

# Royal Revivers

Descendants of erstwhile ruling families are committed to restoring dying traditions in metalwork, handicrafts and handlooms. The result is the aesthetic conservation of a lost era.

By BINDU GOPAL RAO

On a cold winter day, Heeralal, a 90-year-old traditional swordsmith, is busy at the conservation lab of Udaipur's City Palace Museum. It's a mammoth task. He is patiently restoring hundreds of old swords using ancient tools such as emery stone, horse shoes, ferni (a blade-sharpening machine) and deer horn. He belongs to one of the last families of Sikligars, a community of ironsmiths or sword makers from Rajasthan who have been making fine swords for generations. In spite of his advanced years, Heeralal does not miss a stroke as he lovingly works on returning the swords to their original glory. He feels fortunate that his son and daughter-in-law are continuing the traditional occupation instead of finding other work in big cities.

The restored swords and other exhibits of the armoury are to be part of Saleh Khana, the new museum situated on the palace premises set to open this year.

The Maharana of Mewar Charitable Foundation (MMCF) has been working extensively to showcase traditional crafts and craftspeople at the City Palace Museum in Udaipur. MMCF has been directly and indirectly supporting the crafts, honouring the craftspeople with prestigious awards at the Maharana Mewar Foundation Annual Awards Distribution Ceremony every year as part of the living heritage of Mewar. Shriji Arvind Singh Mewar, Chairman and Managing Trustee of MMCF, explains, "Mewar has contributed significantly towards the growth of tourism and I am also very proud to be a small stakeholder in the promotion of tourism in Mewar, working on the path laid by my father, His Late Highness Maharana Bhagwat Singh Mewar. Tourism is the worst-affected sector by Covid-19 pandemic all over the world and the traditional art and artists in rural tourism business have suffered the most."

Similarly, royal descendants from across the country are doing their bit to conserve and promote traditional handlooms and handicrafts. Yuvrani Meenal Kumari Singhdeo of Dhenkanal in Odisha says these

age-old traditions are part of the cultural heritage of the country. "These are today depleting for many reasons. For me, it was important to spread awareness among our youth. We run a heritage homestay at our palace, the Dhenkanal Palace, and have used almost every craft and art form practiced in Odisha as part of its restoration and conversion into a homestay. This is constant process that enables us to patronise the crafts through our renovations and maintenance." For someone who has done a lot of design interventions in the tradition crafts to make sure the products have a contemporary spin, Singhdeo says this helped the artisans make their craft more relevant to modern times. "Minaketan as a brand was started for this reason, so that the crafts of Odisha could be brought to the attention of many others. The visitors and guests at the Dhenkanal Palace are taken on specially curated craft tours to our patronised handicraft and handloom clusters as well as other villages where they can interact and engage with both the crafts and the craftspeople. These interactions enable not only an understanding of the crafts but also the context in which these crafts are today and what little can be done to create a large difference." Through the pandemic as well they were able to reach out to and help over 700



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**Arvind Singh Mewar**  
 Chairman and Managing Trustee, Maharana of Mewar Charitable Foundation

families from the crafts community.

Aimed at protecting, preserving and promoting the country's heritage—be it tangible and intangible or cultural and natural—royal descendants are doing their bit to ensure dying crafts are revived and here are some examples of the work being done across the country.

**Mayurbhanj Chhau & Dokra Art, Odisha**

In Mayurbhanj, the Belgadia Palace in Baripada, home to the royal family, was converted into a hotel whereby a percentage of funds are earmarked for use by the family's foundation called the Mayurbhanj Foundation under which they conduct activities to pump funds into the rural economy. They begin by conducting research on finding new self-help groups (SHGs), community organisations and even small and medium-sized enterprises, and take tourists who stay in their palace to meet these organisations and people, to increase market linkages for these communities. "For example, guests are taken to see a Sabai grass SHG and a Dokra village where they can purchase goods directly from the artisans making them. We do not charge guests for finding these communities nor take any cut from the sale. In addition, we connect global development organisations to communities who may need them, and even have local artists in the arts and culture space to the palace and have them interact with guests to learn about their dying crafts, for example, Mayurbhanj Chhau (a traditional dance). All the money guests give to interact with these artists and to watch them perform is given directly to the artist," says Jema Akshita



