



Raas-lilaPichhavai Painting: A Conservation Case Study

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Introduction

In India one of the most beautiful examples of pigment painting on cloth are the temple hangings of the Vallabhacharya Sampradaya. The majority of pigment painted *pichhavai* comes from Rajasthan, notably from Nathdwara, but there are also examples from Gujarat and the Deccan. These brightly coloured works adorn the walls and furnishing of a temple's inner sanctum where Krishna resides. They varied according to the season or festival and also depended on the wealth of the temple (Talwar & Krishna, 1979). The word *Pichhavai's* stands for hanging at the back (Sanskrit word 'Picch' means back and 'vais' means hanging). These are large cloth paintings, often several metres in height and length, made in the traditional technique of Indian miniature painting. For the *pichhavai* artist, they are visual expressions of devotion, placed behind the Hindu deity during the daily worship of *Shrinathji*, an aspect of Krishna (Lazaro, 2005). The act of surrounding Krishna with luxurious hangings is considered to be an expression of love for Him. At the same time the hangings serve to heighten the emotional impact of the devotee's encounter with the image, which is Krishna incarnate. (Treasure of Indian Textile, 1980). The importance, which is placed upon the visual aspect of the worship service and the hangings, played an important role in the rituals.

As we know that the themes of *pichhavai* are majorly associated with particular festivals, but a large number of hangings have seasonal themes also. During the hot summer days the lightweight painted *pichhavai* with scenes of shady groves and cool streams are used in the shrine. When the air is stagnant and the countryside broils in the sun, *Shrinathji* is surrounded with scenes of dense bowers, water sports or lotus ponds. The warm air of *Shrinathji's* chamber is stirred by the manually operated *punkah* suspended over his head. (Ambalal, 1987). With the advent of the monsoon season the *pichhavais* represents the falling rains and joyously dancing peacock beneath the cloudy skies. During the winter season, the shrine is hung with richly embroidered cloth, heavy brocades and jewelled velvets. A charcoal brazier is lit and placed near him (Ambalal, 1987). This sensitivity to the seasons is evident in every aspect of the seva.

Materials Of Pichhavai Painting

Cotton cloth is traditionally used for *pichhavai* painting. The texture and weight of the cloth may vary, from thin and light to thick and heavy. The heavier coarse weave tends to be durable but more difficult to paint upon, as

*Conservator in Conservation project at MSMS II Museum, Jaipur.

the weave is quite open. Thin, lighter cloths give a smooth paper finish although they are less durable (Lazaro, 2005). Before painting, the *pichhavai* artists first attach the cloth to a board with the use of flour paste. This stretches the cloth so that the colours can be applied in such a way that it results in a flat, even surface. Once the colour has been done the artist removes the cloth from the board or floor. This gives the artist more freedom, as the painting can be stored away after the day's work to protect it from damage. There are two different types of brushes, which is used in *pichhavai* painting. The first is the colour filling brush, which is round tipped with straight hairs made from mongoose. The second is the one made up of squirrel hair, which is used for detailed and intricate work. Colours are an integral aspect of the Indian tradition. In the Hindu tradition, colour, or more specifically coloured pigment, has an essential role in daily life (Lazaro, 2005). The palette of the Nathdwara artist spans the colour spectrum. Although *pichhavai* are perhaps best remembered for their vibrant blues and greens and brilliant reds and oranges, the complete range of colours is used (Talwar & Krishna, 1979). Most artists prepare their own pigments from the traditional mineral compounds and vegetable extracts but some have turned to commercial synthetic paints. Classification of pigments according to the method of preparation (Lazaro, 2005):

- **Minerals:** Pigments, which are made from mineral rocks and stones extracted from the earth, some of which are semi-precious stones, for example, malachite (*dana-farang*), lapis lazuli (*lazwardi*), cinnabar (*hingula*) and azurite (*syama*) (Lazaro, 2005).
- **Earth:** Pigments, which are made from earth surface deposits, for example, yellow ochre (*ramraj*), red ochre (*geru*), chalk white (*kharia*), orpiment (*harital*) and terra verte (*harabhata*).
- **Organic:** Pigments which are made from plants, animals or insects, known as lake or dye colours, for example, red lac or lake lac, indigo (*neel*), turmeric (*haldi*) and lamp black (*kajal*).
- **Alchemical:** Pigments, which are made from various metals, are processed or purified through sublimation (when anything solid turns into a gas without first becoming liquid) for example, verdrigis (*zangal*), vermilion (*hinglu*), minium (*sindur*) and smalt (*asmani*).

