

Art Conservation in India: Challenges, Strategies, and Ethnographic Perspectives in Artworks by Sheela Gowda

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Image



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While conservation practice in India faces challenges on many levels, much contemporary artwork presents a unique set of challenges distinct from traditional art forms due to its relatively recent age, conceptual complexity, and innovative material usage loaded with cultural symbolism. This article aims to explore conservation methodologies and nuanced decision-making based not only on technical expertise, but also on cultural understanding.

Contemporary Indian art, deeply rooted in the country's rich artistic heritage dating back to the Indus Valley civilization, boasts a dynamic, engaged, and innovative character. Artists, both

emerging and established, have crafted a distinct visual and conceptual identity that transcends colonial influences and Western art.

In this article, we introduce the case of *Untitled* (1992), a mixed-media series by Sheela Gowda which presents a microcosm of the challenges, strategies, and ethnographic considerations intrinsic to conservation-restoration of contemporary art in India.

Sheela Gowda (b. Bhadravati, India, 1957) is one of the most iconic figures in contemporary Indian art, employing unconventional materials intertwined with cultural symbolism in her creations. Her use of materials resonates with broader themes of labor, societal hierarchies, and cultural identity, inviting viewers to engage with the complexities of contemporary Indian society (Smith, 2009). Her artworks have been included into the collections of Tate Modern; MOMA; and showcased at the biennials of São Paulo (2014), Kochi (2012), Venice (2009), as well as Documenta 12 (2007).

Contemporary Art Conservation Landscape in India

While the research in contemporary art conservation has seen significant growth since the 1990s, this has still not yet prepared conservators to deal with the unique and complex cases of contemporary art (Marçal, 2012, p. 19).

Additionally in India, many conservator-restorers are not equipped with enhanced infrastructure and strict training programs in conventional methods compared to western countries. While they are constantly improving their conservation approaches, matching ICOM's code and ethics, they are equally endowed with a deep understanding of the cultural context, contemporary art history, and skills borrowed from artists and craftsmen, aligning themselves with an ethnographic approach.

Given this unique situation, contemporary art conservation in India stands at a crossroads with an opportunity to find a balance between boundaries of conventional methods and concepts, cultural and ethical complexities. The keys lie in a holistic approach in preserving the artist's intent, cultural relevance, and employing ethical conservation and restoration practices.

With emerging academic programs, workshops, institutional collaborations and exchanges, funding, and grants, it is beginning to gain momentum. Some examples are the INTACH conservation institutes, Tata Trusts Art Conservation Initiative, LLFCC, Nagaur, ICFP by Andrew Mellon Foundation, and various conservation centers at Mehrangarh Museum Trust, Jodhpur, CSMVS Museum, Mumbai, IGNCA, New Delhi, and MAP in Bengaluru.

***Untitled* (1992) - A story of a culturally laden case study**

Commencing her career with figurative oil paintings, Sheela Gowda swiftly identified limitations within the medium, particularly during the tumultuous 1990s when India underwent significant economic, political, and cultural shifts. Starting from wall-based works, her practice later expanded into three-dimensional pieces and installations. The "Cow Dung" series, *Untitled* (1992), marks a turning point in her artistic development.

Sheela Gowda approached INTACH Conservation Institute, Bengaluru to restore this series for her retrospective exhibition at Lenbachhaus Museum, Munich, Germany in 2020. The artworks had suffered severe deformation and mold infestation due to flooding. Although the artworks were brought back to Bengaluru, India after ensuring they were completely dry, several conservation issues had already manifested by then, leaving them fragile.

Most contemporary artworks received at INTACH, Bengaluru adhere to traditional materials, allowing for conventional treatment approaches. However, the *Untitled* series presented a distinctive and challenging opportunity due to its unconventional material usage and the conceptual and cultural values it embodies.

Understanding the importance of composite materials

The three *Untitled* (1992) artworks are composed of cow dung, Kumkum, Rangoli powder (calcium carbonate), neem oil (*Azadirachta indica*), packaging paper (tetra pack), jute, charcoal, and used fabric.

Cow dung, constituting a large portion of the artworks' surfaces, is a material that resonates with history, ritual, economic, and gendered subtexts and overtones (Millar, 2004). When dried, it is used as fuel in rural areas. When mixed with scents, it is used as incense in religious practices. Rangoli and Kumkum powder are used by Indian women for different ceremonial occasions and have their own contextual and religious significance. Neem oil is also used for multiple medicinal purposes and as a traditional insecticide in India.

The understanding of these intricate cultural connections was indispensable in preserving the essence and authenticity of Gowda's artworks.

Challenges & Alterations in the Artworks

Following an initial assessment and discussions at the artist's studio, the artworks were delicately transported to INTACH, Bengaluru, for conservation treatment.

