

TRADITION *and* TRANSFORMATION:



MITHILA ART OF INDIA

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William Benton Museum of Art
School of Fine Arts
The University of Connecticut

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Mithila Painting: The Vital Tradition @ David Szanton
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Shalini Kumari, High Flying Hope, 2021, acrylic on paper, 30" x 22"

FOREWORD

Amanda A. Douberley
Assistant Curator/Academic Liasion, William Benton Museum of Art

This exhibition deepens the long-standing relationship between American painter and University of Connecticut Professor Kathryn Myers, and the William Benton Museum of Art. Thanks largely to her efforts, the Benton has a growing collection of Indian art and has hosted three prior exhibitions of art from India in collaboration with Professor Myers. In 2004, she filled the entire museum with over 250 works of traditional, folk, popular, and contemporary art for Masala: Diversity and Democracy in South Asian Art. In 2006, a more modest exhibition, Proximities of Distance, celebrated recent acquisitions. Then in 2013, Myers organized Convergence: Contemporary Art from India and the Diaspora. While Convergence focused on mainstream contemporary art, Myers’ current exhibition, Tradition and Transformation: Mithila Art of India, showcases her collection of contemporary indigenous art. Professor Myers’ collection of Indian art is a bequest to the Benton, for which the museum is extremely grateful.

I first learned of Kathryn’s passion for Indian art and culture on a visit to her home, where her collection is prominently displayed. It is indicative of the symbiotic relationship between her collecting and artistic practice that one must walk through her collection of Indian art to get to her art studio. Another example is the annual faculty exhibition at the Benton Museum. Professor Myers alternates between submitting watercolor paintings, which often show scenes from her travels in India, and sharing the video interviews she has recorded with Indian artists that make up the series Regarding India.

As a guest in my Spring 2021 graduate Art History seminar, The Artist as Collector, Professor Myers shared some of the ways that her relationship with the museum has shaped her collection. The bequest has driven her to focus on acquiring works by key artists; even so, she still pursues the works that she likes best. Jean Baudrillard once wrote, “what makes a collection transcend mere accumulation is not only the fact of its being culturally complex, but the fact of its incompleteness, the fact that it lacks something.”¹ As Kathryn told my class, she doesn’t want to keep collecting, until she sees the next piece she must have.

1. Jean Baudrillard, trans Roger Cardinal, “The System of Collecting,” in Cardinal and John Elsner, eds., The Cultures of Collecting (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1994), 23. First published as ‘Le Système marginal: la collection’ in Baudrillard, Le Système des objets (Paris: Gallimard, 1968).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Kathryn Myers
Exhibition Curator, Professor of Art–The University of Connecticut

I am fortunate to have had the opportunity to curate four exhibitions of South Asian art at the Benton Museum. Guided by expert museum staff, my knowledge of Indian art has been both enlarged and refined. In 2002, Masala – Diversity and Democracy in South Asian Art explored the interconnections between a broad range of Indian art forms. India–Proximities of Distance, in 2008, and Convergence, in 2013, focused on contemporary art from India and the South Asian diaspora by featuring works now in the Benton Museum collection. This fourth exhibition, Tradition and Transformation: Mithila Art of India, features a distinctive type of indigenous art from the state of Bihar, in northeast India. I am deeply grateful to past and current Benton directors and curators: Sal Scalora, Tom Bruhn, Nancy Stula, Amanda Douberley, and the many museum staff members, including Karen Sommer, Rachel Zilinski, and Kerry Smith, who have assisted with logistics and details. The UConn Design Center under Creative Director Professor Bianca Ibarlucea, and lead designer Michael Berardis, have designed a beautiful catalog documenting this exhibition.

Grants from the Benton Museum Mittleman Lecture Fund, the University of Connecticut Humanities Institute, Asian & Asian American Studies, India Studies, Women, Gender & Sexuality studies have supported speakers and a panel discussion for the current exhibition. Generous support from a University of Connecticut School of Fine Arts Research Grant and the Office of the Vice President for Research made the exhibition catalog possible.

Any successful curatorial endeavor relies on an interconnected community of artists and scholars. First and foremost, I gratefully acknowledge David Szanton. As president of The Ethnic Arts Foundation and a co-founder of the Mithila Art Institute, for decades David been a guiding force in supporting

Mithila artists and promoting Mithila art globally. Twenty works of art, some of which are part of this exhibition, have been donated by the EAF and made it possible to feature Mithila art in this exhibition. David has also been chosen as the 2022 Radhi Devi Joshi speaker, hosted by India Studies. As member of the EAF board, Peter Zirnis has been immensely generous in providing information on Mithila art and artists, maintaining of the EAF website and through his many close connections with artists, helping to negotiate the marketing of Mithila art in the United States.

Exceptional knowledge, insights and highly personal encounters with Mithila art have contributed greatly to this catalog. David Szanton’s Mithila Painting: The Vital Tradition tells the remarkable history of Mithila art from wall fragments discovered following an earthquake in a rural village in 1934, to international reception and recognition. The complex and intertwined relationship between indigenous and mainstream urban art in India is illuminated in Mapping the Mithila Art Market, by Lina Vincent, art historian and curator based in Goa, India. In Art Found Me, Anubhav Nath, the director of Ojas Gallery, New Delhi, shares a moving story of his initial encounters with indigenous art through the founding of a gallery with unique mission and an award program for artists. Several artists in the exhibition have also contributed extensive narratives about their paintings. I am additionally grateful to John H. Bowles for serving as a mentor through his ambitious curatorial exhibitions of Indian art and our collaborative projects. In Madhubani India, Kaushik Kumar Jha was of immeasurable help in providing information and connecting me with artists and Elizabeth Mahan has given the catalog text her expert editor’s eye. Finally, I thank the artists whose talent, generosity, and ingenuity have graced our museum’s walls and will immeasurably enhance the Benton museum’s permanent collection.

TRANSFORMATIVE ENGAGEMENTS *with* INDIAN ART

Kathryn Myers
Professor of Art—The University of Connecticut

In 1999, during the final days of my first visit to India, I had a life-changing experience while visiting the Handloom and Handicraft Museum in New Delhi, more commonly called the National Crafts Museum. Although as a visual artist I had encountered art throughout my life, I was powerfully moved by works of art in this vast and labyrinthine museum, then under the visionary direction of Dr. Jyotindra Jain. I was particularly captivated by the breadth of symbolism, iconography, and narrative stories and structures, as well as complex cryptic abstract diagrams. Because each regional form of art had originated in places far distant from each other, and in rural or tribal areas outside of urban centers, these art forms often developed their rich, extended traditions in near isolation from one another. The work felt simultaneously ancient and contemporary. Returning to the U.S., I was driven to learn as much as I could about it. Little did I know that my heightened interest and research would become a portal into a continually unfolding world of Indian mythology, iconography, religion, culture, history and politics, and more—which I had a naïve hunger to know all at once! I could not have predicted that this visit to the Crafts Museum would be the beginning of a long and winding journey that would open up new worlds of art, information, and opportunities, as well as connections and collaborations with new friends and colleagues.

In 2002, a Fulbright Fellowship brought me to South India in Chennai, where I had fortunate access to Dakshinachitra, a groundbreaking living history museum for Indian crafts and architecture. Founded and directed by the American scholar Deborah Thiagarajan, this large open-air museum became my second home for several months. Over the ensuing years I have been gratified to attend, participate in, and even organize some of Dakshinachitra’s seminars and exhibitions. While in India, I continued studying and occasionally purchasing works of art. Although these initial purchases were primarily from craft fairs, when

possible I felt it was important, and quite interesting, to visit artists where they lived and worked, which was sometimes a challenge when traveling to villages far from urban areas.

On my return to UConn two serendipitous events aligned. A new program in India studies was launched in 2004, and I was offered the opportunity to organize my first exhibition of Indian art at the Benton Museum. Masala—Diversity and Democracy in South Asian Art opened in January 2004, which also inaugurated the new Gilman wing of the museum. This exhibition included over 250 works of art, including contemporary, traditional, popular, and indigenous art. A stellar speakers series brought knowledge of Indian art and culture to the University. Dance and cultural events were held, and a most gratifying endnote was a review in the New York Times by Holland Cotter, one of the leading critics of contemporary South Asian art. This exhibition also marked the beginning of acquisition of works of South Asian art for the Benton collection by emeritus director Sal Scalora. My curatorial experience with the Masala exhibition led to the development of my new UConn course, Indian Art and Popular Culture.

