

The Interplay between Marriage, Ritual, and Art in Mithila

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The bond between husband and wife is among the most solemn of human relationships. Of the prescriptions of ritual, none demand more strict observance than those of marriage. As the harmony of music brings order to the four seasons, so the interactions of yin and yang, the male and the female principles, are the origin of all creatures. How then can one fail to approach matters of marriage with the utmost circumspection?

Sima Qian (145–90 B.C.E.)¹

The designing and worshipping of cosmic diagrams known as *mandalas* during auspicious ceremonies such as marriage is an ancient ritual of India that has continued to the present day.² The *kohbar mandalas* that are currently painted on the wall and the *aripan mandalas* that are drawn on the ground of houses in Mithila at the time of marriage are good examples of this age-old practice.³ Mithila is a region in the state of Bihar, located in the northeastern part of India. Its inhabitants, known as, the *Maithils*, have until today managed to retain ties with their past traditions. This connection with the past is attributable to the region's secluded geographical location and its political history.⁴ Mithila enjoyed a long and mostly uninterrupted period of Hindu rule from the late eleventh to the late sixteenth centuries, C.E., when kings of the Karnata and Brahmana Oinwar dynasties were in power.⁵ As members of the Hindu faith, these kings set strict rules for the performance of rituals and encouraged their practice by the court and home dwellers. Some of the rulers, as King Harisimhadeva, were also good art patrons who liked to see symbolic motifs or *mandalas* drawn as aids to meditation during sacred ceremonies.

Mithila Paintings in the *Kohbar-ghar*

The *Kohbar-ghar mandalas* of Mithila are unique in India (Fig. 1). They are painted on the main wall of the *kohbar-ghar*, which is the nuptial chamber in the house of a *Maithil* bride, to bless the marriage. Painting the main wall of this chamber has been a part of the marriage ceremony in Mithila for centuries.⁶ It is in this room that the bride and groom spend the first several chaste and chaperoned nights of their marriage.⁷ *Kohbar-ghar* paintings comprise of

mandalas that are surrounded by figural and abstract subjects. Some of the subjects regularly represented in these paintings are Hindu gods and goddesses and less important nature deities, exemplified by the sun and the moon, whose good will is invoked to make the marriage successful. The bride, groom, and their attendants are also portrayed, together with a number of symbols representing fertility and prosperity such as the lotus, bamboo, parrot, peacock, fish, serpent, elephant, and tortoise. The purpose of the *kohbar-ghar* painting is to ensure a healthy union of the wedding couple through the blessing of offspring. Healthy children are regarded as the reward of a happy marriage and a justification for the physical union of husband and wife.

Kohbar-ghar paintings are transitory and mostly anonymous.⁸ When they fade away, the walls are white-washed and painted over again to celebrate the next wedding in the family. A mastery of color, line, and ornamentation is seen in these paintings. The images are painted with raw, flatly applied hues. In some *kohbar-ghar mandalas* only two colors are used, such as pink and black. But generally five to six colors are employed, namely, red, blue, yellow, green, orange, and black. Red tends to dominate the color scheme since it is regarded as auspicious for marriage. The bride, in her traditional red wedding sari, is represented in the lower right hand side of these paintings. The bridegroom is painted beside her, often with a blue complexion. This relates him to the Hindu gods, *Shiva* and *Vishnu*, who are generally portrayed with a blue skin color to elevate them from the mundane realm. He is the answer to the bride's prayers for a good and worthy husband. Like red and blue, most of the other bright, contrasting shades are also not used realistically. They are treated in a decorative and symbolic manner, to add luster and meaning to the scenes and to highlight the wide-ranging emotions involved in marriage. Their intense tonality makes the images project boldly from the walls where natural and supernatural elements coexist in an odd but significant union. At first colors made from vegetable and mineral substances, mixed with oil and milk or gum, were used.⁹ They are now replaced with commercially produced colored powder mixed with milk or gum. Brushes made from rags tied to twigs and a bamboo sliver frayed at the end are still used for filling in colors and for fine line work. But commercially manufactured pens are largely employed today. A bit of twine and a stick are generally used to form a simple compass in order to make circles for the *mandalas*.

