

# Aipan: The Folk Painting Tradition of Kumaon Cultural Symbolism, Ritual Practices, and Contemporary Relevance

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## Abstract

Aipan, the ritual floor and wall painting tradition of the Kumaon region of Uttarakhand, occupies a distinctive place among India's vernacular visual practices. Executed primarily by women using a paste of soaked rice known as biswar applied over a base of red ochre or geru, Aipan accompanies nearly every significant life-cycle and calendrical event in Kumaoni households, from birth and the sacred-thread ceremony to marriage, death, and seasonal festivals. This paper approaches Aipan not simply as a decorative folk art but as a structured ritual language through which cosmological belief, gendered labour, and regional identity are continuously enacted and transmitted across generations. Drawing on documented classifications of Aipan styles and motifs, the study traces the tradition's historical background, its embeddedness in Kumaoni religious life, and the iconographic vocabulary of geometric grids, divine footprints, and floral and astral emblems through which particular chowkis such as the Lakshmi Chowki, Saraswati Chowki, Janeu Chowki, and Dhuliarghya communicate distinct ritual intentions. The paper further considers the tradition's transformation under the combined pressures of urban migration, commercial adaptation, tourism, and digital circulation, alongside institutional interventions such as the 2021 Geographical Indication registration. It concludes that Aipan's continuity depends on reconciling ritual authenticity with the economic and social possibilities opened by modern adaptation, and that women artisans remain both the custodians and the innovators of the tradition.

**Keywords:** Aipan; Kumaon folk art; ritual painting; Uttarakhand cultural identity; intangible cultural heritage; Geographical Indication; gender and folk practice; Himalayan visual culture

## 1. Introduction

Among the many regional idioms of Indian ritual art, Aipan holds a curious position: it is at once intensely local and structurally continuous with a much wider Indian grammar of auspicious floor drawing that includes Rangoli, Alpana, Kolam, and Mandana. What distinguishes Aipan is not the basic gesture of marking a threshold or a worship space with an auspicious design, a gesture found across almost the entire subcontinent, but the specificity with which the Kumaoni tradition has elaborated that gesture into a differentiated system of named chowkis, each tied to a particular deity, occasion, or stage of the life cycle. To describe Aipan only as decoration is to miss what practitioners themselves emphasise: that the act of drawing is inseparable from the act of invoking, and that the finished pattern is less an image to be admired than a threshold condition that must exist before worship or ceremony can properly proceed.

This paper undertakes a critical, historically grounded reading of Aipan as a cultural practice rather than a purely aesthetic one. It asks how the tradition encodes cosmological and social meaning, how it has been sustained almost entirely through female labour and knowledge transmission, and how it is currently being reshaped by forces that operate well beyond the Kumaoni village household—state cultural policy, tourism markets, digital media, and the legal apparatus of Geographical Indication protection. The discussion draws on the limited but growing body of documented scholarship on Aipan, produced largely by researchers affiliated with Kumaon University and allied institutions, supplemented by comparative reference to other Indian floor-painting traditions where such comparison illuminates what is regionally specific about the Kumaoni case.

## **2. Historical Background of Aipan**

Precise documentary evidence for the antiquity of Aipan is thin, as is generally true of practices transmitted orally and manually within domestic space rather than through inscriptional or courtly record. What can be said with reasonable confidence is that the practice belongs to a much older pan-Indian family of auspicious floor and wall markings associated with agrarian, Brahmanical, and goddess-centred ritual complexes, and that within the Central Himalayan region it developed a distinct vocabulary shaped by the area's particular blend of Sanskritic Hindu worship, local mountain deities, and household ritual calendars. The term "Aipan" itself is generally traced to the Kumaoni word Arpan, meaning an offering or dedication made to the gods, a derivation that already signals how the practice has been understood locally: not as free artistic expression but as a form of devotional submission (Lohumi & Joshi, 2024).

The historical record that does exist tends to come from twentieth-century ethnographic and home-science documentation rather than earlier textual sources, which suggests that Aipan, like many household ritual arts practised by women, existed for a long period largely outside the concerns of formal historiography. Its visibility in scholarly literature is comparatively recent, coinciding with a broader academic and policy interest in India's regional folk arts from the later twentieth century onward.

