

The humble village of Nirona lies 40 kilometres ahead of Bhuj in Gujarat. On a hot summer day, the road to Nirona often treats travellers to optical illusions. However, the village is home to the illusive and alluring art form of Rogan

words // Tania Banerjee

Rogan Art

A unique craft



Nestled in the huddle of whitewashed single-storied homes, in a remote village of Bhuj, Sumar D. Khatri, a national award winner in the year 2003, mastered the Rogan Art.

He sat cross-legged on the floor with a piece of blue fabric spread over his lap. On the heels of his right-hand palm was a wobbly mass of colour. In his left hand was a thin metal stylus. He shoved the stylus over the pigment blot in his right hand in a splaying movement until the correct consistency was reached. Two spirals later, the stylus was tinted with colour tapering off at the end. With a deft touch, he glided the stylus over the cloth on his lap, without ever touching it. The thread of paint dangling from the stylus weaved intricate fine lines. Using only his

artistic imagination as a guide, he gave shape to the design on the textile with a free hand. With great skill, he then folded the cloth and took an impression of the artwork creating a mirror image of the motif.

"The impression must be done within two hours of completing the pattern, otherwise the colour would not stick", says Sumar.

The craft is ready for market once the painted piece of fabric is dried under the sun for a day. Items like tablecloths and wall hangings form majority of the canvas on which Rogan Art is painted. No matter how often the clothes are washed, the colours never bleed. The mineral colours used for the art is sourced from Ahmedabad and stored in water to prevent drying.

Rogan art, which travelled to India from Persia is being kept alive in the far-flung village of Nirona in the Kutch district of Gujarat solely by this family. 'Rogan' in Persian language means oil and the paint is made using castor oil. Castor is a crop commonly grown in the Kutch region of Gujarat and the artists source it from local farmers. Castor oil is processed in forest for two days and on the third day it reaches the desirable consistency fit to be used for the art form. This jelly-like daub is called Rogan.

The ten male members of the Khatri family, Sumar, his three brothers, three cousin brothers, one uncle and two nephews are the sole propagators of this art. The art has lived in their family for more than 300 years, making them the



eighth generation torchbearers. They live and work together on the same plot of land tirelessly giving demonstrations to the steady stream of curious visitors — tourists, journalists, writers and students.

Majority of the visitors are students who visit in the hope of learning something new and completing their university assignments. During Rann Utsav, which is held in the months of November-February, the Khatri

household handles a daily footfall of around 300-400 guests.

Earlier, the local communities used to buy Rogan Art pieces for wedding ceremonies. The motifs in those days, would be much thicker. Gradually, Rogan Art failed to win the price competition after the introduction of machine-made prints. The artists migrated to cities and engaged themselves in menial jobs. The story of Khatri family was no different. The decline of Rogan

The impression must be done within two hours of completing the pattern, otherwise the colour would not stick



Image courtesy: Tania Banerjee

pitstop

Rogan Art is believed to have originated in Persia some 400 years ago and was traditionally used to embellish the bridal trousseau.



The 'rogan' has to be prepared by heating Castor Oil to boiling point over three days, cooling it and then as it thickens, mixing in appropriate amount of colours.



During Rann Utsav 2006, Abdulgafur gifted the then Chief Minister of Gujarat, Narendra Modi, a piece of fabric with Rogan Art

Rogan painting using vegetable dyes is made by only one family of Nirona Village

Art crippled them financially. However, unlike others, they never completely gave up on the craft.

In 1985, under the patronage of Sumar's elder brother Abdulgafur D. Khatri, Rogan Art got a fresh lease of life. During Rann Utsav 2006, Abdulgafur gifted the then Chief Minister of Gujarat, Narendra Modi, a piece of fabric with Rogan Art. After becoming the Prime Minister of India, Narendra Modi soon returned the favour by choosing to gift a Rogan Art piece, 'Tree of Life', to Barack Obama, the-then President of USA. This event placed the obscure village of Nirona on the world map.

UNIQUENESS OF THE CRAFT

"Every design that we paint is

unique. It is impossible for us to replicate the exact same sketch or bring out many copies of the same design", explains Sumar. "Price depends on the complexity of the design. Some articles take one-two days whereas some, like sarees, take multiple months. Currently we do not produce more than 3-4 sarees per year", mentioned Sumar. Handbags and purses with minimal Rogan art cost around ₹500. Price of wall hangings with intricate work can shoot up as high as ₹30,000.

As Rogan faces the threat of extinction, Abdulgafur, popularly known as Gafur bhai, has taken upon himself the task of teaching the technique to 300 people, including a group of 200 girls,

from his village to pass on the skill and knowledge of the art form with a view to meet the burgeoning demand of the Rogan Art products in the market. This has breathed fresh life into the dying art.

The shelves and walls of the workshop of Khatri brothers are adorned with 15 state and national-level awards, and a collection of artists' pictures with celebrities. Many rich and famous personalities are now clients of the Khatri family.

Recently, they even launched their products online. After centuries of obscurity, Rogan artists have finally got the much needed recognition and a bright future seems imminent. ✨