

Design Resource

## Usta Art

The Heritage of Rajasthan

by

Tej Prakash Jangid and Sanmati Hosure

IDC, IIT Bombay

Source:

<https://dsource.in/resource/usta-art>



1. About
2. Tools and Raw Materials
3. Making Process
4. Products
5. Video
6. Contact Details

Design Resource

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Source:

<https://dsource.in/resource/usta-art/about>

## About

The word Usta is derived from the Persian word 'Ustad'. Ustad the word itself describe the excellence of a person in particular art. Usta is a professional caste of artists residing in Bikaner the city of Rajasthan, India. Many different techniques are combined to make this unique art of Usta. Mughal Emperors brought this art of golden painting and embossing to India from Iran. The art was on glorious heights in the 16th – 17th century. His highness, the Former ruler of Bikaner, Raja Rai Singh, who was a general in the court of Emperor Akbar and was a contemporary of Jahangir, brought this art to Bikaner. He was highly impressed by this craft and requested Akbar to allow some of the Usta artists to work in Bikaner. Akbar accepted Raja Rai Singh's request and sent seven Usta artists to work in the court of Bikaner. Since then Bikaner became famous for its Usta Art.

One can see the craftsmanship of this art in the Anup Mahal, Phool Mahal, Chandra palace, and Karan Mahal of Junagarh fort even today. As this art flourished in Mughal Era, the motifs used in Usta art are influenced by Mughal designs. Originally, this art was practised mostly on walls and ceilings. During the British period, it was felt that it should also be done on light materials which are easy to carry and maintain. Hence marble, glass, wood and camel hide are used for this art.

The Usta art is famous for rife embossed patterns like leafy, flowers, vines, birds, and animals with golden foil work which makes it more eye-catching and enchanting. The Usta art community here in Bikaner have been practising for a couple of centuries. The unique art can be found in intricate design pattern making and prevalent golden leaf work over the media like MDF/Wood/Camel hide (nowadays it is banned to use camel hide). The leading Usta artisans of Bikaner are well-known for multidimensional forms like meenakari and painting using gold foil on camel hide.

Artist Mohammad Yasin Usta son of Usta artist Ahmed Bakhar Ji Usta. He learned the Usta art form from his uncle Shoukat Ji, father and forefathers. His ancestors practised Usta art for a long time in Bikaner, Rajasthan. His maternal uncle Ajmal Hussain Ji got many awards like Rajasthan State Award, Rashtrapati award, and many more. He is practising this art for the last 15 years.

1. About
2. Tools and Raw Materials
3. Making Process
4. Products
5. Video
6. Contact Details

Design Resource

## Usta Art

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Source:

<https://dsource.in/resource/usta-art/about>



Artist Mohammad Yasin Usta.



Usta art types of frames.

1. About
2. Tools and Raw Materials
3. Making Process
4. Products
5. Video
6. Contact Details



Bird and animal designs.



Delicacy of Usta art.

Design Resource

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The Heritage of Rajasthan

by

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Source:

<https://dsource.in/resource/usta-art/about>



Flora and fauna design.

1. About
2. Tools and Raw Materials
3. Making Process
4. Products
5. Video
6. Contact Details

Design Resource

## Usta Art

The Heritage of Rajasthan

by

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<https://dsource.in/resource/usta-art/about>



Artist with Rashtrapati award winner Usta artist Ajmal Hussain.



Artist Mohammad showing his artefact collection.



Artist Mohammad with his art.



Artist with his art collection.

1. About
2. Tools and Raw Materials
3. Making Process
4. Products
5. Video
6. Contact Details

Design Resource

## Usta Art

The Heritage of Rajasthan

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## Tools and Raw Materials

The tools and raw materials that are used for Usta art:

- **MDF/Wood:** It is used as a canvas for making Usta art.
- **Sandpaper:** Sanding paper no. 200/400/800 is used to smoothen the surface.
- **Design Templates:** These are used for reference design to be pasted on the working area.
- **Akhbara:** the paste of chemical putty applied on the surface area.
- **Gold Foil:** 24-carat gold foil is used for highlighting the intricate design.
- **Acrylic Colours:** Oil and enamel paints are used to fill the gaps in-between embossing work.
- **Brush:** Different sizes of brushes made of squirrel hair are used for painting.
- **Tracing Paper:** It is used to trace the design pattern on the surface.
- **Charcoal Powder:** It is rubbed on the tracing paper to print the design on the surface.



Acrylic colours and brushes.