Pattachitra painting on new age products

Bhanj Deo, Princess of Mayurbhanj, "We have tie-ups with local communities to promote business and provide an alternative livelihood from eco-tourism by giving them access to market linkages with travellers without any middle man with 100 percent profits going back to communities. The Mayurbhanj Foundation keeps a percentage of revenue earmarked for social and environmental projects benefiting the local community throughout the year," avers Princess Mrinalika Manjari Bhanj Deo, her sister.

**Crafts of Udaipur, Rajasthan**

The traditional craftspeople of Udaipur include Jadiya (goldsmith), Bunkar (weaver), Vari (who make utensils from tree-leaves), Ganchi (bamboo

worker), Tamboli (betel seller), Chitrakar (painter), Rangrez-Chhipa (cloth dyer), Kasara (brass worker), Sikligar (swordsmith), Prajapat (potter), Mochi (shoemaker), Suthar (carpenter) and Teli (oil marketers). Udaipur is a big centre for wooden toys and the craftsmen called Suthar use local wood 'Doodhia', which is soft and can be finely chiselled and shaped. The toys are polished with organic colours. Initially, all these communities came with Maharana Udai Singh II from Chittorgarh when he established the city of Udaipur, on the banks of Lake Pichola. MMCF has been at the forefront of documenting the traditional crafts and providing every opportunity to the craftspeople to grow and develop. These artisans were an integral part of

the everyday lives of the citizens of Udaipur. Their livelihood, social and cultural pursuits as well as artistic development, all depended on the royal patronage. With the establishment of World Living Heritage Festival in 2012, a platform to promote the cause of living heritage and create awareness among diverse audiences in India and overseas was mooted.

**Kangra Painting, Himachal Pradesh**  
 The pictorial art of Kangra has been patronised by the Royal Katoch Family as it became prevalent in mid-18th century and the Pahari paintings came to be known as Kangra

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Gond art of Madhya Pradesh





Mrinalika Manjari Bhanj Deo and Jema Akshita Bhanj Deo (right)



**"I decided to take on the project of reviving the Sihor metal crafts. We brought in artisans who were facing financial issues. The idea was to allow them to expand on their creativity."**

**Rajkumari Brijeshwari Kumari Gohil**  
Founder, Bhavnagar Heritage

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paintings. The uniqueness of the Kangra paintings can be seen in the themes of eternal love between Radha and Krishna. The paintings were natural and used cool, fresh colours extracted from minerals, vegetables and had enamel-like lustre. "Verdant greenery of the landscape, brooks, springs were the recurrent themes on the miniatures. The current royal family is trying to revive this lost art by encouraging local artists, some descendants of the original masters, to make new paintings while staying true to the old techniques. These new paintings are available for sale on our website and at the Maharaja Sansar Chand Museum at Kangra Fort," says Tikarani Shailja Katoch, daughter of Maharaja Vikram Singh of Sailana, Madhya Pradesh.

**Minaketan Crafts, Odisha**  
Dhenkanal district in Odisha is a cauldron of craft and textile. All the handloom and handicrafts efforts are showcased through the brand 'Minaketan', named after the royal family insignia, and are housed at their heritage homestay, Dhenkanal Palace. Singhdeo says, "I started my work with Dokra, the craft of brass casting using the lost wax technique that dates to the Indus Valley Civilisation, the best example of which is the Dancing Girl. This work began in a village about nine kilometres away from our home in Dhenkanal and has today spread to Dokra artisans of four different villages. I have been working with the Nuapatna cluster where textiles are made using the



A Sikhligar at work in the City Palace Museum, Udaipur

commission boxes and jars with lacquer finishing as well as pattachitra motifs. Cane basket weaving is also being given a boost as they create and exhibit both coloured and plain cane baskets, hats, fans and storage boxes. Terracotta or pottery is a large part of Minaketan; the artisans create products of utility and decorative nature. Kansa (brass ware) has been traditionally used in all Odia homes.

