



## An Indian Artist's Unique Style of 'Folkindica' Blends Traditional Artforms to Reconnect People, Land, and Biodiversity

*This artist profile is one in an ongoing series highlighting the role creative work plays in connecting people with nature and inspiring a culture of stewardship. If you are an artist whose work is inspired by nature and would like to be featured in a future ILCN newsletter, please reach out to [lrubin@lincolnst.edu](mailto:lrubin@lincolnst.edu). We will accept visual fine art, photography, poetry, personal essays, music, and more.*

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*A biodiversity map of Odisha, India. Artwork credit: Sudarshan Shaw.*



Sudarshan Shaw grew up immersed in a culture rich in color and art that told the tales of the land's past and the present-day people born of them. Raised in Bhubaneswar, the capital city of the Indian state Odisha, Shaw was always an artist and history buff. When he fell in love with nature in college, all three passions intersected in folk art that told India's stories through traditional forms of painting and drawing.

View Shaw's full portfolio and learn more about his past work [@studio\\_kyaari](https://www.instagram.com/studio_kyaari).

After graduating from the National Institute of Fashion Technology, Delhi, in 2016 Shaw began to pursue a career as an artist and communication designer. His work mainly focuses on wild creatures, which he sketches, then paints in mud, water, and primary color paints, though he also dabbles in digital art. He calls the style he has developed "Folkindica", as it is inspired by both traditional and folk-art forms of India.

"It borrows its nature from the richness and rootedness of Indian art, its spirit from the thoughtfulness and vibrancy of ancient artworks, and its matter from the beliefs and practices of Indian culture. It is a combination of both biological and cultural, symbolic, and descriptive & wild and decorated," he explained.



Action poster showing the dos and don'ts of wildlife interactions between elephants, snakes, monkeys, and sloth bears and local communities. Shaw created the poster in collaboration with Wildlife Trust of India. Artwork credit: Sudarshan Shaw.

Through his work, Shaw aims to decolonize Indian graphics and aesthetics and redefine the nation's artistic fabric. "[Folkindica] is a visual language invented to create a unique identity for India in the global landscape that is true to its land, diversity, and heritage," said Shaw. Shaw also uses the style to make art more accessible and relatable.

Shaw's process begins with research. He delves into both the digital and natural world to gather as much information as he can on his subject. He said he is often surprised by how little information is available online about India's native biodiversity and culture. "Most of the stories on interactions and interpretations have travelled orally as traditions or in art forms".

"All of this is followed by another unfair task of fitting so much into one art frame," said Shaw. Here, he leans into traditional art forms, which achieve a seemingly impossible level of detail, woven together in a way that feels fluid and natural, rather than crowded. This style helps Shaw create complex works with hidden stories incorporated throughout.

Each piece Shaw creates pushes a narrative of interconnected life. He depicts native communities sharing space with natural heritage in the same frame using both direct and indirect methods of representation. This might mean illustrating people, practices, and villages, or portraying animals using folk-art styles. "The idea is to undo the colonial narrative of nature being far, pristine, and disconnected," he explained.

Shaw's work is also a powerful teaching tool. Many of his pieces depict native flora and fauna and tell their stories in ways that help people easily and joyfully reconnect with them through deeper understanding of the natural world. One way he has done this is through biodiversity maps. These detailed works show a geographic area overlaid with images of native wildlife and Tribes, a short narrative description, and keys identifying species and wildlife hotspots.

In collaboration with the Delhi-based conservation organization, [Wildlife Trust of India](#), Shaw developed an action poster promoting healthy relationships between people and wildlife. It depicts people engaging in common interactions with plants, animals, and land and uses green check marks and red exes to explain which are sustainable and which are harmful or dangerous.

With the Odisha-based conservation and advocacy organization, [Earth Crusaders](#), Shaw created a series of illustrations, each focused on a single species impacted by human activity. [In one](#), he uses perspective to illustrate the changing role of parakeets in Indian society. Once revered as intelligent, eloquent, and sacred, they are now exploited by rampant illegal trade. [Another reimagines](#) the dynamic between hyenas and local communities to be seamless and resilient, rather than defined by conflict.

Shaw's work has also been welcomed into formal academic spaces. [An ornate landscape](#) centered around a black tiger and decorated by a border of DNA strands stands outside the NandanKanan Zoo in Bhubaneswar and tells the story of the scientific research behind human understanding of the evolutionary and genetic history of tigers. This work was [led by](#) Dr. Uma Ramakrishan and her team from the National Centre for Biological Sciences and has been the basis for emerging conservation projects supporting the welfare of tigers and other native mammal species in India.





*In parts of Odisha, Striped Hyenas scavenge carcasses and clean the landscape, but their habitat is increasingly overlapping with human settlements and creating conflict. Shaw created this illustration as part of a conservation awareness and action campaign led by Earth Crusaders to help local people better understand certain species they share space with. Artwork credit: Sudarshan Shaw.*

Biodiversity conservation is not only an inspiration for Shaw's work, he sees the two as inseparable. "I believe we are as living as our environments. Biodiversity measures life and its knowledge and conservation sets its quality." In turn, he said, art helps spread knowledge of biodiversity widely. "If communicated in a local visual language, art increases reliability manifold."

Shaw has already succeeded in using art in this way, as many of his works hang in common Indian households. He has heard from the people in these households that the pieces create a familiar space, helping to connect them to their history, build a sense of belonging, and foster community. His work has been instrumental in illustrating emerging scientific concepts, especially those related to conservation, to people with limited resources and has helped traditions and past practices resurface to support healthy human-land relationships.

"I hope art, in the global conservation movement and specifically in India, helps restore the long-lost pride in the native sense of living; represents native cultures, voices, and perspectives in conversations of conservation; and eases reception of modern sciences and methods for them," said Shaw. Long term, he hopes to bring back pride and value in practicing folk art for communities that are drifting away from it.

**More about the artist:**



Sudarshan Shaw is an Indian artist and communication designer. He studied at the National Institute of Fashion Technology and fell in love with the wild world during a trip to Ranthambore National Park for his graduation project. That spurred him to explore more Indian forests and seek out interactions with their local communities that helped him re-educate himself about the history, inventiveness, and effectiveness of folk art. Today, he said, “I proudly reserve my biases toward tales of the folks, wisdom of the wild, and laws of the forest”. And, in doing so hopes to “bring native art back as the language of the land, for the land”.