

SIGNIFICANCE OF MATERIALS IN CONTEMPORARY INDIAN PAINTINGS

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Abstract

Through historical context, this study situates contemporary material practices within the longer trajectory of Indian art. By tracing the evolution from traditional, region-specific materials to modern industrial and hybrid forms, the research highlights how material shifts reflect broader social, political, and technological changes. Colonial encounters introduced new materials and techniques that transformed Indian painting practices, while post-independence modernism further encouraged experimentation and abstraction. Contemporary artists inherit this layered history and reinterpret it through innovative material strategies that respond to current realities.

Thematic analysis forms a key component of this research, examining how materials contribute to recurring themes in contemporary Indian painting such as identity, memory, urbanization, spirituality, and ecological crisis. Materials are not merely illustrative tools but active participants in constructing these themes. Their physical presence and symbolic associations enable artists to address complex issues that may resist purely representational approaches. In this way, materiality becomes a language through which abstract ideas are rendered tangible and experiential.



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Notable artist case studies further illuminate the significance of materials in shaping contemporary Indian painting practices. Artists across generations demonstrate diverse approaches to material use, ranging from refined traditional techniques to radical material experimentation. These case studies reveal how individual artistic philosophies manifest through specific material choices, offering insight into the broader cultural and conceptual frameworks that inform contemporary Indian art.

Theoretical perspectives on materiality provide an essential framework for understanding the active role of materials in artistic discourse. Contemporary art theory increasingly recognizes materials as agents that influence meaning rather than passive carriers of form. Phenomenological approaches emphasize the embodied experience of material presence, while postcolonial theory interrogates how material practices reflect power structures and cultural negotiation. Within the Indian context, these theories help unpack the layered significance of materials that operate simultaneously at aesthetic, cultural, and political levels.

In conclusion, materials in contemporary Indian painting function as dynamic, meaning-generating elements that shape artistic discourse in profound ways. They mediate between tradition and innovation, local specificity and global engagement, personal expression and collective history. By treating materials as active agents rather than neutral tools, contemporary Indian artists expand the possibilities of painting as a medium and reaffirm its relevance in a rapidly changing cultural landscape. This research underscores the importance of materiality as a critical lens through which contemporary Indian painting can be understood, analyzed, and appreciated, offering valuable insights into the evolving relationship between art, society, and culture in India.

Keywords

Contemporary Indian painting, materiality, mixed media, cultural identity, traditional techniques, artistic process.

1. Introduction

Artistic materials are the physical and conceptual building blocks of visual expression. In the context of contemporary Indian painting, materials are not neutral tools; they carry historical memory, cultural symbolism, economic significance, and conceptual weight. Whether it's the luminous surface of gesso on canvas, powdered earth on handmade paper, or digital pigment projected on screen, the choice of material reflects an artist's negotiation with tradition, innovation, and identity.

This research explores why materials matter in contemporary Indian painting. It investigates how materiality shapes artistic meaning, influences viewer perception, and connects art practice to broader socio-cultural and political contexts. The study considers not just traditional paints and canvases but also non-conventional materials, found objects, and interdisciplinary practices that blur boundaries between painting and sculpture, craft and fine art.

Thematic analysis forms a key component of this research, examining how materials contribute to recurring themes in contemporary Indian painting such as identity, memory, urbanization, spirituality, and ecological crisis. Materials are not merely illustrative tools but active participants in constructing these themes. Their physical presence and symbolic associations enable artists to address complex issues that may resist purely representational approaches. In this way, materiality becomes a language through which abstract ideas are rendered tangible and experiential.

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2. Literature Review: Materiality and Artistic Practice

Materials in visual art have never operated merely as functional or technical components used to translate artistic ideas into visible form; rather, they function as conceptual anchors that actively shape meaning, structure visual language, and carry cultural, historical, and ideological significance. In the field of contemporary Indian painting, materiality occupies a central position, as artists increasingly recognize

materials not as passive carriers of imagery but as agents that participate in the creation of meaning. Every material—whether pigment, surface, binding medium, textile, found object, or industrial substance—embodies a set of associations linked to its origin, production process, cultural use, and symbolic value. These associations inevitably influence how artworks are conceived, produced, perceived, and interpreted. Contemporary Indian painters consciously engage with this layered nature of materials to articulate complex narratives that negotiate between tradition and modernity, regional specificity and global exchange, and personal experience and collective memory.

Within contemporary Indian painting, material choices often function as a bridge between local identities and global artistic dialogues. Many artists operate within international exhibition circuits and academic frameworks, engaging with global art movements, theoretical discourses, and technological innovations, while remaining rooted in regional cultures and lived experiences. As a result, materials such as acrylic paint, digital prints, or industrial substances are frequently employed alongside handmade paper, textiles, natural pigments, or ritual materials. This fusion allows artists to assert cultural specificity without rejecting global influences, positioning Indian contemporary painting as a dynamic and evolving practice rather than a static or derivative one. Material hybridity thus becomes a strategy through which artists articulate a nuanced cultural identity that is both locally grounded and globally conversant.