Although I was delighted with works of art in different styles I purchased from Bengal, Orissa, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Maharashtra, and elsewhere, there was one form of art I was missing—Mithila. Although I had purchased a few small pieces of Mithila art from craft fairs, work often made with the tourist market in mind, I had no works that truly define Mithila art: stunning large-scale paintings and ink drawings created in two distinct styles by women of two upper castes, and a third style made by Dalit artists. (Formerly known as untouchable.) Most of the art I had collected at the time was affordable, marketed as “folk art” and was, and still is, often sold at prices far below the prices of urban “mainstream” contemporary art. I had yet to make the kind of commitment I would eventually make in order to understand this work

more deeply and develop a more discerning eye. At several South Asia exhibitions and conferences, I met individuals who became important guides in facilitating my greater immersion in Indian indigenous art who became friends and co-collaborators. Several of them have contributed to this exhibition catalog and will participate in a panel discussion.

In 2010, at a stunning exhibition of Pardhan Gond Art at the Davis Art Center at Wellesley College, I met two key scholars and curators of Indian indigenous art: John H. Bowles, the exhibition curator, and the anthropologist David Szanton, emeritus UC Berkeley Executive Director of International and Area Studies. Then, and to this day, Szanton is the tireless president of the Ethnic Arts Foundation—established in 1980 to advance recognition of Mithila art through international exhibitions and publications. At an annual University of Wisconsin South Asia conference, I purchased a large dazzlingly detailed ink drawing, Krishna Stealing the Saris of the Gopies, by Naresh Kumar Paswan, from a collection Szanton had on display. This particular acquisition marked my “passage” into a deeper realm of understanding, connection, and commitment to Mithila art, and it opened the door to many subsequent purchases as I started to build my collection. I have been drawn to traditional imagery that is still highly relevant and ingeniously reimaged, as well to works depicting challenging social and feminist themes that aptly demonstrate the evolution of this ancient art form.

In 2014, after learning of my video series on contemporary Indian art (RegardingIndia.com), initiated thanks to a 2011 Fulbright to India, Szanton and Bowles invited me to join them and other Indian and British scholars on a week-long visit to villages in the Mithila region. After a nearly five-hour drive from the capital city of Patna in the northeastern state of Bihar, we arrived in Madhubani, the largest town in the district. During visits to other nearby villages, we encountered beautifully painted murals, met with artists, and spent time at a remarkable tuition-free school for Mithila art, The Mithila Art Institute founded by the Ethnic Arts Foundation. Some mornings at the hotel we were greeted by artists who carried thick rolls of magnificent paintings for us to look through. I purchased several paintings during that visit had the opportunity to interview a leading Dalit painter Urmila Devi and one of the MIA’s founding teachers, Santosh Kumar Das at his home in Ranti. I had been deeply moved several years earlier by viewing Santosh’s powerful series on the 2002 Gujarat Riots in an exhibition at New York’s

Asia Society. These are the first videos of indigenous artists to be included on my Regarding India website. In 2019, I was invited by Anubhav Nath, of Ojas Gallery in New Delhi, to curate a solo exhibition of Das’s work for which a beautiful catalog was produced. A return to Mithila to create more video interviews during my 2020 Fulbright was unfortunately interrupted by the Covid-19 pandemic.

When first planning this exhibition, I originally intended to include a broad representation of my collection of indigenous art from different regions. This was before David Szanton approached me on behalf of The Ethnic Arts Foundation. After forty-two years of advancing Mithila art in various ways, the foundation would finally close and disburse its entire collection by 2023. Hundreds of works would thus be donated to universities, archives, and museums, as well as to certain appreciative artists, art historians, and curators with the understanding that the donated paintings would be exhibited and made available for research and teaching. In gratefully accepting the EAF’s donation of twenty works of art, it seemed suitable to refocus this exhibition on Mithila art. My life has been extraordinarily transformed by my engagement with Indian art. Over the past thirty-eight years, The University of Connecticut and The School of Fine Arts have provided unparalleled support for my work as an artist and curator. The opportunity to contribute these works to the Benton Museum collection, thus sharing them with my university community, now and in the future, is enormously gratifying.

MITHILA PAINTING: THE VITAL TRADITION

David Szanton
President of the Ethnic Arts Foundation

I have often wondered why so many people of different nationalities, backgrounds, and interests, and from far beyond India, have fallen in love with Mithila painting. Myself included. I think, however, there is a clue in what Stella Kramrisch-then the leading curator and dean of South Asian Art History-said to me in 1985 when I visited her in Philadelphia and showed her some 40 recent Mithila paintings on paper. After going through them carefully, she looked straight at me and said, “Mithila painting has the greatest vitality of all the current Indian art forms!” Somehow that “vitality” she perceived in the energy, seriousness of intent, directness, the combination of simplicity, beauty, technical skill, and the clarity of color and line-often despite limited understanding of the imagery-nevertheless excites viewers coming from very different cultures, and who often project into the art very different meanings and possibilities. It has happened when the paintings have been exhibited in England, France, Germany, Spain, Iceland, Japan, South Africa, and the United States. And at times, and in parts of India, as well.

The “vitality” of the art produced by women in the Mithila region of Bihar in north India is also evident in its longevity. Sanskrit texts document that the paintings go back to at least the 14th century, and they have survived and flourished since then (Rekha, 2023).

Almost certainly the first outsider to fall under their spell was the Cambridge University educated historian, William G. Archer, who between 1933 and 1940 was a Subdivisional Officer, and later Magistrate, in Madhubani District, in the Mithila region of Bihar. In January 1934, just three months after he arrived, a massive earthquake in the region killed over 10,000 people and damaged or destroyed thousands of homes. After the quake, Archer rode horseback to the surrounding villages to assess the damage. Writing later about that experience he noted:

“The houses with their mud walls had been severely damaged yet not so damaged that none were standing. I could see beyond the courtyards into some of the inner rooms and what I saw in the house of a Maithil Brahmin took my breath away. In normal times I would never have seen them since the rooms were private and intimate. But now they stood exposed and with astonished eyes I saw they were covered with brilliantly painted murals. Bright yellow, green and magenta gave them a frail and flickering majesty.... What I was seeing was a marriage chamber, a kohbar. There were figures of the bride herself and other ladies, of gods and goddesses, Krishna, Radha, Durga and parrots—the love-birds of poetry—while covering a whole wall was a forest of lotuses.... The faces had a gay insouciance, the fanciful contortions of a Klee or Miro. The figures also had a dream-like vacuousness. Their very freedom from what was normal sparked off the imagination and one felt as if one was in a fairy like palace, brimful of wonder.”

And when he reached the damaged homes of the high caste Kayastha families he wrote:

“the style of their murals was quite distinct...the same repudiation of truth to natural appearances, the same determination to project a forceful idea of a subject rather than a factual record. But in contrast to the Brahmins, Kayasth women were vehement. They portrayed their main subjects with shrill boldness, with savage forcefulness. Not for them the frail and whimsical fancies of a floating world. They were not so keen on colour and in some cases the entire wall was covered with compositions all executed in a blood-like madder. In one house, I was astonished to see a figure of a bride, her veil a robust triangle, her face a single huge eye. If Maithil Brahmin murals resembled Miro or Klee, here was Picasso naked and unashamed... I was entranced by what I saw”¹

Strict purdah in deeply patriarchal Maithil society unfortunately meant that Archer could not speak with the women who had done the paintings, leaving only senior men in the family with whom to discuss the paintings (and often receive inaccurate information from them). Nevertheless, the energy, passion, distinctive styles and intensity of what he saw, and so “entranced” him, was in fact the product of an ancient tradition of upper caste women painting gods and goddesses, in effect bringing them into their homes, to protect and support their families and provide auspicious spaces for domestic life cycle rituals-most elaborately for marriages.

As it happens, the 40 Mithila paintings I showed to Stella Kramrisch were not on walls, but on hand-made paper, as a result of a second natural disaster; a severe drought during the late 1960s that devastated local agriculture and promised widespread famine. Memories of the Bengal Famine of 1943 that killed over 2 million people were still fresh. Pupul Jayakar, the founder of the National Crafts Museum and Director of the Handicrafts and Handloom Corporation of India, and a close friend of Jawaharlal Nehru and Indira Gandhi, initiated a radical income generating project for the region. Recalling Archer’s accounts of the wall paintings, in 1967 she provided a hippie artist from Bombay, Bhaskar Kulkarny, with crates of paper to take to Madhubani, and charged him to encourage the women to transfer their ritual wall paintings onto paper that he could sell for them in New Delhi. In effect, she was asking Kulkarny to urge the women to shift their powerful art, that for centuries was intended to obtain protection and benefits for their families from Hindu divinities, and instead seek that protection and those benefits from the New Delhi art market!

At first, only a few Brahmin and Kayastha women took up the challenge. But while Mahatma Gandhi had been assassinated in 1948, his commitment to village life and products was still strong among urban elites. The women’s paintings were celebrated and sold out in New Delhi, prompting more Maithil women and a few men, and also from other castes, to begin to paint on paper. Many turned out to be stunning artists, and received public and private commissions. Several were sent to Europe, Russia, the US, and Japan to represent India in international cultural fairs. Within a few years six of the painters received the Padmshri, India’s highest award for art. The distinctive caste styles Archer had discerned remained constant, but since then they have been increasingly shared and are now often combined.

