

THE SHEKHAWATI PROJECT: A shared mission towards the Conservation of mural art in the Old Town of Rajasthan, India



By Cécile Charpentier, Giovanna Carravieri, Sabine Cotte and Harpreet Tandy

The Shekhawati Project (TSP) is an international association created by a team of conservation experts based in Paris, France in collaboration with an Indian NGO. We are a passionate and committed group of expert conservators, architects and historians, active in India since 2016.

In past years we have offered workshops with the aim to integrate both Indian and international viewpoints on the preservation of the region's mural paintings. Our efforts were focused on raising awareness of urban management issues involving the local community for a sensible re-use of buildings, for promoting long-term durability of the traditional materials and for collaborating with craftsmen who are masters of the ancient artisanal techniques.

OUR STORY

In 2016, connected through our professional activities in France and Italy, we joined together to form a temporary equipe and held a professional on-site consultation in India. Once in Rajasthan, we all fell in love with the beauty, the kindness of the population and the vastness of the region's historical heritage. India, to us, encompasses so many things: history, spirituality, diversity, festivals, craftsmanship, authentic and stunning adornments, traditional foods, brightly coloured fabrics, perfumes, flowers, as well as a high level of modernization. But an enormous amount of conservation work was sorely needed, and the lack of funds available inspired us to envision on-site workshops with a combination of volunteers and interns.

THE SHEKHAWATI REGION

The Shekhawati region in Northern Rajasthan is famous for its frescoes and painted haveli dating from the 19th and early 20th centuries. These exceptional palaces are covered with frescoes and murals on both their interior and exterior walls, creating an extraordinary open-air art gallery—a testament to the great splendour of that era. Just a walk through any of the towns of Shekhawati will transport you back in time. The palatial mansions decorated with glorious painted walls and façades and skilfully engraved doors and gates bear witness to the great wealth of the merchants (marwaris) who owned them. These buildings are a tangible symbol of the then flourishing trade of wool, spices, opium and rice.

Unfortunately, the mid-20th century marks the decline of the region, and the merchant families gradually emigrated to the bigger cities of Delhi, Mumbai and Kolkata. As a result of this, many haveli were abandoned or poorly maintained. Despite the region being recently revitalized by developing tourism, there is a strong need for conservation treatment of haveli murals to avoid their relentless disappearance.

Regrettably the historical palaces are rarely occupied by their owners. The cost of maintenance is very high, and due to the complex inheritance system in India, it is difficult to make conservation decisions even for urgent structural interventions. Harsh climate conditions, poor waste management, lack of urban planning and, often, the use of inappropriate or unsustainable materials don't help.

HAVELI, THEIR WALL PAINTING TECHNIQUE AND ICONOGRAPHY

The Shekhawati's haveli were the result of a unique combination of availability of local materials and skilled labour needed to execute construction. The walls' thickest layers are made of brick prepared from local red clay, stone fragments and dhandhala (calcium-rich hardpan soil). This material was brought from quarries located in nearby towns such as Mandawa, Bissau, Fatehpur or Churu and played a major role in building the haveli.

The painting technique, unique to the region, is called arayish and is very similar to the Italian fresco lustro technique. The images were painted on wet plaster composed of lime, marble powder, powdered seashell, curd and natural pigments and finished when the plaster had set or dried. The outcome is a very smooth surface, which was then polished with an agate stone, giving it a semi-shiny appearance. After the mural dried, final details were then added using a mixture of pigments and lime. Today, only a few craftsmen still practice the arayish technique, which puts it at risk of being lost and disappearing.

Iconography is another element of curiosity and wonder as it depicts Hindu mythology including scenes from the Ramayana (e.g., Hanuman paying respect to Ram and Lakshman) and the Mahabharata (e.g., Krishna stealing Gopi's clothes, machan or ghee from his mother Yashoda). There are also scenes from everyday life, such as a local dance game like dandiya, and historical scenes from the British colonial era (e.g., fighting or marching soldiers, trains, bicycles and cars).

WORKSHOP AND ENVIRONMENT

The Shekhawati Project hosts experienced conservators and students from different conservation programmes worldwide to offer an opportunity for research and developing a better understanding of interventions for this vast painted heritage. Our main concerns are sharing knowledge, comparing techniques and ethics and learning from each other's experience during daily discussions with a constant evaluation of our work and interactions.

The Project came to life with the belief that the conservation of this heritage is an important part of the rehabilitation of the region. These towns' pressing issues of waste management and flooding are directly associated with the vulnerability of the art sites. TSP, in tandem with local managers, hopes to persuade regional administrations to implement urban services and improvements. This action could directly impact the condition of the buildings and their frescoes. The Project advocates for economic change through development of sustainable tourism—in close liaison with local entrepreneurs—to preserve traditional skills and promote an adapted reuse of the buildings in a holistic approach that integrates heritage monuments into the needs of modern life.