In art theory, materiality refers to the physicality of the components used to create artwork and how these components affect meaning. Scholars like Rosalind Krauss, Jane Bennett, and W. J. T. Mitchell have emphasized that materials have agency: they participate in making meaning rather than merely carrying it.

Bill Beckley, in *Painting as an Art* (1992), noted that materials often carry histories—geological, cultural, or industrial—that interact with artistic intent. Claudia Mesch (2018) argued that materials shape not just the sensory surface of art but also social and political readings.

Materials in contemporary Indian painting also play a vital role in mediating between individual expression and collective memory. Artists often select materials that resonate with personal histories, childhood memories, ancestral practices, or regional landscapes, transforming the painting surface into a repository of lived experience. Earth pigments may evoke the memory of land and displacement, textile fragments may recall domestic spaces and gendered labor, while ash, rust, or recycled materials may signify decay, loss, or socio-political upheaval. These materials carry emotional and symbolic weight that extends beyond visual representation, enabling artists to communicate experiences that are psychological, historical, or communal

in nature. Through such material engagement, paintings become sites where personal narratives intersect with broader cultural and historical trajectories.



The influence of material choices on artistic intent is particularly evident in contemporary Indian painting, where concept and material are often inseparable. The decision to work with fragile, organic, or impermanent materials may reflect concerns related to transience, ecological vulnerability, or the instability of memory, while the use of industrial or metallic substances may comment on urbanization, mechanization, and economic transformation. Materials shape not only the final appearance of the artwork but also the artist's working process, determining methods of application, temporal rhythms, and modes of experimentation. In this sense, materiality functions as an extension of thought, allowing ideas to emerge through tactile interaction and physical engagement. The process of working with materials thus becomes an intellectual and sensory dialogue between the artist and the medium. Aesthetic experience in contemporary Indian painting is equally shaped by material presence, as different substances generate distinct sensory responses. Textured surfaces created through mixed media techniques invite close observation and evoke tactile awareness, while smooth or reflective surfaces may produce contemplative distance or optical engagement. The weight, density, translucency, and reflectivity of materials influence how artworks interact with light and space, shaping the viewer's perception and emotional response. Contemporary painters increasingly exploit these qualities to challenge conventional modes of viewing, encouraging audiences to engage with paintings not merely as images but as material objects with physical presence. Materiality thus expands the aesthetic dimension of painting beyond visual pleasure to include embodied and experiential modes of perception. Historically, Indian painting traditions demonstrate a deep awareness of material significance, as artistic practices were closely intertwined with local ecology, ritual belief systems, and community knowledge. Natural pigments derived from minerals, plants, shells, and organic substances were meticulously prepared and applied on

surfaces such as handmade paper, cloth, palm leaves, or architectural walls. These materials were integral to the spiritual and cultural function of art, reinforcing the belief that material substance itself possessed symbolic and ritual potency. In contrast, contemporary Indian painting emerges from a context shaped by colonial encounters, industrialization, and globalization, which introduced new materials such as oil paints, acrylics, synthetic pigments, commercial canvases, and digital tools. Rather than abandoning traditional material sensibilities, contemporary artists often combine indigenous and industrial materials, creating hybrid surfaces that reflect the layered realities of modern Indian society. This coexistence of materials from different historical and cultural registers becomes a visual metaphor for India's ongoing negotiation between continuity and change.

In Indian art history, traditional materials like natural pigments, handmade paper, and local brushes are deeply connected to regional painting practices such as Madhubani, Pattachitra, and miniature painting. Scholars like Geeti Sen (2000) and Partha Mitter (1994) have traced how Indian artists navigate colonial legacies and post-independence modernism, often through material choices.

Recent research by Kavita Singh (2016) highlights material hybridity in Indian contemporary art—the blending of indigenous materials with industrial or digital media. This hybridity challenges Eurocentric art historical frameworks and emphasizes localized dialogues.

3. Historical Context: Tradition to Contemporary

Indian painting traditions are rich in material specificity:

- Miniature Painting: Natural mineral and vegetable pigments on handmade paper or cloth.
- Madhubani: Organic dyes and rice paste on walls and paper.
- Pattachitra: Natural pigments derived from stones and plants, applied on cloth prepared with chalk and gum.