And although government support for Kulkarny’s efforts ended in 1975, he was and still entranced by the art he facilitated on paper, and he repeatedly visited the artists in Madhubani until his death in 1991.

Starting a few years later, but overlapping with Kulkarny, a German art historian, anthropologist, and filmmaker, Erika Moser, visited Madhubani in 1972. Among other village activities, Moser filmed another distinctive aesthetic tradition, low relief images of gods and spirits molded onto the exterior walls of their homes by women from the Dusadh community in the nearby village of Jitwarpur. The Dusadh were mostly farm laborers at the bottom of the Hindu social pyramid, ranked below the caste system, in effect as “outcastes.” British gazetteers had labeled them “bandits,” and they were widely referred to as “untouchables.” Gandhi replaced that demeaning term with harijan (Children of God) which the Indian Constitution officially replaced with the term “Scheduled Caste.” Today they are increasingly known and often self-identify as Dalit (Oppressed).

Moser, excited by the Dusadh women’s evident artistic skills in their relief images, encouraged them to experiment with their protective and decorative body tattoos to produce a third style of Mithila painting that became known as godana (tattoo) painting. However, unlike the upper castes whose paintings have primarily focused on the Hindu pantheon, rituals, and classic Hindu narratives, the paintings of the Dusadh women, and a growing number of Dusadh men, traditionally agriculturalists, focus more on nature, the tree of life, and episodes in the oral epic of their own magical culture hero, Raja Salhesh, his magnificent garden, and the flower maidens who cared for it-and for him.

Excited by their work, Moser-Schmitt, also made repeated return trips, researching and developing marketing schemes for the paintings in India, and mounting exhibitions and sales in Germany. She also built a large concrete-floored covered space in Jitwarpur hoping the women might paint there collectively. Much like the upper castes, however, the Dusadh women preferred to paint at home for fear that in an open space others might “steal” their ideas or imagery.

Paralleling Moser, yet another outsider, Yves Vequaud, a French journalist and author, and a well-connected figure in the French cultural and countercultural elite, first visited Madhubani in 1970. Unlike Moser, he had no interest in the Dusadh painters or in aiding the artists. Instead, in that period of Indophilia, he was transfixed

by what he took to be the upper caste paintings and painters’ purity, simplicity, and untouched and timeless spirituality. (Fleury and Ehrhardt, 2023)

With that Orientalist vision in mind, Vequaud brought and encouraged his Parisian friends to visit Madhubani, including, in 1975, the eminent filmmaker, Ludovico Segarra, with whom he made a highly romanticized film, “Mithila,” combining scenes of daily village life with a troupe of touring actors performing scenes from the Ramayana. In 1976 Vequaud published the first well-illustrated book on Mithila painting, “L’art du Mithila,” that in 1977 was translated into English as, “The Art of Mithila,” and “The Women Painters of Mithila, and into German as, “Die Kunst von Mithila.” Unfortunately, the text has numerous ethnographic errors, and while the subjects of the 76 paintings are described, Vequaud never named or gave credit to any of the painters. Nevertheless, between 1973 and 1978 he curated or helped with 16 exhibitions of Mithila paintings in France, Spain, Belgium, and Texas, and added four more exhibits in the following decade.

Between the efforts of Moser and Vequaud, by the mid 1970s Europe was coming to recognize and appreciate Mithila painting. But the paintings were virtually unknown in the United States where the first exhibits were in 1978: an utter failure in a Chicago bookstore, and a great success in a University of Texas, Austin, art gallery. Both exhibits were mounted by yet another outsider, the American anthropologist, Raymond Owens, who had like the others, fallen in love with the paintings and then with the painters.

In the mid-1960s Owens had done research on entrepreneurs in neighboring Bengal, and in 1976 went to Madhubani to conduct research on local flood and irrigation issues. But on arrival he discovered that the recent withdrawal of government support for Kulkarni had led to dealers exploiting the painters, demanding scores of paintings of a few popular subjects, paying paltry sums for them, forcing the painters into a mass production mode in order to generate viable income, flooding the market with cheap copies of popular images, and rapidly destroying the art form.

Owens decided to drop his original research to take on the dealers. Visiting the painters in the surrounding villages he encouraged them to take their time, and do paintings they really cared about. Aware that artists, like other workers, need some reasonable income both to support their families and continue as artists, Owens

paid the artists 10 times what the dealers were paying for good original paintings. Bringing those paintings to the US he mounted exhibitions and sales, and on return to Madhubani initiated an incentive system of distributing the profits from sales as a ‘second payment’ to the artists whose paintings had been sold. In 1977 he organized an artists’ cooperative, the Master Craftsmens Association of Mithila (MCAM). Despite the mis-gendered name, by 1981 MCAM had well over 100 members-including four men. Unfortunately, MCAM collapsed in 1982 when its local director used its collective funds to run for political office and lost the election. The infuriated artists left the MCAM and tales of that betrayal undercut the formation of anything comparable until 25 years later-when a much smaller self-run cooperative, of some 20 women, with strict entry and profit-sharing rules, was established in nearby Ranti village.

Owens, however, continued using his ‘second payment’ system between 1976 and 2000, and purchased some 800 paintings from over 100 painters during his 11 one-to-six-month trips to Madhubani. During those trips he encouraged the painters to expand the repertoire, to draw on rituals, stories about Hindu gods and goddesses, episodes in local and classic narratives (in single paintings, or in a series of paintings), as well as local activities and events, and even their own life histories. But not to duplicate earlier paintings they had sold. He also urged them, as artists, to sign their work, something they had never had reason to do with their own domestic wall paintings. Some 10% of the paintings he bought were to encourage painters just getting started. He also wrote extended notes on conversations about the paintings and artists’ lives for an unfortunately never completed manuscript.

Back in the US, in 1980 Owens and a small group of friends (including the author) founded the non-profit Ethnic Arts Foundation (EAF) to mount exhibits in universities, museums, and professional meetings and to hold funds generated until Owens’ next trip to India when he could distribute them directly to the artists-and purchase new paintings. When Owens died in May 2000 the artists were devastated; they had lost a friend, a guide, access to international audiences, and income. Everyone involved in India and the US assumed that was the end of the project and the EAF. But 15 months later, the EAF was informed that Owens had left 20% of his estate to the foundation, enough to cover several commitments he had made in India, and to restart the project.

With that in mind three of Owens’ closest colleagues, Joseph Elder, Parmeshwar Jha, and myself spent ten days in Madhubani in December 2001/January 2002 informing the painters we would continue what Owens had been doing. The painters were delighted, but also noted that times had changed; young women were going to school, looking for further education and employment in the cities, and were no longer interested in learning Mithila painting at home. In addition, the leading painters were getting old, and it seemed clear the tradition would die out in a few years. In response we asked if a free art school taught by leading artists might restore interest in Mithila painting among young women? Their response was a cautious, “possibly, it might last two or three years.” So drawing on Owens’ bequest the EAF founded the free Mithila Art Institute (MAI) in February 2003 with a one-and two-year program taught by leading Mithila artists. And when it closed, 16 years later, in 2019, it had graduated 400 new young Mithila painters from all across the caste spectrum, 97% young women! Literally re-generating the art form.

What was perhaps most surprising was that while the students, graduates, and artists in the villages have both inspired one another and expanded the repertoire-the subjects of the paintings-they have almost invariably maintained the conventions of the tradition: two dimensions only, no shading, no horizon line, no use of perspective, deities face forward, humans are in profile, figures may float as needed, frames are first painted or outlined on the paper, often with designs linked to the subject of the painting. The artists are well aware of other Indian and Western painting traditions, but insist they can paint anything they wish to express within the boundaries of the Mithila tradition.

The Japanese element of the story began almost in parallel with Owens, but took a different course. In the late 1970s, Tokio Hasegawa, like many other young musicians at that time, followed the ‘hippie trail’ to India, traveled to Madhubani, fell in love with the paintings, bought many, returned home, and readily sold them in Japan. After repeating the cycle several times he acquired an abandoned school building from Tokamachi, a small town high in the mountains northwest of Tokyo and in 1982 turned it into the world’s only Mithila Museum. The Museum has an attached studio to which Hasegawa invites two Mithila artists at a time for 3,

6, or 9 month residencies during which they can work relatively undisturbed, other than attending popular exhibitions of their paintings that Hasegawa organizes in Japanese towns and cities. The Museum holds some 2,000 Mithila paintings including some 300 done by

painters in residence. In the process Hasegawa has become a major figure in Indian-Japanese art and cultural exchanges.

