

From Sequential Narrative to Conceptual Simultaneity: Reinterpreting Continuous Narration in Scroll Paintings of Sanat Kumar Chatterjee

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ABSTRACT

Narrative painting has played an important role in preserving cultural memory. It has changed from early visual records and ongoing narrative traditions into more complex conceptual forms. In India, scroll painting emerged as a practice that combined images, storytelling, and rituals. Traditions like Patachitra, Phad, and Cheriya used sequential designs to share religious, historical, and social stories. This paper looks at the historical development of narrative painting and Indian scroll traditions before exploring how contemporary artist Sanat Kumar Chatterjee has transformed them. Through formal, historical, and contextual analysis, the study examines how Chatterjee reinterprets the scroll format by blending Bengal School aesthetics, the influence of Asit Kumar Haldar, Pahari miniature painting, and Buddhist Thangka traditions. The study focuses on his scrolls, his innovative surface treatments, his pigment techniques, and his construction of portable scrolls. The paper argues that Chatterjee moves away from the traditional sequential storytelling method. Instead, he creates unified pictorial fields where mythology, cosmology, spirituality, and nature coexist. This shift changes the scroll from a tool for performance into a modern conceptual medium that can express philosophical and metaphysical ideas. The study positions Chatterjee's work as an important part of contemporary Indian art, showing how traditional visual practices can be reimagined through new ideas while maintaining their cultural and symbolic connections.

Keywords: *Narrative Painting; Indian Scroll Painting; Sanat Kumar Chatterjee; Bengal School of Art; Asit Kumar Haldar; Pahari Miniature Painting; Buddhist Thangka; Continuous Narrative; Contemporary Indian Art; Monumental Silk Scrolls; Watercolour on Silk; Visual Storytelling; Formal Innovation; Symbolic Simultaneity; Cultural Heritage.*

INTRODUCTION

Narrative painting has long served as a key means of cultural expression. It has evolved from linear, sequential scroll traditions into complex forms of visual storytelling (Porwal et al., 2026; Sharma & Rani, 2024). While historical formats like the Patachitra and Phad relied on a sequence of events to convey meaning (Wolf, 2003), modern scholarship often overlooks how these static structures shift into non-linear, conceptual frameworks (Im, 2026). This study points out a major gap in the discussion about Indian scroll painting, specifically the lack of focus on how contemporary artists move beyond traditional linear limits. Therefore, this research aims to trace the evolution of narrative scroll painting. It looks at how it has changed from continuous narrative forms to the conceptual simultaneity seen in the works of Sanat Kumar Chatterjee, a renowned artist from the Bengal School (Sharma, 2023). By examining his departures from traditional lineages, this paper argues that Chatterjee replaces historical timeline with a layered, unified field of cosmological and symbolic representation. This analysis seeks to redefine the scroll format not just as a medium for oral storytelling, but as a vibrant space for metaphysical exploration (Chakraborty, 2023). By studying his scrolls, this research reveals how Chatterjee merges the tactile heritage of traditional techniques with a cutting-edge approach to narrative depth. This study challenges the common focus on traditional social identities and linear iconography (Majumder, 2020). Instead, it proposes a shift toward an aesthetic that blends different times and ideas. Ultimately, this study claims that such innovation redefines the scroll as a flexible, modern medium. It can express complex philosophical ideas that traditional sequential formats cannot capture (Shil, 2025). By carefully mapping these artistic changes, this research enhances our understanding of how modern Indian artists navigate the conflict between past cultural traditions and current artistic practices. Furthermore, it shows that Chatterjee's new take on the scroll goes beyond just preserving historical methods.

It places the medium as a space for intellectual, spiritual, and artistic exploration. In doing so, the study proposes a new framework for understanding contemporary Indian scroll painting. In this framework, continuity comes not from sequential narration, but from the simultaneous existence of various timeframes, symbolic systems, and philosophical narratives within a single pictorial field.

