

Redefining Regional Folk Art (*Chitrakathi*) in Fashion for its Commercial Application in Lifestyle Products

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ABSTRACT

Indian folk arts have long served as a vital medium for expressing and conveying the evolution of culture through various forms such as paintings, sculptures, wall art, and miniature paintings. These creative expressions, produced by communities across India, often incorporate storytelling, making them particularly compelling to modern consumers who, in turn, connect to and appreciate the grassroots folklore. Rich in cultural significance, products that incorporate Indian folk art can authentically reflect and celebrate the unique characteristics and traditions of their respective regions. However, integrating a few regional folk arts into lifestyle fashion accessories is still neglected and has restricted its global reach and awareness among consumers.

One such distinctive regional folk art form from the western region of India, Maharashtra, is *Chitrakathi*. Handcrafted and hand-painted art forms incorporate human and mythological figures, forms, and patterns to convey regional stories and poems. This hand-painted storytelling art form features vibrant colors, intricate patterns, and rich narratives drawn from regional mythology. Despite its unique craftsmanship, *Chitrakathi* folk art remains underutilized and lacks diversification in the product sector. Fashioning lifestyle products presents a unique opportunity to blend traditional craftsmanship with a contemporary design, as demonstrated by other regional folk arts such as *Ganjipha* of Maharashtra, *Patachitra* from West Bengal, and Miniature paintings of Rajasthan. Therefore, this research proposes a creative utilization of *Chitrakathi* folk art to redefine its potential in the fashion sector through its application in lifestyle products, thereby increasing its reach and appreciation on a global commercial scale.

The qualitative study involves secondary research for the data collection on assessing the gaps in product innovation related to *Chitrakathi* folk art, on utilizing other regional folk arts into lifestyle products, followed by the primary data collection on the folk art by the artisan's community from the region. The study incorporates an exploratory approach to delivering design solutions to provide a unique blend of traditional folk art into contemporary lifestyle products. The research will further pave the way to deliver meaningful designs according to modern consumer preferences through questionnaires that help preserve and promote illustrious age-old craftsmanship.

Keywords: Traditional Folk Art, Local Heritage, Community Engagement, Art Appreciation, Lifestyle Product

INTRODUCTION

Background

Indian folk arts, with their richness in cultural heritage and traditional significance, have long been an incredible medium for preserving regional identities. It takes on diverse manifestations through varied media forms such as dance, pottery, painting, metalwork, paper art, weaving, and designing objects such as jewelry and toys. These forms are not just aesthetic objects but have an imperative significance in people's lives as they are allied to their beliefs and rituals. Out of these widely celebrated media forms in folk art, Indian hand painting has a very long tradition and history in the culture of art.

The earliest Indian paintings chronicled in history were the rock paintings of prehistoric times and the petroglyphs found in places like *Bhimbetka*, which were as old as before 5500 BC. These paintings (Fig.1.1) were the first ever medium that provided a captivating insight into artistic expressions of early human civilizations from the Indian subcontinent.

The term “folk art” in the form of 'folk paintings' here encompasses paintings made in Indian villages by both men and women for ornamentation of their habitats, which often incorporate the portrayals of their gods, customs, and rituals by local artisans for use by the local people from the specific communities. These folk paintings were produced in several styles and themes, portraying multiple narratives from their cultures. Cultural history, sociology, and geography are often infused in the painting through the reflection of local flavor from each region.

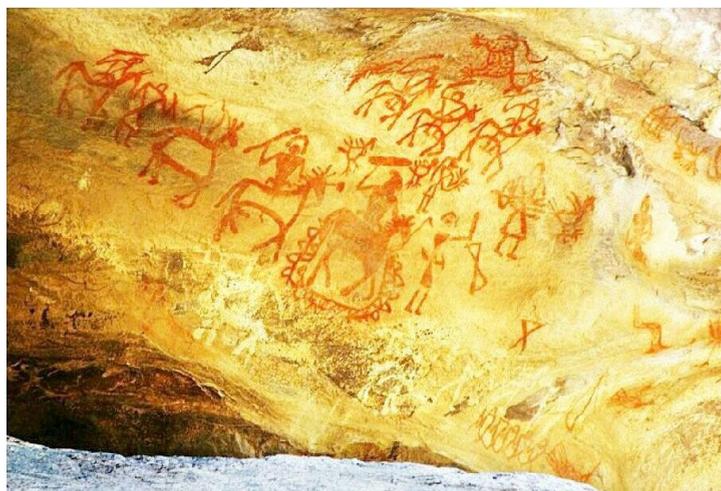


Fig. 1.1 Bimbetka cave paintings from prehistoric times (Image courtesy: The antique story blog)

