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What is art?

Art is a highly diverse range of human activities engaged in creating visual, auditory, or performed artifacts— artworks—that express the author’s imaginative or technical skill, and are intended to be appreciated for their beauty or emotional power.

The oldest documented forms of art are visual arts, which include images or objects in fields like painting, sculpture, printmaking , photography, and other visual media . Architecture is often included as one of the visual arts; however, like the decorative arts, it involves the creation of objects where the practical considerations of use are essential, in a way that they usually are not in another visual art, like a painting.

Art is often examined through the interaction of the *principles* and *elements* of art. The principles of art include *movement, unity, harmony, variety, balance, contrast, proportion* and *pattern*. The elements include *texture, form, space, shape, color, value* and *line*. The various interactions between the elements and principles of art help artists to organize sensorially pleasing works of art while also giving viewers a framework within which to analyze and discuss aesthetic ideas.

Art is a word that means different things to different people. Is art’s purpose mainly utilitarian? Or is it decorative? Does art exist as a form of self-

expression, or to fulfill a need? Is art *art* only when it is beautiful? Or, is there a place for art that is shocking and thought-provoking?

To attempt to classify art into clear-cut periods is a tricky endeavor. But, classifications can help us understand the ideas that shaped the work of artists at any given time.

Very Broadly speaking, we can travel through art in several periods:

Pre-historic Art



Painting of Jaguar, Tapir, and Red Deer, 28,000-6,000 BCE, Serra de Capivara, Brazil.

This includes several centuries' worth of work! Basically, all art produced before the advent of writing can be included in this category. Much of the art of this period was created with a specific function in mind. Many times, these aims had an underpinning of magic. Artists, and their communities, believed these objects to be infused with power that helped organize nature.

Art from Egypt



Book of the Dead of Hunefer, circa 1275 BCE

Egyptian art holds a special fascination in the public's eye, maybe because it was intended to last forever. The Egyptians' belief in the afterlife influenced many of their daily activities—particularly their art—which was monumental and solid so that it could stand the test of time.

Art in Egypt had a religious and magical purpose. Its common themes are the cycles of life, the roles of the Gods, the roles of the King, and life after death. The colors used are bright and vivid. We can immediately recognize a work of Egyptian art because of the formulaic presentation of the human figure in frontal view, with the head in profile. There will usually be writing, as well, in the form of hieroglyphs.

Art From Greece



Venus de Milo, circa 100 BCE

Greece presents a very interesting point in the history of art. Here, the old formulas of representing nature and the human figure that the Assyrians and Egyptians had used, begin to change. For all of the peoples of Hellenic descent, it became important to portray the world as accurately as possible. It is here that we begin to see foreshortening, which was a major breakthrough in the realistic depiction of depth and perspective. In their quest for the ideal of beauty and perfection, the Greeks were able to achieve a high level of naturalism that influenced European art even until today.

Art from Rome



Augustus from Prima Porta, 1st century CE, Musei Vaticani, Vatican City

Romans had a fascination with Greece. So much so that many of the works we now identify as Greek have come to us as roman copies of a Greek original. Rome's greatest achievements are perhaps in the area of civil engineering. However, a very unique innovation of Roman art was the creation of lifelike portraits. Greeks were concerned with perfection and idealized beauty; Romans, always pragmatic, portrayed their subjects true to life.

Art from India



The Lion Capital of Ashoka, circa 250 BCE, Sarnath, India.

While the Western Hemisphere was undergoing all the great transformations brought about by the Greeks and Romans, art in India had flourished into a very distinct style. It would be impossible to summarize all the great artistic manifestations, and the different dynasties that brought them about. But, a very well-known symbol of Indian art, the Lion Capital of Ashoka, has also been adopted as the emblem of India, and it showcases how intricate the art, and how highly specialized were the craftsmen in this part of the world.

Art themes are, traditionally, religious and mythological in nature. Around the 2nd century CE, we first see the figure of Buddha in the reliefs at Gandhara, which became models for later Indian art.

Art from Islam



Patio of the Lions, circa 1377, Alhambra, Granada, Spain

During the 7th and 8th centuries CE, the religion of the Muslim conquerors swept the world from the Middle-East to Spain. Islam was also very rigorous regarding the matter of images, not allowing any representation of human religious images. Artists turned to intricate geometric patterns and forms, and subtle lacework ornamentation known as arabesques.

Later, artists in Persia and also in India, under the Mughal rulers, illustrated romances, histories, and fables, full of detail and craftsmanship that show the mastery of their skill.

