

Commercialisation and the Structural Transformation of an Indigenous Visual Tradition: A Critical Political-Economy Analysis of Warli Art

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Abstract

This paper presents a political-economy critique of the commodification of Warli painting, a tribal mural tradition practised in Maharashtra, India. Commercialisation has intensified since the mid-1970s, as Warli painting transformed from an improvised ritual tradition centred on home and village life into an art commodity with burgeoning regional and global markets in tourism and international art. With forty-five interviews and formal analysis of sixty paintings produced across three phases of commodification, we find evidence of a significant shift away from complex compositions, detailed iconography, and the use of traditional media, and toward simplification of visual forms, greater uniformity of production, and decorative clarity. Warli art and design constitute a highly unequal field in Bourdieu's sense, where a prestige hierarchy allows a few artists to appropriate most symbolic and economic rewards while the vast majority struggle, and where corporate interests linked to the design/consumer goods market profit from Warli imagery far more than the Warli themselves do. The article argues that formal innovation is not intrinsically opposed to cultural sustainability; rather, the culturally consequential distinction is between innovation that engages the tradition's cosmological and ecological logic and innovation, or reproduction, that merely exploits its surface visual legibility. The article concludes with implications for cultural intellectual property protection, tourism governance, and institutional design.

Keywords: Warli art; commercialisation; cultural political economy; indigenous art markets; cultural appropriation; Bourdieu; field theory.

1. Introduction

The shift of Warli painting from its traditional context as a regional ritual-based visual tradition into a commodity moving in national and international circuits is one of the most significant changes that have occurred in contemporary indigenous Indian art history (Dalmia, 1988; Jain, 1998; Appadurai, 1986). Since the mid-1970s, this transition has accelerated across every platform, from unique gallery works to mass-produced consumer goods, generating substantial economic opportunity alongside serious and unevenly distributed cultural risk. This article undertakes a critical political-economy analysis of that transformation, examining its visual, economic, and institutional dimensions in order to establish what has changed, why, who has benefited, and what the implications are for the tradition's long-term cultural sustainability.

The analysis integrates visual-formal, socio-economic, and cultural-sustainability levels of enquiry, drawing on fieldwork comprising 50 structured interviews with Warli artists, government officials, NGO workers, gallery owners, and craft entrepreneurs, supplemented by systematic visual analysis of a sample of 50 artworks and published economic and policy data. The argument proceeds through five themes: the changing visual trends of contemporary Warli art; the structuring influence of market forces; the modes of commercial motif adaptation; the institutional and governmental framework; and the consequences for authenticity and indigenous identity.

2. Theoretical Framework: Field Theory and Cultural Capital

The analysis is organised around Bourdieu's (1993) field theory, which conceptualises a cultural market as a structured space defined by the unequal distribution of economic, cultural, and symbolic capital among its participants. Applied to the Warli art market, this framework directs attention to the mechanisms by which dominant positions, occupied by a small number of high-prestige artists, prominent galleries, and major craft-promotion institutions, accumulate symbolic capital that compounds across transactions, while subordinate positions, occupied by the great majority of practising artists, are structurally confined to price-suppressed, commercially standardised production. Alongside these approaches, this article draws upon Throsby's (2001, 2010) concepts of tangible and intangible cultural capital, which enable this study to tease apart the tangible growth of the market for Warli-style objects from the intangible question of whether expansion of that market allows the culture's cosmological and ecological knowledge traditions to persist or erodes them. The article also employs Appadurai's (1986) idea of the social life of commodities to frame the passage of Warli motifs into commodity form, that is, from ritual objects to tradable signs.

3. Methodology

This research utilized semi-structured interviews of fifty informants including artists, government officials, NGO representatives, gallery owners, and craft entrepreneurs based in Palghar district and Mumbai along with formal visual analysis of fifty purposively sampled works of art separated into three groups based on period of production: traditional ritual murals created prior to 1970, early commercial (1970-1995), and contemporary commercial (1995-present) artworks. Through coding each work along the same set of visual traits, including primary surface and pigment, brush/tool used, colour scheme, compositional logic, deity depicted, iconographic complexity, scale/production methods, social function, and intended audience, the formal analysis allowed visual change across the three periods to be compared systematically. Interview transcripts were coded for themes that elucidate market processes and institutional conditions responsible for observed trends in practice.

