

# A Village of Painters: Narrative Scrolls from West Bengal

## Lesson Plan



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Naju Chitrakar gluing cloth from a discarded sari onto the back of a scroll  
Photographs courtesy of the Museum of International Folk Art, DCA by Paul Smutko

## Village of Painters: Narrative Scrolls from West Bengal

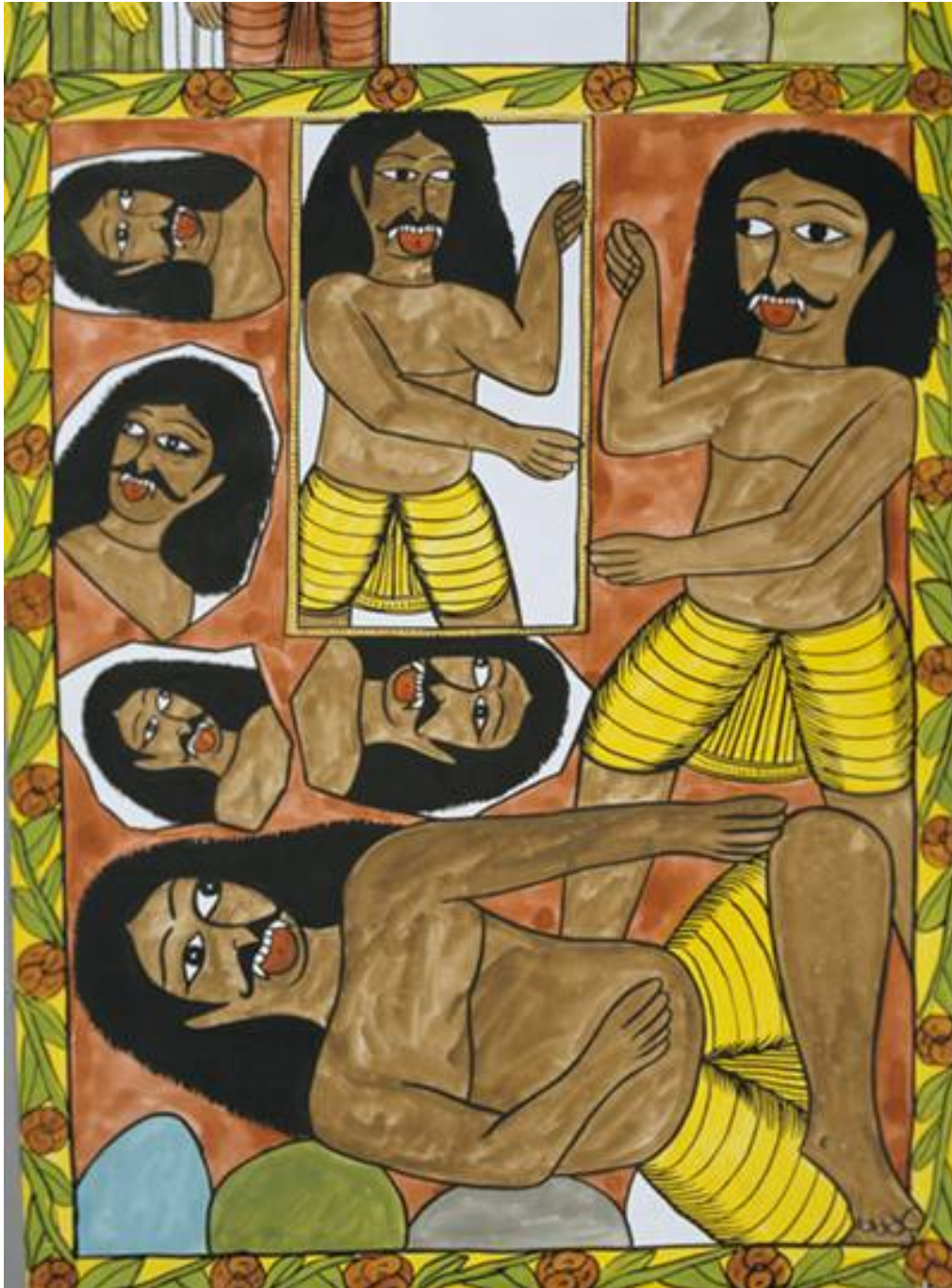
In West Bengal, India, a traditional caste community of artists, called *patuas*, paint colorful scrolls to accompany songs which they sing to relate historic, current, religious and cultural events to their audiences. These itinerant painter/singers are part of a long lineage that has passed the tradition down for generations. In the past, *patuas* traveled long distances to perform in small villages, singing the songs and unrolling the scrolls panel by panel to accompany the narrative in exchange for food, clothing or payment. Now, many *patuas* perform in more populated areas for people who come to them to purchase their painted scrolls. While their work has been recognized by museums and universities around the world, the artists are still struggling to compete with other popular entertainment forms such as radio, television and movies. Over time, the artists have created repertoires of scrolls and songs that continue to engage their audiences, covering such topics as 9/11, the movie "The Titanic," the tsunami in Indonesia and how to use a condom to prevent the spread of HIV and AIDS. Many of the scrolls have a moral or lesson which relates to the story.