The appreciation and support for Mithila paintings by art lovers from beyond India has vastly exceeded appreciation and support from within India. In part the competition for attention is overwhelming. India has an enormous array of ancient classical, local, traditional, and contemporary visual art forms, rooted in historical Persian, Islamic, and Western connections and influences. Gandhian celebration of village life has all but disappeared as India rapidly urbanizes. Stacks of small cheap mass-produced repetitive paintings in urban markets and emporia undercut Indian attention to and the value of the serious art being produced in Mithila. We are aware of only a handful of curated exhibitions of Mithila Painting in India, while there have been at least 100 in the Western world and Japan.

Stella Kramrisch’s identification of Mithila paintings’ “vitality,” mentioned at the beginning of this essay, is certainly part of the explanation. But a nine-year-old-boy at an exhibition in in a small California town took it a step farther. I had given a gallery talk about a dozen of the paintings, and when it was over he came up to me and said, ‘Thank you. At first, I thought they were just pictures on a wall, but now I see there are stories inside the paintings!’ I think he got it right. In fact, aside from the skill, elegance, or beauty of the images, there are at least three stories ‘inside the paintings’. There is a story about the figures in the painting, an iconography and mythology that most Indians know from childhood, but most foreigners do not. There is a second a story about what in the artist’s life, imagination, or surroundings led her or him to do that particular painting; what it meant to the artist. And there is a third story that the viewer projects into the images, drawing on his or her own experience and desires. For Europeans, Japanese, and Americans, Mithila paintings tend to provoke all three, including a unique response of their own.

1. The quotes are from Archer, William, “Into Hidden Maithila,” pg. 53-58. In India Served and Observed, by William and Mildred Archer, British Association for Cemeteries in South Asia (BACSA) London, 1994. After World War II Archer when on to become the Keeper of the South Collection at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London.

MAPPING *the* MITHILA MARKET

Lina Vincent

Independent Art Historian and Curator based in Goa.

The period between March of 2020 and the time we are living through currently has been a complex one for humanity in general. Never at the forefront of any nation’s industry, the cultural world has felt a deep, and rather painful impact, one that has resulted in further crumbling of meagre resources and fragile socio-economic infrastructures. This has been especially noticeable in countries like India, that has a vast partially disadvantaged population in rural and semi-rural belts. A large number of communities inhabiting these regions are involved with different forms of artisanal and craft practices that often form the basis of their sustenance.

This essay discusses the specific region of Northern Bihar, and the legacy of Mithila painting that has made its presence felt in the larger discourse on contemporary Indian art. Cultural production in India is studied largely within a dichotomy, with Fine Art-coming out of the traditions of academic instruction at one end; and everything else that is indigenous, folk, traditional, tribal and outsider, clubbed together as Folk Art and Craft, at the other. Even since India’s independence, interpretation of visual and built cultures has been through the lens of western academic discourse and within constrained categorization arising from colonial standpoints. The multiplicity of identity and community, the constant binaries of tradition and modernity, rural and urban, past and present, classical and popular; and the diverging trajectories of the many contemporaries that exist simultaneously are not addressed to the extent that they need to be. It is in this complex and evolving space that the artists working in the Mithila tradition have been attempting to make their mark.

Geographically, a Mithila artist is located outside the general ‘art hubs’ in the country. These are considered to be the metropolitan cities–Bombay, Delhi, Kolkata, Bangalore, Baroda and Chennai, to a certain extent. The ‘Art World’ consists of a network of commercial galleries concentrated in these cities, a few corporate establishments and private institutions that support

and collect art, and a handful of government cultural bodies distributed across few other cities and towns across India. In a case of centre vs periphery, this Art World is more easily accessible to those from urban centres, with the privilege of a Fine Arts education, a fair knowledge of English for communication, and an ability to negotiate the competitive and demanding requirements of presentation and marketing. It is a tough proposition for those coming from educated but regionally oriented situations, and the same problems are compounded for those from folk and craft backgrounds–often with low literacy levels.

There is an accepted hierarchy, even within urban fine art, that privileges’ some forms and mediums of art over others. From the 80s, there have been attempts by a few prominent art historians and curators to publicise and theorise work of artists from folk traditions practicing in contemporary spaces, and several collaborative projects that brought urban and rural art practices together. However, these have been few and far between, and the only way folk art appears to be legitimised is through a relative positioning with urban fine art, particularly within the structure of the art market. Additionally, the artist community’s lack of awareness and access to technological resources, the presence of exploitative middle-men, and lack of rigour with regard to the contextualisation of work for the market, produces multi-layered setbacks.

For many of the artists, selling artwork is their sole income. They are attuned to register every interest in their work as that of a prospective customer’s engagement. The notion of exhibiting their paintings for a period of consignment, as a gallery would, and waiting for it to be sold, is not something they understand easily even though the returns may be much higher. Historically the Mithila form of art making has been of temporary durations, intrinsically connected to life rituals and sacred visualisations, and therefore has had a very short connection with the processes of commodification–this has certainly influenced the way contemporary artists understand

and approach this space. Immediate purchases are more beneficial for them than artistic appreciation from an unknown audience. That is perhaps also the reason why they are convinced to produce work in bulk (for bazaars and fairs), or even participate in public mural making exercises that pay daily wage rates for many hours of complex painting work. During the pandemic, large numbers of them have been engaged in painting masks, for a meagre 50 rupees (less than a Dollar) a piece, but which they consider ‘something better than nothing’ to keep their households running.

This brings us to the artists’ interaction with networks of the market, which can be seen as divided into two major sections.

TOURISM MARKET

- Local handicraft agencies
- Women’s organisations and self help groups
- Textile and utility design chains
- Craft fairs and bazaars
- International craft fairs
- Government outlets
- Middle men
- Architects and interior decorators (buying as bulk design)

ART MARKET

- Local/regional galleries
- Local/regional museums
- Urban galleries showcasing mainstream contemporary art practices
- Curators
- Art historians
- Architects and interior decorators (buying as art)

The Tourism market provides the largest consumer base for ‘ethnic’ art and craft in India (this ranges from inexpensive baubles to finely constructed textiles, paintings, objects and artefacts made by indigenous communities from various parts of the country). It is a nebulous and generally unorganized sector in India, that provides livelihoods to a large number of artists and artisans. As it concentrates on commercial viability alone and is controlled by powerful lobbies and middle-men, the returns to the creators of the art and craft, and the safeguarding of their rights, is often on shaky ground. When these artists are struggling for their livelihoods, the matter of aesthetics is all but sacrificed, even though they might have high standards to begin with. The Central and State Government Departments that handle matters of Culture also

organize bazaars or fairs that bring together regional artists and craftspeople in commercial stalls where demand from the mass market for cheap items transforms the art into repetitive patterns and formulas. The Government Ministry of Culture² also offers annual awards (usually in cash) in recognition of outstanding work done by particular artists and communities, however as there are established political and socio-cultural hierarchies, and vested interests in the fray, this space is frequently shadowed by systemic imbalances and biases. While policies do exist on paper to support folk and tribal artists, the implementation of these remain poor or non-existent. The artists’ resilience can be appreciated however; in their constant urge to respond to contemporary events and situations, the Mithila artists have produced some compelling and thought-provoking records of the pandemic, in terms of personal and local experiences as well as observations of global situations.

A few Mithila artists over the last twenty-five years or so have managed to overcome these barriers and enter into the Art World, as well as sustain a practice with formal gallery representation. Unfortunately, there is also an ingrained prejudice within the urban Indian artist about being showcased alongside a folk or indigenous artist, that discourages a larger number of galleries from mixing the two. Foreign collectors might purchase a Mithila painting at the price it deserves, for the artist having spent many months on a work, but an Indian collector is wont to question and balk at the pricing of an indigenously produced artwork as compared to a highly priced ‘signature’ piece by a contemporary urban artist presented in a white cube gallery. Just like other products in a market, demand and supply contribute to establishing a price range for the work, and so in a vicious cycle, the lack of demand pushes a supply chain out of the window, and if artists are able to sell only a work or two a year, it cannot sustain their art and many choose to stop painting altogether.

There is a necessity to document and respond to these situations comprehensively and equitably. Some of the ways in which the positive changes that have taken place over the last decade can be enhanced is to have widespread surveys among the community so that they can voice their needs and concerns; create streamlined networks between local community representatives and urban galleries so as to generate a more responsive and collaborative understanding of the market; consciously develop a cultural ecosystem that integrates indigenous contemporary art practices with

their urban counterparts, through awareness, education and equal opportunities; provide artists access to legal guidance and management of consignments, pricing and insurance; and finally the participation of Government agencies and the state Akademies in strategizing residencies, mentoring programs and professionalisation courses that work on capacity building, and enabling artists to grow beyond the mere act of supporting their livelihoods.