Such reflections of culture through folk paintings brought a unique identity to the communities, displaying their special characteristics and ability to show profound expressions through the narratives that revolved around stories, mythology, lifestyles, and experiences.

Introduction to *Chitrakathi*:

One such distinct folk painting from the folk art of Maharashtra (A state of India) is *Chitrakathi* folk art, which is believed to be 300-400 years old. The word *Chitrakathi* means Pictorial stories as *Chitra* stands for picture and *Kathi* or *Katha* stands for story, which is a local name given to the art form.

Created by the nomadic community of storytellers from rural areas, the *Chitrakathi* art form was used widely to convey mythological stories through the visual art form of painting. The hand-painted versions of characters on paper were used to narrate stories from the most celebrated epics from Indian cultures, such as *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* (The two epic mythological tales of Indian cultural history) (Fig. 2.1). The *Chitrakathi* folk art was utilized by the nomadic community of the *Thakkar* tribal community of rural Maharashtra, who made a living by narrating different folktales and displaying the unique artwork in the marketplaces while traveling from village to village. Often depicted on a piece of handmade paper, the *Chitrakathi* art form covered Stories along with the prominent characters from Indian cultural epics using natural colors in the free-hand figurative drawings.



Fig.2.1 Story of *Ramayana* through the visual art form of *Chitrakathi* displayed at a museum in *Maharashtra*

Simple yet striking, often created with natural pigments and minimalistic detailing using bold outlines and earthy tones of colors like red, yellow, black, and white are prominent aesthetic elements that reflect the visual representation of Indian mythology. The use of handmade paper or any available solid piece of cloth, hand painted, incorporating colors that are extracted from natural sources like stones, leaves, and flowers are its characteristics.

Beyond being a hand-painted art form, *Chitrakathi* majorly holds an important form of performance where stories are narrated in exceptional ways, including Indian musical instruments. The narrative styles include poems, songs, and even dramatic appearances based on mythological stories from Indian cultures, which often depict a social message and morals. The art form not only concerns the widespread of the culture with morals and messages but also holds a crucial livelihood that preserves the culturally immersive folk art of the region.

The other famous Indian folk arts, such as *Ganjipha* (A Hand painted art form of playing worked on wood and paper mainly used in playing cards and indoor games) (Fig.2.2) from *Maharashtra*, as well as *Pattachitra*, (Hand painting on stripes of natural leaves or surfaces of leaves) (Fig.2.3) from the states of *Odisha*, depict similar elemental use of aesthetic visual forms and figures but hold significant distinctions in their appeal and their application in product sectors.



Fig. 2.2 *Ganjipha* Playing Cards from *Maharashtra* (Image Courtesy: [Arts culture.google.com](https://arts.culture.google.com))



Fig. 2.3 *Pattachitra* Painting from Odisha

Many of such similarly hand-crafted and hand-painted crafts depict the narratives of various forms of Indian culture, but the special use and application of visual elements, compositions, narrative styles, and aesthetic appeal make them unique from each other.

Research Gap

The folk spirit has been playing an incredible role in the inclination of consumer interest in art and in the overall consciousness of Indigenous Indian cultures. Folk arts, especially *Chitrakathi*, which originated primarily for social education and entertainment through cultural depiction in society, have lost their way in the past. As a result of technological advancements and industrialization, consumer inclination towards the grassroots culture has declined which affected the folk-art segment of Indian culture such as *Chitrakathi*.

Lack of interest, awareness, reduced social performances, and restricted manner of utilization have affected unique art forms such as *Chitrakathi* from Maharashtra.

