

The Politics of Mithila Painting

David L. Szanton

Works of art - in this case, Mithila paintings such as Sita Devi's "Krishna" (Figure 1) - are usually appreciated and judged on the basis of some combination of their beauty or aesthetics, their technical skill, and the artist's ability to produce an image that conveys powerful or subtle perspectives or meanings that move, engage, or enlighten us. The artist's technical skill, creativity, and vision are usually deemed as central. This has certainly been true of the paintings from the Mithila region of Bihar in north India, just below the border with Nepal.



Figure1. Sita Devi, 1981. Krishna

Nevertheless, art and artistic production are also deeply embedded in a less recognized, complex and multilayered "art world" (Danto 1964), an elaborate and shifting politics of culture with the power to define, legitimate, and value the work of art –and shape an artist's work, reputation, access to resources, and survival. It is a politics that operates in multiple interconnected frames and arenas, that actively of art by influence artists' perceptions of and engagements with the

multiple worlds that surround them; their communities, patrons, dealers, critics, curators, galleries, museums, exhibitions, histories, political debates, governments and states, war and peace, and often rapidly changing national and transnational trends, fashions, and markets.

In addition to the external politics that frame a work of art, there is frequently a powerful politics, subtle or blatant, within a work of art - embedded in its imagery - a celebration or a critique of a power relation that personally excites or troubles the artist.

Works of art are thus infused with multiple forms of politics and sources of power both from within the artist and from well beyond her. In addition to their aesthetics, technique, and explicit imagery, works of arts are also imbued with deeply influential power laden historical and contemporary relationships. And some understanding of these relationships is usually essential for the viewer to appreciate – to see and feel - the work of art, and perhaps understand the intent of the artist. This is as true of the wall paintings of a Pompeii villa, the Sistine Chapel, the Rembrandt self-portrait, as it is for the Guernica, the Kandinsky, and the Jackson Pollock. It is also true of the Hokusai landscape, the Australian Aboriginal painting, the Balinese market scene, the Varma chromo, the Bengali Kalighat painting, and the Mithila paintings of Bihar.

Literary references suggest that Mithila painting dates back to at least the 14th centuryⁱ as a women's domestic wall and floor painting tradition.ⁱⁱ Historically, its imagery consisted of Hindu deities and icons that provide a divine presence and auspicious settings for family rituals – most elaborately for weddings. Figure 2, for example, is a black and white photograph from 1934 of a brightly colored wall painting of the lotus pond, symbolizing female beauty and fecundity, and the “invincible” goddess

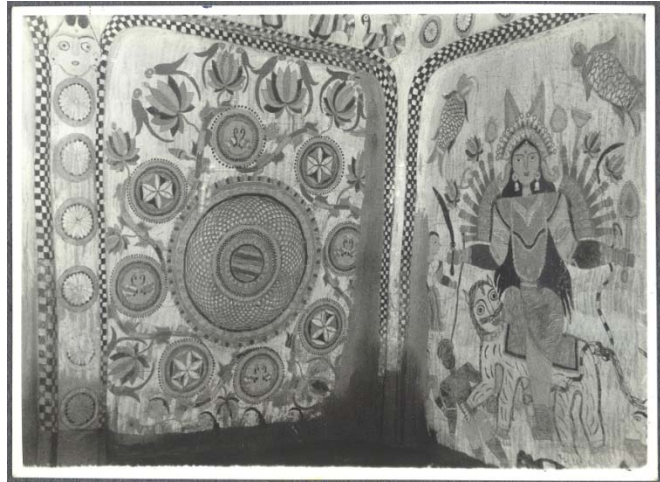


Figure 2. WG Archer, 1929. Lotus Pond and Durga on Tiger



Figure 3. Jagadamba Devi 1977, Durga on Tiger

Durga astride her Lion killing the powerful demon Mahishⁱⁱⁱ. Images of the other major deities, Krishna, Vishnu, Shiva, Lakshmi, Ganesh, etc. were also common. Similar – though generally more modest - wall paintings continue today. However, in the late 1960s, in the midst of a severe drought, a handful of upper caste women began to transfer these wall paintings to paper - for example, Figure 3, Jagadamba Devi's, "Durga" - in order to sell them as a new source of family

income. Over the past 50 years hundreds of other women, from a wide array of castes, communities, and villages – and even a few men – have also taken up painting on paper.

As early as 1980, Stella Kramrish, the late doyen of South Asia art history in the United States as well as other professionals and the public have remarked on the extraordinary vitality and rapid evolution of Mithila painting on paper over the past 40+ years. Yet at the same time, in painting on paper, the artists have remained remarkably close to the distinctive aesthetics and techniques of the wall painting tradition. Thus despite the presence of numerous other visual traditions around them (in magazines, advertisements, TV, movie hoardings, etc.), Mithila paintings remain consistently two dimensional; there is no horizon line or effort at perspective; figures are flat and “float” across the image; would-be empty spaces are filled with flowers and foliage; deities are usually full face, humans in profile; paintings begin with a painted frame mimicking the wooden beams that framed the wall paintings, etc. However, in sharp contrast to the relatively constant stylistics, the subject matter of the paintings has vastly expanded, fomenting intense political debates among scholars, critics, the general public, and even some artists regarding the very nature of the painting tradition, including challenges to its continuing “authenticity,” and heavy charges that “commercialization has destroyed Mithila painting.”