HISTORY OF NARRATIVE PAINTING

Narrative painting is one of the oldest and most lasting forms of visual communication. It comes from humanity's basic desire to record, keep, and share experiences through images. Long before writing existed, prehistoric communities used pictures to document hunting trips, rituals, and social events on cave walls. This established the early principles of visual storytelling (Gombrich, 1995). Sites like Lascaux in France and Bhimbetka in India show an early grasp of action over time, spatial continuity, and symbolism. This suggests that narrative imagery served as a mental tool to preserve cultural memory rather than just showing separate events. As a result, narrative painting became a vital medium for societies to embed history, mythology, religious beliefs, and shared identity into lasting visual forms. As civilizations grew, narrative painting took on more complex forms that reflected changes in religion, politics, and culture. In ancient Egypt, mural paintings and funerary reliefs arranged stories based on hierarchy and symbolism. Here, the sequence of time took a back seat to spiritual meaning and cosmological order (Kemp, 2006). Similarly, Mesopotamian relief sculptures, Greek vase paintings, and Roman frescoes used sequential imagery to honor historical victories, mythic tales, and ceremonies. Instead of showing a single moment, these works often combined multiple events within a single pictorial space. This allowed viewers to reconstruct intricate narratives through visual cues. These developments laid the groundwork for continuous narration, where a single character might appear several times in one image to show the passage of time without splitting the picture into separate panels. The evolution of narrative painting became even more intricate across Asia, where religious beliefs and performance traditions greatly impacted visual storytelling. Indian art, particularly from Buddhist, Hindu, and Jain cultures, turned narrative painting into a tool for spiritual teaching and cultural sharing. The murals at Ajanta, dating from the second century BCE to the sixth century CE, showcase advanced continuous narrative techniques by illustrating several episodes from the Jataka tales within cohesive architectural spaces (Spink, 2005). Rather than dividing stories chronologically, these works invite viewers to explore the picture through symbolic relationships, spatial movement, and recurring characters. Similar narrative techniques also emerged in palm-leaf manuscripts, temple murals, and illustrated religious texts, where visual continuity supported oral traditions and performative storytelling.

With the advent of scroll painting, the scope of narrative representations was also expanded by establishing a temporal link between the artwork and its viewers. Unlike static murals or framed paintings, scrolls were progressively unrolled, revealing narratives in a controlled visual sequence that paralleled the unfolding of oral recitation and musical performance. Throughout Asia, Chinese handscrolls, Japanese emakimono, Tibetan thangkas, and many Indian scroll traditions developed distinct narrative systems in pursuit of the common objective of integrating image, performance, and cultural memory (Sullivan, 1999). In the Indian context, traditions like Patachitra, Phad, Cheriya, Jadopatia and Patua scrolls developed as performative visual texts, allowing itinerant storytellers to communicate religious epics, regional folklore and historical events to diverse audiences (Wolf, 2003). The sequential unfolding of these scrolls transformed viewing into a temporal experience, where meaning emerged through the gradual revelation of interconnected episodes rather than instantaneous visual perception.

In the medieval and early modern periods narrative painting split into a variety of regional idioms corresponding to local aesthetic philosophies and patronage systems. Persian miniature painting brought to the fore complex compositional schemes in which a number of events were depicted at the same time within carefully constructed pictorial spaces. These innovations had a major effect on the Mughal workshops of India, where artists combined Persian conventions with local visual traditions to produce richly detailed manuscripts illustrating imperial histories, literary epics, and religious stories (Beach, 1992). Simultaneously, the Rajput and Pahari miniature schools developed expressive narrative languages that privileged poetic symbolism, emotional resonance, and spiritual devotion over strict historical realism. Narrative thus became more and more dependent on metaphor, iconography and psychological expression, allowing artists to express philosophical ideas as well as descriptive events.