The Women Artists of Mithila

It is mainly the women artists of the Mithila towns and villages, such as Darbhanga, Madhubani, Jitwarpur, Rasidpur, and Ranti, who execute the *kohbar-ghar* wall paintings.¹⁰ They belong to the Kayastha caste, which is one of the upper castes of the *Maithil* society.¹¹ The mature artists among them follow old extant Sanskrit code-books, like the *Manusmriti* and *Grihyasutra*, which describe the procedures for sacred ceremonies such as marriage as well as the symbols drawn to accompany such occasions.¹² The subject matter, composition, and delineation of each project is governed by a single woman who is the expert in the household. She is assisted by her relatives who are less experienced than her. Sometimes capable women from neighboring households are also invited to participate in the undertaking. A group of approximately four or five girls, aged around 12 to 17, accompany older women to complete one wall painting. By the time a young girl is ready to marry and leave her parents' house, these patterns are imprinted in her mind. Nevertheless, a collection of the best family motifs drawn in miniature on paper with pen, ink, and watercolor are included in her dowry to serve as memory-aids. At the house of her husband and his family, the bride learns new motifs and adds to them from her old stock of family motifs. In this way, the tradition of Mithila painting is preserved and enriched year after year. The general practice, however, is for women to paint from memory rather than from paper 'models.'¹³

The *kohbar-ghar* paintings seen today, consequently, follow conventions formulated in the past. Traditional designs are mastered and handed down from one generation to another. However, the artists have the freedom to add details to the basic patterns guided by their ability and fancy. Hence, alongside the old tradition, a new form of art is constantly emerging. Furthermore, after paper became readily available in Mithila during the late 1960s, new strides were taken by some of the artists. In 1966–67 Bihar was struck by famine. As part of the relief campaign, Mithila artists were supplied sheets of paper and encouraged to paint on them so that their paintings could be circulated and sold to raise funds for the area.¹⁴ Painting on paper enabled these artists to compose their designs with much greater freedom than was possible when painting on the wall.¹⁵ Gifted artists, such as, the late Ganga Devi, Sita Devi, and Mahasundari Devi, began from the late 1960 onwards to develop distinct styles of their own by creatively reinterpreting motifs used in the past.¹⁶

The symbolic meaning of the *kohbar-ghar* wall painting

The wall painting of the *kohbar-ghar* is designed to promote fertility and prevent disease.¹⁷ It includes a large central *mandala* or medallion surrounded by six smaller *mandalas* of stylized lotus leaves known as *purain*. As Jyotindra Jain points out, the word *kohbar* essentially means the lotus plant motif.¹⁸ A dense growth of stylized lotus stems, roots, buds, calyxes, flowers, birds, and aquatic creatures are depicted in and around these seven *mandalas*. They unite to form an elaborate floral *mandala* or disc portrayed floating on water, which is indicated by stylized snakes, fish, and tortoises. The painting captures the atmosphere of a pond called *kamaldah*.

After consulting a *purohit* or priest, an auspicious day and time are selected to begin painting the main wall of the *kohbar-ghar*. The wall is white-washed and coated with rice-paste. This converts the wall-surface into consecrated space. A red dot is then painted in the center of the wall.¹⁹ This dot serves as the pivot of the composition. Only an *ahibati*, that is, a married woman whose husband is living, can perform this ceremony called *tip lagavaichi*, that is, applying the red dot on the wall. Usually the head painter carries out this ritual. If she is a widow, the dot is applied by another woman. The lotus pond stems from the central dot and spreads over the entire wall surface. Empty space is avoided because it is equated with barrenness.

A vertical stem with a broad base, called *muri*, is painted cutting across the central *mandala* or medallion. At the pinnacle of this stem is often portrayed a female face, indicating that the lotus plant motif is a personification of the bride or feminine power.²⁰ The Hindu goddess of good fortune and abundance is known as *Kamala*, 'one who dwells in the lotus,' or *Lakshmi*, 'one who fertilizes the soil for agriculture.'²¹ She is believed to promote health, offspring, long life, and prosperity. The Hindu bride is believed to be an incarnation of the goddess *Kamala* or *Lakshmi*. Underneath the central stem is painted a *patia* or rectangular mat with a pattern of squares. It is on a mat such as this that the bridal couple spends the first four nights after their wedding. The mat is woven with *mothi*, a reed that grows profusely in the Mithila environment. Next to the mat is placed a *kalasha* or pitcher with holy water, symbolizing domestic bliss.

A row of parrots is often painted around the rim of the elaborate *mandala* or lotus pond. In addition, a pair of male and female birds, usually parrots, who are regarded as the *vahanas* or mounts of *Kama*, the Hindu god of love and desire, is placed atop the central lotus stem in a beak to beak union.²² Sometimes a pair of exuberant peacocks are painted here instead of parrots. At other times two nonspecific, mythological birds, known as *bidh–bidhata*, who are believed to determine the course of an individual's life, are placed at the peak to shelter the interests of the newly-weds. Another motif often included around the *mandalas* is that of two parrots playfully encircling each other in an amorous manner. They are called *latpatia suga* and symbolize harmonious relations between the bride and groom. These frolicking birds are painted near gods and goddesses and nature deities, making clear that sensuality and spirituality do not negate one another in the minds of these artists. Also depicted are pairs of fish and serpents. Like the birds, they represent the strengthening of the feminine and masculine forces of nature. Fish and serpents are regarded as sacred motifs and are frequently depicted as relief sculptures on temples all over India.²³