Drawing on a series of paintings, my intent here is to suggest the power and interaction of seven distinct political frames – components of Danto’s “art world” - that have directly affected the evolution and appreciation of Mithila painting since it went onto paper some 50 years ago. The seven political frames are; Imperial politics, caste politics, class and local politics, gender politics, generational politics, national politics, and frankly, my own personal politics.

1. Imperial Politics

In January 1934, W.G. Archer, the local British Collector in Madhubani District, “discovered” the ancient wall painting tradition when the massive Bihar earthquake (8.4 on the Richter scale, killing at least 10,000 people), tumbled down the exterior walls of local domestic compounds allowing

him to see paintings on the interior walls of several high caste Brahmin and Kayastha homes. Archer was enthralled by what he saw, excited by their “modernity,” beauty, and the parallels he perceived to contemporary Western modern art, and quite specifically to Klee, Miro, Chagall, and Picasso.



Figure 4. WG Archer 1940. Vishnu, Lakshmi, Brahma, Krishna, Ganesha

For example, Figure 4, with the “floating” images of the gods, Vishnu, Lakshmi, Krishna, and Ganesha. As he traveled through the region in the 1930s he photographed a



Figure 5. WG Archer 1937. Kohbar (Lotus pond/female), Maid, & Bamboo (male)

number of the wall paintings, and in 1949 he published an article about them in the Indian art journal, *Marg*^{iv}. However, from Archer's commentaries it is clear that rather than discussing the meanings of the wall paintings with the women who painted them, he largely drew on his Cambridge University education and love of modern Western art, to interpret the central marriage painting, the *kohbar*, Figure 5, via then popular Freudian notions that led him to see the *kohbar* in terms of sexual symbolism, exotic Tantrism, and even Herrick's 17th century erotic love poetry. Archer's sexually charged Tantric interpretations were then adopted and legitimated by his elite (male) upper caste Maithil friends who otherwise knew little about their wives and daughter's wall painting tradition. Painting was women's work, not men's.

Archer's erotic and specifically Tantric interpretations were then picked up and further romanticized and valorized by the novelist, Yves Vequaud, in his error-filled volume, *L'Art du Mithila* (1976), and its English translation, "The Women Painters of Mithila" (1977), the first book solely devoted to the painting tradition.^v Today, these externally derived erotic interpretations have had lingering effects as they are still heard from local elite males, and are still reproduced in academic literature, despite anthropologist Carolyn Henning Brown's (1996) devastating critique, based on actual discussions of the meanings of the paintings with the women artists who produce them.

Archer's political status as a Imperial official – and his subsequent position as Curator of the South Asia Collection at London's Victoria and Albert Museum – also reinforced his definition of Mithila painting as only an upper caste tradition, dismissing other Mithila castes' painting as "derivative." His wife, Mildred's book, "Indian Popular Painting," (1977) published by Her Majesty's Stationary Office, only furthered Archer's influence, authority – and misinterpretations.

1. Caste Politics

Archer's designation of Mithila painting as an upper caste art form has had on-going political consequences. Thus even though Mithila is a large culture-historical region, painters from

different castes often live in close proximity to each other in the same villages. As a result, techniques and images have often passed between artists and across castes at least since the paintings first went onto paper in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Thus the early Dalit painters, Jumuna Devi (a Chamar), and Shanti Devi (a Dusadh), both drew on the techniques and style of the nearby eminent Brahmin painter, Sita Devi. Likewise, upper caste painters at times use the light brown cow dung wash to prepare the white paper - a technique pioneered by Jumuna Devi - to suggest a background of a traditional mud-plastered wall. Nevertheless, thanks to Archer's imperial authority, the very term "Mithila Painting," is still often locally and nationally considered only what upper caste painters paint. In fact, many local upper caste residents patronizingly denigrate the art of the numerous lower caste painters as mere "harijan paintings." In effect, by reserving the term, "Mithila Painting," for only the art of the upper castes, lower caste and Dalit painters, despite equally long residence in Mithila, are denied recognition as members of Mithila society and culture, denied a valued cultural identity as "Mithila Painters," and receive much lower prices for their paintings.

This has however provoked a not-so-subtle political response. While the Dusadh are the largest local Dalit community, they are too poor and vulnerable to directly challenge the upper castes - either individually or collectively.^{vi} In Gayatri Spivak's terms (1999), at least literally, they cannot "speak back." However, several of the major Dusadh artists have long been painting episodes from the numerous versions of the elaborate oral epic centered on their magical culture hero, Raja Salhesh, his brothers, nephews, and adoring *malins* (flower girls, parallel to Ram's *gopis*), and his crafty and powerful enemies. Figure 6, by Shanti Devi, has Raja Salhesh and Kusuma, his *malin* (flower maid) wife, traveling in the forest on his elephant, followed by his brother, Moti Ram on horseback. By focusing attention on their own epic and Raja Salhesh as equivalents to the upper caste's Ramayana and Ram, the Dusadh are using paintings to quietly challenge the upper castes' representation of themselves as innately superior, and assert their own comparable and intrinsic human value.^{vii} ^{viii}



Figure 6. Shanti Devi, 1981. Raja Salhesh, his wife Kusuma, and companions

There are other deep markers of caste and socio-political hierarchy embedded in the paintings themselves. The Dusadh, while traditionally defined as “watchmen” (the British classified them as a “criminal caste”), are mostly agricultural laborers, working the land and tending the crops and animals of middle and upper caste landowners. Working close to nature, their paintings often deal with village life and frequently make use of the wide-spread Indo-European image of the Tree of Life. Thus Rampari Devi depicts the village potter’s family in Figure 7, and Urmila Devi’s “Tree of Life,” Figure 8,



