A Brief History of
The Ethnic Arts Foundation and The Mithila Art Institute in Madhubani, Bihar

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On the ground in India, from 1977 to 2000, the Ethnic Arts Foundation (EAF), essentially consisted of one person, the American anthropologist, Raymond Owens. Owens and I had become friends as doctoral students at the University of Chicago, where we both finished our PhDs in 1970. In summer 1976 Owens went to Mithila on a Fulbright post-doctoral grant to do research on local flood control and irrigation issues. At the time he was totally unaware of the Mithila painting tradition. However, when he arrived in Madhubani he was immediately entranced by the beauty of the paintings by Sita Devi, Ganga Devi, and several of the other early painters on paper. But he was also dismayed by how the painters were being exploited by local and Delhi based dealers who demanded 40-50 copies of the same painting while only offering to pay them 3-5 rupees per painting. It meant the only way the painters could generate useful income was to mass-produce crude images as rapidly as possible. Owens and many of the painters he spoke with, recognized that the demand for mass production would soon reduce the distinctive and powerful aesthetic tradition to tourist items and collapse the painters' innovative and creative capacities.

As it happened, just before going to Madhubani, Owens had heard the eminent Indian anthropologist, M. N. Srinivas, give a talk arguing that anthropologists should not just study villages, but should be of use to villages and villagers. Taking this to heart, Owens abandoned his original water research, and spent his time in the key nearby painting villages of Jitwarpur and Ranti. While carefully avoiding suggesting what the painters should paint, he actively encouraged them to take their time, do their best work, and paint subjects they really cared about and were interested in, offering to pay them 50 to 75 rupees (out of his own pocket) for such paintings.

In 1977, Owens returned to the US with 35 of the paintings he had bought and showed them to me and several other friends and colleagues. Even though we rarely understood the subject matter, we were all stunned by their technical skill, vitality, and beauty. Thinking about what to do with them and how to meet Srinivas' mandate, Owens put together a group of friends including Prof Joseph Elder (a sociologist at the University of Wisconsin, Madison), Prof Parmeshwar Jha (an economist, originally

from Madhubani, at Rutgers University), and myself (an anthropologist at the Social Science Research Council and later at University of California, Berkeley), and several others to found the nonprofit, totally pro bono, US Internal Revenue Service approved 50(c)3, Ethnic Arts Foundation (EAF). The EAF then mounted exhibitions and sales of Mithila paintings in the US, India, and elsewhere, at academic gatherings, art and university museums, libraries, offices, and even a Woman's Bank. The idea was to sell as many paintings as possible and on Owens next trip to India he would return the life- and art-sustaining profits as a second payment to the painters whose paintings had been sold. This second payment was intended as a mark of respect and appreciation for the quality of their paintings, as well as encouragement and an added incentive for the painters to do their very best work - because those were the paintings that would sell. In effect, the goal was to make aesthetically powerful painting humanly and economically viable for the painters.

Between 1977 and 2000 the EAF mounted some 20 exhibits and sales, and Owens traveled to India seven times on his own funds distributing the profits from those sales; more than one lakh of rupees to over 100 painters. While also buying still more paintings to continue the process. He also made two films about the painters and helped organize an artists' cooperative (that collapsed when the Director used the cooperative's funds to run, unsuccessfully, for the provincial legislature). During this period the subject matter of the paintings gradually expanded from the original gods and goddesses and ritual icons that women had painted on domestic walls and floors on ritual occasions since at least the 14th century. In time the repertoire came to include episodes from the Ramayana, village life, local tales, ritual events, and especially marriages, and the personal life histories of the artists.

When Owens died in mid-2000, the painters were dismayed. They had lost a friend, encouragement, support, and a major source of income. In the US we were equally pained, and we all assumed that his death meant the end of the EAF and its activities. Then in late 2001 we learned that Owens had left in his will a modest bequest to the EAF to continue its activities. Thus in December 2001 and January 2002, three of us who had worked most closely with Owens; Joseph Elder, Parmeshwar Jha, and myself, spent two weeks in Madhubani and the surrounding villages. Because the dealers were back and again exploiting the artists, we indicated we would continue using the system that Raymond had initiated – buying paintings at the artists Rupee prices, selling as many as we could in Dollar prices, and returning the profits to the

artists. But we also asked the painters about the current situation and what else we might do to be useful.

Those discussions uncovered another a deeper problem, that few young women were still interested in learning to paint from the mothers as they had in the past. That led to suggestions that perhaps a serious, free, art school in Madhubani, taught by salaried leading artists, might draw some young women back to painting. (And perhaps a few young men as well.) The response from the artists was positive, although with doubts that such a school could last more than two or three years, we used Owens' bequest to found the Mithila Art Institute (MAI) in Madhubani in March 2003.