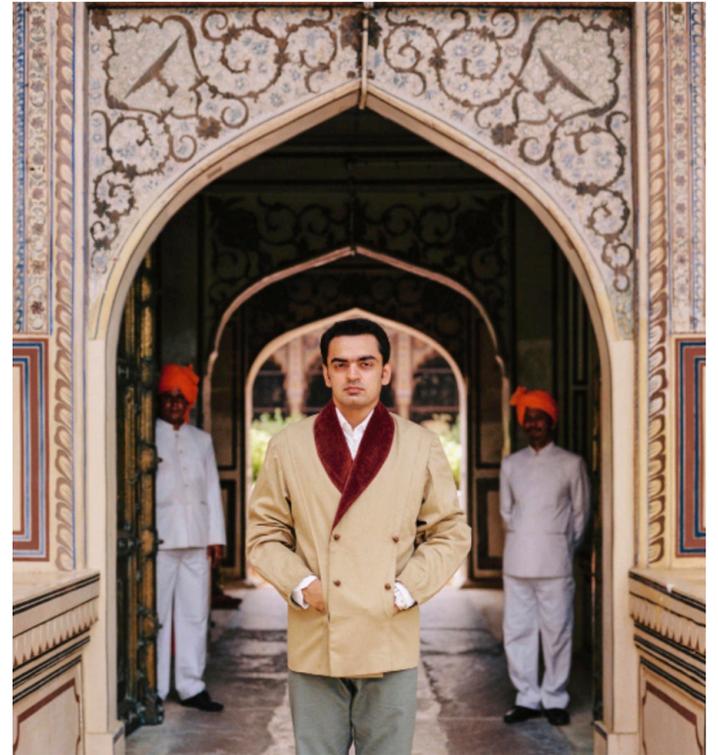
**Gond Art, Madhya Pradesh**  
This ancient art form is commonly seen on the walls of rural Indian homes. Initially the medium was charcoal, and canvas was on the walls within and outside their homes. "I have been working on reviving this art form, particularly from the regions of Jhabua and Alirajpur, predominantly

Art in Madhya Pradesh. She typically curates and exhibits this form of art through home soiree keeping the client base small and through word of mouth. "There are challenges as it is difficult to sell in such trying times. Since demonetisation, a thriving art like the Gond Art and its artists have faced a huge setback on sales and to find a niche market in India is very difficult." Social media platforms, collaborations and curation with art galleries and royal fables exposition have been extremely helpful in overcoming the challenges with Covid-19.

**Karauli's School of Miniature Painting, Rajasthan**  
Yuvraj Vivasvat Pal, an artist, hotelier and scion of Karauli, a royal house and historic custodianship, is working on the restoration and revival of the miniature paintings and frescoes of the Karauli school of art. Karauli has developed a distinct school of miniature painting, different even from the Hadoti school, its nearest geographical neighbour. The artists, known as chateras, have benefitted from royal patronage. At Bhanwar Vilas Palace, now a heritage hotel, you can explore Karauli City Palace that dates to the 14th century for an immersive museum experience. "We are working to revive araiash plaster and frescoes in the traditional ala-gila method," says Pal. He has drawn upon his own experiences as an artist to gather a team of craftspeople, including artists and glass workers to conduct restoration at the city palace. "We are extraordinarily lucky to have the descendants of the chateras, still working with us. I feel we have come a long way as we now have a dedicated team working at the palace. After our establishment of the Karauli chapter of INTACH, there is also a group of the local youth who conduct cleaning and repair-work sessions at our old forts and are sensitised to collecting information about the rich history we all share," says Pal. His aim is to create a resilient ecosystem where archiving,

documentation and historiography of our ancient forts all flourish alongside the arts in a way that celebrates the prismatic vibrancy of Karauli in all its myriad artistic forms.