With modernization and globalization, cherishing such folk art forms from cultural roots is crucial in educating the youth. Hence, a revitalization to carry forward the cultural legacy of *Chitrakathi* is essential, and redefining its unique characteristics

through traditional artistry for a commercial way of preserving the art form, is imperative.

OBJECTIVES

The study of exceptional folk art from Maharashtra proposes to appreciate the cultural identity of the Chitrakathi folk art and understand community values and aesthetic appeals through visual forms. The study further delivers design solutions to blend traditional art into contemporary lifestyle products, considering modern consumer preferences for *Chitrakathi's* future sustenance.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The hand-painted folk art of *Chitrakathi* is unfamous beyond Maharashtra borders compared to other states of India that hold unique hand-painted folk art that is widely recognized for its wide acceptance and availability.

Due to its limited exposure, folk art, such as *Chitrakathi*, has remained unexplored beyond its utilization in puppetry and storytelling, which is, in a way, the source of livelihood for the community of the artisans. Such exceptional folk art indeed entails an in-depth understanding through the literature review.

In order to identify the significance, similarity, and distinct characteristics of *Chitrakathi* folk art, the literature review was conducted with specific reference to Indian folk arts and their cultural expressions, *Chitrakathi* folk art and relevant literature, and contemporary utilization of other folk arts to preserve the heritage.

Indian folk arts and cultural expression

Indian folklore, since ancient times, is best known as the visual canvas of the local people of India, be it through art, craft, dance, music, theatre, or literature. They can be seen as different manifestations of visual expressions tied to the beliefs and rituals of the people. The term folk defines the sense of community belonging and people who share common influences like religion, culture, and ethnicity. (Singh, December 2022)

Indian folk art showcases a unique blend of tradition and artistry which are passed down from generation to generation. These art forms exhibit a sense of freedom, spontaneity, and flexibility in their creation. (Kokane, 2024) Folk art revolves around the visual expressions of the nomadic people and is the art of people who are exposed to changing landscapes as they travel over the valleys and highlands of India.

***Chitrakathi*: A regional treasure**

One of the most ancient and significant forms of artistic pictorial expression was

employed by the traditional picture showmen in parts of India for religious and ethical education, as well as for entertainment. Indian states of Gujarat, Rajasthan, Maharashtra and many more have had a long tradition of local folk legends narrated through artistic illustrations by these picture showmen. One such forgotten treasure is *Chitrakathi* folk art belonging to the state of Maharashtra.

Chitrakathi, the migrating community of storytellers, were found once all over Maharashtra and some parts of Andhra and Karnataka. The *Chitrakathi* were wandering folk who earned their livelihood by going from village to village, narrating various vernacular legends, and showing related paintings in the marketplaces. According to one source, a tribe called *Thakkar* came from Rajasthan in the 18th century to settle in Maharashtra and spread out from there to other nearby regions and brought to existence this folk art. (M, 2022)

Preserving heritage through contemporary applications

Scholars in their research have pointed out the limited commercial utilization of folk art compared to the other regional art forms highlighting that the successful transition of folk art in the modern scenario and its market presence is minimal due to lack of awareness and non-inclusion of folk art into mainstream art business. (Gaonkar, 2018) The thesis on 'The Charm of Indian Folk Art' gives insights on the modern adaptations of folk arts like kalamkari and highlights that commercialization of folk arts is one of the instrumental ways for them to profitably stay alive in the modern age with traditional heritage being passed on to new generations. It also underlines the need to thoughtfully alter and modify folk art to meet the recreational demands of the new generations. (Beniwal, 2016). In yet another study, it is mentioned that it's not just economies colliding in international markets but also people from varied cultural backgrounds that give new dimensions to global markets (Jena, 2010).

Indian folk art has shown immense potential in the international markets because of its regional and cultural aesthetics and authentic artistry. In spite of this, traditional art forms like *Chitrakathi* are finding it difficult to upgrade to the demands of the evolving lifestyle of modern society.