The top surfaces of the artworks feature found objects like charcoal, fabric, cow dung, rangoli powder and other pigments. The original primary supports consisted of paper mounted on a jute layer while wooden strainers served as auxiliary supports at the base.

The flooding had rendered the jute layers brittle and the wooden strainer dislodged. The surface faced several issues including cracks in the cow dung layers, discoloration, loss of pigments, deformations, and insect frass.

Conservation Strategy

The technical examination highlighted the fact that strictly following the traditional conservation approach with absolute notions of "objectivity"—such as authenticity and reversibility—would pose a threat to the artwork. They would have altered the cultural significance of the materials and the artist's intention, thus endangering the integrity of the series. Recent contemporary conservation theories that are based on subjective notions, such as meaning and value, prove to be better tools for dealing with the need to compromise and, therefore, cope with these

challenges (Muñoz-Viñas, 2020).

Intervention method

The primary objective of the treatments was to prevent further deterioration and to stabilize the structural condition of the artworks allowing them to withstand transportation and display in Munich.

Dry and solvent cleaning methods were tested and applied to remove dust and debris from all the artworks. To retain the intended meaning of the artworks, a blend of cow dung and neem oil was employed to fill losses following the artist's recommended technique. Using cow dung and neem oil to treat the artworks was more an ethical decision than a technical one, acknowledging the materials' artistic and cultural relevance while addressing preservation needs.

The three artworks presented almost identical problems. Controlled humidity was used to deal with surface deformation of paper from the center to outer edges. As the final jute layer and wooden strainer in each artwork was beyond repair, it was mutually decided to replace those supports in order to save the paper layers. New mounting systems were added for display.

Collaboration with the artist: a key point

Sheela Gowda expressed her keen interest in participating in every decision-making process throughout the project. She provided essential insights into the materials necessary for restoring the areas of loss in the cow dung application. She advised sourcing dung from a specific breed of cows and from those fed only hay, to obtain a dung richer in fiber. The artist interviews, based on available resources (Beerkens et al., 2012), allowed us to strengthen our documentation. Furthermore, bi-weekly meetings, phone calls, and emails generated important information needed to address complex conservation related questions. This project also gave us the knowledge to deal with similar cases going forward; we can now prepare questionnaires for contemporary artists, we know how to conduct an artist interview, we know what documents to collect, how to arrive at a mutual consensus in collaborative decision-making, and how to improvise and adapt traditional approaches in conservation practice in the care of Indian contemporary art.

Balancing artistic intent, cultural significance, and conservation ethics

While the tailored treatment method here goes beyond the limits of what is generally considered minimal intervention, our conservation strategy reflects a thorough examination and understanding of the risks.

We demonstrate our commitment to transparency, professional standards, and ethical decision-making. One must accept that conservation decisions may involve some compromises (Wharton, 2018, p. 62) but may also result in a work's enrichment (van de Vall, 2009, p. 53).

The negotiation between the various stakeholders is crucial for the development of an appropriate conservation strategy (Beerkens et al., 2012, p. 14). Alongside the cultural understanding we happened to inherit, we also collaborated with local community members to arrive at a decision-making consensus.

Embracing an Ethnographic Approach In Contemporary Art Conservation

Contemporary art and ethnographic objects both challenge traditional tenets of conservation as it extends beyond the physical aspect of material (McHugh & Gunnison, 2016). Yet, important divergences exist in conservation ethics and treatment approaches to ethnographic and contemporary art. Sheela Gowda's use of cultural materials and objects demands that conservators grasp not only the technical expertise but also the ethnographic significance in contemporary art conservation.

Alongside our technical and methodological understanding, seeking cross-cultural collaborations from the respective cultural communities proved essential in nuanced decision-making that respected the artist's intent and material cultural contexts.

It is also worth mentioning that there is still a lack of contemporary art conservators in non-Western countries, making global support and collaborative efforts even more crucial for conservation of contemporary art worldwide, beyond Western countries.

In essence, Sheela Gowda's case study allowed us to provide an insight into conservation of contemporary art in India. It stands as an example, emphasizing the paramount importance of cultural sensitivity in contemporary art conservation.

Author Bios

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Nalini Biluka is an independent conservator based in Bengaluru, India. She is specialized in Indian traditional and contemporary painting with an M.A. in conservation from Delhi Institute of Heritage Research. As senior conservator, she contributed to conserving paintings at INTACH, Bengaluru, TIFR, Mumbai, Asiatic Society, Kolkata, Albert House Museum, Jaipur, and IGNCA among others. She received the Andrew Mellon Fellowship in 2021.

Sindhu Nagaraja is a painting conservator, specialized in South Indian traditional art. She holds a master's degree in art history and was a conservation trainee at the INTACH Conservation Institute. As conservator, she has worked at the Karnataka State Museum, MAP Bengaluru and INTACH. Currently she works as paper conservator at NCBS, Bengaluru.

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