

The Semiotic Architecture of an Indigenous Visual Language:

A Multi-Level Analysis of Symbolism in Warli Art

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Abstract

This article presents a systematic semiotic analysis of the visual language of Warli painting, an indigenous mural tradition of the Warli community of Maharashtra, India, built from a restricted set of elementary geometric forms, the circle, the triangle, the straight line, and the wavy line, that together encode a cosmological worldview of considerable complexity. Integrating Peircean sign theory, Barthes's denotation-connotation model, and Panofsky's iconological method, the analysis distinguishes the iconic, indexical, and symbolic levels of meaning carried by the tradition's core visual elements and demonstrates that the apparent formal simplicity of the Warli grammar conceals a highly structured and culturally saturated code. Drawing on fieldwork interviews and the documented practice of contemporary artists, the article further shows that commercialisation tends to preserve the iconic legibility of Warli motifs, their visual recognisability, while eroding their indexical and symbolic depth, and that the tradition's chromatic system, the white-on-ochre binary of rice paste on prepared earth, constitutes an inseparable material dimension of its cosmological meaning that is threatened by the substitution of commercial synthetic pigments. The analysis concludes that the tradition's symbolic richness lies not in individual motifs but in the relational system connecting geometric form, material substrate, and ritual context, with direct implications for how cultural sustainability policy should approach the documentation and transmission of the tradition's visual language.

Keywords: Warli art; visual semiotics; iconography; indigenous symbolism; Peirce; Panofsky; cultural sustainability

1. Introduction

Warli painting has been described as "one of the most syntactically sparse, yet semantically dense pictorial traditions in the indigenous graphic-artistic modes of South Asia." Created with a rudimentary visual vocabulary of circles, triangles, and lines, the tradition depicts a cosmology that maps relationships between the human and divine worlds, as well as realms of nature and agrarian/ritual cycles of time (Dalmia, 19:88; Vatsyayan 1997). This paper presents a semiotic reading of that pictorial vocabulary, its components, their multiple, embedded meanings and how they shift when the visual language becomes commodified. Because the mural tradition's contemporary evolution has been shaped substantially by named individual artists, the analysis draws throughout on the documented practice of four contemporary Warli painters, Jivya Soma Mashe, Manoj Bhadange, Rajesh Wangad, and Anil Wangad, whose divergent engagements with the traditional vocabulary illustrate its resilience, its capacity for renewal, and the risks it faces under market pressure.

The analysis proceeds from a position of methodological humility appropriate to research conducted from outside the tradition's living cultural context: the semiotic frameworks applied here were not developed with Warli art specifically in mind, and their application is checked throughout against ethnographic literature and artist and community interview data rather than treated as self-sufficient (Smith, 1999; Battiste, 2000).

The stakes of this analysis extend beyond the specific case of Warli art. The global expansion of markets for indigenous and tribal visual traditions has generated a substantial literature on the economic and institutional dimensions of commercialisation, but comparatively less systematic attention has been paid to the internal semiotic architecture of the visual languages themselves, the specific mechanisms by which meaning is layered, transmitted, and, under commercial pressure, selectively eroded. A visual language that appears, to the untrained eye, as a simple decorative style may in fact encode a highly organised cosmological system whose different levels of meaning respond differently to the pressures of the market. Demonstrating this for the Warli case, in a manner that is both theoretically rigorous and empirically anchored in the community's own understanding of its visual forms, is the specific contribution this article seeks to make to the broader comparative study of indigenous visual semiotics (Myers, 2002; Morphy, 1991).

2. Theoretical Framework

Three complementary semiotic frameworks structure the analysis. Peirce's (1931-1958) tripartite sign typology distinguishes the iconic dimension of a sign, its relation of resemblance to its object, from its indexical dimension, its relation of causal or contextual connection, and its symbolic dimension, its relation of arbitrary, culturally coded convention. Barthes's (1977) distinction between denotation, the literal representational content of a sign, and connotation, the culturally coded associations layered upon it, refines the analysis of how a single geometric form can carry multiple simultaneous meanings. Panofsky's (1955) iconological method, which distinguishes pre-iconographic description, iconographic analysis, and iconological interpretation, provides a procedure for moving from the formal description of Warli motifs to their embeddedness within the community's broader cosmological worldview. Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) social semiotics extend this framework to the compositional and material dimensions of the visual sign, providing the conceptual bridge to the analysis, in Section 5, of the tradition's chromatic and material symbolism.