These materials were not selected randomly; they carried ritual significance, regional availability, and climatic suitability. With colonial encounters came industrial paints, Western canvas, and imported brushes. Early 20th-century Indian modernists like Raja Ravi Varma adapted oil paints and European realism techniques, marking a shift in material practice. By mid-20th century, artists trained at the Bombay and Delhi Art Schools began experimenting with acrylics, watercolors, and mixed media, integrating local and global visual vocabularies.

Post-1990 Contemporary Art Scene

Post-1990, India's art scene became globalized. Biennales, galleries, and

international residencies exposed Indian artists to diverse materials and technologies—digital media, installation components, recycled matter, and performance elements. Material choice became a central conceptual strategy rather than a technical afterthought.

Socio-cultural narratives embedded in contemporary Indian painting are deeply intertwined with material choices, as materials often operate as cultural symbols that reference caste, gender, labor, religion, and environment. The incorporation of textiles may allude to domestic labor, craft traditions, or marginalized artistic practices, while ritual materials such as vermilion, turmeric, or ash may evoke spiritual belief systems and sacred spaces. By using materials associated with everyday life or marginalized communities, artists challenge established hierarchies within both society and the art world. The elevation of humble, discarded, or non-art materials to the status of fine art questions conventional notions of value, authenticity, and artistic skill, positioning material experimentation as a form of cultural and political critique.

Material choices also significantly influence the market reception and institutional positioning of contemporary Indian paintings. Traditional formats such as oil or acrylic on canvas continue to dominate the commercial art market due to their perceived durability and compatibility with established modes of collection and display. However, many contemporary artists deliberately resist these conventions by adopting unconventional, ephemeral, or mixed media materials that challenge market expectations. While such practices may complicate issues of conservation and commodification, they also expand the conceptual boundaries of painting and assert artistic autonomy. The tension between material experimentation and market demands highlights the complex relationship between creativity, commerce, and institutional validation in contemporary Indian art.

Theoretical perspectives on materiality further illuminate the active role of materials in shaping artistic discourse. Contemporary art theory increasingly recognizes materials as agents that contribute to meaning rather than inert substances that merely support form. Phenomenological approaches emphasize the viewer's embodied engagement with material presence, while postcolonial theory examines how material practices reflect histories of power, resistance, and cultural negotiation. Within the Indian context, these theoretical frameworks help unpack the layered significance of materials that simultaneously operate at aesthetic, cultural, and political levels. Materials become sites where histories are contested, identities are negotiated, and new visual languages are forged.

4. Material Choices and Artistic Intent

Contemporary painters often juxtapose traditional materials (natural pigments, handmade paper) with industrial ones (acrylics, commercial canvases, synthetic pigments). This contrast can signal:

- A critique of modernization
- A reassertion of cultural roots
- Dialogues between the local and global

Artist Arpita Singh, for example, combines acrylic paint with collage and textiles, using commercial and found materials to explore memory and emotion. The use of found objects and recycled materials reflects environmental consciousness and social commentary. Artists like Jitish Kallat incorporate urban detritus into painting surfaces to address themes of urbanization and history. Digital painting tools (tablets, software) and hybrid outputs (digital prints, projections) expand the definition of painting. These materials challenge traditional notions of authenticity and originality, prompting debate within Indian art circles.



5. Materials as Cultural Signifiers

Natural pigments bind contemporary practice with indigenous knowledge systems. Raqs Media Collective, for instance, uses earth pigments to evoke geological time and cultural memory. Textiles often enter painting surfaces as commentary on gendered labor. Artists like Nilima Sheikh integrate embroidery, thread, and fabric into paintings to highlight craft traditions and women's work. Some contemporary painters incorporate ritual materials—vermilion (sindoor), turmeric, Kumkum particles—to invoke spiritual dimensions and challenge secular frameworks in art.

6. Case Studies of Notable Contemporary Indian Painters

6.1 Anjolie Ela Menon

Anjolie Ela Menon's works often use oil on masonite or canvas, with glass and resin accents. Her material choices create luminous surfaces that blend figuration with introspective symbolism.

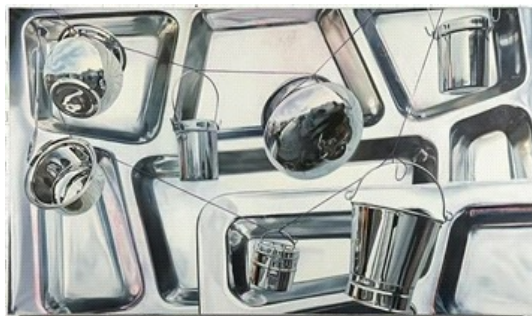
- **Material Impact:** Oil's slow drying and deep color lend emotional depth; resin and glass add reflective quality.
- **Interpretative Outcome:** Her paintings evoke psychological spaces and personal narratives.