Figure 7. Rampari Devi, 2008. Village Potter Family

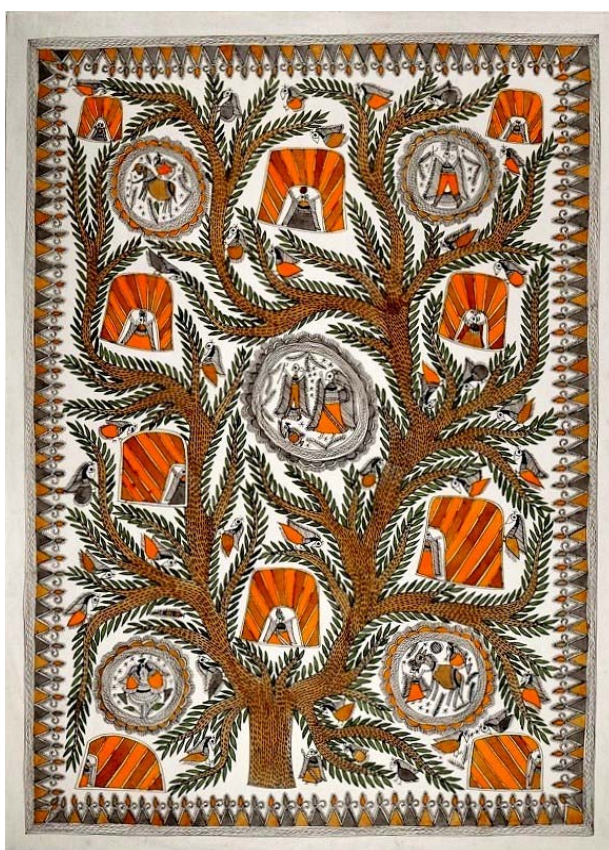


Figure 8. Urmila Devi. 2004. Tree of Life with Migrant Laborers

includes in its branches the tents, corrals, and animals of the migrant laborers who regularly appear at harvest time - part of the natural cycle of village life.

In contrast, upper caste artists rarely paint daily life, the natural world, or the Tree of Life, and more often paint rituals, gods and goddesses, and other cosmological images.

But there are also signs of change. At a recent graduation ceremony of the Mithila Art Institute (MAI) in Madhubani (more on the MAI later), many upper caste students received their certificates from senior artists in the Dusadh Dalit community. As they did so, they bent down and touched the feet of these established artists. There were gasps from the family members in the audience, but many people came up to us afterwards and said with evident satisfaction that “you have not only taught them art, you have broken the caste barrier.”

2. Class and Local Politics

Caste, class, and local politics are closely intertwined throughout India and in Mithila as well. So far, however, only one painter, Dulari Devi, of the low Fisher caste, has taken class differentials as a frequent subject of her paintings. Along with paintings of very traditional subjects, such as Ganesha and episodes from the Ramayana, based on her personal observations, Dulari has done paintings of the differential government medical care for the rich and the poor, upper class officials’ dismissive attitude towards poor village women, and an extraordinary painting of the flood of 2008 (Figure 9).



Figure 9. Dulari Devi 2008. The Flood in Her Village

The painting shows a rich family escaping the flood in a boat, having padlocked their large house behind them, leaving the poor to recover the drowned from the water and to mourn the dead. Dulari has had no schooling is illiterate, and has just published her autobiography in paintings with Tara Press in Chennai.

Several of the younger painters, however, have recently been taking on the incompetence and corruption of local government officials and agencies. Thus Figure 10, Angeli Kumari's flood painting of people immersed in the waters while officials sit in their office talking about what to do. Or Figure 11. Bharti Kumari's painting of villagers putting out a fire while the Fire Brigade is just getting round to filling the fire truck.



Figure 10. Angeli Kumari, 2010. Flooded Villagers while Officials Chat in their Offices



Figure 11. Bharti Kumari, 2011. The Fire Brigade Always Comes Too Late

Recent national attention to corruption has also drawn paintings such as Figure 12, Supriya Jha's painting of local corruption; a policeman demanding a bribe, teachers who spend their class time reading newspapers, railway ticket clerks who don't come to work on time, and doctors who take money for illegal abortions.



Figure 12. Supriya Jha, 2012. Four Local Forms of Corruption

4. Gender Politics

Mithila is an intensely patriarchal society. Maithil men are the dominant decision makers in their families, nearly universally determining their children's marriage choices and occupations. Upper caste men have often been able to study, travel, become professionals, government officials, poets, scholars, and theologians – almost all men. The world of upper caste women, in contrast, has for centuries been limited by purdah to the domestic, family rituals, and ritual painting.^{ix} The common refrain that women move from the control of their father, to the control of their husband, and then on to their sons, is variously depicted in numerous paintings, and critically illustrated in Figure 13, Sugata Kumari's, "Woman as Beast of Burden." Around the central image of a man riding an elephant (the "Beast of Burden"), Sugata depicts a woman's life cycle; birth, childhood, marriage, subservience to in-laws, expulsion from her husband's home, meditation, and death. Lower caste women may work outside the home in the fields, but at least until past menopause^x, they remain under the control of their male kinsman.



Figure 13. Sugata Kumari, 2004. Woman as Beast of Burden

As Sugata Kumari's painting suggests, however, critical attitudes are emerging. With education and the media both younger and older women in rural Mithila have become increasingly conscious and critical of the limitations on their movement and choices.

