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From Kalighat To The World

The Art of Kalam Patua

DISCOVER MAP

Kalam Patua is an artist from West Bengal. He is a postmaster by day but his real passion lies in painting.

Patua's art is special because through it, he carries forward a special legacy handed down to him by his ancestors.

THINK.
Read his name again and try to break it down.

Do you know what *Kalam* means? What language is it from?* What might the second word *Patua* mean?

*Kalam refers to a pen in many Indian languages.

Image: Facebook page of Kalam Patua

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Kalam Patua was born in a community called the *patuas* – the name reflecting the fact that they painted on scrolls called *patas*. Here is a detail of such a scroll.

LOOK CLOSELY.
Do you recognise the story that is painted? Can you name all the characters from this story?

What does the layout of this painting look like?

*This is an episode from the famous Indian epic, Ramayana. Seen here are Rama, Lakshmana, Sita and Ravana, some of the main characters of the story.

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LEARN MORE.
Patuas were storytellers in West Bengal who travelled from village to village, unrolling and singing from their scrolls.

You can learn more about them in our resource pack called **On A Roll!**!
Download it here.

If this were a film poster, would do you think the film would be about?

With time, the patuas moved to small sheets from scrolls and began selling their paintings at a place called Kalighat, giving birth to **Kalighat Paintings.**

Kalighat is a very famous area of Kolkata. Do you know which state Kolkata is in? Can you point it out in this map?

Can you name three things that is associated with the city of Kolkata?

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Kalighat painters initially made images of gods and religious stories, before moving on to everyday scenes and their experiences in the big city.

Much like online bloggers of today, they were chroniclers of their city and time!

Here is a Kalighat painting depicting a Hindu god. Do you know his name?*

Which two species combine to make this hybrid god?

*This is the Hindu deity Ganesha, identified by an elephant head over a human body.

Coming from this incredible community of painters and storytellers, Kalam Patua also makes paintings of gods and of religious stories.
Here is an example.

THINK.
Do you know who this is?
What does this god usually hold, in his now empty hands?

*This is the Hindu deity Krishna identified by a blue body, a peacock feather on his head and a flute (which is symbolised by his gesture here!).

Why do you think the background of this artwork is plain?

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Here is another painting by Patua, but this time it does not show gods or religious stories. What do you think it shows instead?

LOOK CLOSELY.

- What is the item in the man's hand?
- What do you think is going on between these people?
- In this Kalighat painting, there is *another* Kalighat painting! Do you see it?*

If the woman spoke, what might she say?

*Kalighat paintings were often used as home decor or in personal shrines. Here, for example, is a Kalighat painting of Ganesha on the wall, perhaps serving both purposes.

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This painting looks somewhat similar to the last one, but there are some minor differences.

REFLECT.

- What do you think is the occupation of the seated man?
- Have you seen shops like this in real life?
- Do you know where the entry to the shop is? Why do you think it's there?

Patua derives a lot of inspiration from traditional Kalighat paintings, and if you look closely you can find many similarities.

COMPARE AND CONTRAST

Can you compare these two images and list down the similarities you see? If you find any differences, make a list of those too. Which one do you think is made by Kalam Patua. Why did you choose that one?

A

Collection: Victoria & Albert Museum,London

B

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If you chose image ‘B’ for the last question, you are absolutely right! This is the one made by Kalam Patua.

LOOK CLOSELY.

- What do you think the man is doing? Have you seen something like this in real life?
- What might be the thing that the woman is holding?
- Can you find a small piece of jewellery that the man is wearing?

*The man here is a professional ear cleaner! He is picking wax out of the woman’s ear, while she smokes a hookah; and the for the jewellery he’s wearing, check out his foot! This job does not exist anymore, but at one point of time it used to be a rather common practice. Do you know of other professions like this that have gone out of fashion?

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CREATE. WHAT WILL PEOPLE FROM 3020 THINK OF THIS?

As we saw, ear cleaning was a *legit* job for people in the old days! Do you think you would have liked to be an ear cleaner? Even if you said yes, I think we can agree that today, it sounds kind of strange and bizzare! Can you think of jobs that exist today, that people a hundred years from now might find similarly weird or unnecessary?

As a first step, think of a profession from today which people in the future might find strange, ridiculous or hard to believe existed. Then list out reasons why you think so. Now think of how you might visualise this profession for future generations.

Do a couple of rough layouts for your artwork and transfer the final design along with a write-up about the profession, why you think it might no longer exist one day and how you have tried to represent it visually.