In Europe the Renaissance introduced another major change in the history of narrative painting. The systematic application of linear perspective, anatomical realism and naturalistic observation. The dramatic composition, emotional expression, and consistent spatial illusion were emphasized by artists such as Giotto, Masaccio, Leonardo da Vinci, Raphael, and Michelangelo, who transformed pictorial storytelling (Panofsky, 1991). Renaissance artists more often portrayed a single moment of climax rather than a sequence of moments, but their paintings still conveyed a rich narrative complexity through gesture, symbolism and compositional relationships carefully orchestrated. Later developments in the Baroque period expanded the expressive power of narrative by using theatrical lighting, animated movement, and psychological tension to seize viewers' emotions in the midst of unfolding visual dramas.

The nineteenth and twentieth centuries saw profound re-evaluations of narrative painting as artists began to question traditional modes of representation. Modernism shifted the emphasis from descriptive realism to subjective experience, symbolic abstraction and conceptual interpretation. This changed the relationship between narrative and pictorial form. Artists experimented with fragmented temporalities, psychological states, and multiple interpretative possibilities via increasingly experimental visual languages rather than linear stories (Foster et al., 2016). Simultaneously, non-Western artistic traditions gained new scholarly and institutional interest, leading artists to re-engage with indigenous narrative practices, while adapting them to contemporary social and philosophical concerns. Thus the narrative transcended chronological story-telling to become a multi-dimensional structure which could contain memory, identity, mythology and metaphysical speculation within unified visual fields.

Within contemporary Indian art, this transformation has become particularly significant as artists negotiate the relationship between inherited traditions and modern conceptual practices. While many practitioners continue to draw inspiration from historical scroll formats, their works frequently depart from linear sequentiality in favour of symbolic simultaneity, layered iconography, and philosophical abstraction. The scroll is therefore reimagined not merely as a carrier of sequential episodes but as an expansive spatial environment in which multiple temporalities, cultural references, and conceptual systems coexist simultaneously. This evolution reflects broader shifts within contemporary visual culture, where narrative functions less as the representation of chronological events than as an exploration of interconnected histories, identities, and cosmological ideas.

The history of narrative painting thus reveals a continuous process of transformation rather than a linear progression of stylistic developments. From prehistoric cave imagery and ancient mural traditions to medieval manuscripts, performative scrolls, miniature paintings, and contemporary conceptual practices, narrative has consistently adapted to changing cultural, religious, and philosophical contexts. Despite these transformations, its fundamental purpose remains remarkably consistent: to communicate experiences that transcend individual moments and connect viewers with broader systems of meaning. Understanding this historical evolution provides an essential framework for examining contemporary artists who reinterpret traditional narrative structures through innovative formal and conceptual strategies. It is within this broader historical continuum that the scroll paintings of Sanat Kumar Chatterjee acquire particular significance, representing not the continuation of historical narrative conventions, but their profound reconfiguration into a contemporary visual language that privileges simultaneity, symbolism, and metaphysical inquiry over chronological storytelling.

EVOLUTION OF INDIAN SCROLL PAINTING

The evolution of Indian scroll painting reflects one of the most enduring trajectories of visual storytelling, wherein the painted surface functioned not merely as an artistic object but as a performative medium for preserving religious, historical, and cultural knowledge. Emerging from ancient traditions of narrative representation, Indian scroll painting developed through a dynamic interaction between oral traditions, ritual practices, and regional artistic idioms. Unlike monumental temple murals or illustrated manuscripts, scroll paintings were inherently mobile, allowing artists and itinerant storytellers to carry narratives across diverse geographical and cultural landscapes. Consequently, the scroll became a unique visual archive that integrated painting, performance, music, and oral narration into a unified system of communication (Wolf, 2003).

