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## Shekhawati Art: The Evolution Of Traditional Motifs And Cultural Narratives

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### Abstract

Shekhawati, which lies in Rajasthan, India, has been known for its art scene for hundreds of years; the glorious frescoes and murals adorning havelis, temples and cenotaphs. These artworks have been characterized by their bold use of color palettes and intricate arrangements of motifs, which have served as a visual chronicle of the socio-cultural, religious, and historical narratives of the region. These paintings found their emergence in the 18th and 19th centuries whence they made their way through support from rich merchant families as a unique blend of native, Mughal and European influences. Art is a cultural phenomenon that has undergone a critical evolution; in this context, the present study has assessed Shekhawati art of the past, highlighting the changes observed in the meanings and symbolisms weaved in traditional motifs. Overview: These motifs are analyzed to preserve the identity, belief system and heritage of the region. The selected works demonstrate the shift of these familiar patterning systems into textile fields, as well as the recontextualization of heritage in modern-day creative code. And of course, the myriad dangers to this disappearing tradition, such as environmental degradation, urban sprawl, and the decrease in local interest, have also been tackled. Each of such measures helps in revival and sustainability of Shekhawati art like heritage tourism, digital documentation, use of traditional patterns in modern textile and fashion design etc. This way, the study offered richer insights into the ways cultural memory and artistic performativity travel and are re-enacted across different generations and artistic media.

**Keywords:** Shekhawati Art; Motif Design; Cultural Heritage Preservation; Modern Textile and Fashion Design

### Introduction

The Shekhawati region, located in the northeastern part of Rajasthan, India, stands as a remarkable testament to the subcontinent's artistic and architectural richness. Encompassing parts of Jhunjhunu, Sikar, and Churu districts, Shekhawati is internationally acclaimed for its densely painted havelis (merchant mansions), temples, wells, and cenotaphs. These structures are intricately adorned with vivid frescoes and murals that narrate a complex tapestry of mythological, historical, and social themes. The painted tradition, which reached its zenith during the 18th and 19th centuries, coincided with a period of substantial economic growth driven by the Marwari merchant community. These affluent patrons, having accumulated wealth through long-distance trade across the Indian subcontinent and beyond, invested in ornate architecture as a means of displaying status and perpetuating cultural memory.

The frescoes serve not merely as decorative embellishments, but as narrative devices capturing the everyday lives, spiritual beliefs, and evolving worldviews of the era. They integrate a diverse range of influences—drawing on indigenous Rajasthani motifs, the refined aesthetics of Mughal miniature painting, and, intriguingly, imagery borrowed from European visual culture, including representations of British officers, steam engines, hot air balloons, and Western-style architecture. This stylistic syncretism reflects both the cultural permeability of the region and the cosmopolitan outlook of its patrons.

Despite its significance, the artistic heritage of Shekhawati faces growing threats from environmental degradation, urban expansion, neglect, and diminishing local engagement. The current research endeavors to trace the historical development of Shekhawati painting traditions, decode the layered meanings embedded within its traditional motifs, and analyze how these elements are being adapted into contemporary textile and fashion design. Furthermore, the paper evaluates the efficacy of ongoing preservation efforts and highlights potential strategies for sustaining this endangered cultural legacy in a rapidly modernizing world.

