

[Nepal's Home Art: Literally Off the Wall](#)

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ART

## Nepal's Home Art: Literally Off the Wall

The Mithila art form has quietly endured three millennia. Will it survive the next?

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In an historically and religiously rich territory spanning a portion of northeast India and southern Nepal, a requisite household ritual has won some women world renown. The region is commonly known as Mithila, and the rite of repute, painting, is performed by virtually all women of the area. With a karmic nudge, and through the inevitable expanded global awareness of our times, their localized, private ritual has become recognized as a distinguished skill. For some it is an honored career. For most women in this sub-Himalayan paradise, the ritual of painting maintains its simplicity and functionality. It is religious first and foremost.

Mithila names the ancient kingdom that was nestled between the Himalayas in the north and the Ganga in the south. Mithila had Janakpur, Nepal, as its capital, and philosopher kings, called the Janakas, ruled the state for centuries. Following the split between Nepal and the East India Company in 1816, the northern parts of Mithila, including Janakpur, were merged with

Nepal. The southern region went to India as northern Bihar.

The unique and distinctive style of Hindu religious art that developed long ago in this province is called Mithila in Nepal and Madhubani in India. (Madhubani is a city in northern Bihar, 100km south of Janakpur.) Though the names differ, the basic painting style is the same.

The art has survived due to tradition. Women have been teaching daughters the Mithila technique for 3,000 years. Only recently has it become public and famous. Even with this recognition, few women seriously consider making a career of it. For the majority, painting remains their homemaker duty, their worship, their prayer.

In Mithila, every woman is an artist, regardless of education. Men rarely take part, for it is considered a domestic duty. Primarily crafted upon the walls of their mud homes, paintings are done for all manner of events. They are sometimes created on the ground, similar to India's rangoli, and on pottery, fans and earthen dishes. Painting in this style is as natural and as necessary to women here as sweeping the courtyard.

This was the Mithila way for centuries. It was not until the 1960s that it was suggested to the women that they do paintings on paper so they could be sold and distributed. One account attributes the idea to one person. It is said that the Mithila region, a normally fertile area, underwent a blistering drought and inhabitants faced widespread starvation. In 1965, an aid worker for the Indian government, Bhaskar Kulkarni,

arrived from Delhi and encouraged the idea of translating onto paper the paintings traditionally created on walls and floors.

Paper was adopted slowly. Mr. Rajeeb Roy, director of R.R. International, India, states on his web page ([www.chennaibiz.com/rrintl/madhubani/](http://www.chennaibiz.com/rrintl/madhubani/)), "Only a few women demonstrated a willingness and ability to work extensively with the medium of paper, most recently from 1993." There is still no formal school where training is given. Thus, art connoisseurs from outside Nepal and India who value the artwork highly deem the shift to permanent and portable media as essential to the perpetuation of the style.

More recently, artists with extraordinary skill have been sponsored abroad. A Mithila museum has arisen in Tokamachi, Japan, and there have been exhibitions in the US. Usha Jha, my wife, and I operate a Mithila art school for destitute women and children, with the hopes that artistic skill may give them the hope and means for self-sufficiency. We are presently seeking a wider market in the US to promote their efforts.

To paint, to pray: There are two critical distinctions between Western artists and the Mithila painters. The first is stated by Roy: "Even

now, most of their work remains anonymous. The women, some of them illiterate, are in any case reluctant to consider themselves individual producers of 'works of art' and only a few of them mark the paintings with their own name."

The second remarkable aspect of the art is its impermanence. In the West, the physical "piece of art" is the end that is sought, and it is preserved and protected, even restored and reconstructed at great cost, so that it not be lost. The religious art of Hinduism is different. Each year, Mithila women make exquisite or simple paintings on their house walls, especially for the occasion of Dipavali, the famous festival of lights. Wind, sun and rain naturally discolor these decorations. They are not designed to withstand climate and time. In fact, they will most often get covered over with mud when the women clean house for the next festival.

Wall paintings fade away. Those placed on floors are scuffed under foot. They were never meant to last. The Nepal Traveller website ([www.casinosnepal.com/traveller/august/mithila\\_art.htm](http://www.casinosnepal.com/traveller/august/mithila_art.htm)) explains, "The paintings are not

intended to be intricate masterpieces. The process of composition is as important as the finished product itself, if not more so. An iconographer may consider him or herself to pray rather than to paint an icon. So, in the Mithila tradition, the act of painting as veneration of the subject may be foremost in the artist's mind. Once completed, the purpose will have been fulfilled and the painting may be discarded."