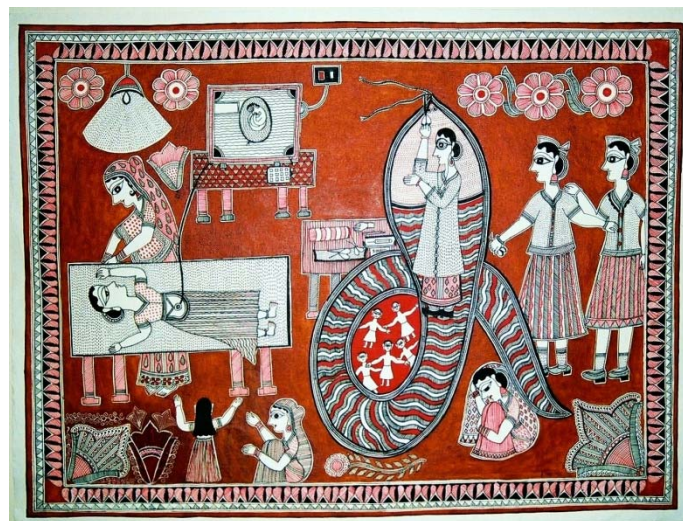


Figure 14. Rani Jha, 2004. The Abortion Clinic

Thus Figure 14, a blood red critical image of "The Abortion Clinic" by Rani Jha, shows a pregnant woman on a gurney viewing the ultrasound of her fetus. Her mother-in-law hovers above her

insisting that she abort the child, while her daughter below pleads that she keep her unborn sister. Five aborted female fetuses are already in the coils of the snake containing the (female) doctor.^{xi} On the table in front of her are her surgical instruments and a 5,000 rupee note, roughly \$100, the recent cost of a local abortion. Such abortions, though illegal, remain common. There are also paintings documenting the greater medical attention and schooling for boys and men, in comparison girls and women.

This has led to a sex ratio in Bihar of 916 women for every 1,000 men, and as literacy rate among women of only 53%, the lowest among Indian states.

Painting on paper, however, is now slowly transforming local gender relations and gender politics. Ever since it began in the late 1960s, growing numbers of mostly married women have been invited to exhibit and sell their paintings in Delhi, elsewhere in India, and beyond. They have received private, public, and commercial commissions for their paintings. They increasingly travel - with a husband or son - to other parts of India. Several have been sent by the government to represent India in cultural fairs around the world, and invited to exhibit their paintings in galleries and museums in Europe, the US, and Japan. Women are thus receiving local recognition and status, as well as state and national awards. In the process, many have become the major - even the sole - source of family income.

Mithila remains a patriarchal society, but elements of its gender politics are discernibly changing. Many women are using their income from paintings to improve family living conditions and to send their daughters to school. As indicated, their paintings have led to national and international travel, contact with diverse buyers, while radio, television, and now the internet have more broadly expanded knowledge and engagements with the outside world, taking them far beyond their traditional domestic and ritual domains. This is directly reflected in their paintings. Thus many have now added to the traditional repertoire paintings that deal with current events: terrorism, floods, pollution, global warming, and reforestation. Many are also taking on gender issues, with for example,



Figure 15. Gunjeshwaran 2010. Better a Flowering Tree than a Baby Girl

critical paintings of “daughter aversion,” such as Figure 15, a narrative painting by Gunjeshwaran Kumari, “Better a Flowering Tree than a Baby Girl.” Strikingly, it draws on (“intertextually”?) an element of Figure 14, Rani Jha’s “Abortion Clinic.” Yet other painters and paintings critique the deep constraints on a married woman’s life, the differential medical treatment and educational opportunities for young boys and girls, the evils of dowry, arranged marriages versus love marriages, and the threat of bride burning.^{xii}

In contrast, there are also growing numbers of paintings that celebrate women’s increasing empowerment, for example, Figure 16, Shalinee Kumari’s, “Women Can Do Everything,” Figure 17, Annu Priya’s, “Traditional Woman vs. Modern Woman,” and Figure 18, Rani Jha’s, “Breaking Through the Curtain.” Not surprisingly, these socio-cultural changes and visual critiques often trigger deeply gendered controversy and backlash. Local men often become suspicious and

jealous of their wives' and daughters' recognition, travel, income, independence, expanded worldviews, expressive capacities, and feisty empowerment - and at times they become violent. The husband of one major and highly successful painter smashed a kerosine lamp into her face. It nearly took out an eye, left a permanent scar, and stopped her from painting for three years.