The review of literature based on themes such as Indian folk arts, their cultural expressions, and their role and application in preserving heritage through contemporary applications employ the wide range of utilization of other folk arts from India. The review also covers folk art from Maharashtra, which, with the available literature, portrays a limited utilization of products. The gap in limited usage and restricted application hinders further innovation. This also implies a tremendous scope in creating a range of numerous products out of *Chitrakathi*.

The available review also suggests the limited usage of the *Chitrakathi* folk art despite its unique craftsmanship, which affects the utilization of the arts; hence, product

diversification with innovation using the folk art is the need of the hour for its survival in the craft sector of Maharashtra.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The qualitative study involves detailed data collection regarding the ethnography of the *Chitrakathi* folk art from the rural region of Maharashtra. The initial primary information was collected by visiting two museums in Maharashtra, which helped in understanding the ethos, legacy, cultural significance & visual essence of the art through photographs of paintings in the museums.

The primary data collection of the study focused on finding the artisans from the regions near *Sawantwadi* around Goa, where folk art is widely practiced by the artisan family. The artisan's family was convinced with a brief on the study and the need for research with a promising opportunity for the folk art upon a telephonic conversation. The study further involved a detailed, in-person interview with artisans for ethnographic aspects of folk art in terms of its significance and cultural importance. The conversation with the artisans also involved the aesthetic values, design elements and the meaning of the forms used in portraying the mythological stories from Indian culture. The conversation with artisans further involved an in-depth demonstration of the procedures of folk art.

Besides the primary data collection from the community of the artisans of *Chitrakathi*, an in-depth secondary data collection was also essential for the existing literature and work involving *Chitrakathi* folk art. The review of the literature was conducted to identify other folk arts and their applications in products and how the contemporary application of the other folk arts helps in preserving which in turn helped in assessing the gaps in product innovation related to *Chitrakathi* folk art.

The gap in existing literature, followed by limited application of *Chitrakathi* in the products, and underutilization of folk art in other product sectors were identified.

On the basis of the data collected, the study initiated a survey through a questionnaire to the craft enthusiast community in the urban area of Pune in order to identify their preference and choices on employing other regional folk arts into lifestyle products. The questionnaire was circulated to the population of craft enthusiasts, and more than 19 samples were recorded for their responses.

The questionnaire was designed to gain insights on the aspects of the *Chitrakathi* from the perspectives of awareness and its application to fashion and lifestyles, opinion on the commercial application of folk art, selection of the prominent aspect of folk art, opinion to a selection of the design innovation in the field of products, suggestions of its value addition in terms of elements such as digital application, and contemporary

design along with eco-friendly material utilization.

Based on the responses, the study incorporated an exploratory approach to delivering design solutions to provide a unique blend of traditional art into contemporary fashion and lifestyle products. A lifestyle-based home decor category was selected from the responses, and an apt design solution was created. The feedback from the artisans was recorded for the acceptance of the contemporary utilization of folk art over a telephonic conversation with image sharing.

FINDINGS

The study explores several aspects and notions of the *Chitrakathi* folk art through the questionnaire to the potential sample of craft enthusiasts that helped identify a design solution for redefining the aesthetics and well as its employment in other product sectors.

The questionnaire focused on a few important suggestions, which further led to the creation of a design solution utilizing *Chitrakathi* folk art. Twenty-one responses were recorded through the questionnaire aged between twenty-five and fifty-five, incorporating 19% male and 81% female respondents for the following questions. The observations and responses of respondents specified more than 90.5% of people consider the folk arts of India to be relevant for modern fashion & lifestyle products (Fig. 7.1). The response portrays a strong imagery of implementing Indian folk arts into modern product sectors such as fashion and lifestyle products.

Do you consider folk arts are relevant in modern fashion and lifestyle products?

