

Village of Painters: Narrative Scrolls from West Bengal.* Frank Korom. Santa Fe: Museum of New Mexico Press, 2006. 119 pp.

Reviewed by Pravina Shukla

Village of Painters is both an exhibition and a handsomely illustrated catalogue based on folklorist Frank Korom's fieldwork in the village of Naya, West Bengal, during 2001. Two more collecting trips to India, during 2002 and 2003, led to the acquisition of the brilliantly painted scrolls that are now part of the permanent collection of the Museum of International Folk Art, in Santa Fe, New Mexico. While the exhibition closed in April of 2007, this book continues to tell the story of Naya, a Muslim and Hindu community of singers and painters, men and women, who sing mythological stories with the aid of the scrolls that depict key episodes of the narratives.

Unlike other exhibition catalogues in which an author struggles to make sense of the objects collected by another, this short catalogue is firmly rooted in fieldwork; it reads more like an ethnographic report of a particular community than as a general essay on art and culture. Before the scrolls are discussed, we are given a description of the landscape of Naya, of the history, tensions, politics, and the pace of life of the Patuas, the "caste" of the painters. Through careful fieldwork, Korom presents the painters' interpretations of their art—not the interpretation of the local merchant, the government official, or even of the foreign art historian, but the interpretations of the artists themselves. Korom's methodical documentation of the songs and paintings is supported by the penultimate scroll of the book—a painting in which Korom's camera and tape recorder are key props in an illustration of his activities among the painters.

In this book, Korom describes the fieldworker's processes of data collection, and also the artist's processes of innovation, of the incorporation of new information or stimuli into an existing tradition of art. Korom's informants explain to him that itinerant singers must have a fresh repertoire of songs so that they may perform over and over again in the same household or village. While people want to hear a familiar story, the singers vary their songs just enough to make it worthwhile to keep them engaged periodically. Some of the song texts are documented here, complete with the accompanying scrolls, including an amusing story about the origin of the Patua occupation, as sung by Korom's main informant in this book, the articulate Gurupada Chitrakar.

The process of innovation, of the incorporation of new events into the subject matter of the scrolls is perfectly exemplified by an episode in which many members of the community, in December of 2001, watch a traveling play about the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks in New York. Within a week, several new scrolls emerge, including two featured in the book, one depicting a plane crashing into the World Trade Center and another of Osama bin Laden. Korom uses the scrolls to raise questions in his book that are at the heart of contemporary scholarship on folk and traditional art—questions about the transition from patronage to cash economies, and about local and global influences, consequences, and the responsibilities of the artist. How do

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artists resolve these tensions, and is their art worsened, improved, or compromised? In this book, the artists are both singers and painters; their art is expressed through two mediums, one musical and one visual. Korom answers these questions well for the art of oral literature, but I wanted more analysis of the art of painting. The book would have been enhanced by more formal analysis of the art, going beyond the subject matter and themes, by careful consideration of style, form, composition, color, and the realization of individual styles within established norms. Aspects of the art of Bengali scrolls—their flatness, the use of bright colors, and the exaggerated, iconographic depiction of people and things—recall the art of European broadsides, South American woodblock prints, and African barber boards. A wider comparative analytic frame, while not necessary, would be useful for those interested in contemporary folk and commercial art.

Village of Painters is a delightful and informative book to read. It is well-written and richly illustrated. Every photograph identifies the subject by name, and every scroll names the artist. Korom accomplishes much in this short book. He gives us an overview of the Patuas of Naya, of their culture, art, and society. He exposes us to contemporary theories and practices of material culture scholarship and fieldwork methodology. One leaves this mini-ethnography with admiration for the enduring art of the Patuas in India, and with gratitude for Korom for bringing us to this community of singers and painters.

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