Art from China



Attributed to Qu Ding, *Summer Mountains*, circa 1050

We know little of the beginnings of art in China. But, by the time China and Europe came into contact, most of the elements that we associate with Chinese art—dynamism, movement, curving, organic forms—had already developed. Another important facet of Chinese art was its purpose in reminding people of virtuous examples from the past, in the spirit of Confucianism.

After Buddhism entered China in the 1st or 2nd century CE, it became a great influence to all aspects of Chinese art. Buddhism, with its emphasis on meditation, introduced a whole new reverence for the artists and their achievements. Artists employed art much less to tell the stories of the Buddha, and more as aids towards reverence, contemplation, and deep thought.

Art during the Middle Ages



The Title Page of St. John's Gospel, The Book of Kells, 9th century

The Middle Ages were a long and confusing time of invasions and raids. Many different groups flourished throughout the landscape of Europe, without any true unifying style. However, monasteries thrived and, within their walls, men and women cultivated art and learning.

One of the greatest artistic achievements of this period came in the preservation of knowledge and the illumination of manuscripts. The examples that have survived are proof that those artisans were very skilled and had quite a unique point of view.

Religious art during this period still hoped to be didactic in nature, focusing exclusively on the pious message of the work. There was also secular art intended for the barons and feudal lords. Since castles were so frequently destroyed in raids during this time, not many examples have survived. Those which remain are memorable in their own right, such as the Bayeux Tapestry.

Gothic Art



Cathedral of Notre-Dame de Paris, 12-14th century

Gothic art was an evolution of medieval art, but the term itself was never used until much later, during the Renaissance. The art form most closely associated with this time period is architecture, with the construction of magnificent, ever taller cathedrals. These magnificent could be built thanks to the development of several brilliant innovations like vaulted ceilings, and flying buttresses. These churches were heavily decorated with sculptures and reliefs of all kinds, as well as stained glass. It was also during this period that frescoes began to gain popularity.

Art of the Renaissance



Michelangelo, Frescoes on the Sistine Chapel ceiling, 1508-1512, Vatican City, The Vatican.

The Renaissance, as such, began in Italy as a revival of the greatness that was Rome. It had a distinctly humanistic bent as artists, scholars, and scientists attempted to revive all the advancements of the earlier classical period. Knowledge flourished in all fields, and we feel the consequences of this rebirth even today. So much so that, whenever we encounter a person who loves learning and knowledge, and seems to be well-rounded in most aspects, we say he or she is a ‘true Renaissance man.’

The Church was still a strong patron, but art was also created for lay people. Portraiture saw a great growth during this time. The subjects were no longer simply religious, but also mythological themes from Greece and Roman antiquity. Paintings were not confined to human subjects, and still lives and allegories also saw great popularity.

Art of the Baroque



Caravaggio, *Death of the Virgin*, 1601-1606, Louvre, Paris, France.

The Baroque period roughly corresponds to the 17th century, and one of its important driving factors was the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation in the Church. In late 1517, Martin Luther posted his *Ninety-five Theses* to the door of the Wittenberg Castle Church. This act began what is known as the Reformation, which resulted in the birth of Protestantism. In turn, the Counter-Reformation began within the Catholic Church, who encouraged art with a religious theme. This art communicated drama, exuberance, and great emotion. The Baroque manifested a little differently in every country, depending on their social, economical, and political climate, but there are a few common points: a proliferation of landscape and still life painting, theatrical light and the use of chiaroscuro, paintings that show very dramatic and emotional moments, and biblical stories depicted in everyday settings.

Art from the Neoclassical Period



Jacques-Louis David, *The Oath of the Horatii*, 1784, Louvre, Paris, France.

Neoclassicism, or the revival of the classical past, occurred during the 18th century, around the time of the Enlightenment. Another great impetus for Neoclassicism was the renewed interest in archaeology that arose during this time, including the discovery and excavation of the ruins at Pompeii and Herculaneum.

Art from this period lost all of the drama of the Baroque, and returned to more stately, dignified poses in accordance with classical ideals. There was a proliferation of mythological, Greek, and Roman backgrounds, dresses, and themes.

Art from the Romantic Period



Eugène Delacroix, *July 28. Liberty Leading the People*, 1831, Louvre, Paris, France.

During the 19th century, the Industrial Revolution completely altered the way of life. Many villages grew into crowded industrial centers, and workers at factories could go for days without seeing the light of day. Romanticism was born as a yearning for a more beautiful past where people lived quieter, less-hurried lives, and before nature was destroyed by technology.

