

Chapter 22

Defining the Concept of Visual Space in Mural Art Traditions of Rural Eastern Jharkhand



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Abstract The rural communities of eastern Jharkhand paint their mud houses annually before the festivals. Various visual forms such as flowers, animals, birds and dancing human forms are painted on the external and internal wall of the mud houses. The placements of these visual forms on the wall vary from one region to another. To understand the concept of visual space in this art form among these communities, ethnographic research has been conducted in three administrative divisions (Santhal Pargana, North Chotanagpur and Kolhan) of eastern rural Jharkhand. Unstructured interview and documentation method were used to understand the concept of visual space in mural art tradition. Specifying the three mural-making mediums, three visual layouts are discussed in this study. Following these three layouts, the concept of physical and conceptual space of rural mural artist has been explained.

22.1 Introduction

In visual arts, mural is defined as two-dimensional artwork. It is executed in painted and applied form on the wall, floor, ceiling or other architectural element with a mutual relation to the architecture and environment [1]. Therefore, mural is a combination of art, architectural elements and space. Visual space is one of the elements of art that is defined and determined by shapes and forms. Literature shows that in two-dimensional arts like paintings (e.g. folk, miniature and scroll) and photography, visual space always gets the attention of the researchers [2, 3]. There is hardly any literature found pertaining to the study of visual space in traditional mural art. Concerning the art, architecture and visual space, the rural mural art forms of eastern Jharkhand are selected for the study. In this study, the

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Fig. 22.1 Painted mud houses of rural eastern Jharkhand

term “rural mural art form” is to mainly specify the artwork that is done by the local villagers on the mud wall, not by the professionals like, advertising company and marriage decorators. The rural communities (e.g. Santhal, Kurmi) of eastern Jharkhand paint their mud houses annually before the festivals. Various visual forms such as flowers, animals, birds and dancing human forms are painted on the external and internal wall of the mud houses (Fig. 22.1). This study aims to understand the idea of visual space in rural mural art tradition of eastern rural Jharkhand. The objectives of the study comprise the visual aspects (i.e. understanding of visual space arrangement) and cultural aspect (i.e. cultural significance) of rural mural art forms of eastern rural Jharkhand. The research questions have been formulated focusing on the concept of visual space among the rural artist of eastern Jharkhand.

22.2 Methodology

To understand the visual and cultural aspects of rural people, ethnographic research has been conducted in three administrative divisions such as Santhal Pargana, North Chotanagpur and Kolhan of eastern Jharkhand. Six districts of Santhal Pargana such as Dumka, Godda, Sahibganj, Pakur, Jamtara and Deoghar; two districts of North Chotanagpur Giridih and Dhanbad; and two districts of Kolhan division such as East Singhbhum and Saraikela-Kharsawan were selected randomly for the field study (Fig. 22.2). Different research methods, such as documentation and unstructured interviews, were adopted to collect the data. Notes on unstructured