4. Findings

4.1 The Directional Transformation of Visual Form

The formal analysis confirms a consistent directional shift across the three production periods, away from compositional complexity, iconographic richness, and material specificity, and towards visual simplification, material standardisation, and decorative legibility. The most fundamental change is the migration of the painting surface from the ritual mud wall, prepared with a geru (red ochre) ground and created within a specific ceremonial occasion, to portable and increasingly digital surfaces, a material shift that carries semiotic consequences well beyond questions of technique (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). Table 1 summarises the principal findings of the formal analysis.

Table 1
Summary of the formal analysis

Visual characteristic	Traditional ritual murals (pre-1970)	Early commercial (1970–1995)	Contemporary commercial (1995–present)
Primary surface	Mud wall (Geru ground)	Handmade paper	Commercial paper, canvas, fabric, digital media
Compositional principle	Mandala / centripetal (Lagnachauk logic)	Centripetal; some narrative extension	Variable; often decorative or design-grid format
Deity representation	Central; elaborate iconographic programme	Present but reduced	Absent or marginalised in most productions
Social function	Sacred ritual instrument; communal	Aesthetic / cultural object	Commercial brand; decorative commodity

Note. Author's own visual analysis (fieldwork 2019-2024), n = 50 artworks across three period groups.

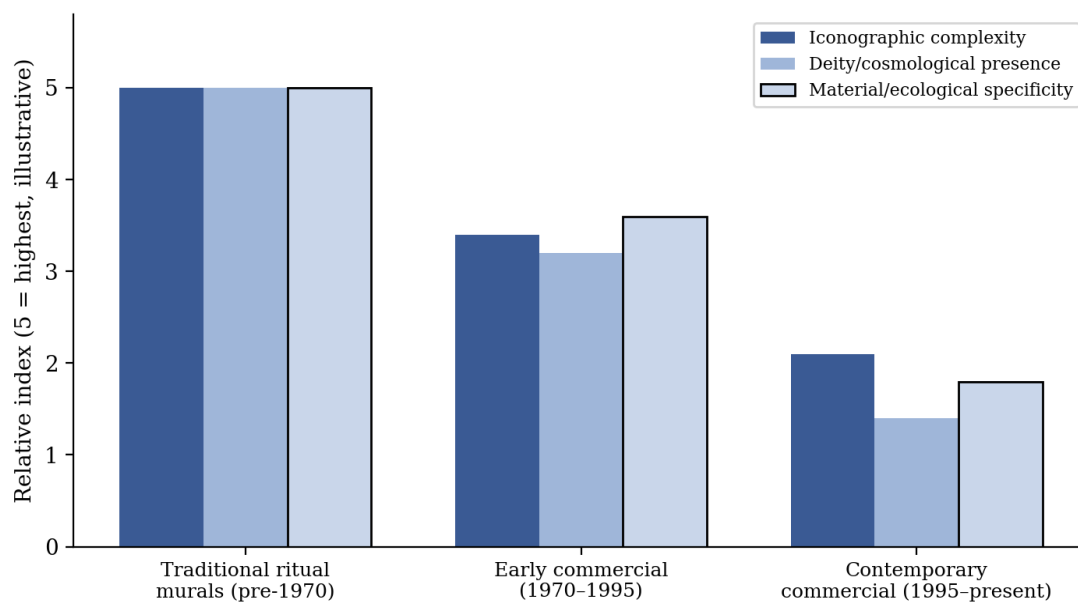


Figure 1. Directional trend in visual and symbolic depth across three Warli art production periods, based on the formal analysis reported in Table 1 (illustrative relative index constructed by the author from the coded artwork sample).