Many Mithila artists seek to enhance their practices, expand their horizons, and improve their chances of being presented at wider art platforms. They are continually experimenting with newer materials and shifting socio-cultural contexts, while keeping alive their relationship with their roots and inherent visual aesthetics of their traditions. As art historians, curators, collectors and connoisseurs of these art forms, it is perhaps part of our responsibility, to bring focus to practical actions as much as the theoretical discourse that surrounds the art and its makers.

- 1. To protect, preserve and promote various forms of folk, traditional art and culture throughout the country, the Government of India set up seven Zonal Cultural Centres (ZCCs) with headquarters at different capital cities across the States of India. These are often the centres where camps, art events and award ceremonies take place.
- 2. Usually handled by the Lalit Kala Akademi (LKA) which is India’s national academy of fine arts. It is an autonomous organisation, established in New Delhi in 1954 by Government of India to promote and propagate understanding of Indian art, within and outside the country.

This essay is an extension of the paper titled ‘En(Count)ering the Art World’ presented at The Annual South Asia Conference, October 2019, University of Wisconsin, Madison, USA, on a panel for Mithila Art with Dr. David Szanton, Dr. Paula Richman and Pranjali Sirasao.

ART FOUND ME

Anubhav Nath
Director of Ojas Art, New Delhi

Since childhood, I have been interested in the arts, coming from a family with a strong tradition in the arts and crafts, it was not surprising. Like most of my peers, during my school years, I made the rounds of museums and art emporiums with my parents, went on organised school trips and of course I saw a lot of art in my home and stores that my family ran.

While in the USA for my undergrad studies, I started “looking” at art—both there and here, in India, mostly via the Internet. On completing my graduation, I returned to India and joined the family business. Dealing in jewellery and handicrafts was interesting, but I wanted to do more and found myself drawn to the arts—particularly the contemporary genre of the visual arts. More than anything else, my main draw was the interaction and conversations with artists, historians and curators that transported me back to the university atmosphere that I missed.

I believe Art Found Me as it was rather unplanned and serendipitous that I found myself organizing art workshops for young inmates at Tihar Jail along with visits by contemporary artists followed by a first-of-its-kind exhibition with artworks by jail inmates and contemporary artists—all displayed in the same exhibition. The exhibition was a big success with a remarkable number of visitors, good press coverage and great feedback from the artists, who said that visiting the prison was an unparalleled experience.

The following year I went on to work on another exhibition-project which explored the concept of Gandhi and entailed travelling with artists along the Dandi March route. This exhibition was also shown in London, Washington D.C. and Port of Spain. After having gained this experience of two major exhibitions, I started a permanent gallery space, Ojas Arts. There was a paradigm shift in the kind and number of exhibitions to be put together—I worked with some master artists and organised a few typical contemporary shows, all of which were great learning experience but did not really make me feel enriched.

Art has a bigger social good is something that I grew up with as there were instances where I saw art at work in changing the lives of communities through the economic independence and sustainability that art provided. Also, the self-respect that the Tihar Jail inmates felt was gratifying for all of us who worked on the project.

Coincidentally, I met some Gond artists at an exhibition in Delhi and really liked their artworks, which was followed by reading more on the subject and a visit to the Bharat Bhawan in Bhopal which is a unique museum that exhibits the work of tribal and traditional artists alongside modern and contemporary art. Gond art has thousands of years of recorded history and is probably the oldest surviving art form along with Australian Aboriginal art. There was immense pedagogical material available on the history of Gond art, but not much on the current scene. Of course, there were other institutions in the vicinity that showed artworks and murals of the contemporary Gond artists but there was not much in terms of books, catalogues or other printed materials. Lacking also was the creation of sufficient recorded history, compared to what is available on mainstream contemporary artists graduating from art schools in Delhi, Mumbai and Vadodara who are having exhibitions in mainstream galleries. Also, the market value of works varied greatly.

Keeping commercial viability aside, I felt that the current contemporary tribal and traditional artists needed greater visibility and by having exhibitions in galleries with catalogs, and collectors who would be interested in acquiring their artworks if not at phenomenal, but reasonable prices. I began showcasing the work of Mithila artists at the gallery, often in group exhibitions, such as an annual exhibition called Satranji. This helped lessen the sense of marginalization indigenous artists often face when their work is relegated only to “folk art” exhibitions or craft fairs.

With the above thoughts, we proposed a holistic concept to the organisers of the immensely popular and well attended Jaipur Literature Festival. We decided that indigenous artists would be honoured annually at the festival along with a display of artworks in Jaipur. This festival has a potential audience of more than 250,000 visitors, this would be followed by an exhibition and publication at Ojas Art in Delhi and an exhibition overseas.

In 2016, Madhubani-Mithila was the chosen genre and Santosh Kumar Das was recognised as the master artist. Since then, we have worked at multiple levels with Das and in looking at his work and background there is still a great deal left uncovered. In 2018, we held his first proper solo show in India, titled, Rerouted Realities, curated by Kathryn Myers with an accompanying publication. This exhibition resulted in his work being placed in museum collections and important private and institutional collections as well.

The Ojas Art Award is now six editions old, and through the award we have explored Gond, Madhubani-Mithila, Bheel, Warli and Pattachitra of Bengal and Orissa. I think in the last six-seven years, I have gained immensely in terms of the experience I have gained, and it is immensely fulfilling to be recognised for my work.

MITHILA ART *at* THE BENTON: STYLES *and* THEMES

Kathryn Myers

Professor of Art–The University of Connecticut

Contemporary Mithila art has usually been defined by two distinct styles created by upper caste Brahmin and Kayastha women, with a more recent style developed by Dalit women, (formerly known as ‘untouchables’). The Brahmin style, bharni (filled) is typified by a vigorous painterly approach using broad shapes of color often outlined in ink. As Kayastha women are from a caste of scribes and accountants, their kachni (linear) style, typically rendered in black and red ink, seems to draw on their husbands’ occupation. Initially Dalit painters adopted the Brahmin’s filled style, but later developed two styles of their own, the godana (tattoo) style, and geru (brown) style. The godana style was inspired by the symbolic and pattern-based tattoos adorning their bodies, with their own visual language of stylized shapes and embellishments. The geru style involves coating the paper with a brown wash (gobar) to make it reminiscent of the mud walls where paintings had been made for centuries.

As evidenced in the work in this exhibition, stylistic distinctions once based on caste and community have become more fluid and this form of art once exclusively practiced by women now includes a small number of male artists as well. Many artists now combine or work in a range of styles, responding to the demands of the market, a collective sense of artistic heritage, and natural artistic curiosity. Mithila artists are exceptional for their remarkable artistic range and astonishing virtuosity while remaining within established stylistic parameters.

Depictions of Hindu deities and epics are a highly visible and vibrant part of pan-Indian culture and an extremely popular subject for Mithila artists of all castes. An estimated 33 million gods in the Hindu pantheon provide a wealth of imagery to choose from. Although Mithila artists are well versed in the more codified ways of depicting Hindu imagery in traditional and popular art, they have often invented radical new ways of visualizing the enduring power

of the iconography. Practicing the Mithila style for over sixty years, Baua Devi brings a lively touch to a much beloved image in Ram Garlanded by Sita, painted in classic bharni style. Her startling Moon God, (Chandra) with its broad flat colors and minimal shapes surrounded by stars, offers a fresh approach to how this planetary deity is typically depicted. Several images of the fierce goddess Kali show a range of artistic invention within established iconography and symbols. Usha Devi’s Kali, painted in bright pinks, oranges, and blues is almost playful in comparison to the foreboding starkness of Santosh Kumar Das’s idiosyncratic Kali rendered in the kachni linear style in crisp red and black. While Das emphasizes Kali’s distinctive bloody lolling tongue, Usha Devi portrays the goddess, with her multiple heads and arms, astride the prone body of the god Shiva. Kiran Devi’s Kali stands within a narrow decorative border hovering over a symbolic Yantra, an abstract form by which she is also identified. A similarly inventive use of a vertical format can be seen Rakesh Kumar’s, Ganesh, who along with his mouse vehicle and bowl of sweets is nearly camouflaged by a dizzying arrangement of monochromatic marks and patterns.