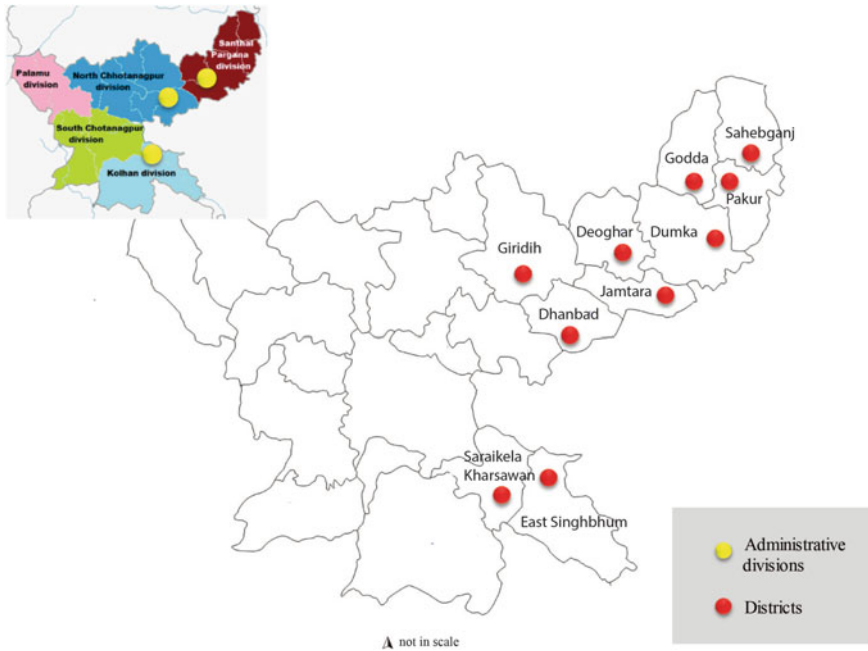


Fig. 22.2 Map of Jharkhand: location of selected administrative divisions and districts

interviews were made and noted with people’s opinion, feeling and knowledge about the visual space. The collected data was analysed by finding the same pattern in documented artwork and notes.

22.3 Ethnographic Study

Ethnographic study has been conducted in three administrative divisions such as Santhal Pargana, North Chotanagpur and Kolhan of eastern Jharkhand and ten districts such as Dumka, Godda, Deoghar, Jamtara, Sahibganj, Pakur, East Singhbhum, Saraikela-Kharsawan, Giridih and Dhanbad (Fig. 22.2).

22.3.1 Documentation

Photography was used as key visual method to document the mural art forms. There are three mural techniques found. The layouts of all the three mural techniques are discussed here as mud mural layout, paint mural layout and rice paste mural layouts. These layouts are discussed below including the marking of wall division A, B

and C or upper, middle and lower. The horizontal and vertical red dotted line shows the placement of creepers or plants, and cross dotted line shows the motifs.

Mud mural layout: In this, the mural is made on the wall by applying mud. Mud mural layouts are basically found in Santhal Pargana (Dumka, Godda, Deoghar, Pakur, Sahebganj, Jamtara) and North Chotanagpur (Dhanbad district) regions. The layout defines the most common visual form placement on the wall. In mud mural, the upper elevation of the wall comprises of horizontal border, creeper and motifs.¹ The border and creepers are mainly the repetition of geometrical and vegetative visual forms. Motifs are mainly painted above the horizontal border and creepers as a single and group. These motifs contain bird, animals and plant form. On the eye level, middle part of the wall contains creepers around the doorframe, group and single motif at the left and right side of doorframe. The creepers around the doorframe are depicted in mirror reflection with central motif² such as plant, pot or word. The visual layout of mud mural is shown below (Fig. 22.3).

Paint mural layout: The painted mud houses of Kolhan (East Singhbhum and Saraikela-Kharsawan) mainly contain horizontal bands and creepers or plants motifs around the doorframe in the middle-lower part of the wall. The painted bands are depicted with plain or decorative border in both sides (i.e. upper and lower). In the horizontal bands, repetition of geometrical shapes is painted on the middle of the band. The pattern of these shapes is designed in special organization which helps to visualize the background in shape or repetitions of shape. The organization of geometrical pattern makes a resemblance with figure-ground principles of Gestalt theory.³ The upper part of the wall does not contain any visual forms and motif. The lower part of the wall (near the seating platform) is painted in flat black colour as horizontal border (Fig. 22.4). The single vertical line shows the placement of creepers or plants, double horizontal line shows the border/band or stripes, and crosses show the motif or repetition of motifs.

Rice paste mural layout: In North Chotanagpur (Giridih district), rice paste is used to draw the border and motif on the middle lower part of the outer walls of the house. During harvesting season, rural people draw borders on the wall to depict paddy fields. This paddy field is drawn in very simplified loop shape, and motifs are arranged within those borders. The visual forms are generally depicted in many layers. Middle lower part of the wall is the most preferable working area for the artist. In this mural medium, doorways are not painted with creepers, pot and central motif (Fig. 22.5).

¹Motif is a decorative, narrative or iconographic image or design.

