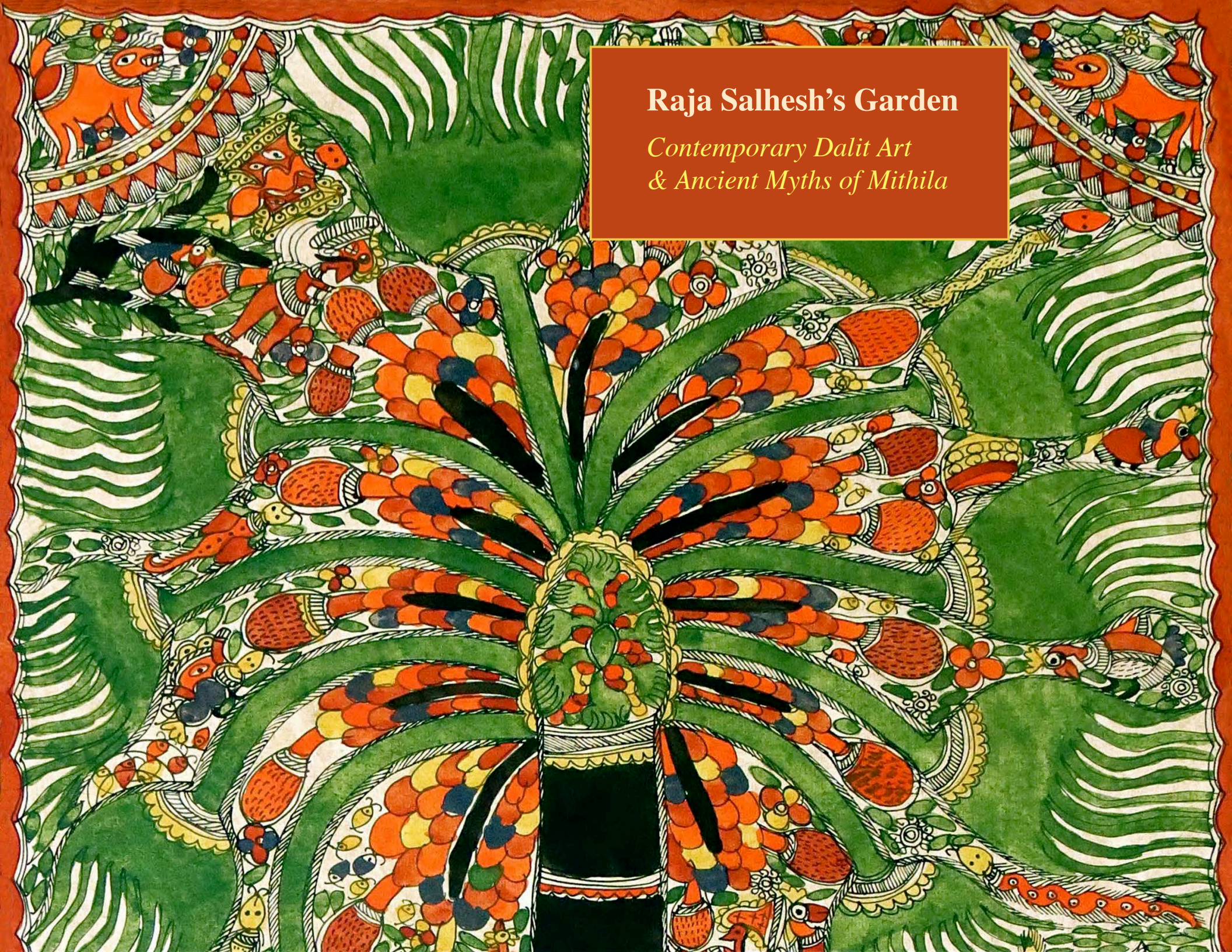


# Raja Salhesh's Garden

*Contemporary Dalit Art  
& Ancient Myths of Mithila*





**Raja Salhesh's Garden**

*Contemporary Dalit Art  
& Ancient Myths of Mithila*

*Edited by*

John H. Bowles

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Radford University Art Museum

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

by Co-Editors Steve Arbury and John H. Bowles

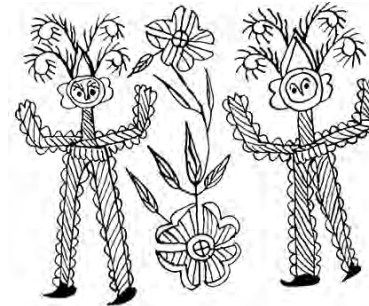
This *Raja Salhesh's Garden* ebook/catalog is part of a larger project pursued over many years in partnership with various institutions and individuals—and under circumstances that proved unusually challenging. In reading through the following multifarious acknowledgments, you will glean some sense of the extraordinary efforts involved in producing this multi-venue/multimedia celebration of Mithila art. These activities continue because this catalog's first volume will be followed by a second, which we plan to release later next year—by which time there will be yet more people and institutions to acknowledge and thank.

First and foremost, we want to extend our hearty gratitude to the inspired Dalit artists represented in this volume who so generously gave of their time—and shared their memories, treasured stories, and rare insights—thus providing accounts of their lives and work with unprecedented detail. They patiently provided answers to what must have seemed an endless stream of queries regarding their inspiration, their paintings' stylistic evolution, preferences in media, family relations, artistic influences—and explaining and dating (as best we could with them) particular paintings (some decades old and but dimly recalled). Memories fade, especially for those of us in our senior years; and the purpose of recalling obscure facts and providing odd details is not always self-evident. In the midst of a pandemic there were obviously other, greater priorities and preoccupations. Yet all the artists with whom we worked—and, for those who predeceased this project, their surviving relatives and neighbors—could not have been more obliging and cooperative. We hope this presentation does justice to what they have so beautifully shared—both visually and verbally—and that they will forgive any shortcomings or inadvertent errors in our efforts to celebrate their imagery, intentions, meanings, and achievements.

As with many cross-cultural endeavors, this one entailed innumerable linguistic translations—back and forth between Maithili, Hindi, French, English and even (if but briefly) Japanese. This took considerable patience and teamwork, and our special thanks thus go to Radhika Bordia, Martine Le Coz, Aurogeeta Das, H  l  ne Fleury, Munna Hasegawa, Kaushik Kumar Jha, Rani Jha, Vibha Jha, Reagan Mihailoff, and Mani Shekhar Singh. Parallel to “linguistic transfers,” the actual works of art had to be conveyed from India to Virginia—a task kindly done, incrementally, in various ways, over many years. For their generous help in physically packing, sending and/or delivering the paintings here from India, France, the UK, and Oman, we thank Adam and Olga Grotzky, Kaushik Kumar Jha, Martine Le Coz, Mary Mount, Kathryn Myers, David Szanton, and Susan Wadley. Many of the custom-made frames were expertly made by Pippi Miller, of Blacksburg's Miller-Off-Main Street Gallery; other framing and ground transportation of the art were generously provided by Pippi Miller, Kathryn Myers, Carl Pechman, Nikki Pynn, and Todd Rykaczewski, who generously volunteered their time and efforts, assisted by Mary Burnette and Theresa Rykaczewski. Pippi Miller and Steve Arbury are responsible for photographing most of the art shown on these pages (and identified on the photo credits page towards the end of this volume). Additional thanks go to Steve Arbury, Jennifer Spoon, and Pam Watkins, for minor yet important photoshopped adjustments. Additional photographs of the artists and their art were provided with reproduction permissions—as duly identified under their illustrations—of their respective photographers. All the artists featured in this catalog gave permission to reproduce photographs of themselves and their art; permission to reproduce photographs of them and their work was likewise granted by the photographers. Special thanks go to Jennifer Spoon, for her elegant design work on this ebook/catalog.

International exhibitions of this sort would be impossible without the gracious loan of paintings, and we are much indebted to the project's many,

widely dispersed private lenders: Martine Le Coz (in Amboise, France), Pankaj and Mary Mishra (in London, UK), Ritu and A.V.K. Mohan (in Pune, India), Kathryn Myers (in Mansfield, Connecticut), Carl and Marianne Pechman (of Washington, D.C.), Donald and Jum Stadtner (of Walnut Creek, California), Susan Wadley (of Syracuse, New York), as well as loans from our (Arbury and Bowles) respective private collections in Radford. In 2021, the Berkeley California-based Ethnic Arts Foundation generously donated twenty-one Mithila paintings to Radford University Art Museum, which now appear throughout this catalog and its related exhibitions. The Foundation's President, the anthropologist David Szanton, graciously provided invaluable scholarly guidance towards developing this project, and also loaned a selection of the Foundation's abecedary drawings by Martine Le Coz for exhibition here. Our special thanks to him and the Ethnic Arts Foundation for their sustaining inspiration, expertise, and largesse.



Considerable financial, institutional, and individual support for shepherding this project to completion was enthusiastically provided by various administrators, sectors, and departments of Radford University, including Radford University's Art Department (Chaired by Stuart Robinson), Radford University Art Museum (especially its past and present registrars Kim Cochran and Theresa Rykaczewski, and Brent Webb, the museum's exhibition preparator); Radford University Art Society and its past and present presidents Myrl G. Jones and Kathleen Harshberger; Radford University's College of

Visual and Performing Arts (CVPA) and its past and present Deans: Margaret Devaney, James Robey and Stephanie Caulder; and CVPA's Communications Officer Sean Kotz; Radford University Foundation and its chief executive officer John Cox; and—most recently—Radford University's newly appointed President Bret Danilowicz and his wife Kay Danilowicz. Additional support has been provided by the Kolla-Landwehr Fund at the Community Foundation of the New River Valley, under the directorship of Jessica Wirgau.

In addition to the *Raja Salhesh's Garden* and *Martine Le Coz* exhibitions featured at Radford University Art Museum's Covington Center Gallery and Tyler Gallery, the museum coordinated two other local satellite exhibitions: *Mithila Medley* at the Floyd Center for the Arts (featuring examples of both Dalit and higher caste art from Mithila), and *Naresh Paswan* (the first solo exhibition of a Dalit artist of Mithila)—displayed at Blacksburg's Miller-Off-Main Street Gallery. We thank the Floyd Center's administrators, staff, and volunteers (including Becca Imbur, Victoria Javier, Liz Mears, and her Exhibition Committee), as well as Robert and Pippi Miller in Blacksburg, for all of their respective efforts. The multi-venue Mithila exhibition project has included complementary enhancements from various academic departments at Radford University, such as its Design Department (whose professor Margaret Carneal conducted a class project inspired by Mithila art and mounted an exhibition titled *Inspired by Mithila: Shadowboxes by RU Design Students*—for display in the university's McConnell Library's Andrew W. Ross Student Gallery); Theater Department (whose Chair, Richard Dunham, arranged for the New Jersey-based Indian Cultural Society Theatre to perform two Indian-themed dramas); the Art Department (whose Prof. Eloise Philpot focused multiple class assignments on the exhibited paintings); and Art Education, whose Prof. Lou Ann Thomas collaborated with two local artists and art educators—Carolee Bondurant and Nikki Pynn—to produce a Mithila-themed program as their

2022 “Sprigs of the Tree” annual public school art teachers’ workshop. Nikki Pynn additionally coordinated and helped execute the creation of *aripans* (floor designs rendered in rice paste) at both the Floyd Center for the Arts and Radford University Art Museum.

Curatorial activities included four visits to Mithila by Bowles—who, during the Covid years, had to suspend his in-person field trips there. Fortunately, he could engage the remarkable services of Kaushik Kumar Jha, the longtime director of the Mithila Art Institute (starting soon after the Institute’s final closure in 2019). Indeed, this project could not have come to fruition were it not for Jha’s dedicated efforts that spanned a broad range of activities, including regularly meeting with the artists—both individually and inclusive of Bowles via Skype—securing their iconographies and bio-data, facilitating translations, packing and shipping art, and tracking down obscure information and references. He also communicated with fellow scholars in India and abroad, and coordinated, with Jindal University Prof. Radhika Bordia, the visit of a team of videographers from Patna who produced a short documentary shown at the opening of the *Raja Salhesh’s Garden* exhibition. He managed to do all of this throughout the perils of Covid, electrical blackouts, floods, heat waves, and all manner of personal vicissitudes. One could not hope for a more capable or obliging assistant curator; nor one who—born into the highest of Mithila’s Brahman communities—was more progressive in thought, spirit, and respect in his warm regard for the Dalit artists, who likewise hold him in high esteem.

Others involved with these projects include two expert co-curators, who worked with Bowles on two of the project’s four exhibitions. The University of Connecticut professor of art Kathryn Myers co-curated, with Bowles, Radford University Art Museum’s “Mithila Medley” satellite exhibition, held at the nearby Floyd Center for the Arts (August 13 – December 1, 2022). That exhibition featured paintings drawn from various castes and communities in

Mithila and drew extensively on works loaned from Myers’s personal collection, which had just previously been shown at the University of Connecticut’s Benton Museum in an exhibition titled *Tradition and Transformation: Mithila Art of India*. Her enthusiasm and acute aesthetic appreciation of India’s indigenous arts and artists—coupled with her own extensive curatorial experience organizing exhibitions both in the US and India—proved invaluable. Myers also made video interviews of two Mithila artists, which were displayed on continuous looped presentations in the exhibitions’ galleries. Five other video interviews—the joint creations of two Syracuse University professors, Tula Goenka (the films’ director) and Susan Wadley (the producer)—were also thus generously shared in the galleries. Wadley was additionally generous in providing texts and information regarding the paintings she loaned to the exhibitions.

The genesis and coordination of the *Martine Le Coz* exhibition presented many challenges. Special thanks go to H el ene Fleury for accompanying Bowles from Paris to Amboise to meet with Le Coz for day-long discussions during which the idea of additional satellite exhibitions occurred to them while perusing Le Coz’s own extraordinary illustrations—ranging from those created for her novel on Raja Salhesh, as well as her remarkable portraits celebrating Mithila’s artists. Le Coz graciously loaned her illustrations and a precious painting by Urmila Devi to Radford University Art Museum—and later personally packed and shipped them to Virginia. Her powerfully soulful essay featured in this volume is likewise deeply appreciated, as is its English translation by Dr. Aurogeeta Das, Senior Curator of the Ipswich Museum (in the UK). As a co-curator (with Bowles) of the *Martine Le Coz* exhibition, Das carefully developed most of the extended label texts that accompanied each of the exhibited paintings and illustrations—drawing their titles from Le Coz’s published texts, and translating, contextualizing, and explaining the significance of relevant passages. Das

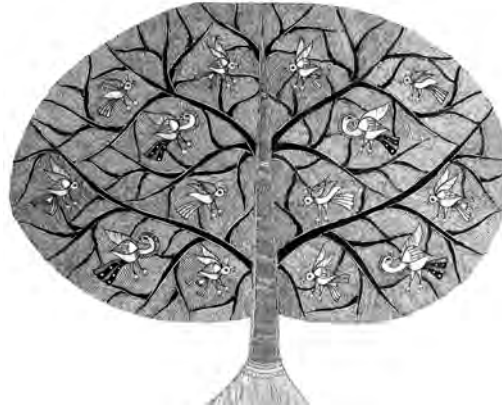
was also ideally positioned to provide this volume’s introductory essay: not only had she extensively immersed herself in Le Coz’s various Mithila-related writings, but moreover had previously co-curated and co-edited, with David Szanton, an international exhibition and catalog entitled *Many Visions, Many Versions: Art from Indigenous Communities in India* (produced/published by International Arts & Artists, Washington, D.C., 2007). That volume included essays by Das, Szanton, and the preeminent Sanskritist Wendy Doniger—the Mircea Eliade Distinguished Service Professor Emerita of History of Religions at the University of Chicago. Here too they have contributed significant essays, written with extraordinary knowledge, insight, wit, and affection. The art historian Donald Stadtner’s lively personal account of his travel experiences with Bhaskar Kulkarni (contemporary indigenous Indian art’s most significant yet mysterious catalyst)—was a most serendipitous addition to this volume. Bowles and Jha are jointly responsible for co-authoring this volume’s individually illustrated catalog entries; and Bowles and Arbury co-edited this volume. Finally, we are indebted to Kalyan Kumar Chakravarty, former Director of India’s National Museum, for generously providing this volume’s Forward.

Volume I of the *Raja Salhesh’s Garden* ebook/catalog will be followed by Volume II—planned for release later in 2023—comprised of essays developed from papers presented at the *Mithila Musings* symposium held jointly at Floyd Center for the Arts and Radford University on October 13, 2022. Participants in that symposium include Punam Madhok (an art historian at East Carolina University—speaking on *Mithila Painting: A Second Look*); Kathryn Myers, speaking on *Mithila Art, Tradition, Evolution, and Style*; Suchitra Samanta, an anthropologist at Virginia Tech, speaking on *Mithila Artists’ Critiques of Women’s Roles and Status in Society*; Susan Wadley, a Syracuse University professor emerita, speaking on *The Changing Roles of Nature in Mithila Art*; and, participating via Zoom from India: Mani Shekhar Singh, a Jindal

University-based scholar of Mithila Art, speaking on *Visual Poetics and Politics in Painting of the Dalit Artists of Mithila*; and Jindal University professor of journalism Radhika Bordia, speaking on *Covid Depictions in Mithila Art*. Bordia also collaborated with the Patna-based videographer M. Habib Ali, to produce a short but impressive *Dalit Artists of Mithila*, featuring interviews with many of the artists represented in our exhibitions. Two days after the symposium, Radford University was privileged to screen the world premiere of a full-length documentary film—titled *Sama in the Forest*, produced by Bucknell University professor Coralynn Davis and directed by Colombian filmmaker Carlos G omez—which likewise includes interviews with the exhibited artists. Both the video and the film, and the symposium itself, were “zoomed” live and thus accessible worldwide, thanks to the combined efforts of Bordia, Jha, and Singh (in India), and (in Virginia) Davis and Radford University’s communications professor Bill Kovarik, and technical director, Allen Conner, coordinating with Floyd Center for the Arts’ Office and Technology Manager Brandon Phillips.

In Volume II of *Raja Salhesh’s Garden*, Arbury, Bowles, and Jha will contribute more detailed accounts of how the overall project (coordinating the exhibition, catalog and symposium) evolved over the course of many years. While these present Volume I acknowledgments thus flag that forthcoming Volume II, they also look back in gratitude to the late pioneers of artistry and scholarship who first blazed the paths of Mithila’s Dalit art movement and its appreciation. It is to them we dedicate Volume I.





***Dedicated in Memory of***

*Jitwarpur's Late Dalit Artists:*

Jamuna Devi (1922–2011)

Sarup Lal Paswan (1933–2009)

Rampari Devi (1953–20011)

Chano Devi (1955–2010)

Uttam Prasad Paswan (1968–2020)

Lalita Devi (1975–2011)

&

*The Late Dusadh Priest & Salhesh Savant*

Roudi Paswan (1952–2015)

&

*The Late Scholars Who First Recognized  
and Encouraged Mithila's Dalit Artists:*

Mulk Raj Anand (1905–2004)

Pupul Jayakar (1915–1997)

Bhaskar Kulkarni (1929–1983)

Erika Moser-Schmitt (c.1938–c.1988)

Raymond Owens (1934–2000)

## FOREWORD

by *Kalyan Kumar Chakravarty*

This catalogue—for which I have been invited by my long-time friend and colleague John Bowles to write this forward—provides a circular, hermeneutic journey between the past and present. It steps back to the ancient folklore of India’s and Nepal’s shared Mithila region, to step forward to its rejuvenation in life-sustaining and life-enhancing forms.

Salhesh—etymologically the “King of the Mountains,” a Mithila folk hero of the Dusadh community, capable of impossible deeds—is celebrated annually in the *Fulbari Mela* (flower festival) of the Himalayan foothills of Nepal, on the first day of Vaishakh (the second month in the Hindu calendar [April/May]) when a sacred orchid blooms. Salhesh’s beloved devotee, Dauna Malin, comes in the form of a beautiful flower that annually meets him in this garden. Throughout Mithila and elsewhere, shrines under peepal trees shelter clay figures dedicated to Salhesh, his pantheon, and his rival Chuharmal—who also comes from his same community. *Bhagats* (shamanic holy men) conduct his worship. Dusadh, Chamar, and other Dalit communities (formerly known as “untouchables”) translate folklore dedicated to Salhesh’s life and deeds into painted narratives on house walls and, for more than a half-century, onto paper and canvases now displayed in art galleries. His worship has spread all over Eastern, Central, and Northern India, and in diaspora to Mauritius, Guyana, and Suriname.

This catalogue celebrates Salhesh’s story across India, Europe, and North America, through a trans-cultural partnership of scholars in art history, sociology, anthropology, philosophy, and experts in film and design, photography, and visual and performing arts. Exhibitions have been created by them, hosted by multiple university museum galleries and community art venues and hailed by print and social media and social activists. *Raja Salhesh’s Garden* has become a metaphor for resuscitating human civilization and habitats dying from the onslaught of unbridled development. Salhesh as the King of



North Carolina-based Benjamin Billingsley depicted endangered regional bird species in woodcut prints cut out and applied with a non-toxic adhesive to trees along a forest trail at Radford University’s Selu Conservancy to create an outdoor environmental art installation titled *Spirit Aviary* (here shown flanked by RU Art Museum Director Dr. Steve Arbury [left] and Prof. Margaret Devaney, former Dean of the College of Visual and Performing Arts [right]). (Photo J.H. Bowles)

Mountains has been transported from the Himalayas, in new incarnations, to the Appalachian mountains of Southwest Virginia’s New River Valley, to convey a message of social and cultural equity, and against the destruction wrought by environmental predators the world over. *Raja Salhesh’s Garden* is the latest in a series of exhibitions nature-inspired art installations and education outreach initiatives—titled *Leaves of the Tree*, *More Leaves of the Tree*, *Sprigs of the Trees*, *Selu Songs*, and *Spirit Aviary*—promoting higher consciousness of nature to counter deforestation, strip mining, and related degradation of the mountains. Salhesh’s imagery celebrates nature and decries its destruction by mega developmental agents, who can perhaps be seen as Salhesh’s



An image of a sacred tree being ritually watered — painted directly onto a tree trunk near the village of Ranti (District Madhubani, Bihar) — in the hope that depicting rituals on living trees may help deter their illegal felling. (Photo J.H. Bowles)

alter ego, the villain and thief Chuharmal—who, through evil machinations, tries to disrupt the peaceful harmony and interdependence of organic and inorganic communities in Raja Salhesh’s garden. A 2019 painting by Martine Le Coz, titled *Som Dev: “I No Longer Know Where My Duty Lies”* (FIG.2a), depicts a young king’s confession about feeling lost while pondering his own past insensitivities—equating the suffering of his people to the pain of trees cut down to build columns for his palace. It thus also comments on the environmental destruction confronted by activists in the Himalayas—and Appalachia.

The artists and art historians who have contributed to this catalogue have moved back and forth to look at the cross pollination of tradition and modernity, classical, folk and tribal art and design in Mithila

imagery—as inspired by the story of Raja Salhesh and his garden. Mithila’s Dalit artists—both women (like Jamuna Devi, Chano Devi and Urmila Devi) and men (like Uttam Prasad Paswan, Naresh Paswan and Ranjit Paswan)—have come together in these horizon-expanding exhibitions. This has been possible because scholars and curators (like Pupal Jayakar, Donald Stadtner, Wendy Doniger, and David Szanton) have throughout their illustrious careers analyzed the fusion of tribal, indigenous, and classical elements in the Indian subcontinent. Jayakar acted as the catalytic agent for introducing Bhaskar Kulkarni to the Mithila artists, thus enabling them to change their medium, surface, and materials, and also export their art to Indian and global markets and museums. German, Colombian, Indian and American ethno-cinematographers, professors of art, anthropology, sociology, media, women and gender studies, as well as Indo-American actors and theater directors, presented a series of productions and events to accompany these exhibitions—including video documentaries and interviews, filmed and dramatic presentations—with titles like *Dalit Artists of Mithila*, *Urmila Devi*, *Sama in the Forest*, *The Girl Who Touched the Stars*, and *The Priest and the Prostitute*.

Salhesh’s tales—as imaginatively retold in French by Martine Le Coz and then translated into English by Regen Kramer—weave together new versions of the story out of narrative strands drawn from various sources, ranging from a 19th-century George Grierson transcription, to contemporary oral histories, blended with ancient Buddhist lore and Hindu epic heroes and deities. In illustrating her *Salhesh Bildungsroman* (formation novel), Le Coz uses the Mughal miniature style. John Bowles as Guest Curator, and Steve Arbury as Radford University Art Museum’s Director, have dedicated their lives and means to bring local colors of the world into luminous focus. Together with the interpreters presented in this catalogue they have showcased Dalit artists as agents for transforming Mithila art from an instrument of passive worship of traditional divinities by higher caste artists, into an instrument of resistance



Detail from *The Malins Pursue Raja Salhesh* (2006) Acrylic on paper (22" x 30") by Raj Kumar Paswan (Born 1962) Village Jitwarpur, District Madhubani, Bihar (See CAT. 18)

against the social and economic injustice inflicted by society on lower castes. Through their collective efforts, the artists from depressed classes, classified as belonging to “criminal tribes” during British colonial days, have regained their place as companions and votaries of Raja Salhesh.

This catalogue describes and shows how the art was transformed by Dalit artists, who transplanted it from local shrines, house walls, and auspicious *aripan* designs on floors, to paper and canvases for exhibition and sale. It offers a tribute to the marvels of design, created by artists from Dalit or socially depressed communities of Chamars (leather workers) and Dusadhs (agricultural labors, watchmen and scavengers) by blending the colors, curves, and contours of flora and fauna; by using materials like paper stained with diluted cow dung, tattoo designs used to make the human body inviolable, and applying muted hues rather than the bright colors used by higher caste artists; by generally preferring a free floating style of forms swimming in space and

time, outthrust chins, sharp noses, large staring eyes, front profile figural combination—rather than the style of symmetry and pattern used by higher castes emulating sculpted clay icons in their temples; by turning the open space inside a forest into a natural ritual site—instead of worshipping in brick and stone temples, as upper caste communities do; by depicting humble village life—in contrast with upper caste concerns with female feticide, or dowry related bride burnings; and, by depicting the trauma caused to migrant Dalit artists from an abrupt Covid-19 lockdown announced by the central government, rather than the traditional theme used by Brahmin painters to show Hindu goddesses battling the pandemic. A moving note is provided about a Dalit artist thankfully acknowledging the Tamra Patra Award from the President of India, while also expressing her greater need for a house.

The interaction of Dalit and higher caste artists is mentioned in the catalogue, as evident in the mutual adoption of pictorial conventions and techniques. Buddha is rendered by a Dalit artist according to

traditional iconography. Architectural features used by another Dalit artist shows some familiarity with the Rajput and Mughal miniature painting traditions. Just as the Dalit artists accept symmetry and pattern in their style, likewise the higher caste artists also move out of a strait jacket of traditional icons and schematic style to adopt a freer flow of forms. The boundaries get broken in the access to non-local markets, and a fusion and cross-pollination between Dalit and traditional upper caste art does take place. We can all look forward to further detailed considerations, academic arguments and counter-arguments, to appear in this catalog’s forthcoming Vol. II—which will include scholarly essays on various sensitive issues (ranging from depictions of feminist concerns, Covid-related ordeals, nature and the environment, further comparisons of upper caste and lower caste visual expression, authentic versus false topicality, problematic trends of cultural and social restitution, etc.)—as part of an ongoing conversation. The relation of these visual arts to *nautanki* and *naach* dance dramas offers yet another area warranting further consideration.

The Ethnic Arts Foundation, Radford University Art Museum, Floyd Center for the Arts, Blacksburg’s Miller-Off-Main Street Gallery, *The Roanoke Times*, and numerous scholars, curators, art connoisseurs and collectors have come together in a transcultural and transcontinental alliance to produce and celebrate three satellite exhibitions (titled: *Martine Le Coz: A French Homage to the Ancient Myths & Contemporary Arts of Mithila*; *Mithila Medley: Contemporary Arts from an Ancient Culture in North India*; and *Naresh Paswan: A Solo Exhibition*) and *Mithila Musings: An International Symposium*—and thus establish a dialogue between ancient myths and current environmental and social crises to demonstrate the dynamic continuum between rural, micropolitan and metropolitan art practices; to celebrate the multicultural heritage of southwest Virginia; and to respond creatively to issues of gender identity, social injustice and climate change. The narrators, artists and videographers whose work figures in this catalogue have virtually identified themselves with the protagonists in Raja Salhesh’s story. They have become the dramatis personae in an act of intercultural translation for transplanting Raja Salhesh’s garden into different continents.

This global partnership of visionaries has recreated the dream of Raja Salhesh’s garden in which: everything connects with everything else; things become persons, qualities objects, objectives nouns; we hear, like Saint Martin, the sound of bowers and see notes that shine; hidden worlds connect to the things that hide them, and tide pools connect with unfathomable seas that connect with our chromosomes. Like Leibniz, they conceive every portion of matter like a garden full of plants or a pond full of fish, and each branch of each plant, every limb of an animal, and every drop of fluid, as also such a pond or garden.



## Flowers from the Earth

by Aurogeeta Das

Over time, countless gardeners, both real and metaphorical, have planted seeds and hoped and trusted that their seeds would yield plants, trees, fruits and flowers. Some seeds were planted in India, some abroad. Some were planted in the fertile soil of Mithila, a region encompassing parts of northern India and Nepal, which has nevertheless been—for the region’s Dalit communities (formerly known as “untouchables”)—a harsh and unyielding land. Despite the hostile soil and environment, Mithila’s Dalit artists have grown and blossomed. Half-way across the world from Mithila, in Virginia, *Raja Salhesh’s Garden* plants many seeds today. This scholarly e-catalog accompanies four distinct but related exhibitions: *Raja Salhesh’s Garden: Contemporary Dalit Art and Ancient Myths of Mithila, India* (Radford University Art Museum’s Covington Gallery, October 13 – December 3, 2022), *Martine Le Coz: A French Homage to the Ancient Myths and Contemporary Artists of Mithila, India* (Radford University Art Museum’s Tyler Gallery, September 14 – November 18, 2022), *Mithila Medley: Contemporary Arts from an Ancient Culture in North India* (Floyd Center for the Arts, August 13 – December 1, 2022), and *Naresh Paswan: A Solo Exhibition* (Miller-off-Main Street Galleries, Blacksburg, September 6 – October 14, 2022). All four exhibitions celebrate the diversity of Mithila art, and especially its Dalit art. In doing so, these exhibitions break new ground, for to our knowledge, never before have such ambitious related exhibitions focused almost solely on Dalit art. Dalits comprise a community that has thus far been oppressed by a hierarchical Hindu caste system and Dalit artists have seldom been given their due either nationally or internationally. This essay highlights some of the art featured in the four exhibitions while also



FIG.1 A 2014 painting attributed to Dharamsheela Devi, Collection of J.H. Bowles, Radford, Virginia

introducing this catalog’s chapters, which explore Dalit culture and art from myriad viewpoints: art historical, literary, artistic, and philosophic.

Donald Stadtner’s essay “‘Coincidence is God’s way of remaining anonymous,’ or how I came to meet Bhaskar Kulkarni and help with his wooden crate” offers a vivid, finely observed snapshot of Bihar in the late 1960s. Having accompanied Kulkarni on a trip to Mithila’s villages, Stadtner can, unusually, provide a glimpse into the early period of Mithila’s contemporary painting tradition when it was still unfurling. This was soon after prime minister Indira Gandhi’s cultural advisor Pupul Jayakar devised what she described as a drought relief project.<sup>1</sup> It was Kulkarni who — among his other assignments — was tasked with delivering the paper to Mithila’s women painters. Kulkarni is a figure so underrated in art historical writings about Mithila art that we know of few instances of documentation about him, especially by his contemporaries. Yet, Kulkarni played a seminal role in the birth of Mithila painting as we know it today. Stadtner’s travel with Kulkarni to meet Mithila’s artists was brief. Despite this, his account of it sheds some light on how the sophisticated Kulkarni interacted with those rural women who took up Mithila painting on paper. Stadtner’s sense of adventure, which comes through

clearly in his lively recollections, contrasts sharply with his sensitive perception of timid encounters between Kulkarni and the women. Stadtner’s writing has that rare gift: it paints a picture. For instance, we see so much more than is being said, when he writes:

The local kids, by contrast, encircled our rickshaw with a mixture of wonderment and play, enlivened with loud, wordless but gleeful shouts. This was joy unmarred by inhibitions picked up from adults. . . I wondered how this charming childhood exuberance was to grow ever so muted as their years progressed.<sup>2</sup>

Stadtner’s later encounters with Mithila art’s key patrons complement his early meeting with Kulkarni. Stadtner’s curiosity, open-minded intellect, aesthetic taste, and rare humor perhaps predisposed him to such experiences, and would ultimately lead to his long and distinguished career as an Indian art historian. Among the encounters that Stadtner shares is one with David L. Szanton, president of the Ethnic Arts Foundation. Szanton’s sustained involvement with Mithila art began well after Kulkarni’s death, so they never met. He was therefore naturally eager for Stadtner to recount what it was like to have met Kulkarni, just as John H. Bowles had wanted him to do. This is not unexpected, because scant documentation has obscured figures like Kulkarni to the extent that they have become partly mythical in art

historical narratives about the early development of contemporary painting traditions such as Mithila’s, which have been habitually marginalized both in India and abroad, at least in mainstream art circles. This marginality is even more pronounced when it comes to Mithila’s Dalit artists.

Such alienation is addressed in David Szanton’s own essay, “Among Others: Mithila’s Dalit Art.” It covers significant ground, from introducing the contemporary Mithila tradition’s genesis, to underscoring Dalit artists’ remarkable contributions towards enriching it. Oftentimes, Dalit artists introduced fresh layers through radical departures (both aesthetic and thematic), although they initially painted in the same vein as the upper caste Hindu artists. Writing as early as 1980, Jayakar referred to recent research in Mithila having revealed a third group of artists who she calls “Harijan” (an older, and then still widely used term for Dalits), some of whose paintings had been discovered earlier.

With patronage, a new style, an individual vision and perception are emerging. The paintings recount the adventures of a mythical ruler, Raja Salhesh. Legends from the Hindu pantheon have entered the pictorial vocabulary of these Harijan painters . . . These are paintings by unknown masters, an emergent perception that was hitherto denied expression. The exploitation in form, color, line and narrative imagery has confidence and power.<sup>3</sup>

The scholar Neel Rekha similarly pointed out the distinctiveness of the Dalit tradition:

Not having an elaborate tradition of floor and wall paintings such as *aripana* (floor paintings) and *kohabar* (wall paintings) . . . women artists from the Chamar and Dusadh castes made their distinctive mark as artists by evolving their unique *gobar* and *godana* styles and projecting their own god Salhesh,<sup>4</sup> an important folk God worshipped by the Dusadh caste.<sup>5</sup>

Indeed, such is their distinctiveness that the scholar Jyotindra Jain briefly debated whether the art by the oppressed castes in the region may even be called Mithila art.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, it is clear that Mithila art has benefited – and would continue to benefit greatly – from the enrichments contributed by the region’s Dalit artists. More importantly, Szanton highlights how, in recent years, Mithila’s Dalit artists have used their artworks to subvert the stratified Hindu caste structure that oppresses them. In doing so, Szanton still pays attention to the site of the paintings themselves, rather than falling into the trap that so many art historians and critics fall prey to, i.e. considering the art a mere crutch for sociopolitical debates. It is certainly important to study how artists choose to – or choose not to – use art as a tool for sociopolitical expression, especially when artists might consciously elect to engage in what is frequently termed ‘artivism’ (in other words, socially engaged art). Yet, visual and aesthetic language are irreducible to other forms of expression, including writing.<sup>7</sup> Fortunately, Szanton steers clear of treating Dalit art as a socio-political doppelganger, even while recognizing and acknowledging what a powerful tool it can be for Dalit expression.

Szanton also draws parallels between characters in Raja Salhesh’s narrative and those in Hindu literature, including the epics *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. His comparisons between distinctive interpretations of marriage and COVID-19 respectively, by upper caste and Dalit artists, are yet more compelling, especially the observations he makes about the Brahmin painter Nisha Jha’s portrayal of the pandemic, as compared to the Dalit painter Naresh Paswan’s depictions. Jha’s adheres more closely to traditional subjects, even while

reimagining a martial Hindu goddess as battling the pandemic. By contrast, Paswan’s shines a spotlight on the national lockdown instituted by prime minister Narendra Modi, in particular the severe and traumatic disruptions to life that this caused for the most disadvantaged sections of Indian society (as well as for migrant workers from abroad). It is, as Szanton points out, liberating for Dalits not to have the weight of a longer tradition, which for upper caste Mithila painters might be constraining insofar as departures from tradition are concerned. Here, again, Szanton could have easily attributed less radical departures among upper caste painters to a less fervent social agency. Instead, he considers the possibility that the Dalits’ radical observations in their art might be as much a result of their oppression as their lack of indebtedness to an artistic tradition, which—by all accounts—they appear to have adopted later than their upper caste counterparts. Rather than making their art derivative, this later adoption allowed them to cherry-pick and recast its features to suit their community’s needs for expression. Among Dalit artists’ thematic innovations was one by the pioneering Chamar artist Jamuna Devi, who began to depict Raja Salhesh.<sup>8</sup> According to Szanton, Salhesh was probably a real king in the seventh century, whom Mithila’s Dalits transmuted into a hero for social exaltation, and thereafter deified into a demigod.