Stories about Krishna, perhaps the most beloved god in the Hindu pantheon, offer boundless imaginative possibilities, from adorable infant to playful trickster and mature god performing benevolent acts for his followers. Rikesh Kumar illustrates an early episode in Krishna’s life in Vasudev Carrying the Infant Krishna Across the Yamuna River. As a newborn, Krishna was carried safely away from the murderous intentions of the evil King Kasma by his father Vasudeva. Through a sinuous use of line, Kumar simultaneously evokes the raging river and the multi-headed canopy the serpent Vasuki used to shield the infant. Krishna’s mischievous nature is depicted in two very different renditions of Krishna Stealing the Saris of the Gopis. Countless artists have enjoyed illustrating this tale as it offers so much opportunity for sumptuous decoration, delight,

and humor. Dulari Devi depicts Krishna as energetic and robust, playing his flute in a striped kadam tree whose “fruits” are the scattered saris stolen from the gopis while bathing in the river. In Naresh Paswan’s monochromatic image, Krishna’s music animates a row of modest gopis whose range of protective postures provide a sensuous sense of rhythm. In Nitin Raut’s Krishna Lifting Mount Govardhan, Krishna lifts the mountain using only his little finger, protecting villagers from a wrathful storm sent by the god Indra. Through alternating patterns of shapes and marks framed by an elaborate border, Raut skillfully plays with two and three-dimensional illusions of space. A mesmerizing image by Naresh Kumar Paswan conjures up an episode from the life of the Dalit folk hero Raja Salhesh. In Insects in the Garden of Raja Salhesh, a nearly solid field of gray is framed by icons of Salhesh rendered in a distinctive godana bird-figure style. Upon a closer look, this “field” is animated by thousands of tiny repetitive marks that evoke a garden teeming with insects. Shanti Devi’s Raja Salhesh Hunting with His Nephews, painted in the bharni style, literally bursts with energy. Her trademark bright pink scalloped border is reminiscent of a theater curtain. Her remarkable range of artistic expression is evident in another pair of works with a more subdued palette, Tiger and Calf in the Jungle and Sadul Bird.

Scenes of village life, including both work and worship, are an enduring part of the Mithila art repertoire. Sharwan Paswan’s scene of farming and fishing in Children Left at Home While Parents Work conveys the challenges many parents around the world now face. In her vertically oriented Chhath Puja, Paswan’s mother, the celebrated Dalit artist Urmila Devi, shows a birds-eye view of scores of worshipers enjoying both sacred and secular activities in this ancient festival honoring the Sun God Surya. In Nisha Jha’s rendition, her extraordinarily fine linework in multi-colored inks resembles stitching. In a multi-tiered scene dense with activity, the viewer is in close proximity to devotees who stand in the water making offerings of coconut, bananas and floating lamps. The exacting detail of these images is both richly informative and visually entrancing. Rampari Devi’s lively Festival Worship of the Sun makes use of the brown toned gobar wash of cow dung that replicates the color and surface of a mud wall. Mithila marriage ceremonies are magnificent four-day affairs encompassing elaborate rites and rituals. In Dulari Devi’s Marriage Preparations, multiple scenes unfold through the use of continuous narrative, where wide-eyed women gather in intimate rituals

including a Mendhi (henna) hand painting process and ceremony and a ritualized visit to a mango grove. The mango tree full of parrots (love birds) and ripe with fruit symbolizes fertility. Along with depictions of momentous events like marriage are witty observations of everyday life as seen in Santosh Kumar Das’s Monsoon Series, where a dhoti-clad Brahmin wrestles with an ungainly umbrella.

Artist’s depictions of local flora and fauna range from experiential to encyclopedic. While Lalita Devi’s Todi Palm, Animals, Birds and Village feels electric with energy, Leela Devi’s quiet sensitive line traces fish scale patterns and pond vegetation with the delicacy of an embroidered handkerchief. Likewise in Fishermen, Vimla Dutta lends a gentle touch to the strenuous work of hoisting nets heavy with fish. Lachhamaiya Devi’s Tortoises and Fish is inspired by Dusadh godana tattoo designs. Dozens of shapes in alternating tones of yellow, orange and ochre are arranged in hypnotic horizontal bands over a luminous green ground. In Nine Trees, Naresh Paswan Kumar’s grid structure contains meticulously rendered trees in a watery landscape where his characteristic density of line evokes a mysterious shadowy effect. Trees, falling nuts and scampering striped squirrels set the stage for Arti Kumari’s exquisite illustration of a local folktale, Poor Girl and the Squirrel. With a light crisp atmosphere rendered in the kachni style, the image’s illusion of serenity is shattered by a tragic finale.

As ritual imagery, for centuries painted on walls and floors, made the transition to paper and canvas, the original meanings and materials have also evolved. Manju Devi’s Aripan replicates a daily ritual of ephemeral floor paintings that can be made with a variety of materials including clay or rice paste. The brown ground of her painting resembles the sanctified cow dung (gobar) surface of a floor where aripans are traditionally and still drawn today. Kohbar, the core marriage image in Mithila art, has traditionally been painted on the wall of a dedicated nuptial chamber, the kohbar ghar, in the bride’s home, where the marriage is consummated on the last of a four-day wedding ceremony. As artists have adapted the kohbar to paintings on paper over the past twenty years, the imagery became somewhat standardized, but in recent years, it has become freighted with new meanings. A more traditional rendering of a kohbar by Umar Shankar Prasad includes six circles, signifying lotus flowers, surrounding a seventh which together represent the beauty and hoped for fertility of the bride.

The lotus flowers may also be painted as faces or with abstract designs. By contrast, Mahalaxmi's Dark Kohbar is a haunting interpretation based on her reflections on Indian marriage customs and her own personal experiences.

Starting slowly in about 1980, and accelerating since 2000, images of political, social and ecological themes have both enlarged and begun the process of transforming Mithila painting from a ritually rooted tradition to a contemporary art form. Deliberate choices of technique and composition amplify the sensation of depicted events. Rani Jha's jarring Earthquake in Nepal simulates the feeling of catastrophic chaos while Leela Devi's 9-11 with flying planes, fire, smoke, and falling buildings nearly vibrates with tension. Many female artists, while offering insights into their multiple roles in Indian society, have also used their paintings to protest oppressive conditions, and to speak out for women's empowerment. This imagery is often heralded in exhibitions in urban India and internationally, but critical works of this nature are harder to sell at local craft fairs and festivals where traditional imagery is popular, and where many artists must earn their living. One result is that female artists are becoming adept at painting both the familiar and the fractious as in the work of the talented mother and daughter, Vinita Jha and Nisha Jha. Nisha Jha's Hungry Man of Dowry reveals the abuses women endure when the traditional dowry system of arranged marriage becomes corrupted by greed, while Vinita Jha elaborately illustrates the increased demands women face in The Responsibilities of Women During Covid. Shaline Kumari's High Flying Hope pairs her dreams of a better life with the reality of the many social and cultural barriers Indian women still face. With stunning artistic impact these images are transforming the tradition of Mithila art by confronting challenging contemporary subjects.



Baua Devi, Sita Garlanding Ram, 1977, natural pigments on paper, 30" x 22"