The conceptual foundations of Indian scroll painting can be traced to early narrative traditions evident in the murals of Ajanta (2nd century BCE–6th century CE), where multiple episodes from Buddhist Jataka tales were represented within continuous pictorial compositions (Spink, 2005). Rather than isolating individual scenes into discrete frames, these murals employed continuous narration, allowing recurring figures and interconnected spatial arrangements to guide the viewer through successive events. This sophisticated understanding of temporal continuity established a visual language that would later become fundamental to India's scroll traditions. Simultaneously, illustrated palm-leaf manuscripts and temple paintings further expanded narrative practices by combining textual and pictorial elements to communicate religious philosophies and mythological histories, reinforcing the intimate relationship between image and storytelling.

By the medieval period, scroll painting had evolved into a widespread artistic practice across the Indian subcontinent, adapting to the cultural, linguistic, and religious diversity of different regions. Distinct traditions such as the Patachitra of Odisha and West Bengal, the Phad paintings of Rajasthan, the Cherial scrolls of Telangana, the Jadopatia scrolls of Jharkhand, and the Patua scrolls of Bengal each developed unique stylistic vocabularies while preserving the essential function of sequential visual narration (Jain, 2012). Although differing in iconography, materials, and compositional conventions, these traditions shared a common objective of presenting extended narratives through a gradual unfolding of painted imagery, often accompanied by oral recitation, devotional songs, or theatrical performance. The scroll therefore transcended its material form to become an interactive medium in which the act of viewing unfolded through time rather than instantaneously.

The performative dimension of Indian scroll painting distinguished it from many other forms of narrative art. Traditional scroll painters, including the Patuas of Bengal and the Bhopa storytellers associated with Rajasthan's Phad tradition, simultaneously assumed the roles of painter, historian, musician, and performer (Wolf, 2003). As the scroll was progressively unrolled before an audience, each painted section corresponded with specific verses, songs, or spoken narratives, enabling viewers to experience the artwork as a temporal sequence rather than a static composition. Meaning therefore emerged through the synchronized interaction of image, performance, and collective participation. This integration of visual and oral traditions allowed scroll paintings to function as powerful instruments of education, religious instruction, and cultural preservation within communities where literacy was often limited.

The iconographic content of Indian scroll paintings likewise evolved in response to shifting social, religious, and political contexts. Early scrolls primarily illustrated episodes from the *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata*, *Bhagavata Purana*, local legends, and regional deities, reinforcing religious values and communal identities through visual storytelling (Mitter, 1994). Over time, however, scroll painters incorporated contemporary events, colonial encounters, social reforms, and local histories into their narratives, demonstrating the remarkable adaptability of the medium. Rather than functioning as fixed repositories of traditional knowledge, scroll paintings continually absorbed new cultural experiences while maintaining their structural reliance on sequential narration and performative engagement.

The nineteenth and twentieth centuries introduced profound transformations to Indian scroll painting through the combined influence of colonial modernity, industrialization, urbanization, and changing patronage systems. The decline of traditional performance-based communities, together with the emergence of museums, galleries, and commercial art markets, altered both the production and reception of scroll paintings (Dallapiccola, 2010). Scrolls increasingly came to be appreciated as autonomous works of art rather than components of live storytelling traditions. Consequently, artists began experimenting with scale, materials, subject matter, and compositional organization, expanding the expressive potential of the format beyond its conventional narrative functions. While many practitioners continued to preserve regional iconographic conventions, others sought to reinterpret inherited traditions within contemporary artistic frameworks.

This transition became particularly significant through the emergence of artists who adopted the scroll not merely as a traditional format but as a conceptual space for artistic innovation. Influenced by the revivalist ideals of the Bengal School and subsequent developments in modern Indian art, several artists began distancing themselves from purely chronological narration in favour of symbolic, philosophical, and spatially integrated compositions (Mitter, 1994). Rather than illustrating successive episodes within clearly segmented panels, these contemporary interpretations emphasized visual simultaneity, layered symbolism, and thematic cohesion. The scroll gradually evolved from a sequential storytelling device into an expansive pictorial field capable of accommodating multiple temporalities, symbolic systems, and metaphysical ideas within a unified composition.