Figure16. Shalinee Kumari 2004. Women Can Do Everything

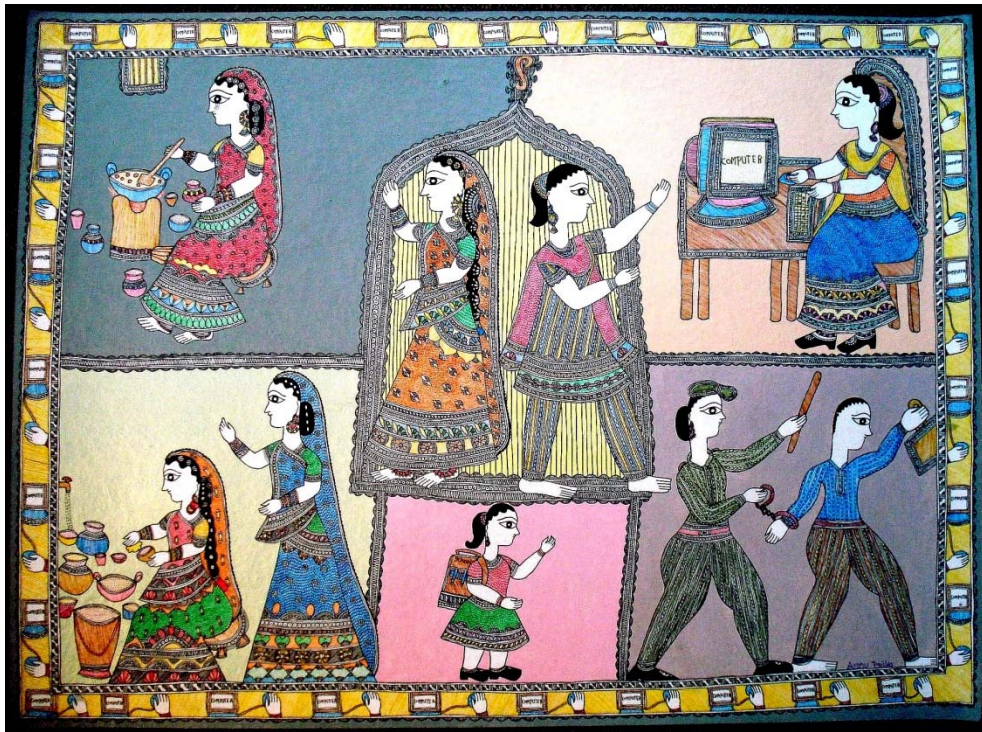


Figure 17. Annu Priya, 2010. Traditional Woman vs Modern Woman



Figure 18. Rani Jha 2010. In the Past We could only Peek through the Curtain. Now We are Joining Together and Breaking through the Curtain

At the same time, the few men who do paint have to be particularly good at it because they are competing with women in what is locally defined as a women's tradition. It is also striking that while the women's paintings are becoming increasingly critical and feisty; the men's paintings are tending towards more benign scenes of village life and the natural world. For example, Figure 19: Kamlesh's, "Carnival of Animals," and Figure 20. Pratik Prabahan's, "Girl Fishing".



Figure 19. Kamlesh 2009. Carnival of Animals



Figure 20. Pratik 2010. Girl Fishing

What remains a more difficult issue of gender politics is that young women who wish to continue painting are often frustrated by marriage. Most women move to their husband's home or village upon marriage and once there are pressed into work for their new family - cooking, cleaning, gardening, and child bearing and raising - work that leaves little time, space, or energy for painting. A few young women find means to continue painting, but most are forced to stop, and may only

begin again 20-25 years later, ironically, when they have their own daughters-in-law to take care of their families' chores and the raise their grandchildren. In contrast, while young men who paint face the universal struggle of convincing their parents they can make a living as artists, they are generally freer to move about, delay marriage, spend time in an urban center, and try to make a career of it.

5. Generational Politics

In a deeply patriarchal society that demands respect for one's seniors, who gets to define and critique Mithila paintings? 50 year old men who have never painted? 50 year old women who learned to paint 35 years ago? Or 20 year old women who are painting different subjects in the same style today?

Many senior local Brahmin and Kayastha notables and academics, including some of the senior women painters, will insist that true Mithila painting must focus on gods and goddesses, auspicious icons, and ritual events and practices rooted in ancient texts and oral traditions. For example, some like Godaveri Dutta (seated before the traditional Kohbar on the wall of her home (Figure 21)), insists that the Mithila paintings derive from



Figure 21 Godaveri Dutta seated before the traditional Kohbar on the wall of her home

and must remain true to the images that King Janak commanded his subjects paint to celebrate the marriage of his adopted daughter, Sita, to Ram, some 3,000 years ago! Thanks to W.G. Archer, his high caste friends, later reinforced by Yves Vequaud (1976/77), the exotica-seeking French writer and novelist, many senior "authoritative" local men today insist the paintings are based on Tantric traditions and practices. This despite the fact that the women painters see no connection to Tantrism in their paintings. And that as the paintings are defined locally as part of the woman's domain, few men ever seem to ask their wives or daughters what they know about or intend by their paintings - either on their walls or on paper.

For the younger generation of artists and scholars such views raise contentious questions and debates regarding who has the power to define and judge Mithila painting, and by what criteria? Does priority go to senior Maithil Brahmins? To art historians? Ethnographers? Bureaucrats and dealers? Philosophers? To the artists themselves? Or can or should the paintings be treated as Rorschach ink blots, open for anyone to define and interpret as they wish? What categories, concepts, or understandings apply?^{xiii}

Likewise, many senior scholars in Delhi and beyond insist that the paintings by younger artists on secular subjects can no longer be considered "Mithila painting," as they have been corrupted by "commodification."

A personal example. I have had an extended exchange on these issues with a philosopher and devout Hindu, a professor at a Canadian university. He has argued that for a Mithila painting to retain its essence as a Mithila painting its imagery must adhere to the principles and categories of the ancient Sanskrit Rasa theory of art, and thus convey to the viewer visual knowledge and the presence of the divine^{xiv}. In contrast, I (and others, including many of the younger painters), have argued that as long the paintings retain the specific aesthetics and technical properties of the Mithila tradition, and deal with subjects of deep concern and interest to the painters, they are still producing Mithila paintings.^{xv}

But the distinction is not so simple. The ancient Indian philosophical/religious concept of Ardhanawishwara, is historically, nationally, and in Mithila, usually depicted as in Figure 22 by Godavari Dutta, in the form of the god Shiva and his consort, the goddess Parvati, as a single figure (Shiva on the right and Parvati on the left.) In this form they represent their complementarity and interdependence, and by extension the complementarity and interdependence of male and female, generally.