Like the lotus plant motif, the bamboo grove motif, called *bans*, is also regarded as very important in these wall paintings. The remaining motifs portrayed are considered of secondary importance and may be included based upon the artist's discretion. The bamboo grove motif is painted in the upper right hand side of the wall. It represents the groom and is regarded as the symbolic male counterpart of the female lotus plant motif. Associated with male power and energy, the bamboo is known for its tenacity. Like the lotus plant it germinates rapidly, symbolizing productivity and family life. Both these primary motifs are represented as ornate and deceptively simple mystical diagrams.

In the lower right hand side of the wall is painted the bride and groom performing *Gauri–puja*, that is, worship of the Hindu goddess *Gauri*.²⁴ An ornamented black elephant with a silver ring, a piece of wood, and an areca nut placed on its head is painted before them. The bride is portrayed taking red–vermilion powder, called *sindur*, from a container to sprinkle it over the installation on the elephant's head. As she makes this offering, she is supported by the bridegroom who stands behind her. Like the bridal couple portrayed in the wall painting, the newly weds are expected to perform this ritual before a small clay elephant in the *kohbar–ghar*. After that the bride puts *sindur* in the parting of her hair, assisted by her husband, to mark their newly married status.

In the lower left hand side of the wall is sometimes painted the bride and the groom being carried in palanquins. Often the symbolic representations of *Shiva* and his female counterpart *Parvati*, called *lingam* and *yoni*, are depicted on this part of the wall. They symbolize the opposing yet harmonizing powers of the sexes.²⁵ A serpent, regarded as the guardian of the *lingam*, is painted coiling around it. In the upper left hand side of the wall are usually painted personifications of the sun, moon, and the nine planets. The sun and moon represent the polarity in an individual, the two genders present in each of us. They are symbols of constant, enduring love between the husband and wife. The sun is believed to fertilize and to impregnate while the moon is the source of *amrit* or heavenly nectar. They bless the married couple with a long and blissful life.²⁶ Also depicted in these paintings are sacred leaves such as *bel* or creeper, *tulsi* or basil, and *pan* or betel, which are used in the marriage ceremony.

Finally, a goddess with magical powers who protects the couple from the evil eye is painted on the walls in the four corners of the *kohbar-ghar*. She is known as *naina-jogin*, which means ‘eye-goddess,’ and is portrayed wearing a long skirt and veil (Fig. 2). The basket on her head contains rice and turmeric roots and is held in place by one of her hands. Her head and the right part of her face are covered with a veil, while her left eye becomes the focal point of the exposed part of her face.²⁷ Images of the one-eyed *naina-jogin*, gazing intently at the bridal couple as though to warn them to act discreetly intensify the mysterious atmosphere of the *kohbar-ghar* where the consummation of marriage takes place. Centuries of rituals have shaped the artistic vocabulary of these unusual wall paintings that represent love and fertility in marriage. Even if one is unaware of the symbolism involved, it is still possible to appreciate these paintings because of their ornate patterns, their glowing colors, and their element of strangeness.

Interpretation of the Leitmotifs: Lotus and Bamboo

The Englishman William G. Archer was the first to discover Mithila paintings in 1934 while conducting relief operations in the Madhubani area which was struck by an earthquake. It was he who made these paintings known to the outside world.²⁸ In his influential article on them, published in 1949, he interpreted the two dominant motifs of the *kohbar-ghar* wall paintings as follows:

The most prominent images which loom largest on the walls are the bamboo tree and the ring of lotuses, the *Kamalban* or *Purain*.

Both of these forms symbolise fertility not only because of the speed with which they proliferate but also because they are diagrams of the sexual organs. The lotus circle is not only a lotus but also the symbol of the bride's sex while the bamboo tree is a bamboo as well as representative of a phallus. This latent symbolism reaches its height in the many paintings in which the bamboo tree is depicted not as aloof and apart but as driven through the centre of a clinging circle.²⁹

Archer also referred to the tortoises represented in *kohbar-ghar* paintings as erotic symbols.