These frameworks were each developed primarily through the study of Western or urban visual and textual media, and their transposition to an indigenous ritual mural tradition requires a degree of interpretive caution. The present analysis therefore treats the three frameworks not as an interpretive grid to be imposed upon the material but as a set of analytical distinctions to be tested against, and where necessary modified by, the tradition's own documented self-understanding. Where fieldwork interviews with artists and cultural informants confirm a proposed symbolic reading, that reading is reported with corresponding confidence; where the semiotic literature suggests an interpretation not corroborated by community testimony, this is flagged explicitly rather than presented as established fact. This procedure follows the broader methodological caution urged by decolonising approaches to indigenous knowledge research (Smith, 1999; Battiste, 2000), which cautions against the uncritical application of external theoretical frameworks to indigenous cultural material without corresponding accountability to the community's own interpretive authority.

3. Methodology

The analysis combines close formal and iconographic examination of the Warli visual vocabulary with fieldwork interview data collected from artists and community cultural informants in Palghar district,

used to verify and refine semiotic interpretations against the tradition's own understanding of its visual forms. This triangulation addresses, without fully resolving, the interpretive risks inherent in a semiotic analysis conducted by a researcher external to the community (Smith, 1999). The analysis is organised around four elements of the visual vocabulary, the circle, the triangle, the line, and colour, examined in turn at the iconic, indexical, and symbolic levels, before a concluding discussion of the compositional and cultural-sustainability implications of the analysis.

4. The Elements of the Warli Visual Vocabulary

The full complexity of the Warli mural is generated from a restricted set of elementary forms combined according to consistent compositional principles. Figure 1 presents a schematic reconstruction, prepared by the author for illustrative purposes, of the tradition's four core elements: the circle, the twin-triangle human torso convention, the composite human figure formed by combining a circle, triangles, and linear limbs, and the wavy line associated with water.

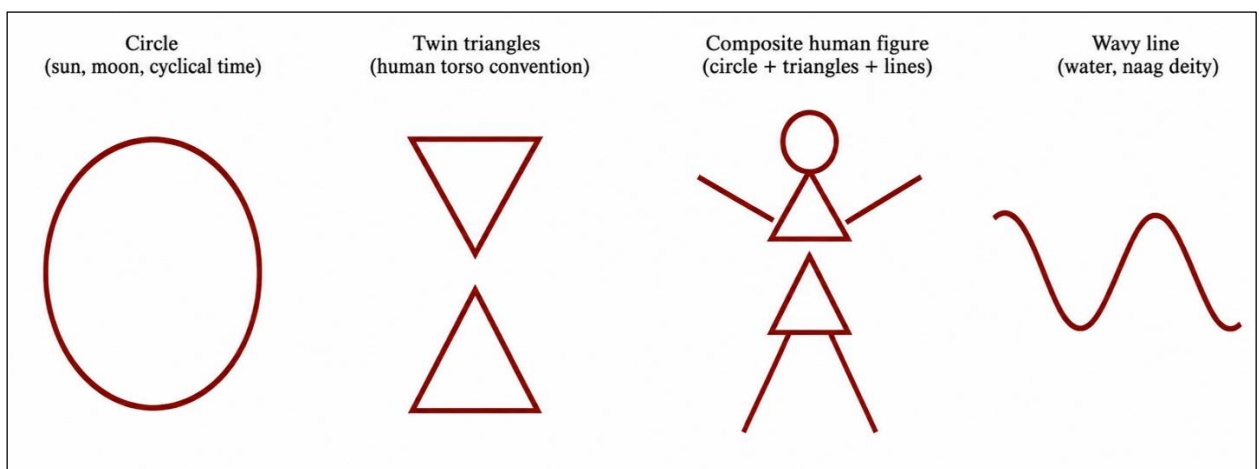


Figure 1. Schematic reconstruction of core elements of the Warli geometric vocabulary, prepared by the author for illustrative purposes; the diagram does not reproduce any specific artwork.

The circle is the tradition's most fundamental element, appearing at the smallest scale as the human head, at an intermediate scale as the organising device for figure groups such as the circular Tarpa dance formation, and at the largest scale as the outer boundary of the Lagnachauk composition marking the sacred ceremonial precinct. Cosmologically, the circle carries associations with the sun, the moon, the female generative principle, and the cyclical structure of time itself; the concentric circles that frame many compositions produce a spatial hierarchy in which the innermost ring is reserved for the divine figure, echoing the pan-South Asian mandala principle while inflecting it with a specifically animist cosmology (Vatsyayan, 1997; Kramrisch, 1968).