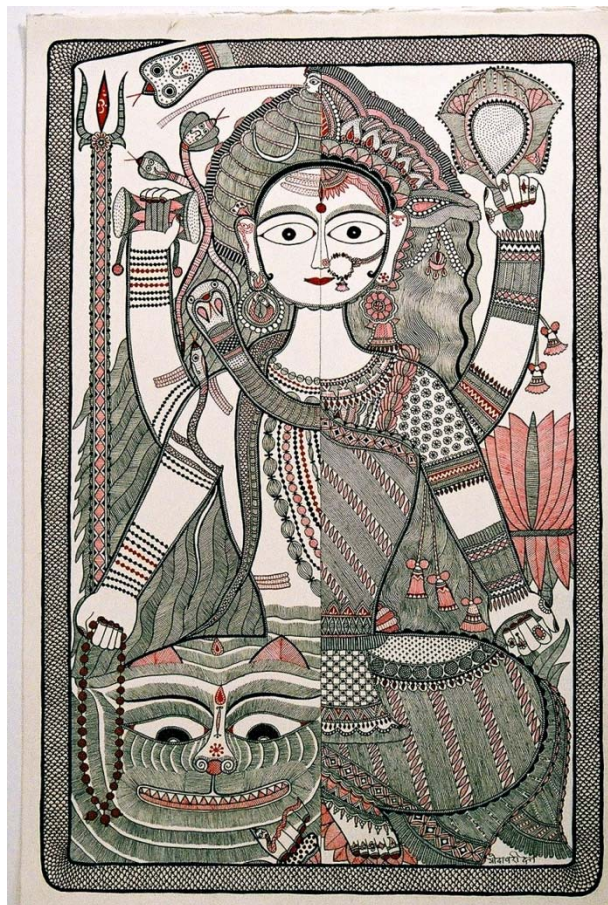


Figure 22 Godavari Dutta 2004 Ardhanawishwara

Here, however, are two nominally secular Mithila paintings by young women drawing on that same concept to express very contemporary concerns and ideas. 18 year old Shaline Kumari explained her painting (Figure 23) “Woman as Radiant, Woman as Submissive,” by saying, “women are radiant, but into a dark and difficult world. At the same time, they are submissive to the men in

their life depicted as, *nagas* (snakes), sexually, spiritually, socially.” And when asked about the *naga* protruding from the woman’s forehead, she added, “men have even captured our minds!”

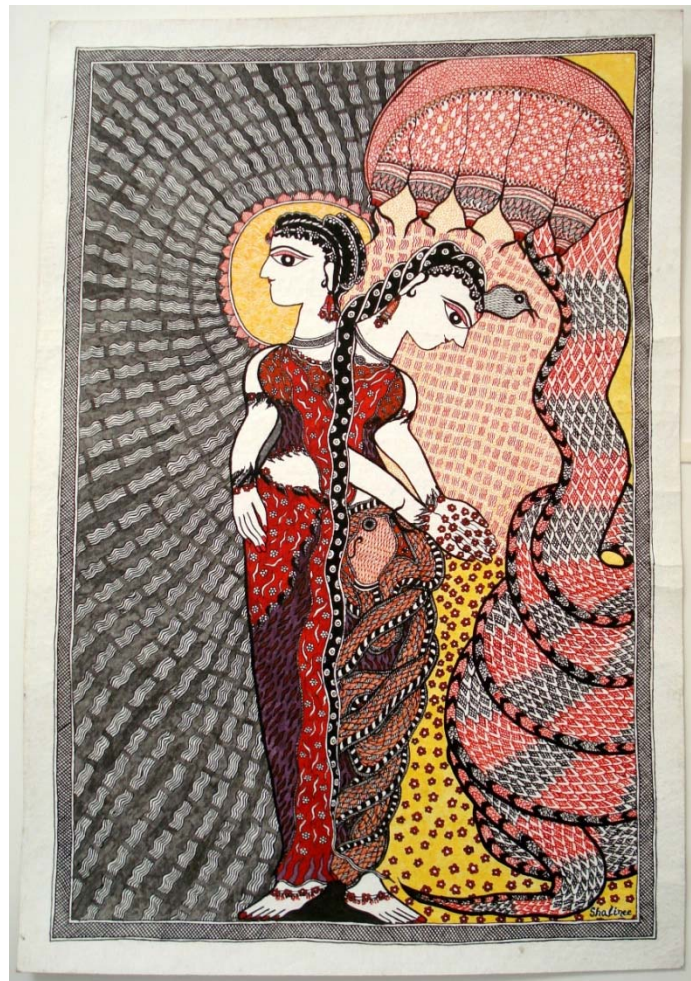


Figure 23 Shalinee Kumari 2008. Woman as Radiant, Woman as Submissive

And 22 year old Amrita Jha, when asked about her painting (Figure 24), “Two Snails,” responded that if male and female are interdependent among the gods and among humans, then that must be true across all of nature, “even in snails.”



Figure 24. Amrita Jha 2009. Two Snails

Here we have neither depictions of gods nor goddesses, nor auspicious icons or ritual events, nor the visual presence of the divine - the older generation's and for some scholars the defining characteristics of a Mithila painting.^{xvi} And yet we have two young women painting in classic Mithila styles, and drawing on an ancient Indian philosophical concept to make powerful modern feminist statements and critiques of contemporary gender relations. The older generation would say these are not Mithila paintings. The younger generation, might (or might not) publicly accede to the politics of (the older) generation, but in their hearts they know they are doing Mithila paintings.

