fabric, often creating symmetrical patterns by folding the cloth.

- This method results in:
 - Near-zero energy consumption during production
 - Absence of large-scale machinery
 - No dependency on continuous power supply

However, this energy efficiency is directly tied to low scalability. The time required to produce a single piece limits output, which in turn affects economic sustainability.

3. Sustainability Beyond Environment

3.1 Cultural Sustainability and Skill Transmission

One of the most critical challenges facing Rogan Art is the decline in artisan participation. The skill required to master the technique is highly specialized and cannot be easily mechanized or digitized.

Younger generations often migrate toward alternative professions due to:

- Limited income stability
- Long training periods
- Restricted market access

From a sustainability standpoint, the loss of Rogan Art would represent not just a cultural erosion but also the disappearance of a low-impact production model.

3.2 Market Integration Constraints

While Rogan Art has found niche appreciation in exhibitions and luxury markets, its integration into mainstream textile consumption remains limited. The reasons include:

- High-cost relative to machine-produced alternatives
- Limited awareness among broader consumer segments
- Lack of scalable distribution channels

This creates a paradox:

A craft that is environmentally sustainable struggles economically, while industrial alternatives thrive despite higher environmental costs.

4. Circularity in Practice

4.1 Inherent Circular Characteristics

Rogan Art demonstrates several features associated with circular design:

- Minimal raw material waste
- Long product lifespan due to handcrafted value
- Potential for repair and preservation

Unlike industrial textiles, where circularity often requires system redesign, Rogan Art inherently operates within a resource-efficient loop.

4.2 Limitations of Scaling Circular Models

Despite its circular advantages, Rogan Art cannot be directly scaled to meet mass-market demand. Attempts to industrialize or replicate the process risk:

- Loss of authenticity
- Degradation of quality
- Erosion of cultural value

Therefore, the role of Rogan Art within a circular economy is not to replace industrial production, but to complement it as a high-value, low-impact segment.

5. Practical Significance

For Designers

Rogan Art offers insights into:

- Slow production models
- Value-driven consumption
- Integration of handcrafted elements into contemporary products

For Policymakers

Support mechanisms may include:

- Skill preservation programs
- Financial incentives for artisan communities
- Promotion through cultural and export platforms

For Sustainability Discourse

Rogan Art challenges the assumption that sustainability must always involve technological innovation. In some cases, traditional knowledge systems already embody sustainable principles.

6. Conclusion

Rogan Art represents a distinct model of sustainability—one that is not driven by industrial optimization but by inherent material efficiency and artisanal practice. Its environmental footprint is minimal, yet its survival is uncertain due to socio-economic pressures.

This study highlights that sustainability in textile systems cannot be universally defined. While industrial sectors require transformation, traditional crafts like Rogan Art require preservation and strategic adaptation. Ensuring their continuity demands not only market support but also recognition of their role within a diversified and resilient textile ecosystem.

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