Raja Salhesh’s narrative is explored in some detail in **Wendy Doniger’s** essay “The Many Lives of the Tale of Raja Salhesh.” Doniger draws upon George A. Grierson’s translation of the tale, published as far back as 1882, and Martine Le Coz’s fresh retelling of the narrative in French, *Le roi de la montagne* (2019), recently translated into English as *King of the Mountain* (2022). Doniger compares and contrasts these two texts with/against each other; in addition, she analyzes the narrative by considering its plot lines alongside those in remarkably similar tales from other cultures, distinct both temporally and geographically. These comparative exercises enable Doniger to indicate fresh twists in the Salhesh plot line, which highlight how Mithila’s Dalits have co-opted the tale to express ideas about caste

hierarchies, social injustice and religion, and indeed, how these social structures intersect.

There have previously been varied narratives of Salhesh; what emerges in the Le Coz retelling is that Salhesh, born as the high-born prince Jaybhardan, was destined to be a great warrior and king; instead he questioned social inequalities and sought to establish a new, egalitarian kingdom in the mountains. Rather than being honored as a victorious warrior king, it is his quietly radical actions that appear to inspire. For instance, Doniger casts a light on a puzzling episode in the narrative, which appears in the Le Coz retelling, wherein Salhesh chooses to be reborn as a low-caste baby but simultaneously continues living as an upper-caste, adult prince. Doniger concludes that it is the deification of Salhesh that allows him to function as both, in a single temporal matrix. It is perhaps as much because of his quiet radicalization as because of his demigod status that Raja Salhesh appears so frequently in paintings by Mithila’s Dalit artists. As Doniger points out, the artworks featuring Salhesh can be inspired by his narrative but they also feed back into the layered

retellings of Salhesh’s life. As such, it is a great story precisely because it is layered and open to versatile—and indeed, variform—(re)interpretations and retellings.

Martine Le Coz’s paintings and book (and the latter’s translation) now join this repository. Le Coz’s story is an amalgamation of collected fragmentary information and dispersed oral interpretations of Salhesh’s story, overlaid with her own perceptions of these. Her illustrations, meanwhile, feature dramatic narrative moments as well as more philosophic turning points, such as her painting titled: *Somdev: I No Longer Know Where My Duty Lies* (FIG.2a). It depicts a line in her retelling, which encapsulates a young king’s confession about feeling lost, and being as insensitive to the suffering of his peoples as to the pain of trees he has cut down to build columns for his palace. This painting offers a fine example of how Le Coz dips into a rich repertoire of artistic traditions. While in her portraits of Mithila artists, Le Coz incorporates the Mithila idiom—including elongated eyes and recurring motifs; here, she employs some of the tropes used in Mughal miniatures. For

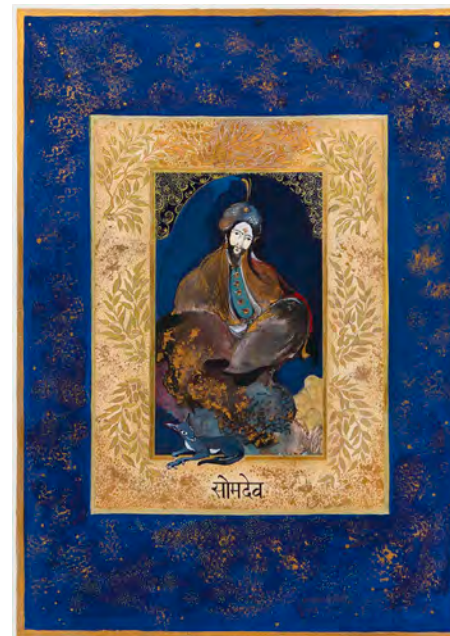


FIG.2a *I No Longer Know Where My Duty Lies*



FIG.2b *The Magicians Were So Interlinked...*



FIG.2c Dawn Spreads Across the Mountain...



FIG.2d Young People Guessed That He Went There on the Back of Ganesh.

example, she uses gold on the outer border and on the illuminated inner border adorned with foliage. Similarly, in a painting titled: *The Magicians Were So Interlinked...* (FIG.2b), the border with foliates and a menagerie of creatures is reminiscent of the miniature painting aesthetic in illuminated Mughal portfolios. In another painting titled *Dawn Spreads Across the Mountain* (FIG.2c), by letting the foliage and clouds spill beyond the border, Le Coz suggests the expanse of the landscape, despite the relatively narrow dimensions of the image. In her book, Le Coz recounts that in its essence, this landscape retains “echoes of a story about an ancient battle.” The trees “know the complaints and songs of this ancient battle in the very heart of their wood, in the thickness of their resin, in their grains, and in their fruits.”<sup>8</sup>

Le Coz also brings into these paintings a touch of France (whether knowingly or unknowingly). For instance, in her painting *The Young People Guessed That He Went There on the Back of Ganesh* (FIG.2d), as in *Salhesh Provided Assistance to the Divine Will*, the coloration and brushwork are reminiscent of the French symbolist painter and pastelist Odilon Redon. Yet, she is equally adept at integrating the Mithila idiom, such as in her painting *The Maithils Draw Durga*, which brings to life a description in her retelling, where Mithila’s women paint a triumphant goddess Durga. The description details Durga’s mounts (alternately a tiger or her lion Manasthala); the elephant skin she drapes on her body; Chanda and Munda — the demons at her feet, whom she has defeated (not shown in the painting); and the black of her piercing eye. Interestingly, Le Coz’s Durga resembles those seen in the earliest photographed murals in Mithila, including those made by Sita Devi.

Thematically, perhaps the most significant Salhesh painting by Le Coz is *The Chandala Wept a Steady Stream of Tears* (FIG.3b). It illustrates the aforementioned incident in her retelling, when Salhesh comes across a pregnant *chandala* in the forest. The *chandala* (belonging to a caste that deal with the disposal of corpses) moans in pain, lamenting the fact that her offspring would have to suffer the same fate as her, i.e. to live in poverty and humiliation



FIG.3a The Maithils Draw Durga

outside the pale of society. Salhesh tells her that he wants her and her offspring to be accorded dignity, but she scoffs at him, reminding him that the fate of one’s birth is inescapable. In response, Salhesh goes beyond discourse. He and his brothers use their magic to shrink themselves, replacing the runt in her body. She thus ends up giving birth to them in the woods with the midwife’s help. Salhesh would later explain to the high-born Brahmin priest in the temple that his experiences of birth with the queen and with the *chandala* had felt no different. It is an example of the egalitarianism that Salhesh champions. Note that in the panels on either side of the painting, the



FIG.3b The Chandela Wept a Steady Stream of Tears

one on the left portrays the gossip and rumors that abound about this incident in his life, while the one on the right most likely depicts the priest at the temple and the brothers dismounting their horses in the forest.<sup>9</sup>

Both stylistically and thematically, Naresh Paswan’s triptych *Raja Salhesh’s Puja* (CAT.45) could not be more distinct from Le Coz’s atmospheric, emotive illustrations. In many ways, this triptych is an anthropologist’s dream because of the minutiae depicting virtually every aspect of Salhesh’s worship. It includes the ritual materials used in prayer (e.g., betel leaves, *paathiya* or bamboo platter, and specific flowers native to Mithila); the musical instruments favored by the devotees (e.g. *dhol* and *taasha*, two kinds of drum); the ritual actors involved (e.g. the *bhagat*, i.e. holy man or shamanic priest and *dhalwaha*, the *bhagat*’s helper); the sequence of rituals in Salhesh’s propitiation (see, for instance, the 10th drawing in the side panels, which depicts the *bhagat* swinging *aahuti* or fireballs, in a purification ritual

wherein a bamboo stick is sanctified with Ganges water and other ritual materials); and consecrated foods (e.g. *kheer* or rice pudding). Equally noteworthy is the 11th drawing in the series, which conveys the charged atmosphere at the scene of worship, which now includes the purified bamboo stick within a sanctified space, demarcated by a circle drawn on the ground. Although many characters and details may be hard to make out for the uninitiated viewer, the artist's accompanying explanations elucidate an elaborate practice of worship that has seldom been shown in such detail. In the 14th drawing in the side panels, for instance, we even see the *Chuharmal bhagat*, a holy man specifically related to Salhesh's cousin Chuharmal; this serves as a reminder of how little of these cultures are documented or studied, as it underlines the interconnections between the orally narrated legend and the extant worship.

The main drawings at the triptych's center likewise offer intricately rendered Salhesh iconography. They show Salhesh and his retinue, including Chuharmal, Kusuma *malin* (a *malin* is a female gardener or flower maiden; Kusuma is one of his two main *malin* admirers), the gates of Salhesh's palace, and a contemporary scene of a family contemplating whether they should attend the fair held as a part of Salhesh *puja* festivities (*puja* is a ritual of worship). The central part of this triptych is compositionally unusual both in the manner in which the panels are divided as well as the central square being turned at a 45 degree angle. In totality, this smorgasbord offers comprehensive details of current worship practices, aspects of the legend (such as the palace gates and retinue), the exquisitely rendered lush forest in which the legend unfolds, and a scene showing the less ritual aspects of festivities (such as the fair).

While Naresh Paswan's triptych interprets the Raja Salhesh rituals of worship, these exhibitions include several paintings by **Shanti Devi** that feature Salhesh's mythology. They reveal the artist's somewhat whimsical take on the narrative, such as in her two paintings portraying Salhesh and Kusuma *malin* catching the thieving Chuharmal red-handed.<sup>10</sup> In one, (CAT.7) the artist shows how, using special

powers, Salhesh has turned himself into a bumble bee while Kusuma has turned herself into a flower, so that Chuharmal can't recognize them. Their smiling faces indicate their pleasure in having caught Chuharmal in the act of riding away, after having stolen the queen Chandravati's clothes and jewelry. In another, the sun god (a friend of Salhesh, according to the artist) is depicted at the center, with mirrors showing Salhesh's and Kusuma's faces (CAT.10). These are special mirrors that allow them to see everything Chuharmal does. At the borders are parrots representing Hiranman (Salhesh's parrot), and more *malin*, whose faces magically mirror any action that Salhesh wishes to witness. In a third work, which – according to the artist – depicts a scene set on a mountain in Nepal, a lion-mounted Salhesh has turned himself into a lotus and is transferring his special powers to his sister Vansapati and her son Korikanha (alternately called Karikant), so that they become impervious to any potential lion attacks (FIG.4).

Three other artists' works in these exhibitions similarly depict aspects of Salhesh's mythology. **Chano Devi's Raja Salhesh** (CAT.13) portrays some key moments in his life and worship, including rituals involving the possession of a *baghat* (shamanic holy man) and a procession with musicians, and possibly a battle with his cousin Chuharmal, and a wedding scene. The lowest row appears to be filled with *malin*. While Salhesh appears mounted on an elephant (in Salhesh iconography, the elephant is his designated mount), his brothers Moti Ram and Budheswar as well as his nephew Karikant, appear on horseback. In the topmost row, Chano Devi depicts parrots, a symbol of love in Indian culture and a likely reference to Hiranman. However, taking pride of place are the two central panels showing a garden with trees and birds. As may be guessed from the title of the main exhibition here, Raja Salhesh's garden features prominently in his tale, so Chano Devi's focus on the garden is fitting. **Urmila Devi's Raja Salhesh Rasa** (CAT. 34) is a charming interpretation, featuring Salhesh in the center on elephant-back, with his parrot Hiranman perched behind. Encircling Salhesh are alternately *malin* and

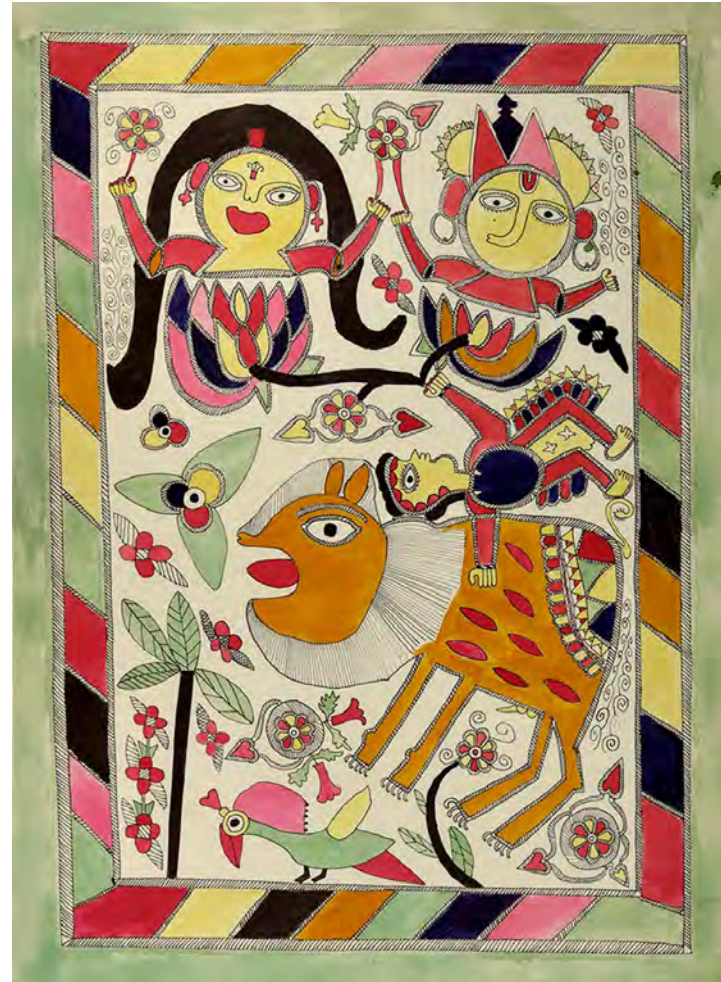


FIG.4 Raja Salhesh on the Back of a Lion (1969)  
Ink and gouache on paper  
by Shanti Devi (born 1958)  
Collection of Radford  
University Art Museum  
Donated by the Ethnic Arts  
Foundation

According to the artist Shanti Devi: *This is the scene of a mountain in Nepal. On the back of the lion is Raja Salhesh in the form of a lotus—who gives power to his sister Vansapati, the goddess of the forest [shown at the top left] and her son Korikanha [at top right]. You can see two black lines which connect all three of them. Through this line Raja Salhesh transfers his power to them. Although the lion can attack anyone, Salhesh protects his sister and nephew from attack. Other plants and birds are just part of the garden.* (Translation by Kaushik Kumar Jha)

birds, and at the corners are amorous birds interlaced with leaves and flowers. The circles are demarcated with tall grasses, reinforcing the impression of a *rasa lila* (a play in aesthetics or a dance of divine love) in Salhesh's garden. Compare these two paintings with **Raj Kumar Paswan's The Malins Pursue Raja Salhesh** (CAT.18), where Salhesh's adoring flower-maidens pursue their hero in a garden filled with birds, flowers, trees and even fish and tortoises. A dizzying mosaic, it has repeating images of Salhesh, the *malins*, and birds, as though one were viewing it through a dioptic scope.

At this point, it may not be out of place to highlight some of the social undertones of this exuberant garden. It functions not only as a location for Salhesh's eventual marital felicity but is also the space he is responsible for guarding in his role as a watchman. Neel Rekha explains that the Dusadhs, as agricultural laborers rearing cattle, pigs, etc., earned a living primarily by labor and cultivation. Yet,

They also monopolized the post of village *chowkidars* (watchmen) in the district. One of the titles among the Dusadhs was *Paswan* which means a watchman or a guard. . . . However, in the colonial accounts, the Dusadhs were enlisted among the criminal castes of the district.<sup>11</sup>

Jyotindra Jain makes a similar statement, adding, “As we shall discover in the orally narrated and painted legend of Raja Salhesh, most of their deities were expert thieves or glorified watchmen.”<sup>12</sup> There may seem to be an inherent contradiction in Dusadhs being watchmen and alternately, thieves, though perhaps not if one thinks of the phrase ‘poacher turned gamekeeper.’ Grierson’s text makes somewhat cryptic references to the deceitful and intractable qualities of a Dusadh, the caste that Salhesh belongs to: “Trust not the caste of Dusádhs.” and “A Dusádhi by caste will never confess.”<sup>13</sup> The categorization of certain castes as ‘criminal’ during the British rule of India was — needless to say — hugely problematic and stigmatizing. This colonial history and the characterization of their alternately sentinel and thieving roles in their own legends will doubtless provide further fodder in future artistic and literary interpretations of Salhesh’s narrative. While it would be instructive to explore the sociopolitically charged implications of attributing certain pejorative traits to an entire community on the basis of caste (or lack thereof, in this instance, considering its *hors* caste status), the beauty of Raja Salhesh’s garden provides a graceful counterpoint to the story’s more gritty possibilities. Indeed, over numerous retellings and artistic interpretations, the garden has been imbued with a symbolic and aesthetic character. As one might expect, it is nature’s timeless beauty that suffuses such illustrations.

Grierson’s translation of the ‘Song of King Salhes’ is replete with references to nature, for instance, in Dauná Málin’s prayer to the deities: “For such a spouse have I built a bridal chamber of fresh bamboo.”<sup>14</sup> Bamboo groves, of course, are regularly depicted in *kohbar ghar* (conjugal chamber) paintings by Mithila’s artists. As I have noted elsewhere, bamboo’s upright growth is possibly a metaphor for male virility.<sup>15</sup> Dauná Málin goes on to say, “For him did I plant a garden, and set therein flowers of varied hue; the *Belí*, *Chamelí*, *Bulkunj*, *Newár*, *Tekhari*, did I set in the garden for Salhes.”<sup>16</sup> Just as there are references to this garden located in the kingdom of Morang (a region in Nepal), there are mentions of the Sál forest.<sup>17</sup> Descriptions of natural

habitats recur, whether it’s the garden and the forest, the swamps and marshes of Pakariá, or indeed the mountains of Tarenganá. Within the unfolding narrative, it is natural habitats that most clearly define the notion of ‘place,’ which almost turns into a character in Salhesh’s story.

While in Maithil literature or oral history, natural habitats recur, in Mithila painting, nature is important in more ways than one. For instance, Vidyant Jha has compiled a comprehensive list of pigments that the Mithila painters obtain from natural materials, including from seeds, roots, rhizomes, leaves, wood, flowers, bracts, and fruits. Examples include red from the *poro* seed (*Basella rubra*), black from the *jau* seed (*Hordeum vulgare*), ochre and shades of red from the *katahar* root (*Artocarpus heterophyllus*), green from the *bel* leaf (*Aegle marmelos*), blue from the *nil* leaf (*Indigofera tinctoria*), chocolate brown from the *khair* wood (*Acacia catechu*), yellow from the *genda* flower (*Tagetes erecta*), and a shade of light pink from the *kadamba* fruit (*Anthocephalus cadamba*).<sup>18</sup>

These exhibitions feature several paintings that celebrate Mithila’s abundant vegetation and in many instances, the colors that were used to make the paintings would have been derived from Mithila’s vegetation. Yet this is not the case in the young **Abhilasha Kumari’s** *Peacocks in a Tree Next to a Tank Full of Fish* (FIG.5), as increasingly, she and other young artists are using acrylic colors. This painting nevertheless replicates abundance through its dense and colorful patterning.<sup>19</sup> Her composition calls to mind a Rajput miniature, with a water body in the foreground and a *rasa lila* in the upper part of the painting, except that instead of the Hindu god Krishna and his adoring *gopis* (milkmaids), Abhilasha Kumari offers us peacocks in profile posing around a dancing, front-facing peacock on a centrally positioned tree, framed further by tree branches interlacing the ‘attendant’ peacocks. In lieu of flowering lotuses, the water body is filled with fish, a common symbol of prosperity across India and especially favored by Mithila’s artists.<sup>20</sup> Four more paintings by the same artist, all in the main



FIG.5 *Peacocks in a Tree Next to a Tank Full of Fish* (2014) Acrylic on Paper By Abhilasha Kumari (born 2000) Sarisab Pahi, District Madhubani, Bihar Collection of John H. Bowles, Radford, Virginia

exhibition, offer us varied compositions of the peacock and fish theme (CAT.22.1-4). It is a subject also explored by **Raj Kumar Paswan** in his graphic and boldly rendered drawing, *Composite Tree* (CAT.19), which mysteriously has a tree filled with fish, flanked by peacocks on either side, who are attempting to peck the fish. Equally compelling is the same artist’s subtle drawing, *Kachbacchias in a Tree* (CAT.20), which so tends towards abstraction that the *kachbacchia* birds could just as easily be the foliage of the tree in which they’re presumably roosting.

**Naresh Paswan’s** *Birdhouse* (FIG.6) is a more controlled depiction of the birds and fish theme,

sporting a border with a repetitive motif of fish, and tree branches radiating out towards the border. What saves this meticulously executed drawing from being too constrained is the interplay between symmetry and asymmetry. While the birds at the top of the bird house and on the feeding perches are symmetrically composed, the birds in the bird house and the fish in the pond below break the symmetry sufficiently to make the eye dance across his depiction. Just as Raj Kumar Paswan’s two arboreal paintings display stylistic versatility, Naresh’s paintings in these exhibitions demonstrate his thematic diversity: the COVID-19 pandemic



FIG.6 *Birdhouse* (2021)  
Acrylic on paper  
by Naresh Paswan (born  
1983)  
Village Kunwar, Dist.  
Madhubani, Bihar (now  
residing in Muscat,  
Oman)  
Collection of Pippi Miller,  
Giles County, Virginia



FIG.7 *Tree* (2018)  
Acrylic on paper primed  
with diluted *gobar*  
(cow dung)  
by Mahanama Devi (born  
1969)  
Village Jitwarpur, District  
Madhubani, Bihar  
Collection of John H.  
Bowles, Radford, Virginia

(FIG.24), Raja Salhesh (CAT.45), two scenes from the *Ramayana* (CAT.43.1 and 43.2), and birds and fish are all rendered in his punctilious style. Fish also appear in **Mahanama Devi's** *Tank with Fish and Snakes* (CAT.42), a startling composition that includes two water snakes diagonally crossing each other. The bold stripes on these two snakes and a couple of smaller ones are conspicuous in an otherwise understated artwork showing a multitude of fish, creatures that look remarkably like newts (but are perhaps meant to be eelvers), and a couple of tiny turtles (lower right). What is as unusual in this

composition is the juxtaposition of nature's creatures and the manmade shapes evident in the tank: the rectangular outer border that also frames the painting (again sporting a motif of fish), a small, rectangular shape at the center of the tank (perhaps a filter?), and two arc-like enclosures on the top and bottom right. All three structures within the tank are 'pierced,' as it were, by the snakes' heads, lending further drama. The water's motion is suggested by the varied sizes of fish swimming in different schools heading in distinct directions. The separate 'schools' of fish are encompassed in the zonal divisions the artist creates

by using both the snakes and man-made structures as compositional demarcations. Mahanama Devi creates multiple perspectives here, compelling varied angles of viewing through her use of scale, directionality and demarcation. This painting is thus rendered perspectival.

Despite Mahanama Devi's vibrant pops of color, *Tree* (FIG.7), her other work in this exhibition, remains just as subtle as *Tank with Fish and Snakes*. A much simpler composition, this feels like a tree of life in Raja Salhesh's garden, perhaps because of

the two sections at the bottom that almost function as inner borders, one showing elephants and the other showing human figures that could well be *malin*. Likewise with **Urmila Devi's** delicately drawn *Tree* (CAT.35), in which she arranges female figures, elephants and birds in an almost labyrinthine composition around a central rectangle showing birds in a tree. Compare these with **Sarup Lal Paswan's** abstract *Birds in the Garden of Raja Salhesh* (CAT.15). They're so abstract that they form a language of their own, like the Hill Korwa artists' 'writing' in Madhya Pradesh.<sup>21</sup> Figuration gives way



FIG.8 *Chano Devi* (2012) Gouache on paper by Martine Le Coz (born 1955) Amboise, France Collection of the artist

to a meditative act. This is not mere doodling; it has turned into a visual chant. The birds, such as they are, have disappeared into the paper. Stopping short of identification, this drawing calls to mind a line of J. Swaminathan as to how certain abstract images can carry “all the imagination and emotion which the human mind is capable of without translating them into cognizable forms.”<sup>22</sup>

Visitors to these exhibitions will doubtless be struck by the range of styles displayed, from Shanti Devi’s figurative paintings, some of which are almost psychedelic in their palette, to Sarup Lal Paswan’s monochromatic abstractions. In her catalog essay titled “An Encounter with Mithila’s Culture: Artistic and Philosophic Affinities,” Martine Le Coz clarifies that she does not regard herself as an artist. She sees herself more as an illustrator, animating and



FIG.9 *Jamuna Devi* (2012) Gouache on paper by Martine Le Coz (born 1955) Amboise, France Collection of the artist

being animated by different characters. Her ability to absorb and mirror the diverse styles displayed by Mithila’s artists is reflected in her portraits shown in the Tyler Gallery exhibition, such as in her portrayals of the late Dalit artists Chano Devi and Jamuna Devi (FIGS.8 and 9). The former is shown with the *chandrama*, the full-moon motif that often recurred in Chano Devi’s work, while the latter is shown emulating Jamuna Devi’s characteristic renderings of celestial deities. The rays of the sun appear as arms, the hands wielding paintbrushes, in recognition of Jamuna Devi’s leading role in Mithila’s art.

While Le Coz’s portraits of Mithila artists demonstrate how she is finely attuned to their styles and keenly aware of their thematic depictions, her catalog essay as well as her Salhesh illustrations reveal a deeper affinity: a journey of discovery on personal, artistic and philosophic levels. Her concise yet moving essay highlights an encounter with the other, a theme that also occurs in Donald Stadtner’s and David Szanton’s essays. It is an encounter that she

writes about with candor, allowing us to understand how something that seems uncomfortably foreign might still prove irresistible, perhaps because of the spiritual strength that Le Coz perceives in the art of Mithila’s women, half-way across the world from France, yet like her, hunched over their artistic creations. While Le Coz senses spiritual power in Mithila art, she nevertheless describes it as “fleeting and only perceptible at the very edge of human sensibility.”<sup>23</sup> Despite the great difficulty we have in verbalizing such experiences, Le Coz manages to hint at the transcendent quality that is so elusive, yet undeniably present, in much of Mithila art.



FIG.10 *Celestial Deities* (late 1970s) Natural colors on diluted *gobar* (cow dung) stained paper by Jamuna Devi (1922-2011) Village Jitwarpur, District Madhubani, Bihar Collection of John H. Bowles, Radford, Virginia

In her community, Jamuna Devi was considered a leading pioneer in technical and thematic aspects of painting on paper. Among Mithila’s Dalits, mural paintings often featured figures bordered by a series of dots—that added a kind of sparkling character to the painting as a whole. The murals were typically painted on domestic walls surfaced with a mixture of clay and *gobar* (cow dung)—and Jamuna Devi was the first artist in Mithila who primed sheets of blank paper with diluted *gobar*, so as to give it a more natural hue. Many of the natural pigments that she used are highly vulnerable to fading when exposed to light, and thus few of her early paintings are in prime condition. Until recently, this painting was stored in a tin chest by one of her neighboring artists—and thus its coloring is relatively intact, but it suffers from some moisture-related damage. (J.H. Bowles)

It is a quality that is especially palpable in works that engage with belief systems, whether it's in portrayals of demigods like Salhesh, in works depicting Hindu deities such as Kali or in paintings portraying the shadow planet deity Rahu, who is particularly favored by Mithila's Dalit artists. Yet, not all such works embody a transcendental spirit. Not much is known about the belief or worship of Rahu by Mithila's Dalit communities. Jain's text describes it briefly in Uttam Paswan's words, offering a few details, including its location (a *kud khet*, i.e. cultivation field), and the sacrifice of a sheep that is first thrown "in volleyball fashion"<sup>24</sup> into enclosures created by stretching *dhotti* (piece of cloth worn as a lower garment by men) where groups of celebrants are made to stand. **Urmila Devi's *Rahu Puja*** (CAT.36) simply depicts women worshipping various planetary deities with floral offerings. **Lalita Devi's *Rahu Puja*** (CAT.37.2), on the other hand, shows several activities, among which are musicians (drummers, possibly *shehnai* players and cymbalists) playing their instruments, women cooking the ritual meal and three scenes described by Uttam Paswan, namely the *bhagat* (holy men) who in a state of possession, lie down and allow grain to be pounded into a mortar placed on their chest (center middle), walk barefoot on a ladder made of naked swords (middle right) and walk on fire (bottom right). **Rampari Devi's *Rahu Puja*** (CAT.37.1) likewise shows celebrants, musicians (two different kinds of drummers on upper left, center right and lower middle, a flautist and a *shehnai* player on upper left), devotees walking over a path of burning embers (lower left), a *bhagat* having grain pounded on his chest (center middle), and one mounting a ladder of swords (right). Several of these scenes are also shown in **Ranjit Paswan's *Rahu Puja*** (CAT.37.3), including walking barefoot on a ladder of unsheathed swords (penultimate row, inner left), the cooking of the ritual meal (bottom row, left), and allowing grain to be pounded on the chest (bottom row, inner right). Twelve sequences are shown on the bottom half of the work, while the upper half shows a resplendent tree of life filled with peacocks, other birds, and two

squirrels on top of the tree. It is an intriguing – and almost odd – composition, in that the elegance of the upper half contrasts with the anthropological detail offered in the lower half.

While the above-mentioned thematic interpretations of Rahu are diverse, what is just as striking is the extraordinary stylistic range displayed in these artworks exploring a single theme. Urmila Devi's interpretation is richly intricate as in fine embroidery, creating a delightfully ethereal impression (note especially the border with flowering plants and birds, the peacocks and the tree's foliage [upper left], and the women interspersing the composition). The brightness of the orange sun and women's garments is off-set by the subtlety of the other muted colors she uses. Lalita Devi's composition is stylistically comparable yet distinct. Densely knotted like a tapestry or crewelwork, it nevertheless incorporates a couple of breathing spaces, such as the wavy branches of the tree (upper right) and the ceremonial platter (lower middle). Both of these works contrast sharply with the structured formality of Ranjit Paswan's monochromatic *Rahu Puja*. Rampari Devi's interpretation of the same theme shares compositional features with Lalita Devi's (such as the breathing space created by the ceremonial platter (lower left) and by the tree's foliage (upper right) but in other respects, it reflects the artist's distinct aesthetic, for example in its jewel-toned coloring, geometric border, and stocky, boldly rendered figures. What is noteworthy is that while every other figure is shown in profile, the two figures of the *bhagat* face the viewer, one seen from the top and one viewed from the front. As noted in David Szanton's essay (p. 14), traditional Indian artists generally depict mortals in profile, and divinities full-faced (here, the *bhagat* is shown spiritually possessed by Salhesh and is thus temporarily deified).

It would be impossible to mention all the works in the exhibitions that merit a fuller discussion and there are many that this essay omits due to spatial constraints, including Lalita Devi's dizzying *Flood* (CAT.25) and her lush *Toddy Palm Harvest*

(CAT.24), as well as Dharamsheela Devi's delightful portrayal of her village, *Jitwarpur* (CAT.11). There is much yet that needs to be done as regards the study and appreciation of Mithila art, and especially Mithila's Dalit art, as evinced in the meager information available on such cherished deities as Rahu. These four exhibitions thus plant seeds that the curators hope will grow into abundant trees of life, as lush, richly layered and populated as those depicted by Mithila's Dalit artists, and as bountiful as those in *Raja Salhesh's Garden*.

## NOTES

1. As she stated, "The Bihar drought of 1968 accentuated the problem of finding light labour schemes for the women of the area and encouraged me to start a project to provide these women with handmade paper on which they could paint." Pupal Jayakar, *The Earth Mother: Legends, Ritual Arts, and Goddesses of India* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990, 104.) [First published as *The Earthen Drum* by National Museum of India, New Delhi, 1980.]
2. Donald Stadner, "'Coincidence is God's way of remaining anonymous,' or how I came to meet Bhaskar Kulkarni and help with his wooden crate" in *Raja Salhesh's Garden*, eds. John H. Bowles and Stephen Arbury (Radford, Virginia: Radford University Art Museum, 2022, p.11) <https://www.radford.edu/content/cvpa/home/art-museum/publications.html>.
3. Pupal Jayakar, *The Earth Mother: Legends, Ritual Arts, and Goddesses of India* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990, 116.) [First published as *The Earthen Drum* by National Museum of India, New Delhi, 1980.]
4. In various texts, Salhesh is alternately spelled as Salhes, or Salhesa. As with most Indian names, there are likewise variant spellings for almost all the characters in the Raja Salhesh narrative, not only due to regional and dialect variations in pronunciation but equally due to trans-phoneticization. So his cousin Chuharmal is also spelled as Chouharmal by Le Coz and as Chuhar Mal in Jain's text. His sister Vansapti is also pronounced/spelled as Bansapti and the artist Shanti Devi refers to Salhesh's nephew (Vansapti's son) as Korikanha while others have called him Karikant.
5. Neel Rekha, "Doing Fieldwork and Discovering Harijan Art in Madhubani" in *Fieldwork in South Asia: Memories, Moments and Experiences*, eds. Sarit K. Chaudhuri and Sucheta Sen Chaudhuri (Sage: New Delhi and Thousand Oaks, 2014), 277. Note that the Chamar community are a caste of tanners or leather workers treated as untouchables by upper caste Hindus. In this book, the Chamar are

more broadly termed Dalit. Dusadhs, agricultural laborers who are also treated as untouchables, are likewise broadly termed Dalit in this book.

6. Despite the early parallels, in a paper discussing the Dalit artist Uttam Paswan's paintings, Jyotindra Jain concludes that Mithila's Dalit art only has tenuous links to the Mithila art tradition. He points out that works by the Kayastha, Brahmin and Mahapatra (i.e. upper caste) painters in Mithila may be compared because of shared religious beliefs, "as well as iconographic and stylistic features (1995: 208)," in part due to the shared traditions of *aripan* (floor-paintings) and *kohbar* (murals made in the conjugal chamber). However, with the Scheduled Castes (Scheduled Castes are officially designated communities of people and among the most disadvantaged socio-economic communities in India) of Dusadh, Mali, Chamar, Nat, etc., who "did not traditionally possess such well established modes of painting as *aripan* or *kohbar* (ibid.)," Jain feels that one cannot establish a school of painting on the basis of caste. "These could be described as Mithila or Madhubani traditions only by virtue of the fact that they too flourished within the same geographical area (ibid., 208-209)."
7. Gilian Rose's methodological framework for the critical analysis of images considers three sites at which images' meanings are made: production of an image, the image itself, and its reception. She emphasizes that while considering images' effects, one has to accept that an image contains something irreducible in words. Put another way, images have their own visual effects, which mobilize ways of seeing. Gilian Rose, *Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to Interpreting Visual Objects* (Sage: London, 2001), 16.
8. Martine Le Coz, *Le roi de la montagne: L'Épopée du Roi Salhesh* (Paris: Massot Éditions, 2019), 31 (translation mine).
9. It is unclear whether Urmila Devi's painting *Rebirth of Raja Salhesh* depicts Salhesh's rebirth as a low-caste baby or whether it depicts Jaybhardan's symbolic rebirth as Salhesh, the deified hero. The dense vegetation and the figures in huts suggest that it may be the former.
10. These explanations by the artist were obtained and translated by Kaushik Kumar Jha.
11. Neel Rekha, "Doing Fieldwork and Discovering Harijan Art in Madhubani" in *Fieldwork in South Asia: Memories, Moments and Experiences*, eds. Sarit K. Chaudhuri and Sucheta Sen Chaudhuri (Sage: New Delhi and Thousand Oaks, 2014), 283.
12. Jyotindra Jain, "The Bridge of Vermillion: Narrative Rhythm in the Dusadh Legends of Mithila" in *Indian Painting: Essays in Honour of Karl J. Khandalavala*, eds. B. N. Goswamy and Usha Bhatia (New Delhi: Lalit Kala Akademi, 1995), 210.
13. George A. Grierson, *An Introduction to the Maithilī Language of North Bihār containing a grammar, chrestomathy & vocabulary, Part II: Chrestomathy and Vocabulary* (Extra number to Journal, Asiatic Society, Bengal, Calcutta: Asiatic Society, 1882), 14 and 16 respectively.



