

## Contemporising Tradition: Jivya Soma Mashe

The Indigenous Warli community living in parts of western and central India are practitioners of a painting tradition that goes back thousands of years. Warli painting is typically characterised by very simple forms, such as the circle representing the sun and moon, the triangle that represents mountains and trees, and the square which indicates a sacred enclosure or land. Traditionally practised by women on the walls of their homes, Warli art depicts scenes from special occasions, like weddings and harvests, often invoking the community's deities through symbolic and decorative depictions.

Despite being an important living tradition, Warli has often been excluded from the wider discourses on art. Let's look at how the work of one artist has transformed, popularised and integrated this Indigenous practice into the history of modern Indian art.

### Innovations in Warli Art

Jivya Soma Mashe was born into the Warli tribe in Dhamangaon, Maharashtra in 1934. Over time, he grew as an artist and created a new contemporary language for Warli art, using it to depict the changing society he lived in. In the 1970s, he was selected to present his works at an exhibition in Delhi. The success of this event put Mashe on the map, opening up a world of opportunities for him to present his paintings at venues in India and abroad.

Traditionally, Warli paintings are white murals on walls prepared with mud and dung. The painting is made from a mixture of rice paste, water and gum, with chewed bamboo sticks serving as paintbrushes. Mashe was the first Warli artist to paint with poster colours on canvas and paper, which enabled Warli paintings to be shown beyond the villages where they were made. This shift in medium would eventually lead to commercial possibilities for this art.

Let's now look at some examples of his paintings that exemplify his innovative style.

### Integrating Traditional Symbols with Modern Elements

*City Scene* from the 1990s shows how Mashe integrated traditional symbols with modern elements in his paintings. While at first glance we see typical Warli visuals of figures, flora and fauna, Mashe has interrupted a timeless scene with a passing train and the inclusion of cars and buses alongside the border. Formally, the painting bears a strong relationship to the simplified lines of traditional Warli painting while also showing Mashe's stylisation, for example in the tail and feathers of the peacocks and the leaves of the trees.

In *Fishing Scene* from 2017, we see how traditional motifs such as the triangle are reinterpreted to represent new subjects. As its title suggests, the work is centred on a mirror image of a large cast fishing net. Although the composition is easily legible, Mashe plays with the traditional geometric forms, abstracting them to create an intricate pattern stippled with fish-like shapes. As we can see here, through his choice of subjects and iconography, he significantly expanded the vocabulary of the painting tradition he had inherited. While he experimented with the form and mediums; closeness with nature continued to remain a central theme in his

work. This reflected how he remained rooted in the land where he was born and in the traditions of his community.

### **Conclusion**

Mashe found independent acclaim through exhibitions worldwide, as well as through collaborations with other practitioners such as British land artist Richard Long. Mashe's practice has had a radical effect on the recognition of Warli culture. Through his work, we can reconsider our understanding of Indigenous and inter-generational art forms within the contemporary context and challenge the misconception of such art as static and unchanging.

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*Jivya Soma Mashe (1934-2018) began drawing in an attempt to communicate after a temporary loss of speech as a child — a result of shock upon his mother's death. Mashe etched these drawings in mud, mimicking the Warli paintings that he saw around him. Over time, he began to receive more recognition, especially when Bhaskar Kulkarni, an artist associated with the Indian Handloom Board, offered him the opportunity to exhibit his work and became his mentor.*

*While Warli painting was traditionally by women, Mashe and more recently, several other male artists, including Amit Mahadev Dombhare, Rajesh Vangad and his son Sadashiv Jivya Mashe have presented their work in mainstream contexts. With the entry of male artists into the practice, the art form has taken a commercial turn, bringing recognition to the community. However, women — who are the original practitioners of the art — have largely not been part of this transformation and often struggle to reclaim their space.*

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