Don’t forget to email us your works at education@map-india.org or DM us on Instagram at @mapbangalore!

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As you already noticed, Kalam Patua's art has some characteristics in the style of Kalighat paintings. The recognisable style includes:

- Creating volume by the use of brushstrokes.
- Quick and flat application of colours.
- Fish-shaped eyes.
- White used for highlights.

Can you spot all these features in this work by him? What else do you see?

Patua also has a step-by-step process of making his paintings.

- **Step 1:** A rough pencil sketch to decide the layout.
- **Step 2:** Outlining with a darker colour like black ink.
- **Step 3:** Filling in the colours.

How many of the three steps do you see in this drawing?

If you had to title this drawing, what would you call it?

Here you can see all three steps of pencil, ink and colours. Can you spot all the additions Patua made in step 3, when using colours? Head to our **Colouring Sheet** extra to give his line drawings your own special touch

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A very common subject of Kalam Patua's work is human figures, especially those of women.

Here too, he takes inspiration from Kalighat painters on how to represent them – what poses to show them in, what kind of props to use, and what stories to make about them using symbols.*

*Do you know what symbols are? Look it up or ask a grown up if you do not.

If this image were an advertisement, what might the product be?

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Here is a woman painted by Kalam Patua.

LOOK CLOSELY.

- Can you guess what room she is in? How do you know?
- What is she holding close to her ear?
- What other tools does she have, and what is she doing with them?
- What time of day is it? Can you look in the background and take a guess?
- How many colours can you spot, used in the painting?

IMAGINE.

What do you think her story might be? Do her surroundings or pose give you any clues?

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Kalam Patua also paints the realities of everyday and derives inspiration from personal experiences.

This is one such painting by the artist inspired by his experience of the city.

LOOK CLOSELY.

- What is the space represented?
- Which part of the country this might be in? (Hint: can you find the text in the image?)

THINK.

Do you think Patua has a message to give through this image? If yes, what is it?

Collection: Victoria & Albert Museum,London

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In this painting, Patua shows us a train journey that he took with his wife when she had a toothache!

Do you see characters in this painting that look like people you may have seen in train rides that YOU have taken in India?

Kalam Patua's style might be a very old one, but his stories are new and varied. And they present familiar things in unexpected, and often funny ways!

Collection: Queensland Art Gallery & Gallery of Modern Art (QAGOMA)

How about putting your own spin on it? Check out our **Stories With Art** extra for a storytelling activity inspired by Kalam Patua!

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A Baul couple, 2012
Kalam Patua
Watercolour on paper
H. 41.1 cm, W. 32.9 cm
PTG.00218

Patachitra of Manasa Devi, 20th century
Bhakti Chitrakar
Natural pigments on paper
L. 270 cm, W. 46 cm
PTG.0786

Ramayana Pata, 20th Century
Unknown Maker(s)
Natural pigments on paper
H. 343 cm, W. 56 cm
PTG.0788

Ganesha, Late 19th century
Unknown Maker(s)
Opaque watercolour on paper
H. 44.5 cm; W. 28 cm
PTG.00074

Cat eating a prawn, 2016
Kalam Patua
Watercolour on paper
H. 41.2 cm, W. 33.7 cm
PTG.01622

Matsya Avatar, 2016
Kalam Patua
Watercolour on paper
H. 41 cm, W. 33.5 cm
PTG.01612

A woman and a goldsmith, 2012
Kalam Patua
Watercolour on paper
H. 41.3 cm, W. 33 cm
PTG.00225

A pan seller, 2005
Kalam Patua
Watercolour on paper
H. 41.1 cm, W. 33 cm
PTG.00216

Barber cleaning woman's ear, 2016
Kalam Patua
Watercolour on paper
H. 41 cm, W. 33.5 cm
PTG.01624

Ganga, 2016
Kalam Patua
Watercolour on paper
H. 41.2 cm, W. 32.9 cm
PTG.01605

A courtesan, 2005
Kalam Patua
Watercolour on paper
H. 41.2 cm, W. 32.8 cm
PTG.00219

A woman in her kitchen, 2012
Kalam Patua
Watercolour on paper
H. 51.1 cm, W. 37.7 cm
PTG.00217

A woman, 2005
Kalam Patua
Watercolour on paper
H. 38.3 cm, W. 25 cm
PTG.00223

Ganga and Bhagirath, 1993
Kalam Patua
Watercolour on paper
H. 41.2 cm, W. 33 cm
PTG.01672

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