21 responses

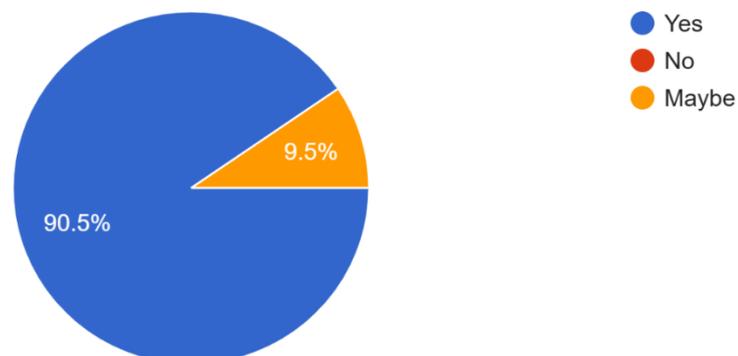


Fig. 7.1 Relevance of folk art to modern fashion and lifestyle products

Out of the total respondents, almost 71.4% of the respondents believed the potential of *Chitrakathi* folk art with similar potential with other widely celebrated folk arts from other regions (Fig. 7.2). The data reveal respondents' appreciation of *Chitrakathi* folk art from Maharashtra along with other most celebrated folk arts from other states of India.

Do you believe Chitrakathi art has the potential to compete with other popular Indian folk arts (Pattachitra, Madhubani etc.) commercially?

21 responses

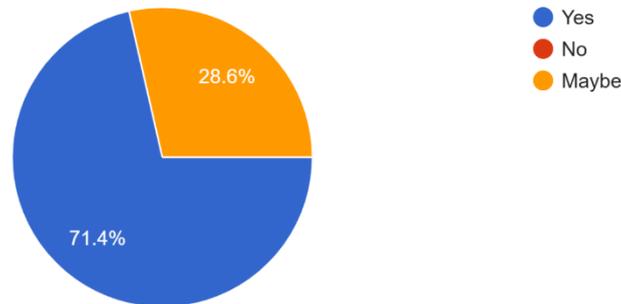


Fig.7.2 Potential of *Chitrakathi* Folk art compared to other folk arts

The respondents also specified the distinct and appealing characteristics of *Chitrakathi* that revolved around aspects such as aesthetic values- 19%, cultural heritage 52.4.% and uniqueness 28.6% (Fig. 7.3). The data portrays that the respondents are well aware of the folk art not only for the regional connotations but also with its explicit characteristics which make the *Chitrakathi* folk art unique in its appearance.

In your opinion, what makes Indian folk art (like Chitrakathi) appealing for lifestyle products?

21 responses

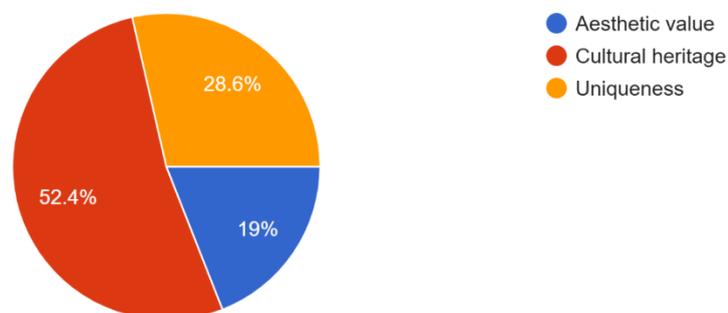


Fig. 7.3 Appealing characteristics of Chitrakathi

The data shows the opinions of the respondents on the application and utilization of *Chitrakathi* in commercial products, which majorly reveals the sectors such as 76.2 % for home decor, 14.3% for accessories, and the remaining from the other sectors such as apparel and corporate stationery (Fig. 7.4).

What kind of lifestyle products would you like to see Chitrakathi art applied to?
21 responses

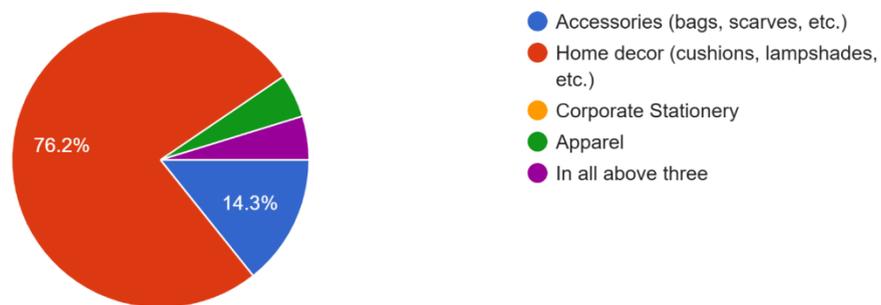


Fig. 7.4 Product preference by the respondents

Based on the above suggestions and selections by the respondents a careful consideration to suggest an apt design solution was brainstormed by the researchers. After a deep market and product analysis in the field of home decor, as per the responses (Fig. 7.4), a thoughtful application of *Chitrakathi* folk art was created.