Madhusudan Chitrakar showing a scroll in the front room of his house.

*Patua* art has always been dynamic, changing to meet the needs and interests of their audiences. The origin story of how this tradition came to be is a problem solving drama that continues to have



relevance today:

"The History of the Patuas" by Gurupada Chitrakar

Many centuries ago, a terrible demon lived in a cave outside a village, coming outside at night to steal villagers and eat them. The people lived in fear, staying home at night, unable to sleep and filled with worry. They feared the demon would consume everyone if something was not done about him. At a village meeting, a wise person came up with a plan. They built a large mirror to fool the demon. They set the mirror up outside the demon's cave and when he emerged, he saw his own reflection in the

glass. Enraged, the demon grabbed a huge stone and hurled it at his reflection thinking it was another demon. The mirror shattered into hundreds of pieces. Each fragment reflected another demon and another and another. Everywhere the demon looked, he found himself surrounded by other demons. Finally, he kills himself in despair. To spread the word of the demon's demise, *patuas* painted and sang the story as they traveled from village to village. Eventually they received payment and added other stories to their repertoire that told about the Hindu gods and goddesses including Shiva, Ganesha, and Durga as well as depicting historical events for entertainment and edification.

Art in India often represents religious ideas. *Patua* artists illustrate and sing stories about Hindu gods and goddesses that originate in ancient texts as well as stories about Muslim Saints, tribal beliefs and contemporary religious figures such as Mother Theresa. Here is a condensed version of the Story of Ganesh:



Ganesh's Life Story by Gurupada Chitrakar

The goddess Parvati was taking a bath. She took the skin she scrubbed from her body and made it into the shape of a boy, Ganesh, who she placed at the door to guard her bathroom. When the god Shiva, Parvati's husband, came home Ganesh wouldn't let him into the bathroom. Shiva got mad and cut off Ganesh's head. Parvati was upset and told Shiva that he had just killed their son. Shiva vowed to bring Ganesh back to life by replacing his head with the first one he saw. With the help of another god, Vishnu, Shiva found an elephant, whose

head was transplanted onto Ganesh's body and Ganesh was brought back to life. That is how the god Ganesh got his elephant head.

Secular stories comprise much of the *patuas* repertoire. Singers perform Bengali folktales, sing about British colonialism, make social commentary about modernity and urban life, relate accounts of international, national and local histories, current events, popular culture and convey information about public health and social services. Here is a rendition of the story of a terrible flood:



Flood by Rani Chitrakar

The Mother Ganges, goddess of the sacred Ganges River, was very angry. She released the waters of the river on an area called Medinipur in West Bengal. There was a terrible flood. Goats, water buffaloes, cows, all kinds of fish, and even people began to float away. People finally arrived in boats and helicopters to help, and provided medicine and food. The waters

receded and life continued.

To make a scroll, the *patua* begins with the paper. Artists use commercial poster paper, using one piece per frame of the scroll, sewing the pieces together. Once the pieces of paper have been assembled, the artist rolls the paper to make it conform to the proper shape. Most *patuas* use pencil to outline the forms of the characters and images. The individual frames are demarcated with decorative borders which disguise the seams between frames.



Rukkini Chitrakar mixing paint

After the imagery and borders have been laid out, the painting begins. The scroll painters use available plants and minerals to them to make pigments for the paintings. The gum of the *bel* (wood apple) fruit acts as a fixative and as a binder. Some of the colors and their sources are white – lime powder, yellow – turmeric, black – lampblack or crushed, burnt rice, red – pomegranate juice or vermilion paste, blue – indigo, green – broad bean leaves. Some artists purchase commercial paints to use in their work. Similarly, many artists use brushes that they make out of goat and squirrel hair while others purchase ready made brushes. Usually the dark outlines are added at the end of the painting process. Cloth is adhered to the back to strengthen the seams. Often old saris are used as the backing and the patterns of the fabric add visual depth to the *patua*'s presentation.



