



Cover Page



## TRANSCENDING THE ART-CRAFT DIVIDE: MITHILA PAINTING

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### Abstract

An intricate and colourful genre, Mithila painting also known as Madhubani<sup>i</sup> painting, is in its originality folk art practised by womenfolk living in the region which was once the ancient kingdom of the Mithila, in north Bihar. Down the ages, womenfolk of Mithila have been painting colourful pictures on the walls and floors of their houses, breathing life into this age-old tradition. As a community activity, women of Mithila have been engaged in weaving visual narratives since time immemorial. Rooted in tradition, the Mithila painting is a compelling display of human creativity and philosophical expressions. This art form is one of the earliest matrilineal-living *paramparā*/ tradition, passed down through generations. As the role of an enduring tradition, i.e., prolonged survival of *paramparā* is regarded as an essential feature in any folk art as in folklore. In the cultural region of Mithila, women are the channel through which this inherited knowledge flows, move, evolve, and transform like a divine force. The legacy of forms and mediums displays increasingly stylized and diverse themes, as in the case of any rural art of India in general and Mithila painting in particular. Originally, a feminine school of folk painting, Mithila painting finds expression on walls, floor, canvas, pottery, fabrics, clay toys etc. As an art form it is traditionally divided into five styles- *Tantrik* (esoteric and ritualistic themes), *Kohbar* (nuptial chamber painting, marriage and fertility theme), *Bharni* (filled style), *Godna* (tattoo style of art) and *Kachni* (intricate fine line work style). A sub-stratum of female memories of power and energy, Madhubani painting represents artists' deep instincts and emotions reconciled to and integrated with socio-cultural experience and philosophical tradition that transcends the art-craft divide.

**Keywords** - Madhubani, *Parampara*, *Kohbar*, folk art.

What might seem as a rather hackneyed approach, I begin with the word meanings of 'art' and 'craft' what the Oxford Advanced Learner's offers,

*"Art is human creative skill/creation or expression of something beautiful especially in a visual form."*<sup>ii</sup>

*"Craft is an activity involving a special skill that needs skill at making things with hands."*<sup>iii</sup>

It is easy to see that while the common notion of art combines beauty, skill and creative expression, craft includes beauty, skill and tradition but not expression as much. Owing to whatever accidental or deliberate factors 'craft' is a somewhat devalued word. The leftist ideal of 'purposeful art' however manifests properly only in 'craft.' The attack on 'fine art' essentially on having been reduced to a purposeful luxury product has its defenders in people like Eric Gill, a renowned sculptor-typographer who believed that,

*"The word 'art' first of all meant skill and it still means that first of all."*<sup>iv</sup>

I feel that it is in such instances we encounter the art-craft divide. I feel that 'art for art's sake' has its role to play. At least it must be allowed its fair share of appreciation.

To reject it altogether would be to impede the stream of creative energy and attempt to stifle the natural flow of self-expression. In any case of creative manifestation whether art or craft it is unfair to make value judgments (as sometimes we are often inclined to do). The distinction is blurred when the idea of creative expression and imagination becomes primary.

The geographical region of Mithila and its rich vegetation needs special mention to understand the age old cultural tradition and the legacy of folk art of Madhubani. Madhubani is a small hamlet in the Mithila region situated near the northern edge



Cover Page



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of Bihar. The literal translation of ‘Madhubani’ is orchard of honey. Madhubani is the heartland where the paintings are more prolific than elsewhere. The painting tradition of Mithila is unique, rooted in close engagement with eco-friendly local materials, traditional forms and collective knowledge, it transcends the long-standing divide between art and craft, exhibiting creativity as a continuous activity shaped by experience, occasion and place. Conveyed by oratory, preserved by memory, and passed on by legacy, the Mithila paintings are celebrations of fertility and divinity in every woman, a form of *sadhana* (contemplation) that were to transform the bleak countryside with the inexhaustible range of creative power awakened in the women of Mithila. It represents a unique complex of medium, material, memory and feminine resilience.