The triangle, applied to the human torso as a pair of forms joined at their apices, is the element most immediately distinctive of the Warli figural convention. The downward-pointing upper triangle and upward-pointing lower triangle carry associations, confirmed by community informants, of complementary generative principles, descent and ascent, sky and earth, whose dynamic union is the source of fertility in the Warli worldview (Dalmia, 1988). Lines and curves complete the vocabulary: straight lines, extending from the triangular torso, encode posture and activity, dancing, running, reaching, while wavy lines represent water in its several manifestations and are closely associated with the Naag (serpent) deity governing monsoon rainfall (Elwin, 1955; Dalmia, 1988).

4.1 Composite Forms and Compositional Rhythm

Beyond these elementary units, the vocabulary generates a further layer of composite and compound forms by combining two or more basic elements into larger visual constructions: the fundamental compound is the humanised figure itself, circular head and triangular torso joined by linear connectors, but the same combinatorial logic produces the diamond-in-circle rendering of the peacock's eye-feathers, the oval-and-triangle fish-rhombus, and the branching tree form combining a vertical trunk line with radiating circular foliage elements. Each compound carries specific symbolic associations while contributing to a broader principle of visual rhythm, the systematic repetition of compound forms across the compositional field, that enacts within the static painted surface the actual rhythmic phenomena the mural represents: the repeated circles of dancing faces in the Tarpa chain, the alternating triangular torsos of figures in motion, and the repeated diamond forms of a peacock's tail all create visual analogues of cyclical, rhythmic time, directly related to the mural's cosmological function (Vatsyayan, 1997; Gell, 1998). This principle of rhythmic repetition is one reason the tradition's formal economy should not be mistaken for representational poverty: the same restricted set of elements generates, through combination and repetition, a compositional complexity fully commensurate with the cosmological content it is designed to carry.

5. A Three-Level Semiotic Analysis

Applying the Peircean, Barthesian, and Panofsky's frameworks jointly to these elements reveals a consistent three-level structure of meaning, illustrated schematically in Figure 2. At the iconic level, Warli forms bear only a minimal, highly conventionalised resemblance to their referents: the circle resembles the sun or moon only in its rotundity; the triangular figure suggests the human body only through bilateral symmetry and top-bottom differentiation. This minimal iconicity is a deliberate formal strategy rather than a representational deficiency, producing a visual language of categorical types: this is a human; this is the sun, rather than individuated particulars, consistent with Coomaraswamy's (1934) broader characterisation of the aesthetic orientation of Indian art towards structural essence over phenomenal surface.