## **3. Origin and Evolution of Aipan in Kumaon**

Within Kumaon, Aipan is understood as belonging distinctly to the Kumaon division of Uttarakhand, as opposed to the neighbouring Garhwal region, which has its own related but distinguishable ritual painting conventions. Early classificatory work on the tradition identifies three broad stylistic categories: Siddhu, associated with patterns drawn on floors and wooden worship seats or chowkis; Devia, a more elaborate form incorporating astrological and manual designs used on door-panels or dwar pattas; and Loukika, a wall-based style exemplified by the bar boond pattern (Chattopadhyay, 1981, as cited in Kaushik & Gupta, 2017). A later classification organised the tradition instead by surface and location—floor painting, wall painting, cloth painting, and painting on wooden chowkis—reflecting how the same underlying visual grammar is redeployed across different ritual contexts (Sah, 2006, as cited in Kaushik & Gupta, 2017).

The evolution of Aipan since the mid-twentieth century has been marked by two parallel movements: the gradual extension of the practice from purely domestic and temple surfaces onto paper, cloth, and portable wooden boards, and its increasing visibility outside Kumaon as migration carried Kumaoni households, and their women, into towns and cities across northern India. Both movements set the stage for the more dramatic commercial and institutional changes discussed later in this paper.

#### 4. Religious, Ritualistic, and Cultural Significance

Aipan cannot be adequately understood outside the ritual occasions that call it into being. It is drawn at the principal transitions of the Kumaoni life cycle—birth, the janeu or sacred-thread ceremony, marriage, and death—as well as at recurring calendrical festivals such as Diwali, Navratri, and Harela. In each case the painted design functions less as an illustration of the occasion than as a precondition for it: certain rites are considered improperly performed, or even inauspicious, if the corresponding chowki has not first been laid down (Kaushik & Gupta, 2017; Lohumi & Joshi, 2024).

This ritual centrality gives Aipan a cultural function that goes well beyond visual embellishment. The practice organises domestic space into zones of ordinary use and zones of heightened sanctity; a doorway, kitchen wall, or puja corner marked with Aipan is understood differently from an unmarked one. It also organises time, since particular motifs are reserved for particular festivals or life-cycle moments and would be considered misapplied if used interchangeably. In this sense Aipan operates as a kind of grammar for household religious life in Kumaon, a system of visual markers that both reflects and helps constitute the community's shared understanding of when and how the sacred is to be approached.

#### 5. Symbolism and Iconography

The iconographic vocabulary of Aipan draws on a recognisable Hindu repertoire—the swastika, the lotus, sun and moon emblems, footprints of goddesses, conch shells, creeper and vine motifs—but organises these elements according to a strict compositional logic tied to geometry rather than pictorial realism (Google Arts & Culture / Project FUEL, 2018). The swastika, for instance, carries particular weight within Aipan because it is understood as an invocation of the full pantheon rather than of any single deity, and its presence is considered close to obligatory in many ritual chowkis and on the pichaura, the ceremonial cloth worn by Kumaoni women during festivals and weddings (Kaushik & Gupta, 2017).

A further distinguishing feature is the vasudhara, the row of dripped vertical lines that borders thresholds, worship platforms, and the base of the tulsi plant. Traditionally applied with the ring finger using the same rice-paste solution, the vasudhara is treated by practitioners as an essential complement to the main design; an Aipan composition lacking this bordering line is regarded as incomplete, regardless of how elaborate the central motif may be (Kaushik & Gupta, 2017). This insistence on completing a composition according to fixed conventions—rather than leaving room for purely individual artistic licence—is one of the clearest markers of Aipan's identity as ritual grammar rather than free decorative art.