14. George A. Grierson, *An Introduction to the Maithilī Language of North Bihār containing a grammar, chrestomathy & vocabulary, Part II: Chrestomathy and Vocabulary* (Extra number to Journal, Asiatic Society, Bengal, Calcutta: Asiatic Society, 1882), 11.

15. Aurogeeta Das, “Pattern” in *Bhumijan: Artists of the Earth*, ed. Minhazz Majumdar (New Delhi: Mitchell S. Crites, 2022), 55.

16. George A. Grierson, *An Introduction to the Maithilī Language of North Bihār containing a grammar, chrestomathy & vocabulary, Part II: Chrestomathy and Vocabulary*, (Extra number to Journal, Asiatic Society, Bengal, Calcutta: Asiatic Society, 1882), 12.

17. Jain’s 1995 essay includes Uttam Paswan’s account of the Raja Salhesh story. To what extent the place names in Grierson’s translation correspond with those in Jain’s and Le Coz’s texts is debatable. For instance, in Jain’s essay, Salhesh’s birth takes place in a village called Phulbari (literally translates to ‘flower house’), which is not mentioned in Grierson’s translation. However, the fortified town mentioned by Jain, Pakadiagadh, clearly corresponds to Pakariá in Grierson’s text. See also Le Coz’s painting titled *You Would Therefore Be Rivals, Because He Is Your Cousin*, which features the splendid gardens in Pakaria. While Jain’s essay mentions a kingdom called Mukamagadh, which has no equivalent in Grierson’s text, his mention of the *malins*’ kingdom, Morangraj, evidently corresponds to Morang in Grierson’s text. It is conceivable that place names in Grierson’s text were anglicized.

18. Vidyantath Jha, “Indigenous Colours in Mithila (North Bihar) – A Historical Perspective” in *Indian Journal of History of Science*, 37: 1 (New Delhi: Indian National Science Academy, 2002), 42-43.

19. The artist painted this and other peacock and fish-themed paintings featured in this exhibition when she was only 14 years old.

20. This is not unlike Lalita Devi’s *Krishna in Kadam Tree Having Stolen the Gopis’ Clothes*, which stylistically conflates common compositional features of Pahari miniatures, *pichwai* paintings and tree of life depictions. A lush and abundant tree of life populated by a menagerie of delightful creatures frames a central *mandala* of Krishna surrounded by adoring *gopi* (much like *pichwai* compositions), with more *gopi* bathing in the waters below (reminiscent of Pahari and Rajput miniatures). Yet, this compositionally inventive painting adheres to the earthy palette of Mithila art, particularly the art of Mithila’s Dalit women.

21. In 1983, the artist Swaminathan met with the Hill or Pahari Korwas living in the Raigarh and Sarguja districts of Madhya Pradesh. Either they requested paper to communicate with him when he had difficulty in doing because he did not speak their Korwari dialect, or Swaminathan offered them paper (there are differing accounts). What they produced was, according to Swaminathan, calligraphic in character — neither hieroglyphic nor representational but possibly aspiring to become writing.

22. J. Swaminathan, *The Perceiving Fingers*, Catalogue of the Roopankar Museum (Bhopal: Bharat Bhavan in association with All India Handicrafts Board, 1987), 61.

23. Martine Le Coz, “An Encounter with Mithila’s Culture: Artistic and Philosophic Affinities” in *Raja Salhesh’s Garden*, eds. John H. Bowles and Stephen Arbury, Radford, Virginia: Radford University Art Museum, 2022, 24. (translation mine). <https://www.radford.edu/content/cvpa/home/art-museum/publications.html>.

24. Jyotindra Jain, “The Bridge of Vermilion: Narrative Rhythm in the Dusadh Legends of Mithila” in *Indian Painting: Essays in honour of Karl J. Khandalavala*, eds. B. N. Goswamy and Usha Bhatia (New Delhi: Lalit Kala Akademi, 1995), 217.

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## ‘Coincidence is God’s way of remaining anonymous,’ or how I came to meet Bhaskar Kulkarni and help with his wooden crate

by Donald M. Stadner

The train stalled again, somewhere shy of Patna. But the delay took my attention back to the thin long crate on the floor between us. It was but a few hours earlier that Bhaskar and I were haggling with two coolies at the Banaras Cantt. station. One was hired to throw himself from the platform onto the moving train that chugged slowly into the station to secure two spots in one of the unreserved third-class bogies. The second shouldered the long wooden crate. It wasn’t actually ‘shouldered’ but balanced on a twisted cloth flattened on his head and expertly steadied with both hands. He ran like the wind down the platform but we were steps behind him. Once or twice we lost him until we spotted the crate bobbing up and down above the crowd with the coolie’s every step. Shortly, we had two places across from each other with the crate as an improvised ottoman. We then settled in for our long journey to Patna.

But my thoughts drifted back to the chaos and confusion of the train station we just left behind. I had feared that we would never be able to squeeze our way onto the train. *Chai wallahs* (tea vendors), fruit sellers and the Wheeler’s Book Stall kiosk with local and national newspapers completed the familiar picture, like a Hollywood Biblical epic with thousands of stand-ins. The chaos was supercharged by scores of competing coolies dressed in thick regulation cotton *kurtas*—once brilliant red, but now faded and tattered. As our train pulled out we saw the hawkers and coolies quickly shift, en masse, to another platform, like a swarm of bees moving from one exhausted fruit tree to the next. The station’s namesake was the former British Cantonment—the old colonial term for a military and civilian enclave with government offices, barracks and bungalows. In

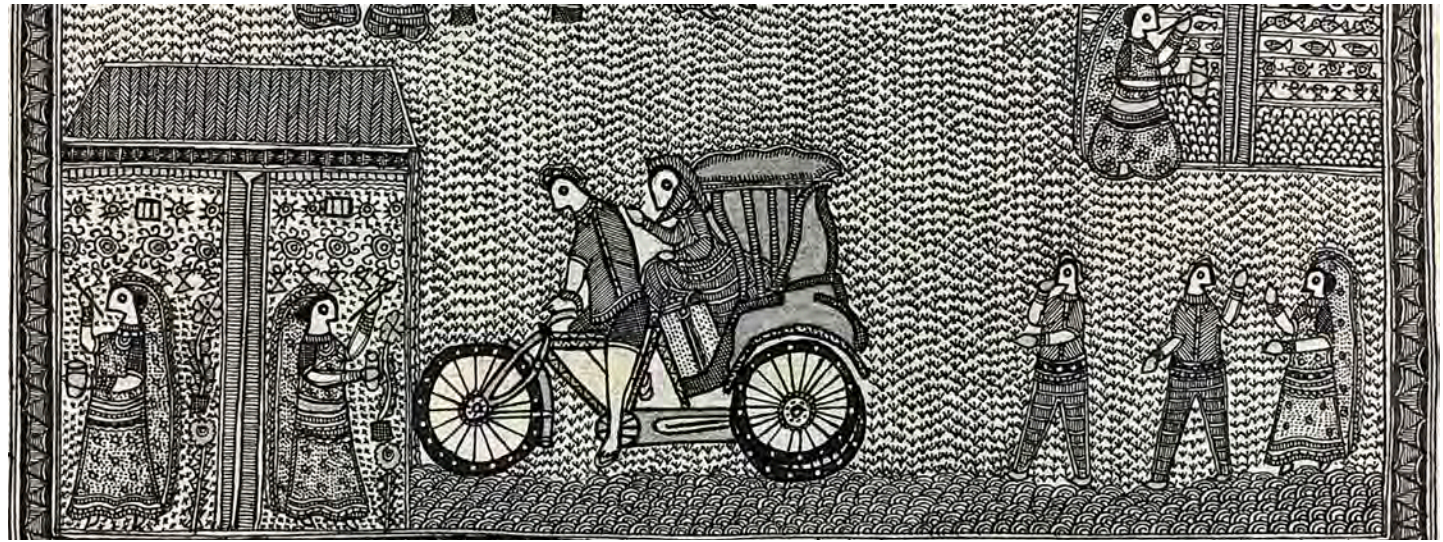


FIG.11 Ranjit Paswan’s *Bhaskar Kulkarni Arrives at Jitwarpur* (2022, detail; for the entire painting, see CAT.40).

Banaras you simply instructed the rickshaws “Cantt., *chalo*” and you were on your way.

Our train remained stalled on the edge of nowhere. But we were comfortable enough, our feet propped up on the crate. My groundnut supply was running low and I kicked myself for ordering only eight annas worth on the Banaras platform. My unshelled nuts were wrapped in paper that was once a math exercise for school kids. As I dug deeper the hand-written math test unfolded itself inside. I was pleased that I could still follow the simple equations, my public elementary school in Stockton, California, still serviceable.



Bhaskar Kulkarni

### The Cantt. Station

How Bhaskar Kulkarni and I established our odd rapport there at the Banaras Cantt. station was quite simply coincidence. He certainly cut a striking figure on the station platform, perched on a bench with this curious long crate at his feet. His classic black and silver Nikkormat was the first thing that I noticed since a costly imported camera was a rare sight in India in those days, especially in Banaras. The camera was strung about his neck, with no case, ready to go into action, like a professional photojournalist. And then there was his well-worn pair of blue jeans that contrasted with the surrounding sea of white *dhotis*, *pyjamas* and *kurtas* so ubiquitous in 1969. His full beard was neither straggly nor groomed but slivers of silver strands led me to reckon his age in his late thirties or early forties. His appearance made no overtly pronounced statement one way or another, but he seemed comfortable with himself. He was soft spoken and rarely allowed himself even a casual smile as he smoked one cigarette after another. In short, there was a subtle sophistication about him more at home in Parisian cafés than Indian railway stations.

I could not get my mind off the wooden crate. My curiosity at the station soon overtook my timidity and, in miserable Hindi, I took the chance and broke the ice by asking him where he was headed. “To Patna,” he replied in English but offered no more. I delicately probed, now in English, and then he related that his mission was to distribute paper to women artists in villages near Madhubani, north of Patna. The paper for the paintings was in the crate. Then, on a whim that I still don’t understand, I asked if I could join him. I made a silly offer to help him with the crate. I was then twenty-one but a weakling compared to the coolies. But I was expecting my offer to help would tip the scales and he would allow me to tag along. Bhaskar said neither yes or no. But we both held third class tickets up to Patna and so many hours lay ahead of us for him to agree to my joining him—or for me to back out. I was to change trains in Patna anyway for Calcutta’s Howrah station.

Surely there’d be no fuss if I was a few days late to Calcutta. The world would go on without me. The war in Vietnam was raging but it was business as usual as the train crossed the border from eastern Uttar Pradesh into Bihar. The news headlines at

Wheeler's kiosk were about the dreaded Naxalite revolutionaries-cum-terrorists storming petty police stations in Bengal and Bihar. It all sounded so remote but this Naxalite news triggered a trifle fear if we were traveling into the remote Bihar countryside. But Bhaskar surely knew the ropes and we would stay clear of dodgy areas. Whether I would join him was still in limbo.

His mention of a "Madhubani school of Indian painting" mystified me.<sup>1</sup> He went on to explain that these paintings were being sold in shops in Delhi and Bombay, and articles about these village women artists were featured now and then in national magazines. Some of the painters were even being promoted by certain government agencies. And there was even talk of international exhibitions outside of India. Bhaskar was surprised (and a bit disappointed) that these village artists were unknown to me, but he detected my curiosity. This 'school' of artists associated with the Madhubani and the Mithila region of North Bihar had never once been mentioned during my year of studying Indian art at Banaras Hindu University. My faculty guru was Dr. Anand Krishna whose father was the legendary Rai Krishnadas, founder of the university's museum. Indian art for me was ancient Kushan and Gupta sculpture—and even the flamboyant medieval stone sculpture of Khajuraho was decadent proof of the inexorable decline from the Golden Age of the Guptas and the flowery poetry of Kalidasa of the fifth century. How could anything worthy emerge after those great traditions? I reluctantly admired Mughal and Rajasthani miniatures, but they were a poor reflection of the ancient murals of Ajanta. The very title of the popular textbook by A. L. Basham—*The Wonder That Was India*—clearly presented India's glories in the past tense; and I too believed Indian civilization drew a final gasp when subjected to the British yoke.

### Patna and Madhubani

Eventually we pulled into the Patna station, with the usual commotion of coolies investing the rail cars, like pirates boarding a ship. It was still up in

the air if Bhaskar was to assent to my request to join him. But a decision needed to be made then and there on the Patna station platform. We beckoned a coolie, and Bhaskar and I together lifted the crate onto the coolie's head. No words passed between us but a sixth sense told me that from that moment on, as we both shared the load of the crate, that we would be travel companions. Our rickshaw took us to a hotel that Bhaskar frequented when he needed to overnight in Patna. Quite basic, the room had two wobbly *charpois* that were cots comprised of basic wood frames supporting a net of woven ropes, with no sheets or bedding. A bare electric light bulb never stopped dimming up and down. A communal bathroom was at the end of the corridor. I slept in my clothes. As we drifted off to sleep we spoke for some time in the pitch darkness. We could make out the monotonous monotone chanting in mixed Hindi and Sanskrit from loudspeakers coming from a far off temple, punctuated by sharp staccato-like horns from trains passing close by.

Bhaskar was as curious about me as I was about him, and thus I shared my woes about escaping military conscription for the Vietnam war. My only hope for escape was to be accepted by a graduate program, since enrollment in a graduate program shielded you, at least in the fall of 1969 (this provision later ended). We couldn't see each other in the darkness, but his nuanced intonations of '*accha*' conveyed his understanding of my plight and his sympathy. In English *accha* usually translates merely as "good," but no other word in Hindi has so many such diverse and subtle meanings—simply by varying the tone and inflection. My application for an M.A. in art history had been sent to The University of Michigan, and it was now up to a faceless faculty committee to determine my fate.

I was only too glad to check out of this uncomfortable hotel in the morning. Bhaskar paid my share since he had a modest budget from an institute in Bombay headed by Pupul Jayakar; Anand Krishna had earlier told me about Jayakar's unique role as

a high ranking cultural activist within the Indian government.<sup>2</sup> The rickshaw pulled in beside a roadside place where we filled up again on *chai* and onion *pakoris*. Thereafter we continued to the jetty on the Ganges where we began the short trip upriver to our landing spot. The ferry was packed—a reminder of numerous frightful accounts of overloaded, capsized boats played into more fears of potential calamities. But luck was still holding out. No boat sinkings, no Naxalites. The ferry nudged into a sandy bank of the river, and as we disembarked it was quickly boarded by more coolies and hundreds of passengers. We made our way up a steep sandy embankment to waiting buses, the new coolie we hired unfazed by the heavy crate and the steep grade of the bank (so much for my earlier offer to help with the crate) and found two seats at the back of a bus going to Madhubani.

The hotel in Madhubani was as basic as the one in Patna. After checking in, Bhaskar locked our room with his own padlock. Then off we went with the crate—on yet another rickshaw—this time to a couple of villages whose names<sup>3</sup> I can no longer recall after a half-century.

A *pakkha* (paved) road out of the town soon led to wide dirt paths connected to the villages. Everyone recognized Bhaskar. The men nodded and raised a hand but with little energy, while the women stole a glance behind *saris* that drooped partially over their faces. Typical north Indian villages these were, with caste divisions and a palpable reticence overshadowing everything. No spontaneous smiles greeted us, although everyone knew Bhaskar from his previous visits. The local kids, by contrast, encircled our rickshaw with a mixture of wonderment and play, enlivened with loud, wordless but gleeful shouts. This was joy unmarred by inhibitions picked up from adults. The *rickshaw-wallah* now and then rang his bell, thus prompting the children blocking our path to scatter. Rarely did such villages attract visiting "outsiders." And I wondered how this charming childhood exuberance was to grow ever so muted as their years progressed.

Bhaskar knew his way around the village and directed the rickshaw down this lane and that. The women artists had been alerted within minutes of our entering the village, and some awaited our arrival, seated on their shaded verandas. But others remained out of sight, preferring to address Bhaskar through closed doors. While this initially appeared unwelcoming, Bhaskar was accustomed to this. I watched his interactions with interest. At some houses we enjoyed a cup of *chai* (sweet tea), sometimes followed by freshly drawn milk from the udders of cows tethered nearby. My worries about the Naxalites were silly when I realized that I could suffer far more from this unpasteurized milk. Still, I felt reassured knowing that, if I fell sick, a Calcutta hospital was a single train journey away.

Bhaskar exchanged blank sheets of paper from the crate—plus carefully counted rupee payments—for the women's finished paintings. Such transactions sometimes meant sliding papers, paintings and rupee bank notes through the narrow gaps beneath the firmly closed doors. Lunch brought another round of *chai* and *pakhori* at a village shop built as a lean-to against a home. We then pushed on to make yet more rounds at nearby villages, returning at the twilight "*gau-dhuli*" (cow dust) hour to our hotel and the *charpois*. While I only glimpsed a few of the paintings Bhaskar acquired that day, I recall their colorful, lively portrayals of Hindu divinities—along with some unfamiliar devotional imagery apparently relating to rituals unique to Mithila. Despite my attachment to antiquity and the "wonder that was India," I was drawn to the artistry and freshness of the paintings. I hoped for Bhaskar's success in popularizing Madhubani painting but I knew the road ahead would be a long one.

The next morning, after more *chai* and *pakoris*—and again sleeping in the same clothes—I told Bhaskar that I was jumping ship and would be retracing our tracks back to Patna and then on to Calcutta. I timed my departure so that there would be time to catch the train to Calcutta, without overnighing in Patna. We

shook hands and Bhaskar wished me well for escaping conscription. We never saw each other again.

Later, in the hustle and bustle of Bombay, I saw “Madhubani paintings”—from those distant Mithila villages—being displayed for sale, and again I reflected on my brief excursions with Bhaskar. I returned to the US, going overland to Europe from Delhi. In Afghanistan I came down with hepatitis, the type from contaminated water. I was accepted to graduate school but it was the hepatitis that really saved me in the end from conscription; and after my trip with Bhaskar there’d be yet more serendipitous encounters with Mithila paintings over the next fifty years.

### Texas

My few days with Bhaskar were long forgotten by the time I took up a teaching post in the art department at the University of Texas in Austin in 1976, after completing my degree at Berkeley. It was a joint appointment with the Asian Studies Center that was an umbrella for all those doing anything with Asia. The Austin campus was enjoying a tremendous faculty expansion, hiring Ph.Ds right and left from the best graduate schools, although the most promising graduates from the best universities declined offers from Texas and understandably went to higher ranked institutions; but Texas oil coffers were determined to purchase greatness at any cost.



FIG.12 Prof. Raymond Owens at his home in Austin, Texas, 1976

It was in 1976 or probably 1977 that I met Ray and Naomi Owens. Ray was a Chicago graduate in anthropology. He was a big burly fellow, over six feet, and very much my senior in every way. His demeanor was serious but he allowed himself a deep throated spontaneous laugh now and then. Naomi was pale, almost anemic in appearance, but I still recall her dark red hair, sometimes up in a bun and other times flowing down to her shoulders. Ray had called me to see if I could help with an exhibition of Mithila painting at the university that he was putting together. He needed a public lecture on Mithila paintings’ ‘Indian roots.’ Their home was like a Mithila museum, with choice examples framed and displayed on walls; but most of the works were spread about the floor or resting on chairs and tables. It felt like walking into the home of Mother Goose, but instead of children there were paintings everywhere. I delivered the talk, linking

the iconography of the paintings distantly to Gupta sculptures of Vishnu and Shiva and Ganesha and so on.<sup>4</sup> It was facile and simple minded, but it was one more accomplishment that I could pad into my slim C.V. I lost touch with Ray and Naomi after they moved from Texas, and it wasn’t until years later—in California—that I learned more about their involvement with Mithila painting.

Mithila painting then drifted deeper into my memory bank, only activated with an article or two in popular magazines or when I saw framed Mithila paintings at the homes of friends. I had long overcome my objections to anything beyond the Golden Gupta age, and in fact I had come full circle. I really appreciated the works from the villages I visited with Bhaskar, and regretted not taking notes and photos. But by then my brief trip with Bhaskar was but one faint glow that blended with so many other extraordinary experiences in India.

### California and Virginia

I was jolted back to Madhubani when I met John Bowles at a 2013 art history conference at UCLA.<sup>5</sup> Coincidence put us at the same table at lunch and the conversation drifted to his involvement in contemporary Gond and Mithila arts. I casually remarked that I had run into Bhaskar Kulkarni and delivered paper with him to the village artists. Then, a long pregnant moment of silence ensued, that finally broke with a blast of questions about Kulkarni and our experiences together. For John, it was like meeting someone out of the blue who knew a close relative who had been lost long ago or had disappeared. And it was this connection with Bhaskar Kulkarni that cemented our friendship. John immediately reminded me of the eccentric British anthropologist Verrier Elwin who dedicated his life to the contemporary tribal arts and cultures of India. Six years later, John



FIG.13 Gathering of scholars and students at the Mithila Art Institute, Madhubani, January 4, 2018 (For identities see Appendix.)

introduced me to another Mithila art aficionado, David Szanton—a UC Berkeley anthropologist/administrator who also headed the Ethnic Arts Foundation, which was founded by Ray Owens and his friends to advance recognition and patronage of Mithila art. Ray and David had become close pals since their graduate school days together at the University of Chicago, but David had never met Bhaskar—and so was eager to hear more about my chance encounter. In the course of sharing with him my 1969 adventures with Bhaskar, David also told me about Ray and the Ethnic Arts Foundation.

Although Ray had passed away in 2000, his will left a bequest supporting the Ethnic Arts Foundation's continued efforts championing Mithila art. Over the past forty-two years, the Foundation has generated funding for various international projects (including research, publications, and touring exhibitions), as well as establishing the Madhubani-based Mithila Art Institute.<sup>6</sup>

At the time I met David, the Ethnic Arts Foundation had just collaborated with San Francisco's Asian Art Museum to produce a major exhibition of Mithila paintings.<sup>7</sup> Curiously, it seemed that my own life trajectory strangely paralleled that of the paintings themselves. Indeed, it's quite possible that some of the very pictures that had just been exhibited in San Francisco were painted on sheets of paper from that crate I first saw at the Banaras Cantt. train station over a half-century ago. Later they too—like me—found their way first to Ray's house in Austin, then to the San Francisco Bay Area, where Ray's friend David and I discovered that we were virtual neighbors.<sup>8</sup> Another parallel: over the years, both the paintings and my regard for them ripened with appreciation. That ripening now continues—in Appalachia's New River Valley of southwest Virginia—where John is organizing four Mithila-related art exhibitions, including many paintings first acquired by Ray which were donated last year by the Ethnic Arts Foundation to Radford University Art

Museum. One of these exhibitions focuses entirely on the much neglected paintings of Mithila's Dalit artists. John explained to me how, almost a decade after my Mithila travels with Bhaskar, low caste women—in one of the very communities I visited with Bhaskar—started painting in the hopes of earning much needed income. Now, thanks to Radford University Art Museum's *Raja Salhesh's Garden* exhibition, three generations of Mithila's Dalit artists are celebrated for the first time in a group exhibition, featuring more than fifty paintings. For centuries, Westerners have marveled over India's aesthetic wonders—by artists either known or presumed to come from upper caste communities. Yet only relatively recently—through occasional publications<sup>9</sup> and exhibitions such as this one—has fresh light been shed on the creativity of communities too long neglected as “*achhut*” (“untouchable”).

Happenstance plays a far larger role in our lives than we allow ourselves to think. We have a great deal of control over our destiny but at so many critical points good or bad luck reigns. Some would call it fate, others capriciousness. Had I not been on the same train platform with Bhaskar at that moment, I would have traveled on to Calcutta. Had I not started teaching in Austin in 1976, I never would have come to know Ray and Naomi. Then there is also the coincidence of sitting down at the same lunch table with John Bowles at the conference in LA in 2013. Gradually, I realized that I had briefly stumbled upon the germinal stage of what would later flower into an indigenously-rooted contemporary art form—destined to attract and sustain ever growing scholarly interest and international patronage. Indeed, coincidences are but cracks in time into which God or the Devil jumps in. Even Einstein's discovery of relativity may have seemed to him like chance, coming to him suddenly and without warning, like the ‘solution’ to a Zen *koan*. Perhaps this is why the great physics genius remarked that “*Coincidence is God's way of remaining anonymous.*”

## NOTES

1 Although initially popularized as “Madhubani paintings” or “Madhubani art”—in reference to the regional city and district of Madhubani—starting in the 1970s, scholars and collectors of these arts have increasingly come to refer to them as “Mithila” art/paintings, given that most of these artists live in villages surrounding Madhubani (rather than within Madhubani itself). Indeed, since Bhaskar Kulkarni helped initiate this contemporary art movement in the late 1960s, its practitioners have expanded well beyond the boundaries of north Bihar's District Madhubani to include other areas of Mithila, which also extends into southern Nepal. In more recent decades, some Mithila artists have also moved to metropolitan areas—like Patna, Delhi and Hyderabad—yet continue practicing their native Mithila painting styles while living outside of Mithila itself. Thus Stadtner's use of “Madhubani” for his 1969 experiences, but thereafter his use of “Mithila.” This and all other endnotes featured in this essay were written by John H. Bowles.

2 Pupul Jayakar (1915-1997) was a prominent Indian scholar, writer and cultural activist—and close friend of three successive Indian prime ministers. In 1969—when Stadtner joined Kulkarni in Mithila—Jayakar was Indira Gandhi's chief advisor on art and cultural heritage.

3 Ranti and Jitwarpur.

4 Stadtner's lecture, titled “The Popular Paintings of Mithila Within the Great Indian Tradition,” was delivered on October 3, 1978 in conjunction with Prof. Raymond Owens' course “Anthropology of Art: India” and an exhibition, titled *Mithila Folk Paintings*, held at University of Texas, Austin's Huntington Gallery (September 19 - November 19, 1978).

5 This conference was organized by the American Council for Southern Asian Art; Stadtner served as a member of its Board of Directors (1978-1981) and its Secretary (1979-1982).

6 The Ethnic Arts Foundation (EAF) was founded in 1980 as a volunteer, charitable NGO dedicated to encouraging and supporting the contemporary arts of Mithila. It has produced numerous publications and exhibitions, and also established the Mithila Art Institute (MAI), which operated in Madhubani between 2003-2019. According to EAF's website description of the Institute, it charged no tuition and used “... an annual blind competition to select 25-30 students for its two year program, the second year by invitation only. Since its founding it [...] graduated over 400 young women and a few men. Some have gone on to become professional artists, a few with national and international reputations.” (See: <https://ethnicartsfoundation.com/2017/01/22/mithila-art-institute/>). For further published information re: EAF and MAI, see: David L. Szanton and Malini Bakshi's *Mithila Painting: The Evolution of an Art Form*. (Ethnic Arts Foundation and PinkMango, L.L.C.; Berkeley, 2007).

7 This exhibition, entitled *Painting is My Everything: Art From India's Mithila Region*, was held at San Francisco's Asian Art Museum from September 6 through December 20, 2018. Many of the Mithila paintings now in that museum's permanent collection were acquired through the Ethnic Arts Foundation. See: <https://exhibitions.asianart.org/exhibitions/painting-is-my-everything-art-from-indias-mithila-region/>

8 Both gentlemen are now living in retirement with their wives in the San Francisco Bay Area: Szanton in Berkeley, and Stadtner in Walnut Creek.

9 Only one significant art historical survey of Dalit art has been published to date: *Dalit Art and Visual Imagery*, edited by Gary Michael Tartakov (Oxford University Press, 2012), a 297-page anthology of essays including David L. Szanton's “Mithila Painting: The Dalit Intervention” pp. 219-234; four of that essay's illustrated paintings are included in Radford University Art Museum's *Raja Salhesh's Garden* exhibition). It also bears noting that Tartakov, like Stadtner, focused his doctoral dissertation on India's ancient arts.

## Among Others: Mithila's Dalit Art

by David L. Szanton

The title for this essay draws on that of a stunningly illustrated, 480-page volume, *AMONG OTHERS: BLACKNESS AT MoMA*, published in 2019 by the Museum of Modern Art in New York City. The volume was a first step by MoMA towards substantially enlarging the museum's appreciation, collection, and exhibition of art by artists who do not happen to be Euro-American white men. And indeed, MoMA is not alone in facing this issue. An elaborate 2019 survey of the eighteen most important U.S. art museums documented that modern art by racial minorities, by women, and by artists from other regions of the world are vastly under-represented in the museums' collections and exhibitions.<sup>1</sup> And at less than 1%, art by African and African-American artists, and on African American experience, has often been overlooked or ignored.<sup>2</sup>

*Raja Salhesh's Garden* is likewise a first step towards redressing a similar artistic exclusion in India, but also in the US. The distinctive Mithila painting tradition by upper caste Brahmin and Kayastha women from the Mithila region of Bihar in northern India is usually recognized across the subcontinent, and has often been exhibited in the United States. However, low caste Dalit artists from the same Mithila villages, with their own unique and innovative paintings, have received little or no attention in either India or the US. Both in India and the US, a few Dalit paintings have sometimes been included in larger Mithila painting exhibits. But up to now there has only been one small exhibition solely devoted to Mithila's Dalit art, shown in New Delhi in 1998.<sup>3</sup> It was curated by the art historian Neel Rekha, the most active scholar of Dalit painting. Other than that, Mithila's Dalit paintings have indeed been lost "Among Others."

There are several reasons for the exclusion of the Dalit paintings. Although there are references to the upper caste wall paintings in 15th century Sanskrit



FIG.14 Detail of *Surya Helps Kusuma Malin and Raja Salhesh Spy on Chuhamal* 1977, gouache on paper (30"x22") by Shanti Devi (see CAT.10). Collection of Radford University Art Museum, donated by the Ethnic Arts Foundation

texts, the paintings were only "discovered" in 1934 by William G. Archer (1907-1979), a Cambridge University and SOAS<sup>4</sup> educated British colonial official, deeply familiar with contemporary European art. Archer had been posted to the Mithila town of Madhubani in 1933, just months before the massive January 15, 1934 earthquake tumbled down the external mud brick walls of numerous upper caste Brahmin and Kayastha homes, thus enabling him to see the paintings on their interior walls. In a short undated essay, "Into Hidden Maithila" (published posthumously in 1994), Archer wrote of seeing "beauty on the mud," and being "entranced" by the similarities of the wall paintings to the contemporary art of Miró, Klee, and Picasso.<sup>5</sup> Excited by the images, he returned to Mithila in the late 1930s to photograph the new Brahmin and Kayastha wall paintings done in the years following the earthquake.<sup>6</sup>

While Archer did not know the age of the wall painting tradition, over the centuries it had clearly developed a particular set of stylistic conventions passed on by women, generation to generation, and between families by marriage. For example, images of gods and goddesses faced forward (to bless the

viewers), while humans were painted in profile. Images were two dimensional; there was no horizon line, perspective, or shading. Figures were not necessarily grounded, but could "float" wherever there was space. And paintings were generally framed by painted leaves, flowers, or geometrical forms. The actual figures on the walls were mostly the major Hindu deities that families wanted present for the specific rituals: Vishnu and Lakshmi, Shiva and Parvati, Krishna with Radha or the *gopis* (milkmaid devotees), Durga or Kali, Ganesh, and Brahma. Marriage imagery was the most elaborated and also included key symbolic icons: a large lotus pond representing the fertility and beauty of the bride; a large bamboo grove representing the groom and his family line; fish representing fecundity; pairs of parrots popularly recognized as love birds; and a checkered mat on which the arranged marriages were consummated.

In the late 1960s, during an extended drought in north India, Pupal Jayakar, the Head of the All India Handicrafts Board, commissioned Bhaskar Kulkarni, a counter-culture artist from Bombay, to bring paper and paints to the Brahmin and Kayastha women and encourage them to transfer their wall paintings onto sheets of paper for sale as an alternative source of

family income. The project was successful; there was an urban market for the paintings, and on paper the marriage paintings were further elaborated with several new images: a bride thanking the goddess Parvati for finding her a good husband; a bride in a palanquin traveling to her husband's home; astrological figures as well as other ritual items used in the four-day marriage ceremonies. However, despite the radical transformation of the ritual murals to commercial paintings on paper, the traditional stylistic conventions were fully maintained. And even today, more than fifty years later, while the upper caste artists are now well aware of other Indian and foreign styles of painting, they insist that they can express anything they wish within their own traditional stylistic conventions.

In contrast, while the Dalit artists from those same villages represented in the *Raja Salhesh's Garden* exhibition follow some of those traditional conventions, they also innovate and experiment well beyond them, both stylistically and thematically. Unfortunately, no early texts mention Dalit paintings and little is known of their deep history or earlier traditions. In fact, the first publication to mention them was Archer's 1949 essay, "Maithil

Painting”—featured in *Marg*, India’s leading art journal—that first brought Mithila wall painting to national and international attention. The second paragraph of Archer’s essay states:

Of the residing castes in this area, Maithil Brahmins and Maithil Kayastha are those in whom painting is most highly developed. It is true that Rajputs, Sonars, Ahirs and Dusadhs also do painting and it is almost as if painting is endemic to the region. But in these latter cases the styles are more fragmentary and it is likely that the custom of painting developed later—Maithil Brahmins and Maithil Kayastha setting the fashion and isolated households of other castes following their example. In its broad essentials Maithil painting is the painting of Maithil Brahmins and Maithil Kayastha.<sup>7</sup>

This 1949 statement, based on Archer’s observations in the 1930s, is both important and unfortunate. It

is important because he indicates that painting was “endemic” in Mithila, and that Rajputs (a military caste), Sonars (goldsmiths), Ahirs (herders), and Dusadhs (agricultural laborers) were already painting at least three decades before Brahmin and Kayastha women began painting on paper for sale in the late 1960s. It thus undercuts a common presumption today that other castes and communities only began to paint when the upper castes demonstrated that painting on paper was of economic value. But his statement is also unfortunate because having dismissed the art of other castes and communities as latecomers and derivative, Archer undercut both public and scholarly interest in the history, techniques, and subject matter of their paintings.



FIG. 15 *Collecting a Dead Cow* (2004) Gouache on paper stained with diluted *gobar* (cow dung) 22" x 30" by Binda Devi (born 1970, Village Jitwarpur, District Madhubani). Donated to Radford University Art Museum by the Ethnic Arts Foundation

The artist Binda Devi belongs to her village’s Chamar community (traditional leather workers), one of innumerable communities now known throughout India as Dalits. Since the late 1970s, Mithila’s Dalit artists have been exploring innovative styles, techniques and subject matter. The application of diluted *gobar* (cow dung) over the paper gives the overall painting an earthy, natural tone—and in India *gobar* is considered auspicious (and has many practical applications in villages; e.g., when dried it is burned in kitchen stoves; wet *gobar* is mixed with clay and applied to walls of houses, especially before the painting of fresh murals). The subject matter of this painting is a complete novelty in Indian art: although cows are venerated by Hindus throughout India, dead ones are considered “untouchable”—and thus such a depiction would traditionally be deemed highly inauspicious. This painting thus affirms the dignity of labor collecting dead cows to process into leather. [J.H. Bowles]

### On Being Dalit

Ironically, while the Rajputs, Sonars, and Ahirs are all included in the Hindu caste hierarchy, it was only the Dusadh painters that Archer mentions last, plus one painter from the Chamar (leather worker) community, who were not in the caste system, but who the mid 1970s began to draw outside attention. The Dusadh were, and still are, largely poor, rural village dwellers (often banned from living in towns or cities), mostly landless agricultural laborers and the keepers of livestock for wealthier landed families. Indeed, the over five million Dusadh who live in Bihar are but one of some 170 different communities across India—including more than 200 million people<sup>8</sup>—who due to of birth, poverty, and/or “polluting” hereditary occupations (sanitation workers, disposing of dead animals, leather workers, garbage collectors, street and drain cleaners, etc.)—most of Indian society has for centuries considered “polluted,” “outcastes,” and *achhut* (an ancient Sanskrit word, meaning “untouchable”).

The designations for these communities—including both the Dusadh and Chamar—have had a convoluted history. When the British colonial government ruled India it officially labeled these communities “Other Backward Classes.” Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948) attempted to replace these stigmatizing terms with “*Harijan*,” (Children of God), a name still frequently used by caste Hindus despite it having been rejected by progressive members of both communities as belittling and insulting. The 1950 Indian Constitution officially relabeled them “Scheduled Castes,” and reserved some places for them in higher education and government offices. Nevertheless, despite these efforts, depending on with whom you speak, members of these communities are still largely considered at the very bottom of—or even beneath or entirely outside—the hierarchical Hindu caste system; and to this day they often, both individually and collectively, suffer severe social discrimination and violence.