At the back of the magical creativity and knowledge of the Mithila artists lies the rich historical past of the region which contributed to and did not break the ritual context of life in Mithila. There is a legend that for his daughter Sita’s marriage with Rama, king Janaka of Mithila commissioned artists of Mithila to decorate the wedding venue with beautiful traditional paintings. And Madhubani painting, as it is known today, was born. It has come a long way since then. Known for its aesthetic sensibility and visual representation of lived experience, Madhubani folk art embodies distinctively revealing relationship between art and culture.

For the womenfolk, the source of this skill and creativity is rooted in *parampara*, a time without beginning. Mithila painting is not just pretty drawings, it reflects the artists’ souls, which visually translates Indian mysticism, culture, religious traditions, emotional world flavours from mythology and spirituality through a wealth of pictorial control and confidence of the women of Mithila. The vibrant colours and intricate designs are not just mere expressions of beauty but represent the very soul of the cultural region of Mithila. What is interesting about this folk painting is its immediacy with community life, beautifully expressed through the vitality of the hands, heart and eyes where the art-craft divide melts away.

Though our present notions of popular culture are varied, folk cultures are often the most effective representation of popular culture which has been preserved through the ages as treasured heritage. It circumscribes a diverse range of social performative elements from traditions, religious literature, various belief systems, superstitions, myths, and rituals, to musical performance and painting tradition. The importance of folk arts despite the marginalised status that they suffer cannot be cast aside. To stress this point, I look at Madhubani folk painting in trying to ‘narrativize popular culture.’

Embedded with history and glazed with regional identity, Mithila painting is one of the living creative visual traditions of the women (mainly) of the Mithila region. Mithila, the ancient Videha, the birthplace of Sita of *Ramayana* and its association with epics and legends link it to the earliest memories of this land. For centuries the art expressions of its people continue to flourish, spreading its colourful gems – on the threshold of their cozy little huts, on the walls of their dwellings, on floors, furnishings, and toys. Embellished with colours and aural vocabulary, tempered with women’s knowledge of their ecosystem, their understanding of the nature of cyclic time, the transmission of myth, festivals, rituals, and the rites of passage flows from mother to daughter who enriches the Mithila tradition. Thus, it has neither become mannered nor lost its integrity. On such occasions especially festivals and marriages, painting is done on a large scale for which many hands come together to execute and here one notices painting translating into community activity.

As a dynamic tradition of folk painting, it is one of the earliest women-centric art which is integral to women’s understanding of nature and culture. Nurtured by the poems of Vidyapati, who sang his supreme sensuous poetry in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, songs of *Krishna* and *Radha* and of the energy-charged devotion of *Shakti* as *Devi Gauri* and *Bhagwati*, Mithila has an ancient history of cross-fertilization. It was in the region of Mithila that over three thousand years ago the Vedic thrust was contained. Sanskrit learning flourished through centuries along with a vigorous stream of vernacular expression in literature, culture, and painting.

Till recent times there were no formal centres of training for Madhubani. It was purely inherited, passed down from mother to daughter and so the most notable feature is that it is essentially and primarily a ‘women’s art’.

Mulk Raj Anand in the preface of his book titled ‘Madhubani Painting’ says with relief,



Cover Page



“As the folk of all countries do not go to Art Galleries for sustenance, but paint their pictures, evolve their reliefs, and mostly build their own houses, they keep the continuity of the human impulse to renew with colours and forms, the sensibility suppressed by the routine life of work without pleasure.”<sup>v</sup>

Madhubani painting too follows this vital pattern which is characteristic of any living folk tradition.

Most of the works of Madhubani Painting remains anonymous. The ‘artist’ is absent unlike the modern Western concept of art which markedly bears the name in the form of the ‘signature’ of the artist. In contrast, Madhubani women painters rarely consider themselves as an individual creator of “*works of art*” like most of the craftsmen\ and women in India. Inspired by the world of mythology and folklore the artwork clearly reveals the artists as an observer of life. Everything to do with their spirit is important to them. Being spiritual means being in touch with nature and with the outside world around us.