Techniques Of *Pichhavai* Painting

The cloth is first starched with flour paste. This process prevents the colours running together as well as from bleeding through the material. The preliminary sketches be it Shrinathji, *gopis*, sky, trees, animals, flowers, architectures are traced on an acetate sheet. The transferring of image is done by a traditional method called 'pouncing'. Before the application of colours the painting must be sized. The size, or ground, acts as an adhesive, fixing the paint to a given surface. *Kharia*, chalk powder is used as a ground (Talwar & Krishna, 1979). Once the drawing is set with ink and brush, a light coat of *Kharia* is applied to the surface. After the ground has been applied then the artist starts the filling of the colours. Lastly the painting is burnished by agate stone so that pigment will stay on the surface.

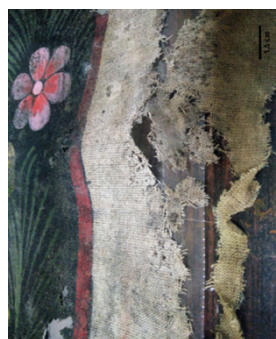
The Raas –*lila Pichhavai* Painting- a case study

The *pichhavai* painting on which this study is based depicts the *raslila* of Lord Krishna with his *gopis*. Trees, bushes and flowers, which represent Vrindavana, surround them. Minute detailing of leaves are made on the trees and bushes. The border of this painting is in black colour on which floral motifs have been made which is pink and yellow colour. This painting has been divided into 3 sections and in each section Krishna is seen in the centre. In the upper section one can see the sky with blue and orange shade of colour. Krishna, which is seen in light blue complexion, is standing in the centre with *Balarama* surrounded by *gopis*. In this we can see that *gopis* are offering a devotional dance to Lord Krishna. In the middle section, again it's a beautiful scene of Krishna and his *gopis*. While returning home Krishna appeared in between *gopis* and started breaking their pots filled with water for seeking the devotional love of his beloved *gopis*.

In this *gopis* were wearing colourful *ghagra-choli* and attractive ornaments of pearls, which has been painted in white colour. In the lower part of this painting Radha and Krishna are dancing with *gopis* and *gopas* in the bank of river *Jamunathat* is filled with lots of pink lotus. The painting is in a very fragile condition. (Figure 1) Probably due to its poor storage, it has been exposed to moisture, which has led to water stains, mould and fungal growth. Another effect of poor storage is the formation of folds and creases not only on the painted surface but also on the border of the painting. Holes are there on border of the painting, which might be due to pulling of the cloth from the stretcher that has been nailed. May be due to continuous storage in rolled condition there has been abrasion of paint layer and also fading of colours in some areas on the object. The fabric of this painting has also been found in a bad condition and the fibres have been misaligned. As we know that there is a fundamental principle of deterioration of all objects whether it is a sculpture, wood, painting, textiles etc. The materials they are made up of will naturally decay after sometimes. So, to save the object from further damage and to maintain it in good condition; conservation treatment is done. The *pichhavai* painting on which this study is based will focus mainly on the conservation treatment of the object mainly the stabilization of textile.



Figure: 1 Raas –*lila Pichhavai* Painting: Before conservation showing deterioration details, All Photo Courtesy: Author



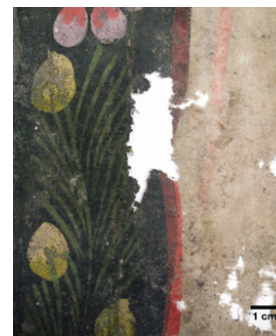
Folds and creases on the edges of the painting



