

TRAVEL

Where the walls whisper



Shailaja Tripathi

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Art historian and photographer Ilay Cooper travelled across Rajasthan on his bike in the Seventies. He talks to Shailaja Tripathi about his seminal book, *Rajasthan: Exploring Painted Shekhawati*, that recalls his discovery and adventures in the region

When Ilay Cooper first came hitch-hiking to India as a 22-year-old, he hadn't anticipated a life-long relationship with the art and architecture of Rajasthan. On his second visit in 1972, Cooper cycled across North India and discovered Shekhawati, lled with grand havelis and mansions bearing intricate frescoes. Cooper's extensive travels along with Ravindra Sharma of Churu resulted in two books: *The Painted Towns of Shekhawati* and *Rajasthan: Exploring Painted Shekhawati*, now in its fourth edition *ROHIT JAIN PARAS AND ILAY COOPER

Magical Shekhawati



As compared to its counterparts in colourful Rajasthan, this region, somehow, doesn't figure high on the tourist itinerary. But for an art lover like Cooper, who roams around the UK in a caravan and was recently invited to India by Jaipur Rugs Company to give a talk on the subject, it was paradise. Ornate havelis bearing extraordinary paintings are a tradition here. Shekhawati, comprising the districts of Jhunjhunu, Nagaur, Sikar and Churu, was founded by Rajput warrior Maharao Shekha. He broke away from the powerful Kachwaha dynasty of Jaipur, and declared himself independent in 1471. The Shekhwat rulers built several forts and palaces during their 500-year rule over the Shekhawati region. A series of forts, built long ago to protect Shekhawati from invasion, crowns the line of the Aravalli hills.

Mural magic



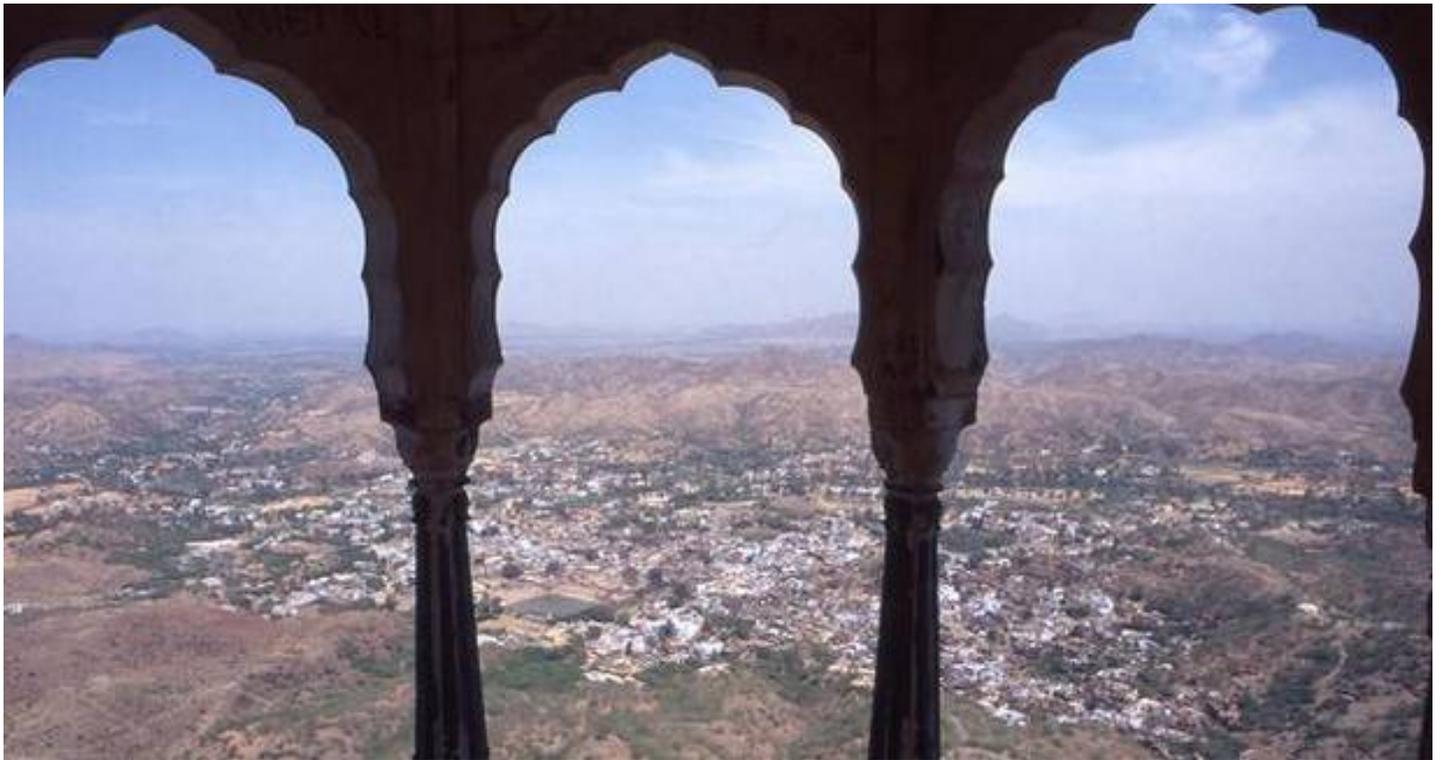
Shekhawati's frescoes are found on havelis, forts, temples and palaces. The artists, *chiteras* (Hindu potters) and *chejaras* (Muslim masons), drew from mythology, royalty, folk legends, animals and plants, and daily lives. They used a richer palette which included natural cinnabar, green copper chloride, Indian yellow and natural ultramarine made from lapis lazuli, gold and silver. The painters drew their designs and then painted them in. The paintings on exterior walls were often painted onto damp plaster so that the pigment was bound into the setting wall. They used cheaper pigments which were very resilient and could survive strong sunlight. From 1850 onwards, two new artificial pigments became more important – chrome red and artificial ultramarine blue, which had been synthesised in Europe.