Fortunately, Santosh Kumar Das, the one Mithila painter with a BFA from MS University in Barodha, and thus who knew something about running an art school, was willing to serve as the initial Instructor/Director and we rented appropriate space across from the Mahila Women's College on one of the main streets of Madhubani. Santosh and others then traveled through the surrounding villages informing people of the MAI's existence, inviting people to apply. On a designated day in February 2003 113 young women and 5 young men appeared for a "blind" entrance competition at the school. Each applicant was given a number - no names were used - and were given four hours to do a painting on the spot. At the end of the four hours their paintings were collected - and with no names attached, just their numbers - and were judged for talent by a panel of senior artists for the 25 places in the planned one-year, and two-year, four-hours-a-day, five-days-a-week, Mithila art training program.

Now in its 16th(!) year the Mithila Art Institute (MAI) consistently gets from 150 to 250 applicants from villages up to 40 kms away for the annual "blind" entrance competition. The curriculum was developed by Santosh Kumar Das, Parmeshwar Jha as President of the MAI, and the MAI Board led by senior artists from different castes working in the various Mithila styles. The instructors have all been leading local artists. For the first five years Santosh was the main instructor, followed then by six women, Shashikala Devi, Manju Devi, Soni (a superb painter recently graduated from the MAI), Rani Jha, Dulari Devi, and Vinita Jha - all of whom work within the broad Mithila tradition, but each with their own distinctive styles and interests - variously assisted and supplemented by other local and visiting artists.

Over the years the curriculum has evolved slowly with the varying pedagogies and interests of the different teachers, but remains quite similar. First year students do

not receive stipends – they are expected to come to learn to paint, not for the money. The materials and instruction are free. Usually about half the students live at some distance from Madhubani and are reimbursed their daily travel costs to and from their homes. The first six months focuses on control of materials, figure drawing, Maithil culture, and command of the traditional iconography (gods and goddesses, the Kohbar (marriage) imagery, etc.). During the last six months the students are free to choose what they wish to paint; traditional or contemporary subjects, and often do both. In addition, the 5-8 most talented and dedicated students are given a second year of training and encouragement, plus a small honorary stipend.

The emphasis throughout the one and two year program is on classic Maithil aesthetics, care of execution, and subject matter that truly engages the individual students. Although it teaches the *craft* of painting, the MAI is an Art School selecting, encouraging, and training the students to produce art, and to think of themselves as artists. It does so by both encouraging and enabling them to use the distinctive Mithila aesthetics and iconography to produce powerful paintings, both traditional and contemporary, that can stand as a deeply rooted and personally expressive alternative to the tourist art and mass-produced "Madhubani paintings" that one sees in urban craft markets, local fairs, and emporia.

Over the years the MAI has added new elements to the curriculum; encouragement to use an expanding library of art books; a requirement that students write out in English or Hindi the story or meaning of their paintings, useful for describing their work to viewers; trips to local cultural sites; meetings with older village-based artists, and a variety of workshops. For example, sessions among students to discuss each others paintings; others led by artists on specific techniques; yet others on how to mix art and family responsibilities, on what it takes to be a professional artist, on the current work of young artists elsewhere in India; on the use of laptop computers and thumb drives for making and presenting portfolios of their own paintings, and a two week print making workshop.

Overall, as suggested by the paintings in the 12 page "Thematic Portfolio" that opens Spring 2013 issue of Marg (India's oldest and leading art magazine), the results have been stunning. Several of the graduates have moved to Delhi, Varanasi, Hyderabad, and other major urban centers and are attempting to establish themselves as contemporary artists who happen to work in this alternative, indigenous, Mithila art tradition. Most, of course, have returned to their home villages, or communities into

which they have married, where they interact with local painters. Some also teach painting in community workshops and nearby schools. Some also run informal workshops to prepare applicants for the next blind competition to enter the MAI. Those who are or who get married often struggle to fit painting into their domestic responsibilities, but frequently express their hope to return to painting more actively later in their life. Our 2007, exhibition of 155 paintings at Delhi's India Habitat Centre included painters of all ages and backgrounds. Our February 2013 "New Generation" (post 2000) exhibition at Arpana Caur's New Delhi Institute of Fine Arts and Literature was dominated by the younger painters, and enthusiastically supported by Arpana Caurand was inaugurated by Rajeev Luchan, the Director of the National Museum.

During the past decade the repertoire of the painters has continued to grow with the expanding consciousness of the multiple worlds around them derived from increased education for women, the spread of national and international media, and the Women's Movement – all of which now reach once distant rural Mithila. The vast majority of paintings produced by the students and graduates of the MAI, and other painters in the villages, still deal with traditional subjects and classical themes. And much like Raymond Owens, we never tell or even suggest what the students or other artists should paint. Nevertheless, a small and slowly growing number of paintings are now concerned with current social and political issues such as terrorism, corruption, major disasters, the environment, and as might be expected in a largely women's painting tradition, feminist issues; patriarchy, dowry, bride burning, female infanticide, and gender discrimination in health and education, all issues of direct concern to many of the painters, both young and old. Indeed, every year we are surprised by the new and increasingly sophisticated, critical and even international images and themes the painters are taking up.