4.2 Market Structure and Stratified Value Capture

The market for contemporary Warli art operates across at least four distinguishable segments: the global gallery and auction market for individually authored, formally ambitious works; the domestic craft and souvenir market catering to tourists and the corporate gift trade; the design and consumer-goods market incorporating Warli motifs into commercial products; and the rapidly growing digital market for Warli-inspired content. Each segment exerts distinctive pressures on visual character and production conditions (Phillips & Steiner, 1999; Appadurai, 1986).

The gallery and auction segment places the highest premium on individually authored, formally ambitious works, and prices are determined primarily by an artist's institutional reputation and exhibition history; fewer than five Warli practitioners, most notably Jivya Soma Mashe, have meaningfully participated in this segment. The domestic craft and souvenir market is the largest segment by number of participating artists but is characterised by intense price suppression: of twenty-five artists interviewed for the present study, only three reported annual art-related incomes exceeding one lakh rupees, while the majority reported incomes below twenty thousand rupees, barely above the rural poverty line (Srinivasan et al., 2018). The design and consumer-goods segment generates the largest aggregate commercial value of any segment but is the most thoroughly disconnected from the community's cultural and economic life: Warli motifs function there as a branding asset signalling artisanal authenticity, generating substantial revenue for commercial enterprises while the community of origin typically receives no compensation, attribution, or benefit

(Coombe, 1998; WIPO, 2017). Figure 2 illustrates the resulting price gradient across market segments.

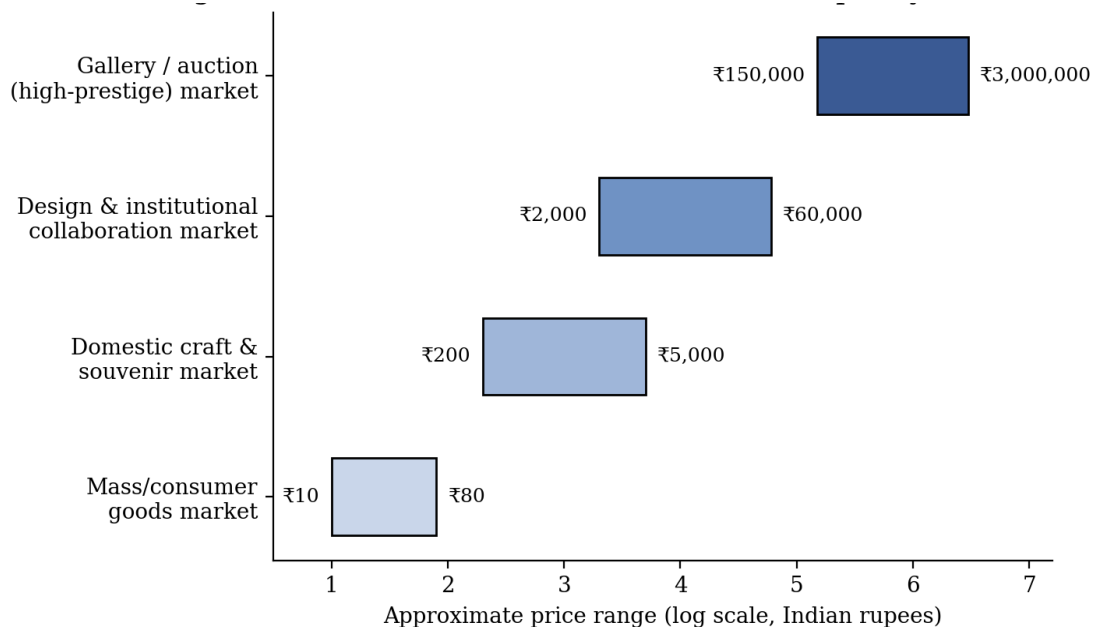


Figure 2. Stratified price structure of the contemporary Warli art market, illustrating the approximate price range of representative works across four market segments (constructed by the author from fieldwork and documentary price data; figures are illustrative order-of-magnitude ranges rather than precise averages).