Read against comparable Indian traditions, Aipan's symbolic logic becomes sharper by contrast. Warli painting of Maharashtra, for example, draws on an entirely different cosmology rooted in tribal agrarian life and ancestor worship, expressed through human and animal figures built from simple geometric forms; it shares Aipan's reliance on geometry but not its Sanskritic ritual vocabulary. Madhubani painting of Mithila, meanwhile, is closer to Aipan in its devotional content and its historical association with women's domestic practice, yet it developed toward dense figurative composition and, eventually, a widely commercialised painting-on-paper tradition much earlier than Aipan did. Rangoli and Alpana, the traditions closest to Aipan in both form and function, share its floor-based, threshold-marking logic but tend toward more freely improvised, occasion-general patterns, whereas Aipan retains a comparatively fixed inventory of named, occasion-specific chowkis. Mandana of Rajasthan resembles Aipan closely in

its use of an ochre or mud base overlaid with a contrasting pigment, suggesting a shared technical ancestry across the drier, colour-scarce regions of the subcontinent even where the two traditions' motifs diverge.

## 6. Materials, Techniques, and Traditional Practices

The technical basis of Aipan is deceptively simple. A wall, floor, or wooden chowki is first prepared with geru, a filtered red ochre earth pigment, which forms the ground colour of nearly all traditional Aipan. Over this red field, the artist applies biswar, a white paste made by soaking rice grains and grinding them into a fine solution, using the last three fingers of the right hand rather than a brush (Kaushik & Gupta, 2017). This reliance on the hand itself as the drawing instrument is significant: the skill of Aipan is understood locally not as a technique that can be fully separated from the body of the woman who performs it, but as an embodied competence transmitted through repeated practice within the household.

Traditional surfaces include the floor and threshold, domestic and temple walls, wooden worship chowkis carved from mango wood, and ceremonial cloth such as the pichaura. In recent decades these surfaces have expanded to include paper, canvas, and manufactured objects intended for sale, a shift discussed further in the section on contemporary transformation below.

## 7. Major Motifs and Their Meanings

Certain named chowkis recur across the documented literature and remain the clearest entry point into Aipan's system of meaning. The Lakshmi Chowki is drawn to invoke prosperity and is closely associated with Diwali and with the threshold and kitchen areas of the home, while the Saraswati Chowki, oriented toward learning and the arts, is typically drawn during Basant Panchami and educational or initiatory occasions (Lohumi & Joshi, 2024). The Janeu Chowki accompanies the sacred-thread ceremony that marks a boy's ritual initiation into formal religious life, situating Aipan within the broader Hindu framework of samskaras or life-cycle sacraments (Kaushik & Gupta, 2017).

The Dhuliarghya chowki is drawn in the courtyard of the bride's natal home specifically to welcome the arriving groom and his party, marking one of the most emotionally charged thresholds in the Kumaoni wedding sequence—the formal transition of the bride from her natal household toward her marital one (Kaushik & Gupta, 2017). Chowkis associated with Navratri, sometimes referred to locally in connection with the worship of the nine forms of the goddess Durga, extend this same logic of occasion-specific invocation to the autumn and spring goddess festivals, reinforcing how thoroughly the Aipan repertoire is structured around the Hindu ritual calendar rather than around open-ended decorative choice (Kalra & Harikrishnan, 2026). Taken together, these named chowkis demonstrate that Aipan functions as a differentiated symbolic system: each pattern is legible to the community as referring to a specific deity, life stage, or seasonal moment, and substituting one chowki for another would be understood as a ritual error rather than a stylistic variation.

## 8. Role of Women in Preserving Aipan Tradition

Aipan is, without significant exception in the documented literature, a practice performed by women, and its transmission has historically occurred through observation and participation within the household rather than through formal instruction. Girls learn the basic vocabulary of the tradition by watching

mothers, grandmothers, and aunts prepare chowkis for festivals and ceremonies, gradually taking on more of the drawing themselves as they acquire the necessary steadiness of hand and knowledge of which pattern belongs to which occasion (Kaushik & Gupta, 2017).