RESULT

Based on the current market scenario, responses to the questionnaire, and consumer acceptance of the modernized application in other folk arts, a contemporary design solution utilizing *Chitrakathi* was ideated. The design solution involves bringing a unique blend of *Chitrakathi*'s traditional art forms into the contemporary lifestyle sector by ideating home décor products.

Design Solution

As per the responses through the questionnaire, the design solution emphasizes the lifestyle and home décor sector, incorporating relevant products. Upon careful consideration of employing *Chitrakathi* folk art in the lifestyle sector, home décor for the living room was identified.

Product Identification in home décor

Based on the cultural significance, it was imperative to utilize *Chitrakathi* folk art to focus on the aesthetic appeal, original essence, and visual elements of the authentic craft along with morals or a message to be inspired from. Hence, the most prominent area of the living room, the entrance, was chosen with a functional separator/ divider

panel made of glass and wood.

Motif ideation

A thoughtful brainstorming was conducted between the researchers to develop motifs while keeping the authentic essence of Chitrakathi intact. The major considerations behind developing motifs of inspirational factors to implement traditional *Chitrakathi* in a modernized form, such as the current scenario, women empowerment, technological advancements, and the role of women in numerous industries, were carefully thought upon.

The meaningful creation of motif designs was initiated based on the idea of portraying women's empowerment and the role of women through multi-tasking capacities. The inspirations were incorporated in the form of “motifs” employing authentic visual forms of women figurative from Chitrakathi folk art along with a modernized addition of elements to portray modern women.

The idea behind the motifs was to showcase an ideal balance of women of India for their sensitivity towards traditions as well as an optimism to accept new challenges of modern contemporary life. The motifs such as a typical culturally brought-up traditional woman, driving a new-age vehicle (Fig. 8.1), a traditional woman enjoying music and entertainment on I-pad along with her household chores (Fig. 8.2), a traditional woman working as a mechanic (Fig.8.3), and a traditional woman going to her work (Fig 8.4), all suggest the culmination of the traditional and cultural richness amalgamated with modern changing contemporary lives of women through design ideations.



Fig. 8.1 A typical culturally brought-up traditional woman, driving a new-age vehicle



Fig. 8.2 A traditional woman enjoying music and entertainment on I-pad along with her household chores