In response to their inhuman and illegal treatment, many individuals in these communities have followed their brilliant leader, B.R. Ambedkar

(1891-1956), in converting to Buddhism to establish themselves as worthy human beings outside of the caste system. In recent years many Dusadh have also taken on the surname Paswan, while some individuals and segments of these communities have become politically active and call themselves “*Dalit*,” an ancient Sanskrit word meaning “broken” or “oppressed”—but now increasingly adopted and repurposed in proud, ironic defiance against the prejudice of casteism. Following their lead, and as the Dusadh constitute the majority of the Dalit artists in Bihar, this exhibition has adopted the term Dalit for the Dusadh and Chamar painters of Mithila.

### What do we know about early Dalit Art in Mithila?

Absent Archer, there are two major sources to draw on: Erika Moser-Schmitt’s films and writings, and Neel Rekha’s numerous publications and especially her interviews of Jamuna Devi about Bhaskar Kulkarni.<sup>9</sup> Erika Moser-Schmitt, a German folklorist, scholar of Indian art history, and filmmaker, made several extended visits to the village of Jitwarpur near the town of Madhubani between 1973 and 1976. In 1973 and 1974 she made a series of fourteen short (5-16 minute) films of daily activities among the village’s Dusadh and Brahmin households. One film has a German voiceover explaining the activities, the other films are silent, though all have brief accompanying notes. Three of the films document Dusadh women individually and collectively engaged in making lively mud reliefs—of deities, animals, spirits, symbolic icons, and Raja Salhesh mounted on his elephant—across the outer walls of their homes. Two films also have extended segments on Dusadh women painting “sacred trees,” spirit figures, and animals on the external mud walls of their homes. One film also shows both Dusadh and Brahmin women painting on walls and seated on the ground, painting on paper. The Dusadh women’s paintings on paper are not as elegant as their Brahmin neighbors—who included Sita Devi and Baua Devi, probably the most talented and honored Brahmin painters. But the Dusadh paintings are less constrained and equally vivid, using the same bright colorful palette



FIG. 16a-h Screenshots from Erika Moser-Schmitt's documentary films.

as their Brahmin neighbors. (See [FIG. 16a-h] and p.88)<sup>10</sup> Aside from making unique films, documenting Dusadh wall reliefs and paintings on walls and paper, Moser-Schmitt encouraged the development of a new style of Dusadh painting. Struck by the decorative and ritually protective tattoos on the arms, chest, and legs of many of the Dusadh women—and recognizing the aesthetic talent of Chano Devi, a Dusadh woman in Jitwarpur—Moser-Schmitt suggested that Chano Devi make artistic use of the tattoos as a basis for painting. Excited by the idea, Chano Devi worked for several weeks with an itinerant female tattoo artist to develop the *godana* (tattoo) style of painting, characterized by repetitive patterns and small stick figures, that was quickly adopted by many other artists (CATS.2, 14, 18, 23, and 31), and soon became the dominant and most widely recognized Dusadh style of painting.

Chano Devi's innovative, pioneering creativity earned her a National Award for her paintings, as well as an honored place within the community.



FIG. 17 *Storyboard*, acrylic on paper smeared with diluted *gobar* (cow dung) by Ranjit Paswan. Collection of Radford University Art Museum, Donated by the Ethnic Arts Foundation

Ironically, her National Award was given for *Godana* Painting, not Mithila Painting, even though she lived in the same village a scant 100 yards from the home of the Brahmin painter, Sita Devi, whose National Award was for Mithila Painting. In effect, Chano Devi was denied the prestigious Mithila Painting Award, because she was not painting in a proper upper caste style.

Initially, *godana* paintings rhythmically arranged small, often bird-like, repetitive figures in simple geometrical compositions—aligned or in concentric

circles that often seemed to expand beyond the paper<sup>11</sup> (e.g. CATS.17, 23, 26, 30, 34, and 35). At times the geometry is embedded and more subtle, and employed to create inventive depictions of fish, peacocks, trees—or whole landscapes, village scenes, etc. (CATS.11, 25, 28 and 37.2).

The *godana* style later led to another new format: multiple rows of small rectangles or squares, spread across an entire painting—or above and below a central image—presenting a series of small icons creating visual narratives that depict daily and ritual



FIG. 18 *Nine Trees*, acrylic on paper (30" x 22") by Ranjit Paswan. Collection of Prof. Kathryn Myers, Mansfield, Connecticut

activities (FIG. 17 and CAT.37.3) or catalogs of flora and fauna, such as Naresh Paswan's *Nine Trees* (FIG.18). The late master of *godana* style painting, Lalita Devi (1975-2011), excelled in her inventive inclusion of miscellaneous imagery—juxtaposing in a single picture (FIG.19) various deities (Krishna playing his flute, Durga riding her tiger, Salhesh on his elephant, a wide-eyed Surya), people (dancers, a woman in her kitchen), wildlife (monkeys, fish, elephants, turtles, insects, birds)—and even a car, a bus, village buildings—and a small Taj Mahal.



Given Moser-Schmitt's role in both documenting and helping expand the Dusadh women's aesthetic repertoire, it is not surprising that in her 1988 article, "Women in an Indian Village and their Creativity in the Visual Arts," she argues forcefully against a prejudicial Western assumption that in the visual arts men are more creative than women. Her evidence from Mithila runs the other way!<sup>12</sup>

Other than his as yet unpublished personal diaries,<sup>13</sup> Bhaskar Kulkarni is not known to have written about his work with the painters in Mithila. However, Neel Rekha's interviews of Jamuna Devi about Bhaskar Kulkarni, as described in Rekha's dissertation and subsequent publications, reveal a great deal.<sup>14</sup> Kulkarni's government commission to encourage the Brahmin and Kayastha painters to paint on paper ended in 1975. He nevertheless continued to work with the artists for many months thereafter and later made numerous return visits. Although specifically charged to work with the upper caste women, he was also excited by the clay bas-reliefs and murals of Jamuna Devi, a Chamar woman in Jitwarpur, and encouraged her to experiment with painting on paper.<sup>15</sup> Taking up his suggestion, Jamuna Devi was initially inspired by the colorful paintings of Hindu gods and goddesses by Sita Devi, living nearby in Jitwarpur. She began by painting those same deities, but soon differentiated her work by placing rows of black dots between the traditionally doubled lines around figures in Brahmin paintings (CATS.1, 3, 4, and 5). In the process she established a new "dot painting," style, akin to the dots extensively used in the Dusadh wall paintings. Dot painting was quickly appropriated by many other artists including Shanti Devi (CAT.7)—and today, some 45 years later, Binda Devi, Jamuna Devi's daughter-in-law, maintains the dot painting tradition (FIG.15).

Drawing on Sita Devi's paintings of Hindu deities, however, turned out to be a problem. Uncomfortable and unfamiliar with the figures and detailed attributes of the Hindu pantheon, and criticized by upper caste men for even attempting to paint their gods, Jamuna Devi expanded Dalit painting by introducing two new subjects. One was scenes of village



life, local events (e.g., FIG.20 and CAT.5), and the natural world (CAT.18 and 6) rarely addressed in the ritual and *Ramayana* paintings of the Brahmin and Kayastha women, but themes quickly explored and expanded by other Dalit painters.

Jamuna Devi's second innovation was stylistic. She created a technique of coating blank, white paper with a thin wash of diluted *gobar* (cow dung) to make the painting's surface look more like a traditional mud wall. Initially, it seemed shocking to spoil the "pure" white paper the artists were using. However, here culture makes a difference. Cows are sacred in India, and their dung is used for many purposes from dried fuel for cooking, to preparing the



FIG.20 *Women Performing Household Tasks*, (1982), gouache and natural colors on paper smeared with diluted *gobar* (cow dung) by Jamuna Devi. Collection of Radford University Art Museum, donated by the Ethnic Arts Foundation

FIG.19 *Storyboard*, (2004) acrylic on paper smeared with diluted *gobar* (cow dung), (30"x 22") by Lalita Devi. Collection of Radford University Art Museum, donated by the Ethnic Arts Foundation

ground for ritual floor paintings. Soon many other Dalit painters—including Chano Devi and Urmila Devi—were using the *gobar* technique (CATS.14, 15, 17, 21, 23, 24 and 29), and gradually some upper caste painters have begun using it as well.

Meanwhile, Jamuna Devi continued innovating, and in the late 1970s, having stopped painting Hindu deities, she initiated what was probably the most artistically and politically consequential expansion of the Dalit repertoire; she began painting episodes in the life of Raja Salhesh (CAT.3), well known from oral narratives and depicted in the mud reliefs on the walls of Dusadh homes. Historical evidence suggests that Raja Salhesh was an actual local ruler in about

the 7th century. Today some Dusadh claim that their low status as Dalits derives from Raja Salhesh having been defeated in battle and that today's Dusadhs are the descendants of his enslaved followers. Yet, despite his military defeat, in recent years Raja Salhesh has become the Dusadh's most important deity, replacing Rahu (CATS.36 and 37.1-3), an older demon god associated with eclipses.

While Jamuna Devi's intentions in this regard are unknown, the growing numbers of Dalit paintings of Raja Salhesh sharing attributes of high Hindu Gods has become a veiled but significant political statement of the Dalit's assertion of human equality to the upper caste Hindus. For example, much as the god Krishna's numerous *gopis* (milkmaids/devotees) are in love with him, Raja Salhesh has a bevy of *malins* (flower maidens or gardeners) who tend his magnificent palace garden and who are likewise in love with him. And much like Ram, the hero of the *Ramayana*, who constantly traveled with his younger brother Lakshman, Raja Salhesh consistently travels with his younger brother, Moti Ram.

Attesting to the importance of Raja Salhesh to the Dusadh Dalit community, eleven of the paintings in the exhibit (CATS.3, 7, 9, 10, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, and 34) by seven different artists are about Raja

Salhesh—as well as his central depiction in Naresh Paswan’s extraordinary *Raja Salhesh’s Puja* triptych (CAT.45), and the triptych’s two flanking panels of sixteen pictures, depicting Salhesh’s spirit possessing a *bhagat* (holy man / shamanic priest) and related rituals. One of the paintings (CAT.3) is an early work by Jamuna Devi that shows Raja Salhesh on his elephant, and his brothers Moti Ram and Bhudeshwar on horseback, led and followed by flower maidens. Three other paintings depicting Salhesh are by Shanti Devi (CATS.7, 9, and 10), who also drew on Sita Devi’s colorful palette, but then produced a series of well over 30 paintings of episodes in Salhesh’s life based on the numerous songs about Salhesh that her father-in-law, a respected Dusadh priest, would sing at their home in the evening. The songs described Salhesh’s rise from watchman to king, battles with his enemies, his magical powers enabling him to make multiple copies of himself to escape the maidens who wished to marry him, and transform himself into a bird or a flower anywhere he wished, so as to keep a protective eye on his family, his enemies, and his cattle. In recognition of Shanti Devi’s and Jamuna Devi’s artistic skills and innovations, they are to date the only Dalit artists to win the highest National Award for “Mithila Painting.”

#### What is New?

Returning annually to Madhubani from 2002 to 2018, each year I was confronted with new imagery. While both the Dalit and the upper caste painters are deeply rooted in Maithil history, society, and culture, their positions in the region’s highly stratified society are distinct—marked by contrasting levels of wealth, status, education, language skills, and mobility, as well as their different personal experience and concerns within Maithil society. In consequence, while both communities of artists have continually expanded their repertoire, they have done so in significantly different ways. The vast majority of the upper caste painters working in a centuries-old aesthetic tradition continue to focus on episodes in the lives of gods and goddesses, marriage icons and rituals, and traditional narratives. To the extent that they produce new imagery, it is from a small minority of mostly younger painters keen to explore new ways

of using traditional imagery to address both personal concerns and contemporary critical social and political issues.

For example, marriages are major events at all levels of Maithil society, but their depictions by the upper caste and Dalit artists are strikingly different. Thus the Brahmin artist, Pinki Kumari, has done at least fourteen different paintings of the *kohbar*, the central ritual image of murals in nuptial chambers—and perhaps the core image of Mithila painting generally. Yet even when she wishes to critique the upper caste marriage system, she uses subtle variations of the traditional image to make her point. For example, her *Kohbar for a Love Marriage* (FIG.21) includes five key images in the traditional *kohbar* on paper.

- In the center, the lotus pond, represents the beauty of the bride, filled with aquatic creatures representing the desired fecundity of the bride.
- In the upper right, the bamboo grove represents the groom and his family line.
- In the lower right, the bride, with the groom behind her, is making an offering to a clay elephant representing the goddess Parvati, thanking the goddess for finding her a good husband—like Parvati’s own husband, the god Shiva.
- In the lower left are Parvati and Shiva, but in place of the traditional image of Parvati adoringly facing Shiva, here Shiva is facing Parvati, devotedly looking after her!

• Each of these four images—plus the key new image in the upper left—are contained in a *kalash* (clay pot), at least two of which are important ritual objects in traditional marriage ceremonies. Building on the reversal of the caring looks of the deities, in the fifth *kalash* (shown in the upper left corner) the bride and groom are looking at each other, holding hands, sharing *paan* (a betel leaf savory), and are standing on a traditional checkered mat upon which (after four days of rituals) the marriage is consummated. This is not the traditional “Arranged Marriage” negotiated between the parents of the bride and groom who have often never previously met each other. Instead, it represents the younger generation’s increasingly desired and popular “Love Marriage,” in which the bride and groom themselves



FIG.21 *Kohbar for a Love Marriage* (2017) by the Brahmin artist Pinki Jha.



FIG.22 *The Marriage of Raja Salhesh and Rani Chandravati* (1997). Natural pigments on cement board, (55"x 71") by Shanti Devi. Collection of the Mithila Museum, Tokamachi, Japan

decide whom they will marry. The traditional imagery is retained, but also subtly yet decisively amended to give the painting a new contemporary meaning.

Marriages are equally central and important for the Dalit artists. But when the innovative Dalit artist Shanti Devi depicted the *Love Marriage of Raja Salhesh and Rani Chandravati*, she felt less constrained by prior traditions and status issues, and

turned the wedding into an all encompassing community celebration (FIG.22).

Starting from the top left we see Raja Salhesh's house, then Salhesh himself under the canopy where the rituals are performed, and a small temple. Below that are two processions, Salhesh in a palanquin arriving for the wedding followed by his devoted flower maidens, and his bride in her own palanquin en route to his home.

The next line down has two women dancing in a wheelbarrow; Motiram, Salhesh's brother, with a stick; a woman bringing rice pudding from the bride's palace; Salhesh's personal messenger; and a lady balloon vendor. Behind her is a rampant peacock, Salhesh on his elephant, and Motiram again, but now on horseback. The bottom line includes musicians with horns, dancing figures, and a mango tree with a beekeeper plucking mangos, Salhesh's

favorite fruit, and in the tree are monkeys and birds with egg filled nests.<sup>16</sup>

The two paintings represent very different ways of depicting marriage: Pinki Kumari uses traditional marriage imagery to make a modern feminist protest against arranged marriages, while Shanti Devi employs her own unique version of tattoo-style painting to depict marriage as a community celebration.

In a similar way, both upper caste and Dalit artists have produced very different paintings in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. The young Brahmin painter, Nisha Jha, refigures the traditional image of the powerful ten-armed goddess, Durga (frequently wielding weapons in each hand and mounted on her lion while slaying a demon with a long spear) as *Dr. Durga*, with medical items in each hand, slaying the Covid demon with a long hypodermic needle.<sup>17</sup> (FIG.23)

In contrast, the Dalit artist Naresh Paswan has addressed the Covid pandemic by focusing on the struggles of migrant workers desperate to return home during the nationwide "lockdown." (FIG.24) An angry Corona Virus face dominates the painting, and is shown surrounded by masked overseas workers returning to India being checked by a doctor, and figures, alone and in families, walking, snacking, and traveling by bus, train, empty trucks—even inside a cement mixer—to get back to their distant villages. It also includes motorcyclists stopped by police for not wearing helmets, a now famous young girl who peddled her aged father home on the back of her bicycle some 1,200 kilometers, and a man who carried his elderly parents home in two baskets on a pole slung over his shoulder.<sup>18</sup>

The upper caste artists continue to draw on their ancient tradition, its classic style, and its Hindu imagery, while gradually expanding its use to express personal concerns or to comment subtly or dramatically on the contemporary world. Less committed to an ancient tradition, the Dalit artists may at times borrow elements of Hindu imagery such as Lalita Devi's *Krishna Steals the Gopis' Clothes* (CAT.26), or Naresh Paswan's scenes from the *Ramayana*

(CAT.43.1 and 43.2). More generally, however, Dalit artists have been exploring, innovating, and developing novel styles of painting, evolving on multiple fronts with new imagery rooted in a world of their own experience: daily village and community life, animals, trees, nature generally, popular narratives, and of course, Raja Salhesh. Yet, both in India and the US, the upper caste painting has been more familiar and appreciated.

In effect, the Dalit painters are bringing fresh energy and new ideas to a traditional elite style of art, much as members of the Société des Artistes Indépendants—artists like Paul Cézanne, Paul Gauguin, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, Vincent van Gogh, Henri Rousseau, Henri Matisse, and many others—who broke free of the official standards for fine art strictly maintained by the elite Académie Royale de Peinture, and initiated a dramatic

expansion of western art, including the early modern European masters so admired by W.G. Archer. In France, the process took several years and many fierce debates. Hopefully, *Raja Salhesh's Garden* will initiate a similar but smoother recognition, appreciation, and expansion of Mithila's Dalit artists and paintings—one that will gain them new respect and an honored place, "Among Others."

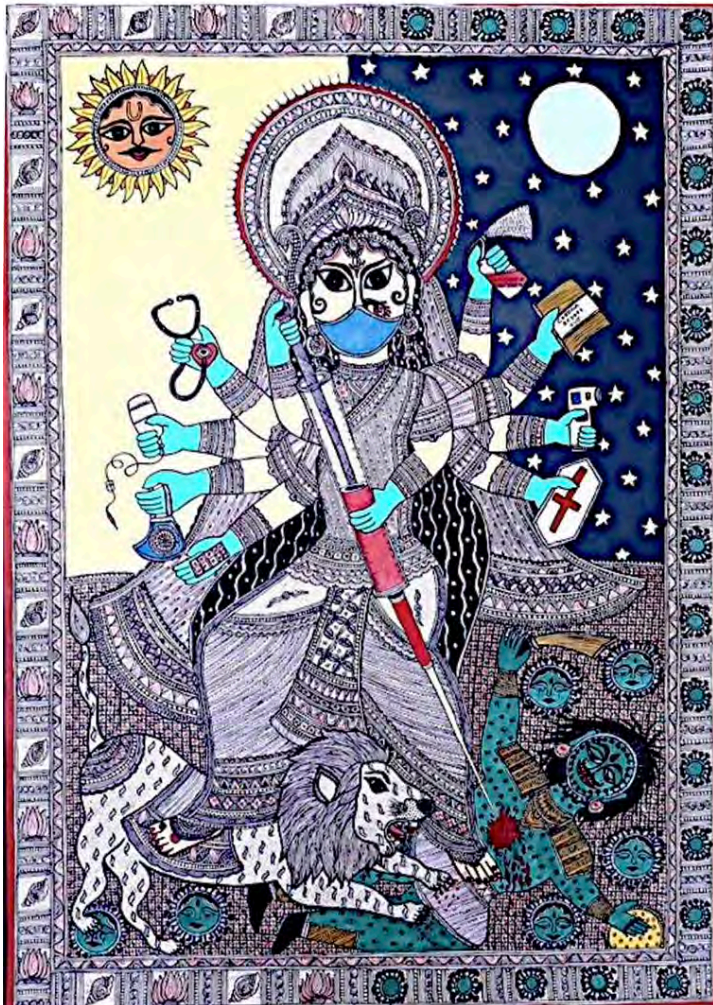


FIG.23 *Doctor Durga* (2021), acrylic on paper by the Brahman artist Nisha Jha.



FIG.24 *Covid* (2021), acrylic on paper (22" x 30") by Naresh Kumar Paswan. Collection of Prof. Steve Arbury, Radford, Virginia

## NOTES

1 Diversity of Artists in Major US Museums, 2019 [arxiv.org/abs/1812.03899](https://arxiv.org/abs/1812.03899)

2 There is a vast amount of serious and powerful modern art by Africans and African Americans in addition to that contained in the MoMA volume. See Enwezor & Okeke-Agulu (2009); Eveleigh, Canady, Cave & Swams (2017); Pedroso & Toledo (2021); and Okeke-Agulu (2021).

3 Vijayakanta Mishra, Cultural Heritage of Mithila, 1979:13 234-240. Cited by Neel Rekha, "From Folk Art to Fine Art: Changing Paradigms in the Historiography of Maithil Painting," *Journal of Art Historiography*, Number 2, June 2010: 2.

4 The University of London's School of Oriental and African Studies.

5 Quoted from W.G. Archer's "Into Hidden Mithila" essay, in William and Mildred Archer's *India Served and Observed* (British Association for Cemeteries in South Asia, London, 1994: 56 & 58). Both Archer and his wife Mildred became leading scholars of Indian art. After World War II they returned to London, where he served as Keeper of the Victoria and Albert Museum's Indian Section, and she served as Curator of Prints and Drawings at the India Office Library.

6 Some 200 photographs of the Brahmin and Kayastha wall paintings, annotated as to subject and location by Archer, are now in the British Library in London. The 47 large photographs are listed in Mildred Archer (1977) along with twelve of the large photographs.

7 *Marg*, 1949, vol. 3, no. 3: 25.

8 The population figures are estimates based on the 2011 Census of India. The 2021 Census has been delayed due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

9 Jyotindra Jain, "The Bridge of Vermilion: Narrative Rhythm in the Dusadh Legends of Mithila," in *Indian Painting: Essays in Honor of Karl J. Khandalavala*, Ed. B.N. Goswamy and Usha Bhatia, Lalit Kala Akademi, New Delhi, 1995, is a useful essay, but focuses on a male Dusadh painter who was then painting in an upper caste style.

10 Screenshots of paintings and wall reliefs (FIGS.a-h and page 88) reproduced with permission from Technische Informationsbibliothek (TIB).

11 See Mani Shekhar Singh's essay, "The Melody of Repetition in Paintings of the Dalit Artists in Mithila" to appear in the forthcoming publication on Mithila art co-edited by Paula Richman and David Szanton, scheduled for release by the University of Washington Press in 2024.

12 Moser-Schmitt, Erika, "Women in an Indian Village and Their Creativity in the Visual Arts," *Visual Anthropology*, Volume 1, 1988, Issue 3: Ethnographic Film in Germany (pp. 299-303).

13 <https://sproutsnews.com/full-story/861/At-the-bottommost-of-unknown>

14 See especially, Rekha, Neel, "Salhesa Iconography In Madhubani Paintings: A Case of Harijan Assertion." *Folklore and Folkloristic*; vol. 4, no. 2 December 2011.

15 The Chamar community in Bihar numbers some 4 million, and although the men are nominally tanners, leatherworkers, shoemakers, and ritual drummers, and the women are often midwives, they are largely agriculturalists. Very few are artists.

16 This description briefly paraphrases the artist's own detailed account of this painting—which appears in the Appendix (p.84).

17 This image directly relates Covid 19's successive mutations to the successive shape-shifting transformations of the ancient Hindu demon Mahishasura, who was likewise vanquished by Durga—wielding a lance and innumerable other weapons—in her Mahishasuramardini manifestation, whose similar iconographic representations date back to the 2nd century.

18 See Appendix p.83 for the artist's own full account of this painting.



Seevan Paswan's *King Salesh Folklore* displayed to the right of a painting by Mithila's master Brahman artist Vinita Jha at Patna's Bihar Museum.

## Encountering Mithila's Culture: Artistic and Philosophic Affinities

by *Martine Le Coz*

translated by *Aurogeeta Das*

**Translator's Preamble:** *The best and the most passionate advocates of artists who need support are often those who feel both a personal and a professional connection to such artists. Martine Le Coz writes a succinct and heartfelt text about the artists of Mithila because she feels affinities with Mithila's women and senses a resonance between her art and theirs. France has a long history of exploring and being influenced by foreign cultures. Japonisme, or the influence of Japan's culture on France and other European nations in the 19th century, is an example that readily springs to mind. Indian philosophy and mysticism likewise exerted a cultural influence, in part perhaps occasioned and facilitated by France's little-known colonial relationship with India but no less due to the vast extent and reach of a culture as ancient as India's. Indeed, Indian philosophy has had some influence in the United States too; to cite only one example, it helped to shape some of the New England Transcendentalists' work in the late 19th century. The pithiness of this text belies an unusual ability on the part of the author to perceive affinities not only between cultures and people but also between the aesthetic and the philosophical, such as when she draws parallels between utopia as a visual composition and as a human ideal. Foreign admirers of Indian philosophies have sometimes been prone to romanticizing the subcontinent's mysticism. It is to the author's credit that she perceives what she terms the "brutality of the truly ineffable," an expression that jars and jolts because it conveys the power and force of the spiritual. Martine Le Coz's advocacy of Mithila's art thus extends beyond that of someone who could have readily succumbed to the seduction of Indian culture.*

Aurogeeta Das



FIG.25 *The Magicians Were So Interlinked...* Detail from a 2019 illustration by Martine Le Coz for her book *Le roi de la montagne* (King of the Mountain); entire painting illustrated as FIG.2b.

### In the 20th century, the art of Mithila has

**changed.** It had, perhaps, evolved over the course of the preceding centuries. Perhaps it had not changed at all, for a thousand or two thousand years, since its inception at the time of Rama and Sita's marriage recounted in the *Ramayana*. We like to think that it had remained impervious to all external influences, to all the periods, under every rule. Impervious to the masculine influence too. In any event, I like to think so, just a little. But in the end, climactic and economic earthquakes revolutionised it. Thereafter, young girls adapted to their conditions. They now live differently with their art, and they channel it by venturing into different directions: either more personal, or more political or social.

I discovered the traditional art of Mithila in Tours in 1975, during a modest exhibition organised jointly by the Amboise resident Jean-Marc Doron (who recently informed me of this!) and Yves Véquaud. En route to Nepal, Véquaud had found himself in Madhubani during a transitional period. If one might say so, it was meant to happen at that particular moment. The spiritual imprint was still palpable. It

still permeated almost everything. The women did not sign their works but they already sold them. The men rarely got involved in drawing. Véquaud spent the rest of his life showing, wherever he could, the art that had so dazzled him.

Doubtless struck with the same astonishment, I did not immediately set forth towards the women of Mithila. I had to make the effort of partly leaving behind me my own tastes: the aesthetic void and the visual expanse of Chinese painting, Turner's "painting of the air," my taste for the incomplete.<sup>1</sup> I ignored the fact that I was otherwise going to encounter what seemed "incomplete" and "in progress" in Mithila's art – not at its surface, but in its spiritual depths. I also had to make the effort to leave behind the biblical culture I had held with a certain zeal for a long time. It took me thirty years to open myself up to another culture, which appeared to me to be dense, terribly complex and encumbered with too great a plurality, one that was difficult for a Western mind to grasp; in India, one Reality is perceived, and several degrees of truth, which are approximations of that Reality. I was, moreover, imagining too great



FIG.26 *Portrait of Abhilasha Kurmari*, (2012) by Martine Le Coz. Collection of the Artist, Amboise, France.



FIG.27 Peacocks at a Fish-Filled Tank, by Abhilasha Kumari. Collection of John H. Bowles, Radford.

a seduction, perhaps because I was drawn to India. It offered too much of everything, for someone who, since childhood, had preferred understatement and transparency, to the point of thinking that no reconciliation was possible with my mother, because she liked Renoir.

Without the women of Mithila, I would have never visited India. I would have never remained attached to it if I had not met André Padoux, a specialist in Tantra. But there was drawing, also a path for me, and the revelation of certain “illuminating” keys in Indian thought: the concept of Reality in terms of Consciousness and Energy, and of divine play – a source of infinite potentialities – which liberated one from the threat of the trenchant separation of Good and Evil. There remains for me drawing, and the greatly nuanced approaches of Consciousness and Reality. I will also always have the love, particularly of certain women in Mithila.

What then, had I perceived, in Tours, in 1975, in these meticulous and finished drawings, often framed by a frieze of repetitive motifs? Something that could have given me the effect of an obsessively busy and dense aesthetic – the opposite of what I liked. But there was the candor of line, almost the brutality of the utterly ineffable, impossible to capture, a presence that was stronger than that of the women who had revealed it in these drawings. I felt shock, beyond the forms, some of which I did not like at all, and others that I did not like very much. The memory of those drawings made with simplicity, including those made on the ground,<sup>2</sup> and the thought of these women, so removed from the world – but, like me, hunched over their work, with the same attention – is forever etched in my mind. The notion of an infinite chain of women who drew similarly and tirelessly in their *tête à tête* with the invisible, and their experience of feeling insignificant.

How to define art – as distinct from craft and from technique – which has as its aim neither beauty nor irreplaceable expression, nor emotion produced by its effect upon those who will view it? Not so long

ago, a few decades back, Mithila’s art was only worth something because of the tension of the moment, of an anonymous and collective encounter, a simultaneously ritual and timeless encounter between the human and the divine. As for the creations achieved by those whom we today call “artists,” they did not really matter as art per se. Their act alone held merit. The firm line, the vivid colors that bore witness to a communion experienced outside the bounds of time, between families of women and divine families – in short, a historical matrix – no longer mattered beyond the confines of a select and attentive audience. During the act, the Mithila region – encompassing parts of the south of Nepal and northern Bihar – shrunk to the dimensions of the wall in an enclosed chamber. The creation or, to be more precise, its function, was realized within the house, on the wall’s body of clay, mixed with sacred cow dung. Then the mysterious embrace took place imperceptibly, in the powerful circle of a *kohbar* [conjugal chamber where ritual murals are traditionally painted], to end with a point the woman placed within the circle painted with a divine eye.



FIG.28 An Empty Space, or One Filled with Light? (2019). Illustration by Martine Le Coz for her book *Le roi de la montagne* (King of the Mountain).

This woman, or another: her mother, her neighbor or her cousin, but always a woman in the traditional ritual. This magical, divine pupil devoured time and space and pulverized it in its vortex, at the epicenter of an extremely dense utopia, in the human and divine concurrence. At the heart of the fleeting mutation of matter, this mysterious, intangible embrace between human and divine melted in absolute, mute joy.

The philosopher André Comte-Sponville defined Utopia as, “That which exists nowhere. An ideal? If we desire it, but programmed, organized, planned, often with a maniacal care for details.”<sup>3</sup> There is some of this too, in the art of Mithila: a certain organization, an attention to details that is often remarkable. But the phenomenon that was palpable in these works not so long ago was not imagined, even if it may have been fleeting and only perceptible at the very edge of human sensibility. This is because the women who performed these traditional

rituals had an acute awareness of what they were doing, a consciousness that was harnessed at the tip of their bamboo sticks, in order for them to draw a point with the utmost certainty, without the least tremor of the hand, a point in the eye of the deity they were honoring, and perhaps to thus be reintegrated into the cosmic flux.

The underlying magic of all this or, to put it more precisely, the power of the palpitating divine act, must have fascinated Véquaud the way it fascinated me. The *bindu* is a point of extreme concentration, which – according to André Padoux – is a drop of energy and of light. Do not forget that sound plays an eminent part in formulating the luminous character of Consciousness. The energy of Speech emits the universe in a luminous flash.

At a certain level of Consciousness, audition and vision are one and the same. Intuitively, the women of Mithila were accessing states of Consciousness at the level where it still conserved something

impersonal, at the edge of Unity, before any perturbing manifestation of objective diversity.<sup>4</sup> André Padoux reminded me of spiritual affinities: the characteristic correlations of Tantric Hinduism, the continual validations established between humans, rites and the cosmos, the affirmation of the simultaneously human and cosmic nature of energy. He certainly did not go so far as to suggest that the women of Mithila were “technicians of deliverance” intently followed by those on the Tantric path, in search of supreme bliss.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, I did not imagine them preoccupied with manipulating cosmic energy in order to take advantage of it. However, André Padoux’s analyses allowed me to approach ritual forms in their art as if they were theatrical stages, where the drama of Consciousness unfurls like the fabric of the cosmic body and is thus revealed. It is from this perspective that my irritation stems, at sometimes finding such powerful expression labeled by the Western art market as decorative or infantile.

One cannot say that the art of Mithila has modified my style of drawing. I can draw in different ways; like a novelist, I can animate and be animated by very different characters, to the point that I sometimes feel devoid of all personality. I do not really perceive myself as an artist – as though my particular expression held such importance that it had to be imposed at all costs.

No doubt this has something to do with the fact that, as a child, I did not imagine myself to be a princess. The image that came to mind was of a little lady carrying a tray at the foot of a lighthouse; I had to climb its staircase to bring nourishment to those above who activated the light. I prefer placing myself at the service of others who are more advanced than I am on the paths of knowledge and love, or, if possible, to highlight their vocation and engagement through my writing and illustrations.

To feel astonishment, admiration and respect for the work of others helps us grow. It is sometimes good to work against one’s inclination and instead, to make the additional effort to build bridges with

others, in an act of fraternity. The women and art of Mithila have bestowed much upon me, and they continue to nourish me. What I confided to Lina Vincent Sunish in April 2015 still rings true to me: “You need to develop your brain to obtain new results in life. You have to farm your own ground differently before fantastic, unknown flowers and animals enjoy sharing it with you.”<sup>6</sup>

At my home, paintings by Dulari Devi and Urmila Devi (FIG.29) are for me like dual sentinels and lighthouses – ever-active and charged with inexhaustible potentialities – animating me by emanating a living Universal Reality that breathes in and out. Painted episodes in the life of Raja Salhesh, often mounted on his elephant, regularly emerge in Jitwarpur village, on the walls of Urmila Devi’s residence, and others in her neighborhood. I would have liked to read the account of his life but such a book did not seem to exist. The story of Salhesh only seemed to reveal itself here and there, in fragments.



FIG.29 An example of Urmila Devi’s early work, now in the collection of Martine Le Coz, Amboise, France.



FIG.30 Somdev Dreamed of a Fiftieth Elephant illustration from Martine Le Coz’s *Le roi de la montagne* (King of the Mountain).





FIG.31 *You Would Therefore Be Rivals, Because He Is Your Cousin*, an illustration from Martine Le Coz's *Le roi de la montagne* (King of the Mountain).

Spontaneously, I proposed to write it. Thereafter, unable to return to Jitwarpur to assemble works by Urmila Devi to illustrate this marvelous story, I undertook illustrations of my own, while awaiting other, truer, more just illustrations to be created by a woman from the community of Dusadhs, living on the very soil where Salhesh's advent occurred.

24 November 2021

## NOTES

1 As opposed to the finished, polished work, Le Coz refers here to the charm of sketches, which — to quote Jules Laforgue — “catch the thought of the artist in all its freshness, at the very moment of manifestation, with perhaps even more truth and sincerity than in the works that require arduous hours of labour.” Cited in De Waal, Edmund, *The Hare With Amber Eyes: A Hidden Inheritance*, Random House: Chatto & Windus, London, pp. 73.) (Translation mine.)

2 Le Coz refers here to auspicious, ritual drawings generally made by women in threshold spaces, including on domestic floors.

3 *Dictionnaire philosophique*, (Presses Universitaires de France, PUF 2001.)

4 The author is referring here to the Hindu metaphysical concept of Brahman, the immanent Absolute, which transcends all the differentiating qualifications of sex and all limiting, individualizing characteristics. “Out of Brahman . . . proceed the energies of Nature, to produce our world of individuated forms, the swarming world of our empirical experience, which is characterized by limitations, polarities, antagonisms and co-operation.” (Heinrich Robert Zimmer, *Myths and Symbols in Indian Art and Civilization*, Pantheon Books, (New York, 1963), p. 123.

5 Tantric art and practice offer techniques and means towards the attainment of spiritual powers and salvation. Padoux is therefore indicating here that Mithila's women were not necessarily offering their art as a means of salvation, even if it did offer bridges to divine truths, etc.

6 Lina Vincent Sunish, “Indian Connections” interview with Martine Le Coz. In *Art and Deal*, Issue 79-80; vol.11, No. 46 & 47; April/May 2015; pp 35-36.

## The Many Lives of the Tale of Raja Salhesh

by Wendy Doniger

Like all great cultural products, the tale of Raja Salhesh is many-layered and complex. Many rivers feed into the ocean of this story, as oral narratives evolve over time, space, culture, local interests, and circumstances, and in the process many elements are added, others dropped, all reshaped. The great myths have long traversed continents, oceans, eras, and diverse cultures and traditions. And the tale of Raja Salhesh is indeed a great myth, inspiring countless retellings through its long history, only some of which are still available to us today. But this rich tradition now includes a newly-inspired French version – Martine Le Coz’s *King of the Mountains* – that testifies to the ongoing evolution of the story even in our day.