This stratified structure generates new forms of social differentiation within a community whose internal social organisation was historically relatively egalitarian: a small number of recognised artists, disproportionately male and disproportionately connected to national institutional networks, acquire cultural authority extending well beyond their economic position, while the majority of practising artists remain economically marginal despite comparable technical competence (Bourdieu, 1993; Xaxa, 1999). The phenomenon the study terms cultural mimicry, the production of commercially indistinguishable Warli-style work by non-Warli artisans trained through government craft programmes, compounds this structural inequality by expanding supply within an already price-suppressed market while further detaching the visual vocabulary from its cultural substance (Scafidi, 2005; Smith, 1999).

4.3 Modes of Motif Adaptation

Commercial adaptation of traditional Warli motifs spans a spectrum from culturally grounded creative extension to indiscriminate surface-level extraction. At one end, the most accomplished contemporary artists demonstrate that formal innovation is not intrinsically opposed to cultural depth: recontextualization of established motifs within compositions of great complexity, deployment of traditional compositional structures for explicit contemporary social commentary, spatial

redployment of the tradition's visual grammar into new institutional and urban contexts, and systematic adaptive expansion into cross-disciplinary design collaboration each represent culturally coherent innovation, generating new meaning from established convention in the manner Panofsky (1955) identifies as characteristic of a living iconographic tradition. At the other end of the spectrum, the more prevalent commercial practice of contextual redeployment without cultural grounding applies recognisable visual elements to new subjects and formats with no engagement with, or even awareness of, their symbolic and ritual associations, preserving the iconic legibility of the sign while allowing its indexical and symbolic dimensions to atrophy (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006; Gell, 1998).

5. Discussion

The findings support three principal conclusions of relevance to cultural policy and institutional design. First, the relationship between visual innovation and cultural sustainability is not one of simple opposition: the evidence does not support strategies of formal conservatism as a protective response to commercialisation. The most culturally significant contemporary works are precisely those that engage most creatively with the tradition's cosmological and ecological logic, not those that most closely replicate pre-commercial convention. The relevant distinction for policy purposes is therefore not between innovation and tradition, but between culturally grounded and culturally ungrounded modes of engagement with the visual vocabulary.

Second, the extreme-value asymmetry documented in the design and consumer-goods segments constitutes the central political-economy problem of the tradition's contemporary situation, and existing legal protections, principally the Geographical Indication registration for Warli painting, are inadequate to address it. Strengthening cultural intellectual property protection along the lines advocated by the WIPO Intergovernmental Committee on traditional cultural expressions, combined with benefit-sharing and attribution requirements for commercial use, represents the most direct policy response to this asymmetry (WIPO, 2017; Coombe, 1998).

Third, the phenomenon of cultural mimicry indicates that government training programmes, however well-intentioned, can inadvertently compound the market pressures that generate cultural homogenisation by expanding the supply of commercially competent yet culturally disconnected production. This suggests that institutional training and market-development interventions should be redesigned around cultural depth criteria rather than technical reproduction alone, a conclusion consistent with the broader cultural sustainability literature on indigenous art governance (Throsby, 2010; UNESCO, 2003).

6. Conclusion

This study has presented a critical political-economy analysis of the commercialisation of Warli art, documenting a consistent directional shift in visual and symbolic depth across three production periods and a steeply stratified market structure in which economic and symbolic value accrues disproportionately to a small number of high-prestige artists and to commercial enterprises operating at a considerable remove from the community of origin. The analysis demonstrates that formal innovation, when exercised by culturally grounded practitioners, is compatible with, and indeed constitutive of, cultural sustainability, whereas the more consequential threat lies in the decontextualised extraction of surface visual conventions by market actors without cultural knowledge or accountability. These findings point towards specific and actionable policy priorities: the strengthening of cultural intellectual property protection, the reform of institutional training criteria, and the development of market mechanisms that reward, rather than merely tolerate, culturally grounded production.

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