According to him:

...their strange shape is diagrammatic of the lovers' union. The head and the tail emerging from the shell are the exact counterparts of the bamboo plunging in the lotuses.³⁰

The Frenchman Yves Vequaud, a great patron of Mithila paintings, first encountered them in the early 1970s at Delhi, the capital city of India. He was the one to identify the late Ganga Devi, now acknowledged as one of the best talents of Mithila painting. Vequaud was very intrigued by her work and traced her during 1973–74 to her village home at Rasidpur.³¹ In his book, titled *The Art of Mithila: Ceremonial Paintings from an Ancient Kingdom*, he too interpreted the lotus and bamboo as symbols of the female and male reproductive organs:

The *kohbar's* basic design and composition is heavily charged with *tantric* symbolism, and in its centre a *lingam*, the phallus, penetrates the circular beauty of a *yoni*, the symbol of the female genitals, often drawn as a fully-opened lotus.³²

As with Archer and Vequaud, several Indian scholars, like Pupul Jayakar and Upendra Thakur, have misinterpreted the leitmotifs of *kohbar* paintings as emblems of female and male sexuality.³³

In her insightful review of *The Art of Mithila* by Vequaud, Carolyn H. Brown, who read this book while she was engaged in anthropological field work among *Maithil brahmins*, severely criticized Vequaud's "extravagant and unsubstantial interpretations" of the *kohbar-ghar* wall paintings. In her words:

I write neither as a positivist nor a prude when I question the erotic symbolism which Vequaud finds everywhere in Mithila art. Indeed, something may be in it all. But since the excesses of these interpretations have led to a total misrepresentation of the society and culture of Mithila, it is imperative to ask whether there are not

some rules of fair play in the interpretation of other peoples' symbols?³⁴

Brown pointed out that when she questioned the women artists of Mithila about the meaning of these motifs, they did not offer *lingams* and *yonis* as interpretations. While living and working amongst the *Maithil* folk, she realized how conservative this society is; a girl is married at an early age of around fifteen to the young man chosen for her by her father.³⁵ Brown concluded her observation by stating:

I do not deny possible *Tantric* influence in the art of Mithila, but it is not on the surface; Mithila culture is far more subtle and convoluted than that.³⁶

According to Jyotindra Jain, who has undertaken an extensive study of these paintings, the lotus motif pierced by a shaft does not represent “sexual union of any kind.”³⁷ He interprets this motif in the following way:

It primarily represents the lotus plant, with its *jar–muri* or roots and stem from which leaves grow in various directions. The floral medallions, that surround the central stem, like a ring, are not lotus flowers but *pat* or leaves. On account of their floral form, many scholars have mistaken the lotus leaves for flowers. Similarly, the central vertical stem cutting across the ring of lotus leaves is not meant to be a bamboo shaft but the ‘stem and roots’ of the lotus plant....The entire *kohbar* motif, with its roots, stem, and proliferating leaves, is the symbol of the bride or the female but is not, as some scholars have it, her yoni or sexual organ.³⁸

Likewise, Jain interprets the bamboo grove motif:

As the lotus plant motif represents female fertility, the bamboo grove motif epitomizes the male regenerative energy, though not the male sexual organ as some writers suggest.³⁹

As Jain points out, lotus and bamboo are found in abundance in the environment of the Mithila region; because of their proliferating nature, they are used as fertility symbols in the *kohbar ghar* wall paintings.⁴⁰

The Frenchman Vequaud also erred when he referred to the *kohbar* motifs drawn on small sheets of paper as “marriage proposals.” According to him, young *Maithil* women draw these motifs on paper to present them to young men whom they wish to marry.⁴¹ Contradicting Vequaud in this matter as well, Brown wrote:

When I asked the women artists about this, they replied they had never heard of such a thing, and certainly no girl would be brazen enough to draw and send a picture to a boy. Nor would any family accept such a girl for their son.⁴²

As Jain mentions, sheets of paper with *kohbar* motifs drawn on them are used to wrap *sindur* or vermilion–red powder for the bride.⁴³ This is considered a very significant step in the marriage process and is called *sindurdan*. The motifs are drawn by the women artists of the bridegroom’s family.

When I visited the villages of Madhubani, Jitwarpur, and Ranti in June 2001, I too found the Mithila society to be conservative. It was important to dress soberly and for my sari clad mother to accompany me when I visited the houses of some of the best known *Maithil* artists, namely, Godavari Devi, Mahasundari Devi, and Sita Devi. When I discussed the iconography of the *kohbar–ghar* wall paintings with them, they described the motifs as representative of fecundity. Since it is believed in India that the universe was created from the lotus, it has come to be regarded as a symbol of the female reproductive organ. This has led some scholars to read blatant erotic meaning into the *kohbar–ghar mandalas*.⁴⁴ But, as mentioned at the beginning, *mandalas* have accompanied sacred ceremonies in India since ancient times to channel meditation. Besides, the presence of deities and holy objects around the *kohbar–ghar mandalas* indicate that these paintings are meant to help the married couple transcend the physical plane. Marriage is a vehicle for creating and rearing children; sexual union is a blessing bestowed upon the newly weds to enable them to do so. Hence, the leitmotifs–lotus and bamboo–are more appropriately interpreted as symbols of divinity within us.