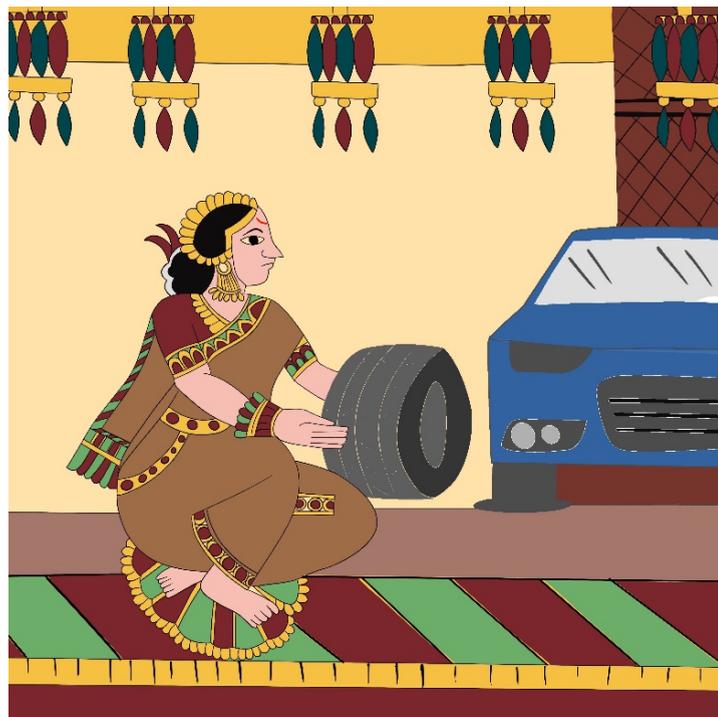


Fig. 8.3 A traditional woman working as a mechanic



Fig. 8.4 A traditional woman going to her work

Final Product

Based on the above-developed motifs using *Chitrakathi* folk art's visual elements and aesthetic appeal, a large glass panel at the entrance of a living room with an added functional consideration as a separator/ divider, was digitally visualized (8.5). The hand painted revolving/ rotating pieces of the artwork within the panel display the motifs developed by researchers with intrinsic and unique elements of all colors, forms, and shapes of *Chitrakathi* folk art. The additional panels incorporating traditional border forms of *Chitrakathi* have also been utilized in the panel.



Fig. 8.5 A glass panel as a separator/divider in a living room incorporating contemporary motif designs by researchers

To complement the look of the glass panel, a few hand-painted wall décor have also been initiated employing contemporary motifs. To give a comprehensive collection feel, the product range is also extended to cushion covers by utilizing the motifs in the form of hand painting on textiles (Fig. 8.6).



Fig. 8.6 An extended product range of Cushions for living room décor

Each motif used for the above product in home décor for lifestyle depicts the significant role of women since ancient ages with the unique forms, color relations, and intricate craftsmanship of hand painting employing *Chittrakathi* folk art technique. The authentic application of original forms of *Chittrakathi* has been utilized to complement the exceptional aesthetics of traditional folk art that further amalgamates the contemporary application in the modern lifestyle sector through home decor.

The developed product range in home decor utilized the original visual forms of women's figurative of *Chittrakathi* folk art with a twist of modern and contemporary application in the lifestyle sector in order to uphold and preserve the authenticity of art. Furthermore, the visualizations of *Chittrakathi* in home decor were also depicted through a complete product range in digital visualization of home decor (Fig. 8.7).

