


Madhubani

Madhubani, which in literal translation means Forest of Honey, (*Madhu* – honey, *Bans* – forest or woods) is a small village in the northern part of Bihar, which has now become a market town. The traditional Madhubani artists now reside mainly in the districts of Jitwanpur and still exercise their art with full passion and creativity. An outstanding observation about Madhubani artists is that they do not allow caste, race or creed to hinder them in the progress of their work of art. All are one when it comes to art. This village is located in the Mithila region of northern Bihar and so the art is also known as Mithila Painting. Hindu Mythology is the main theme in Madhubani Painting and it is usually done on cow dung treated paper with natural paints. It has mainly three schools: Kayastha, Brahmin, and Tattoo.

History and Folklore

The state of Bihar consists of about seventy-two thousand villages and one of its unique features is that it has a number of aboriginal tribes. In fact it has the third largest tribal population in India, which belongs to two language groups: the Austric and the Dravidian. Religion plays an important role in the lifestyle and tradition of the people of Bihar. It is because of their desire to please their gods and to develop their spirituality that brought in Madhubani Painting. It is the womenfolk who tried to keep alive the folk songs, folk tales, folk arts and folk crafts. But for the womenfolk, folklore could not have been able to withstand the changes in this fast moving world and adhere to its traditional form. It is them who have kept alive the old traditions of the rural life and this enthusiasm is passed down from mother to daughter from generations. In folk art, especially in painting, women play a vital role. Women do most of the Madhubani Paintings and their creativity can be interpreted and visualised from these paintings themselves. Like almost all other folklore around the world, there is an element of myth in the folklore of Bihar too. It consists of the tales of the origin of the earth, existence of supernatural beings like gandharvas, apsaras, morals, and cumulative and pastoral songs. Coming to folk art, Bihar enjoys a prominent place. Mulk Raj Anand says: *The sources of folk art of Madhubani lie on the dim areas of silence, of the approximation to the heightened moments of creation itself.*

With an extraordinary history in its art, women in the villages around Madhubani have been practising their folk art for centuries but it has been recognised as a form of art only in the recent years. The women painters lived in a closed society and were unwilling to paint openly. Eventually due to a drought (1966-68) in the surrounding areas of Mithila that resulted in severe economic crisis women began to commercialise their art. The All India Handicrafts Board encouraged the women artists to produce their paintings on handmade paper for commercial sale. The government of India, the state government of Bihar and the regional craft guilds have all come in together to initiate the productions and marketing for these women painters. This sudden change in the form of art and its presentation has enabled the world to discover a new form of art with an enviable linkage to the lives of women. The ancient tradition of elaborate wall paintings or *Bhitti - Chitra* in Bihar played a major role in the emergence of this new art form. The original inspiration for Madhubani art emerged out of women's craving for religiousness and an intense desire to be one with God. With the belief that painting something divine would achieve that desire, women began to paint pictures of gods and goddesses with an interpretation so divine that captured the hearts of many. Women of upper castes mainly did the wall paintings of the *Kohbar Ghar*, *Gosain Ghar* and the *AripanFloor* paintings. The use of colours would differentiate each from their work. Colours like pink, green, Brahmins use yellow, lemon, blue and black. Kayastha painting consist of just black or deep red. These paintings have representations of lotus flower, palki, horse, elephant, goose, peacock, bans, pan, sun, moon, birds, fish, and 



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snakes in union, each as a symbol. They are painted with brushes made of rags, which are tied to the end of a stick, in the occasion of a wedding. According to the tradition the bride takes along with her the paper design of the *Bhitta-Chitra* to her husband's home.

Motifs and techniques

Kohbar Ghar paintings are elaborate wall paintings of the nuptial chamber with representations of the lotus (*purain*), bamboo grove, fish, birds and snakes in union, which largely symbolises fertility and life. Women members of the bride's family, village and caste, paint them on the occasion of a wedding. The bride and groom spend three nights within the painted walls but are allowed to consummate the marriage only on the fourth night. Various motifs, each with a different symbol, are used: The Kohbar motif, Bans (bamboo grove motif), Latpatia Suga (parrots in union),

Bidh-bidhata (a male and a female bird facing each other), Patia (mat woven from mothi), Nag-nagin (entwined male and female cobras), Pan ke ghar (leaf house) and Naina jogin (Goddess with magical powers). Women paint Aripan floor paintings on a sacred day of every lunar month. Rice paste is used as pigment and a twig is used as a brush. Gosain Ghar paintings (room for kuladevata or the deity of the family) are also prevalent.