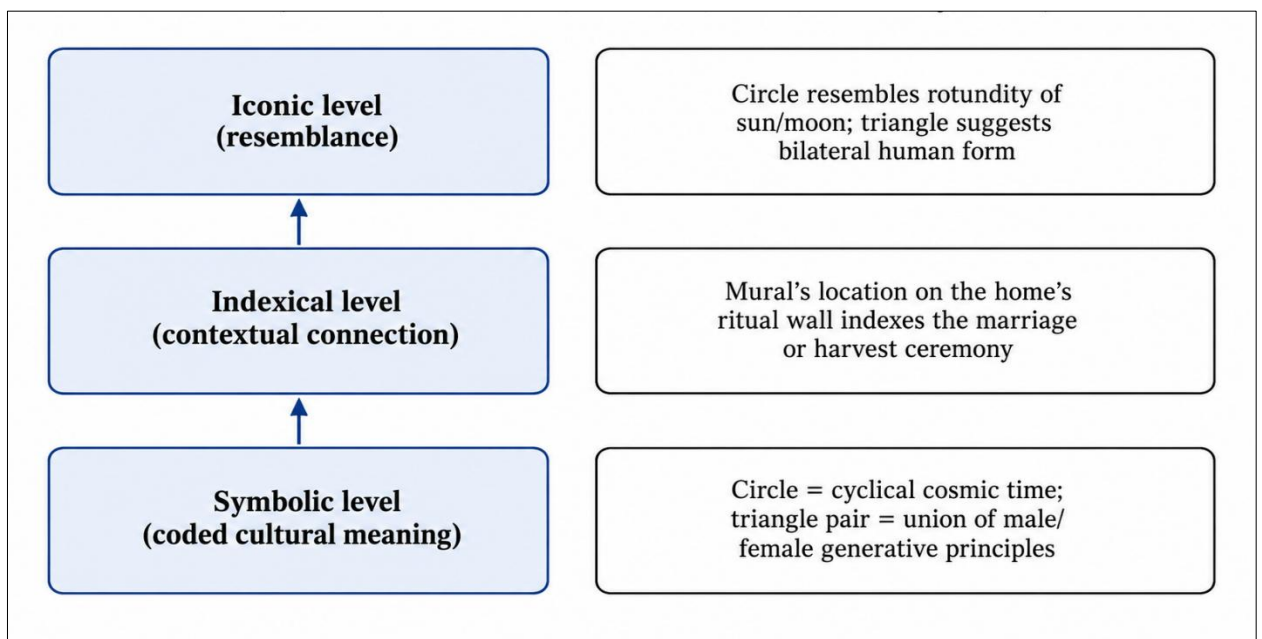


Figure 2. Three-level semiotic model applied to Warli geometric forms (author's own synthesis, following Peirce, 1931-1958; Barthes, 1977; Panofsky, 1955).

At the indexical level, Warli forms point to the specific ritual and material circumstances of their creation: a mural's location on the interior wall of a home indexes the marriage or harvest ceremony for which it was made, and the specific pigments used, rice paste and geru, index the community's agricultural and ecological life. At the symbolic level, the forms are embedded within a coded cosmological system in which meaning is arbitrary in the Saussurean sense but stable and shared within the community: the circle encodes cyclical cosmic time, the triangle pair encodes the union of complementary generative principles, and the wavy line encodes the sacred and fertility-bearing power of water administered by the Naag deity.

The central analytical finding of this multi-level approach concerns the differential vulnerability of the three levels under commercialisation. Commercial reproduction of Warli motifs, whether by trained community artists working for the mass market or by non-community artisans producing commercially indistinguishable work, reliably preserves the iconic level of the sign, its visual recognisability as a stylistic marker, while the indexical and symbolic levels are frequently lost or attenuated. A circle reproduced on a printed textile retains its iconic resemblance to the traditional motif but carries no indexical connection to a specific ceremonial occasion and, for a viewer unfamiliar with the tradition's cosmology, no symbolic connection to cyclical time or the divine order. This differential erosion, iconic preservation alongside indexical and symbolic loss, is the semiotic mechanism underlying the broader cultural sustainability concerns documented in the literature on Warli art's commercialisation (Throsby, 2001; UNESCO, 2003).

6. Material and Chromatic Symbolism

The tradition's chromatic structure constitutes a further, materially embedded layer of symbolic meaning operating alongside the geometric vocabulary. The foundational binary of white rice-paste figures against a warm red-ochre (Geru) ground is not merely an aesthetic convention but a cosmological statement in which white, associated with purity and the sacred, asserts divine presence against an earthly ground associated with the material and human domain (Jayakar, 1980; Eck, 1981). This chromatic symbolism is inseparable from its material substrate: rice paste, drawn from the community's most sacred agricultural product, carries associations of fertility and abundance, while Geru anchors the mural in the specific earth of the community's ecological environment. The contemporary substitution of commercial acrylic paints, introducing chromatic values, fluorescent greens, electric blues, entirely foreign to the traditional palette, therefore represents a semiotic disruption considerably deeper than a change in aesthetic style: it severs the material connection between the mural and the specific agricultural resources that constitute its cosmological substrate. Fieldwork informants, particularly older practitioners, explicitly identified the act of preparing rice paste as itself a ritual component of mural creation, one whose replacement by the act of opening a commercial paint tube alters the artist's relationship to the work at a level that a purely formal analysis of colour would not detect (Dalmia, 1988).

This material dimension of the tradition's semiotics has a further consequence that is easily overlooked in analyses confined to the level of pictorial form: because the white-on-ochre binary is constituted by specific agricultural and geological materials rather than by colour values considered in the abstract, the tradition's chromatic system is directly dependent on continued access to the specific ecological resources, paddy rice for the paste, the particular red earth used to prepare the ground, from which those materials are drawn. Ecological degradation of the Warli community's agricultural landscape therefore threatens the tradition's chromatic symbolism in a manner exactly parallel to the way demographic and ceremonial decline threatens its ritual and iconographic dimensions, reinforcing the broader argument, developed elsewhere in the literature on the tradition's sustainability, that the visual language cannot be

preserved independently of the ecological and agricultural conditions of the community that produces it (Throsby, 2001; Berkes, 1999).