CONSERVATION TREATMENT: SCIENTIFIC APPROACH

During the two months of our first workshops in the small town of Fatehpur, we operated on private properties ("Prince Haveli" in Fatehpur, "Gulab Ladia Haveli" in Mandawa) in collaboration with knowledgeable owners and the International Conservation Scientific Lab (Prof.ssa Maria Letizia Amadori, Department DiSPeA, University of Urbino). Together we have been able to collect, in our final reports, a significant amount of information about the original materials and traditional techniques through onsite observation, documentation, datalogger

recording to monitor environmental fluctuations (T-RH) and analysis of samples with non-invasive ED-XRF spectrometer investigation.

An intern, Ilaria Alessi, wrote her dissertation, *Increasing Cultural Awareness Through Analysis of Materials and Techniques*, for her master's degree at Cardiff University, UK (Master on Science in Conservation) in 2021. Her work added precious information about the deterioration phenomena affecting the paintings.

The protocol for the treatment is the result of collective observation, evaluation of data, exchange of experience and numerous testing sessions. We had some especially challenging aspects such as identifying previous interventions in order to establish a designated "original" level as a reference. In this type of scenario, it is more complicated to obtain a clear ethical, historical and aesthetic guideline to define which overpaint to remove or save.

The huge amount of painted wall surface is a huge factor because of work-time issues and the high cost of conservation supplies. For instance, we have debated how to manage the in-painting of vast areas of loss and applying final protection on frescos.

The specific climate conditions, the air pollution and the large surface of the murals led to a compromise between needs and hindrances—a meeting point between the options of advanced products (like nano technology and silicate-based solutions) and local materials and the know-how (local lime-based derivatives and their application, and the recreation of images) of painting craftsmen.

ADVOCACY

Our advocacy activity includes talks and conferences to increase awareness and share knowledge with Indian cultural heritage and conservation associations and institutions such as Sahapedia, an online resource on the arts, culture and heritage; IGNCA (Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts); and Mody University's Architecture Department.

SOCIAL INVOLVEMENT

The social and urban impact that the Shekhawati Project could promote is encouraging. The strong participation of young Indian women at every stage can contribute to their professionalization and broader empowerment. Many young women students left their families for the first time in order to join TSP, finding an opportunity to build strong friendships with peers and colleagues from abroad.

The Project has also been a vehicle for raising awareness of urban management issues through showcasing local conservation sites. Supporting the community for the practical reuse of buildings and the revival of local skills is a more holistic approach which would integrate heritage monuments into the necessities of every-day life. Being aware that urban planning and heritage conservation are intrinsically linked together, we advocate for the region's economic revival through the development of sustainable tourism and propose lobbying local governments to implement protective measures for the monuments, including town infrastructure and waste

management which directly impact the condition of the buildings and their frescoes.

A GLIMPSE INTO THE FUTURE

The pandemic forced TSP to suspend our yearly workshop in 2020. However, we are currently raising funds, hoping to launch a new onsite residency soon, collaborating with the local community as best as possible.

Sharing information about the reopening of TSP workshops will draw attention to the value of this exquisite heritage; to continue to raise awareness, we also support the idea of a permanent local conservation centre with training programmes.

<https://www.theshekhawatiproject.net/>

AUTHOR BIOS

Cécile Charpentier: Founder, French-American Private Practice Conservator, Painting Expert, Graduate of the École du Louvre, Paris (Museology). Master in Cultural Conservation, University of Paris I Panthéon-Sorbonne. Cécile is an admirer of Indian art. She is based in Paris and heads many major restoration sites world-wide and has 30+ years of experience.

Giovanna Carravieri: Co-founder, Private Practice Conservator, specialized in Italian frescoes. Graduate of the School of Cremona, Italy. Giovanna studied art history at the University of La Sapienza in Rome and at the University of Paris IV-Sorbonne. She is based in San Francisco where she founded "Kalos Art Conservation". She worked as a conservator for numerous sites in Rome, Florence, the Vatican City and Paris, and has 30+ years of experience.

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Sabine Cotte: Co-founder, French-Australian Private Practice Conservator, based in Melbourne, graduated from Institut National du Patrimoine (Paris), ICCROM (Rome) and has a PhD from University of Melbourne, where she also teaches in Conservation and Art Curatorship. She has led several workshops in the Himalayan Region for UNESCO, ICCROM and private NGOs, focusing on training local people in conservation and in disaster recovery, and has 30+ years of experience.

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Harpreet Tandy: Co-founder, Indian-Italian Private Practice Conservator, based in Melbourne where she co-founded Delta Conservation. She has a master's degree in wall paintings, stone, stucco and architectural surfaces conservation from SUPSI (Scuola Universitaria della Svizzera Italiana), Switzerland after a bachelor's degree from Italy (Conservation department in "G.B. Cignaroli, Verona). She worked as a conservator on several projects on wall paintings and historical buildings in Italy, Switzerland, India and Australia.

(Watch the video and see the full article in the October-November 2023 "News in Conservation" Issue 98, p. 18-23)