The plot of the story of Raja Salhesh is precisely what doesn’t matter. The basic story is an old one, that we know from the *Arabian Nights* and from the *Ocean of the Streams of Story (Kathasaritsagara)*, a Sanskrit text written by Somadeva in about the 12th century in Kashmir, retelling tales long known in the Indian/Sanskrit and Persian/Islamic/Arabic worlds. In that foundational plot, the hero, who is often a master thief, sometimes the youngest and least promising of several brothers, meets a princess in a garden and falls in love with her; an evil rival commits a crime and casts the blame on the hero, who is imprisoned. The hero-thief (often with the help of his trusty brothers or helpers and his trusty elephant or horse) escapes and steals the very bed out from under a sleeping queen without waking her. He is vindicated, his evil rival is punished, he marries the princess, and they live happily ever after.<sup>1</sup>



FIG.32 *Raja Salhesh* (detail). Natural colors and diluted *gobar* (cow dung) on paper, by Jamuna Devi (1922-2011). Collection of Aurogeeta Das, Norwich, UK.

The hero in this case is called King Salhesh (or Salhes; both spellings occur) in a Maithili text that the linguist George Grierson reproduced and translated in 1882. In this telling, a unique version of the old story is claimed as the particular provenance of a particular low caste community, whom Grierson calls the Dusadhs and describes as “a caste whose profession is to steal and to act as *Chaukidárs*, preferably the former,”<sup>2</sup> and who worship clay idols of Salhesh. Grierson says that Salhesh was the first *chaukidar*. *Chaukidars* are watchmen, who belong to a low caste formerly called “Untouchables,” now generally called Dalits. Grierson says he got the story from a Dom, a member of a different Dalit community that is in charge of cremations and therefore is an uncertain authority for the core Dusadh epic. The Dom caste was regarded as a criminal caste (listed under “Other Backward Classes,” i.e. “Untouchables” and tribals) under the British Raj. In Grierson’s retelling, it is because Salhesh is the *chaukidar* of the palace that he is blamed for the theft, which, as watchman, he should have prevented, even if he did not commit the crime himself.

And yet Grierson’s story is still all about the prince who marries his princess (here called Dauna Malin), after the usual adventures with the theft of the bed and the garden and all the rest. But in this new telling, the villain is Salhesh’s cousin Chuharmal (or Chuhar Mál), who steals the bed and casts the blame on the innocent Salhesh, who never steals anything. And there is another important innovation: now the story begins not with a prince seeking his princess but with a princess who hopes to marry her prince, and only subsequently do we encounter the prince who does, eventually, fall in love with his princess. The final line reverts to the old royal story: “And ever after, with Dauna Malin, king Salhes remained in the garden of king Bhim Sain, and guarded it for the rest of his life.”<sup>3</sup>

There is nothing in the version of the story that Grierson translated (nor, indeed, in the older tale of the clever thief) about religion, the gods, or social injustice.

These concerns, however, have become the very soul of the variant of the old plot that forms the substance

of this *Raja Salhesh’s Garden* book, reconstructed in our time from words and images created among the Dusadh women and men of the Mithila region of Bihar, the very region where Grierson had recorded his story in 1882. Both Grierson’s and the new retellings know the old story of the master thief who steals the bed and wins the princess (the king, Salhesh’s father, is named Somdev, perhaps a nod to the Somadeva who composed the *Kathasaritsagara*?), but they turn that story on its head. The new tellers of the story keep the outline of the old plot and its key motifs—the king’s son, the woman he is intended to marry, his helpers, his elephant, the garden, the theft of the bed—but weave these threads into an entirely new fabric. Like the line of scripture that’s the basis of a Bach chorale, the traditional plot of the epic of Salhesh serves as the excuse for a number of meditations on human life and society and the role that the gods play in them. This, rather than the plot, is what matters. And the paintings made by women in Mithila, illustrating various moments in the story, present yet another layer of new ideas and

new details, inspired by the contemporary context and social and religious meaning of events of the plots, now several times removed from the original story. These visual ideas then fed back into subsequent retellings of the story.

Finally, yet another creative force entered this still very much alive artistic process. In 2012, Martine Le Coz encountered the tale of Salhesh among the Dusadhs of Mithila. Painstakingly collecting and collating the many old tellings and contemporary visual images and the many Maithili variants of the story (some of which may derive from much earlier texts), Le Coz has constructed a new version of the tale. Her translation of that collated version into French produced a work that was then, finally, further developed into Regan Kramer's translation of the French text into English. And it is now a frieze on which many hands have worked.

In the process, much of the story had been turned on its head yet again, perhaps because in this version of the story it is the princess, rather than the prince, who first longs for their connection (a version that we know from Grierson), and the prince does *not* want to marry at all and does not want to be king. Instead, he wishes to renounce his kingship in the search of a religious goal, ultimately to create a casteless society.

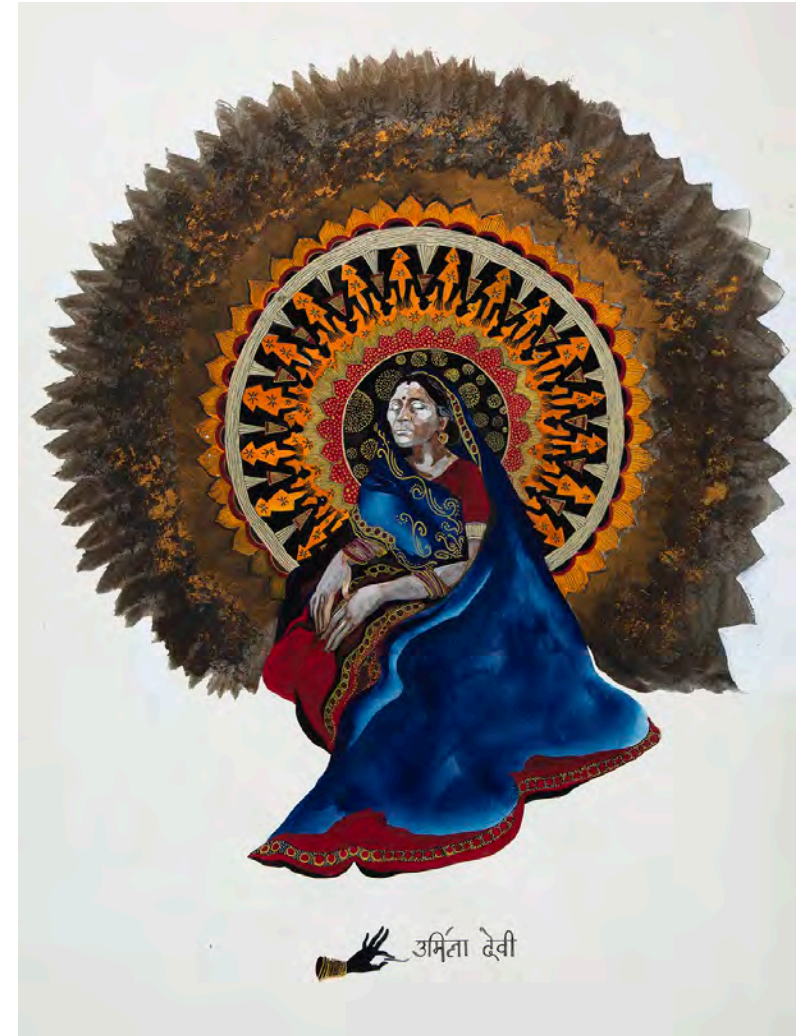
The king who wants to renounce his kingship is well known from Sanskrit literature, from Yudhishtira in the *Mahabharata* and Rama in the *Yogavisistha* to tales still told in India today. And, indeed, the theme of the renouncing king is one of a number of ancient and medieval Hindu religious motifs that have found their way into this 21st-century reconstruction of the Maithili tellings. In Grierson's 19th-century version, the only reference to religion is a passage that occurs near the start of the story, when the hero prays to Indra, king of the Vedic gods (the gods of the most ancient Indian text, the *Rig Veda*, c. 2000 BCE), as well as to the fifty-four crores of Hindu gods (from later Sanskrit texts such as the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*). In the Le Coz text we still have the Vedic Indra, still riding on his elephant Airavata and controlling storms and rainbows, "Indra, father of

Arjuna and ancestor of Shiva, known for inserting himself into wombs of his choosing."<sup>24</sup> But now we also have the Hindu deities Shiva, Durga, Ganga, Krishna, Rama and Sita, Ganesha, Hanuman, the goddess Ganges with her *makara* (the Sanskrit word for the sea serpent on which she rides), and several other Sanskrit deities. Shiva and Durga are directly involved in the birth of Somdev's daughter and three sons, and in that context we hear the Puranic story of

the descent of the Ganges into Shiva's hair. Salhesh remembers that (in the *Mahabharata*) the great Arjuna had withdrawn from the world to die in the Himalayas, leaving his grandson Parikshit to carry on their royal lineage. At the end, Salhesh meets King Janaka, from the *Ramayana*, and the sage Ashtavakra, from the *Mahabharata*. More and more often as the text draws to a close, the gods hover above the earth in classical Indo-European fashion,

Krishna and Shiva and all the others, sitting in the clouds as they discuss Salhesh's spiritual progress like teachers at a school conference.

But the religious world in which most of the story is now set is not Vedic or Epic but a combination of Hindu bhakti, mystical Vedantic philosophy, and late medieval Hindu theology, complete with gurus. (Salhesh even gives sermons sitting under a tree, just like the Buddha, and indeed there is a



FIGS.33 & 34 (Left & Right): two 2012 portraits of Urmila Devi by Martine Le Coz, published in her 2013 book *Mithilā: l'honneur des femmes (Mithila: Women's Honor)*.



FIG.35 *Raja Salhesh's Second Birth* (2016), gouache on paper—by Urmila Devi. Collection of Martine Le Coz, Amboise, France.

lot of quasi-Buddhist talk about mindfulness and paying attention to all creatures.) This is a world of meditative, philosophical religion. “Lord Shiva [...] deliver me from emotions,”<sup>55</sup> Salhesh prays at one point. We keep encountering phrases like “the Divine Consciousness still floated in the rivers”<sup>56</sup> and “the mystery of the center”<sup>57</sup> and “Divine Oneness.”<sup>58</sup> The princes are taught meditation. On every page we meet a Hindu god from the Sanskrit traditions, which are basically Brahmin traditions.

But how can this text, that is preserved by “Untouchables” (and, as we will see, is about the need to treat “Untouchables” justly), take place in a quasi-Brahmanical world? The Dusadh pantheon, as we know it from other texts and images, is not the Hindu pantheon. The Dusadh primarily venerate Rahou, who is not a Hindu god, though his name does suggest the identity of the demon Rahu who swallows the sun, a theme illustrated in some Maithili paintings. But in this story of Salhesh we never encounter any of the “Untouchable” gods like Lal Beg, god of the sweepers, or, for that matter, any deity from tribal or other such communities. We encounter only mainstream Hindu gods.

Nevertheless, the main actors in our story blur the lines of class and caste. In Le Coz’s tale of Salhesh, he was originally born into the Kshatriya (warrior) caste, but what was the caste of the people, particularly the women, generally billed as princesses, whom he encounters? Grierson’s telling begins with Dauna Malin, the woman who wants to marry Salhesh, and she remains the woman in love with Salhesh in the modern retelling. The Malin caste are gardeners (now called Malis), and the Malin sisters are, not surprisingly, closely associated with the garden at the center of the plot. Malis nowadays are listed (like the *chaukidars*) among the “Other Backward Classes,” and in our contemporary text they are paired with the Dusadhs and said to pride themselves on their knowledge of the marshlands’ medicinal flowers and plants. It is entirely appropriate that Dauna Malin, Dauna the Gardener, should rescue Salhesh in the magic garden and, at the end (in the

very last line of Grierson’s version of the story), live in it with him forever after.<sup>9</sup>

In the contemporary retelling, however, the Malin sisters have become not only gardeners but also painters. They are expressly said to come from Mithila and Madhubani, just like the women painters of Mithila who are now telling the story. There is a charming self-reference to birds, “...the kind that the women of Mithila drew to symbolize carnal desire.”<sup>10</sup> And now, as painters, the sisters are involved in a complicated episode about painting the temple walls and fixing the Hanuman statue, in the course of which Salhesh rails against painting and the “vanity of art”<sup>11</sup> and demands, “Why must there be art? Creating illusion!”<sup>12</sup> This is yet another instance of his resistance to Dauna Malin both as a woman and as an artist, a resistance which the story is designed to make him overcome. Near the end of the text, the gods say: “*May the women of Mithila continue to paint Salhesh’s acts and so transmit his wisdom to the world!*”<sup>13</sup> And in the end, Dauna Malin finally becomes Salhesh’s spiritual counselor, not his wife.

Another clue to the complexity of the caste structure in this tale is the nature of the central battle. Towards the end of the story, Salhesh encounters his cousin



FIG.36 The pregnant Dalit woman bearing the re-born Raja Salhesh, detail from *Raja Salhesh's Second Birth* (2016) by Urmila Devi. Collection of Martine Le Coz, Amboise, France. (See FIG.35 for entire painting.)

and enemy, Chuharmal, on a battlefield, as befits two members of the Kshatriya caste. However, in a sense, their more significant clash comes much earlier in the story, about midway, when they find themselves in competition in a garden. They compete over who will be its *chaukidar* (watchman)—not a royal role at all, but a low-caste role suitable for Dusadhs who fall in love with Malins, gardeners.

The issue of concern for the lower castes is present from the very start. Even before Salhesh is born, his father, King Somdev, listens sympathetically as the “Untouchables” complain of their mistreatment. As Salhesh grows up, his enemies in the court regard as a serious flaw in his character the fact that he cares for his low-caste servants. As he matures, he becomes more and more concerned with “the rights of every being, starting with the oppressed, whom he wished to save from the powerful and their shows of pride.”<sup>14</sup> He decides to become a bridge between the “Untouchables” and the rest of society.

And there is a stunning new twist in the caste structures of the story. When, in the Sanskrit texts, the king wished to become a renouncer, he would become a royal renouncer, a *rajarshi* (“king-sage”), with no loss of caste. But in Le Coz’s text, the prince wants to renounce not only his royal role (and his social role, his marriage) but his very caste, to become a Dalit. (Finally, he decides not to renounce the world, but to stay in it, “neither a sadhu nor a spouse,”<sup>15</sup> to help people, like a Bodhisattva.) There are several allusions to a story according to which Salhesh somehow actually became, through his own wish, the embryo in the womb of a Dalit woman, through the ministrations of the Dalit midwife, whom Le Coz names Urmila—in honor of the contemporary artist from whom Le Coz heard this striking account.<sup>16</sup> (Later, when Urmila, the midwife, comes to Salhesh because she has heard that he has established a casteless society, he hands over the rule of his new society to her). But it’s not clear precisely

what happened after the birth; we never learn about the life of the low caste person that resulted from Salhesh’s entry into that Dalit womb. Moreover, though Salhesh shrinks into an embryo and is reborn as an “Untouchable” infant, presumably to grow up into an “Untouchable” man, he doesn’t cease to be an adult man; he continues to function as Salhesh of royal birth. We will return to this riddle at the end of this brief essay.

One of the most extraordinary aspects of the contemporary telling of the story of Salhesh is its quality as a kind of Indian *Bildungsroman* (“formation novel”) about the spiritual education, the moral formation, of a prince. A *Bildungsroman* is a rather modern genre that is not generally recognized before the early 19th century in Europe. Though we may look upon the ancient Indian narratives of the life of the Buddha and the education of prince Arjuna and prince Rama

as stories of the formation of a prince (and, in the case of the Buddha, a renouncer), it would be hard to find a precedent for the story of a prince who rejects the Kshatriya world in order to create a new world of social justice, particularly social justice for “Untouchables.” As part of his *Bildung* (perhaps echoing the spiritual crisis that Arjuna undergoes before the great battle, in the *Bhagavad Gita*), and before the battle with Chuharmal, Salhesh confronts his own egotism and rejects it in shame.

In many ways, the contemporary Maithili story of Salhesh mirrors the basic structure of the life of the hero in Otto Rank’s construction (better known from Joseph Campbell’s popularization<sup>17</sup>), beginning with the theme of the two babies switched at birth (which appears in the Dusadh story as Salhesh’s second birth as the Dalit baby). The most famous instance of this paradigm in India is the tale of the birth of Krishna,



FIGS. 37 & 38  
Salhesh shrine murals (Maharani Gacchi, Laheria Ganj—near Jitwarpur) by Shanti Devi and Seevan Paswan, assisted by Seevan’s younger brothers Ganesh Paswan and Ashok Kumar Paswan. (Photos by Mani Shekhar Singh)

doomed to die in a slaughter of the innocents until he is switched with a new-born girl, who dies in his place.<sup>18</sup> Outside of India, the broad outline of this aspect of the tale of Salhesh also strangely mirrors the life of Jesus: the son of a god, spurned by his contemporaries, preaching for and establishing the roots of a new kingdom of social justice, falsely accused and imprisoned, a king who rejects his kingship and goes on to form a new moral society. This divine paradigm fits Salhesh very well.

And it is Salhesh's divine quality that, I think, explains the puzzling episode in which Salhesh both enters a Dalit embryo and continues as an adult king. In this episode, Salhesh splits himself in the same way that the gods do: when Vishnu becomes incarnate as Rama he also continues in heaven as Vishnu. So when Salhesh becomes incarnate as an "Untouchable," he continues in his kingdom as Salhesh. His "rebirth" as an "Untouchable" is more like an incarnation. Although Salhesh does not function as a god in this story, he is very much a god in Dusadh society, venerated as a semi-divine hero who eclipses even the god Rahou. Small altars dedicated to him are built in the state of Bihar, and in the northernmost reaches of Mithila, a New Year festival is devoted to him every year in Nepal, where multitudes of Dusadhs make pilgrimages to visit his sacred garden. For, though we encounter Salhesh for almost all of the story as a flawed and suffering human, he does not merely become a great hero, but a great god.

## NOTES

1 Wendy Doniger, "Pregnant Riddles and Clever Wives," *The Ring of Truth: And Other Myths of Sex and Jewelry* (Oxford University Press: New York) 2017: 139-146.

2 George A. Grierson, *An Introduction to the Maithili Language of North Bihar containing a grammar, chrestomathy & vocabulary, Part II: Chrestomathy and Vocabulary*, Extra number to Journal, Asiatic Society, Bengal, Calcutta: Asiatic Society) 1882:3.

3 Ibid. 19-20

4 Martine Le Coz, *The King of the Mountain*. Translated from the French by Regan Kramer. (New Delhi: Navayana), 2022:81

5 Ibid., 79.

6 Ibid., 15.

7 Ibid., 70.

8 Ibid., 44.

9 Grierson (Op. Cit.) 20.

10 Le Coz (Op. Cit.) 95.

11 Ibid., 80.

12 Ibid., 77.

13 Ibid., 205.

14 Ibid., 155.

15 Ibid., 77.

16 This story was told to Le Coz by the artist Urmila Devi as an explanation of one of her paintings (here shown as FIG.35). For a fuller account of this painting and its story's significance for Le Coz, see Le Coz (2022: 226-229).

17 Otto Rank, *The Myth of the Birth of the Hero* (translated from *Der Mythos von der Geburt des Helden*, 1909); and Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1940).

18 *Bhagavata Purana*, Book 10, chapter 3.

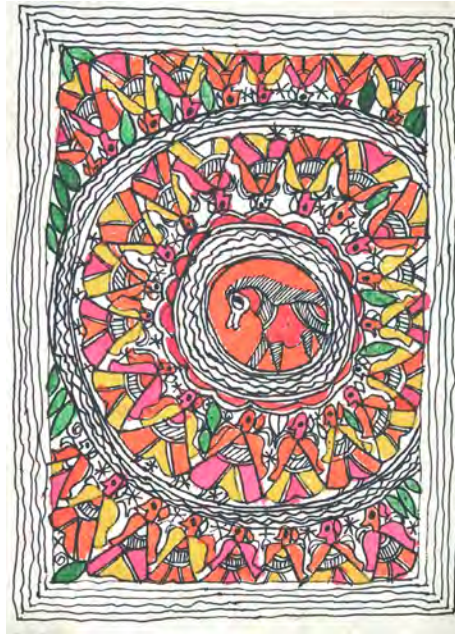


FIG.39 *Horse Rasa* (2014), acrylic on paper by Abhilasha Kumari, collection of Wendy Doniger.

While Raja Salhesh is traditionally shown riding his elephant Bhauranand, Salhesh's brothers Moti Ram and Budheshwar ride horses—which are closely associated with soldiers (as shown and explained by Abhilasha Kumari's grandmother Urmila Devi, CAT.31 and 32. [J.H. Bowles]).



Raja Salhesh's Garden

*Contemporary Dalit Art  
& Ancient Myths of Mithila*

Catalog

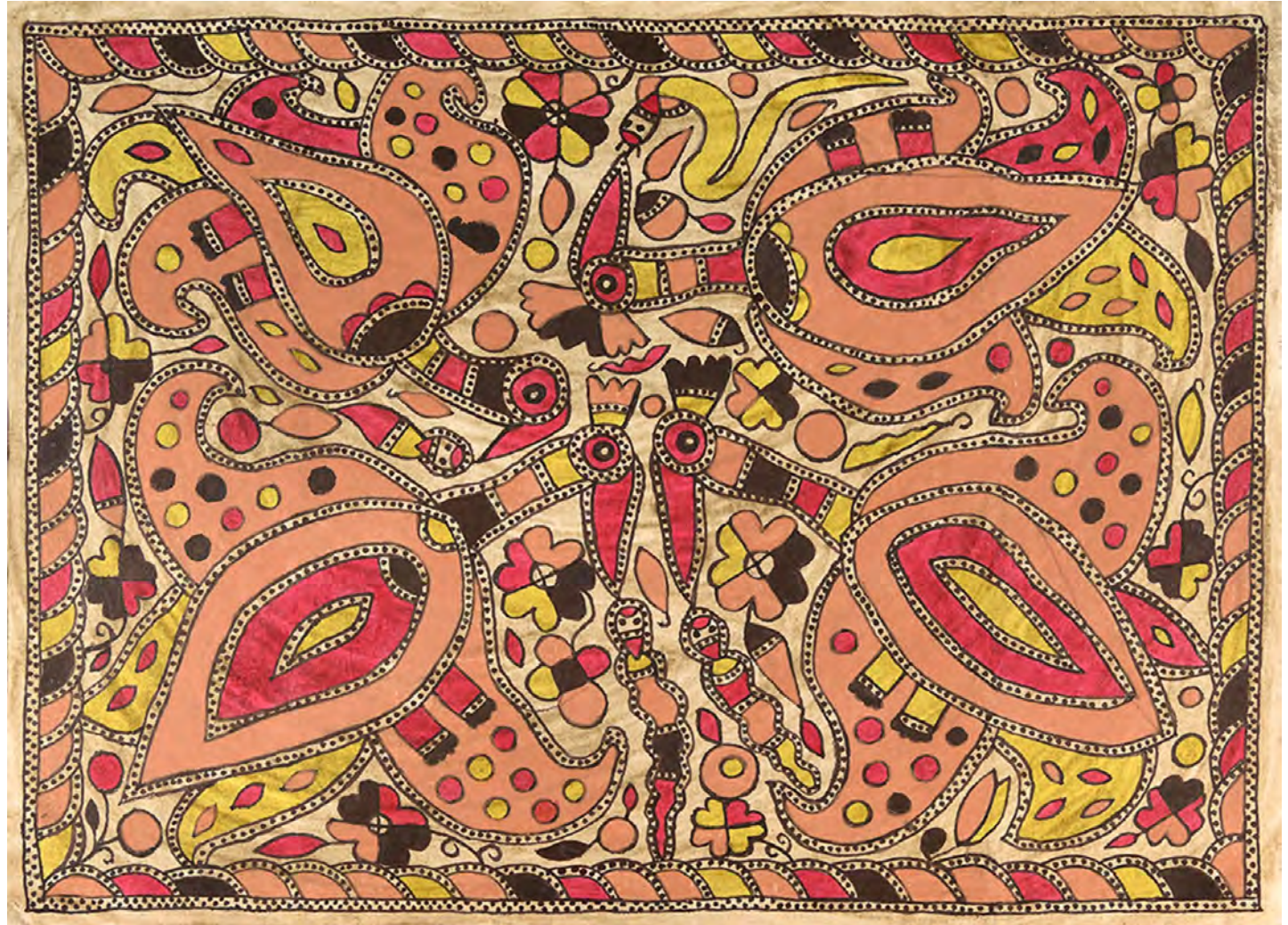
John H. Bowles and Kaushik Kumar Jha

## 1 *Four Ducks* (1982)

Gouache and natural colors on *gobar*  
(cow dung) stained paper (30" x 22")

by Jamuna Devi aka Yamuna Devi (1922-2011)  
Village Jitwarpur, District Madhubani, Bihar  
Collection of Radford University Art Museum,  
donated by the Ethnic Arts Foundation

Jamuna Devi belonged to her village's Chamar community (traditional leatherworkers) and was one of the first Dalits to be encouraged by the Bombay-based artist and government agent Bhaskar Kulkarni to paint on paper sometime in the late 1960s to mid-1970s.<sup>1</sup> She and other Dalit women artists were initially inspired by the paintings then being done by upper caste artists, yet also replicated on paper the mural styles typically used by their own community. In addition to recreating their mural imagery onto paper, Jamuna was responsible for a technical innovation inspired by their traditional murals. Such murals are painted on the surface of walls made of mixed mud and *gobar* (cow dung—combined to the mud to add viscosity). *Gobar* and all other cattle bi-products have a special status in India, where the majority-Hindu population consider cows to be sacred. Jamuna decided that it would be both auspicious and aesthetically desirable to prime her paper with diluted *gobar* before painting her imagery—thus creating a warm, earthy mural-like undertone to many of her works. Her application of *gobar* to pure white paper initially caused scandalous consternation among her fellow artists in Village Jitwarpur;<sup>2</sup> but in time the technique caught on (as can be seen elsewhere in this catalogue)—and was eventually sometimes adopted by upper caste artists too. In this particular painting, Jamuna Devi uses a style called *geru*,<sup>3</sup> literally meaning “brown,” and characterized by limited earthen hues and diluted *gobar* to depict four ducks in a way that's both boldly vivid yet rather ambiguous. Are these ducks converging, flying, or floating? The picture itself has no clearly-indicated top or bottom (and thus can be displayed either vertically or horizontally).



1a Murals by unknown Dalit artist, Village Jitwarpur. Such exterior murals are often created at the time of *Diwali*—a major autumn “festival of lights”—in celebration of Lakshmi, the Hindu goddess of wealth (c.1992 photo by Mani Shekhar Singh).



**2 Several Designs of 'Gato' (1981)**  
**Black and pink ink on paper (22" x 30")**  
 by Jamuna Devi—aka Yamuna Devi (1922-2011)  
 Village Jitwarpur, District Madhubani, Bihar  
 Collection of Radford University Art Museum,  
 donated by the Ethnic Arts Foundation

Another major source of aesthetic inspiration for contemporary Dalit artists in Mithila are *godana* (tattoos), which they acquire by engaging the tattoo services of itinerant *natins* (gypsies). While it's difficult to ascertain specific meanings to particular tattoo motifs, in India (and elsewhere) tattooing among women of low status communities is often the equivalent of jewelry—but a jewelry that cannot be taken away. According to the late anthropologist Alfred Gell, tattoos do more than simply “beautify.” They are considered “*indestructible, permanent and inalienable* [...] *testify to the idea of personal wealth and worth* [...] *prerequisite to marriage*”—and serve as protection in both life and death. Gell further explains: “*Tattooed skin protects the woman after death, not just because it pleases the ruler of the underworld, but also, in certain instances, because it is held to be intrinsically resistant to attack. This is connected with the common Indian practice of putting black dots on people and things to protect them from the evil eye. Either the deities or demons of the underworld cannot consume the tattooed portions of the body, and therefore are obliged to leave the whole body intact, or the tattoo designs are said to constitute a puzzle which the deity cannot solve, so restraining his anger and saving the tattooed person from harm.*”<sup>1</sup>

Although originally drawing inspiration from the *natins*' tattoos designs, Mithila's Dalit artists have utilized, expanded and embellished such designs to create a visual vocabulary to depict a broad range of imagery—including deities, scenes of rituals, myths and legends, as well as natural landscapes. This particular painting—depicting various tattoo designs with a delicacy reminiscent of the modern Swiss Primitivist painter Paul Klee—was originally acquired from the artist about forty years ago by the anthropologist Raymond Owens, who titled it *Several Designs of 'Gato'*—the meaning of which remains to date an enigma.



2a Notebook drawings by a *natin* tattoo artist, drawn on Feb. 19, 2019 at the request of Urmila Devi, J.H. Bowles, and K.K. Jha.

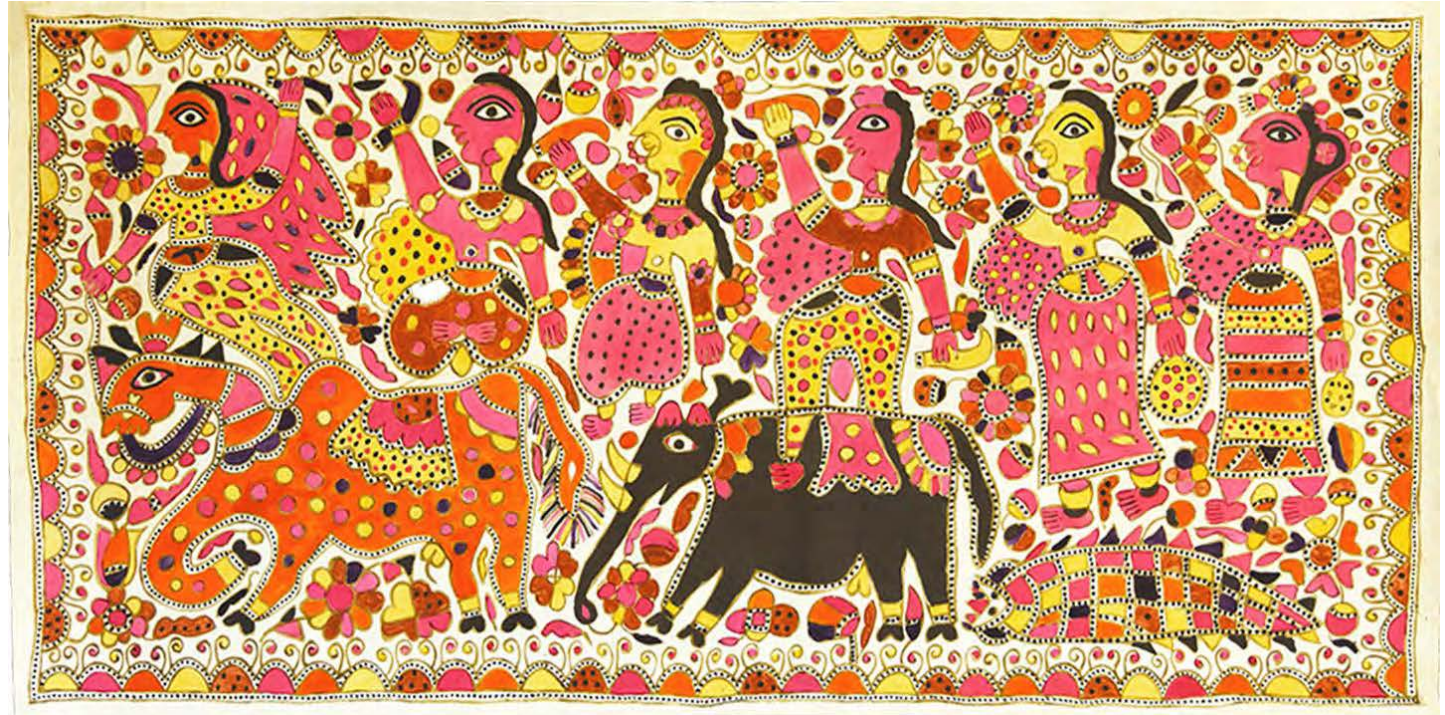
2b The Dalit artist Urmila Devi discusses traditional tattoo motifs drawn by a *natin* (gypsy) — shown on the notebook at left. (2019 photo by J.H. Bowles)

### 3 *Raja Salhesh with his Two Brothers and Three Flower Maidens* (c. 2000)

Natural colors on paper (30" x 60")  
by Jamuna Devi—aka Yamuna Devi (1922-2011)  
Village Jitwarpur, District Madhubani, Bihar  
Collection of John H. Bowles, Radford

According to the art historian Aurogeeta Das, Senior Curator at the Ipswich Museum (UK): *Raja Salhesh was extremely handsome and was famous for his fabulous palace garden cared for by his numerous adoring malis (flower maidens), such as the three shown in the procession. However—finding their continuous attentions tiresome—he is often depicted using his magical powers to create multiple copies of himself so the malis cannot tell which is the real Raja Salhesh. [Among certain Dalit communities in Mithila] Raja Salhesh serves as a subtle but political point in these paintings as a reference to the Hindu god Krishna, who likewise can multiply himself so that each one of a circle of gopis (cowherd women) can feel that she alone is dancing with him.<sup>1</sup>*

One of the chief delights of this painting is the manner in which Jamuna Devi's depicted figures seem to float in suspended animation amidst a wondrous field of likewise-buoyant flowers. A limited range of delicate colors— mostly bright yellows, oranges and pinks—create a light, celebratory impression. The surrounding border of colorful semi-circles and small dots underscores the picture's overall jaunty rhythm. Although Jamuna Devi experimented with different styles and techniques throughout her life (as can be seen in her other paintings in this catalogue), she is today most readily and popularly recognized for the style exemplified by this work. In 1987, Jamuna Devi became the first Dalit artist in Mithila to receive a national award.



3a Jamuna Devi receives her national award from Venkat Raman, President of India (1987 photo courtesy of Bindu Devi).