²The motif is presented in centre of any group motif like two birds with one pot. Here, pot is a central motif.

³Figure-ground organization is one of the principles of Gestalt psychology. In art, it is explained as perceptual grouping in which a figure is identified as a background and background identified as a figure through vision.

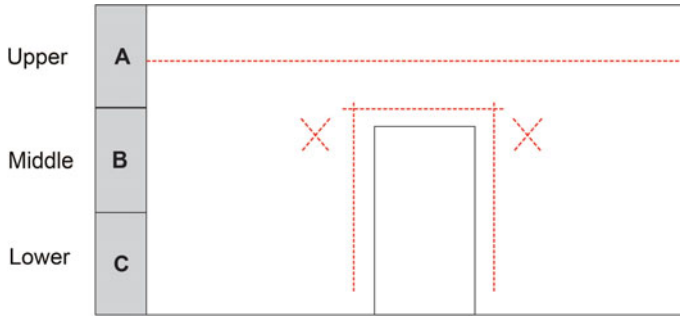


Fig. 22.3 Mud mural layout A, B and C is upper, middle and lower division of the wall

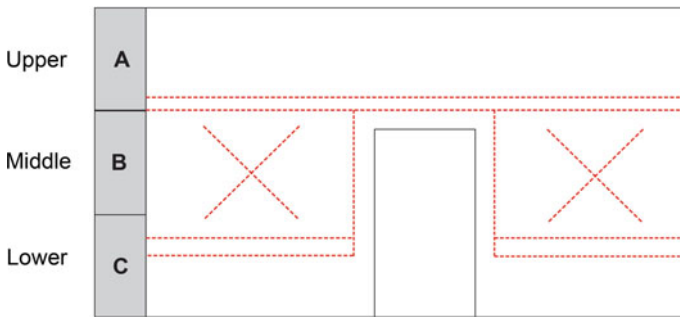


Fig. 22.4 Paint mural layout A, B and C is upper, middle and lower division of the wall

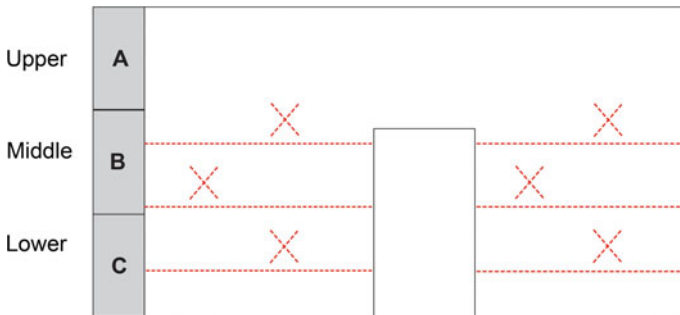


Fig. 22.5 Rice paste mural layout A, B and C is upper, middle and lower division of the wall

22.3.2 Unstructured Interviews

A total of 38 unstructured interviews were conducted in all the 10 selected districts. Age of the participants ranged from 15 to 50 years, both male and female. Sample size constrained for the study was 90, administrative division—30 and district—9.

The participants were farmers, labour, employ and housewives but are involved in mural making tradition of eastern rural Jharkhand. In the interview, questions regarding purpose behind making the murals, subject or theme of murals and reasons of placement of visual forms were clarified. The artist’s opinion about visual space in mural and in general lifestyle was also discussed. By the conversation, it is understood that decoration, documentation, and prosperity are the main purposes of these living mural art traditions. In mud mural layout, birds, animals, flowers, creepers and plants are main visual motifs. In rice paste mural, agriculture motifs such as, paddy field, paddy and other corns are main visual motifs that are executed on the wall. In paint mural layout, geometrical shapes and horizontal bands are main visual forms.