1. About
2. Tools and Raw Materials
3. Making Process
4. Products
5. Video
6. Contact Details

Design Resource

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The Heritage of Rajasthan

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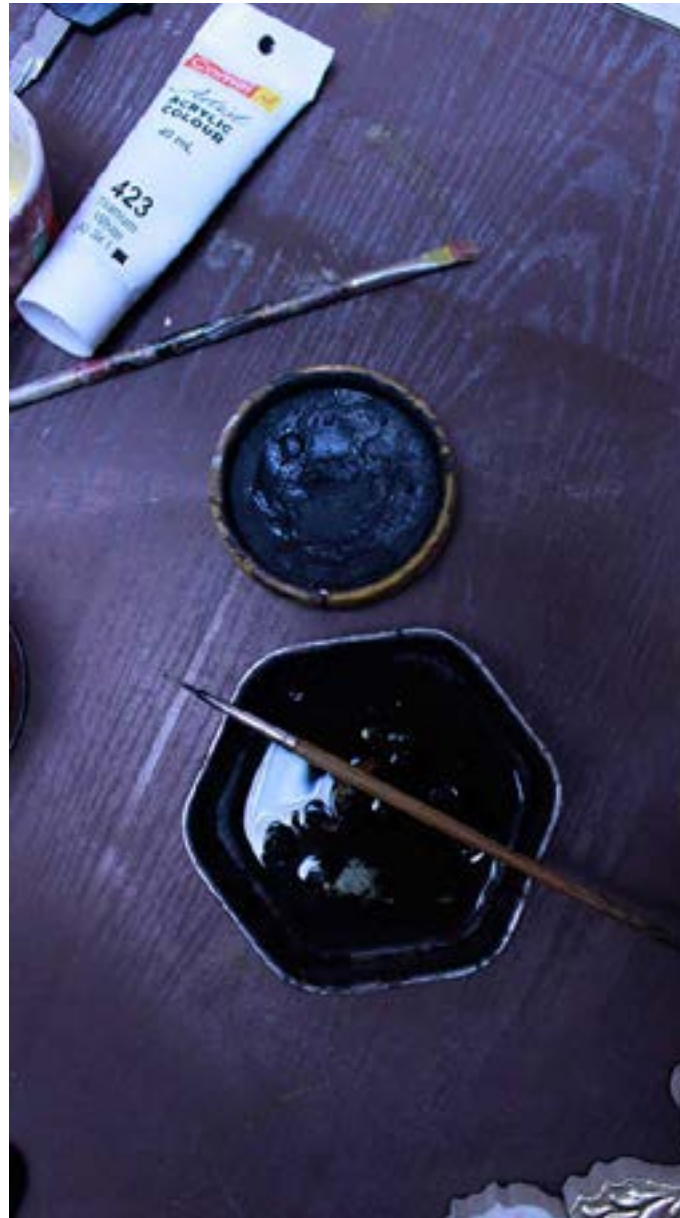
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Source:

<https://dsource.in/resource/usta-art/tools-and-raw-materials>

1. About
2. Tools and Raw Materials
3. Making Process
4. Products
5. Video
6. Contact Details



Black colour is used for the outline.



Squirrel hair brushes.

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## Usta Art

The Heritage of Rajasthan

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Black colour and small size brush are used to outline the design.



Chemical Putty.



Gold Foil.



Golden yellow colour applied on the surface.

1. About
2. Tools and Raw Materials
3. Making Process
4. Products
5. Video
6. Contact Details



Design Resource

## Usta Art

The Heritage of Rajasthan

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White base colour applied on the surface.



Acrylic paints.



Base frames.

1. About
2. Tools and Raw Materials
3. Making Process
4. Products
5. Video
6. Contact Details

Design Resource

## Usta Art

The Heritage of Rajasthan

by

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IDC, IIT Bombay

Source:

<https://dsource.in/resource/usta-art/tools-and-raw-materials>

1. About
2. Tools and Raw Materials
3. Making Process
4. Products
5. Video
6. Contact Details



Big sized brushes.

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## Usta Art

The Heritage of Rajasthan

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Source:

<https://dsource.in/resource/usta-art/tools-and-raw-materials>



Enamel paints used for Usta art.



Pencils are used to draw designs.



Required materials for Usta art.



Small sized brushes.