**Metal work, Bhavnagar, Gujarat**  
Situating at 45-minute drive from Bhavnagar city, the quaint town of Sihor was once the seat of the warrior Rajputs of Gohilwad before they established their capital in Bhavnagar in 1723. Metal work has long been a staple practice in this town. With several artisans creating intricate works of art on brass, copper, silver and gold. However, as demand increased and mass production of utility goods took over the market, the artisans at Sihor stopped their traditional practices and started making daily use goods with zero-to-no intricacies on them. As creativity amongst artists dwindled so did an interest in the new generation leading to fewer artisans practicing the craft now. "After witnessing this decline, I decided to take on the project of reviving the Sihor metal crafts. To begin, my team and I researched old designs on artefacts, listing out the ones that stood out the most to us. We also drew inspiration from the historic architectural elements of the town. Using this research as a framework, we brought in artisans who were facing financial issues. The idea was to allow



them to expand on their creativity with each piece, keeping in mind the general theme and idea that we presented," says Rajkumari. **"We are working to revive araiash plaster and frescoes in the traditional ala-gila method. We are extraordinarily lucky to have the descendants of the chateras, still working with us."**  
**Yuvraj Vivasvat Pal Karauli**  
Artist, hotelier and scion of Karauli, Rajasthan

Brijeshwari Kumari Gohil, Founder, Bhavnagar Heritage, and Director, Nilambag Palace Hotel. At present, their artefacts include copper bottles, bangles, pataras and traditional pooja thalis. These efforts have managed to start a movement to spread awareness, create a market and encourage

younger individuals to take an interest in this artistry. "Our main challenge at the very beginning was bringing in very sceptical artisans to actually be on board and spend their time. It was also challenging to meet deadlines and bring in the professional methodologies while working with them," says Gohil.

**Pottery, Kathiwada, Madhya Pradesh**  
Through the Kathiwada Foundation, the pottery community has seen a revival. Digvijay Singh Kathiwada, Director, Kathiwada Brands PLC, and Trustee, Kathiwada Foundation, says, "Shankar, our local potter, is a third-generation potter supported by our family since my great grandfather HH Rana Onkar Sinhji of Kathiwada donated some land to his forefathers. Shankar is now the godfather of the pottery community in Kathiwada and relentlessly works on his craft along with his wife and children. There are two buying seasons, one in the summer when local tribal

women need to shore up water for storage in their homes which creates a surge in demand for large pots and the other is Holi, which celebrates the 'Bhaguria' and requires Shankar to stock up on decorative clay horses." The indigenous Bhil tribe worships these clay figurines by setting up open temples with no fixed location year on year as each family finds "their own spot" usually shaded under large bamboo trees, which can be found across the village plains and the forests of Kathiwada. As the horse figurines find their way back into the soil, the following year a new open temple is erected elsewhere and, in some cases, resurrected with more such figurines in the same location. Kathiwada is studied with these symbolic gestures conducted by the Bhil tribe. "Shankar's challenge is to ensure he creates enough stock for the buying seasons and more often than not we continue to support him in his endeavour to create the inventory to sustain. Besides pots and ghodas, Shankar is now supplying tea kullads to Kathiwada Raaj Mahal as our initiative to create a steady demand for potters year-round," adds Digvijay. Royalty is dead. Long live royalty.



resist-dyeing technique, also known as the 'bandha' of Odisha. The yarn is first tied in different designs and then dyed multiple times to get a variety of colours after which it is handwoven into various fabrics. This technique is also referred to as 'ikat'. I not only provide the weavers with designs but also use the traditional fabrics to create clothes in contemporary silhouettes and many other utility items." Pattachitra is another art form on which she works extensively. The dying craft of wood carving is being revived as they

tribal belts of Madhya Pradesh. I belong to Jhabua. My ancestors, including my grandfather late HH Ajit Singh ji, worked a lot in the region to harness tribal talent. After I came back from the US, I decided to take charge and bring the artists much talented work in prominence globally. My ancestors did a lot of work in the field of education and setting up of 'Bhil' (a tribe sect) arts and craft school to explore and harness tribal talents," says Nandini Singh Jhabua, Princess of Jhabua, who is a heritage conservationist and patron of Gond



The Mayurbhanj Chhau performers