Aripan Mandalas in the kohbar–ghar

On the fourth day after the wedding, an *aripan mandala* known as ‘*mohak*’ is drawn on the floor of the *kohbar–ghar* while a *mantra* or prayer is chanted.⁴⁵ Its purpose is to mitigate tension between the married couple who may be unknown to each other since marriages are usually arranged by family members in the rigid society of Mithila. ‘*Mohak*’ *aripan* consists of two fully bloomed lotus flowers connected by a stem, symbolizing a joining of fates of the bride and groom who are made to sit before this diagram on a *patia* or grass mat and perform a number of intimate rituals such as feeding each other. At this time, relatives sing special songs to tease and bless the newly weds. Another *aripan mandala* consisting of fertility symbols, such as, fish

and lotus, is sometimes also drawn on the floor of the *kohbar-ghar* (Fig. 3).⁴⁶ It reiterates the value given to fecundity by the *Maithil* folk. The face of the goddess *Gauri* is often drawn in the central part of this *mandala*. *Gauri* is the goddess to whom the bride prays for a virtuous husband.⁴⁷

Composition and Meaning of the *Aripan Mandala*

An *aripan mandala* is drawn to provide protection from the malevolent forces of nature.⁴⁸ *Purain* or lotus is one of its chief emblems. The lotus symbolizes purity of character because its petals and leaves remain unsoiled despite growing in dirty water.⁴⁹ Its tender beauty has made it a symbol of feminine grace and its prolific growth has become synonymous with abundance. An endless variety of floral-geometric *aripan mandalas* evolve from the lotus motif. They are drawn directly with the figure tip using a watery solution of white rice powder, called *pindar*, or powdered substances of various colors.⁵⁰

After marriage, a bride draws an *aripan mandala* in the courtyard, door-front, and other parts of the house early in the morning to ensure happiness and good fortune in her family life.⁵¹ Decorating the house with ritual floor diagrams every morning becomes a matter of course for her, like keeping it clean. She then recites prayers, offers flowers, and burns a stick of incense on the *aripan mandala*, which serves as an altar. Some scholars, such as, Jayakar and Thakur, refer to this magical diagram as writing rather than as drawing and believe that it possibly had archaic hieroglyphic origin.⁵² In the course of the day, the *aripan mandala* gets smudged by the movement of house dwellers carrying out their domestic chores and a fresh one is drawn in its place the next day. Secular and sacred activities are closely intertwined in Mithila lifestyle. The same ground that is trodden upon is sanctified when adorned with an *aripan mandala*, whose ephemeral nature is part of its charm. This undoing and remaking of *aripan mandalas* symbolize the impermanence of life and its rejuvenating quality.

The close resemblance between the *aripan* and *kohbar mandalas* seems to suggest that the latter stemmed from the former. As in *aripan mandalas*, in *kohbar mandalas* balance and symmetry are taken into consideration while composing designs from natural forms such as flowers, leaves, birds, and animals. Both these art forms adhere to traditional patterns; yet their creation involves imagination and skill. Old motifs are constantly embellished with new and

innovative details. But unlike *aripan mandalas* that are drawn in most parts of India, *kohbar mandalas* are peculiar to the region of Mithila.⁵³

Wedding Songs

While the wedding rites are performed, *jog* songs, that is, songs which dispel evil spirits, are sung to safe guard the future of the bridal couple.⁵⁴ Also sung are songs by Vidyapati (ca.1352–1448 C.E.), the love poet of Mithila.⁵⁵ These songs celebrate the legendary romance of *Krishna*, the cowherd god (a popular incarnation or *avatar* of *Vishnu*) and his favorite cowherd maiden or *gopi*, *Radha*. Although well-versed in Sanskrit, Vidyapati composed his songs in *Maithili*, the sweet and charming language of the Mithila towns and villages, because he wanted them to touch the hearts of both the simple and the learned folks of this region. Unlike his predecessor Jayadeva of Bengal (12th century, C.E.) who, in his famous Sanskrit poem called *Gita Govinda* or Songs of *Krishna*, highlighted the role of *Krishna* as the divine and perfect lover, Vidyapati made *Radha* with her changing moods and subtle emotions his true heroine. The feminine point of view of these love songs make them especially dear to *Maithil* brides who learn by heart their favorite songs by Vidyapati. Like the love songs of Vidyapati, *kohbar* and *aripan mandalas* emphasize the symbol of the female, namely, the lotus, and appeal to people from all segments of society. In a similar spirit, K. Prakash, an ardent admirer of Mithila paintings, has aptly described them as “...full of innocence, yet so full of life; utterly simple, yet so full of meaning; astonishingly human, yet so very divine...”⁵⁶ Images of *Radha* and *Krishna* and episodes from their enchanting love affair are often painted on the entrance wall of the *kohbar-ghar* (Fig. 4).⁵⁷