#### 4 *Shiva Crushing the Demon Apasmara Purusha* (1981)

Natural colors, including diluted *gobar*  
(cow dung) on paper (30" x 22")

by Jamuna Devi—aka Yamuna Devi (1922-2011)  
Village Jitwarpur, District Madhubani, Bihar  
Collection of John H. Bowles, Radford

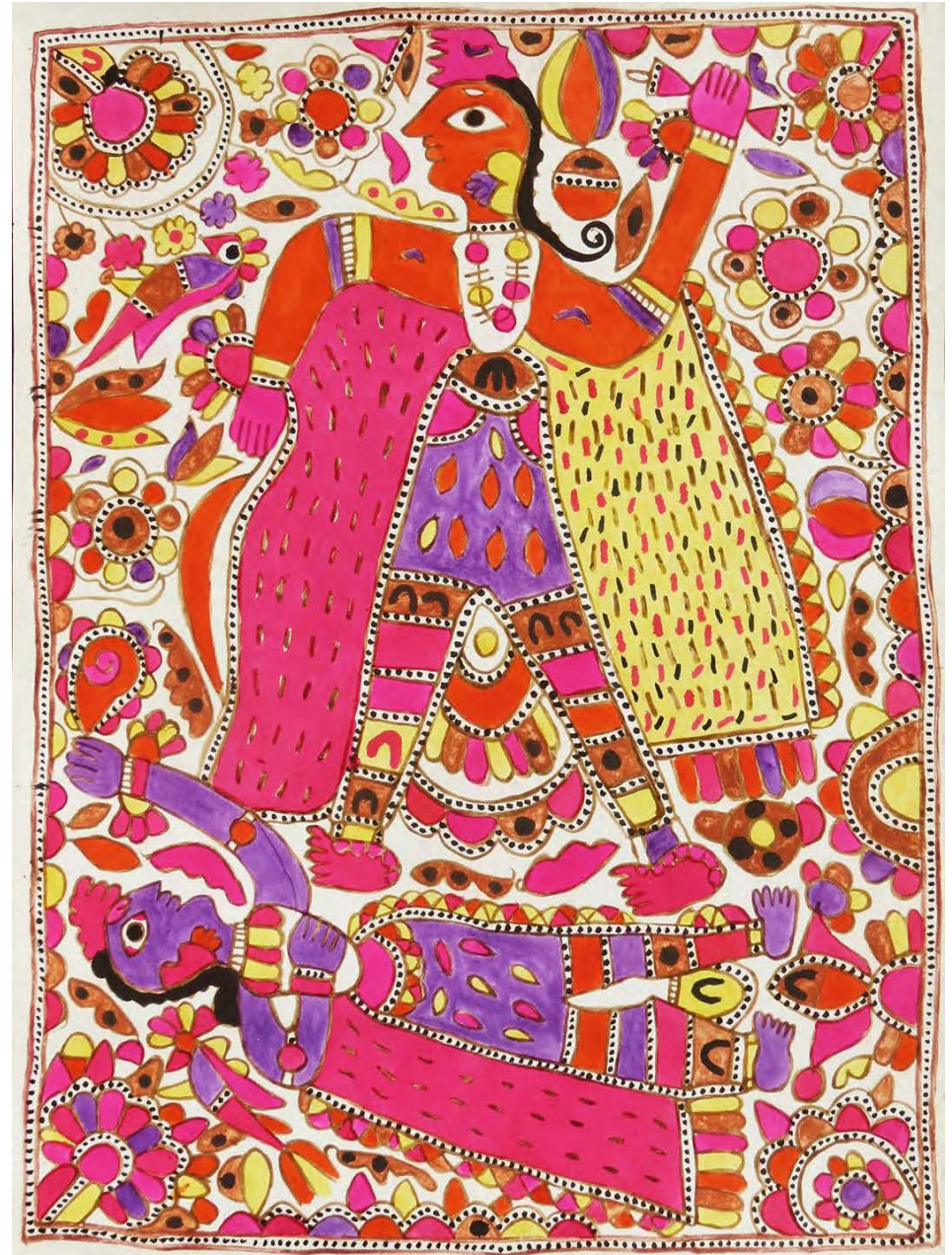
According to Dr. Mani Shekhar Singh, a leading Mithila art scholar: "Because the portrayal of Hindu deities in paintings by Dalit artists do not follow standardized iconography, this departure can convey a sense of freshness and creativity often lacking in the more formulaic representations of many upper-caste artists. This freshness appears in an early Jamuna Devi painting of Shiva trampling Apasmara Purusha, the demon personifying ignorance. The upright figure of Shiva-as-Nataraja, with a small drum [damru] in his left hand, occupies the central vertical axis of the image-field and is walking from the right to the left section of the field, looking away from the viewer. His gesture and body posture indicate that he is totally engaged in action. In contrast to upright Shiva, the image of the reclining demon, Apasmara Purusha, occupies the horizontal axis. He is glancing upwards, as if to attract Shiva's attention. The figure of Shiva in brown with a flowing and dotted red and yellow robe contrasts with the purple colored Apasmara Purusha dressed in red clothing. Jamuna Devi packs the field around the two main figures with floral motifs and images of birds. In its use of bold colors and thick (impasto like) cow dung dots, this dancing Shiva as Nataraja is a classic example of Dalit explorations of color painting in early *gobar* style."<sup>1</sup>

For centuries, the general composition of these iconic bronze statues has been replicated ad infinitum (sometimes with extraordinary refinements, but most recently mass produced for either devotional purposes or the ethnic art market)—to the point of cliché. Jamuna Devi's depiction breathes bright new life into this long-cherished subject.



4a *Shiva as Lord of Dance*, Tamil Nadu,  
c. 950-1000 CE Collection of the Los Angeles  
County Museum of Art.

By contrast, compare Jamuna Devi's *Shiva Crushing the Demon Apasmara Purusha* to this cast bronze sculptural masterpiece depicting the dancing Shiva—created a millennium ago during South India's Chola Dynasty: Shiva triumphantly dances with one foot firmly planted upon the demon symbolizing spiritual ignorance, here depicted as a tiny dwarf.



## 5 *Two Girlfriends* (c. 1981)

Gouache on paper (22" x 30")

by Jamuna Devi—aka Yamuna Devi (1922-2011)  
Village Jitwarpur, District Madhubani, Bihar  
Collection of Radford University Art Museum,  
donated by the Ethnic Arts Foundation

In both form and content, paintings by Mithila's Dalit community differ from works by their upper caste neighbors. While Mithila's upper caste Brahman and Kayastha painters focus on pan-Indian religious imagery—or, more recently, on depicting topical contemporary subjects (such as global climate change, deforestation, feminist issues, etc.)—the Dalit artists mostly focus on their regional hero-deities, depictions of nature, and scenes from daily life. A domestic scene such as shown here—focusing solely on two girlfriends chatting—would be considered unworthy of painting by an upper caste artist, but was one of Jamuna Devi's specialties.

Initially Jamuna Devi emulated her neighboring Brahman artists' traditional *bharni* ("color infill") style, which she came to apply with increasingly bold and bright colors—as can also be seen in her 1988 "Tiger Hunting" painting (CAT.6).



5a Jamuna Devi (photo courtesy of Binda Devi)



## 6 *Tiger Hunting* (c. 1988)

Ink and gouache paper (22" x 30")

by Jamuna Devi—aka Yamuna Devi (1922-2011)

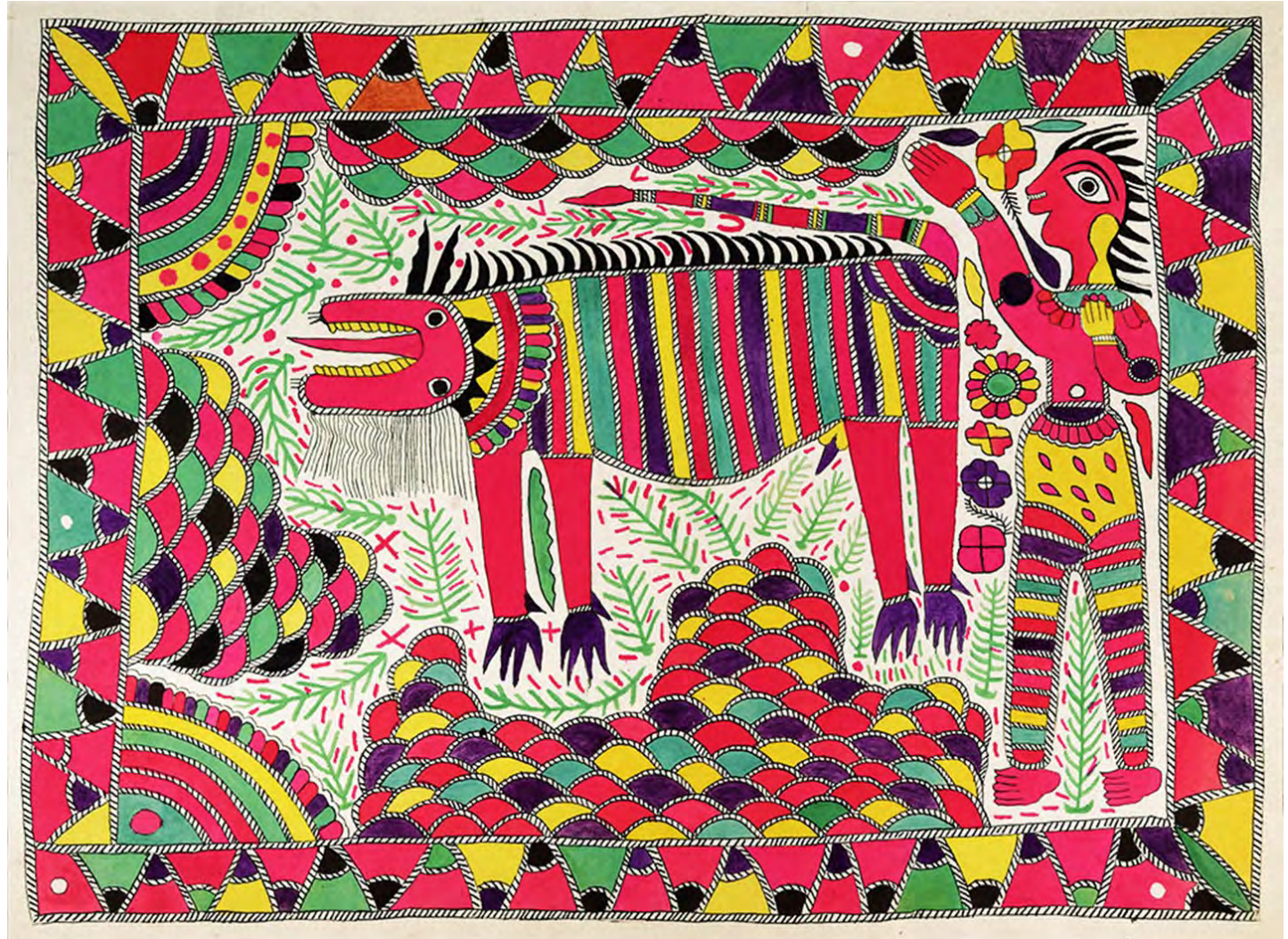
Village Jitwarpur, District Madhubani, Bihar

Collection of Radford University Art Museum,

donated by the Ethnic Arts Foundation

The artist Jamuna Devi was one of Mithila's most stylistically innovative artists. Mani Shekhar Singh—one of the leading scholars of these arts—has much admired how she: "...explores the expressive potential of color painting [...] More than any Maithil artist, her constant engagement with the medium, material, and technique reinvigorates Maithil art."<sup>1</sup>

This *Tiger Hunting* painting shows her mature painting style's delight in juxtaposing bold colors. Although she belonged to the Chamar community (traditional leatherworkers)—regarded by orthodox Hindus to be one of the lowest ranking of the Dalit communities—her works radiate vigorous confidence & rhythmic energy. According to the UK-based art historian and Ipswich Museum Senior Curator Aurogeeta Das, Jamuna Devi "...was among the first artists in Mithila's Dalit community to paint and sell paintings on paper. In addition to establishing herself as one of the region's leading artists—and the first Dalit woman artist to receive a national award from the Indian government [in 1987]—she also was a trailblazer, demonstrating art's potential for economically empowering women in her long-marginalized and impoverished community."<sup>2</sup>



6a Jamuna Devi and her husband Ramji Ram (photo courtesy of Binda Devi)

## 7 *Chuharmal on a Camel* (1977-78)

Gouache on paper (30" x 22")

by Shanti Devi (Born 1958)

Village Laheria Ganj, District Madhubani,  
Bihar, & New Delhi

Collection of Radford University Art Museum,  
donated by the Ethnic Arts Foundation

In creating their contemporary paintings on paper, Mithila's artists draw upon many sources of inspiration—including their mural traditions. In Mithila's Dalit communities, the murals often feature figures outlined by double borders containing evenly spaced dots. These dotted borders enhance the painting with a lively staccato/sparkling-like effect, as can be seen in both this painting and the accompanying photograph of a detail (CAT.7a) from a mural in a Dalit neighborhood of Village Jitwarpur.

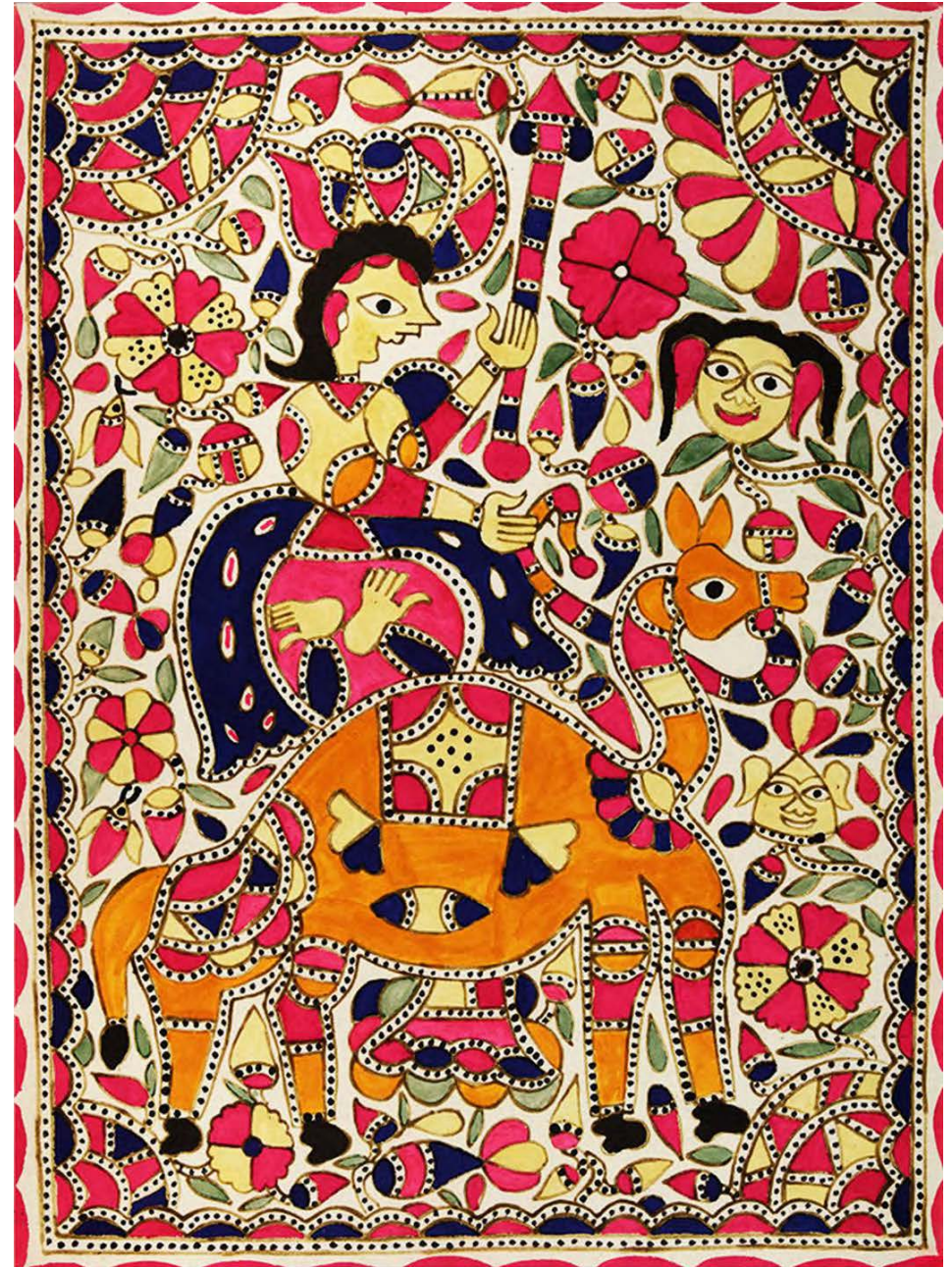
According to Shanti Devi's recent explanation of this painting,<sup>1</sup> here *Chuharmal* is shown after stealing the clothes and jewelry of Rani Chandrawati. He is riding on a camel; in one hand he holds the reins, in the other a spear. Two small faces in this painting [shown along the right margin] are Kusuma Malin [a flower maiden], in the form of a flower, and Raja Salhesh as a bhaura [bumble-bee]. Both have changed their form thus to disguise themselves from *Chuharmal*. He is not aware of them, but they are happily smiling as they witness him committing a theft [—thus proving Raja Salhesh's own innocence].” — Translated by Kaushik Kumar Jha

According to the scholar Neel Rekha, Shanti Devi and her husband Seewan (or “Shivan”) were: “[i]nspired by his mother, Kushuma Devi, who was by that time an established artist” in the field of mud wall frescos, Seewan and his wife started working for Raymond Lee Owens, an American anthropologist doing a fifteen-month cultural study of Jitwarpur who founded the Master Craftsmen's Association of Mithila (MCAM) in 1977. During 1978-82 they made paintings based on their community's legends [...] The recognition they received through state and

national awards for paintings of *Salhesh* [Salhesh] inspired other Harijan [Dalit] painters to concentrate on this theme.<sup>2</sup> It should be noted that, like Shanti Devi, Seewan Paswan has also achieved much recognition and a state award for his own paintings. For example, in 2017 he was commissioned to create a huge (10'x10½') painting in the *godana* (tattoo) style—entitled *King Salhesh Folklore*— for permanent display in Patna's prestigious Bihar Museum, where it now hangs next to a painting by Mithila's master Brahman artist Vinita Jha (Essays p.21). Thus Mithila's traditional mural and tattoo imagery—originally practiced and first transferred to paper by women artists—has recently been further transformed into mural-sized acrylic paintings on canvas, thus demonstrating how living traditions can evolve and expand to include different media, generations and genders.



7a Detail of a mural in Village Jitwarpur, showing a lotus outlined with dotted double borders. (Photo by Mani Shekhar Singh)



**8 Moti Ram on Horseback  
Encounters Kusuma Malin** (c. 1969)

Ink & gouache on paper

by Shanti Devi (Born 1958)

Village Laheria Ganj, District Madhubani, Bihar,  
and New Delhi

Collection of Radford University Art Museum,  
donated by the Ethnic Arts Foundation

The artist Shanti Devi showed great artistic promise from a very young age. This picture is one of the earliest examples of her art—created when she was just eleven years old. Although born into Village Sima’s marginalized Dalit community, thanks to the help of upper caste children (who lived in the household where her mother worked as a housemaid), Shanti learned to read and write. After marrying an impoverished artist named Shivan (“Seevan”) Paswan, she attended a local middle school, where she studied various subjects, including English. In her neighborhood she met two foreign anthropologists—the German Erika Moser-Schmitt and the American Raymond Owens—both of whom played major roles in documenting & promoting recognition of traditional Mithila art and culture. They recognized and encouraged Shanti’s budding artistic talents, and helped launch her career. Now entering her mid-60s, she has traveled and been exhibited internationally, and her works are widely collected and published. In 1985, India’s President presented her with the national Tamra Patra Award. When accepting the award in a grand ceremony in New Delhi, she expressed her thanks but said what she really needed was a house—and thus she was provided with a small brick house, the first of its kind in her neighborhood.<sup>1</sup>

Shanti Devi recently explained this picture thus: *Moti Ram* [Raja Salhesh’s brother] is riding on the horse and *Kusuma Malin* [the flower maiden Kusuma] is standing on the flower just in front of *Moti Ram*. She is holding a long-stemmed flower and is teasing him by asking: “Will you marry me? I want to marry you!” There is a bunch of flowers behind *Moti Ram*. She is flirting with him, and thus he looks scared.

—Translated by Kaushik Kumar Jha



8a Shanti Devi  
(2014 photo by J. H. Bowles)

8b Shanti Devi receives the  
1985 National Tamra Patra  
Award from Shri Gyani Zail  
Singh, President of India.

## 9 *Raja Salhesh Goes to Battle*

(c. 1979-80)

Ink & gouache on paper

by Shanti Devi (Born 1958)

Village Laheria Ganj, District Madhubani, Bihar,  
and New Delhi

Collection of Dr. & Mrs. Carl Pechman,  
Washington, DC

The artist Shanti Devi's art career spans over six decades, during which time she has been ceaselessly experimenting with new styles and techniques. This painting of *Raja Salhesh Goes to Battle* was done when she was twenty-one years old (about a decade after *Moti Ram on Horseback Encounters Kusuma Malin* [CAT.8]), and working in an especially bold style. This contrasts with her slightly later, subtly muted *geru* (brown) style coloring of her *Sadul Bird* (CAT.9a), as well as her delicate linear imagery, lightly tinted with natural colors (FIG.22), and her most recent, richly patterned style—with high psychedelic coloring (CAT.9b). Shanti Devi's *Raja Salhesh Goes to Battle* is a fine example of Shanti Devi's boldest style, created at a relatively early stage in her long career. Throughout her artistic evolution she has explored various manners of composition, coloring, line, pattern, etc.—constantly creating fresh surprises for scholars and collectors of her art, and laying to rest misconceptions that India's contemporary village-based artists create tradition-bound and stylistically uniform imagery.



9a *Sadul Bird* (c. 1981-1983)  
by Shanti Devi  
Collection of Kathryn Myers.

9b Detail of a 2021 painting  
by Shanti Devi  
Collection of the artist.



**10 Surya Helps Kusuma Malin and Raja Salhesh Spy on Chuharmal (1977)**

Gouache on paper 22"x 30"

by Shanti Devi (Born 1958)

Village Laheria Ganj, District Madhubani,  
Bihar, and New Delhi

Collection of Radford University Art Museum,  
donated by the Ethnic Arts Foundation

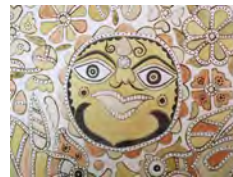
As recently explained by the artist Shanti Devi: *Surya* [the sun god] is depicted in the center of this painting. He is a good friend of Raja Salhesh. There are mirrors around Surya in the form of lotuses. These are magic mirrors, through which Raja Salhesh and Kusuma Malin can watch anyone, regardless of how distant they may be. Here, with the help of these lotiform mirrors—in which the faces of Kusuma Malin and Raja Salhesh appear—they both watch Chuharmal, and thus witness his thievery. Hiranman parrots are shown at the bottom of the picture and also appear—along with more malin [flower maiden] faces—around the surrounding border. This picture is part of Raja Salhesh's long story, which I have depicted from my imagination.

—Translated by Kaushik Kumar Jha

Shanti Devi and other Dalit artists have at times been inspired by imagery of upper caste *kohbars* (auspicious ritual murals traditionally painted by upper caste artists on nuptial chambers in their homes) to create original works of their own. While Urmila Devi's *Kohbar* (CAT.10a) retains much traditional *kohbar* iconography,<sup>1</sup> by contrast (CAT.10) Shanti Devi has here inventively employed a *kohbar* composition to depict a Salhesh-related narrative—in which Surya (the sun god) plays a central role. Shanti Devi has long delighted in representing Surya in various styles and media. Compare this previously published example<sup>2</sup> with her joyous depictions of the deity at the time of the world's creation (10c)—created in the *geru* ("brown") style<sup>3</sup>—and a detail of the mural she created with her husband Seewan (aka Shivan) Paswan, assisted by his two younger



brothers (CAT.10b and FIG.37 and 38). Depictions of Surya likewise recur in paintings by Chano Devi, Urmila Devi, and other Dalit artists in Mithila (e.g., FIG.18, CAT. 10a, 12, 36 and 45.18).



10b Mural at a Salhesh shrine (detail of FIG.37).

10c *Surya* (detail) by Shanti Devi. (Collection of the Ethnic Arts Foundation).



10a *Kohbar* (2014); acrylics and natural colors on paper, by Urmila Devi (Collection of J.H. Bowles).

The imagery featured in this painting is derived from ritual murals traditionally painted on the *kohbar* nuptial chambers of upper caste artists, and thus this depiction by a Dalit artist is unusual. The traditional *kohbar* composition has also influenced Shanti Devi's painting.

## 11 Village Jitwarpur (2020)

Gouache on paper

by Dharamsheela Devi (Born 1974)

Village Jitwarpur, District Madhubani, Bihar

Collection of John H. Bowles, Radford

According to the artist Dharamsheela Devi:

*I have depicted daily activities here in the village. This scene [at top left] shows a husband and wife sleeping in a hut. The husband's sister came but when she saw her brother and bhabhi [sister-in-law] sleeping, she did not enter. The two ladies are shown again [below] cooking. One of the ladies is educated. Below her I have depicted a coaching class, where she is teaching and the boys and girls are studying. A family member returns home after grazing the buffalo in the field [shown to the right of the house depicted in the upper left corner]. Just below her husband is going to plow the field with ox and plow.*

*On the right top I have depicted another village family. Again, a husband and wife are sleeping in the house. It is early morning. After rising, the head of the house sits on a chair, while his elderly wife cooks food. Their son and his wife are also there; he sits on the earth while their children go to school.*

*In the center scene appears another sleeping husband and wife. After rising, the woman cleans rice and pounds paddy with another woman, and is shown cooking on a wood fire. Her husband brought wood from the forest, which will be used for cooking. The woman performs her puja [worship] by giving water to the tulsi [basil]. An old man sits on a chair next to his wife, and [behind him] his three grandchildren are returning from school.*

*Below them [in the lower right corner] a fisherman fishes in a pond and a farmer ploughs a field. The farmer's wife has come to him with breakfast. A man behind her is going to the field to throw gobar [cow dung] there, because it increases the field's fertility.*

*A lady is pumping water at the village handpump [shown at lower left]. Two women are plucking flowers to perform their puja, and below them sits a parrot. In the village everyone has a similar type of work, which I have tried to depict.*



11a Dharamsheela Devi, 2014  
(Photo by J.H. Bowles).

## 12 *Surya* (2007)

Natural colors on paper (30" x 22")

By Chano Devi (1955-2010)

Village Jitwarpur, District Madhubani, Bihar

Collection of John H. Bowles, Radford

For millennia, civilizations and cultures throughout the world have worshipped the sun in various ways and forms. In ancient Greece the sun was envisioned as a deity who drove a mighty chariot across the heavens (as seen in a second century BCE coin depicting the sun god Helios [CAT.12a]). The contemporaneous and earliest extant depiction of the Hindu sun god Surya (carved as a stone relief at Bodh Gaya, Bihar [CAT.12b]) is likewise shown driving a blazing chariot across the skies. Over subsequent centuries, Surya's depiction has evolved in various ways in India, according to different regions and religious traditions (he appears in ancient Buddhist as well as Hindu art). Hindu depictions can be extremely elaborate in their iconography—ranging from his simple aniconic symbol of the *swastika* (as later adopted and distorted by the Nazis) to extravagantly embellished sculptures showing him crowned, holding lotuses in both hands, sometimes four-armed and holding other attributes, accompanied by wives or goddesses of the dawn, sometimes wearing a cape and high boots, with his chariot pulled by seven horses named after the seven meters of Sanskrit prosody, etc. Over the past century, paintings of Surya have become increasingly Westernized and saccharnized into “calendar style”



12a c. 2nd century greek coin depicting the sun god Helios.  
12b c. 2nd century stone relief at Bodh Gaya, Bihar.

imagery derived from mass-produced lithographs, as first popularized by the Indian artist Ravi Varma (1848-1906). In this context, Chano Devi's *Surya* depicted in a garden landscape brings renewed freshness to traditional imagery that has become highly codified and/or trivialized. In the words of the Mithila art scholar Mani Shekhar Singh: *...few Dalits possessed more than a sketchy knowledge about the forms and conventional iconography of deities worshipped by non-Dalit castes. Nevertheless, some of their early attempts at picturing Hindu “high” gods are extremely powerful, displaying vigor and vitality seldom found in the more formulaic works of established artists.*<sup>1</sup> In Mithila, depictions of Surya occur in other Dalit artists' paintings, each rendered with zest and individually unique styles (CAT.10, 10b, 10c, 36, and 45.18).



12c Late 19th c. lithograph of Surya by Ravi Varma.



### 13 *Raja Sahlesh* (2007)

Natural colors on paper (50½" x 39")

By Chano Devi (1955-2010)

Village Jitwarpur, District Madhubani, Bihar

Collection of John H. Bowles, Radford

The sociologist Sandali Thakur focused much of her doctoral dissertation on the contemporary arts of Village Jitwarpur's Dusadh community (a distinct community of Dalits to which most of the painters in this exhibition belong). According to Thakur:

*Chano Devi spent several summer afternoons with Jayda Natin—a tattoo maker belonging to a nomadic tribal community—learning the intricacies of godhana [tattoo] patterns, which she then re-created using paint on paper, thus initiating a new style of figurative art. The style became so successful that it has increasingly been appropriated by 'upper' caste Mithila artists, some of whom initially reprimanded Dusadh artists for depicting high Hindu gods—thereby inspiring them instead to depict deities and heroes from their own cultural universe. Dusadh deities are sometimes benevolent and playful, and sometimes ridiculing, defining and contesting dominance strictures and injunctions. Raja Salhesh is one such deity.*

*In this painting, Chano Devi depicts Raja Salhesh, his entourage, and various rituals associated with their worship. In the centre appear two pairs of black birds perched on trees—a motif that recurs in her later works. The sheer scale of this work makes its rhythmic, detailed imagery especially compelling. It was for this painting that Chano Devi won the National Award, the first time that the award was given to an artist working in the godhana style.<sup>1</sup>*



13a Sonia Gandhi observes Chano Devi painting.



## 14 *The Ghosts of Raja Salhesh* (2006)<sup>1</sup>

Ink on *gobar* [cow dung] stained paper (30" x 22")

By Chano Devi (1955-2010)

Village Jitwarpur, District Madhubani, Bihar  
Collection of Radford University Art Museum,  
donated by the Ethnic Arts Foundation

This painting by Chano Devi features repeated *godana* (tattoo) style representations of *Raja Salhesh's Ghost*—a title given by the artist, but unfortunately no further detailed explanation was recorded before her death twelve years ago. Still, Salhesh's magical abilities to metamorphose and self-replicate are recurrently noted throughout this catalog's various essays, and thematic and aesthetic repetitions can also be seen recurring throughout the exhibited paintings. Chano Devi created other, similar versions of *Raja Salhesh's Ghosts*—in which she experimented with different compositions, such as depicting Salhesh's multiple silhouettes in rows of concentric circles. Although we unfortunately lack her own account of Salhesh's ghostly manifestations, we can appreciate her delightfully graphic and rhythmic *godana*-style depictions.

Compared with documentation of Mithila's upper caste communities' mythology, folklore, ritual traditions and arts, to date relatively little in-depth information has been recorded from the region's Dalit communities. Gathering oral histories and iconographies from artists offers a key means for researching and better understanding long marginalized sub-cultures, which offer religious and social perspectives similar to—yet often subtly or significantly different from—those of the more dominant social sectors.



**15 *Birds in the Garden*  
of Raja Salhesh (c. 2004-5)**

Lampblack ink applied

with matchsticks on paper (9" x 6")

By Sarup Lal Paswan (1933-2009)

Village Jitwarpur, District Madhubani, Bihar  
Collection of Radford University Art Museum,  
donated by the Ethnic Arts Foundation

According to the anthropologist David Szanton: "In his last two years, the late Sarup Lal Paswan produced a series of extraordinary meditative images of the tiny birds and even tinier insects in the fabulous garden of Raja Salhesh."<sup>1</sup> This small, rare example of the artist's latest paintings shows a point where abstracting tendencies—which can be seen in the works of other Mithila artists (such as Raj Kumar Paswan's *Kachbacchias in a Tree* [CAT.20])—have here reached an extreme. Some degree of abstraction is inherent to all modes of painting, and certainly Mithila's Dalit artists have long reveled in rhythmic repetitions, creating fields of patterns rich in textured effects. In her introductory essay to this volume, Aurogeeta Das notes how Sarup Lal Paswan's "[f]iguration gives way to a meditative act. This is not mere doodling; it has turned into a visual chant."<sup>2</sup> The mesmerizingly *enchanted* qualities of Mithila's Dalit paintings have likewise been admired by Mani Shekhar Singh and other scholars of these arts.<sup>2</sup>

Sarup Lal Paswan's late works can present a challenge to those who consider extreme abstractionism significant only when created by Abstract Expressionists and other metropolitan-based modern artists—such as the calligraphic "mark-making" paintings of the late Cy Twombly (a native of Southwest Virginia). Like certain works by Twombly, Sarup Lal Paswan's late images can either be seen as superficial scribbles—or a more significant achievement.

If the aesthetics of abstraction requires a certain degree of sophistication to produce and appreciate by those of us born into urban or Western modernity, then how much more remarkable when achieved by a marginalized artist in his mid-70s living in rural Mithila? These and related questions warrant consideration by art history students and scholars at Radford University and elsewhere.

It should be noted that Sarup Lal Paswan's legacy includes being the late patriarch of an artistically gifted and influential family, including: his (now deceased) brothers, the artist Uttam Prasad Paswan (FIGS.16 and 17) and Roudi Paswan (a savant of Raja Salhesh oral histories and major influence on his wife Chano Devi's iconographies [e.g., FIG.13 ]); Roudi Paswan and Chano Devi's daughter-in-law Indu Devi; Sarup Lal Paswan's wife Rampari Devi (FIG.37.1) and their son Raj Kumar Paswan (FIGS.18, 19 and 20); Raj Kumar Paswan's first wife, the late Lalita Devi (CAT.23-26, and 37.2); and their three sons, Ranjan Paswan, Rakesh Paswan, and Hitesh Paswan; Rakesh Paswan's wife Poonam Devi—and Raj Kumar Paswan's present wife Gayatri. All have contributed in various ways to the evolution of their community's painting traditions.



## 16 *The World and Deities Dance to Raja Salhesh's Drum Beat* (2014)

Ink on diluted *gobar* (cow dung) smeared paper (22" x 30")

by Uttam Prasad Paswan (1968-2020)

Village Jitwarpur, District Madhubani, Bihar

Collection of John H. Bowles, Radford

Traditional *godana* (tattoo) patterns greatly influenced the figurative style of this painting (shown on next page) and its subject matter is easily misinterpreted by upper caste Hindus as representing their ancient *Samudra Mantan* ("Churning of the Ocean") creation myth—in which Mount Mandara serves as a mammoth churning staff—anchored on the back of a great turtle beneath the ocean; the staff is churned by gods and demons, using a huge snake as the churning rope (as shown in CAT 16a). Likewise, in Uttam Prasad Paswan's monochromatic painting, the great turtle is depicted in the ocean (surrounded by natural and mythical sea creatures); in the center of the turtle's shell appears the great serpent coiled around the base of the stylized mountain—like a churning rope twisted around a churning staff. The serpent has seven heads that fan out above the mountain. Various Hindu deities are shown gathered around the heads—including Brahma, the god of creation (shown as three-headed), Shiva (aka Mahesh, the god of destruction), Saraswati (the goddess of wisdom and the arts), Vishnu (the god of preservation), and Lakshmi (the goddess of wealth). But amidst these Brahmanical deities appears an apparent interloper—Mithila's Dalit hero-deity Raja Salhesh—who is not mentioned in ancient Bhramanical texts, but is here shown playing a central role. According to the artist:

*The king of gods, Indra, invited all the gods and goddesses to his Indralok, and among them Raja Salhesh was also invited. Indra offered to grant the wish of whomever among them could make the earth and Lakshmi [the goddess of wealth] dance. All deities were present there—including Brahma, Vishnu, Mahesh, Lakshmi and Saraswati—but none accepted this challenge. Seeing this, Raja Salhesh got excited*

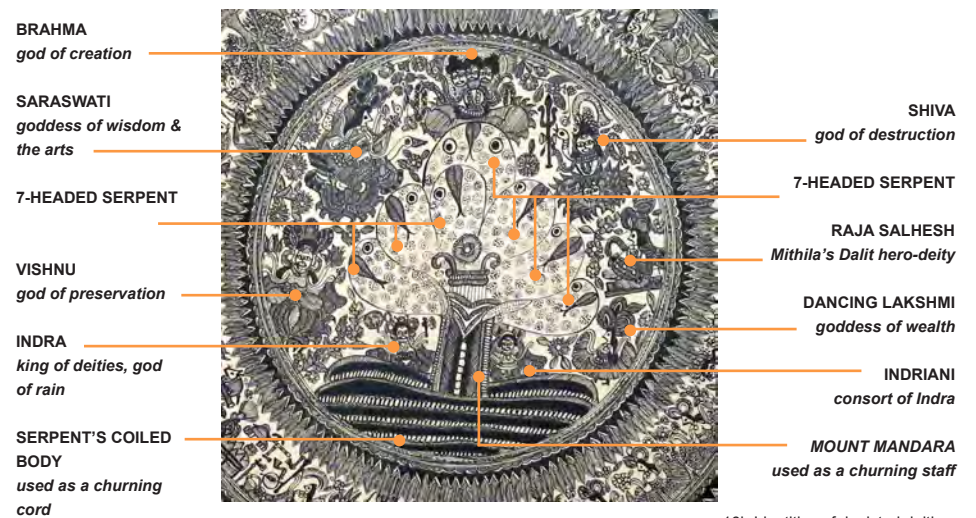
*and stepped forward. He had tied a turban on his head, was wearing his usual clothes, and carried a big dholak [drum]. When he started beating the drum, the whole earth began to shake, and Lakshmi started dancing. Then all the others started dancing to the sound of Raja Salhesh's drum in Indralok. The sound of that drum was so fascinating that all the animals, men and women—even trees, houses, fire, bamboo, agricultural tools and books of knowledge—were drawn by the drum beat to gather in Indralok. That's what I've shown in this ring [of figures depicted around the central circle]. After all the divinities and nature had gathered in Indralok, Salhesh stopped beating the drum, and Indra divided everyone into their assigned, separate realms. Then he asked Raja Salhesh to tell him about himself. Salhesh replied: "I am a king of only the Dusadh community, and they worship me; I'm their god." Indra replied: "You made Lakshmi dance, so now you will have to marry her!" Salhesh immediately refused, saying: "I can't because she is like my mother." Thereafter Indra gave him the kingdom of Raj Mashota, and declared him the god of the Dusadh community.*

*Indralok [Indra's heavenly realm] is under the ocean, and that's the abode of the snake Sheshnaag, upon which Indra and [his consort] Indrani reside. [The deities] Brahma, Vishnu and Mahesh are in the sky, and look down from above. They all came to earth to create life. The earth is born on the back of the kachua [turtle], which is under the ocean. Earthquakes come from its movements. Everything that nature has produced was there —dancing to the drum beat of Raja Salhesh!*

*I received the national award for doing this theme. I've done it at least twenty-five to thirty times!*



16a Depiction of *Samudra Manthan* creation myth—detail of painting on paper., Chandigarh Museum, Chandigarh, Punjab.