Roy adds, "These ephemeral paintings are considered a form of prayer. They are created when the artist is in a meditative state." Stephen P. Huyler elaborates on this discipline in his book *Meeting God* [see *Hinduism Today*, Nov., 1999]. In describing a ritual decoration in India using oil lamps which took six hours to complete, he concludes, "When the yantra has finished burning, it is dismantled. Its value lies solely in its creation and in the link it provides between devotee and Deity."

God's colors: Mithila art can be classified into two categories: 1) Paintings depicting Hindu Gods and Goddesses; 2) Those showing human or earthly figures, such as brides and bridegrooms, animals and plants.

The people of Mithila are deeply influenced by the Hindu Gods and Goddesses, especially Shakti, Vishnu and Siva. These are the most prominent figures in the paintings, and they appear in their varied incarnations. Shakti appears as Goddess Durga and Kali, symbolizing the Creator. Vishnu as Rama and Krishna is the preserver, and Siva is the transformer. All paintings of the Deities portray auspicious and familiar scenes. Their primary objective is to secure blessings on important occasions. Apart from paintings for Dipavali, unique

pieces are required for important household events, such renovations of the family shrine, marriages, and upanayana, the sacred thread-giving ceremony.

Flowers, plants and animals, especially elephants, horses and peacocks, are an integral part of art. The elephant and peacock signify wealth, prosperity and good fortune. The horse symbolizes male energy and bravery. The parrot and the turtle are symbols of love, and the fish is the definitive emblem of fertility.

Marriage paintings often highlight the sexual and creative aspects through the use of motifs like the sun and moon, bamboo, a circle of lotuses, parrots, turtles and fish. For newlyweds, the

paintings are presented on the walls of the kohabar, the room where the bride receives her husband. It is here that the couple spends the first four nights of their life together while maintaining sexual abstinence. The kohabar artwork is an essential element of blessing for the new couple and of protection against evil forces. Scenes of the marriage process are depicted, along with paintings of the bride and bridegroom in their wedding palanquin.

Aripan, floor paintings, are created throughout the year. The impetus may be mundane, such as the first hair-cutting ceremony, or more elevated reasons. Pertinent images of the individual's social life and astrology will appear in these works. One of the basic objectives of the aripan is to purify the Earth, so

traditionally the floor is washed with cow dung before beginning.

The Mithila method remains utterly simple. No sophisticated tools are needed. The traditional brush is made from a bamboo twig, by wrapping it with a piece of cloth or fraying its end in such a way that the fiber becomes fine like hair. Some may use threads from a sari. Preliminary sketching is hardly required, as outlines are developed in a single sweep of the hand.

In keeping with the simplicity of the design and execution, the colors used are few. Some villages only produce black ink drawings. Other villages use pink, yellow, blue, red and parrot green, each paint being mixed with the traditional goat's

milk. Black paint can be obtained by burning straw or scraping soot from the bottom of a cooking pot or from the chimney of a hurricane lamp. White is produced by powdering rice to make flour and mixing it with water.

As women in the past did not leave their villages and were kept fully occupied with traditional jobs, the recent support for their art and appreciation for their talents are altering the fabric of life in the villages. Generally, the extra income enriches their life.

To suit the taste of Western customers, inventive artists, some who are non-Mithila, have distorted tradition by introducing airplanes, motorcars and other modern elements into the art. Even

the dress of the Mithila women is altered. In order to preserve the original tradition, the Janakpur based NGO, Foundation for Economic and Social Change (FESC), has been providing training in Mithila painting since February, 1997. This is the first time that art training is being given to women and children so that they may be self employed. A small grant is available to FESC from the International Labor Organization for this purpose.

So it is that the accumulated power of an ancient tradition has attracted the capricious influence of the West. Yet, so far, the prevailing sentiments are honor, admiration and the desire not to taint a world treasure.

Resource:the Art of Mithila, by Thames

and Hudson, 30 Bloomsbury Street,  
London WC1B 3QP