22.4 Analysis

To analyse the layouts of three murals, participatory research followed in mural making events in villages of Dumka district (Santhal Pargana), Giridih district (North Chotanagpur) and East Singhbhum district (Kolhan). Detailed information about medium, execution techniques and painted visual form and shape was clarified by participating in mural making events. The upper part of the wall contains visual forms, and the middle and lower part of the wall contains that kind of visual forms which are interlinked in both part of the wall. The measurements conclude that in all three layouts rural artists are not following general divisions of wall like upper, middle and lower or A, B and C. It is found that there are only two divisions of wall that are done by the artist while making the murals. The updated layout has been shown below, in that the upper (A) and middle-lower (B-C) marks show the divisions of the wall (Fig. 22.6).

The contents of the unstructured interview were analysed finding the majority of similar words, sentences and similar meaning of words and sentences. There are some patterns from the statements that are discussed here. “We like to sit on the platform and in sitting position our back touch to the wall”, “Our houses are like our

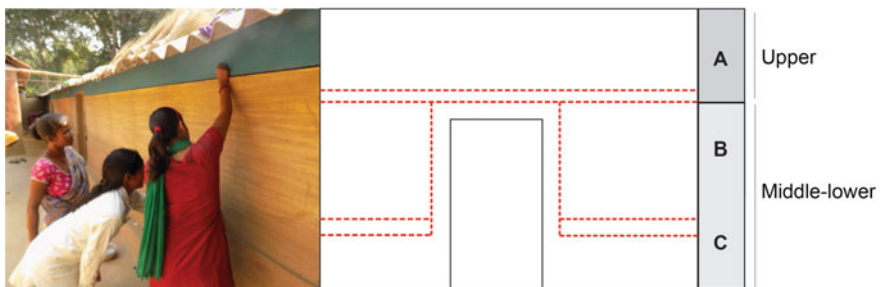


Fig. 22.6 Analysis of the layout

mother and the wall of the house is anchal”, “Wall is like infinite space for us”, and “We feel happy when anyone praise our mural while passing through the street”. “In harvesting season, before going to the paddy field we draw paddy on the wall”. These statements open various insights about visual aspects and cultural aspects. It can be said that the architectural elements (e.g. doorway, sitting platform, pillar and window) are essential part of the mural but there are some cultural phenomena which constrain them to picturing the wall not as a bounded space but beyond that.

22.5 Mural and Visual Space

In all three mural layouts, the front wall of the house (i.e. mural execution area) on which the subject of the artwork painted or executed is described as visual space among the rural artists. While designing the murals by the rural artists, the decision regarding visual space (e.g. space division, angle of visual form) effects two significant aspects of the space: one is physical space and another is conceptual space. Both concepts are discussed in the following paragraphs.

22.5.1 *Physical Space*

By the ethnography study, it is understood that the space which is the part of architectural elements and the space which is created by architectural elements deal with physical space among the villagers (Fig. 22.7). In figure “A” physical space is comprised of working space, empty space and depth of the architectural elements. While executing murals, depth of the architectural elements is either counted as empty space by the artist or as a figure on the wall which has shape and form. While executing the mural, depth of the architectural elements space always gets a special attention by the artist. As shown in the figure “A” following the shape of the architectural elements, visual forms are arranged.

Figure B and C mainly explains the house organization pattern in the villages. In selected villages, there is always a main street and small street between two houses. The entrance of some of the houses opens into the main street and some of them in the courtyard. There is generally a small street between the two houses. Generally, seating platforms are attached to the outer wall of the house and that marks the edge of the house. Houses mainly contain rooms, courtyard, veranda. In figure B and C, space which is created by architectural elements like main street, small street and courtyard creates physical space which is important to get the viewer’s attention. In support of viewer’s attention, it can be added that front wall of the house is the most decorated wall of the house and it contains entrance doorway and seating platform and there is always open space in front of the wall in the form of street and courtyard. In some villages, mural execution is not done on side and backyard wall because side wall is adjunct with small street or granary stores and these portions do