Mithila Painting and its Artists in Present Times

In April 1956, when Pupul Jayakar sought William Archer’s advice on where to see Mithila paintings, she received the following reply from him:

If you are interested in procuring a visual record of them, the best thing to do would be to go by car from Darbhanga to Madhubani and there enquire from Maithil Brahmins and Kayasths. They would soon direct you to the best houses and villages.⁵⁸

Not much seems to have changed in the Mithila region since Archer visited it between 1930 and 1940 because in June 2001, when I went to see Mithila paintings, I too was advised by the local dwellers of Darbhanga to travel by car to Madhubani, Ranti, and Jitwarpur. There I was directed to the houses of the best known artists, namely, Godavari Devi, Mahasundari Devi, and Sita Devi. The road from Darbhanga to Madhubani and the neighboring villages is in very poor condition, which makes travel by car difficult and uncomfortable. On meeting the Mithila artists, I was taken aback to see how self-conscious they were of their talent despite living in such a secluded and rural environment (Fig. 5). Regarding the availability of Mithila paintings on paper, Archer wrote to Jayakar:

Whether you would be able to collect some paintings on paper I am not certain. These were rather unusual and scarce in my time and I think the usual practice is for ladies of the house to paint from memory instead of using paper 'models'. But there would be no harm in asking and perhaps you would have the good luck to hit upon some families who still preserved paper 'models' and who would part with them to you.⁵⁹

This factor has changed today. It is now possible to purchase fairly easily Mithila paintings rendered on paper. Well aware of their worth, the well-known artists of Mithila charge high prices for these paintings. One can however come across a range of charming paintings on paper created by lesser known *Maithil* women that are sold at lower prices (Fig. 6). The quality of paintings that one encounters in the Mithila region is rarely matched by those sold at Emporiums in other parts of India or abroad. Several of Mithila's native artists have in recent times been invited by foreign countries to demonstrate and exhibit their work, which can be seen at art museums in different parts of the world as for example the Mithila Museum at Niigata in Japan.⁶⁰ Despite the international recognition they are receiving today, Mithila artists lead simple lives in order to preserve the naive quality of their art. Playful in appearance but universal in significance, the characteristic motifs of Mithila art appear on many items of Indian crafts, such as textiles, jewelry, ceramics, book covers, and leather work (Figs. 7, 8).⁶¹ The contemporary studio artists of India constantly draw inspiration from its vitality and spontaneity of expression. Unlike other folk arts of India such as Kalighat painting, whose worth was recognized only after it had ceased to exist, Mithila paintings have survived the test of time. They are presently supported by the Indian government and are still flourishing.⁶²