This evolution reaches a particularly significant stage in the monumental silk scrolls of Sanat Kumar Chatterjee, whose practice fundamentally redefines the narrative possibilities of the medium. While deeply informed by the visual heritage of Indian scroll painting, Chatterjee departs from its conventional dependence on linear progression and episodic sequencing. Instead, his compositions construct an immersive visual continuum in which mythology, cosmology, nature, spirituality, and philosophical reflection coexist simultaneously within a single pictorial space. Narrative therefore emerges not through chronological movement from one scene to another, but through the viewer's interpretative engagement with interconnected symbolic relationships distributed across the entire scroll. This conceptual transformation marks a decisive departure from the performative traditions of earlier scroll painting while preserving the medium's capacity for conveying layered cultural and philosophical meanings.

The evolution of Indian scroll painting thus demonstrates a remarkable continuity of artistic purpose alongside continual formal innovation. From its origins in ancient mural traditions and medieval performative storytelling to its contemporary reinterpretation as a conceptual visual language, the scroll has consistently adapted to changing historical, cultural, and aesthetic conditions. Although its material form has remained recognizably consistent, its narrative strategies have undergone profound transformation—from sequential narration and oral performance to symbolic simultaneity and philosophical abstraction. Understanding this evolutionary trajectory is essential for situating contemporary practitioners such as Sanat Kumar Chatterjee within the broader history of Indian narrative painting, where the scroll is no longer perceived solely as a carrier of stories but as a dynamic medium for exploring complex relationships between time, memory, spirituality, and visual thought.

SANAT KUMAR CHATTERJEE: BETWEEN TRADITION AND INNOVATION

The evolution of Indian scroll painting finds one of its most compelling contemporary expressions in the works of Sanat Kumar Chatterjee, whose scrolls represent a remarkable synthesis of historical tradition and conceptual innovation. While deeply rooted in the pedagogical lineage of the Bengal School of Art, Chatterjee departs significantly from its revivalist framework, constructing a unique visual language that integrates the aesthetics of Pahari miniature painting, the spiritual symbolism of Buddhist Thangka traditions, and the philosophical concerns of contemporary Indian art. Rather than merely preserving inherited conventions, his practice demonstrates how traditional visual systems can be reconfigured to address modern questions concerning cosmology, ecology, spirituality, and human existence. Consequently, Chatterjee occupies a distinctive position within contemporary Indian art, where continuity with tradition is achieved through transformation rather than imitation.

Sanat Kumar Chatterjee's artistic foundation is inseparable from the intellectual and aesthetic principles of the Bengal School of Art, a movement that emerged during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as a response to colonial academic realism. Led by artists such as Abanindranath Tagore, Nandalal Bose, and later Asit Kumar Haldar, the Bengal School sought to revive indigenous artistic traditions by drawing inspiration from Ajanta murals, Mughal miniatures, Rajput painting, East Asian wash techniques, and Indian philosophical thought (Mitter, 1994). Rather than emphasizing illusionistic realism, the movement privileged lyrical compositions, spiritual symbolism, rhythmic line, and atmospheric colour harmonies.

Among these influences, Asit Kumar Haldar played a particularly significant role in shaping Chatterjee's artistic sensibility. Haldar's synthesis of Indian mythology, Buddhist aesthetics, and modern compositional experimentation provided an important conceptual foundation for Chatterjee's later practice. However, whereas Haldar primarily worked within conventional pictorial formats, Chatterjee expanded these principles into monumental scroll compositions, transforming the Bengal School's poetic visual language into immersive narrative environments. Thus, his work may be understood not as a continuation of Bengal School aesthetics alone but as their contemporary evolution through experimentation with scale, materiality, and narrative structure.