Since the last 40-50 years people around the world have come to know of Mithila painting. What led to the Madhubani /Mithila painters to transcend the borders and share their art with the larger world was a major ecological catastrophe followed by financial crisis, the disastrous famine in 1966-68 which struck Madhubani and the surrounding region of Mithila. As a fallout, most of the artists got trapped with the onslaught of consumerism and this art which was just a customary and routine way of life as well as a constituent of domestic rituals for them, succumbed to forces beyond control. In this context, it may be said that the artisans ceased to be regarded as skilled artists and became a kind of creative labour. As a result, most of the artists started losing contact with the design roots of the tradition and with a living concern for originality and quality just became craft workers only in their technology. In spirit, vision, and execution these artists tend to become mechanical and imitative which affected the integrity of form-features and functionality leading to further impoverishment of the spirit. There occur thus a transformation and a process of alienation of the folk- tradition and the devaluation of the artists.

In the case of Mithila painting the craft-art divide melts away with the rampant consumerism and accelerated penetration of technology. Mithila painting has taken the form of a craft in the sense of livelihood. It gains “utility” when done on paper mâché, fabrics, toys, and bags, and thus becomes valuable, creates demand and is ready for market for sale as a craft- goods.

In its genesis however, Mithila painting was a craft only in the sense of skill but more aptly it is art - a skill handed down traditionally that provide a kind of vent to emotional undercurrents and occur in the cultural complex of society within the set ritualistic pattern of life, often on mud walls and floors of houses.

The mainstream argument seems to be that craft does not express and Madhubani is a craft. As an alternative stand, there have been studies that suggest that the women engaged themselves in this artistic activity to channel their energies into positive thought and drew emotional support and nourishment from it. Choked in oppressive obligations of patriarchal family structure womenfolk often find a respite in engaging in painting which acted as a ‘solace’ art.

The studies revealed that ‘by getting into the mind’ (to use Derrida’s<sup>vi</sup> vocabulary) it was possible to try decoding the psychological stream of consciousness of the women artists. A powerful and effective visual form of self-expression, Mithila painting imbibes in it the character of modern painting’s interpretation as representative of both the traumatic and joyful moods of the artist.

Even after having accepted Madhubani art as an occupation still the village artists feel that their art is either overlooked or turned into a product. When asked as to the source, skill and connection with art, the rural women said, ‘This is not our way, for us art is not a business it is a way of our life.’ Together with cooking, weaving, farming, and homemaking we also engage in storytelling, singing, and painting (this is how the women artists express them connect). Art for them is a continuum of life and not a separate activity. The way of life should be affordable. Mithila painting fits in this description well. As a regional art form, it is inexpensive and inherited so it is easy to pursue. It functions within a self-sustained cultural unit and is never in need of material required from outside.



Cover Page



It is worth mentioning that Madhubani as the folk tradition has vibrant ritualistic, cultural, and philosophical underpinnings. It reflects a body of beliefs, myths, and spirituality. Ritualized in structure and flexible in operation, like other folk traditions, Mithila painting often creates an animated world. Motivated and shaped by religious tradition, ecology and mythology, the relationship of this art form with fauna-flora, legends and religion is a universal feature like any other folk tradition. Mulk Raj Anand in his book titled ‘Madhubani Painting’ has stated that

“The art of Madhubani is purposive mythology. Not art in the sense of a ‘significant form’ of the West. The paintings are legends to which the folk turn to pray in the daily ritual.”<sup>vii</sup>

By merging the mind, breath and space the artist transforms the bodies into spirits with their magical hands. The flora, the fauna, the motifs and the themes all reflects the power within which signifies life and living. As the literal meaning of the word ‘Madhubani’ conveys: ‘*Madhu*’ for honey and ‘*Ban*’ for forests, ‘Madhubani’ depicts that sweet sense of exaltation which these affable folk cultures in the hearts of the painter while conceiving the image of their favourite deities. The analogy of the name of ‘Madhubani’ is one of the many legends through which the community here, as elsewhere, have related themselves with the universe. The naming of the village may have come from a dim sense of revelation of things from the obscure corners of the heart. This is how human beings become aware of nature, as a mother, hear echoes of the feelings they experience, which they put into words to signify the surrounding around them, so that the obscure sentiments about the fertile mother earth, the sun, the moon and the stars, the lush forests, the exotic animal kingdom, flowers, and ponds, may become apparent to them. Hence, before the child utter words, they inherit the skill of making images based on mythology, dreams, and fantasies.