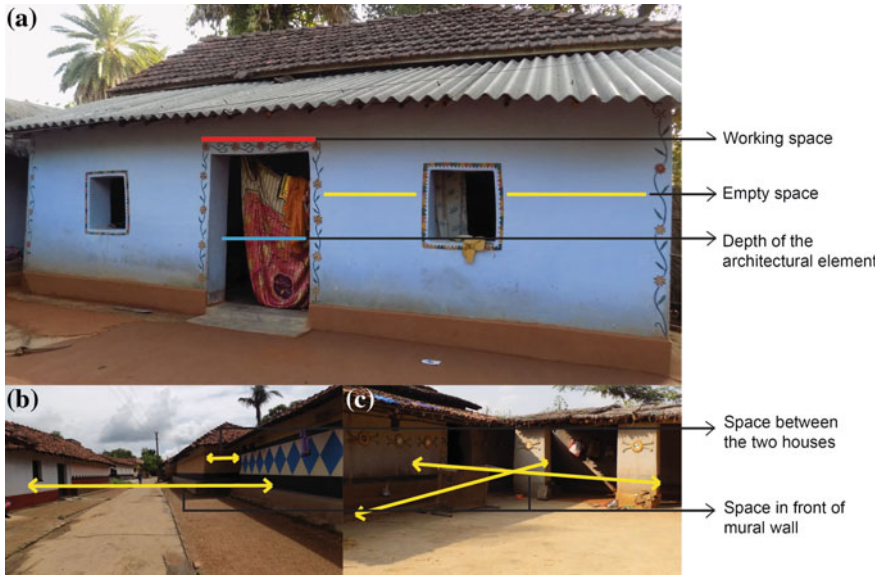


Fig. 22.7 Explaining physical space; **a** space within the architectural elements, **b** and **c** space created by architectural elements

not get viewer's attention. Consequently, the decorations on those walls are optional. In below paragraphs, all three layouts the physical space is discussed in detail.

Mud mural layout: Mud mural layout is mainly found in Santhal Pargana and in some villages of North Chotanagpur regions. In this region, most of the villages have courtyard style houses, and in this style houses, more than two entrances open in the courtyard facing to each other. On these entrance walls, murals are executed. The mural execution wall mainly contains doorway and sitting platform, and rarely window or ventilator is found on these walls. The height of the wall is generally 5–6 ft or more than an average human's height. The height of the wall motivates the artist to work on the eye level. As it is mentioned that the mural wall is the part of courtyard, and the courtyard is used for various household purpose such as for cooking, drying cloths or agricultural work. In these work, it is noticed that people use the seating platform for sitting purpose or keeping vessels. This habit indirectly guides the artist to make a proper distinction of foreground and background in mural. Consequently, creepers or plants and pot are drawn around the doorway. Rectangular shape of the doorway also directs the artist to mark the shape with the help of visual forms and repetition of visual forms. The space between the edge of the wall and doorways is used as working space and empty space. In this layout, empty space is found in vast area of the wall.

Paint mural layout: Paint mural layout basically found in Kolhan region. In this region, the entrance of the painted house mainly opens in the main street. In the

main street, people dance, sing and perform many rituals. Their village governance council is also held in the main street. The seating platform is frequently used by the villagers for the sitting purpose. In the paint mural layout, the middle-lower portion of the wall carries most of the visual forms. In lower portion of the wall, the sitting platform attached to the wall is painted with plain bands. It is noticed that till the sitting height the bands are intentionally painted plain (i.e. without any motif or pattern). As the upper elevation of the wall generally used to dry clothes or to hang pitchers for pigeons, the upper portions of the wall are not painted with any visual forms.

Rice paste mural layout: Rice paste mural found in North Chotanagpur region. There are not any particular house patterns identified in this region. The entrance of the houses opens in main street, courtyard and sometimes in small street. In most of the house, sitting platform is attached with mural execution wall. Middle lower portion of the wall is used for the mural execution. Upper portion of the wall is used to keep some agricultural equipment and to dry cloths.