Fading colours



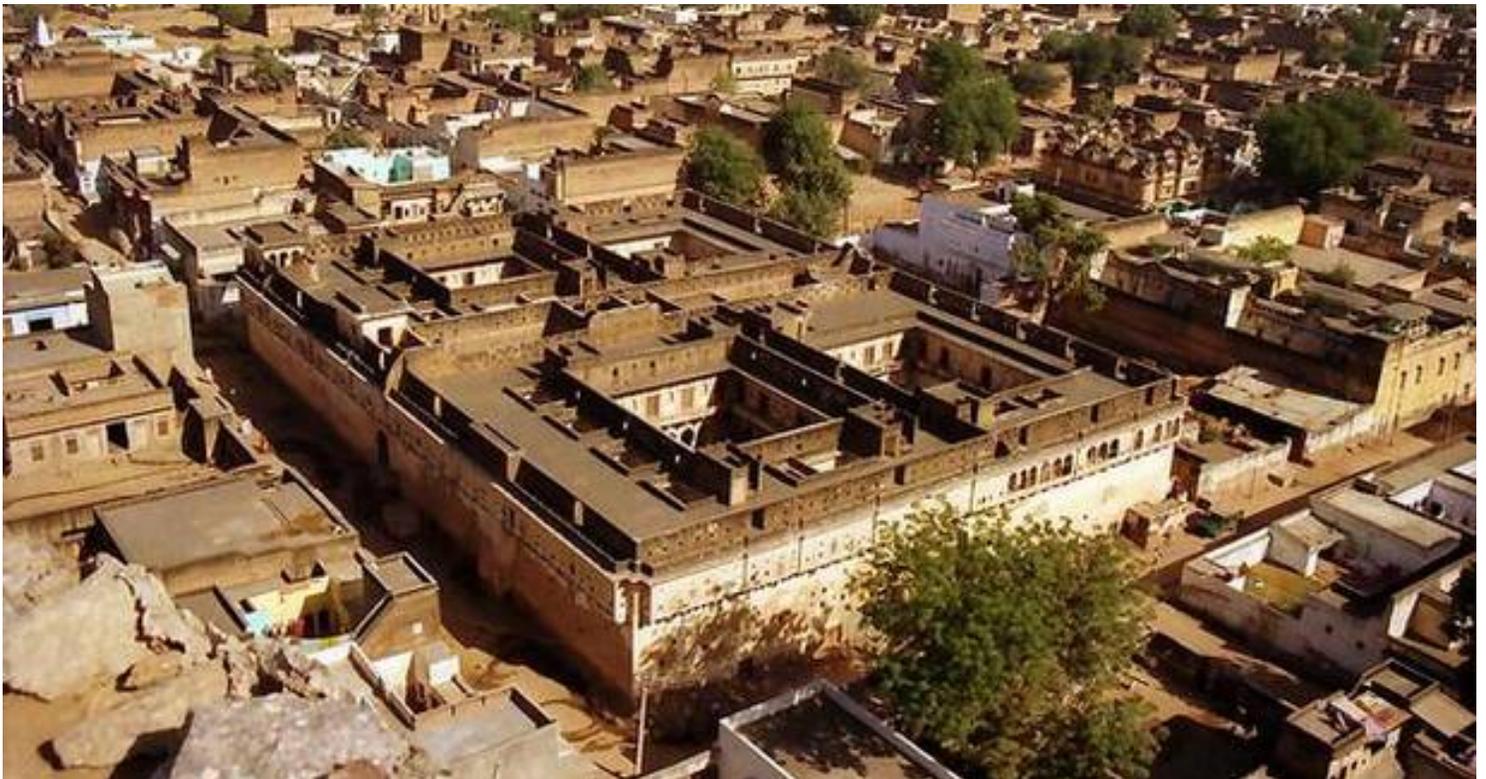
The murals were painted on fine, dry plaster and were often the work of teams of professional artists, particularly from in and around Jaipur, who assimilated influences from their surroundings into their art. Changing forces of power too reflected in their art. During the Raj, western imagery like gramophones, English ladies, motorcars, and trains blended with the traditional motifs adorning the walls. But the days of the traditional Shekhawati painters are long over, rues Cooper. “When I settled in this region in the 1970s, there were still some men who had learnt the old methods. The masons still do the work, but the men who paint now use modern pigments applied to dry plaster. The painter, Kesardev Naik, in the picture, is descended from masons who moved to Lakshargarh in the early 19th Century.”