Romanticism was also a reaction to the ideas espoused by the Enlightenment, which placed an emphasis on reason above all things. The Romantics did not think that science, reason, and empirical evidence were the only way to find answers to the mysteries of life. Emotion, imagination, and intuition were

celebrated instead, and there was a glorification of nature as the greatest teacher of all.

In Romantic art, nature plays a predominant part, with the sky taking up most of the composition in very atmospheric backgrounds. The brushstrokes are loose and visible, and the scenes can be dramatic or even horrific.

Realism



Jean-François Millet, *The Gleaners*, 1857, Musée d'Orsay, Paris, France.

Realism appeared in France after the revolution of 1848. Artists were trying to represent the circumstances of life as they really were, and without the heightened sense of emotion of the Romanticism.

For the first time in the history of art, the subjects of Realism were working-class people doing their everyday jobs. Instead of looking to glorified settings of the past, Realism preferred contemporary settings, and showcased them as worthy subject matter for art.

Impressionism



Claude Monet, *Impression, Sunrise*, 1872

The first photograph was taken in 1826. This event marked another turning point for art. If pictures portrayed people and places exactly as they were, paintings were no longer the only medium to represent reality. How should art respond?

Impressionism was the first art movement that presented work that appeared, as the critics said, unfinished. But, in fact, impressionist artists were hoping to

depict modern life in a way that had never been done before. They hoped to capture light, and movement, as they were perceived, not in an idealized way.

Post-Impressionism



Vincent van Gogh, *Sunflowers*, 1889, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam, Netherlands.

During this period, artists continued to depict the same subject matters, showcasing the life of the urban middle class, also favoring outdoor scenes like beaches and landscapes. But, instead of employing the vague, almost fuzzy outlines of Impressionism, the unifying characteristic of this style is a heavy, strong outline that emphasized form.

The Pointillism of Georges Seurat and Paul Signac is a subcategory of Post-Impressionism.

Symbolism



Gustav Klimt, 1907-8, The Kiss

Art is reactionary in nature. Symbolism was born as a reaction to the realism depicted in Impressionism, Realism, and Naturalism. Around this time, in the late 19th century, Freud was also developing his theories of psychoanalysis that would change the field of psychology. This was the first theory to focus on the unconscious and the desires that drive our actions.

Symbolists responded to all this stimuli by turning to the imagined world of dreams and mysticism. Common themes were those of love, death, mortality,

eroticism and the figure of the femme fatale, unrequited love, anguish, fear, visions of hybrid creatures, monsters, and the macabre.

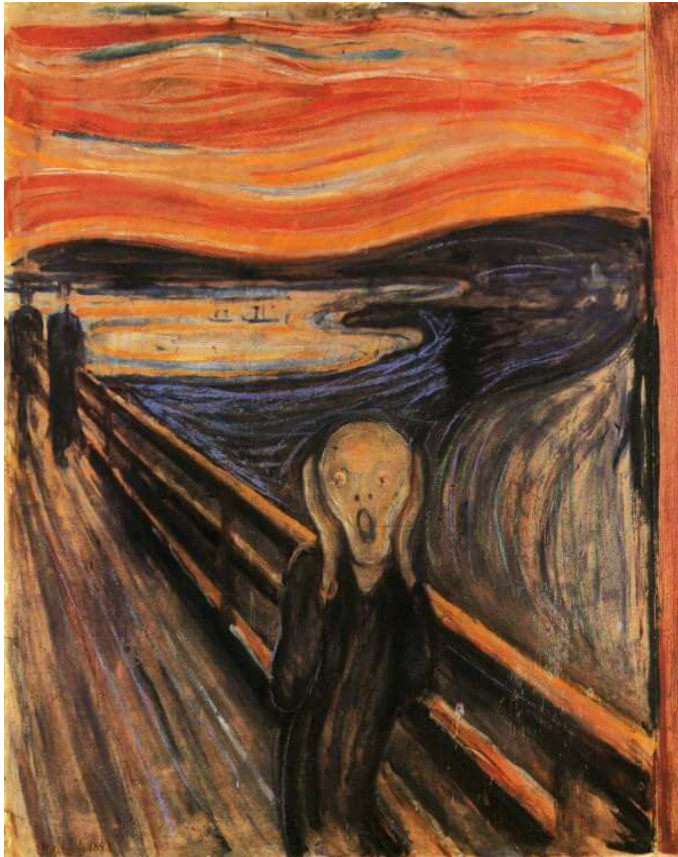
Fauvism



Henri Matisse, *The Dessert: Harmony in Red*, 1908

The term means “wild beasts.” Fauvism originated during the early 20th century, and was characterized by a strong, non-naturalistic use of color, and heavy, spontaneous brushwork. These artists were very interested in the color theories that were being developed during this time, particularly as it regards to complementary colors. With Fauvism, art is continuing the path away from the Realism that began with Symbolism.