7. Discussion: Individual Artists and the Vocabulary's Contemporary Condition

The documented practice of contemporary artists provides a living index of how the semiotic structure analysed above is being sustained, extended, or eroded. Jivya Soma Mashe's mature compositional practice exploits the full cosmological and rhythmic potential of the vocabulary, extending the concentric circular and repeated triangular principles across compositions of extraordinary density that intensify, rather than dilute, the tradition's symbolic depth. Manoj Bhadange's redeployment of the traditional wavy-line convention in works addressing ecological degradation demonstrates the vocabulary's capacity for symbolic renewal: by rendering a polluted river in the sinuous form traditionally associated with life-giving fertility, such work activates the motif's full traditional symbolic weight as the ground of a contemporary political argument, rather than discarding it. Rajesh Wangad's large-scale urban murals demonstrate the formal resilience of the geometric grammar under radical changes of scale and spatial context, while Anil Wangad's extended narrative cycles demonstrate the vocabulary's capacity for combinatorial extension into new compositional ambitions. Read together, these four practices indicate that the tradition's semiotic depth is not incompatible with formal innovation; the decisive variable is whether an artist's engagement with the vocabulary activates its indexical and symbolic levels or merely reproduces its iconic surface.

This finding carries a specific implication for cultural sustainability policy and documentation practice. Efforts to safeguard the Warli visual language that focus exclusively on the cataloguing of motifs, treating the circle, the triangle, and the wavy line as a fixed inventory of forms, will capture only the iconic level of the tradition's semiotic structure. Effective documentation and transmission must instead capture the indexical and symbolic layers of meaning, the ritual occasions, material practices, and cosmological associations that give the forms their cultural depth, a requirement consistent with the UNESCO (2003) Convention's emphasis on safeguarding intangible, rather than merely material, cultural heritage.

A further implication concerns the design of arts education and training programmes intended to transmit the tradition to younger practitioners. Programmes organised around the technical reproduction of recognisable motifs, however effective at producing commercially competent painters, will by construction transmit only the iconic level of the vocabulary. The comparative evidence from the four case study artists suggests that programmes are more likely to sustain the tradition's full semiotic depth when they are organised around sustained engagement with ritual context and material practice, of the kind documented in Bhadange's community-based teaching, rather than around studio instruction in visual technique alone. This is consistent with the broader argument, made elsewhere in the literature on the tradition's institutional framework, that the transmission of cosmological and ecological knowledge cannot be separated from the transmission of technical skill without a corresponding loss of cultural substance (Rogoff, 1990; Lave & Wenger, 1991).

7.1 Limitations

Three limitations of the present analysis should be noted. First, the semiotic readings offered here, while checked against fieldwork interviews, remain the product of an analytical framework developed outside the Warli community's own interpretive traditions, and a fully community-authored semiotic account would likely surface distinctions and associations not captured here. Second, the analysis draws its evidence of contemporary practice from four male artists whose individual prominence in the documentary record does not represent the full diversity of contemporary Warli visual production and,

in particular, underrepresents the practice of women artists, who remain the tradition's historical ritual custodians. Third, the necessarily selective focus on four vocabulary elements, the circle, the triangle, the line, and colour, leaves less-examined dimensions of the visual system, spatial organisation, figure grouping, and narrative sequencing, for further semiotic investigation.

8. Conclusion

This article has presented a multi-level semiotic analysis of the Warli visual language, showing that its apparent formal simplicity conceals a highly structured system of meaning operating simultaneously at iconic, indexical, and symbolic levels, and that this structure extends beyond geometric form to encompass the tradition's material and chromatic practice. The analysis demonstrates that commercialisation tends to preserve the iconic legibility of Warli motifs while eroding their indexical and symbolic depth, but that individual artists working with genuine cultural knowledge can extend and renew the vocabulary's full semiotic range rather than merely reproducing its surface. These findings suggest that cultural sustainability interventions for Warli art should prioritise the documentation and transmission of ritual and material context alongside visual form, and they contribute a transferable analytical framework for the study of symbolic depth in other commercialising indigenous visual traditions.

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