1. About
2. Tools and Raw Materials
3. Making Process
4. Products
5. Video
6. Contact Details

Design Resource

## Usta Art

The Heritage of Rajasthan

by

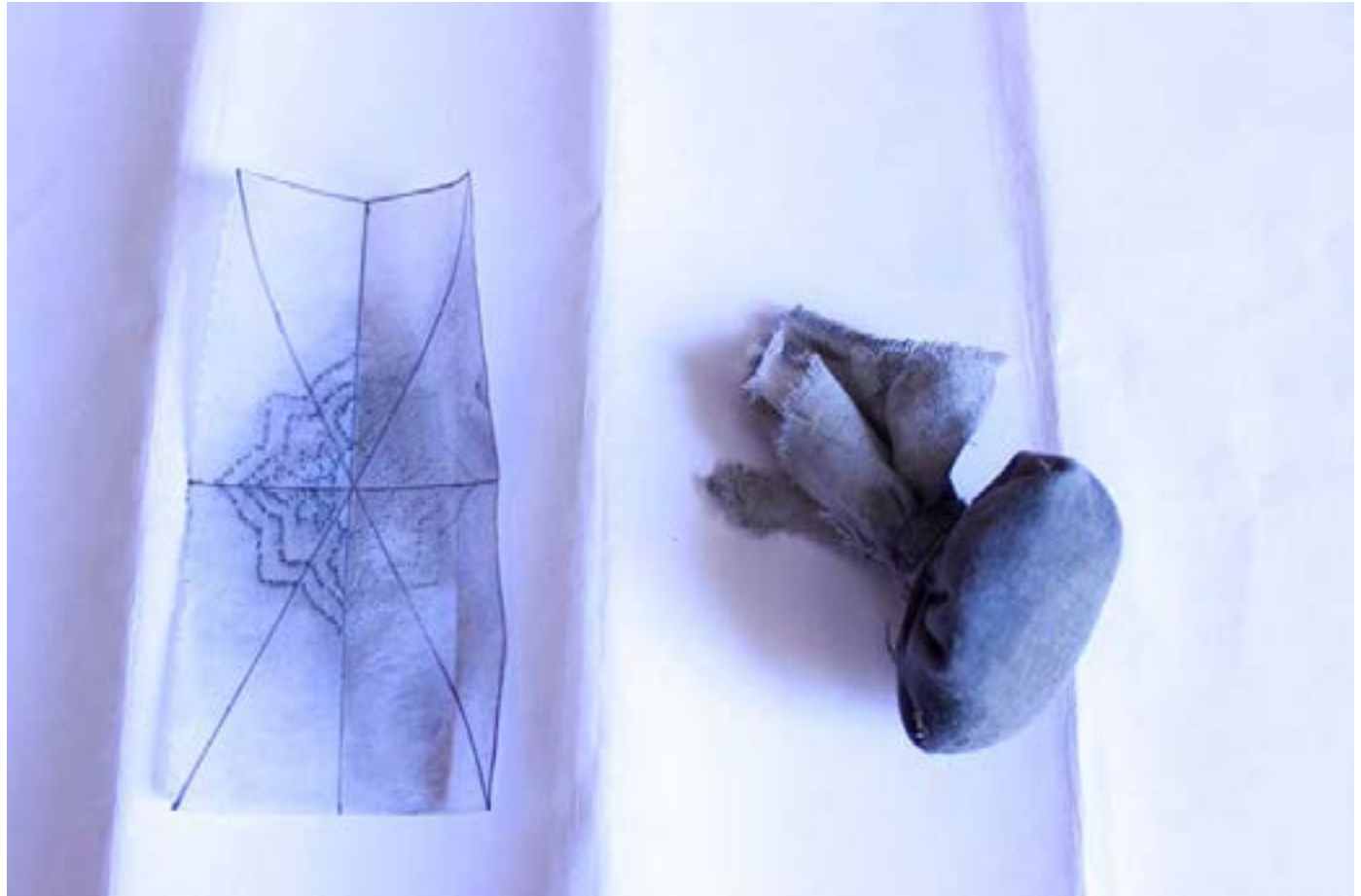
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Source:

<https://dsource.in/resource/usta-art/tools-and-raw-materials>

1. About
2. Tools and Raw Materials
3. Making Process
4. Products
5. Video
6. Contact Details



Tracing paper and charcoal powder.

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## Usta Art

The Heritage of Rajasthan

by

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Source:

<https://dsource.in/resource/usta-art/making-process>

1. About
2. Tools and Raw Materials
3. Making Process
4. Products
5. Video
6. Contact Details

## Making Process

Usta art is a combination of different techniques. Gold emboss work or Sunehri Munawwati Nakkashi work is completed in many stages.

### Surface Selection:

Earlier Usta art was used to make over the walls, ceilings, and camel hides but nowadays MDF, Wood, Metal, Marble, and Brickwall can be painted. The surface is selected and prepared according to the requirement.