The Kayastha Tradition

The unique feature of the Kayastha tradition is the use of mainly two colours, black and red. The Kayastha style of painting basically was a practice of elaborate wall paintings of the nuptial chamber. The wrappers for the vermilion powder were painted by the bridegroom's family and sent to the bride before the wedding. These paintings were line-drawings of sacred symbols. They represented the lotus plant, bamboo grove, fish, tortoises, parrots, birds and all that symbolised fertility. Thus even when this style is conceived in paper, single colour line work defines the Kayastha style of painting even today.

The Brahmin Tradition

Unlike the Kayastha, the Brahmin style of painting lavishly deals with rich variety of colours. Their easy access to Hindu sacred literature has helped them immensely in portraying the rich Hindu iconography and mythology. The Brahmin tradition mainly deals with themes of gods and goddesses and magical symbols connected with deities. This school usually used pigments on paper for their art.

The Tattoo Tradition

This style is also an old craft practised in ancient Bihar. The Tattoo – based paintings reflect the primitive art and creates its impact by a serial replication of the same image. The painting is originally in the form of a line-drawing and is divided into several horizontal margins. Their themes are normally based on the legend of Raja Salhesh but eventually artists have begun to do illustrations on Hindu epics and mythology. Considering its rich use of colour it is closer to the Brahmin school of painting.



Changes in artistic tradition

In due course of time, with the easy availability of paper, these wall paintings were brought down on paper and women began to experience a new kind of independence and began to express their feelings that they had otherwise suppressed for so long. Ganga Devi, Mahasundari Devi, Sita Devi and Bani Devi are some of the prominent women artists who fully exploited the use of paper.

In his book *Ganga Devi: Tradition and Expression in Mithila Painting*, Jyotindra Jain deals extensively, from the origin to the present stage, on Mithila Painting, through the life and works of Ganga Devi. The name of Ganga Devi is highly associated with Mithila or Madhubani Painting. Jain says, *Her (Ganga Devi) chaotic life and the ordered and harmonious world of her painting were organically related. In her personal life there was an all round invasion and encroachment but, as if to balance this, in her painting each character and each image was provided with its own breathing space. Her inner turmoil led her to create a world of harmony and beauty in her work.*

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to Dr Jyotindra Jain, Senior Director, Crafts Museum, for arranging eminent women Madhubani artists to come to Chennai specifically for this workshop. We are also thankful to him for providing us with research materials. We are also grateful to Dr. Sunitha Sharma, The Indian National Trust for the Welfare of Tribals for providing us research materials for the brochure. Also we are thankful to Joginder Dhattad of Little India Gallery for publicity support.

*Exhibition cum sale of Madhubani paintings by the artists at Lalit Kala Akademy, 170 Greams Road, Chennai - 600 006.
Tel / Fax : 044-8277692
Dates : 8 - 9 September, 2000
Time : 11 a.m. - 7p.m.*

Madubani workshop - Schedule

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| Date | 4 – 8 September, 2000 |
| Venue | Centenary Hall, Government Museum, Chennai |
| Time | 10.00 am – 5.00 pm |
| 4 September | Inauguration Lecture Demonstration Sketching |
| 5 September | Sketching and painting of Kayastha Style |
| 6 September | Lecture: <i>A comparative Study of Madhubani and Indian Tribal Paintings</i> by K. Lakshminarayanan Finishing touches of Kayastha style Sketching and painting of Brahmin style |
| 7 September | Lecture: <i>To draw is to abstract: Aesthetic appreciation of Madhubani Painting</i> by M.D. Muthukumaraswamy Finishing touches of Brahmin style Sketching and painting Tattoo style |
| 8 September | Finishing touches of Tattoo style Sketching of motifs Closing ceremony |
| 4 – 7 September | Madhubani Painting Exhibition at Centenary Hall, Government Museum, Chennai |



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On line resources on Madhubani

- www.ahmedabad.com/incity/2k/mar/25art.htm
Madhubani, the Art of Mithila

- www.bampfa.berkeley.edu/exhibits/devi/
Baua Devi and the Art of Mithila

- www.asianart.com/exhibitions/jwdc/
Janakpur Women's Development Center:
Maithil Paintings
(An exhibition of Mithila Paintings)

- www.artindia.net/madhubani.html
Madhubani Art

- www.vpa.syr.edu/VPAEXTRA/Lowe/show1/Mithila.html
Mithila Paintings: The Art of Bihar, India

Regional background information :

- www.meadev.gov.in/states/bih/bih.htm
Bihar State Resident Commissioner in Delhi
(India)

- www.csuchico.edu/anth/mithila/
The Maithili Brahmins: An online Ethnography



National
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Support Centre

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