

Aepan Art: From Sacred Hearth to Museum

by L. A. Schoch

Most of the designs in the exhibition were abstract and geometrical. As I stared at one that seemed almost out of place with the rest because there was clearly a story being told, one of the experts there came up and said, with a twinkle in her eye, "Men always like that one best" and then related a myth of the ultimate devoted wife. Savitri, sent by her father in search of a husband, finds Satyavan,

living ascetically in the woods. When Savitri tells her father of her choice, he tries to dissuade her from marrying a man who the gods have declared will die in a year. Savitri convinces her father with arguments of devotion, marries, and

lives the year in perfect obedience to the blind hermit she has chosen. When Yama, the lord of death, claims Satyavan, Savitri follows and appealing to the god's wisdom, convinces Yama to change what everyone but Savitri had accepted as inevitable. Satyavan is brought back to life, his kingdom restored.

The story is part of the ancient Sanskrit epic, *Mahabharata*. The painting comes from a collection of Aepan, an Indian household, ephemeral art that is beginning to gain wider cultural recognition. The IU Art Museum offered 19 examples of items rarely on display in the U.S. from the collection of Prema and William Popkin. Aepan was mainly the work of women drawing with their fingers in ocher and rice paste on the floors and walls of their homes. Although the tradition developed an elaborate iconography inspired by a philosophy that expressed harmony in the universe, it was never meant to be a public form. Artists felt it was sacrilege to explain the symbols and forms that were part of their devotions. The privacy at the center of its tradition was almost the cause of its extinction, but efforts of Jaya Gupta and others to transfer these skills to a younger generation and to convince the artists to paint on canvas and allow their work to become more public have preserved the form.

As I stood looking at Savitri consoling her husband at the moment of the arrival of the god of death, I wondered how much this really was a painting for men. The work and traditions before me were solely the efforts of generations of women, and while the story is undoubtedly one of a devoted wife, it is also one where the well-being of the world was assured by the actions of a woman who wouldn't take no for an answer.

Of Note



Kathleen Sideli (left) receives the Lifetime Achievement Award from IES Abroad President Mary Dwyer.

Sideli Honored for Lifetime Service

Kathleen Sideli, associate vice president for overseas study at Indiana University, received from IES Abroad its Lifetime Achievement Award—the organization's highest honor.

IES Abroad President Mary Dwyer described Sideli as "brilliant,

strategic, and incredibly energetic. She is all about one thing . . . quality . . . quality in academic programming, administrative activities, supporting students, scholarship and standards."

Sideli has written extensively about the field, most recently contributing to a groundbreaking history of study abroad in the United States. She has served in policymaking roles for several national organizations involved in global education initiatives.