Gurupada Chitrakar painting

The *patuas*' official caste designation (or hereditary occupation) is "Chitrakar" or Picture Maker. The term *patua* and "Chitrakar" are interchangeable, though the artists generally use "Chitrakar" as their surname even though they are not related to one another. Traditionally, *patuas* were men. Women have always assisted with the preparation of materials, but now they are also recognized as talented artists and performers in their own right. Female *patuas* play an important role in sharing information with women about issues that might be regarded as inappropriate topics of discussion between women and men. As the scroll painters adapt their work to changing times and topics, their devotion to their trade can be seen in the following verse:

### The Patua's Creed

To speak the truth is our vow.  
Our work will be to establish the truth.  
We shall follow the path trodden by great men and women.  
We shall serve the poor and downtrodden.  
That will be our religion.  
We shall speak the truth and not uphold the wrong.  
It will spread the fragrance, the fragrance of the rose.  
We will behave like human beings, not hating one another.  
We shall light the way of truth, the light of truth will spread.  
We shall overcome all malice and greed, all anger and lust.  
To speak the truth is our vow.  
Our work will be to establish the truth.  
We shall follow the path trodden by great men and women.  
We shall persuade men and women to act in a humane way,  
To give up what is false in word and deed.  
As the sunlight that shines on the daytime,  
May we all become the light of goodness to everyone.  
We shall honor those who are poor and oppressed.  
Never shall we be unmindful of their sorrow.  
We shall shun violence, speaking ill of others,  
And spreading rumors.  
To speak the truth is our vow,

And to follow the path trodden by great men and women.

Nanigopal Chitrakar, Naya village, Medinipur, West Bengal. The Patua's Creed was written as a way to legitimize the social status of the West Bengali scroll painters.

## Narrative Scroll Project

The following standards are addressed in this lesson plan.

### National Standards for Arts Education

#### Content Standards for the Visual Arts Grades K – 12

1. Understanding and applying media, techniques, and processes.
2. using knowledge of structures and foundations.
3. Choosing and evaluating a range of subject matter, symbols, and ideas.
4. Understanding the visual arts in relation to history and cultures.
5. reflecting upon and assessing the characteristics and merits of their work and the work of others.
6. Making connections between visual arts and other disciplines.

### Objectives

1. Students will learn about the process of making narrative scrolls in the *patua* style and how they are used over time to convey important events and transmit cultural values (historical and cultural understanding.)
2. Students will explore the imagery used in *patua* paintings (perceiving, analyzing and responding.)
3. Students will use their own imagery to create *patua* painting (creating and performing.)

### Materials

Heavy drawing or lightweight watercolor paper, approximately 9" x 16", pencils, erasers, indelible markers, watercolors, watercolor brushes, water, water containers, newspaper to cover tables.

### Motivation

1. Engage the students in a discussion about the way that they hear stories and get information. Where do they hear stories? How do they get information? How do they find out what is going on? Who are the really good story tellers? Who are the really good singers? What kinds of stories are important? Are they political, historical or religious? What stories do they think are really important to tell?
2. Introduce the students to the *patua* storytelling tradition, using as many visual resources as possible.
3. Explain that the scroll painting tradition from West Bengal, India is usually passed down within a family and/or a community. You can discuss the way that women have always been involved in the work but are now being actively recognized for their participating and achievements. Are they aware that this is true for other contemporary artists and art forms?
4. Look at the ways that the scroll imagery is organized. Have the students look at the motifs used for the borders and the way that the characters are depicted.
5. Encourage them to come up with their own ideas for a scroll. They can think of topics that are autobiographical, political or related to current events, myths or religious stories or aspects of popular culture. Remind the students that their story can have a moral or a particular message. Students may want to work together on a scroll to create a series of images that make a story.

## Procedure

1. Have the students draw out their ideas for one frame of the scroll in pencil. Encourage them to use the entire space and to include the setting and a border.
2. When their drawing is complete they make outlines with the indelible markers.
3. Students then use watercolors to fill in the forms with color. Set aside to dry.
4. Repeat the steps to add to the scroll story.
5. If the students have made sequences of images to place together they can glue them onto recycled sheets or curtains cut to the width of the paper and as long as the scroll is.

## Evaluation

Display the students' work and have the students talk about or sing their stories.

Group the students' work according to theme. Have the students talk about why they chose the

subject matter that they did.

Have the students work in small groups to make individual panels to connect in sequence to make up a scroll.

### Curriculum Connections

Have students research the history of scrolls and scroll paintings from different cultures. They can make a presentation to the class regarding the way that scrolls have been used over time, in different places to record historical, religious and fictional events. (Art History, Visual Arts)

Use the relationship between *patua* art, codices (stories painted on *amate* paper that were created by the ancient *Mexika/Aztec* people) and comic books to engage students in an exploration of the way that comic artists, ancient peoples, scroll painters and graphic novelists use images to tell stories. (Visual Arts & Social Studies)

### Children's Books

Chitrakar, Karuna & Basu, Maura Hurley. To the Local Bazaar. Calcutta, India: Mustard Seed Books, 2002.

### Adult Books

Korom, Frank J. South Asian Folklore, A Handbook. Westport, Connecticut: Glenwood Press, 2006.

A Village of Painters: Narrative Scrolls from West Bengal. Santa Fe, NM: Museum of New Mexico

Press, 2006.

Sen, Prabhas. Living Traditions of India, Crafts of West Bengal. MIDDLETOWN< NJ: Grantha Corporation, 1994.

Rossi, Barbara. From the Ocean of Painting, India's Popular Painting 1589 to the Present. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1998.