Expressionism



Edvard Munch, *The Scream*, 1893, Munch Museum, Oslo, Norway

Expressionism introduced a new standard to the creation and appreciation of art. It sought to produce work that came from within the artist, and expressed their inner-life, rather than depicting their outer reality. Expressionist artists used color and form—or their distortion—to convey intense feelings and anxieties.

In Expressionist art, the unnatural colors, distorted forms and portrayals of nature, aggressive brushstrokes, and nightmarish scenes, are meant to show a hostile modern world.

Cubism



Pablo Picasso, *Les Femmes d'Alger (O.J. No. 146)*, 1907,

Cubism began mainly with the work of Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque. It was another movement that revolutionized the way art was done as it represented a great stride towards Abstraction. By reducing figures to their main constituent planes, and rejecting foreshortening and perspective, Cubists aimed to show different perspectives and points of view of the same object, in the same painting.

Futurism



Gino Severini, *Armored Train in Action*, 1915

Futurism was mainly an Italian movement that sought to capture the movement and dynamism of modern life. Particularly in Italy, the weight of the past was so heavy, that Futurism aimed to break free from it and jump into modernity.

In Futurism, objects are captured in motion, and the art itself is full of lines and spirals in repetition to convey dynamism. Modern objects like cars, street lights, speeding trains, steamships, frequently appear in paintings to convey that progressive attitude. War and industrialization were often glorified; The idea was to portray modernity and innovation.

Abstract Art



Wassily Kandinsky, *White Center*, 1921

Several movements are included within this category, such as **Abstract Expressionism, Suprematism, Minimalism, Orphism, Op Art, Suprematism, Constructivism, De Stijl, Bauhaus**. Within these movements, we recognize artists like **Joan Miró, Jesús Soto, Piet Mondrian, Wassily Kandinsky, El Lissitzky, Walter Gropius, Bridget Riley, and Jackson Pollock**, among many others.

We have seen how art had been steadily moving toward a complete abstraction of form beginning from as early as the Impressionism. The term abstract simply means, “to take out of something else,” meaning, the reduction of objects to their basic forms, essence, and colors.

Abstract art introduces a whole new visual language that is independent from any tangible references, and therein lies its importance. Abstract art invites the viewer to engage with the world and bring his or her complete experience into it. For the artist, it offers the prospect of creating something into the world that is utterly unique.

Dada



Marcel Duchamp, *Fountain*, 1917

The beginning of the 20th century was a time of great upheaval and change. Dada was born during World War I in Zurich, as a reaction to the horrors of war.

The movement got its name when artist Richard Huelsenbeck and poet Hugo Ball came upon the word in a French-German dictionary. It means “yes, yes” in Rumanian, and “rocking horse” in French. An interesting, nonsensical name that fit the movement perfectly given the satirical, irreverent, and reactionary nature of its works.

Surrealism



Art History 101: Salvador Dalí, *The Persistence of Memory*, 1931

The word “Surrealist,” a term that suggests the idea of something beyond reality, was coined by the French poet Guillaume Apollinaire. Surrealism, like Symbolism, also looked inside, searching within the subconscious and rejecting the rational life, delighting in the unexpected and the uncanny. In Surrealism, however, sometimes the symbols are used in a nonsensical, humorous, rather incoherent manner that would never have occurred in Symbolist art.

Art Deco



William Van Alen, Ralph Squire & Sons, The Chrysler Building, 1928-1930, New York,

Art Deco flourished in the period between the two World Wars. It was propelled by the wish of a society that was desperate for pleasure after the privations and the terror of war, and who wished to embrace modernity in all its forms.

Art Deco is characterized by sleek, modern lines, geometric motifs, sunburst patterns, sweeping curves, and, particularly in architecture, the use of modern materials pursuing a design that was glamorous but functional.

Pop-Art



Andy Warhol, *Marilyn Monroe*, 1967

Pop Art reached its peak in the 1950s, and it sought to glorify popular culture, revolting against the traditional approaches to art and what art should be.