16b Identities of depicted deities.





**17 Raja Salhesh Wrestles  
Moti Ram (c. 2006)**

Ink on diluted *gobar* (cow dung) smeared  
paper (22" x 30")

by Uttam Prasad Paswan (1968-2020)  
Village Jitwarpur, District Madhubani, Bihar  
Collection of John H. Bowles, Radford

According to the artist:

*Raja Salhesh was living in Raj Maisotha, which now is in Nepal. Every morning Raja Salhesh rode on his elephant—and Moti Ram [his brother] and their other brother Budheshar rode on their horses—and together went to Raja Salhesh's garden. They took their bath there, and all three brothers wrestled every day in that garden. There were three sisters—named Reshma, Kusuma and Dauna—who wanted to attract Raja Salhesh for marriage while he and his brothers were wrestling. But all three sisters belonged to the Mali caste [farmers/gardeners/horticulturists]. All the sisters planned ways to capture and marry Salhesh; but he had many soldiers and horses—and was surrounded by his own force, and thus it wasn't easy for them to approach him. So they changed their clothes to those of natinis [gypsies]. Raja Salhesh has a parrot named Sugga Hiravan [Parrot Hiravan], who was able to know immediately if someone was approaching Salhesh, and would inform him accordingly. After getting frustrated because they couldn't meet Raja Salhesh, the three sisters started to pray to goddess Durga. She appeared and told them "You are Malins, and Raja Salhesh is a Dusadh; why are you trying to marry him—when you are from different castes?" So Kusuma said: Yes, we know, but he is so handsome that we still want to marry him; and after all he's a king!" The goddess Durga said to Kusuma "Yes, you want to meet Raja Salhesh, but you should first meet the Lord Shiva." Then all the sisters decided to collect flowers and worship Shiva, and in that very place they were able to see all the horses and elephants, but still not able to see Raja Salhesh [...] Here I have shown first an army of elephants, then an army of horses, then a ring of Sugga Hiravan. The three sisters and their fellow mali*

*[flower maiden] friends are shown dancing. Around them is Sugga Hiravan, who's like a guard—protecting the place where Raja Salhesh and his brothers bathe and wrestle. Because it's a forest, all sorts of animals are there, including deer, lions, tigers and such. The outer border shows fish—which live in Raja Salhesh's pond, and are auspicious. If you see a fish in the morning, that's a good sign for the day! This is the story of this painting.*

—Translation by Kaushik Kumar Jha



While this painting shows Uttam Prasad Paswan's application of the *godana* (tattoo) style in a wonderfully radiating, rhythmic composition, in the course of his artistic career he has also experimented in other styles (such as shown in photograph 17a).<sup>1</sup> In his later years, he seemed to always surround his paintings with a distinctive fish motif that became his signature margin.

17a Uttam Prasad Paswan shows a painting on canvas depicting Raja Salhesh (riding his elephant) flanked by his brothers (on horseback), the Goddess Durga and other figures. (2014 Photo by J.H. Bowles).



## 18 *The Malins Pursue Raja Salhesh* (2006)

Acrylic on paper (22" x 30")

by Raj Kumar Paswan (Born 1962)

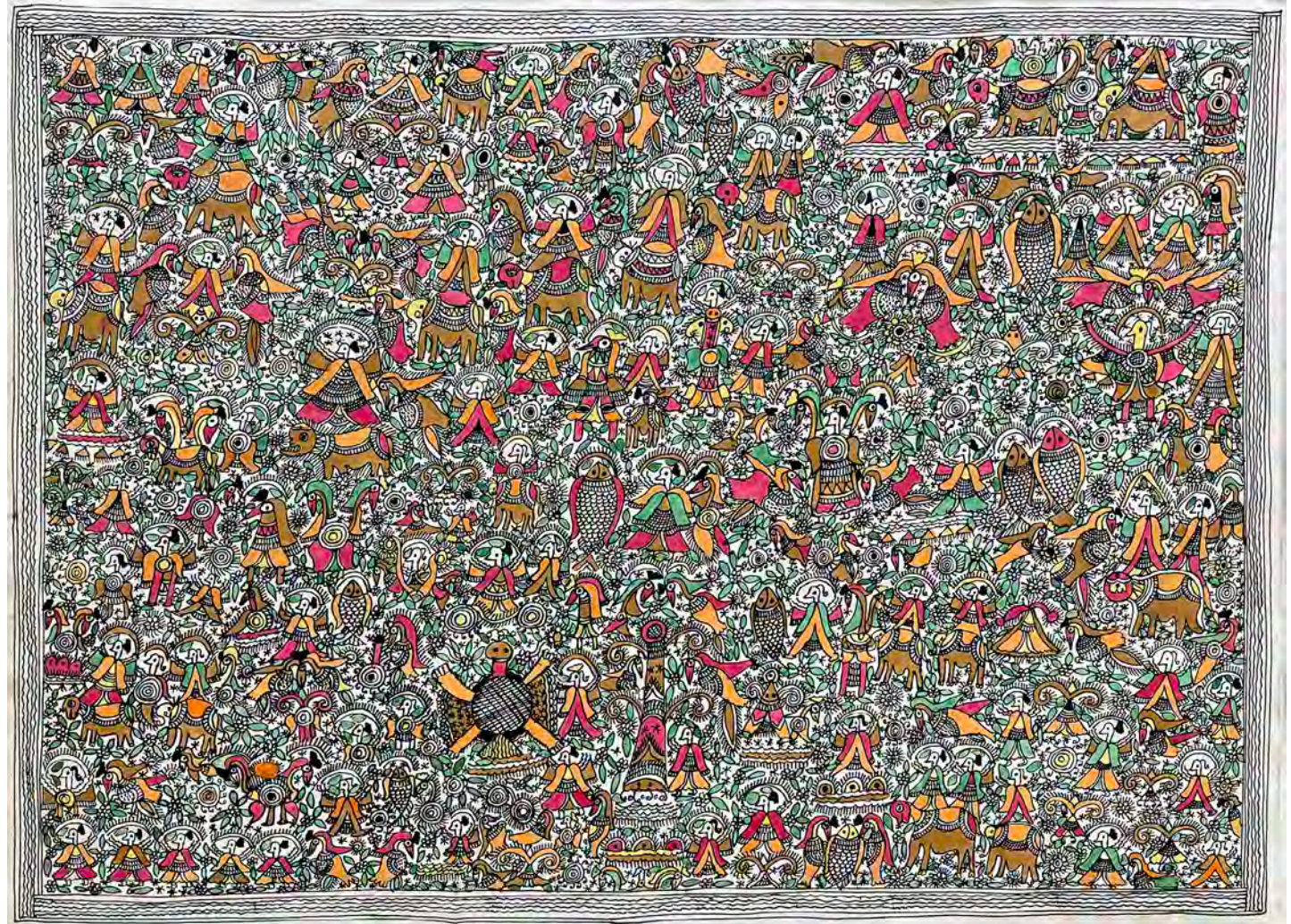
Village Jitwarpur, District Madhubani, Bihar

Collection of John H. Bowles, Radford

According to the artist: *This painting is a hundred percent my idea. All the malins [flower maidens] are chasing Raja Salhesh, each with the hope of catching and marrying him. They keep changing their own forms into birds, fish, tortoise, elephants, and cocks, goats, etc. Raja Salhesh was trying to hide from the malins. They could transform from being a goat into a cock, or a horse into a goat—all in order to confuse Raja Salhesh. Even when Raja Salhesh went to harvest geera and marich [cumin and pepper corns for seasoning food], they would transform themselves into that too. They also took the forms of natins [gypsy women], kanjans and multanis [local birds] and Garuda [a mythical bird that served as the god Vishnu's vehicle]. Both Raja Salhesh and the malins thus play hide-and-seek by constantly changing their forms. The arches above their heads are a kind of mukut [crown]. The first painting I did like this was in 1993, and since then I've done about fifty. This one was made in 2006. I have made several different depictions of Raja Salhesh stories, but none are left with me. Whenever one is completed it gets sold.*

This scene, rendered in the Dalit community's characteristic *godana* (tattoo) style, proved to be one of the artist's most popular, and thus he produced many versions—each slightly different in its coloring and details.

The magical “shapeshifting” powers that Raja Salhesh and the *malins* display in this painting recur throughout his mythology. Further accounts of Raja Salhesh can be read in Wendy Doniger's essay in this volume. (see Essays, pages 26-30).



18a Raj Kumar Paswan shows a painting to Bucknell University Prof. Coralyn Davis (2018, photo by J.H. Bowles).

### 19 *Composite Tree* (2018)

Acrylic on paper (30" x 22')

by Raj Kumar Paswan (Born 1962)

Village Jitwarpur, District Madhubani, Bihar

Collection of John H. Bowles, Radford

Raj Kumar Paswan's black-&-white tree imagery can be wonderfully daring and whimsical. Here the central tree is comprised of interlocking fish and peacocks, all surrounded by a radiating aura of "jazzy zig-zags" depicting the sharp fronds of adjacent toddy palms. Boldly exuberant and stylishly elegant, this whimsical painting compares well with some of the most extravagant art deco designs.



## 20 *Kachbacchias in a Tree* (2018)

Acrylic on paper (30" x 22")

by Raj Kumar Paswan (Born 1962)

Village Jitwarpur, District Madhubani, Bihar

Collection of John H. Bowles, Radford

A recurrent and favorite theme in Dalit art is that of a tree inhabited by innumerable, small *kachbacchia* birds (aka “jungle babblers,” or *Argya satriata*) which are regarded as sweet chatterboxes because of their constant melodious and auspicious “*katch-katch*” song.<sup>1</sup> Typically, such *kachbacchia*-inhabited trees are rendered as having solid black trunks, limbs and twigs, with interstices filled with tiny birds. Raj Kumar Paswan’s version of this theme verges on complete abstraction, with the tiny birds only indicated by their gray bodies alternating with their white heads—each with a tiny dot indicating an eye.



20a *Argya satriata* (aka jungle babbler; photo by Krishna Prajapati).



## 21 *The Birth and Creation of Mother Earth* (2017)

Acrylic, boiled peepal bark and diluted *gobar* (cow dung) on canvas (5'x 3')

by Shrawan Paswan (Born 1977)

Village Jitwarpur, District Madhubani, Bihar

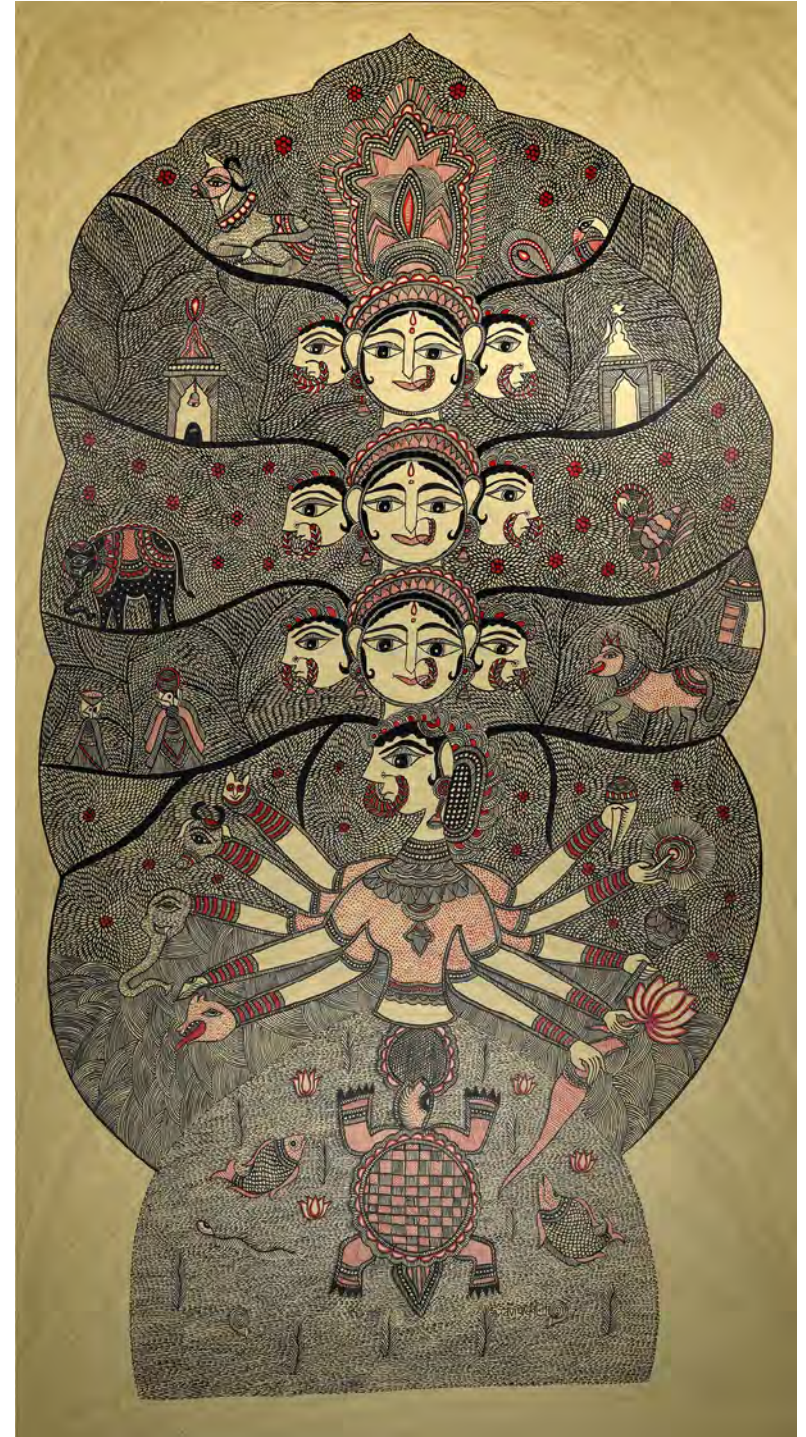
Collection of John H. Bowles, Radford

This is an especially innovative depiction of Mother Earth—here manifest as the mighty Goddess Durga. She emerges from the head of Kurma (the god Vishnu's turtle avatar)—and is shown as nine-headed and ten-armed—with half of her hands wielding conventional attributes (conch, mace, lotus, sword and *chakra* [disk]), and her remaining “hands” shown as the heads of various creatures (tiger, snake, elephant, bull and owl)—an iconographic innovation unprecedented in Indian art. Flanking her nine upper heads are various creation scenes—including (at upper right) a small mosque surmounted by a crescent moon, and (at upper left) a trident-topped Hindu temple devoted to the god Shiva, containing a *lingam* (symbolic stone phallus of the god) and ritual bell. In the branch above the temple is the bull Nandi, Shiva's vehicle; and Shrawan explains that: “...above the mosque I put a peacock, because the Muslims love peacocks.” Shrawan is a devotee of the 15th century mystic poet/saint Kabir, widely revered for rejecting caste distinctions and religious antagonisms. In this present era of increasing communal strife between India's Hindu majority and its many minority communities (Muslim, Christian, Buddhist and others), the Dalit artist Shrawan Paswan here celebrates a vision of primordial peaceful harmony within the overarching canopy of a cosmic tree.<sup>1</sup>

Walking along the tree's lower left branch are depictions of two women—carrying baskets on the top of their heads—who have been rendered in the *godana* (tattoo) style most associated with Shrawan Paswan's community in general—and his mother Urmila Devi, the most prominent living master of that style (FIGS.29, 34, 37, CAT.27-36). While traditionally the practice of painting has been transmitted from mothers to daughters, in this instance Shrawan first learned to paint from his mother, and thereafter she and he transmitted the practice to his daughter Abhilasha (FIGS.5 and 17, CAT.22.1-4).



21a Shrawan Paswan proudly shows his forearm's tattoo—depicting a portrait of the Hindu god Shiva, 2018 (Photo by J.H. Bowles).



## 22 • 1– 4 *Paintings of Auspicious Trees, Peacocks and Fish* (2014)

Acrylic on paper (30" x 22")

By Abhilasha Kumari (Born 2000)

Sarisab Pahi, District Madhubani, Bihar

Collection of John H. Bowles, Radford

Throughout the Indian subcontinent, and especially in the Mithila region, trees, peacocks, and fish are all considered auspicious. Here we see a variety of depictions featuring these popular subjects, sometimes in isolation but often combined within the same picture (FIGS.5 and 27 CAT.22.1–4). The artist Abhilasha Kumari is the youngest artist in a family that includes her father Shrawan Paswan and his mother Urmila Devi (both of whom are also included in the *Raja Salthesh's Garden* exhibition). Abhilasha painted these works when she was fourteen years old, at which time she relished experimenting with wildly bold juxtapositions of color and patterns. Her peacocks exuberantly fly about and roost in tree branches, and her lively depictions of fish have endearingly goofy expressions as they merrily swim amidst tiny snakes in a village tank—with water improbably colored bright canary yellow (CAT.22.1).

Abhilasha's sole black-&-white painting on display here is likewise jazzy in its extensive use of zig-zag patterns. It depicts a tree growing from a *kalash* (pot), with peacocks roosting in the tree's branches. Both the *kalash* and the peacocks are comprised of interlocking fish motifs, creating a striking yet ingeniously puzzling image that offers the viewer an eye-teasing delight to decipher. For centuries Indian painters and sculptors have excelled in concocting inventive composite imagery (ranging from

elephants, tigers, horses and bulls composed of puzzle-like interlocked humans and other creatures)—a tradition that has long been popular in the arts of India, Central Asia, Persia and elsewhere. While unaware of such historical precedents, Abhilasha clearly enjoys playing with interlocking forms.

Abhilasha first learned to paint by following the examples of her grandmother and father (FIGS.29, 34, 37, CAT.21, 27-36). In the eight years since creating these paintings, Abhilasha got married, gave birth to a son earlier this year, and will soon take her final examinations in preparation for pursuing a Bachelor's degree in education—to become a teacher at a government school. Her husband works for a private company in Noida (near New Delhi), where she will soon join him. Martine Le Coz's portrait of Abhilasha—done before she was in her teens—appears as FIG.26.



22a Abhilasha Kumari celebrates the Sama Chekeva festival (2020 photo by K.K. Jha).



22 • 1



22 • 2



22 • 3



22 • 4



**23 • 1– 3 *Three Drawings of Godana Motifs* (c. 1995)**

Lampblack ink on paper primed with diluted gobar (cow dung) (14½" x 21¼" each)

By Lalita Devi (1975-2011)

Village Jitwarpur, Dist. Madhubani, Bihar

Collection of John H. Bowles, Radford

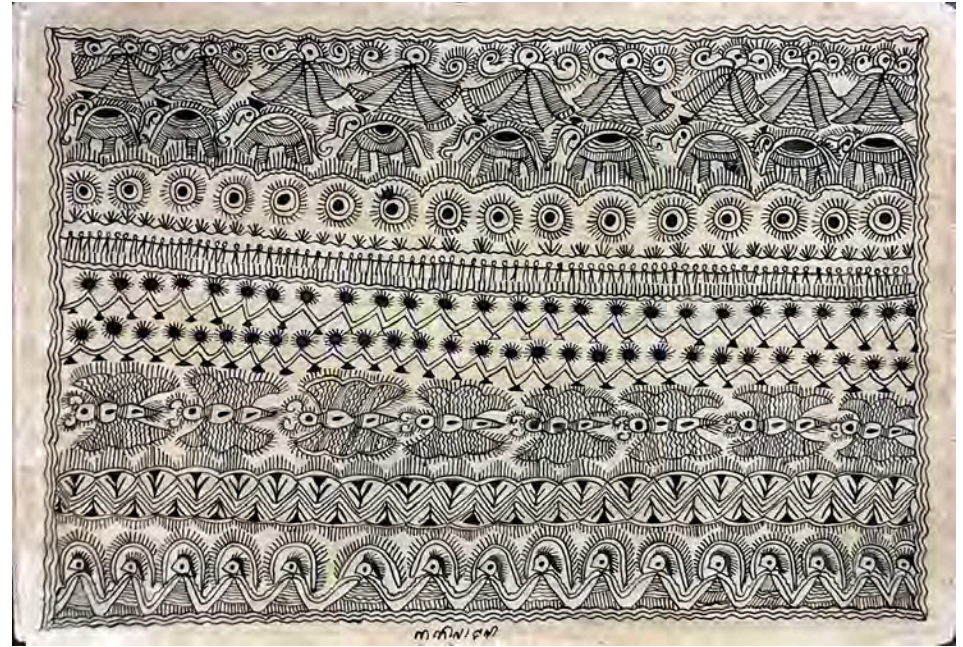
These three monochromatic works demonstrate Lalita Devi's delight in creating disciplined, geometric patterns. Her rows of parrots, butterflies, elephants, insects, dancers holding hands and bird-like rain clouds are rendered into captivating patterns that sustain regular but lively rhythms across the picture field. RU Art Museum Director Steve Arbury has noted various striking similarities to paintings on ancient Greek vases of the so-called geometric style. According to Arbury:

*The regularized patterning and figure style of Mithila's godana paintings recall scenes and decoration on many surviving ancient Greek vases of the Geometric period (9th - 8th centuries BCE). One sees similar semi-abstract animal figures and human*

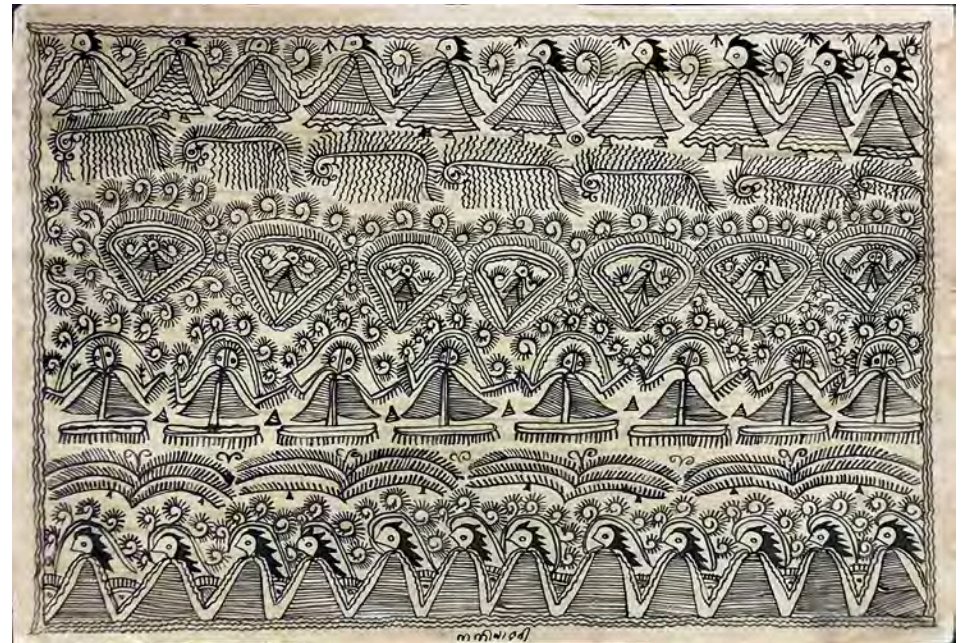
*figures with bird-like heads whose only facial feature is a single eye, as well as a plethora of decorative forms that fill the entire area in a true sense of horror vacui [an aesthetic avoidance of blank spaces].*



23a Detail of an Attic late geometric crater from Kerameikos (Dipylon) by the Hirschfeld Painter. 750-735 B.C. National Archaeology Museum, Athens. (Photo by Steve Arbury).



23 • 2



23 • 3



23 • 1

## 24 *Toddy Palm Harvest* (c. 2006)

Natural colors on paper (30" x 22")

Lalita Devi (1975-2011)

Village Jitwarpur, Dist. Madhubani, Bihar

Collection of John H. Bowles, Radford

This “Toddy Palm Harvest” scene was painted by one of Mithila’s leading Dalit artists. Lalita Devi’s work exudes a spontaneous and irrepressible *joie de vivre*. Look closely at the painting, and you’ll see a tiny harvester depicted—climbing the upper right side of the palm trunk to tap the ambrosia. Intoxicating exudations attract and delight birds and various tiny and big bugs. The toddy is lovingly prepared (in the small hut shown at lower left), while villagers quaff and make music.

Shortly after a statewide ban on alcohol was imposed by Bihar (the north Indian state containing most of Mithila), political forces rallied to exempt toddy from the prohibition. Unlike alcoholic beverages processed by large-scale distilleries, toddy is largely produced by individual harvesters belonging to low caste communities, who are their main customers. Fermented from palm natural juices into a “poor man’s beer,” it is relished widely by village folks throughout rural Bihar, and has indeed played a central role in their lives on both festival and ordinary occasions. Thus the exuberance of Lalita Devi’s depiction—wherein the palm fronds seem to burst from the top of the tree like a fireworks display. The late Harvard art historian, Pramod Chandra, described this painting as a “[p]owerful rendering of the toddy palm tree of life and the festivities of all life around it. Have not seen anything so good for a long time.”<sup>1</sup>



24a Firoz Paswan, toddy palm harvester, Village Jitwarpur (2014 photo by J.H. Bowles).



## 25 *Flood* (c. 2006)

Natural colors on paper (22" x 30")

Lalita Devi (1975-2011)

Village Jitwarpur, Dist. Madhubani, Bihar

Collection of John H. Bowles, Radford

Lalita Devi's vivid depiction of her memories of Bihar's great 1987 flood aesthetically captures the topsy-turvy natural chaos she experienced. Villagers carry their belongings onto a couple of boats so as to escape to higher ground—or drown, flounder and are attacked by all sorts of aquatic creatures (including alligators, snakes, snapping turtles and crabs).

Mithila's topography is mostly comprised of flat alluvial plains watered by seven rivers flowing from the southern slopes of the Himalayas—the world's highest mountain range. According to the Bihar State Management Authority, "Bihar is India's most flood-prone state and is under constant threat of flooding. Every year, floods destroy lives, livestock, infrastructure and bring with them a huge financial toll [...] 76 per cent of residents in the northern regions [are] vulnerable to recurring floods."<sup>1</sup> This account was written six years ago, and since then the impact caused by climate change has further exacerbated Bihar's annual weather patterns. Last year Rohin Kumar (of India's *Mongabay* nature journal) reported how "[c]limate change is making extreme climate events more frequent in the state and the incidences of landslides, flash floods, and droughts are on the rise."<sup>2</sup>



25a Lalita Devi  
(2005 Photo by  
David L. Szanton).

## 26 *Krishna Steals the Gopis' Clothes* (c. 2006)

Natural colors on paper (30" x 22")

Lalita Devi (1975-2011)

Village Jitwarpur, Dist. Madhubani, Bihar

Collection of Mr. and Mrs. A.V.K. Mohan,  
Pune, India

Here Lalita Devi depicts one of the most popular themes in Indian art—Krishna stealing the clothes of his devoted *gopis* (milkmaids). As recounted by P. Banerjee: *One day the damsels of Vraja came to the river Yamunā, and leaving their clothes on the bank, entered the water and began to sport singing the glories of Krishna. [...] Krishna came and took away their clothes and hastily climbed a kadamba tree and told the damsels to come up and take the clothes from him. The Gopis were overwhelmed with tender feelings at Krishna's jokes, but they did not come at once out of shyness. Krishna asked them to bend their heads down, after holding the folded palms over their heads [...] The damsels having done as Krishna wished, Krishna returned the clothes back to them who were inspired with love for him!* (The Hindu metaphysical interpretation and morale of this famous story is that the *gopis* represent human souls, who—when approaching god—must bare themselves with complete honesty and vulnerable openness in order to receive his blessings.)

As is customary in Hindu iconography, Lalita Devi has depicted the flute-playing Krishna blue, but in other respects this painting features various innovations. She has rendered the deity in a nearly-abstract *godana* (tattoo) style. He is perched in the center of a flowering kadamba tree, encircled by a series of concentric bands. The broadest circular band features flowers alternating with eleven brightly colored dancing *gopis*—forming a *rasa lila* (dance of divine love). The kadamba tree's trunk and curvaceous branches are boldly rendered in broadly applied brushstrokes of ink, creating a lush, undulating tracery with interstices tightly filled with pastel-hued depictions of tiny leaves, flowers, birds, monkeys, squirrels, and stolen saris. The contrast between

black tracery juxtaposed with an openwork of bright, dazzling colors creates a refulgent effect akin to an illuminated stained-glass window. The upper torsos and profiled heads of the *gopis* emerge from the river flowing before the tree—and their arms prayerfully extend upward towards Krishna. Mithila's prevailing prudery regarding depictions of nudity is such that—although viewers typically know that the *gopis* were bathing naked—for decorum's sake Lalita Devi still shows them clothed (as do other artists in Mithila). Rarely have the two themes—the *rasa lila* and Krishna stealing the *gopis'* clothes—been so coherently and effectively integrated into a single composition, with the architecture of a tree providing the picture's necessary aesthetic composition.

This painting—on loan from India—was first displayed and acquired at a major 2006 exhibition of Mithila art at New Delhi's Habitat Centre, which was organized by the Berkeley-based Ethnic Arts Foundation (which donated twenty-one Mithila paintings to Radford University Art Museum in 2021).



26a Lalita Devi  
(2010 photo by  
Michele Modglin).



## 27 • 1–2 *Ajaba Chiriya*

(Wondrous/Strange Bird)

Two acrylic paintings on paper

27.1 black-&-white painting 2014 (30" x 22")

27.2 color painting c. 2017 (22¾" x 15½")

By Urmila Devi (Born 1957)

Village Jitwarpur, District Madhubani, Bihar

Collection of John H. Bowles, Radford

In these two paintings, the artist Urmila Devi creates a virtual tapestry comprised of repetitions of a *godana* (tattoo) motif called *ajaba chiriya* (wondrous/strange bird), which has long been popular among the women in her community. The tattoos are traditionally applied by *natin*s (nomadic tribal women, akin to gypsies in Europe). Starting in the late 1970s, Dalit women of Village Jitwarpur began inventively transferring such tattoo designs onto paper in a broad range of ways, including simple stick figures with bird-like heads, shown inhabiting landscapes featuring festivals, village houses and temples or simply as rhythmically repeated patterns—either radiating outwards in concentric circles, or aligned in rows (as in these two exhibited paintings—one painted in color, and the other in black-&-white). Urmila Devi received a Bihar State Award for her 2014 black-&-white painting (CAT.27-1).

It is fascinating to trace the multiple transfers of such imagery: both from skin to paper, as well as from *natin* tattoo specialists to Dalit painters— and, more recently, from Dalit artists to upper caste painters— as shown in a painting by the Brahman artist Amrita Jha (CAT.27a).

While such imagery is now created in a celebratory spirit, tattoo traditions in Mithila have darker origins. According to Neel Rekha, the leading Indian scholar of Mithila's Dalit arts: *Oral accounts state that during the Mughal period, the Dusadhs were tortured and their women were raped and kidnapped. To protect the chastity of their women they adopted protective measures which included giving of their*

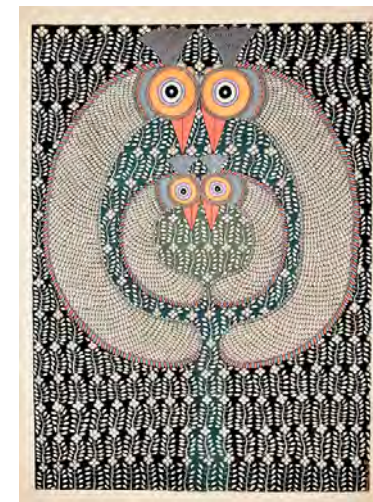


27 • 2

*daughters in marriage before the age of five, the rearing of pigs and eating of pork which are considered unclean in Islam, and the tattooing of exposed parts of the body to make the girls less attractive in appearance. Tattoos thus became an inseparable part of the women's lives.'*



27 • 1



27a The Brahman artist Amrita Jha's depiction of *Ajaba Chiriya* (c. 2013).

## 28 Mahadev Puja

(Worship of Shiva) (c. 2014)

Acrylic and natural colors on diluted  
*gobar* (cowdung) smeared paper (30" x 22")

By Urmila Devi (Born 1957)

Village Jitwarpur, District, Madhubani, Bihar  
Collection of John H. Bowles, Radford

According to the artist:

*Here is a Shiva temple under the pipal [sacred fig] tree. Devotees are continuously coming and going, while making offerings. The outer border is like the path on which people are coming and going; I've drawn it like a mala [necklace]. The devotees are worshipping the pipal tree by watering it. Thereafter they sit and relax under it while eating prasad [food offerings] and worshipping. At the bottom, the women are shown carrying dali [small baskets] filled with some of the prasad and flowers that they've just offered. These they will enjoy either under the pipal tree, or at their homes. Above the Shiva lingam [a phallic stone manifestation of the god Shiva—here shown as the black object in the center of the temple], there is a basket dripping water to keep the lingam wet. The snakes above the lingam are painted on the temple wall."*

—Translation by Kaushik Kumar Jha



28a Urmila Devi displaying her tattoo necklace  
(2014 photo by J.H. Bowles).



## 29 *Wildflowers, Parrots, Tigers and Dancers* (mid-1970s)

Acrylic on paper smeared with  
diluted *gobar* (cow dung) (30" x 22")

By Urmila Devi (Born 1957)

Village Jitwarpur, District Madhubani, Bihar

Collection of John H. Bowles, Radford

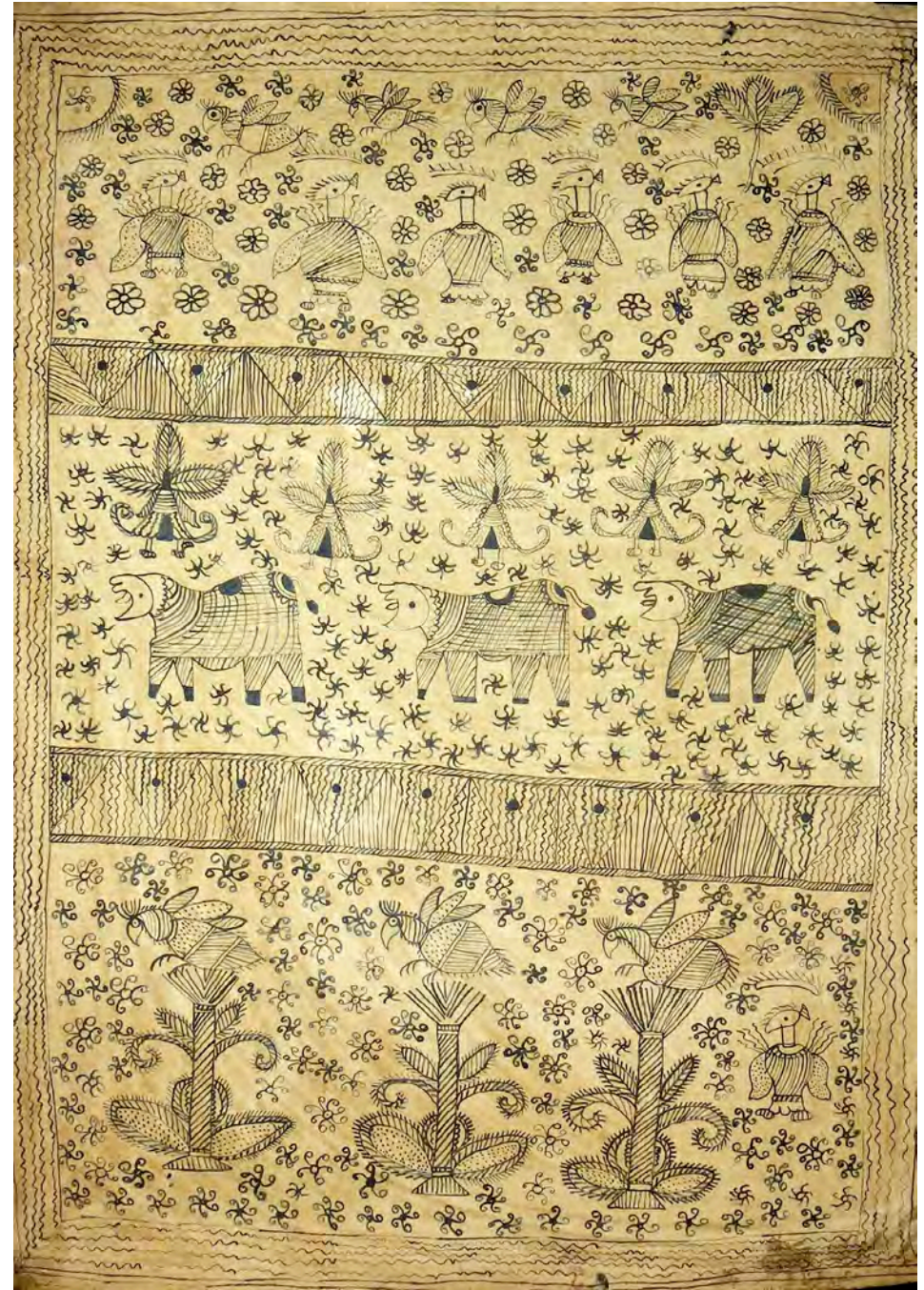
This is a strikingly rare early example of Urmila Devi's paintings. Following the example of her village neighbor Jamuna Devi, Urmila Devi first primed the entire sheet of paper with diluted *gobar* (cow dung)—to recreate the natural, earthy hue associated with the mixed clay-&-*gobar* surfaces of village houses on which murals were traditionally painted. Thus, this painting can be appreciated as a kind of miniature/portable mural. Despite the earthy hue of the paper, the imagery is remarkably delicate and ethereal. The figures all seem to float ungrounded in fields strewn with flowers. In the bottom register birds fly above curious trees with pillar-like trunks branching out in leaves and volutes, which Urmila Devi identifies as *supari* (areca palms) that are greatly cherished for bearing "nuts" (actually berries) used as the primary ingredient for making *paan* (a popular chewing stimulant comprised of spiced areca

wrapped in betel leaf). Raja Salhesh is thought to be very partial to *paan*, which is often given as devotional offerings at his shrines.