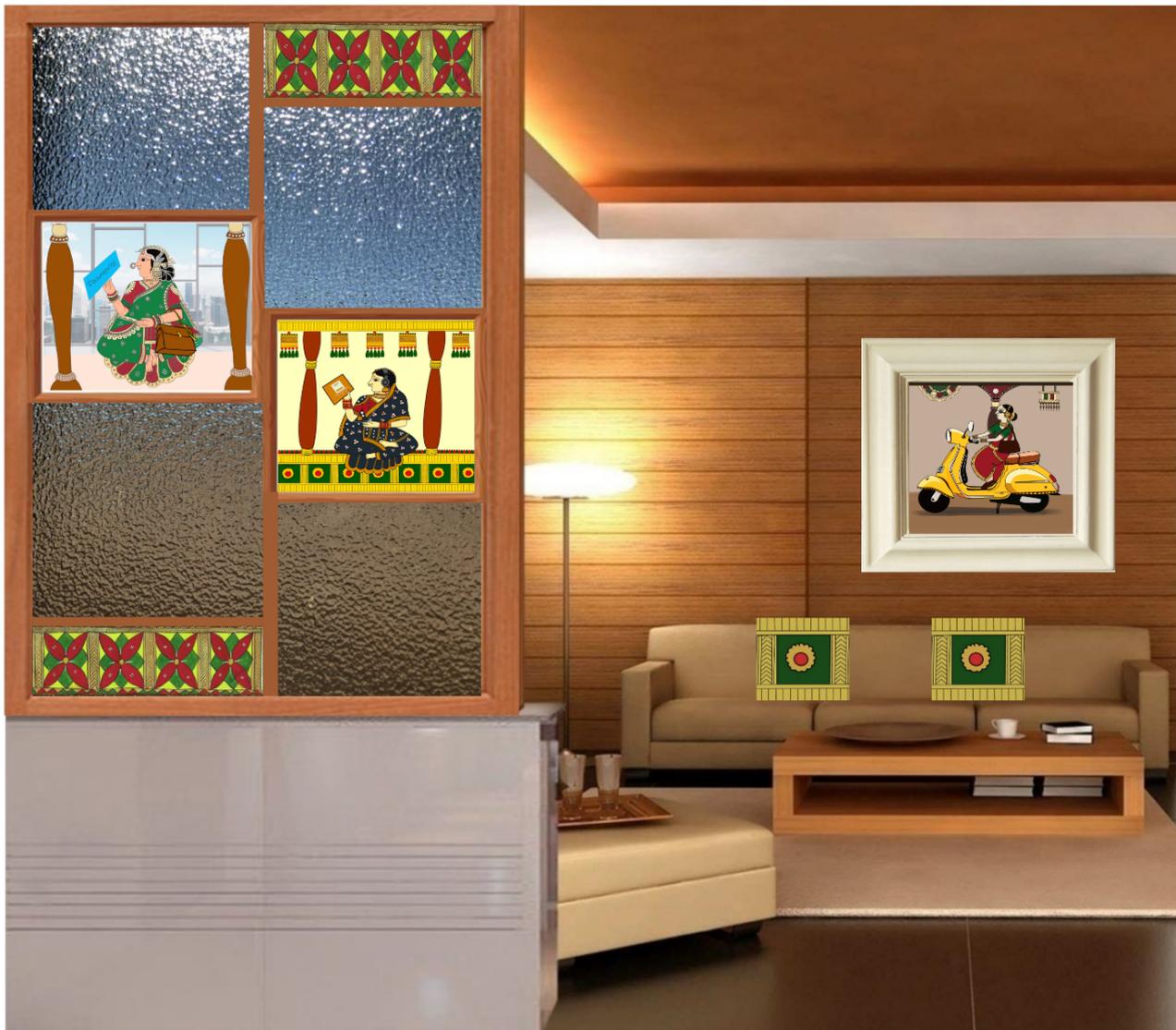


Fig. 8.7 Complete product range in digital visualization

By synthesizing creative ideas and authentic application of *Chitrakathi* folk art into the home decor product sector, the study offers a unique and modern way of redefining the traditional folk art of *Chitrakathi* in a contemporary way.

CONCLUSION

Most of the celebrated folk arts from India have been well established with their employment in a variety of product sectors. This has given such folk arts substantial opportunities to grow and further flourish. Exceptional folk arts, such as *Chitrakathi* of Maharashtra, due to limited recognition, has been overlooked and has persisted in its typical form of storytelling and puppetry. The research is an attempt to employ and redefine the incomparable hand-painted folk art- *Chitrakathi* in the other product sectors to revive and uplift it through design solutions.

The lifestyle product sector that utilizes folk art holds a tremendous opportunity as it brings with it an aesthetic appeal from various art forms and delivers a sense of belonging to the cultural essence of folk art. Hence, the lifestyle product sector in home decor, which is a widely appreciated and accepted product area; has been opted to utilize *Chitrakathi* folk art from Maharashtra.

The visualized product range of home decor as per the consumer preferences not only depicts awareness but also reveals consumers' acceptance, appreciation, and expectations for having regional folk art like *Chitrakathi* in the market, which otherwise is an underutilized art form.

The study not only maintains the dynamics of the folk art but also transforms the way of applying it in other product sectors. The application of underutilized *Chitrakathi* in a commercially viable range of products in home décor, envisions a transformative approach. This serves a wide array of prospects for *Chitrakathi's* global commercialization along with a panoramic scope for design. This approach not only benefits the artisanal community but brings along designers for a meaningful 'give and take' of proficiency, dexterity, and originality by keeping intact artisans' ownership and fostering the "best of both worlds" for design futures.

The researchers' contribution through meaningful design solutions in home décor facilitates the conservation of the Indian mythological culture in the most illustrious age-old craftsmanship embodied in *Chitrakathi* folk art and further paves away the opportunities to endorse the folk art through redefined aesthetics & visual forms through panoramic utilization in the lifestyle product design sector.

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