Another less complex but equally pointed example. Many years ago when she was young, Lalita Devi, one of the finest of her generation, did a painting of many armed Durga with a broom and pots and pans in her hands rather than weapons. "A man told me this was not Durga," she said. "I

told him that he keeps looking for Durga in the sky but does not see the hundreds of Durgas around him!”

Several authors have recently been pointing towards the growing discontinuities between generations in India. Thus, although my philosopher friend and I are of roughly the same age, it is evident that the power to define a painting as Mithila, or not, is deeply generational, and marks a declining locus of authority in Indian society away from family, age, caste, and tradition, and towards individual decision making, autonomy, and youth.

6. National and State Politics

Over the years, national politics have also affected the painting tradition. In the 1960s, in newly independent India, with still recent memories of the Bengal Famine under British rule, draughts and the famines they can trigger, had to be actively countered to save lives and maintain national dignity. Thus during the severe 1966-68 drought in north India, Pupil Jayakar, a close friend of Nehru, and Head of the All India Handicrafts Board, sought advice from WG Archer and commissioned a Bombay artist, Bhaskar Kulkarni, to teach the upper caste Brahmin and Kayastha women in Madhubani how to transfer their wall paintings to paper for sale. This was explicitly a national government income generating scheme designed to prevent a potential drought induced famine.

When Kulkarni exhibited the first paintings on paper in Delhi, in 1967, they caused great excitement. The paintings were immediately seen as stunningly beautiful, and at that time the continuities between urban and rural tastes and culture were still strong. The paintings were snapped up by collectors, museums, and ordinary citizens. As mentioned above, the government sent artists around the world to represent Indian culture, and several soon received national commissions and awards. However, since the late 1970s aside from a brief flurry of commissions by the Maithil Railroad Minister, Lalit Narayan Mishra, and awards to a few individual painters, neither the Bihar nor national government has given any serious recognition or support to Mithila

painting, or to the other indigenous aesthetic systems. And the situation has only become worse since India shifted to a more open capitalist system, for the rapidly growing and increasingly cosmopolitan art buying urban upper and middle classes have turned to collecting and decorating their homes with easel paintings on canvas largely derived from colonial and European traditions. In consequence, recognition, appreciation, audiences, and markets for indigenous Indian aesthetic systems and art forms – such as Mithila painting – with roots in rural India, has plummeted. Thus while there are at least five art and university museums in the US with major collections of Mithila paintings, and a Mithila Museum in Japan almost totally devoted to the painting tradition, there is nothing of the sort in India.^{xvii}

Ironically, in the last three years, along with growing urban anomie, critiques of ostentatious consumerism, and the massive escalation of prices for “contemporary art,” there has been a surge of romantic nostalgia, not for village life, but for the presumed innocence of India’s tribal communities, and their art. Most of this has bypassed Mithila painting. Nevertheless, in both popular and government publications, to the consternation of the artists, Mithila Painting is now frequently being incorporated in, re-defined and designated for marketing purposes as “Primitive,” and “Tribal Art”!

7. Personal Politics

As a social anthropologist long interested in the interaction of art and society, I have been deeply troubled by the growing homogenization of cultural and expressive forms around the globe, and the shrinking of perspectives on the human condition these losses have entailed. Thus it is perhaps not surprising that for me, Mithila paintings’ unique beauty, and vulnerability – it was close to dying out in the early 2000s - have led to a long engagement with the painters and the paintings. Along with the late Raymond Owens, Joseph Elder, Parmeshwar Jha and other like-minded friends and colleagues in 1980 I helped to found, and am now the nominal President, of the tiny Ethnic Arts Foundation (EAF), solely focused on helping sustain the Mithila painting tradition. While I am insistently NOT a collector, I have published fairly extensively on the tradition in India. As part of

the EAF, between 2003 and 2016, I have bought, generally for four to five times local dealer's prices, some 1,100 paintings directly from the artists; curated numerous exhibitions and sales of the paintings in the US, India, and South Africa, sold some 450 paintings mostly in the United States, and returned the profits as a second payment to the artists. Then in 2003 the EAF founded and has struggled to fund in Madhubani a free art school, the Mithila Art Institute (Figure 25), with a one- and two-year curriculum taught by local painters, specifically to encourage and train new generations of artists in the Mithila tradition.



Figure 25, The Mithila Art Institute in Session

I would never claim that the EAF is responsible for the continuing development of Mithila painting. Many other individuals - an array of friends and colleagues connected with the Ethnic Arts Foundation, but also of course many other people well beyond it - have been equally involved. However, as a consequence of my own intellectual orientation and personal political views regarding the importance of maintaining diverse aesthetic systems and supporting artists whose creative visions often contribute important new perspectives on the world, I have played some kind of significant role in it.

There remain other domains and examples of dynamic political framing and influences on the nature and evolution of Mithila painting. However, I hope I have made my point that along with aesthetics, technical skills, and innovative and moving imagery, in evaluating a work of art, it is also essential to recognize its embeddedness in a complex evolving politics of culture that defines, shapes, even limits, but also empowers and art and enables artistic expression. That said, it is clear that Mithila painting – and the numerous other indigenous Indian aesthetic systems - will live or die not only on the basis of their own inherent characteristics or capacities, but equally on the basis of cultural trends, political actions, and institutional developments in the surrounding societies.