Each painting is treated as a prayer and an accompaniment to contemplation. For the artists, painting is a spiritual obligation and an act of inner transformation. The paintings transcend the mere aesthetics to turn spaces into soulful sanctuaries where the artists philosophy of arts acts as a transformative force, leading towards the urge for connection, absorption and salvation. This urge to go beyond the daily routines and hustle-bustle of life, into the lofty stage of attaining enlightenment and spirituality is every artist’s aspiration of Mithila.

The Mithila artists therefore remind themselves of the pleasant after-life, by aesthetically recounting the auspicious presence of all-pervading lord *Vishnu*, the elemental force of omniscient *Mahadeva*, the evil-destroying feminine energy of goddess *Durga*, and the formidable, awe-inspiring destructive wrath of *Kali*. Painting the diverse forms of God and his creation, the artist’s vision of the magnanimity of the divine spirit is also reflected in the paintings.

Dominated and shaped by natural and religious images, the relation between Mithila art and religious ritual is a unique feature. The observance of *vratas* (votive rituals) in the lives of Hindu women is an age-old ritual-bound base that conditions the life of the Hindu householder. Women are the key participants and actors of the *vrata* worship, unlike the rituals of Brahmanic worship. In areas where the *vrata* retain their magical charm, invocations accompany the liturgical drawings in a secret initiatory vocabulary, popularly known as the *vrata manḍala* in Mithila. One prominent act of these women is to draw *vrata* drawings on the walls and floor. It was around the tradition of *vratas*, that different rural arts found significant expression. In Mithila *vrata* drawing is known as *aripan* or *alpana*, interestingly the making of these drawings is referred to as *likhiya*/ writing and never as drawing or painting. This is possibly evidence of its archaic hieroglyphic origin. As mentioned in the *Gṛhyasūtras*, manuals dealing with an elaborate description of sacraments and the significance of *vrata*, obligatory for any Hindu householder and of the *vrata* tradition, particularly within the lives of Hindu women, enjoined the drawings of *vrata manḍalas* (magical drawings through meditative chanting) by women in rituals connected with conception, birth, initiation, marriage, or any domestic ritual. The *vrata mandala* art, created through meditative chanting and drawn from cultural roots reflects Mithila’s enduring legacy of making ritualistic drawings not only for spreading positivity and enhancing the energy of any space but also for the fulfillment of the *Purushartha* or the four goals (*Dharma, Artha, Kama and Moksha*) prescribed for leading a purposeful life. The desire for sex, fertility and prosperity was translated into minutely detailed rituals that provided the country with a common bond and vision. The *Vrata* rituals which accompany



Cover Page



the sacred *maṇḍala* diagram or the *aripān* thus became an indispensable means of communication between the artists and the almighty.

One finds an interesting connection with the age-old narrative technique and the folk art of Mithila. Mythology and Puranic tales were inherited by the generations of artists for weaving visual narratives especially during family ceremonies and yearly festivals. Legends that infused the landscape with a vocabulary of pictures and symbols, using song, meme, dance, icon, and all other creative media known to human beings, gave to the participating individuals multiple exposures to traditional myths and metaphors.

In such context, embedded *katha* or oral ritualistic tradition was dynamic in nature and their evolution in tandem with the socio-cultural environment proved vital in sustaining the folk tradition of Madhubani. Multidimensional in approach, votive observance (*vrata*) became a vehicle for the artistic expression. Along with daily prayer, *vratas* and domestic rituals constitute a greater part of the religious activity of Hindu Women. Specifically in Mithila, the *vratas* have been the dominating factor that directly or indirectly has influenced and shaped the folk art in Mithila. Votive observances are regarded as a medium for fulfilment of their duty as chaste wife and ideal mother. The desire for fertility, wealth and prosperity was translated into meticulously and minutely detailed rituals expressed through *aripān* drawing and *vrata maṇḍala*, executed exclusively by women. Votive rites within the lives of Hindu women are a means for attaining security, longevity, prosperity and attaining the world (beyond) as well as of attaining fulfilment as a wife and mother. So vibrant images and icons of divinities and natural objects began to be created by the folk to express the contours of the desired for spirits.