Endnotes

1. Liang Congjie, ed., *The Great Thoughts of China, 3,000 Years of Wisdom that shaped a Civilization* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1996), 205.
2. J. C. Mathur, "Domestic Arts of Mithila," *Marg*, 20, 1 (1966), 43–46: 44.
3. The Vedic altar can be regarded as one of the earliest examples of the mandala. See Gudrun Buhnemann et al., *Mandalas or Yantras in the Hindu Tradition* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 1.
4. Upendra Thakur, *Madhubani Painting* (New Delhi: Abhinav Publications, 1981), 11–15.
5. The kingdoms of these Hindu kings were subject to only partial control from the Muslim Sultanate of Delhi on a periodical basis. See Mathur 1966, 44.
6. Thakur n.d., 61.
7. Jyotindra Jain, *Ganga Devi: Tradition and Expression in Mithila Painting* (Ahmedabad: Mapin Publishing Pvt. Ltd., 1997), 9, 36, 46–47; Jyotindra Jain, "Ganga Devi: Tradition and Expression in Mithila (Madhubani) Painting," in *Perceptions of South Asia's Visual Past*, ed. Catherine B. Asher and Thomas R. Metcalf (New Delhi: Oxford & IBH Publishing Co. Pvt. Ltd., 1994), 149–57: 152; Carolyn Henning Brown, "Folk Art and the Art Books: Who Speaks for the Traditional Artists?" in *Modern Asian Studies*, 16, 3 (1982), 519–22: 521.
8. Pupul Jayakar, *The Earthen Drum* (New Delhi: National Museum, 1980), 92; Thakur n.d., 58–59.
9. Jain 1997, 54–55; Mary C. Lanius, "Mithila Painting," in *Making Things in South Asia: The Role of Artist and Craftsman*, ed. Michael W. Meister (Philadelphia: The University, Dept. Of South Asia Regional Studies, 1988), 135–45: 137–38; Pupul Jayakar, *The Earth Mother: Legends, Goddesses, and Ritual Arts of India* (New York: Harper & Row, 1990), 106–07; Mildred Archer, *Indian Popular Painting in the India Office Library* (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1977), 87–88.
10. Ever since Mithila paintings began receiving universal acclaim, men have also started practicing this art. See Lanius 1988, 137, 139–40; Thakur 1981, 23, 57; and Ranadhar Jha, "Mithila Paintings" in *Lesser Known Forms of Performing Arts in India*, ed. Durgadas Mukhopadhyay (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 1978), 38–44: 41. Since the town of Madhubani (which means "forest of honey") has today become an important center of Mithila art, Mithila paintings are also known as Madhubani paintings. See Barbara Rossi, *From the Ocean of Painting: India's Popular Paintings 1589 to the Present* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 36; Jain 1994, 150; Thakur n.d., 11.
11. It is the Kayasths who excel at kohbar–ghar wall paintings that are designed to complement their elaborate wedding ceremonies. The Brahmins, who celebrate their marriages simply, used to adorn the wall in the kohbar–ghar by making five impressions of the palm dipped in rice paste; vermilion was then applied over the hand prints. Later they learned the elaborate form of painting kohbars from the Kayasths. See Rossi 1998, 37; Jyotindra Jain, "Ganga Devi" in *Other Masters: Five Contemporary Folk and Tribal Artists of India* (New Delhi: Crafts Museum and The Handicrafts and Handlooms Exports Corporation of India Ltd., 1998), 71–86: 71; Jain 1997, 28, 50; Jyotindra Jain, "The Bridge of Vermillion: Narrative Rhythm in the Dusadh Legends of Mithila," in *Indian Painting*, ed. B.N.Goswami (New Delhi: Lalit Kala Akademi, 1995), 207–08; Jain 1994, 151.
12. Mathur 1966, 44.
13. Jain 1997, 32; Thakur 1981, 56–57, 66; M. Archer 1977, 87, 88, 90; Mildred Archer, "Domestic Arts of Mithila: Notes on Painting" in *Marg*, 20, 1 (1966), 47–52: 47; William G. Archer, "Maithil Painting" in *Marg, A Magazine of Architecture & Art*, 3, 3 (Bombay: Marg Publications, 1949), 24–33: 26.
14. For more information on the famine relief campaign, see Rossi 1998, 37. Also see Jain 1997, 31; Jain 1994, 152. Pupul Jayakar, a representative of the All India Handicrafts Board in New Delhi, was one of the first to get involved in this relief project. She learned of Mithila paintings from W. G. Archer; see M. Archer 1977, 89. Also see Lanius 1988, 136–37.

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15. However, the easy availability of paper has also led some artists to hastily produce for wide circulation dull and unimaginative paintings. See Jain 1997, 32, 132, n.7.
 16. Devi, which means goddess or the bright and shining one, is appended to the names of several Maithil women. See Jagdish J. Chavda, "The Narrative Paintings of India's Jitwarpuri Women" in *Woman's Art Journal*, 11, 1 (1990), 26–28: 27.
 17. The iconography and meaning of the symbols used in the kohbar–ghar wall paintings have been discussed by Jain in his book, *Ganga Devi*, 1997, 27–64.
 18. Jain 1997, 27–28, 55. The word kohbar is apparently related to the word gobar, which means cow dung. See Jain 1994, 157, n.5.
 19. The dot holds symbolic meanings of health, good luck, love, fertility, safety in childbirth, prosperity, and protection from harmful spirits in India.
 20. Jain 1994, 151. Also see Brown 1996, 730.
 21. Heinrich Zimmer, *Myths and Symbols in Indian Art and Civilization*, ed. Joseph Campbell (New York: Pantheon Books Inc., 1946), 91.
 22. Yves Vequaud, *The Art of Mithila: Ceremonial Paintings from an Ancient Kingdom*, trans. George Robinson (London: Thames and Hudson, 1977), 97; M. Archer 1977, 86; W. G. Archer 1949, 29.
 23. Jain 1997, 47; C. Sivaramamurti, *Panorama of Jain Art*, (New Delhi: Times of India, 1983), 84–85, pls. 112–13; Zimmer 1946, 72–75.
 24. Jain 1997, 45–46.
 25. Zimmer 1946, 126–27; Vequaud 1977, 74.
 26. Monisha Bharadwaj, *Beauty Secrets of India from Ayurvedic Techniques to Exotic Adornments* (London: Ulysses Press, 2000), 114–15; Loretta Roome, *Mehndi: The Timeless Art of Henna Painting* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1998), 22; M. Archer 1977, 86; W. G. Archer 1949, 29.
 27. Jain 1997, 39; Carolyn Brown Heinz, "Mithila Painting," in *South Asian Folklore: An Encyclopedia: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka*, ed. Peter J. Claus, Sarah Diamond, and Margaret Ann Mills (New York: Routledge, 2003), 404–06: 405.
 28. For more information, see Lanius 1988, 135 and M. Archer 1977, 89.
 29. W. G. Archer 1949, 28.
 30. *Ibid.*, 29.
 31. Jain 1997, 16.
 32. Vequaud 1977, 17. For a discussion on Tantrism, see Benjamin Walker, "Tantrism," in *Man, Myth & Magic: The Illustrated Encyclopedia of Mythology, Religion and the Unknown*, ed. Richard Cavendish (New York: Marshall Cavendish Corporation, 1995), 18, 2555–61; Andre Padoux, "Hindu Tantrism," in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Mircea Eliade (New York: Macmillan, 1987), 14, 274–80.
 33. See Jayakar 1980, 136; Thakur 1981, 70.
 34. Brown 1982, 522.
 35. *Ibid.*, 521.
 36. *Ibid.*, 522. Also read her article, titled "Contested Meanings: Tantra and the Poetics of Mithila Art," in *American Ethnologist*, 23, 4 (November 1996), 717–37.
 37. Jain 1977, 55.

