

Design Resource

Palm Leaf Painting - Bhubaneswar, Orissa

Talapatra Chitra

by

Prof. Bibhudutta Baral, Divyadarshan C. S. and
Sandhya B.

NID Campus, Bengaluru

Source:

<http://www.dsource.in/resource/palm-leaf-painting-bhubaneswar-orissa>

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Introduction

Palm leaf painting is a sacred art of Orissa and even to this date the use of palm leaves can be observed. The use of palm leaves earlier were witnessed as manuscripts where the palm leaves were used as writing materials. They were used to record the moments and traditional narratives and also to pass on the knowledge to the forthcoming generations. Palm leaf manuscript is one of the ancient medium of writing in India particularly in Southern India, the practice that has also led to the origination of exquisite Palm Leaf Painting of Orissa. The ancient art creators devised the writing on palm leaves to an art form for etching and painting. It is noted to have begun from the Odisha state that is also known as Orissa. The accurate start of this form of art is difficult to say. However, considering the mention of palm leaf in several literary works and its pictorial representation realized in several sculptures and monuments it is accounted to be the oldest.

Benudhar Mohapatra is one of the known artist of Raghurajpur, Puri district, Orissa who is related with the art of painting on palm leaves that is also termed as 'Talapatra chitra' (tala-palm, patra-leaf, chitra-painting). The artist has carried this skill of painting on palm leaves from his ancestors and has won awards for executing marvelous work of Talapatra chitra. He has had the opportunity to train the methods of Talapatra chitra to the people who came from Delhi and Bombay and has also served his good years in Hastakala Paatli Prahishtana, Puri. His son Arun Uday Mohapatra is a state awardee, who has graduated with diploma in stone carving. From a very young age he has been interested and in school has always stood first competing in painting contests by completing Talapatra chitra. Along with studies the son has carried forward the interests of painting. Currently he is well versed in the art and trains people, teachers and lecturers in drawing.

In the language of Odia, this art form is spoken as Devakala. Orissa's traditional stories are the inspirational stories that become the basic drawing on palm leaves. Mythological stories- Ramayana, Mahabharata and stories like Shiv Puran are depicted in the paintings. Even in these days at Orissa, with an advancement of printing press, Talapatra chitra is done for the Kundlis, Wedding cards, New Year cards, and others that are required on the special occasions. It is said that to have the palm leaves at home is very pious, it also considered as symbol of triumph, peace and everlasting life. The palm leaves are dried in the sun and soaked in water before beginning to use. Then it is treated with turmeric. The leaves are tied and etched that follows with coloring. There are five colors that are basically prepared, white, black and primary colors- red, blue and yellow, with this set of colors another set of secondary colors are obtained when needed. A sharp pointed tool helps in carving out the drawing and etch. There are various sizes of palm leaves and the thick palm leaves are supposed to be good to work on with less ruins. This art form has grown to gather a multitude of ideas, myths and stories to life with the engraving and use of color. Palm leaves are tied together with help of needle and thread in Zigzag folds which hold the drawings that are excellently etched. These Talapatra chitras hold wonderful stories depicted by artists of Orissa. The great epics Ramayana and Mahabharata are most chosen for the illustrations to work on the palm leaf painting.

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Stories of Gods and Goddesses are depicted with fine specifics of ornaments, animals, flowers, floral and elements of nature. The colors are prepared by the artists and no chemical is used. Seven artists from the place Puri have won President's award for their fineness in patachitra and palm leaf painting, and Raghurajpur houses more than hundred traditional artisans most of them dedicated to Lord Jagannath engaged in painting walls and religious motifs.



Shri. Arun Vudhay Mahapatra is palm leaf manuscript artist, Orissa.



Bhubaneswar is the capital city of Orissa.



Illuminated palm leaf manuscript.

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Tools and Raw Materials

The tools that are used to complete a palm leaf painting:-

- **Palm Leaves:** The basic raw material that is processed to use.
- **Turmeric:** It is used to apply on the palm leaves.
- **Scale:** It is used to measure and for trimming palm leaves.
- **Cutter Knife:** It is used to cut the palm leaves.
- **Colors:** Primary colors, black and white are the basic color used.
- **Paint Brush:** Thin handmade brush is used to paint.
- **Water:** To soak the palm leaves and also to wash off the color.
- **Sharp Pointed Tool:** It is used for etching.
- **Needle and Thread:** It is used to tie all the palm leaves together.
- **Piece of Cloth:** It is used to spread the ink and smudge the extra color on palm leaves.



Stylus (thick metal needle with a sharp point) was used to inscribe or engrave the art on the palm leaf.

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Shri Guru Annadh maharshi illustration for reference.



Utility knife for palm leaf cutting.

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Cotton thread used to tie the palm leaves.



Apsara pencils are used to compose drawing on palm leaves.

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Selected palm leaves to prepare the manuscript.



Hand sewing needle.



Organic colors are used to paint.



Cotton cloth and water in bowl for clean surface of palm leaves.

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Artist paint brush set-10.