Art was thus a means for contemplation of *dhyān* or meditation. It also embodies *rāsa* or essence which is different from aesthetic delight. Unlike the ideal of Western art, this *rāsa* is the flavour, essence, that fullness of seeing, listening, touching, and feeling – an essential element that permeates, transforms, and quickens life. *Rāsa* is the rising wave of beauty without which the object of perfect proportions and colours becomes lifeless. *Rāsa* is an important element of Mithila painting, guided by artists inner and emotional landscapes accompanied with a sense of aesthetic beauty.

Womenfolk of Mithila are simple housewives who do not get any formal training for learning the skill of painting, it is an inherent skill and so it evokes mystery that captures the vastness of the universe. Be it the floor painting or *aripāna*, wall painting or *bhitti-chitra*, *kohabar* or tantrik style painting all reflects that the artists were born ‘Picasso’. What they could not do through a study of the alphabet, they do it through these paintings. Every girl learns this art from her mother who in turn teaches it to her female offspring. No one knows when this art form began. It is interesting to note that the *bhitti-chitra* painted on the mud walls of homes starts with making a circle, philosophically it reflects the awareness of the womenfolk about the cosmic nature of the ‘circle.’ They drew the circular *Ras Mandala* with lord *Krishna* as the primal mode of energy at the centre and painted semi-circles to surround the circular *Ras* with beautiful motifs in vibrant colours. There was a profound inherited comprehension of space as an extension and the potential of the semi-circles extending to infinity. The circle when reduced to its last point was the *bindu*, the ‘dot’- depicting both male and female, the *Srishti beeja* or the seed of creation and the *samhara beeja* or the seed of destruction in a subtle way. Philosophically, in such a scenario, of ending and beginning, death is an ending and yet a passage to a beginning. In *Srishti* is *samhara*, in *samhara* is *Srishti*.

Here one notices an interesting connection with *Samkhya* one of the classical systems of Indian philosophy which describes the ultimate ground cosmos and all the manifestation as *prakrit*, the first cause, the female principle, primeval matter, undifferentiated, holding within it both the expressed and the unarticulated. Within her lay dormant the potential seed of sprouting. The root meaning of the word ‘*Pra-Kriti*’ is ‘*Pra*’-excellent, ‘*Kriti*’-creation. It thus appears that ‘*Kriti*,’ craft and art could have shared roots.

The symbolism in Mithila painting is subtle, expressive, never overstated but comprehended because of the similarity of symbol, perception, and tradition. Art in India has never been the expression of an individual artist’s personal feelings but has mirrored ideals formed over many centuries of beliefs and traditions. When art permeates into cultural tradition it never remains an art for the privileged. Mithila painting in this sense draws away from fine art.



Cover Page



The distinction between art-crafts seems trivial when one sees Mithila painting as a ‘way of life’ as a broader spiritual, religious, and social experience emanating from inner quests, desires, and orientation. Letting in flow the creative stream and nurturing a precious skill inherited through tradition (if that fits the definition of craft) and today succumbing to the pressure of commercialization and being forced to mould traditional skill into ‘money’ craft, the womenfolk of Mithila exhibit three different facets of their character – being women, being artists and being marginalised.

And yet it is impossible to plug the artistic spontaneity that they demonstrate. Much more just for a livelihood the Mithila womenfolk continue to create mystical magic in sun-faces, *Ram* and *Sita*, *Krishna* and *Radha*, a little universe of ponds, fishes and lotuses, flowers and parrots enlivening the poetry of life, merging movements, depicting the perfect relationship of man, woman, and nature; the flawless ecological symbiosis, soul and the supreme divine. Capturing the harmony and the rhythm of the cosmic play with their memory, energy, and magical hand, the art reflects the power within.

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## References

- <sup>i</sup> The name Mithila/Madhubani will be used interchangeably in this paper.
- <sup>ii</sup> *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* (Fifth ed.) 56-57, Oxford University Press: United Kingdom.
- <sup>iii</sup> *Ibid*, 271-272.
- <sup>iv</sup> *New Blackfriars*. 1940. December, Vol 21, Issue 249, 680.
- <sup>v</sup> Anand, Mulk Raj. 1984. *Madhubani Painting*, New Delhi: Publication Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India.
- <sup>vi</sup> Derrida, Jacques.1930. French philosopher, whose work originated the School of Deconstruction.
- <sup>vii</sup> Anand, Mulk Raj. 1984. *Madhubani Painting*, New Delhi: Publication Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, 10.