Biological attack on the painting



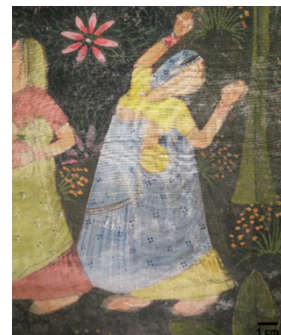
Stains on the border of the painting



Loss area on the painting



Abrasion on the painted area



Alteration of painted surface

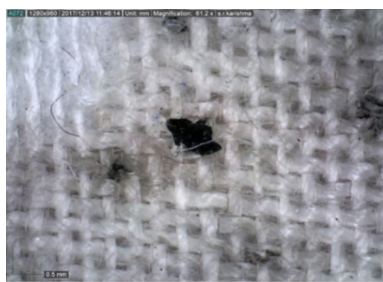
Technical Study

Microscopy in Normal Light

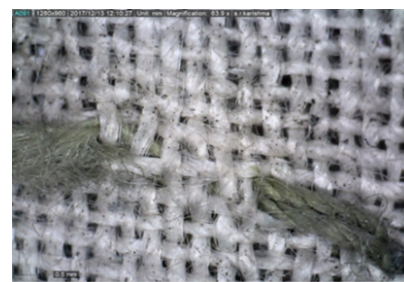
For the conservation of this *pichhavai* painting digital microscope plays an important role in deciding the further conservation treatment on the object and also helps in studying the deterioration problems in detail. It helps in understanding the basic structure of the object. The digital microscope mainly used on the front side of the painting and the problem area was determined with non-destructive method of the sample. It showed the weave pattern, thickness of threads, stains, weakening of threads of the object. The digital micrograph was done on the painted and non-painted surface area of the painting. (Figure 2)



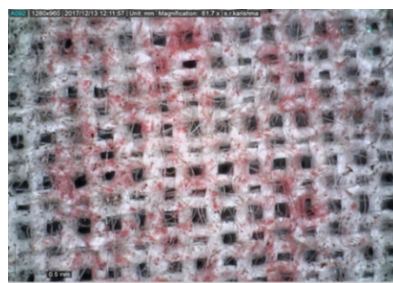
Detail image of fibres



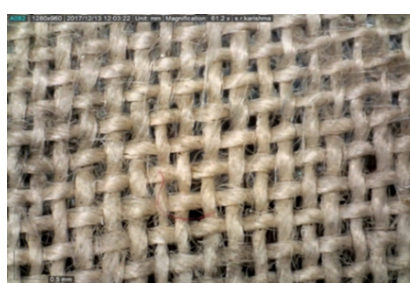
Biological attack



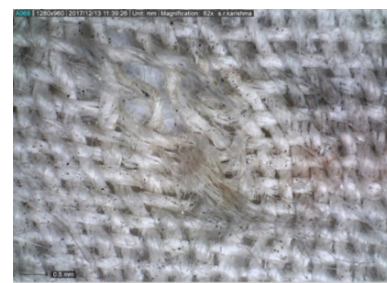
Previous stitching on the cloth



Alteration of pigments



Stains

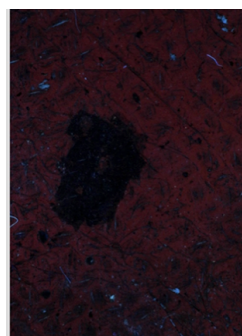


Loss area

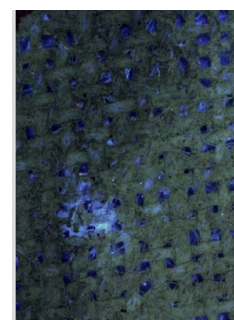
Figure 2: Digital Micrograph of *Pichhavai* painting in Normal Light, Photo Courtesy: Author

Microscopy in Ultra- Violet Light

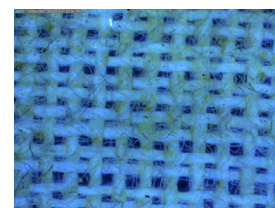
It helps in determining the pigments of the object whether it is organic or inorganic. Under UV radiation some organic pigments has the tendency to fluorescence. For the *pichhavai* object UV digital microscope is used for the identification of the organic pigment. Non-destructive method of the samples was seen under UV digital microscope. It was resulted that there was no fluorescence on any of the pigments when UV microscope was used on the object. The colour used on the object might be water based i.e. poster colour or watercolour. The only fluorescence was showing on the object was of the support fabric used for the painting. The fabric is of cotton, which is a cellulosic fibre. That's why it was giving fluorescence. The alteration of pigments or the abrasion on paint layer can be clearly seen under the UV digital microscope. (Figure 3)