A decisive transformation in Chatterjee's artistic language occurred following his prolonged residence in Himachal Pradesh. The Himalayan environment fundamentally reshaped his understanding of landscape, spirituality, and pictorial space. Surrounded by ancient monasteries, mountain architecture, indigenous ritual practices, and living traditions of

Buddhist visual culture, Chatterjee gradually moved away from representational narrative towards symbolic and cosmological representation. The Himalayan landscape became more than a geographical setting; it evolved into a conceptual framework through which natural forms, philosophical ideas, and spiritual symbolism merged within his paintings. Mountain peaks, rivers, forests, celestial bodies, and human figures no longer function as isolated visual motifs but become interconnected components within an integrated cosmological system. This shift marks an important departure from the descriptive tendencies of earlier Bengal School painting, replacing pictorial realism with layered metaphysical interpretation.

The visual traditions of Pahari miniature painting exerted a profound influence on Chatterjee's mature artistic vocabulary. Originating in the Himalayan kingdoms of Basohli, Kangra, Guler, Chamba, and Mandi between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries, Pahari painting is distinguished by its lyrical landscapes, expressive line work, delicate chromatic modulation, and emotional sensitivity (Goswamy & Fischer, 1992). Unlike Mughal painting, which emphasized courtly realism, Pahari miniatures privileged devotional emotion (*bhakti*), poetic symbolism, and spiritual contemplation.

Chatterjee assimilates these qualities without reproducing miniature conventions literally. The rhythmic contour lines, flowing compositional movement, atmospheric colour transitions, and symbolic treatment of nature characteristic of Pahari painting reappear throughout his monumental scrolls. However, he enlarges these visual principles to unprecedented scales, transforming the intimate viewing experience of miniature painting into expansive panoramic compositions. The influence is therefore conceptual rather than stylistic, enabling Chatterjee to reinterpret Himalayan aesthetics within a contemporary monumental format.

Equally significant is the influence of Buddhist Thangka painting, encountered through Chatterjee's engagement with Himalayan monastic culture. Traditionally, Thangkas function as portable devotional paintings designed to facilitate meditation, ritual practice, and philosophical contemplation. Their carefully organized iconographic systems present multiple spiritual realities simultaneously, emphasizing symbolic relationships over chronological narration.

This conception of pictorial space profoundly informs Chatterjee's scroll paintings. Rather than organizing imagery according to sequential episodes, he constructs unified symbolic fields in which deities, natural forms, celestial elements, mythological motifs, and philosophical concepts coexist within a single visual continuum. Similar to the Thangka tradition, meaning is generated through contemplation and interpretative engagement rather than through linear storytelling. Consequently, his scrolls function less as narrative illustrations and more as visual cosmologies that invite prolonged intellectual and spiritual reflection.

A NEW TRANSPORTABLE SCROLL FORMAT

Although inspired by traditional Indian scroll painting, Chatterjee fundamentally redefines the physical structure of the scroll itself. Historical scrolls were generally produced for itinerant performers who gradually unfolded painted narratives before an audience during oral recitation. Chatterjee retains the portability of the scroll while transforming it into a monumental exhibition format suitable for galleries, museums, and architectural spaces.

His scrolls are designed to maintain portability despite their extraordinary dimensions, enabling them to be rolled, transported, and installed without compromising their structural integrity. This innovation preserves the mobility characteristic of historical scroll traditions while adapting the format to contemporary exhibition practices. The scroll thereby becomes both an archival object and an immersive spatial environment.