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Making Process

The palm leaves are dried under sun for two to three months. They are cut to the required sizes, soaked in water for days and treated with a solution of turmeric, ensuring the long last of the palm leaves and the painting. Once the leaves are dried, they are ready to be painted. The palm leaves are tied together to form a zigzag form of a scroll. Once the palm leaves (strips) are tied together a scene from one of the traditional stories is depicted in the drawing. The drawing is carefully done with appropriate spacing and with details of figures giving prominence to the hairstyle, ornaments, flora and fauna and elements that relate to nature. The painting on palm leaves is a unique process, unlike the regular paintings, a sharp pointed iron tool is used to etch the drawing on the brittle surface of the leaf, making sure that it doesn't go wrong or the leaf doesn't break, the color is spread or rubbed all over the leaves with the help of piece of cotton cloth. The scroll is cleansed and wiped with cloth giving it a fine black color to the carved lines leaving the rest of surface clean. The artists on occasion, to give it a stencil like appearance. This requires a great deal of accuracy and skill, as the palm leaf is brittle and has reversing grains interfering with a smooth usage of the cutting blade. Such beautifully positioned cut outs make the painting even more intricate and lace like. Sometimes the artists use colour to beautify the painting by coloring with natural colours. The colors are prepared by the artists. There are five basic colors they use white, black and primary colors- red, blue and yellow. The color white is prepared from conch shell, soot from lamp that is lamp black with oil makes black color. Colors from vegetables are extracted as well, for green color green leaves like neem (azadirachta indica) are boiled and mixed with water and gum to prepare the color. Addition of color and cut out technique are all the developments of recent times compared to the oldness of the art and have taken this form of art to another level.



A half opened young shoot of palm leaves are suitable for making manuscripts.

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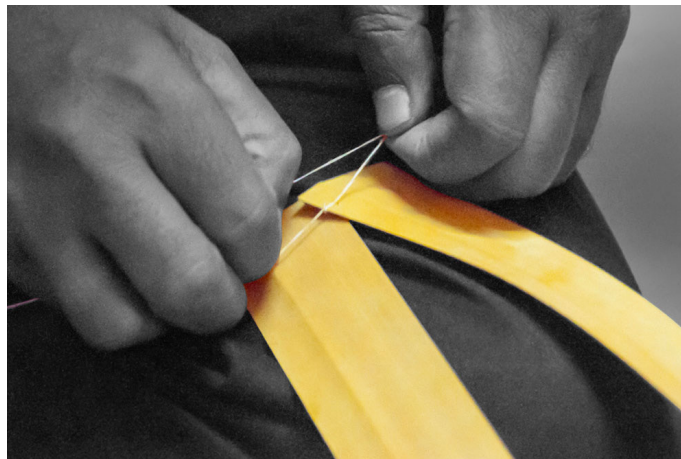
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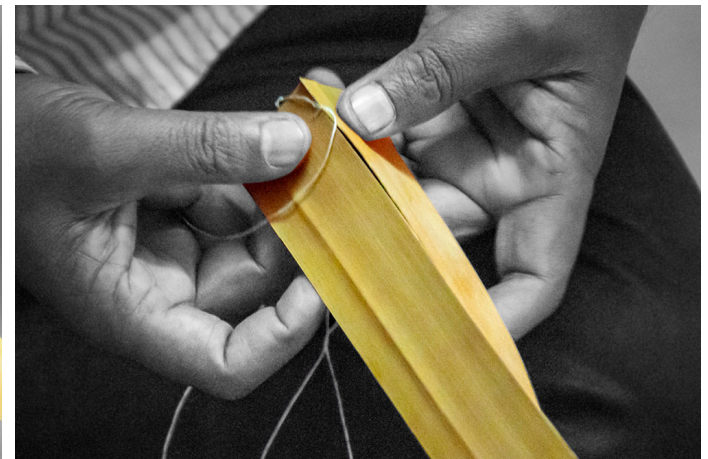
Unwanted middle ridge is removed from the main leaf.



Hand sewing needle is used to sew on either side of the leaves.



Cotton thread is passed through the holes to hold the leaves together.



This process helps to fold and secure the manuscripts.

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Palm leaf having very good tensile strength, is even better than that of good quality ledger paper.



Unwanted part are marked using scale and pencil.



Palm leaves as per required size, i.e. generally 34x5 cm.



The total number of leaves in a manuscript depends on its content.

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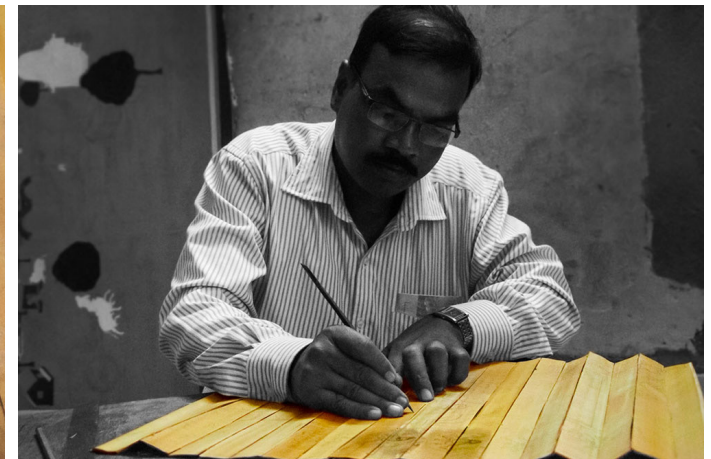
The art of writing on these leaves are unique.