This gendered structure of transmission means that Aipan has functioned historically as a significant, if largely unrecognised, domain of female cultural authority within Kumaoni households: women are the ones who determine whether a ritual space has been correctly prepared, and their competence in Aipan carries social weight independent of, though intersecting with, their other domestic roles. Scholarship examining the tradition through the lens of gender has argued that Aipan motifs, while rooted in a broadly Brahmanical symbolic order, are sustained and reinterpreted through specifically feminine oral and practical traditions, making the art form a site where personal and community identity are jointly constructed (Kalra & Harikrishnan, 2026). Contemporary skill-development and self-help-group initiatives built around Aipan, discussed further below, have in some cases converted this traditionally unpaid domestic competence into a recognised economic asset, a shift that carries its own complicated implications for how the practice is valued (Lohumi & Joshi, 2024; Oli et al., 2025).

## 9. Aipan as Intangible Cultural Heritage

UNESCO's Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage defines such heritage as practices, knowledge, and skills that communities recognise as part of their cultural heritage and continually recreate in response to their environment and history (UNESCO, 2003). Aipan fits this definition closely: it is transmitted informally across generations, it is bound up with communal recognition and identity, and it continues to be adapted rather than fixed in a single historical form. It is worth noting, however, that Aipan does not currently appear on UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity; its formal recognition to date has come through India's domestic legal and administrative apparatus rather than through international inscription.

The most significant such recognition is the Geographical Indication (GI) certification granted to Uttarakhand Aipan in September 2021 under the Geographical Indications of Goods (Registration and Protection) Act, 1999 (Lohumi & Joshi, 2024). Unlike UNESCO's heritage framework, which is primarily concerned with safeguarding cultural practice, GI registration functions as an intellectual-property mechanism: it legally ties the name "Aipan" to its Kumaoni origin and to production according to traditional methods, offering artisans a measure of protection against imitation by unauthorised producers elsewhere. The GI tag thus represents a hybrid form of heritage recognition, simultaneously cultural and commercial in character, and its practical effect on artisan livelihoods has itself become a subject of academic study (Oli et al., 2025).

## 10. Contemporary Transformation

### *Urbanization*

Migration from Kumaoni villages to towns, to the plains of Uttar Pradesh and Delhi, and further afield has steadily reduced the proportion of Kumaoni households that maintain a mud-and-ochre wall or an earthen threshold on which Aipan can be drawn in its traditional form. Apartment living, tiled or painted concrete surfaces, and the general spatial reorganisation of urban domestic life have made the traditional wall-and-

floor mode of Aipan increasingly impractical, pushing the tradition toward portable formats such as paper, canvas, and printed reproductions even among households that wish to maintain some connection to the practice.

### ***Commercialization***

Alongside this loss of traditional domestic surfaces, Aipan has entered commercial production in new ways. Documented design research has explored adapting Aipan motifs, using computer-aided design tools, for printing and embroidery on items such as bags, cushion covers, stoles, and shrugs, with prototype designs evaluated by expert judges for their suitability to these new applications (Bhandari et al., 2019). Such adaptation extends the visual life of Aipan motifs well beyond their original ritual context, raising a genuine tension between economic opportunity for artisans and the risk that motifs once reserved for specific sacred occasions become generic decorative patterns detached from their original meaning.

### ***Tourism***

Uttarakhand's identity as a pilgrimage and hill-tourism destination has made Aipan visible to visitors in ways that were previously uncommon, through its use in hotel and resort décor, souvenir products, and cultural showcases. Ventures such as the Aipan Resort established in Chopta, Rudraprayag, by a group of young entrepreneurs explicitly aim to bring the practice of Aipan to a single accessible site for visitors while supporting the artisans who produce it (Lohumi & Joshi, 2024), illustrating how tourism can function as both a market for Aipan and a stage for its display.

### ***Digital Media***

Aipan has also entered digital circulation through platforms such as Google Arts & Culture, social media, and e-commerce, which document individual artisans and market their work to audiences well beyond Kumaon. The practitioner Namita Tiwari, for instance, has been documented teaching Aipan to younger women through the initiative Cheli Aipan, founded in 2015, illustrating how digital documentation projects can simultaneously record traditional knowledge and actively support its continued transmission (Google Arts & Culture / Project FUEL, 2018).