Visual Meditations on the Five Elements in Sanat Kumar Chatterjee's paintings

The research posits, the two bodies of work that represent two distinct stages in Sanat Kumar Chatterjee's artistic evolution, demonstrating a significant transition from individual thematic paintings to a single integrated narrative scroll. While the first body consists of five independent paintings, each representing one of the *Panchmahabhuta* (the Five

Great Elements), the second work synthesizes these separate compositions into a monumental scroll that abandons sequential viewing in favour of a unified cosmological vision. Rather than merely enlarging or rearranging the earlier images, the scroll fundamentally reinterprets their visual relationships, transforming isolated symbolic representations into an interconnected philosophical narrative.



fig (i)

The series “panchmahabhoota” (fig-i) , five individual paintings, each dedicated to one of the five primordial elements described in Indian philosophical traditions Prithvi (Earth), Apas (Water), Agni (Fire), Vayu (Air), and Akasha (Ether/Space). Each composition is conceived as a self-contained visual entity, centred around a deity-like anthropomorphic figure whose physical appearance, colour palette, iconographic attributes, and emotional expression correspond to the metaphysical qualities of the respective element.

Although executed within a consistent stylistic vocabulary, each painting maintains compositional autonomy. The figures are placed centrally within circular or halo-like spatial arrangements, creating an icon-like presence that emphasizes contemplation rather than action. The absence of elaborate backgrounds directs the viewer's attention towards symbolic facial expressions, ornamental details, and chromatic harmonies that communicate the essence of each element.

Colour functions as the primary expressive device throughout the series. Warm reds and oranges dominate the representation of Agni, visually suggesting transformation, energy, sacrifice, and regeneration. Cool blues and soft greys characterize Apas, evoking fluidity, emotional depth, purification, and continuity. Green organic forms surrounding another figure emphasize the regenerative qualities associated with Prithvi, while lighter atmospheric tones and flowing hair become visual metaphors for Vayu. The final composition employs luminous whites and subtle spatial ornamentation to suggest Akasha, the intangible element associated with consciousness, infinity, and cosmic space.

Despite their thematic unity, these paintings remain fundamentally discrete representations. Each element is visually isolated, inviting independent contemplation. Their narrative structure resembles traditional iconographic panels, where meaning is derived through symbolic correspondence rather than interaction between adjacent compositions. The viewer encounters each element separately, constructing conceptual relationships mentally rather than visually.

This compositional strategy reflects an early stage of Chatterjee's investigation into cosmological themes, where philosophical ideas are organized through individual pictorial units instead of integrated visual systems.



fig (ii)

The second painting, a scroll combines the five elements (fig-ii), marks a profound conceptual and formal transformation. Rather than presenting five isolated paintings, Chatterjee combines the symbolic content of the earlier series into a single panoramic scroll. The result is not a sequence of five paintings arranged horizontally but an entirely new composition in which the elements become interdependent components of a unified cosmological field.

The most striking innovation lies in the disappearance of pictorial boundaries. The distinct circular compositions of the earlier paintings dissolve into an uninterrupted visual continuum. Smoke, flames, clouds, water currents, flowing garments, and organic linear rhythms move seamlessly across the entire surface, creating visual continuity between previously independent elemental forms.

Instead of separating Earth, Water, Fire, Air, and Ether into autonomous images, the scroll demonstrates that each element exists only through its relationship with the others. This reflects the philosophical understanding of the Panchmahabhuta, where no element exists independently; rather, all five participate in the continual processes of creation, transformation, preservation, and dissolution.

The transition from the series to the scroll also signifies a fundamental shift in narrative strategy. The earlier paintings function through iconographic isolation. Each image presents a complete symbolic statement whose meaning is largely self-contained. The viewer experiences the paintings individually and constructs the philosophical relationships intellectually after viewing the entire series.

In contrast, the scroll abandons this episodic structure entirely. Narrative emerges through simultaneity rather than sequence. Multiple symbolic events coexist within the same pictorial space. The central figure associated with Agni no longer functions merely as an isolated deity but becomes the energetic axis around which the entire composition revolves. On either side, figures representing Water and Air appear interconnected through flowing linear movements that visually dissolve into one another. The organic transitions between flame, smoke, wind, and water eliminate any rigid distinction between the elements.

Consequently, the scroll no longer narrates five separate elemental stories. Instead, it narrates the perpetual interaction between elemental forces themselves.