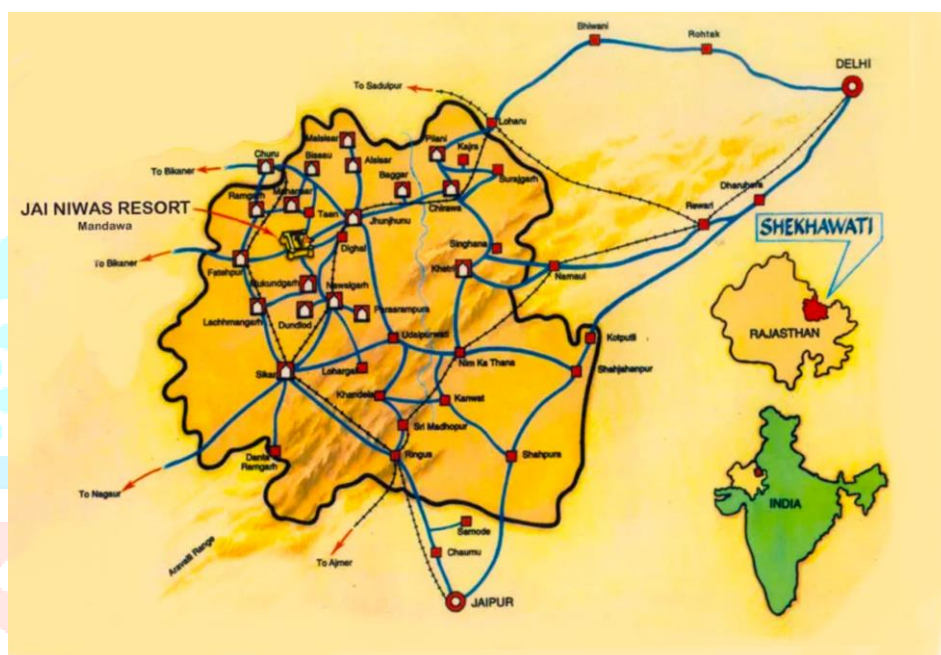


Fig. 1 Shekhawati Map (source- <https://shekhawati.in/map/>)



Fig. 2 Morarka Haveli, Nawalgarh, Rajasthan - India

## Historical Context and Emergence of Shekhawati Art

The development of Shekhawati art coincided with a period of prosperity in the region, as Marwari merchants amassed wealth through trade and investment. These affluent patrons commissioned elaborate frescoes and murals on their havelis, transforming architecture into a canvas for storytelling. The paintings not only served decorative purposes but also chronicled religious epics, folklore, colonial encounters, and local life. The fusion of styles—Rajputana boldness, Mughal elegance, and European realism—resulted in a vibrant, hybrid visual tradition.

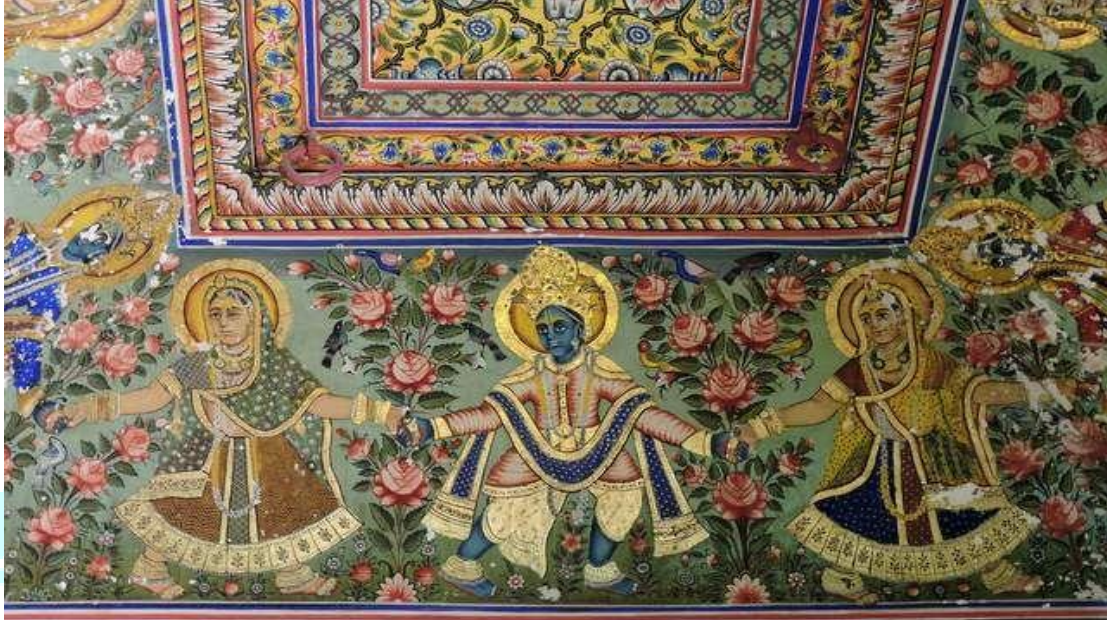


Fig. 3 Murals 'RASLEELA' painted at Shekhawati Haveli

**Symbolism and Motifs in Traditional Frescoes** Traditional Shekhawati murals feature a rich array of motifs and symbols. Common elements include:



Fig. 5 Most popular motif of Shekhawati art

- **Floral and geometric patterns** symbolizing fertility, prosperity, and cosmic harmony.
- **Mythological figures** from Hindu epics such as the Ramayana and Mahabharata, representing moral and spiritual values.
- **Scenes of daily life** including traders, animals, and modes of transport, which serve as historical records.
- **Colonial-era imagery** such as steam engines, gramophones, and European attire, reflecting global influences and aspirations of modernity. These motifs are often arranged in narrative sequences, creating layered compositions that speak to the socio-cultural milieu of the time.