ⁱ Vijayakanta Mishra, *Cultural Heritage of Mithila* 1979 234-240

ⁱⁱ Mithila is a roughly rectangular region, some 150 east to west, and 50 miles north to south, on the northern side of the Gangetic flood plain. Most of the historic Mithila is in the Indian state of Bihar, but as a culture historical and linguistic region it also extends into the Terai of Nepal. The Indian population is approximately 33 million, and after some agitation, Maithili was recently included among the official languages of India.

ⁱⁱⁱ This photograph, and Figures 4 and 5 as well, are part of a set of 47 photographs from the 1930s donated to the British Library in London by William G Archer. They are reproduced here with permission from the British Library. The quotes from W.G. Archer come from “India Served and Observed,” a 1994 collection of short essays by him and his wife Mildred.

^{iv} Marg Vol No pg

^v Vequaud’s volume contains many photographs of early paintings, unfortunately not identified by artist, and the late anthropologist, Raymond Owens, who worked closely with the painters between 1977 and 2000, counted 63 errors of fact or interpretation in Vequaud’s text.

^{vi} I have only seen two paintings (out of many thousands) that directly refer to caste conflict, and both were done by upper caste young women. The first, in two panels, shows in the upper panel a Dalit women being denied access to a well during the day by a group of upper caste women. In the lower panel she manages to draw water from the well at night. The second painting in a series of nine panels narrates an actual event in a local village in which a lower caste but educated young man was hired to tutor a upper caste young woman, They fell in love and her parents quickly married her to someone else. In despair she set herself alight. The young man was then beaten by her friends and then hanged himself.

^{vii} There is little evidence of the local Dalit communities turning to Buddhism to escape the caste system as urged by their late political champion, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar. But Dusadh in other Bihar communities are claiming that their low social and cultural status results from their high ranking king having been defeated in battle some 500 years ago, leading to the loss of their land and their virtual enslavement to the victors. And that therefore there is

nothing inherently inferior about them as human beings – as the caste system would suggest – it was just the chance defeat in an ancient war that laid them low.

^{viii} Strikingly, the only painting I have seen directly dealing with caste conflict was by a young upper caste woman. It depicts a group of high caste women shooing a Dalit woman away from the village well during the day, and only allowing her access at night.

^{ix} A 2010 University of Darbhanga Doctoral Dissertation “Women in Maithil Art, Music and Culture,” by Rani Jha is said to dispute this. However, the dissertation is written in Maithil and is not yet accessible to me.

^x Sylvia Vatuk, personal communication

^{xi} Women are very much aware and have produced paintings that point to the fact that it is often women themselves who press other women to conform to traditional subservient roles.

^{xii} Indeed, paintings of a woman burning - whether to test Sita’s purity, images of Sutee, or a husband pouring kerosene on his wife with her mother-in-law lighting a match, are not uncommon.

^{xiii} These issues become even more complicated when people from other parts of India, or elsewhere in the world, do Mithila style paintings.

^{xiv} For example in a 3/8/2007 e-mail exchange with me Professor Harsha Dehejia wrote:

“No tradition needs to be static and it should and must evolve.

However what seems to have happened to the Mithila painters is that some of them have moved away from traditional paintings initially on walls and then on paper to contemporary themes.

Traditional Mithila paintings were sources of Visual Knowledge [of the divine - DLS] both to the artists and to the limited audience that they had, namely the people of Mithila. When they started painting on paper and Mithila art became a bazaar art they still continued to do this as their themes were still traditional and centred around mythic gods and goddesses and their stories. People who bought them put them up on their walls and derived the same inspiration by looking at them and being in their presence.

When a contemporary Mithila painter does a painting of 9/11 what is the subjective response of that painting in the person who is engaging with that painting? Is it the same as the traditional painting of gods and goddesses? Can it qualify as Visual Knowledge or DRSTI?

A psychological response to a painting does not qualify as Visual Knowledge, it only leads to Visual Information, a mental stirring.”

^{xv} In counter point, consider this 2012 exchange between my colleague, Peter Zirnis and one of the younger generation of artists, Rambharos Jha.

PZ: Do you consider yourself a Mithila artist? I ask this because if one looks at a painting from Waterlife [a 2010 Tara Press volume of paintings by Rambharos-DLS] it does not look at all like a traditional Mithila painting?

RJ: Of course I’m a Mithila artist. Tradition is like flowing water. It must flow to stay clean. If it stops flowing it gets dirty, becomes stagnant. What is traditional Mithila painting? It comes from a time when things were so much different, from an agricultural society, a society where time moved slowly and according to rituals that were carefully kept. The art was a ritual art painted on the walls and on the floor to celebrate and commemorate important life occasions. If you were marrying off a daughter, you might ask a neighbor in your village who was skilled at painting to do a ritual khobar painting on the marriage room wall, a tradition in upper caste families.

But she was a friend or neighbor first, not an artist as such. This was part of village life. You would feed her, give her some sweets, perhaps a shawl or a cap, and that would be that. The community coming together. When painting moved from wall and floor to paper everything changed. With paper professional artists emerged. Sita Devi and Ganga Devi, for example, but even they worked very differently. Their work is not similar at all. Ganga worked with a fine line and mainly in black and white whereas Sita Devi was a great colorist and used colors to great effect in her work. Which one represents the true Mithila tradition? They both do and so do I.

^{xvii} There is a Craft Museum on New Delhi that on last viewing include six Mithila paintings in a dark alcove, and a new Director had a room size stunning Mithila wall painting totally white-washed and destroyed.