The progression from the *Panchmahabhuta* series of individual paintings to the monumental *Panchmahabhuta* scroll encapsulates the essence of Sanat Kumar Chatterjee's contribution to contemporary Indian narrative painting. More than a formal expansion in scale, this transformation signifies a profound conceptual shift in the understanding of narrative, space, and visual continuity. While the earlier paintings explore each of the five elements as independent symbolic entities, the later scroll dissolves these boundaries to create a unified cosmological field in which Earth (*Prithvi*), Water (*Apas*), Fire (*Agni*), Air (*Vayu*), and Ether (*Akasha*) coexist in an uninterrupted continuum. This transition reflects Chatterjee's mature artistic philosophy, where meaning emerges not from isolated images but from the dynamic relationships established across the entire pictorial surface.

CONCLUSION

Chatterjee's innovation lies in his reinterpretation of the ancient principle of continuous narration. Historically, continuous narration in Indian art, as seen in the murals of Ajanta and the performative traditions of Patachitra and Phad scrolls, depended upon the sequential unfolding of episodes, guiding the viewer through a chronological progression of events. Narrative continuity was achieved through repetition of figures, episodic divisions, and the physical act of unrolling the scroll. Chatterjee fundamentally redefines this convention by rejecting chronology altogether. In his scrolls, continuity is no longer temporal but conceptual. Instead of narrating successive events, he constructs a visual ecosystem in which multiple symbolic realities coexist simultaneously. The viewer is not asked to follow a story from beginning to end but to engage with an integrated field of interconnected meanings that unfold through contemplation and repeated viewing.

This approach transforms the scroll into a medium of conceptual simultaneity, where mythology, cosmology, ecology, spirituality, and human existence are woven into a single visual continuum. The narrative no longer progresses linearly; rather, it circulates across the surface through rhythmic line, flowing forms, atmospheric colour transitions, and symbolic correspondences. Fire dissolves into smoke, smoke merges with air, air carries water, and water nourishes the earth, visually embodying the cyclical interdependence of the *Panchmahabhuta*. In this sense, Chatterjee replaces the episodic

structure of traditional scroll painting with a holistic narrative that mirrors Indian philosophical conceptions of the universe as an interconnected and ever-transforming whole.

Technically, Chatterjee reinforces this conceptual innovation through his mastery of watercolour-on-silk scrolls. His experimental surface treatments, transparent pigment layering and innovative scroll construction create an immersive pictorial experience. The portability of the scroll preserves the historical identity of the medium, while its monumental scale and unified composition reposition it within the context of contemporary gallery and museum spaces. Thus, his work simultaneously honours the traditional scroll format and expands its aesthetic and conceptual possibilities.

Sanat Kumar Chatterjee's artistic practice therefore occupies a unique position in the evolution of Indian narrative painting. Rooted in the intellectual heritage of the Bengal School and enriched by the visual traditions of Pahari miniature painting and Buddhist Thangka art, his work transcends revivalism to establish a distinctly contemporary visual language. His scrolls demonstrate that continuity need not rely upon sequential storytelling; instead, it can be achieved through the simultaneous interaction of symbols, forms, and philosophical ideas within a unified pictorial field.

Ultimately, Chatterjee's contribution extends beyond the revival of the scroll as a traditional artistic format. He redefines the very nature of visual narration by transforming the scroll from a chronological storytelling device into a philosophical and experiential space, where multiple temporalities, cosmological principles, and symbolic systems coexist. In doing so, he introduces a new paradigm of conceptual continuous narration, one that shifts the focus from the representation of successive events to the visualization of interconnected existence itself. This innovation not only expands the expressive potential of the Indian scroll but also establishes Sanat Kumar Chatterjee as one of the few contemporary artists who has successfully bridged historical narrative traditions with modern conceptual thought, ensuring the continued relevance of the scroll as a living and evolving medium within contemporary Indian art.

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