### ***Government Initiatives***

State-level intervention has taken several concrete forms. The Uttarakhand Handloom and Handicraft Development Council, established under the Societies Registration Act of 1860, has worked to support artisans producing Aipan and other regional crafts. In 2015 the state government decided to commission Aipan-based artwork for government buildings, including those of the Uttarakhand Power Corporation Limited, Kumaon Mandal Vikas Nigam, and Garhwal Mandal Vikas Nigam, and it has separately supported the Cheli Aipan initiative aimed at training younger women in the craft (Lohumi & Joshi, 2024). The 2021 GI registration discussed above represents the most consequential recent state and central government action, converting Aipan from an informally recognised regional tradition into a legally protected named product.



## 11. Challenges in Preservation

Despite these interventions, Aipan faces several documented obstacles to its continued transmission in anything resembling its traditional form. Research on artisans in Nainital district identifies persistent structural difficulties, including limited access to wider markets, inconsistent availability of appropriate raw materials, weak mechanisms for ensuring artisans receive fair prices for their work, and an ongoing need for structured skill development beyond what informal household transmission can provide (Oli et al., 2025).

Beyond these economic constraints lies a subtler cultural risk: as Aipan motifs are adapted for printing, embroidery, and mass-produced décor, there is a real possibility that the tradition's underlying ritual logic—the strict association of particular chowkis with particular deities and occasions—will erode even as the visual motifs themselves proliferate. A pattern reproduced as generic ornamentation on a commercial product does not carry the same meaning as the same pattern drawn by a woman's hand in rice paste before a specific ceremony, and the difference between these two modes of existence is not always acknowledged in discussions that treat Aipan primarily as a marketable design resource.

## 12. Future Prospects and Sustainable Conservation

A sustainable future for Aipan is likely to depend on holding together, rather than choosing between, its ritual and its commercial dimensions. Skill-development programmes, cooperative and self-help-group structures for marketing, and continued institutional purchase of Aipan-based work by government bodies all offer plausible routes to economic security for artisans without necessarily requiring the abandonment of traditional practice (Lohumi & Joshi, 2024; Oli et al., 2025). Equally important is the deliberate transmission of the tradition's ritual grammar—the specific meanings attached to named chowkis, the correct occasions for particular motifs, and techniques such as the vasudhara border—rather than only its surface visual vocabulary, since it is this grammar that distinguishes Aipan from a generic decorative style available for indiscriminate reproduction.

Continued documentation by university researchers, particularly those affiliated with Kumaon University, alongside careful use of digital platforms to record practitioners' own explanations of their work, offers one route toward preserving this grammar even as the material contexts in which Aipan is practised continue to change. Whether Aipan is eventually considered for a formal UNESCO nomination remains an open question, but the more immediate and practical work of conservation lies in supporting the artisans, overwhelmingly women, who continue to carry the tradition forward.

## 13. Conclusion

Aipan occupies a position that is at once marginal to mainstream art-historical attention and central to Kumaoni religious and domestic life. Its significance lies not in any single striking visual feature but in the density of meaning packed into a comparatively restrained formal vocabulary: a red ochre ground, a white rice-paste line, and a fixed repertoire of named chowkis that together encode an entire calendar of ritual obligation. The tradition's continuity has depended overwhelmingly on women, who have transmitted it through practice rather than instruction and who remain its principal artisans even as the tradition is drawn into new commercial and institutional contexts. Aipan's contribution to Uttarakhand's

cultural identity, and to the broader claim that Kumaon and Garhwal together constitute a culturally distinct Himalayan region within India, rests on precisely this combination of ritual specificity and continued adaptability. Its future will be determined less by whether its motifs continue to circulate—they clearly will, on textiles, in resorts, and across digital platforms—than by whether the ritual grammar that gives those motifs their original meaning continues to be understood and transmitted alongside them.

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*Note: In-text references to Chattopadhyay (1981) and Sah (2006) are secondary citations drawn from Kaushik and Gupta (2017), as the original works could not be independently verified for this paper.*