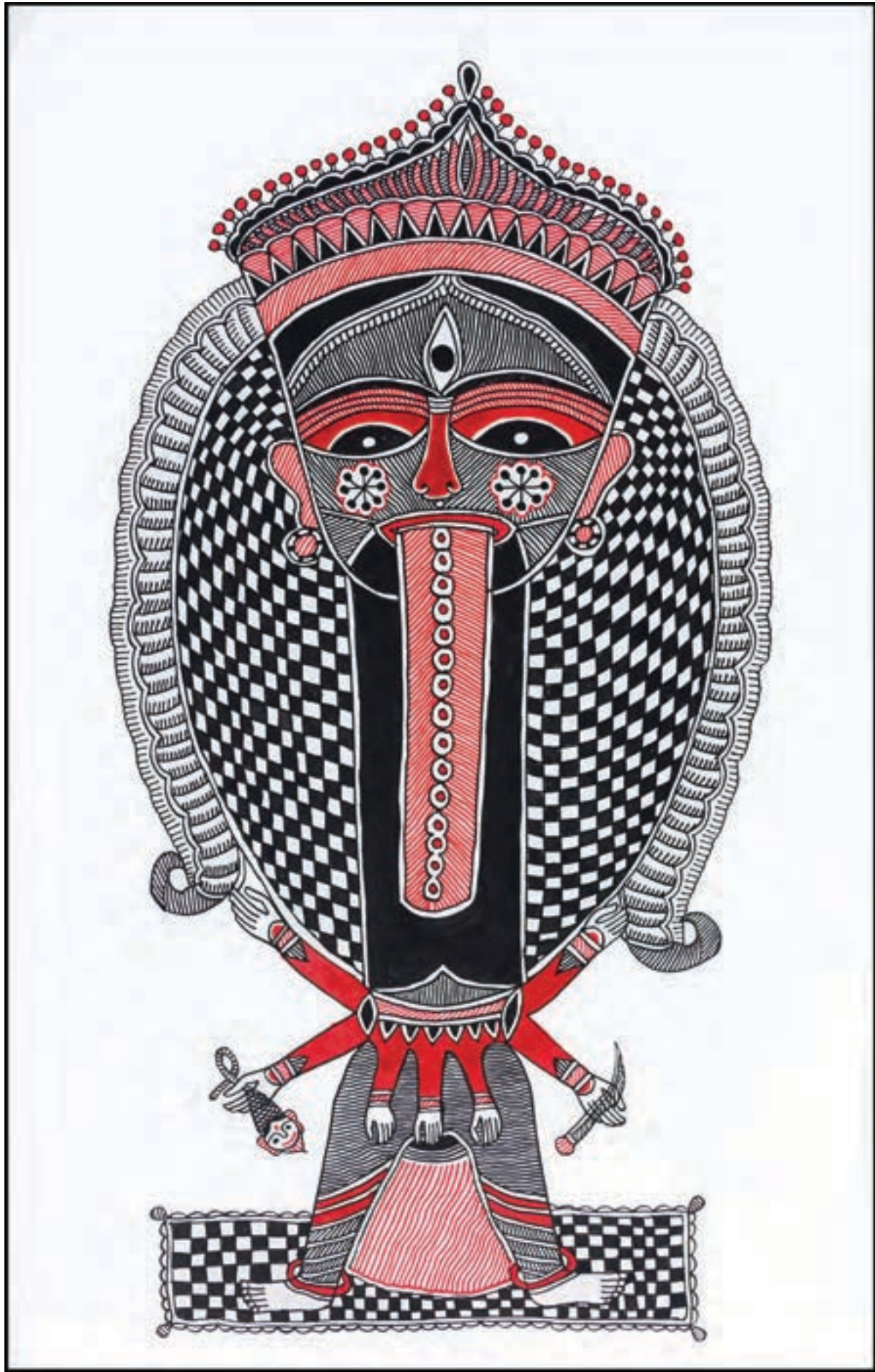


Baua Devi "Moon God" (Chandra), natural pigments on paper, 30 x 22"

In addition to myriad deities with human attributes, Hindu's also worship a series of nine planetary deities, Navagraha, which play a major role in the destiny of human lives and are often found in temples along with primary and subsidiary deities. There are several major temples to Surya, the Sun god, other planets are: Chandra (Moon, also called Soma), Mangal (Mars), Budha (Mercury), Brihaspati, (Jupiter), Suhkra (Venus), Shanti (Saturn), Rahu (south lunar mode) and Ketu (south lunar mode.)



Usha Devi, Kali, 1977, natural pigments on paper, 30" x 22"



Santosh Kumar Das, *Kali*, ink on paper, 16" x 10"



Santosh Kumar Das, *Kali*, ink on paper, 16" x 11"



Kiran Devi, *Kali*, 1999, acrylic on paper, 22" x 7 1/2"



Rakesh Paswan, *Ganesh*, 2016, ink on paper, 7 3/4" x 23"



Naresh Kumar Paswan, *Krishna Stealing the Saris of the Gopis*, ink on paper, 22" x 30"



Dulari Devi, *Krishna Stealing the Saris of the Gopis*, 2020, natural pigments and ink on paper, 22" x 30"



Nitin Raut, *Krishna Lifting Mt. Govardhan*, 2016, ink on paper, 22" x 30"



Ritesh Kumar, *Vasudev Carrying the Infant Krishna Across the Yamuna River*, 2011, ink on paper, 30" x 22"



Naresh Kumar Paswan, *Insects in the Garden of Raja Salhesh*, ink on paper, 22" x 30"



Shanti Devi, Raja Salhesh Hunting with his Nephews, natural pigments on paper, 22" x 30"

Raja Salhesh is a folk hero revered by the Dusadh caste, the largest local Dalit community in the Mithila region. Numerous episodes from the elaborate epic of his life include his garden with parrots, flowers and adoring malins (flower maidens), or, as in this image, adventures with his extended family.



Shanti Devi, Tiger and Calf in the Jungle, natural pigments on paper, 22" x 30"



Shanti Devi, Sadul Bird, natural pigments on paper, 22" x 30"



Shrawan Paswan, *Children Left at Home While Parents Work*, ink on paper, 30" x 22"



Urmilla Devi, *Chhath Puja*, 2014, ink on paper, 30" x 22"



Nisha Jha, Chaath—The Incredible Festival of India, 2021, acrylic on paper, 22" x 30"



Rampari Devi, Festival Worship of the Sun, 2005, natural pigments on paper, 22" x 30"



Dulari Devi, Marriage Preparations, 2021, natural pigments and ink on paper, 20" x 29"



Santosh Kumar Das, *Monsoon Series*, 2013, ink on paper, 18" x 12"



Manju Devi, *Aripan*, natural pigments on gobar, (paper coated with cow dung) 22" x 30"

An aripan, also referred to as rangoli, or kollam in other regions of India, is an ephemeral floor drawing made from materials such as clay, rice flour, colored sand, rocks or even flower petals. Traditionally made by women as an everyday ritual, or for festivals or auspicious events, they are created over a purifying layer of cow dung and water.



Umar Shankar Prasad, *Kohbar*, 2002, ink and natural pigments on paper, 22" x 30"

A kohbar is one of the most distinctive and a core image in Mithila art of which there are many variations including those using a standard iconography as well as new interpretations. Richly imbued with symbolism a kohbar is traditionally painted quite elaborately on the wall of the nuptial chamber usually accompanied by images of gods and goddesses. It is where the bride and groom spend their first four nights, watched over by an older woman, who discretely leaves on the 4th night of the marriage rituals, when the marriage is consummated.

The central motif is a ring of six lotus flowers surrounding a seventh (or in the case of Brahmin

weddings. sometime eight lotuses, surrounding a ninth). Together they represent the beauty and hoped for fertility and fecundity of the bride. The painters see it as the stalk of the lotus plant with a woman's face at the top. Variations of the lotus flowers include abstract designs or faces. The sun and moon (upper left and right) along with the auspicious astrological nine planets, visualized here as small heads, are also always present. The stylized bamboo grove, on the lower left corner variously described as the groom, male potency, or the groom's family line—that the bride will hopefully continue. (when on walls it was usually on an adjacent wall, and of comparable size to the

lotus pond.) In the lower right the bride and groom perform gauri-puja. The goddess Gauri is another name for, or manifestation of, the goddess Parvati, Shiva's wife. They are regarded as the idea couple. Here, however, Gauri(Parvati) takes the form of an elephant. The bride places a betel nut on a silver ring, on a piece of wood on the head of the elephant to show her gratitude to Parvati, for giving her a good husband. Young women pray to a basil plant representing Parvati, somewhere around their home every morning for years, for a good husband, like Parvati's husband Shiva.

David Szanton



Mahalaxmi, *Dark Kohbar*, 2012, Ink on paper, 22" x 30"

Mahalaxmi's "Dark Kohbar" provides an arresting visual and iconographic contrast to Umar Shankar Prasad's rendition, the artist describes her inspiration for this image.

The kohbar comes into use on the wedding night, but as night does not exist symbolically or figuratively in the traditional composition, I painted it black. Around the time I was painting the dark kohbar I fell in love and was sick of doing bright red kohbars for one too many weddings. My own

marriage was indefinite and my family was seeing bad times and could not afford an investment in the form of an arranged marriage, a costly affair within my caste. A hefty dowry guarantees a good groom with a good financial position and could mean almost a fortune from lacs of money in cash to automobiles, electronic appliances and jewelry.

I was never trained to like love marriages and arranged marriage is taken as a safe choice socially. But with time, my opinions developed and my

understanding changed. I fell in love and I grew more conscious about a girl's choices and the pressures on her life. In a way, a kohbar has a very strong impact in molding a girl to the patriarchal structures of our society. That's why I stopped seeing it as a fixed symbol and started playing with it. In the process, the dark kohbar happened.

Mahalaxmi



Lalita Devi, Toddy Palm, Animals, Birds and Village, 2004, natural pigments on gohar (dung wash) 30" x 22"



Leela Devi, Fish Pond, ink on paper, 22" x 30"



Bimila Dutta, Fishermen, ink on paper, 22" x 30"

Lachhamaiya Devi, Tortoises and Fish, 2010, ink and acrylic on paper 22" x 30"Naresh Kumar Paswan, Nine Trees, 2016, ink on paper, 30" x 22"



Arti Kumari, The Poor Girl and the Squirrel, 2010, ink on paper, 22" x 30"

In this local tale a poor but beautiful girl is helped by a kind squirrel and his friends who shake down nuts from high in the trees. The squirrel asks to marry her, she falls in love with him and agrees. But a prince on horseback comes by, scoffs at her marrying a squirrel and abducts her. Her squirrel husband chases them and is beheaded by the prince. At his palace, the girl commits suttee with her beloved squirrel husband. (Suttee, or sati, is a former practice in India where a wife threw herself on her husband's funeral pyre.)