Red colour under UV



Green pigment under UV



Yellow pigment under UV

Figure 3: Digital Micrograph of *Picchhavai* painting in UV Light, Photo Courtesy: Author

Conservation treatment

- **Flattening of painting:** The object has lots of wrinkle and folds near border area of the cloth especially on the holes as seen on the Fig (9). For the treatment, firstly wrinkle and fold area has been straighten or aligned with the help of swab stick. Then melinex sheet was placed on that area. After that a piece of glass has been kept on top of it. Glass was kept properly so that it does not damage the cloth. After 3 days the glass has been removed and it was resulted that the area, which has wrinkles and folds, has been flattened up. (Figure 4)



Figure: 4 Before and After flattening of painting, Photo Courtesy: Author

- **Cleaning:** The first and most important step in conservation is cleaning i.e. removal of alien parts. These become irritants to the threads, often completely enclosing them, thereby robbing them of their remaining elasticity and ultimately, contributing to their destruction. For this object, only upper section has been mechanically cleaned with the help of brush and smoke sponge. The border area which does not have painted surface contains water stains and lots of biological attack spores. Therefore, these have been removed with the help of brush as much as possible. Then afterwards with the help of smoke sponge some of them were lifted off. Wet cleaning is not done on the biological attack area because most of it are deep inside the fibres which is difficult to remove. Also for the painted area only mechanical cleaning has been done with the help of brush. Wet and solvent cleaning does not show the best result because the colour was coming off on the cotton swab when spot test was done on the painted area. This shows that the colour used on this *pichhava* is poster colour. So therefore no wet and solvent cleaning was carried out for painted surface. (Figure 5)



Figure 5: Cleaning of biological attack with brush and sponge, Photo Courtesy: Author

- **Repair:** The object needs to be strengthened therefore it is decided that a new support to be provided as a lining to the object. As the damaged area of the object is around the border so strip-lining method has been chosen for the lining. This method not only supports the fragile area but also covers the surface, which have holes. The strip lining will be done with the stitching method as to use adhesive may further increase the damage to the painting. The strips were cut to provide lining to the object. Then these strips have been fixed, the longer strip is placed in the centre and then the other two strips are attached with the help of herringbone stitch using beige colour polyester thread. After stitching these strips together then they have been positioned under the object in such a way that the half of the strip covers till the black border and other half of the strip is kept extra outside the border of the cloth. This extra portion has been put so that in future if there is any need of this *pichhavai* to be stretched on a stretcher. This lining has been stitch with the black border by herringbone stitch. (Figure 6)



Attaching the lining on the object with the help of herringbone stitch



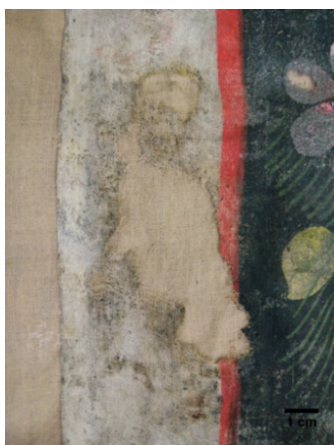
After attaching the lining (front side)



Running stitch around the hole

Figure 6: During Repair of *Pichhavai* Painting, Photo Courtesy: Author

The object has also been stitched throughout all the corners along with the strips to secure it with the help of running stitch. The running stitch is a simple under/over stitch, in which the length of the under and over part of the stitch varies according to need. At the back of the object the stitches will be longer and in the front it will appear small stitch. (Figure 7)



Running stitch to secure the border with the lining



Running stitch from back side



Running stitch from front side

Figure 7: After Repair of *Pichhavai* Painting, Photo Courtesy: Author

During repair process various existing holes, which may cause damage to the object, has also been secured with the help of stitches. The small running stitch has been made in surrounding of the holes.



Figure 8: Raas- lila Pichhvai Painting Before and After Conservation, Photo Courtesy: Author

References

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