22.5.2 *Conceptual Space*

In this mural-making tradition, the involved communities are followers of various religions like Sarna, Hindu and Christian. The followers of Sarna religion are nature worshiper; for them, the cosmic space is the spirit world. Bir Bonga is the forest spirit. Jaher era is the spirit of the sacred grove, Dadi Bonga is the spring spirit, Marang Buru is the spirit who dwelt with the first Santhal, Pargana Bonga is the spirit of the region, Sima Bonga is the boundary spirit, and Manjhi Haram is the spirit of the founder of the village [4]. They worship animals such as bull, cow, cock, tree, farm barn and also other symbols of nature like Sun, Moon, stars, rivers and mountains. For them, the house is like “maa ka anchal”,⁴ and they have to decorate mother’s clothes with various visual motifs. Cleaning houses with mud is equal to worshipping the mother earth. For the other communities, prosperity is interconnected with clean and decorated space. According to them, the divine god and goddess only pay their visit in decorated houses. Most of the communities decorate the main entrance of the houses to welcoming the guest who will come to pay their visit during festivals. Rycroft remarks that conceptually the entrance gate is decorated to welcoming the guest with flower garland [5]. The pot motif is represented as earth, which symbolizes the life in creepers. In layouts, the creepers and motif are arranged without the division of ground and the skyline by the villagers. It gives a perception of conceptual space among rural people. All three layouts discussed below defining the conceptual space.

⁴Anchal is the end/corner of the Saree (it is a traditional Indian dress worn by women), and in Hindi, it is known as Aanchal or Pallu. Aanchal is generally the most decorated part of the Saree. ‘maa ka anchal’ is a proverb used by the rural people for the decorated houses.

Mud mural layout: In mud mural layout, wall is seen as an infinite space or boundless space among the villagers of Santhal Pargana. They depict animals, birds, flower plants, creepers on their wall and show their gratitude to Mother Nature. Sometimes animals are placed in upper part of the wall and the birds in the middle. These arrangements clarify their angle of seeing this wall as earth in aerial view. The conceptual lay outing process makes the resemblance with the prehistoric art concept of visual form placement. The primitive concept of space suggests the visual world as a spatial extension of visual forms. Mathpal has mentioned in his cave art study that the prehistoric artist was not bound by conventional restrictions of space. There is no indication of ground line with the figure [6].

Paint mural layout: In paint mural layout, horizontal geometrical bands are never framed with vertical border. It defines that artist does not want to limit their earthen canvas within their own wall of the house; in fact, they want to create their conceptual space consistency beyond it. It also shows their social unity, in which they want to bind each other in one band symbolically.

Rice paste mural: In rice paste mural layout, agricultural motifs are painted in layers without perspective. In this mural art form, rather than considering the wall as a vertical canvas they consider it as an agricultural field. In support of that, they place their motifs in layers. They do not use any border to bind the wall, and they do not use any pot motif to represent the earth. Through this mural, they thank the motherland before working on field and paint their houses with agriculture-related motif. For them, it helps to increase their prosperity and wealth.

22.6 Discussion and Conclusion

This study opens new insights of visual space in rural mural art forms, it shows that the physical and conceptual space are essential aspects of space while designing the mural on the mud houses in eastern rural Jharkhand. At the physical level, the vertical earthen canvas can be visualized as two opposing groups: working space and empty space. The visual forms like border and motifs cover the working space of the layout, and the space around the visual forms is empty space of the layout. In mural layouts, the depth of the architectural elements is treated as figure and as empty space. At the conceptual level, the placement of visual forms does not follow a conventional understanding of space for instance. Here, the visual space defines the infinite space. In the mural layouts, rural people arrange visual forms in an infinite space at the conceptual level, and at the same time, they show their consciousness for doorframe, roof shed and seating platform for placing visual forms as physical level. This compositional aspect gives valuable clues of equal importance of conceptual and physical space in rural mural art forms. It can be concluded that, in these mural art forms, the physical concept of space defines the visual space beyond the frame, and at the same level, conceptual space defines it within the frame. It can also mention that the shape of the wall, order of houses, daily lifestyle, nature attachment and superstitions encourage the villagers to organize visual

elements in a certain layout. The physical and conceptual aspects of rural community and its representation in murals stand in their own signature style among others art forms.

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