### Surface Preparation:

Preparation needs attention to smoothen well and no loose particles to exist over the surface. It is done by sanding with higher grades of sanding paper no. 200/400/800. Afterwards, the surface is painted with primer and let it cure well.

### Drawing / Template Pasting:

Usually, artists use templates if the design pattern has repetitive work. Sometimes they need to put extra effort to fix the design if the design is totally fresh. The artisans draw intricate design patterns over the media.

### Design Tracing:

Sometimes charcoal powder is rubbed on the tracing paper to print the design on the surface. Then the artist can start directly working on it.

### Base Colouring / aka "Akhbara":

Now the design has to be painted with the lighter shade. While the colour cures the paste of chemical putty, this is readily available in the market nowadays. But earlier putty was made with a mixture of gum, naushadar, pot clay and jaggery ingredient.

### Embossing:

In the previous step, the putty has to lay over the designing part which needs to be embossed. After embossing, leave it to dry for a few hours.

### Laying Yellow base coat for gold foil:

After the well dried embossed putty; two coats of yellow enamel paint are applied which acts as a base coat for gold foil work. The artisan makes sure that after performing any colouring step he leaves the artefacts for a couple of hours to dry uniformly.

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### Gold Leaf work (the culminating step of art):

The desired part of the intricate design is layered with 24-carat gold foil over the yellow-painted space. Thereafter black pointed brush is used to draw the outline for every single pattern and the remaining negative space is filled with vibrant colours artist especially uses green and red colours.



MDF is cut and smoothed for a base of Usta art.



Designs are hand-drawn or stencil is used.



Design drawn with pencil.



After putty, it is left to dry.

1. About
2. Tools and Raw Materials
3. Making Process
4. Products
5. Video
6. Contact Details

Design Resource

## Usta Art

The Heritage of Rajasthan

by

Tej Prakash Jangid and Sanmati Hosure

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Source:

<https://dsource.in/resource/usta-art/making-process>



Chemical putty is used to emboss the design.



Design after applying putty.



White colour is applied as a base colour.



Golden yellow colour is applied before applying gold foil.

1. About
2. Tools and Raw Materials
3. Making Process
4. Products
5. Video
6. Contact Details

Design Resource

## Usta Art

The Heritage of Rajasthan

by

Tej Prakash Jangid and Sanmati Hosure

IDC, IIT Bombay

Source:

<https://dsource.in/resource/usta-art/making-process>



24-carat gold foil is used to highlight the embossing.



Gold embossing.



Black colour is used to outline the design.



Colouring in process.

1. About
2. Tools and Raw Materials
3. Making Process
4. Products
5. Video
6. Contact Details



Design Resource

## Usta Art

The Heritage of Rajasthan

by

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IDC, IIT Bombay

Source:

<https://dsource.in/resource/usta-art/making-process>

1. About
2. Tools and Raw Materials
3. Making Process
4. Products
5. Video
6. Contact Details



Red colour is used to fill the design gap.



The finished Usta art product.

Design Resource

## Usta Art

The Heritage of Rajasthan

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Source:

<https://dsource.in/resource/usta-art/products>

## Products

Usta art was on its high when adorned by Royal families. Gradually, the demand is decreasing due to its cost factor. As the original 24-carat gold foil is used in this art, not everyone can afford it. Nowadays to meet the market demands, artists switched to using locally available raw materials. Earlier this art was practised only on walls and ceilings. Wood or MDF and other mediums like marble, pots, frames, and boxes are used for making this art. Most visitors bought these artefacts as a souvenir while visiting Bikaner.

Usta art is highly-priced not only because of the amount of gold used in it but also because a lot of kaarigari (craftsmanship) is involved while making this art. For making on the small size of artefact, a minimum of seven days is required. Artists need support from Government to bring this art form in limelight. They need a proper platform to showcase their art.



Usta Art frame.



Usta Art frame.

1. About
2. Tools and Raw Materials
3. Making Process
4. Products
5. Video
6. Contact Details

Design Resource

## Usta Art

The Heritage of Rajasthan

by

Tej Prakash Jangid and Sanmati Hosure

IDC, IIT Bombay

Source:

<https://dsource.in/resource/usta-art/products>

1. About
2. Tools and Raw Materials
3. Making Process
4. Products
5. Video
6. Contact Details



Different types of Usta frames.