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38. *Ibid.*, 55. Also see Heinz 2003, 405.
39. Jain 1977, 57. Also see Heinz 2003, 405.
40. *Ibid.*, 42, 45. Also see Brown 1996, 727–29 and Carolyn Henning Brown, “The Women Painters of Mithila” in *Festival of India in the United States 1985–1986* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1985), 155–61: 156.
41. Vequaud 1977, 17.
42. Brown 1982, 521.
43. Before the introduction of thick, white paper in the 1960s, a coarse variety of beige Nepali paper, called *basaha*, was used to wrap *sindur*. The *kohbar* motifs were drawn mainly in red ink on beige colored paper. See Jain 1997, 28–29, 31–32.
44. David Fontana, *The Secret Language of Symbols, A Visual Key to Symbols and their Meanings* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1993), 180; Zimmer 1946, p. 90.
45. Jain 1997, 47; Jayakar 1980, 139, 141.
46. Jayakar 1980, 11, 136.
47. See Brown 1985, 155.
48. Roome 1998, 19–20; Fontana 1993, 60; Vequaud 1977, 28; Jayakar, 1980, 134.
49. Roome 1998, 20–21.
50. Mathur 1966, 45.
51. Vequaud 1977, 28.
52. Pupul Jayakar, “Paintings of Rural India” in *The Times of India Annual* (Bombay, 1975), 53–62: 58; Thakur n.d., 38.
53. These floor mandala are called *aripans* only in the state of Bihar. They are known by different names in other states of India; for example, *alpana* in West Bengal, *osa* in Orissa, *chowk* in Uttar Pradesh, *mehndi mandana* in Rajasthan, *sathia* in Gujrat, *rangoli* in Maharashtra, *kolam* in Tamil Nadu, and *aipana* in other parts of northern India. See Jayakar 1975, 58; Thakur n.d., 37.
54. Jain 1997, 39. Also see William G. Archer, *Songs for the Bride: Wedding Rites of Rural India*, ed. Barbara Stoler Miller and Mildred Archer (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).
55. See introduction by William G. Archer in *Love Songs by Vidyapati*, trans. Deben Bhattacharya, ed. W. G. Archer (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1963), 17–38. Also see *The Songs of Vidyapati*, ed. Subhadra Jha (Banaras: Motilal Banarasidass, 1954).
56. K. Prakash, *Madhubani* (Bombay: The Design Point, 1994), 10.
57. Jain 1997, 54.
58. M. Archer 1977, 90.
59. *Ibid.*, 90.
60. Jain 1997, 20, 125–30. Mithila paintings have also been exhibited at Montreal, Paris, Osaka, Rio de Janeiro, Munich, Berlin, Switzerland, London, and in a number of places in the U.S. such as Austin, Denver, New York, Chicago, St. Louis, Madison, and Washington, D.C. See Lanius 1988, 137; Brown 1985, 155; M. Archer 1977, 90.
61. For a range of decorative motifs derived from Mithila art that have influenced different branches of Indian art and craft, see K. Prakash 1994.
62. See Jain 1997, 15–16; Lanius 1988, 140; Betty LaDuke, “Traditional Women Artists in Borneo, Indonesia, and India” in *Woman’s Art Journal*, 2, 1 (Spring/Summer, 1981), 17–20: 19–20. I wish to express my gratitude to my parents who kindly accompanied me to the Mithila towns and villages to help me study these paintings. I also wish

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