

Stacey Ravel Abarbanel, staceyra@arts.ucla.edu
310/825-4288

For Immediate Use
February 14, 2008

**‘Please Listen, People’:
Addressing HIV/AIDS in Bengali Scroll Paintings
Opens Mar. 16 at the Fowler Museum at UCLA**



The Patua of West Bengal, India, are multimedia artists who paint narrative scrolls and compose songs to accompany the scenes they have painted. They perform their songs while unrolling the scroll in front of their audience. While this performance genre once drew its stories from the great Indian epics or other traditional sources, in recent years local non-governmental organizations have begun commissioning scrolls addressing health issues, including HIV/AIDS education. “‘Please Listen, People’: Addressing HIV/AIDS in Bengali Scroll Paintings”—on display at the Fowler Museum at UCLA from March 16–July 13, 2008—features twenty-six of these colorful and innovative works of art, along with a video showing scroll performances (the title “Please Listen, People” is a line taken from one performer’s song).

Nandita Palchoudhuri, a curator based in Kolkata—100 miles from Naya, where many Patua reside—became concerned that Patua scroll painting was dying out. In 2001, after hearing that the American Center in Kolkata was organizing an HIV/AIDS communications fair and collecting educational materials from all over India, Palchoudhuri approached a husband-and-wife team of Patua artists, Rani and Shamsundar Chitrakar with the idea that they produce HIV/AIDS scrolls to be exhibited at the fair.

A few years later co-curator David Gere traveled to India and met the artists, who showed him their AIDS scrolls. Rani Chitrakar sang her scroll—a plaintive poem that accurately described how HIV is transmitted. Walking through the village, Gere was surprised to see that other Patua painters were also producing HIV/AIDS scrolls, but many with shockingly inaccurate messages. One, for example, said that AIDS came from Poland and that certain little pills would cure it. In fact, these erroneous AIDS scrolls were such curiosities that a niche market had developed for them, especially among Western tourists.

Gere and Palchoudhuri began to organize efforts to correct the inaccuracies that had crept into Patua HIV/AIDS scrolls. Gere invited Rani Chitrakar and another artist, Monimala Chitrakar, to the inaugural Make Art/Stop AIDS conference in Kolkata. The artists questioned why urban Indian artists were afraid to address sex in their work. They told the other delegates what would and would not work in their village.

On the final day of the conference, as the delegates briefed government officials, Monimala Chitrakar demanded a role for herself and her fellow Patua painters in the public health interventions being planned for West Bengal. With support from the West Bengal organization Bhoruka Public Welfare Trust, many Patua painters began producing scrolls that featured accurate HIV/AIDS information, including several featured in “Please Listen, People” that were purchased by the Fowler Museum in 2007.

In 2007 Gere, Palchoudhuri, Tom Coates and the staff of the UCLA Program in Global Health, and the Patua painters teamed with the Kolkata organization SPARSHA (Society for Positive Atmosphere and Related Support to HIV/AIDS) to devise a new arts-based intervention program for villages in West Bengal. In each village, two Patua—one man and one woman—would join a pair of community health workers from SPARSHA, at least one of whom is HIV-positive. Together they make multiple visits to villages, sing poems about how HIV/AIDS is transmitted, and teach about condom use and access to medications. Examples of these newest scrolls used in this program are featured on the final gallery wall, and focus on themes of HIV transmission, stigmatization, testimonials of AIDS patients, and love with responsibility.

“Please Listen, People’: Addressing HIV/AIDS in Bengali Scroll Paintings’ is a joint project of the Fowler Museum at UCLA and the UCLA Art | Global Health Center and is a component of the “Make Art/Stop AIDS” initiative. It has been curated by Nandita Palchoudhuri, Independent Curator, Consultant, and Chairperson of the India Foundation for the Arts, Bangalore; David Gere, Director, Art | Global Health Center, Department of World Arts and Cultures, UCLA; and Roy W. Hamilton, Curator of Asian and Pacific Collections, Fowler Museum.

The exhibition received support from the Ford Foundation, UCLA International Institute, UCLA AIDS Institute, and UCLA School of the Arts and Architecture. Additional support for accompanying programs was provided by the UCLA Program in Global Health, UCLA School of Public Health, UCLA Center for India and South Asia, UCLA Center for the Study of Women, and Corrine A. Seeds University Elementary School.

Special thanks to UNAIDS, UNESCO, the West Bengal State AIDS Control and Prevention Society, the American Center, Kolkata, the United States Educational Foundation in India, SPARSHA, Dr. Samiran Panda, Rajeev Varma, and Karuna Singh.

“Please Listen, People’: Addressing HIV/AIDS in Bengali Scroll Paintings’ will be on view in the Fowler Museum’s Goldenberg Galleria, and is presented in conjunction with the traveling exhibition “Make Art/Stop AIDS.” The Fowler is open Wednesdays through Sundays, from noon to 5 p.m.; and on Thursdays, from noon until 8 p.m. The museum is closed Mondays and Tuesdays. The Fowler Museum, part of UCLA Arts, is located in the north part of the UCLA campus. Admission is free. Parking is available for a maximum of \$8 in Lot 4. For more information, the public may call (310) 825-4361 or visit fowler.ucla.edu.

Related Programs:

Sunday, May 11, 2008

1–4 pm

Kids in the Courtyard: Bengali Scroll Painting

At this drop-in art workshop, use markers to draw a comic strip-style scene and then sing your story out loud.

2 pm

Performance and Exhibition Tour: The Sounds of Bengali Scrolls

Patua Gurupada Chitrakar demonstrates this traditional performance genre of India, using scrolls featured in the exhibition “Please Listen, People’: Addressing HIV/AIDS in Bengali Scroll Paintings.’ Kolkata-based curator Nandita Palchoudhuri translates the performance, and discusses the evolving practice of using scroll painting for HIV/AIDS education.

-UCLA-