Pop Art focused on the use of recognized images of mainstream media, bright colors, collage, with the object of satirizing the status quo or making a statement about current events.

What's Happening Today?

As we move closer to our own time, it becomes very difficult to establish movements or definitions for what artists in our day are doing, and to what they are responding. Contemporary art varies greatly, as befits the pace of our contemporary world. Movements like **Conceptual Art**, **Photorealism**, **Earth**

Art, and Street Art, are all happening, seemingly, at once. It is because our world is in constant change. Developments in technology, communications, science, and all of the other disciplines, occur daily. And all of these changes affect us personally and profoundly, and therefore they affect our art. Paul Cézanne once said: “To my mind one does not put oneself in place of the past, one only adds a new link.”

Different Indian Art Forms

Indian folk art is still alive in many parts of the country. Being culturally diverse and distinct, a variety of art forms have evolved over the years; some untouched by modernisation, some adapting to new paint colours and materials. Each depict religious epics or Gods and Goddesses mostly, but they're all unique, admirable and inimitable in their own right. In the past, they were made with natural dyes and colours made of soil, mud, leaves and charcoal, on canvas or cloth – giving it a sense of antiquity, vintage nostalgia.

Madhubani



Also called Mithila art, it originated in the kingdom of Janak (Sita's father in *Ramayana*) in Nepal and in present-day Bihar. It is one of the most popular Indian folk arts, practiced mostly by women who wanted to be one with God. Characterised by geometric patterns, this art form wasn't known to the outside world until the British discovered it after an earthquake in 1930's revealed broken houses with Madhubani paintings. It mirrored the work of Picasso and Miro, according to William G. Archer. Most of these paintings or wall murals depict gods, flora and fauna.

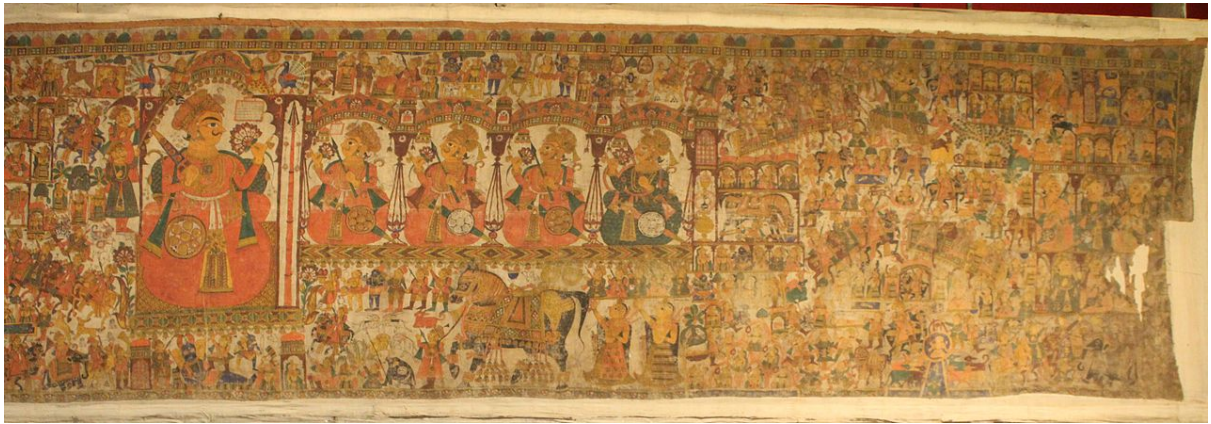
Miniature Paintings



These paintings are characterised by its miniature size but intricate details and acute expressions. Originating in the Mughal era, around 16th century, Miniature paintings are influenced by Persian styles, and flourished under Shah Jahan and Akbar's rule. Later, it was adopted by Rajputs, and is now popularly practiced in Rajasthan. As with other art forms, the paintings depict religious symbols and epics. These

paintings stand out as humans are portrayed with large eyes, a pointed nose and a slim waist, and men are always seen with a turban.

Phad



Phad depicting a tale about Pabuji

Originating in Rajasthan, Phad is mainly a religious form of scroll painting depicting folk deities Pabuji or Devnarayan. The 30- or 15 feet-long canvas or cloth that it is painted on is called *phad*. Vegetable colours and a running narrative of the lives and heroic deeds of deities characterise these paintings.