Equally striking and important, the paintings purchased at exhibitions in both India and the US range across the full array of traditional and contemporary subjects, reflecting the heterogeneity of the artists and both audiences and markets.

At the same time, we have also been surprised that despite the expanded subject matter, the painters remain committed to working within the stylistic constraints and aesthetic conventions of the Mithila tradition despite their growing familiarity with other Indian and foreign painting styles that make use of perspective, modeling, horizon lines, clear distinctions of top and bottom, etc. In contrast, the MAI students and graduates, and the painters at large, consistently maintain that the distinctive and

immediately recognizable conventions of Mithila painting - the language of the art form - are fully sufficient to express whatever they wish to convey.

It should also be emphasized that the EAF purchases both traditional and contemporary paintings from MAI students, graduates, and also many other painters, and does so based entirely based on their aesthetic qualities and the probability that we can find purchasers for them and then return reasonable second payments to the painters. The EAF is not composed of collectors, nor do we look for particular styles or subjects. However, to broaden recognition and appreciation of the painting tradition, aside from the exhibitions and sales, and aside from two films made by Raymond Owens, and a series of videos by Tula Guenka and Kathryn Myers, we have produced one book, published a dozen articles on the paintings in Indian journals and volumes, as well as created websites, a blog, and a Facebook page on the MAI and the paintings. The EAF also encourages and facilitates authors in India and the US to use paintings in or on the covers of their books (and provide a fee and a copy of the book to the painters). Overall, the goal is to help train, encourage, and support as best we can, painters who have the skills, vision, and imagination that will sustain the essential creative vitality of the Mithila painting tradition.

While the EAF Board has expanded to 12 people, all of whom contribute their own specific skills and interests to the project, funding for all its activities has not been easy. The EAF has no endowment. The EAF tries to cover direct out-of-pocket expenses, but everyone involved works *pro bono*. Funding for its activities has been patched together from a variety of sources: Owens' initial bequest (now long depleted); small ad hoc grants from the Luxembourg Embassy, the Ford and Rubin Foundations; donations from friends; a small percentage from the sales of paintings; and personal contributions by some EAF Board members. Repeated funding proposals to Indian foundations and corporations failed until 2012 when Tata Steel, responded with a 3-year grant for the MAI through 2015. Then in 2013 a French artist and writer, Martine le Coz, who had made several independent trips to Madhubani and who had fallen in love with the paintings and painters, wrote a book about them, She also donated to the EAF a set of her own quasi-Mithila paintings of the 42 letters of the Devanagri alphabet that the EAF has now published – available on Amazon in English and French - for teaching Hindi. All as a means for generating funds for the MAI.

So far at least, the combination of the MAI encouraging the production of the art, and EAF mounting exhibitions and sales, and supporting films and publications has

seemed a reasonably successful model for helping sustain the creative vitality and aesthetic integrity of the Mithila painting tradition. Broadly speaking the model has four major elements: (1) respect for the artists and their creativity; (2) the provision of serious training for the younger generation by major Mithila artists; (3) encouraging national and international recognition and appreciation of the art form; and (4) generating art- and life-sustaining income and national and international contacts for the artists from exhibitions and sales.

Nevertheless, many questions remain: sources of long term financial and organizational support for the MAI and the EAF; expansion of the MAI curriculum, the adaptability of the EAF/MAI model to other vulnerable Indian aesthetic traditions; exchanges and joint exhibitions with counterpart traditions elsewhere in India; and transplanting the goals and activities of the US-based EAF into Indian soil and society. There is still a long road to go.

Some relevant on-line resources:

The MAI Facebook page: Mithilaartinstitute.org
The current EAF Traveling Exhibition: www.mithilapaintings-eaf.org
Recent video interviews by Tula Goenka <tgoenka@syr.edu>

Shalinee Kumari: https://vimeo.com/68330811
Dulari Devi: https://vimeo.com/68330134
Rambharos Jha: https://vimeo.com/68330986
Amrita Jha: https://vimeo.com/68404941
Mithila Art Institute: https://vimeo.com/68314602
Rani Jha: https://vimeo.com/84765721

Rani Jha http://www.satyamevjayate.in/the-idea-of-india/painting-a-protest.aspx

Kathryn Myers regardingindia conversations with artists, Santosh Kumar Das
And forthcoming, video conversations with three generations of Mithila painters: Urmila Devi, her son, Shravan, and his daughter, Abhilasha.