Hilltop fort



The photograph shows the view from Bakhtawar Mahal, which is within the fort above Khetri. The view from the hilltop fort is breathtaking. Until 1987, when the old raja died, Bakhtawar Mahal was locked. Later, it was left open and suffered vandalism. But do look out for panels depicting Raja Bakhtawar in court and line drawings of Jaipur city. Carrying out the INTACH survey, we slept there a couple of times when in the vicinity. We were provided with a Rajdoot 175cc motorcycle. That spoiled me for the freedom it offered. Since then, I have had a motorbike which I shared with Ravindraji, in India. I rarely use it now. Khetri is also the second-largest hub of Shekhawat Rajputs and the town is known for its copper-rich mines.

Char Chowk haveli



One of the most unique and largest havelis in Lakshmangarh – a fortified town in Sikar district – the Char Chowk haveli is actually a pair of two chowk havelis built side-by-side. It was built by Muralidhar Ganeriwala, a Marwari trader in the 1840s, with some marvellous frescoes. While the most exposed paintings on the outer walls have faded, those between the brackets survive and include pictures of birds, soldiers and even a giraffe. A particular painting that stands out is that of a bird perched on an elephant. Much painted plaster has fallen from the walls of this haveli. You find some erotic paintings in the master bedroom in the northern part of these two havelis. While this part is empty, the southern section of the haveli is inhabited.