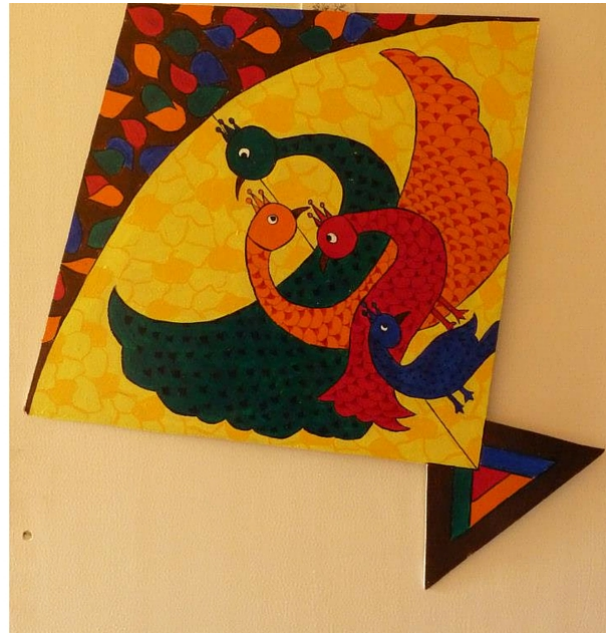
Warli



Originated by the Warli tribes from the Western Ghat of India, in 2500 BCE, this is easily one of the oldest art forms of India. It is mainly the use of circles, triangles and squares to form numerous shapes and depict daily life activities like fishing, hunting, festivals, dance and more. What sets it apart is the human shape: a circle and two

triangles. All the paintings are done on a red ochre or dark background, while the shapes are white in colour.

Gond



Characterised by a sense of belonging with nature, the Gondi tribe in Madhya Pradesh created these bold, vibrantly coloured paintings, depicting mainly flora and fauna. The colours come from charcoal, cow dung, leaves and coloured soil. If you look closely, it is made up of dots and lines. Today, these styles are imitated, but with acrylic paints. It can be called an evolution in the Gond art form, spearheaded by Jangarh Singh Shyam, the most popular Gond artist who revived the art for the world in the 1960's.

Kalamkari



Literally meaning 'drawings with a pen', Kalamkari is of two types in India: Machilipatnam, which originates from Machilipatnam in Andhra Pradesh and Srikalahasti, which originates from Chittoor in the same state. While the former refers to block-printed form of art, the latter is a free flowing art with a pen on fabric. Today, Kalamkari art is used on sarees and ethnic clothing, and depicts anything from flora and fauna to epics such as Mahabharata or Ramayana.

Tanjore



From down South, Tanjore or Thanjavur paintings originated in 1600 AD, encouraged by the Nayakas of Thanjavur. You can recognise a Thanjavur painting by its use of gold foil, which glitters and lends the painting a surreal look. These panel paintings on wooden planks depict devotion to gods, goddesses and saints. It borrows its styles from Maratha and Deccani art, as well as European styles.

Cheriyal Scrolls



Originating in present-day Telangana, this dying art form is practised by the Nakashi family only, where it has been passed down for many generations. The tradition of long scrolls and Kalamkari art influenced the Cheriyal scrolls, a much more stylised version of Nakashi art. Depicting *puranas* and epics, these 40-45 feet scrolls were an essential visual accompaniment as saints wandered around singing or narrating the epics. They resemble modern-day comic panels, with about 50 on each scroll. They use primary colours and a vivid imagination, a stark contrast from the traditional rigour of Tanjore or Mysore paintings.

Kalighat Paintings



A recently discovered painting style, it originated in the 19th century Bengal, from Kalighat. It was the time when upheaval against the British was a possible, exciting idea. These paintings, on cloth and *pattas*, at first depicted Gods and Goddesses, but then took a turn towards social reform. With cheap paper and paint colours, squirrel hair brushes and colour pigments, the art was characterised by flawless strokes, brushwork, and simple but bold drawings. It sought to raise awareness about social conditions in its viewers – rich zamindars were depicted drinking wine with women, while priests were shown with ‘unchaste’ women and police *babus* being sloppy.

Patachitra



A cloth-based scroll painting from Odisha and West Bengal, these paintings with sharp, angular bold lines depict epics, Gods and Goddesses. Originating from the fifth century in religious hubs like Puri and Konark, around the same time that

sculpturing began, considering there was no known distinction between an artist and sculptor back then. What's unique about this art form is that the dress style depicted in the paintings has heavy influence of the Mughal era.

(Sources: Lumen Learning, Daily Art Magazine, Artsy, The Better India)