## Decline and Challenges

Despite the profound historical and artistic value of Shekhawati's painted heritage, the region's mural tradition is currently facing a critical period of decline. A confluence of environmental, socio-economic, and cultural factors has significantly endangered the preservation and continuity of this unique art form. Foremost among these challenges is environmental degradation. Fluctuations in temperature, increased humidity, pollution, and the absence of climate-controlled preservation have accelerated the physical deterioration of fresco surfaces. Plaster erosion, pigment fading, and biological growth such as mold and lichen are now commonly observed on these once-vibrant walls.

Urban expansion and real estate development have also played a detrimental role. Many historically significant havelis have been demolished to make way for modern infrastructure, or left in a state of abandonment due to changing land-use priorities. The shift away from traditional joint family systems and the emigration of wealthy merchant families to metropolitan centers has left numerous properties uninhabited and vulnerable to decay.

Equally concerning is the decline in local engagement with the art form. The younger generation, often drawn to urban lifestyles and alternative professions, shows limited interest in either preserving or practicing traditional mural techniques. The migration of skilled artisans and the lack of formal training institutions further exacerbate the situation, resulting in a dwindling community of practitioners with the necessary expertise to conserve or replicate the original works. This loss not only affects the physical artwork but also severs the intangible cultural knowledge systems embedded in the creation and interpretation of these murals.

Together, these multifaceted threats present a significant challenge to the survival of Shekhawati's visual legacy and underscore the urgent need for comprehensive preservation and revitalization strategies.

## Contextualization in Modern Design

In recent years, there has been a growing movement to reinterpret Shekhawati motifs in contemporary contexts. Textile and fashion designers have begun incorporating traditional patterns into fabrics, creating a bridge between heritage and innovation. These efforts are not merely aesthetic but also serve as cultural storytelling mechanisms, bringing ancestral narratives into modern wardrobes. Digital technology has also played a role in documenting and preserving these designs for use in print, embroidery, and digital art.

**Preservation Strategies and Cultural Revival** Several initiatives aim to safeguard Shekhawati art:

- **Heritage tourism:** Promoting Shekhawati as a cultural destination encourages local pride and economic incentives for preservation.
- **Digital documentation:** Archiving high-resolution images and cataloguing motifs help scholars and designers access the heritage remotely.
- **Community engagement:** Workshops, exhibitions, and educational programs can revive interest among local youth.
- **Adaptive reuse:** Transforming old havelis into museums, boutique hotels, or cultural centers helps maintain their relevance and upkeep.

**7. Conclusion** Shekhawati art represents far more than a decorative tradition; it serves as a vivid visual language that chronicles the historical, cultural, and spiritual journey of the region. The intricate frescoes, painted havelis, and symbolic motifs reflect not only the religious beliefs and social customs of the Shekhawati people but also their interactions with diverse cultural influences—from Rajput valor and Marwari patronage to colonial encounters and global trade. Each wall painting is a narrative layer, revealing tales of mythology, daily life, trade, and migration.

However, the continuity of this artistic heritage is under growing threat. Rapid urbanization, neglect of historic buildings, changing aesthetic preferences, and harsh climatic conditions have all contributed to the deterioration of these invaluable artworks. As newer generations become distanced from traditional practices, and as economic priorities shift, the preservation of Shekhawati's visual culture faces increasing challenges.

Yet, this decline is not inevitable. With thoughtful conservation strategies and a willingness to innovate, Shekhawati art can be safeguarded and revitalized. One promising approach is the integration of its traditional motifs and storytelling techniques into contemporary design fields such as fashion, textiles, architecture, and digital media. This not only keeps the art form relevant but also introduces it to a global audience in fresh and meaningful ways.

Equally important is the role of the local community. By involving residents, artisans, and young creatives in heritage projects, skill training, and cultural tourism initiatives, the preservation of Shekhawati art becomes a shared responsibility and source of regional pride. Educational outreach, workshops, and collaborations with designers can foster a renewed appreciation among both locals and visitors.

Ultimately, the future of Shekhawati art lies in a delicate balance between honoring its roots and embracing evolution. Through creative adaptation and inclusive stewardship, this unique artistic tradition can continue to thrive—serving as a bridge between past and present, and as a vibrant testament to the enduring spirit of Shekhawati.

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