Girdarilal Sigtia haveli



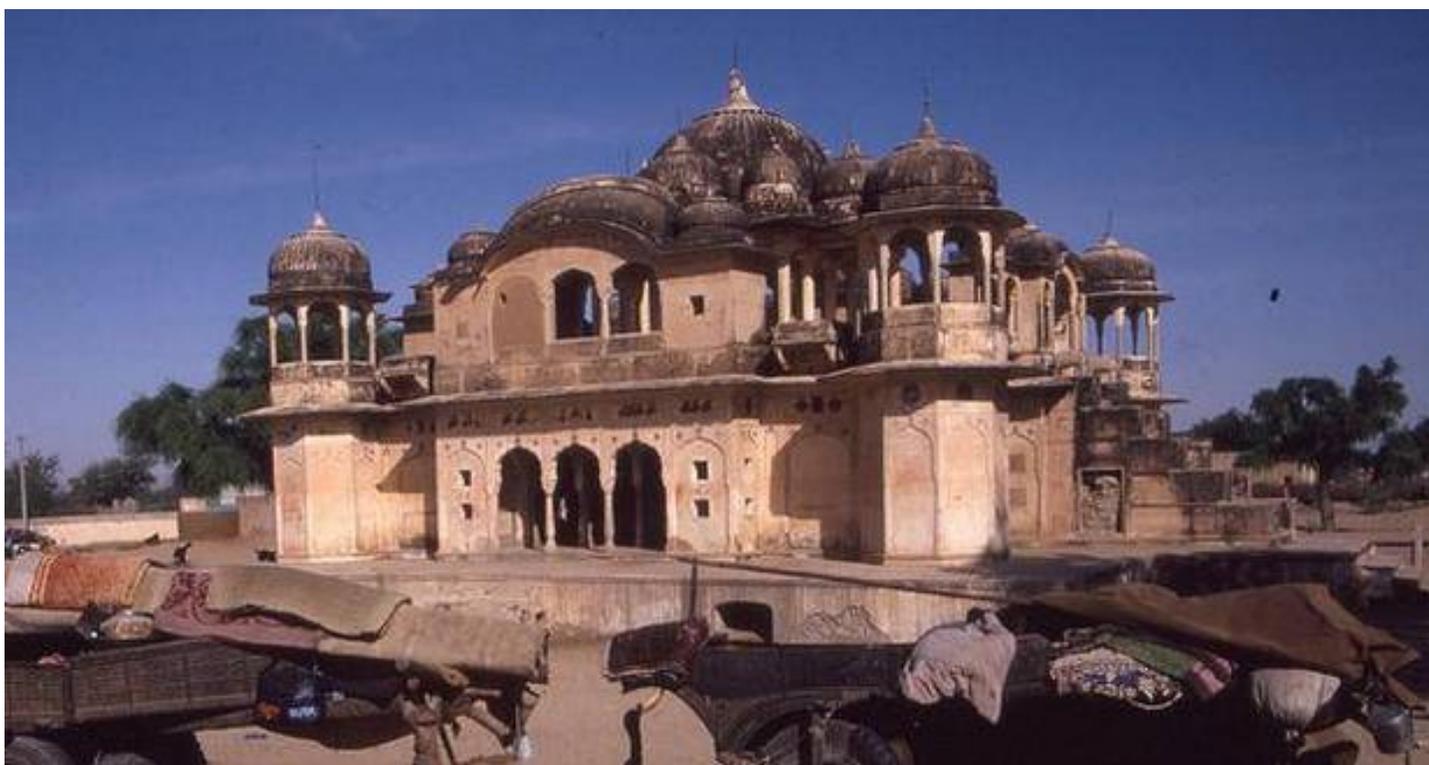
The Girdarilal Sigtia haveli is remarkable for its many, brightly-painted upper rooms, depicting folk tales. It is situated in the south-eastern sector of Bissau, a small town east of Churu. There is a considerable individual variation between the style and subjects of the paintings in each town, presumably depending on the local team of painters. In Fatehpur, a large panel of Gajalakshmi can be found in a deep ultramarine blue background. A team based at the town of Chirawa in the early 20th Century favoured carefully-shaded pink-cheeked faces. Ramgarh specialised in eccentric fish designs. It is important to note that the variation was between towns rather than havelis, says the art historian.

Sethani ka Johara



When Churu faced a famine during 1956, the widow of Bhagwandas Bagla got a water reservoir built to provide relief to the inhabitants of the area. Some of his philanthropic zeal had rubbed off on the lady as well. Literally translated, the name means 'The reservoir of the wealthy lady'. This historic site is a must-visit place to experience, in particular, the sunset when the water body attracts a lot of thirsty birds, nilgai and tourists. I used to cycle out to it for some quiet when I was living in Churu. It was the source of drinking water for a nearby village. Today, folk come by vehicles to drink liquor and throw bottles and plastic plates into its water. A few hotels located close to the tranquil spot bring in their guests for high tea.

Sahaj Ram Poddar chhatri



Chhatris or cenotaphs, built to commemorate kings and wealthy merchants, are a common sight in this region. The Sahaj Ram Poddar Chhatri in Mahansar, dedicated to a famous businessman, is one fine example of it. Built over Sahaj Ram Poddar's cremation site in 1836, there is an inscription on a kirti stambh. On the chhatri, you find paintings done in the traditional mode, with strong imagery comprising figures painted in natural ochre against a simple or bare background. We used one of the images on the front of the first edition of my book, *The Painted Towns of Shekhawati*. Ravindra and I once spent a night in this chhatri. The glow of our bidis attracted some men to come and investigate the odd lights – they clearly thought we were ghosts.

Open-air gallery



This residence came up in 1905 just outside the walls of Nawalgarh. It was built by the Kulwal merchant family and was richly painted. One mural in the forecourt shows a train with one truck addressed to a prominent local merchant, Ram Chandra Goenka of Dundlod. Now, it is home to the Kedwals. The town of Nawalgarh, among the biggest in Shekhawati, was founded by Thakur Nawal Singh in 1737. Referred to as the open-air gallery, the murals one finds on Anandilal Poddar Haveli, the Jodhraj Patodia Haveli, Bansidhar Bhagat Haveli, Chokhani Haveli, the Aath (eight) Haveli complex, Chhawchhariya Haveli, Murarka Haveli, Hem Raj Kulwal Haveli, Bhagton Ki Haveli, and Khedwal Bhavan remain unmatched.

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