Rani Jha, Earthquake in Nepal, 2015, acrylic on paper, 22" x 30"



Leela Devi, 9-11, ink on paper, 22" x 30"



Vinita Jha, *Responsibilities of Women During Covid*, 2021, ink on paper, 22" x 30"



Nisha Jha, *The Hungry Man of Dowry*, 2021, ink on paper, 22" x 30"

Although the dowry system has been illegal since 1961, many Hindus still adhere to it. In this story, parents who are devoted to their only child, a daughter named Koyli, find a groom for her from a prosperous family. They are relieved that due to his status she will not face any problems in life. However, the groom's father demanded a great deal of money and luxury goods, claiming that they could easily find another bride's father to pay this dowry and that they must give it or go away. Since Koyli was happy with their choice of a husband, her parents wanted her to be happy and not to know that although they sold their land and house, even that was not enough money. The groom and his family considered the bride as Kamadhenu, a cow with heavenly powers who fulfills wishes, and thus the bride's value was buried under the goods in her dowry. In this image Koyli's distraught parents leave their house and mourn their separation from her. Koyli is led away by her husband in the form of the Kamadhenu, laden with the gifts from her dowry.



Shalini Kumari, *High Flying Hope*, 2021, acrylic on paper, 30" x 22"

CONTRIBUTOR BIOGRAPHIES

David Szanton is a social anthropologist based in Berkeley, California. After a BA from Harvard (1960), he studied sculpture and art history in Rome, then earned an M.A. and a Ph.D. in Anthropology from the University of Chicago (1970) with a strong interest in non-Western conceptual systems. He was Humanities and Social Science Program Officer with the Ford Foundation in Manila and Bangkok (1970–75), staffed the interdisciplinary South Asia and Southeast Asia research committees at the Social Science Research Council (1975–86), and edited “The Politics of Knowledge: Area Studies and the Disciplines” (1974). He was Director of International and Area Studies at the University of California, Berkeley (1991–2010). Working closely with the Mithila painters since 1977, he co-founded the Ethnic Arts Foundation in 1980, has been its President since 2002, co-founded the Mithila Art Institute in Madhubani, Bihar, has published widely on Mithila painting, and curated numerous exhibitions in the US and India.

Lina Vincent is an independent art historian and curator with two decades experience in arts management. She is committed to socially engaged practices that reflect in multidisciplinary projects she has developed and participated in. The focus areas of her research extend to projects with arts education, printmaking history and practice, the documentation of living traditions and vernacular arts, and environmental consciousness in the arts. She initiated and headed the Piramal Residency Artist Incubator Programme

2019-20 and is heading the Sunaparanta Arts Initiator Lab, Goa (S.A.I.L) in 2021-22. Lina is Associate Curator with ARTPORT–making waves and honorary Visiting Professor at the Trans-disciplinary University (TDU) Bengaluru. She runs the Goa Familia archival photography project with Serendipity Arts Foundation and concluded an Archival Museum Fellowship through India Foundation for the Arts for Goa Chitra Museum (2018-19). Selected recent curatorial projects include ‘GOOD FOOD India’ -international arts program for climate-change awareness (2017-18); Story of Space–multidisciplinary public arts program, Goa (2017); ‘Tabiyat: Medicine and Healing in India’ CSMVS Mumbai (2016-17). She has curated numerous exhibitions with galleries across India and continues to contribute to publications on art history and contemporary cultural practices.

Lina has a BFA in printmaking and an MFA in Art History from Bangalore University.

Anubhav Nath is the director of Ojas Art, New Delhi. Ojas is a Sanskrit word which may be best described as an embodiment of the creative energy of the universe. Ojas Art takes an innovative approach to promoting Indian art with a pronounced mission of presenting projects that are well researched. Through solo and group exhibitions and the annual Ojas Art Award, Ojas Art regularly showcases the work of traditional and tribal artists in India, artists who are often otherwise marginalized in the contemporary art scene.

ARTIST BIOGRAPHIES

Santosh Kumar Das is unique among Mithila artists for having received a BFA at The MS University of Baroda. He was the founding director of the Mithila Art Institute and achieved international recognition for his Gujarat Series about the 2002 communal riots. In 2018 he had his first solo exhibition at Ojas Arts in New Delhi. A video about his work is included in the Regardingindia.com series on contemporary Indian artist. He was born in 1962 and lives and works in the village of Ranti, Madhubani District.

Baua Devi began transferring her wall paintings to paper in the late 1960’s. She is the first Mithila artist to receive international recognition following inclusion in an exhibition at the Centre Pompidou in 1989. She was born in 1944 and received the Padma Shri award in 2017 and the National Award in 1984. She lives and works in the village of Jitwarpur, Madhubani District.

Dulari Devi received the Padma Shri award in 2021, which is the fourth highest civilian award given in India. In 2011 she produced a book titled Following My Paintbrush with publisher Gita Wolf. Her work is the subject of a film by Tula Goenka, Professor of Television, Radio and Film, Syracuse University. She was born in 1962 and lives and works in Ranti Village, Madhubani.

Lalita Devi was born in 1945 and lives and works in the village of Jitwarpur, Madhubani district.

Leela Devi was born in 1954 and lives and works in the village of Rashidpur, Madhubani district.

Lachhamaiya Devi was born in 1964 and lives and works in the village of Jitwarpur, Madhubani district.

Manju Devi was born in 1954 and lives and works in the village Rasidpur, Madhubani district.

Rampari Devi, 1942-2011, lived and worked in the village of Jitwarpur, Madhubani district.

Shanti Devi learned painting from her neighbor, a senior Mithila artist, as a child of seven. She has received the Bihar state Award and the National Award. She was

born in 1955 and although she is from the state of Bihar she currently lives and works in New Delhi.

Urmila Devi received the State Award for Best Craftsman in 1985 and the Sita Devi Award in 2014. A video of her work is featured on the Regardingindia.com website on contemporary Indian art. She was born in 1957 and lives and works in the village of Jitwarpur, Madhubani District.

Usha Devi, 1906-1985, lived in worked in the village of Jitwarpur, Madhubani District.

Vimla Dutta was born in 1941 and lives and works in the village of Ranti, Madhubani District.

Amit Dutta, was born in 1991 and lives and works in the village of Jitwarpur, Madhubani District.

Nisha Jha is in the collection of the Asian Art Museum, San Francisco and the Graphic Arts Collection, Princeton University Library. She received the National Award in Mithila Painting by the Ministry of Indian Railways and the State Award in Mithila Painting. She was born in 1990 and lives and works in the village of Ramnagar, Madhubani District.

Rani Jha completed her PhD at Darbhanga University with a thesis on Women and Art in Mithila History. She is particularly recognized for her works on feminist issues and is in the collection of the Asian Art Museum, San Francisco. She was a master teacher at the Mithila Art Institute. Her work was the subject of a film by Tula Goenka, Professor of Television, Radio and Film, Syracuse University. She was born in 1964 and lives and works in the town of Madhubani.

Vinita Jha, is in the collection of the Asian Art Museum, San Francisco and the Graphic Arts Collection, Princeton University Library. She received the State Award for Mithila Painting in 2006, and a National Trophy in 2010. Her work is the subject of a film by Tula Goenka, Professor of Television, Radio and Film, Syracuse University. She was born in 1964 and lives and works in the village of Ramnagar, Madhubani district.

Shalinee Kumari studied at the Mithila Art Institute and had a solo show of her work in San Francisco in 2009. In 2018, she taught at the Asian Art Museum in San Francisco. Her works focus on feminist issues and social change. Her work is the subject of a film by Tula Goenka, Professor of Television, Radio and Film, Syracuse University. She was born in 1985 and lives in Hyderabad with her husband daughter.

Arti Kumari was born in 1992 and lives and works in the village of Bhachhi, Madhubani District.

Mahalaxmi was trained by her uncle, the artist Santosh Kumar Das. She has exhibited her work internationally including at the Santa Fe Folk Art Museum. She works both as a solo artist and in collaboration with her husband, painter Shantanu Das. She was born in 1988 and lives and works in the village of Ranti, Madhubani district.

Naresh Kumar Paswan, has been commissioned to paint a large depiction of Raja Salhesh for the 2022 exhibition Raja Salhesh’s Garden at Radford University Art Museum, Virginia. His work is the Graphic Arts Collection, Princeton University Library. He was born in 1987 and lives and works in Kunwar Village Madhubani district and in Muskat, Oman.

Rakesh Paswan was born in 1990 and lives and works in the village of Jitwarpur, Madhubani District.

Shrawan Paswan is the son of the Godana painter Urmila Devi. He was born in 1977 and lives and works in the village of Jitwarpur, Madhubani district.

Nitin Raut was born in 1992 and lives and works in the village of Bharban, Madhubani District.

Artist bios kindly provided by Kaushik Jha, John H. Bowles, David Szanton, Peter Zirrus and the artists.

Opposite: Amit Dutta, Tree, ink and acrylic on paper, 22 1/2" x 3 1/2"



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