6.2 Subodh Gupta

Although often associated with sculpture, Gupta's painting works include stainless steel utensils, mirror shards, and milk cans. His signature use of kitchen objects embedded into surfaces references India's economic transitions.

- **Material Impact:** Industrial and domestic materials collapse public and private spheres.
- **Interpretative Outcome:** His works critique globalization and celebrate quotidian life.



6.3 Bharti Kher

Kher's paintings often incorporate bindis, creating textured surfaces that oscillate between painting and installation.

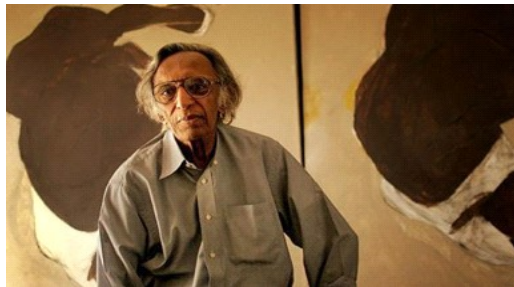
- **Material Impact:** Bindis fuse decorative and symbolic meaning.
- **Interpretative Outcome:** They explore femininity, identity, and cultural signifiers.



6.4 Tyeb Mehta

Tyeb Mehta's vigorous lines and expressive forms often use oil and acrylic on canvas. His material economy—limited palette and stark contrasts—emphasizes emotional intensity.

- **Material Impact:** Sparse materials focus attention on form and gesture.
- **Interpretative Outcome:** Works suggest universal themes of tragedy and resilience.



7. Materials, Process and Viewer Perception

7.1 Sensory Engagement

Different materials evoke distinct sensory experiences. Rough handmade paper invites close tactile inspection, while glossy acrylic surfaces reflect light dynamically. These qualities shape how viewers perceive and interact with paintings.

7.2 Material Narratives

Viewers may read materials as narratives themselves. Recycled elements can suggest history and memory; natural pigments may evoke land, climate, and local ecology.

7.3 Conceptual Transparency

When materials visibly relate to conceptual content (for example, using ash to depict loss), the viewer gains immediate insight into thematic concerns.

8. Economic and Institutional Impacts

8.1 Market Value and Materials

Materiality influences market valuation. Traditional oil and canvas paintings

often fetch higher prices than works using ephemeral or unconventional materials. This economic criterion shapes artistic practice and institutional support.

8.2 Conservation Challenges

Materials with limited durability (organic pigments, mixed media components, digital files) pose challenges for collectors and museums. Conservation demands specialized techniques, which can affect how works are archived and displayed.

8.3 Institutional Recognition

Museums and galleries sometimes prefer works that fit conventional display formats (framed paintings vs. installations). Artists navigating such institutions must balance material experimentation with exhibition constraints.

9. Theoretical Perspectives on Material Significance

Marshall McLuhan's dictum—"the medium is the message"—applies strongly in contemporary Indian art. Materials carry their own histories and connotations, shaping interpretation. Phenomenologists like Maurice Merleau-Ponty emphasize embodied perception. Materials with distinct textures and weights engage the viewer's bodily senses, not just visual cognition. Postcolonial theory considers how materials reflect power dynamics. Indian artists may use indigenous materials to assert cultural sovereignty or hybrid materials to critique globalization.

10. Challenges and Future Directions

As artists increasingly engage with ecological themes, material sourcing becomes ethically charged. Sustainable pigments, recycled bases, and low-impact processes are gaining prominence. Digital painting and NFTs (non-fungible tokens) challenge traditional material boundaries. These digital materials raise questions about ownership, authenticity, and sensory experience. Global artistic exchange encourages hybrid material practices. Indian artists collaborate internationally, incorporating diverse material vocabularies while retaining localized meanings.

Conclusion

In conclusion, materials in contemporary Indian painting function as dynamic and meaning-generating elements that profoundly shape artistic practice and discourse. They mediate between tradition and innovation, local specificity and global engagement, and personal expression and collective history. By treating materials as active agents rather than neutral tools, contemporary Indian artists expand the possibilities of painting as a medium and reaffirm its relevance in an increasingly complex and interconnected world. An understanding of materiality thus provides a critical lens through which contemporary Indian painting can be analyzed and

appreciated, revealing the intricate relationship between art, culture, and society in present-day India. Materials in contemporary Indian painting are far more than utilities; they are dynamic participants in artistic discourse. Whether derived from earth, invented in industrial processes, or generated digitally, materials shape artistic form, cultural meaning, political critique, and aesthetic experience. Through deliberate material choices, Indian painters negotiate tradition and innovation, express individual and collective identity, and engage with global conversations in art.

Understanding the significance of materials deepens both academic insight and public appreciation of contemporary Indian art. As artists experiment with new mediums and contexts, materiality will continue to play a central role in defining Indian painting's evolving languages.

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