Design Resource

## Usta Art

The Heritage of Rajasthan

by

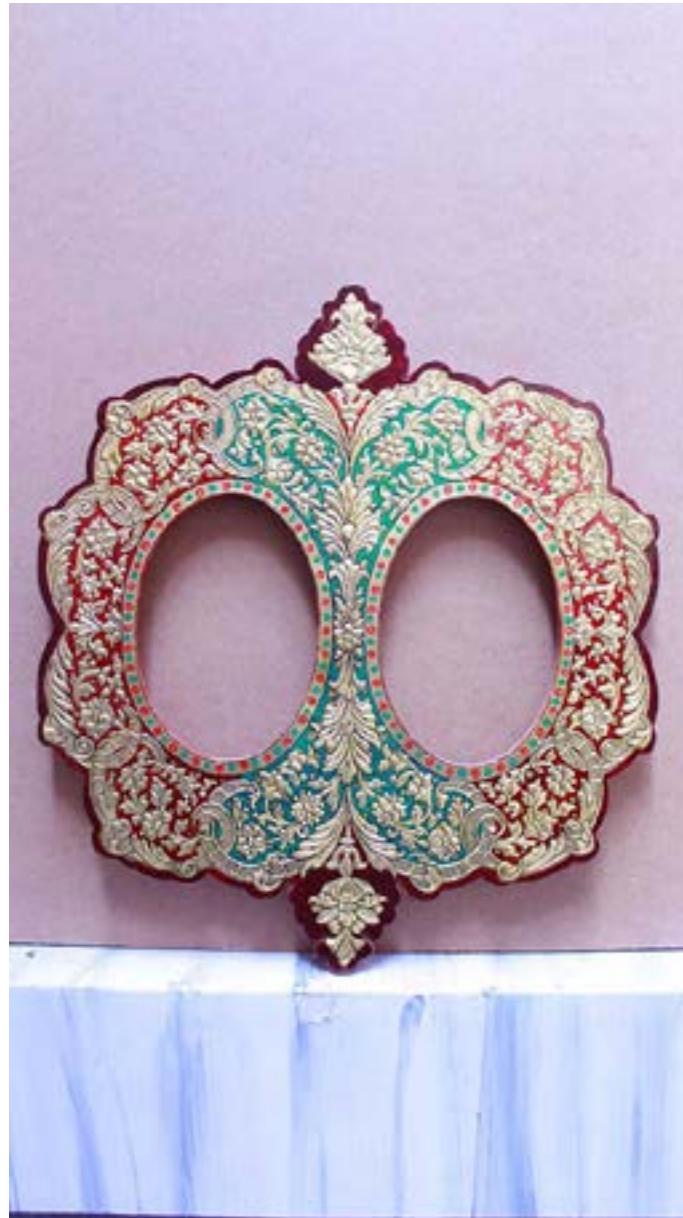
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Source:

<https://dsource.in/resource/usta-art/products>

1. About
2. Tools and Raw Materials
3. Making Process
4. Products
5. Video
6. Contact Details



Usta Art photo frame.



Usta Art frame.

Design Resource

## Usta Art

The Heritage of Rajasthan

by

Tej Prakash Jangid and Sanmati Hosure

IDC, IIT Bombay

Source:

<https://dsource.in/resource/usta-art/products>

1. About
2. Tools and Raw Materials
3. Making Process
4. Products
5. Video
6. Contact Details



Usta Art frame.



Usta Art photo frame.

Design Resource

## Usta Art

The Heritage of Rajasthan

by

Tej Prakash Jangid and Sanmati Hosure

IDC, IIT Bombay

Source:

<https://dsource.in/resource/usta-art/products>

1. About
2. Tools and Raw Materials
3. Making Process
4. Products
5. Video
6. Contact Details



Bottom view of the frame.

Design Resource

## Usta Art

The Heritage of Rajasthan

by

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Source:

<https://dsource.in/resource/usta-art/products>



Bottom view of the frame.



Green Colour highlights gold embossing.



Side panel of frame.



Top view of the frame.

1. About
2. Tools and Raw Materials
3. Making Process
4. Products
5. Video
6. Contact Details

Design Resource

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## Video



Usta Artist Mohamaad Yasin Usta



Making of Usta Art Part 1



Making of Usta Art Part 2

1. About
2. Tools and Raw Materials
3. Making Process
4. Products
5. Video
6. Contact Details



Design Resource

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## Contact Details

This documentation was done by Tej Prakash Jangid and Sanmati Hosure at **IDC, IIT Bombay**.

You can get in touch with him at [nationalcraft.export\[at\]gmail.com](mailto:nationalcraft.export[at]gmail.com)

You can write to the following address regarding suggestions and clarifications:

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1. About
2. Tools and Raw Materials
3. Making Process
4. Products
5. Video
6. Contact Details