Illustration are drawn on the palm leaf with help of stylus.



To write on the palm leaf, the leaf is to be supported by the fingers of the left hand.



Shri. Arun vudhay mahapatra, a specialist in the art of writing on palm leaflets.

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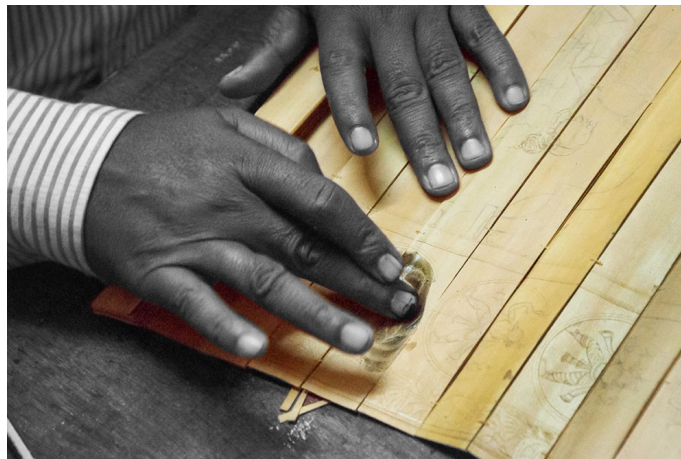
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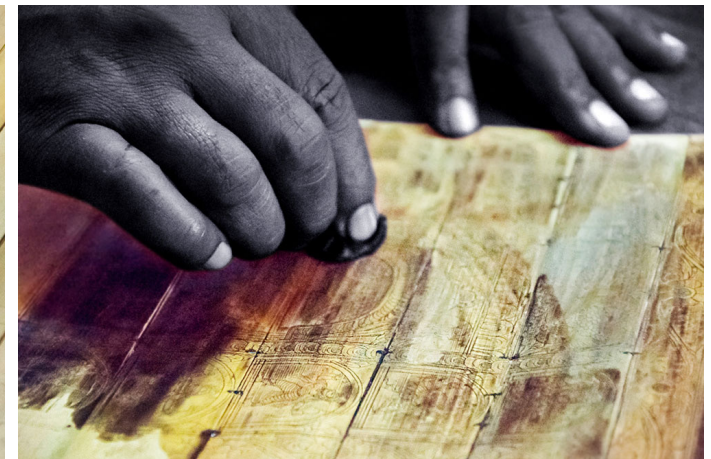
The width of the leaf and size of the illustration determines on folio.



At this stage both the incised illustrations and text are barely visible.



Lamp-black mixed with oil is applied on the leaves.



The mixture of lamp-black with oil been employed to render the art visible.

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The excess mixture is then wiped off with clean water.



Artisan clean manuscripts with help of dry cotton cloth.



Manuscript depicting ten avatars of Lord Vishnu.

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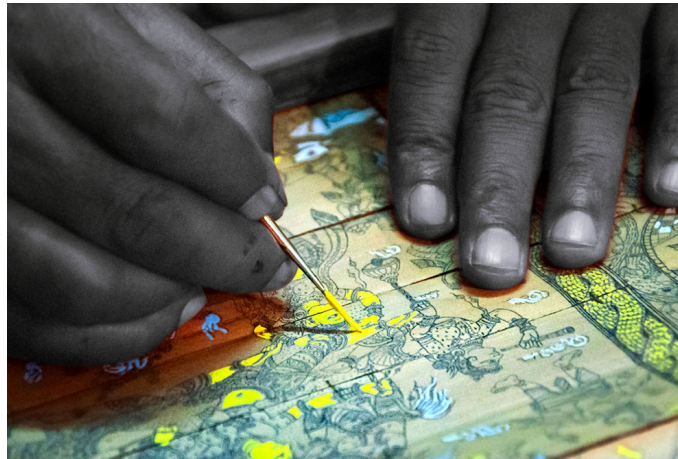
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A contemporary scribe incising illustration on the palm leaf using different colors.



Gum tempera paints were filled within the incised designs.



Illustrated palm leaf from western India.

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The Talapatra chitra or the palm leaf painting is a known art form of the village Raghurajpur, Puri district, Orissa. The fine pictorial depiction makes distinguishes this art form from the rest. The fine lines and overall look and placement of elements stands out in a unique way. Even without the depth or perspective visualization the art work has got its prominence for the two dimensional look and feel. Elements of the art form such as drawings of mythical stories, minimum colors, fine lines and motifs are addition of charm. The postures and detailing are well defined and add to the aesthetical feel. Palm leaf paintings range from eight to twelve inches of width and length can go up to the number of palm leaves added or sewed to one another. The palm leaf are good sign of victory and health hence few prefer to keep the art work made of palm leaf.



Completed illustrated palm leaf with multi-colors.

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Manuscript depicting life history of Lord Krishna.

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