Pichhavai of Krishna as Shrinathji

By Dinesh Sathisan

"Wow, interesting eyes!" said a visitor I was taking around the Asian Civilisations Museum (ACM) referring to the 19th century *pichhavai* depicting Krishna as *Shrinathji*. We were near the exit of the South Asia gallery in the ACM where a small collection of *pichhavai* was displayed. A *pichhavai* (sometimes spelt *pichhwai* or *pichhvai*, literally translating to 'that which hangs behind') is a religious cloth decoration designed to be hung behind a shrine in the sanctum sanctorum of a temple. *Pichhavais* are created for a particular type of shrine – that of Krishna in his appearance as *Shrinathji*. In this form, Krishna is a child-god seen lifting Mount Govardhan on the fingertips of his left hand to shelter his friends, the cowherds, from rain brought down on them by Indra, the King of the Heavens.

19th century pichhavai *depicting Krishna as* Shrinathji, *photo courtesy of the Asian Civilisations Museum*

Painted on cloth, *pichhavais* were also often made of brocade or heavy silk. Some were painted and dyed or tinsel-printed. The *Shrinathji* manifestation is worshipped by devotees of the Vallabhacharya sect, founded at the turn of the 16th century. Vallabacharya (1478-1530) believed that enlightenment could not be achieved through asceticism, but rather through personal devotion (*bhakti*) to Krishna. The heartland of the sect is in Rajasthan, with its centre in Nathdwara near Udaipur. It has been said that several rulers of Rajasthan were devotees of *Shrinathji* and paid him elaborate reverence.

The *pichhavai* in the ACM collection shows *Shrinathji* wearing a loin cloth (*kaupinam*). *Shrinathji's* eyes are his most striking feature, half-closed and looking down in meditation. His body is blue-black, and he wears pearl ornaments and a green turban. The simplicity of his ornamentation gives *Shrinathji* the appearance of a young cowherd. In this *pichhavai*, Mount Govardhan is depicted in detail in the background. Embedded within the image of Mount Govardhan are images of a parrot, a snake, two peacocks, a bull, and a cow among other things. While absent in this *pichhavai*, images of *Shrinathji* are often depicted with a snack or sweet-box (*banta*), folded betel leaves (*paan-bida*) and a water jug (*jhari*) at the feet of the image.

In other commonly seen *pichhavais*, *Shrinathji* is depicted in resplendent costumes and is often richly bejewelled. Special *pichhavais* are created for the festival of *Sharat Purnima*, the autumn full moon, which commemorates the *rasalila*, the divine dance which Krishna performs with the *gopis* (milkmaids) with the silvery full moon of autumn in the backdrop. In other *pichhavais*, *Shrinathji* is flanked by two priests worshipping the image; and in others, *Shrinathji* is surrounded by adoring cows, plantain leaves and mango trees. It is also not uncommon to find *pichhavais* that depict *Shrinathji's* 24 seasonal festivals (*utsavas*) in the form of small insets within the *pichhavais*.

While *pichhavais* depicting *Shrinathji* were once considered 'folk art' and were not popular with the art collector looking for 'high' Indian art, antique *pichhavais* now appear to have become popular with collectors. The trend is likely to continue.

For further reading on *pichhavais* depicting *Shrinathji*, you may wish to see:

Amit Ambalal, *Krishna* as *Shrinathji* (1987);
Robert Skelton, *Rajasthani Temple Hangings of the Krishna Cult* (1973); and
Kalyan Krishna and Kay Talwar, *In Adoration of Krishna: Pichhwais of Shrinathji, TAPI Collection* (2007).

Dinesh Sathisan *does defence diplomacy to pay the bills. When he's not travelling on the job, he spends his weekends guiding at the ACM and the Peranakan Museum. Should you have a comment on the article, or if you collect* pichhavais *and want to discuss more on the subject, please contact Dinesh at dinesh.sathisan@gmail.com.*