

Is heritage always traditional?

A case study of continuity and changes in Cheriyal painting from Telangana

a talk by

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Room 103, SAA old Building

on Friday, 9th March at 5 pm

all are cordially invited

tea will be served at 4:45

In the Southern Indian state of Telangana and some parts of Andhra Pradesh, itinerant storytellers traditionally narrate genealogies of the local castes Puranas using a scroll painting on cloth as a visual aid to their performance. In the early 1980s, representatives of the All Indian Handloom and Handicraft Board (AIHHB) visited Cheriyal where these paintings were produced and initiated a revival of the tradition as part of their activities to sustain Indian handicrafts.

The Board's intervention increased the visibility of the paintings, hence relegating the performances to a secondary position. The emphasis on the material culture of this tradition permitted their entry to museums and the craft market, and initiated what I call the institutionalization of Cheriyal paintings. In this process, the makers of these paintings adapted their practice and incorporated new techniques, iconography, and style. In addition to their role as guardians of the local cultural heritage, Cheriyal painters now partake in the national discourse on art, and crafts.

This talk proposes reviews the continuity and changes in the Cheriyal painting tradition through examples selected from my PhD research. The first part introduces the original function of these paintings for the storytelling of local castes Puranas; and discusses the necessity of visual fixity in maintaining the identity and cultural heritage of the local communities. In contrast, the second part of the paper examine changes in the painting practice, in material, style, iconography, patronage, and museum display. These changes are a dynamic response to the contemporaneity of both local communities and the State, therefore challenging the presupposed fixity of tradition and questioning the nature of the heritage it has come to represent.