The entire picture field is filled—as leaving blank spaces is generally considered inauspicious. Above each dancer appears a crescent—which Urmila Devi identifies as the *dupatta* (long scarf worn by women) periodically thrown up in the air during certain dances. In later years, Urmila Devi would strive to create greater regularity and evermore embellished and refined details in her repeated imagery and designs (CAT.27, 28, and 34-36). Like any serious contemporary painter, her art has evolved over the course of time. While she now feels somewhat embarrassed by the irregularities of her earliest paintings, their fresh and delicate spontaneity is prized by collectors.



29a Urmila Devi and her home in Village Jitwarpur, freshly-painted with a mural created at *Diwali*—the Hindu "festival of lights" celebrated in honor of the goddess Lakshmi (2020 photo by Kaushik Kumar Jha).



### 30 *Auspicious Tattoo Patterns* (2017)

Acrylic and natural colors on paper primed  
with diluted *gobar* (cow dung) (30" x 22")

by Urmila Devi (born 1957)

Collection of Radford University Art Museum,  
donated by the Ethnic Arts Foundation

This painting is an example of Urmila Devi's more recent style—which can be contrasted with other earlier works of hers. Here we see her strive for greater regularity in her repeated renderings of *godana* (tattoo) motifs—charged with jaunty rhythm and controlled buoyancy.

In recent years, a popular tattoo motif shown in this painting has been humorously dubbed *Jhum Barabar* ("Dance Baby Dance")—after a famous 2007 Bollywood film co-starring Preity Zinta, Amitabh and Abhishek Bachchan.



30a Urmila Devi's  
rendering of the Jhum  
Barabar tattoo motif.





### 31 *Soldiers and Horses* (late 1970s)

Acrylic and lampblack ink on paper (30" x 22")  
by Urmila Devi (born 1957)

Village Jitwarpur, District Madhubani, Bihar  
Collection of Radford University Art Museum,  
donated by John H. Bowles in memory of  
Priscilla Burns Moore

Urmila Devi's art has appeared in various Indian and international publications— including an essay by the Berkeley-based anthropologist David Szanton, who highlights this particular black-&-white painting as exemplifying how Mithila's Dalit art styles were influenced by various other art forms—including tattoos and relief sculpture: "The early tattoo (*godana*) paintings were largely composed of rows [...] of flowers, fields, animals, figures and spirits drawn with a pointed bamboo pen and lampblack ink."<sup>1</sup> Szanton also juxtaposed an illustration of this painting by Urmila with a photograph of a clay bas-relief from village Jitwarpur (31b)—to indicate other figurative influences.

According to Urmila Devi: *In godanas [tattoos] we often depict army men and their horses. For a long time, we've been poor people who can't afford jewelry, so this is a form of ornament. We would put tattoos of the military men on our upper arms. Actual jewelry can be worn or not worn, but tattoos will always be with us, even after death. Army men don't go alone; they're always shown with the horse. When women get married and go to their new in-laws' homes, to have such tattoos is auspicious; not to have them is inauspicious. When the newly wed girl goes to her new family, the family won't allow her to worship gods and goddesses without having tattoos, because tattoos are a symbol of purity. At the top and bottom, I've shown a necklace design, which is also auspicious.* — Translation by Kaushik Kumar Jha



31a Tattoo (Photo by J.H. Bowles).



31b Bas-relief at Dalit house, Jitwarpur  
(c. 1991 photo by Mary Lanius).





### 32 *Dusadh Procession* (c. 2011)

Acrylic and diluted *gobar* (cow dung)

on canvas (35¼" x 68")

by Urmila Devi (born 1957)

Village Jitwarpur, District Madhubani, Bihar

Collection of Radford University Art Museum,  
acquired through a donation from the  
Community Foundation of the New River  
Valley's Kolla-Landwehr Fund, in Memory of  
Norma L. Bowles

This mural-sized painting shows a grand procession of soldiers on horseback across the center of the picture, surrounded by their entourage. Beneath the horses are rows of birds, lions, maidens and elephants. Above the soldiers appear rows of mythic birds—including pairs of *ajaba chiriya* (strange/wondrous birds), surmounted by double-headed birds. The surrounding borders include more maidens, horses, dancers and elephants, and pairs of birds roosting in voluted *supari* trees (areca palms). The anthropologist David L. Szanton, has much admired this painting's rich details and grand scale—and considers it one of Urmila Devi's masterpieces.

Accounts of grand processions and military parades of mounted soldiers recur throughout Indian history, mythology and folklore—and are especially cherished by Urmila Devi's community, whose married menfolk all bear the last name of "Paswan" (the Urdu word for "defender" or "bodyguard")—and claim martial caste origins much higher than their present status as Dalits. The Paswans are also known as Dusadhs, who claim that the origin of that name is *Dusadhya*, meaning someone "difficult to defeat;" and "Paswan" means "one who always stays close, that is, a guard or personal attendant of the king."<sup>1</sup> Their claims for martial prowess include serving as soldiers at the 1757 Battle

of Plassey (in which they allegedly helped Robert Clive defeat the Nawab Siraj-ud-Daulah's army, thus advancing British colonialism in India) and as troops who valiantly fought for both their legendary hero-deity Raja Salhesh and his cousin Chuharmal. In recent years, Mithila's Dusadhs are widely employed as *chowkidars* (professional watchmen), and take pride in their heritage and ancestral claims; Raja Salhesh himself was considered the regal *chowkidar*/protector of a magnificent garden. For more about Salhesh's legendary battles, his guardianship of the garden and other adventures, see Wendy Doniger's essay, (Essays pages 26-30).

### 33 *Tattoo Painting* (c. 1988)

Acrylic on paper (30" x 22")

by Urmila Devi (born 1957)

Village Jitwarpur, District Madhubani, Bihar

Collection of John H. Bowles, Radford

According to the artist:

*I tried to draw different godana [tattoo] motives in this painting. I had seen these tattoos on my mother's body. So I tried to depict them in one painting. Along the top of the painting I have shown sunflowers and roses, under which appear three boxes of plants: [from left to right] sprouting cumin seeds, black pepper, and blossoming cumin. In the center are depictions of Goddess Durga; this is the way we make necklaces of Durga on our bodies. Underneath is a line of elephants, and then a row of rose plants, and finally [at the very bottom, growing upwards from the wavy-lined border] linseed and sikat [succulent] plants.* — Translated by Kaushik Kumar Jha

Urmila Devi is the proud matriarch and chief bread-winner for her family—including children, grandchildren and in-laws who are likewise talented artists, such as her son Shrawan and her granddaughter Abhilasha (whose works are illustrated in this volume [FIGS. 5 and 27, CAT. 21 and 22.1-4]). Urmila Devi's large extended family (less than half

of whom are shown in the above photograph) jointly live in a brick house with indoor plumbing—made possible by the sale of her paintings. But her success was hard-won, achieved after years of suffering from poverty and abuse. As a Dalit woman at the very bottom of Mithila's patriarchal caste hierarchy, she struggled hard to advance against pervasive social prejudice and a difficult marriage. She describes her ordeals and experiences in the video interview filmed in 2014 by the University of Connecticut Professor of Art Kathryn Myers.<sup>1</sup> Even while undergoing great personal challenges, she consistently produced whimsically charming and joyful imagery—such as these multiple depictions of Durga, in which simple wavy lines indicate exuberantly raised arms, and four wonderfully droll elephants—with calligraphic S-curved trunks rising from heads succinctly indicated by a semicircle surrounding a dot—the whole head thus reduced to a single eyeball.<sup>2</sup>



33a Urmila Devi surrounded by various family members atop her home in Village Jitwarpur (2018; photo by J.H. Bowles; see Appendix for identifications).



### 34 *Raja Salhesh's Rasa* (2014)

Acrylic and natural colors on paper (30" x 22")

by Urmila Devi (born 1957)

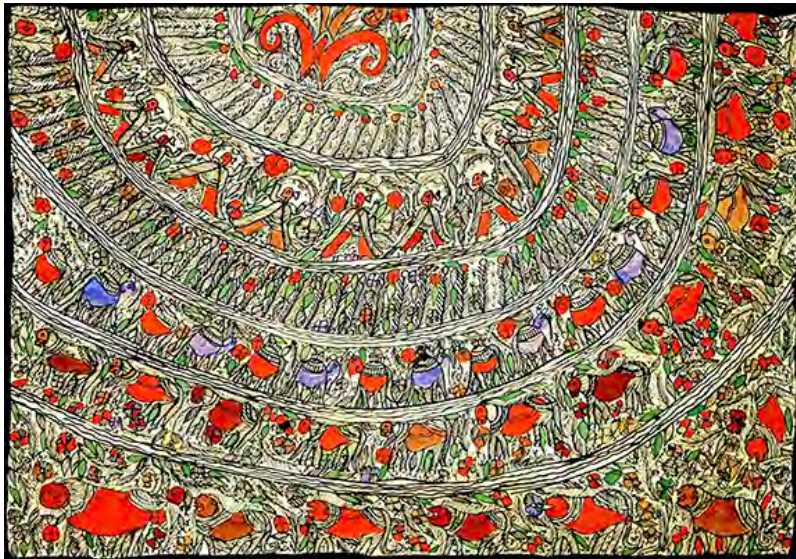
Village Jitwarpur, Dist. Madhubani, Bihar

Collection of John H. Bowles, Radford

Urmila Devi offers her own detailed account of this painting of *Raja Salhesh's Rasa*, as well as an account of her life and art, in a video interview filmed by University of Connecticut Professor and Fulbright scholar Kathryn Myers (which is posted on her website.)<sup>1</sup>

Not shown in that video interview is the extraordinary evolution of Urmila's painting styles—as suggested by comparing this painting with an earlier and more spontaneous one of similar composition—that only partly survives as a fragment that she salvaged, after spilled ink ruined part of it, and then painted a new black border to frame the fragment (CAT.34a). While the more recent and complete painting demonstrates Urmila Devi's greater discipline and control, her "reframing" of the earlier work offers revealing insight into her creative process. As explained by the scholar Mani Shekhar Singh: *She literally created a painting out of painting. Does*

*Urmila Devi's aesthetic practice point towards the modernist experiments in creating picture collages? Or does her art provoke us into thinking about creative potential of destruction and reconstruction in artistic practice? Wherever reflections on the painting lead a viewer, it points out that Urmila Devi's art making, as well as her creativity, is an ongoing process rather than an endpoint. Her imagination allows her to reconceptualize the picture surface not as damaged or wasted—and hence useless—but as one full of aesthetic possibilities. Using the thickly painted border-as-frame, she bestowed a new life trajectory to the picture surface. To reimagine a painting in process in this manner reveals Urmila Devi's aesthetic sensibilities and should be viewed against the background of women's expressive traditions in South Asia, where they derive pleasure from creating aesthetic objects and artworks from used and discarded things (such as quilts made of old cloth).<sup>2</sup>*



34a Salvaged fragment of a painting showing Urmila Devi's earlier, more spontaneous style.

### 35 *Tree* (2017)

Acrylic and natural colors on paper (30" x 22")  
by Urmila Devi (born 1957)  
Village Jitwarpur, Dist., Madhubani, Bihar  
Collection of John H. Bowles, Radford

A bird-inhabited tree at center is surrounded by labyrinthine bands of *godana* (tattoo) motifs depicting rows of elephants, dancing maidens, and various plants and birds—including a two-headed mythical bird, as well as peacocks and owls. This is a representative example of Urmila Devi's most refined recent painting style, in which her delicate, richly detailed imagery almost seems to be stitched together in an additive way (reminiscent of Mani Shekhar Singh's observations quoted in the preceding catalogue entry (CAT.34).

Such light and elegant celebrations of nature through tattoo-derived figurative styles is a specialty of Mithila's Dalit artists—and Urmila Devi is now the leading contemporary practitioner of their distinctive *godana* style. Her art always maintains a fresh, bright and lively touch.



35a Urmila Devi and her buffalo, 2014 (Photo by J.H. Bowles).



### 36 Rahu Puja

(The Worship of Rahu, c. 2006)

Natural colors and lampblack ink on paper  
smeared with diluted *gobar* (cow dung; 30" x 22")  
by Urmila Devi (Born 1957)  
Village Jitwarpur, District Madhubani, Bihar  
Collection of John H. Bowles, Radford

According to the artist: *This is a special type of puja [worship], in the month of Maag [January/February]. We celebrate this puja after the harvest. In such festivals, one person gets possessed by our god Rahu [a celestial god associated with eclipses], Raja Salhesh and other deities. In this festival a person possessed by Rahu performs supernatural feats to help grant devotees their wishes. The possessed person [climbs up and then] stands on top of a ladder made of bamboo [poles] and [horizontally crossed] swords. The possessed man here is shown dressed as a woman. People follow behind the possessed person, who walks across burning embers—and so do they. The possessed person has the power to protect them all. In the center and in the upper left I've shown Surya [the sun god]. Chandrama [the moon god] I've shown here [at upper right]. The people on the bottom are walking through flickering embers. Below the [central depiction of] Surya I've shown an aripan [ritual floor design] decorated with flowers. The borders are made of different birds and trees.*

—Translation by Vibha Jha

A double-voluted tattoo motif provided the inspiration for this painting's elaborate tree-and-bird-embellished border (CAT.36a). *Godana* (tattoo) style imagery has been circuitously transmitted in recent years since *natin* (gypsy) artists originally applied their traditional designs onto the skin of their clients—including the Dalit women in Mithila, who were the first to transfer it onto paper to create paintings. After the style became increasingly popular with buyers, it was soon taken up by upper caste women and, by the late 1990s, it was being practiced by at least one Brahman male artist—Sat Narayana Pandey. He in turn was invited to collaborate with

one of India's leading metropolitan women artists, the Delhi-based Sikh artist Arpana Caur—who, at a certain stage in her own stylistic evolution, extensively incorporated various Mithila-inspired *godana* motifs and styles into her acrylic paintings and collage imagery.<sup>1</sup> Like Caur, Mithila's Dalit painters have also explored a surprisingly broad range of styles over the course of their artistic careers—as can be seen by comparing Urmila Devi's c. 2006 *Rahu Puja* with her earlier paintings (e.g., FIG.29 and CAT.29). A remarkable broad range of styles can likewise be found between different artists of the same community—as can be seen by comparing this *Rahu Puja* painting by Urmila Devi to other Dalit artists' depictions of the same rituals (CAT. 37.1-3). While all of these paintings can immediately be identified as examples of Mithila's Dalit art, each has been stylistically rendered in ways unique to their respective artists.



36a Detail of border design in Urmila Devi's *Rahu Puja* painting, with 36b similar auspicious tattoo motif (photo by Hervé Perdrille).



### 37 • 1–3 *Rahu Puja*

(Ritual worship of the celestial deity *Rahu*)

Three depictions by artists of Village Jitwarpur,  
District Madhubani, Bihar

37.1 Rampari Devi (1953–2011)

Natural colors on paper primed with diluted  
*gobar* (cow dung; 22" x 30"), c. 2005

37.2 Lalita Devi (1975–2011)

Natural colors on paper primed with diluted  
*gobar* (cow dung; 30" x 22"), c. 2005

37.3 Ranjit Paswan (born 1990)

Acrylic on paper primed with diluted *gobar*  
(cow dung; 30" x 22"), 2017

Collection of John H. Bowles, Radford

According to Stephen Markel (Senior Curator of South and Southeast Asian Art at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, and author of the 1995 book *Origins of the Indian Planetary Deities*): “Rahu is a member of the nine Indian planetary deities (*nava-graha*). In his original Vedic theological conception, he was believed to be a disembodied demonic head that caused eclipses by devouring the Sun and the Moon.”<sup>1</sup> References to the ancient worship of Rahu can be traced back to a Vedic *mantra* (a chanted ritual prayer, dating between 1200–800 BCE) invoking the deity’s blessings for courage by “[r]eleasing one from the great fear, from the darkness, from the snares of death, may *Rāhu* make us fearless.”<sup>2</sup>

The art historian Aurogeeta Das has previously noted that “Not much is known about the belief or worship of Rahu by Mithila’s Dalit community.”<sup>3</sup> Of the artists who painted these three paintings, two had passed away before preparations for this publication; (only Ranjit Paswan’s personal account has been recorded [see Appendix]). These rituals include the deity’s possession of a *baghat* (shaman/priest)—who demonstrates his powers by performing various supernatural feats, such as: climbing a ladder comprised of sharp sword blades; withstanding the force of having grain pounded on a large mortar placed on his chest; holding thin bowls of blazing fire with his bare hands; and walking across a path of burning embers.



37 • 1

Even when depicting basically the same subject matter, each of these artists has done so in his or her own unique style. Ranjit Paswan exclusively uses black when painting in the *godana* (tattoo) style (CAT.37.3). Rampari Devi’s boldly-colored figural depictions are full-bodied and muscular (CAT.37.1). Lalita Devi color-tints her *godana* style depictions (CAT.37.2), creating richly detailed tapestry-like scenes full of charming details (here, for example,

she shows Rahu possession rituals amidst a joyous fair, including musicians, dancers, feasting and even—in the upper left corner—a balloon vendor). Urmila Devi’s picture (CAT.36) renders *godana* style figures and decorative patterns with distinctive gossamer elegance. Yet, despite the broad range of their unique styles, all of these paintings can be readily identified as examples of Mithila’s richly varied Dalit painting tradition.



37a *Rahu, The Demon of Eclipses*, earthenware relief c. 500–550, Uttar Pradesh, India  
Los Angeles County Museum of Art.



37 • 2



37 • 3



### 38 Buddha Under the Bodhi Tree

(2018)

Acrylic on paper primed with diluted *gobar*  
(cow dung; 30" x 22")

by Ranjit Paswan (Born 1991)

Village Jitwarpur, District Madhubani, Bihar

Collection of John H. Bowles, Radford

Although the artist Ranjit Paswan does not consider himself Buddhist, he is deeply self-reflective by nature, has read about the Buddha and admires Buddhist principles and insights. To the right is the cover of a popular paperback book (its translated title: *The Founder of the Buddhist Religion: Gautam Buddha*) that inspired Ranjit to create this ink depiction of the Buddha. The book's cliché "calendar style" front cover illustration provided Ranjit with a point of departure for his figure's basic composition. Both images show the Buddha's upper hand in the *vitarka mudra* (gesture of teaching or discussion), but in Ranjit's depiction the lower hand holds a begging bowl. Two *hamsa* (geese)—ancient symbols of wisdom—flank the seated Buddha, behind whom rises the Bodhi Tree (the "sacred fig" tree, *ficus religiosa*) under which he achieved Enlightenment. Most mesmerizing of all are the tree's innumerable leaves, rendered in astonishing detail and exquisitely clustered into a kind of arboreal cosmos. Although the limbs of the tree seem physically disconnected from the tree's trunk, this artistic liberty purposefully focuses attention on the Buddha's head, which becomes the picture's concentric and eccentric fulcrum—compositionally directing the viewer's eye to the contemplative face, which in turn seems to radiate outward spokes of energy. The bright halo that appears behind the head underscores and anchors the divinity of Buddha's enlightenment. It might be noted that the convention of using halos to denote sanctity—and indicate the special aura often associated with holy persons—first originated in ancient Indian art, and later influenced European and other art traditions elsewhere.

Throughout art history, master artists have borrowed or quoted popular imagery—transforming, enhancing and elaborating a basic composition so as to express their own unique personal feelings & thoughts. Another example of Ranjit's Buddhist-inspired art depicts the Buddha meditating under the Bodhi Tree in the center of a *mandala* comprised of six concentric rings of animals—including deer, elephants, and rabbits (CAT.38b)



38a Cover of a book on the Buddha, which artistically and spiritually inspired Ranjit Paswan.



38b *Buddha Mandala* (2018) by Ranjit Paswan, collection of J.H. Bowles.



### 39 *Tree with Peacocks and Elephants* (2018)

Acrylic and color tinting on paper smeared with diluted *gobar* (cow dung; 5½" x 7¼")

by Ranjit Paswan (Born 1991)

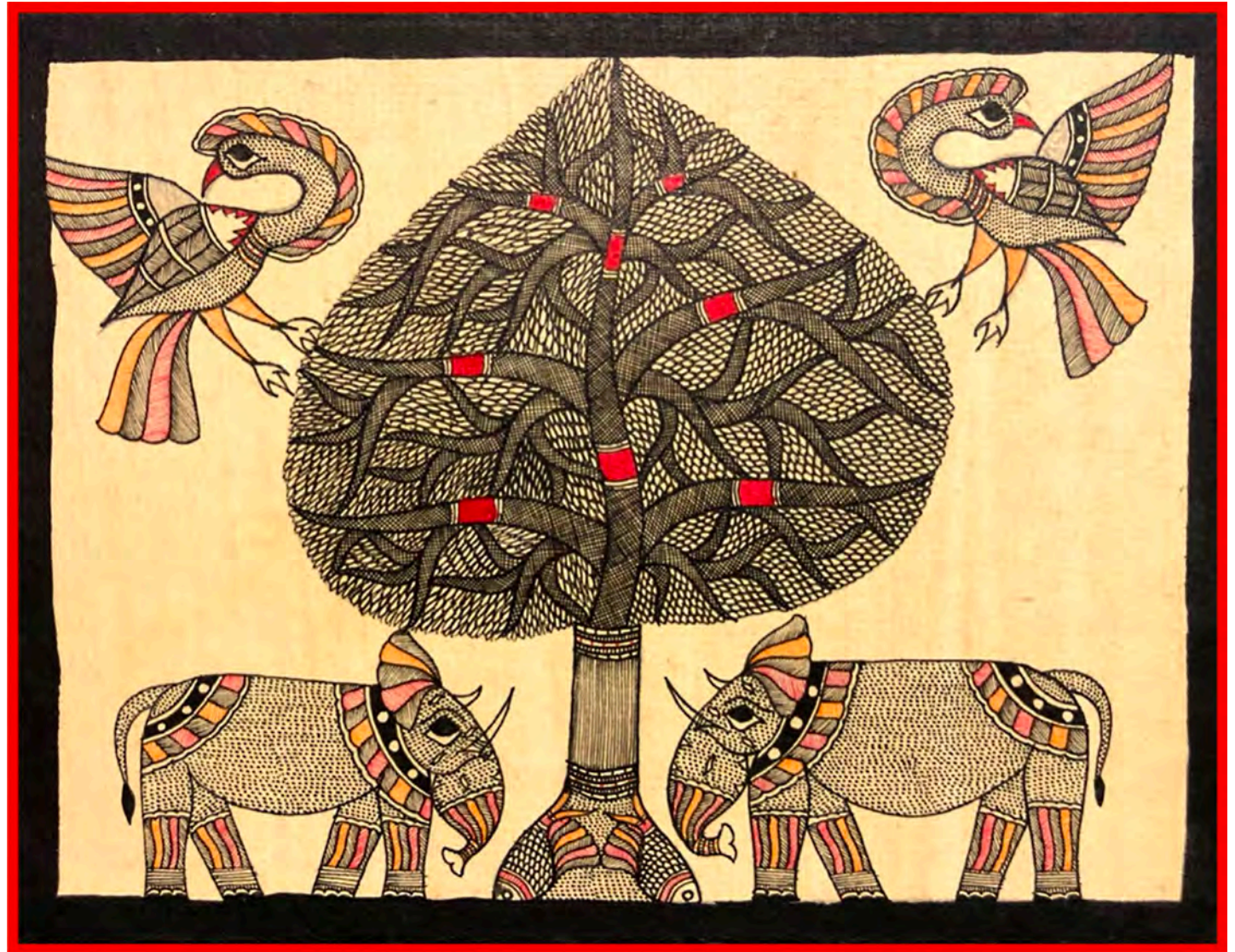
Village Jitwarpur, District Madhubani, Bihar  
Collection of Radford University Art Museum,  
donated by John H. Bowles, Radford

Ranjit Paswan is a young, emerging painter in his community of Dalits artists in Village Jitwarpur. After graduating from the Mithila Art Institute in 2009, he has become increasingly recognized for his meticulously drawn and highly-stylized depictions of trees—sometimes flanked by birds and animals, or rendered as canopies above Hindu and Buddhist deities.

This is one of his smallest tree pictures. His detailed miniatures have become highly prized—especially following Michelle Obama's acquisition of a number of them during her 2010 visit to India.



39a Ranjit Paswan (2018, photo by J. H. Bowles).



## 40 *Bhaskar Kulkarni Arrives at Jitwarpur* (2022)

Acrylic on paper primed with diluted *gobar*  
(cow dung; 8" x 11")

by Ranjit Paswan (Born 1991)

Village Jitwarpur, District Madhubani, Bihar  
Collection of Dr. & Mrs. Donald Stadtner,  
Walnut Creek, California

This small painting by Ranjit Paswan depicts a seminal event in this history of contemporary Mithila art. In response to a terrible drought that hit Bihar in 1966, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's chief cultural administrator assigned an art student named Bhaskar Kulkarni (see photo on page 10) to travel to Mithila to distribute reams of paper to upper caste women—who were known to make elaborate ritual murals in their homes—and urge them to recreate such imagery on sheets of paper that could then be sold to outside ethnic art markets to generate much needed income. Here we see Kulkarni arriving at the village of Jitwarpur as a cycle rickshaw passenger—with a crate full of paper at his feet. For many years he would deliver blank sheets of paper, and take away finished paintings for sale, to deliver initially to distant galleries and crafts fairs in India's various metropolitan centers and—soon thereafter, as this new development in Mithila art became increasingly successful—for exhibition and sale internationally. By the mid-1970s, lower caste Dalit women had also started painting on paper for sale to outsiders—finding success of their own by focusing on their community's distinctive traditions. They stylistically based their painting on then-popular tattoo imagery, often depicting their regional hero-deity Raja Salhesh and scenes of local daily life and their natural environment. In time, their children and grandchildren have become artists—sometimes including male members of their families. The male artist Ranjit Paswan first learned to paint by watching his mother Mahanama Devi; (for examples of her art, see: FIG.7 and CAT.42).



This painting is loaned to the exhibition by Donald Stadtner, who briefly traveled with Kulkarni to Mithila in 1969 (as described in Stadtner's essay in this volume). Ever since Kulkarni's death in 1983, he has become increasingly recognized for his seminal role encouraging indigenous women artists in Mithila—as well as the Warli *adivasis* (tribals) of Maharashtra—to transfer their traditional ritual mural imagery onto paper, thus helping establish two of south Asia's leading contemporary indigenous art movements.<sup>1</sup>

## 41·1–19 Lockdown (2021)

A series of nineteen paintings  
Color tinting on paper primed with diluted  
*gobar* (cow dung; 9" x 9")  
by Ranjit Paswan (Born 1991)  
Village Jitwarpur, District Madhubani, Bihar  
Collection of John H. Bowles, Radford

On March 24, 2020, Prime Minister Narendra Modi proclaimed a strict nationwide lockdown—forcing 1.3 billion Indians to stay in place, be they at home or then traveling elsewhere in the country. As always with such draconian acts, those with meager means faced especially difficult challenges.

The artist Ranjit Paswan and five members of his family—including his mother, two brothers, a sister and a niece—had been visiting New Delhi at that time, to participate in a painting exhibition, and were about to return to their village in Mithila. Instead, they found themselves stranded in Delhi for over two months, forced to remain in their temporary accommodations—a 9' x 8' room—atop a concrete building with little ventilation and sporadic electricity through the hottest season of the year. During the course of this ordeal they were visited by Radhika Bordia, a former producer of cultural programs for NDTV (New Delhi Television), currently a professor of journalism at Jindal University. As members of the press were exempt from the lockdown restrictions, Prof. Bordia's friend John Bowles (curator of this exhibition and a patron of Ranjit's) urged her to track Ranjit down and find out how he and his family were managing. Prof. Bordia found them physically well, but under great stress—including unexpected financial duress; so she helped them by purchasing paintings for herself and her personal friends—at rates considered "good prices" by Ranjit. She also arranged for John Bowles to speak with Ranjit via Internet and cell phone—at which time they discussed the commission of this series of pictures, which Ranjit completed in 2021. Here follows Ranjit's full account of the series, as translated by Kaushik Kumar Jha:

*First of all, I want to tell the story behind my Lockdown series of paintings.*

*I went to [New Delhi's] Surajkund fair to participate in a painting exhibition in February 2020, and planned to return back to my village after a month. I was with my two brothers, our sister, mother and a niece. I had booked my train tickets of 23rd March. But at the same day, Prime Minister Modi imposed a lockdown on the country due to the Covid-19 virus. Because of lockdown, we were not able to go outside, even to buy vegetables, milk or groceries. If somehow we went outside, the police would beat us. Once a policeman beat me up with his lathi stick; but somehow I escaped back to my room.*

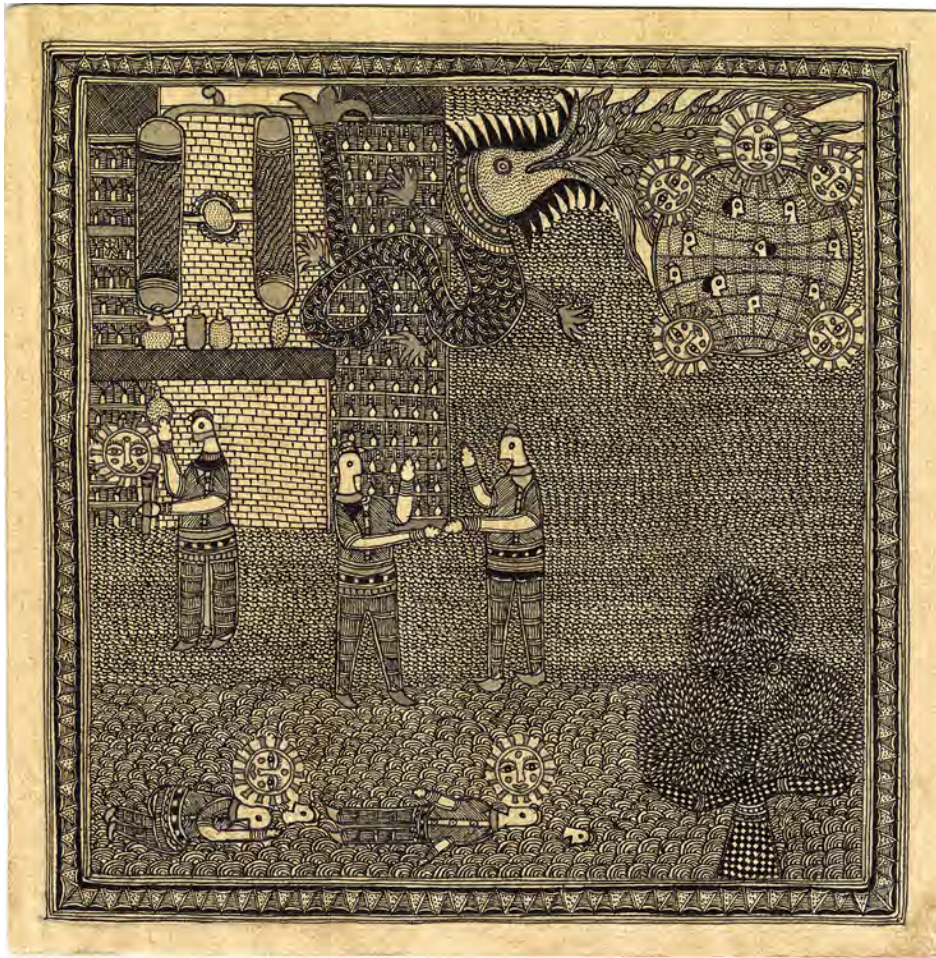
*We were living in a small rented room with all my family members. The room was very small, and it was hard for all six people to live in that room 24/7. I was feeling stuck. But then, I came to know that many daily-waged laborers were traveling back to their native villages by foot. It was a panic situation, and I was very disturbed. One night, I was trying to sleep and was thinking about how all six of us could reach our village. Then suddenly, I remembered John Bowles. Then, I sent an email to him explaining my situation and requested financial assistance.*

*By that time, we had already planned to return to our village by foot, because there was no other transportation option. Many laborers were already going back by foot. But the next morning I received a call from Kaushik [former director of the Mithila Art Institute]. He told me "Don't come by foot; we are trying to arrange something for you and your family." Next morning, I got a call from Madam Radhika [Bordia] in Delhi. She was a friend of John Bowles.*

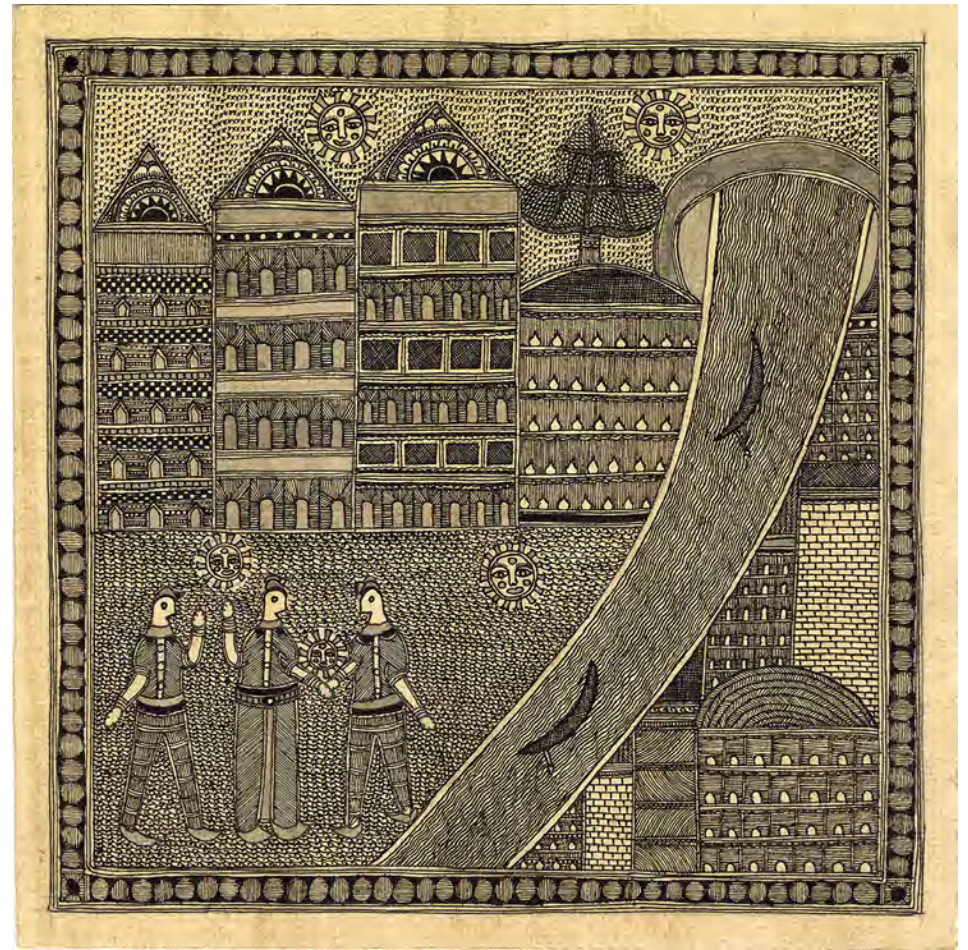


*She invited me to her house, and told me to bring some paintings. So my brother and I took paintings in a bag and met her at her home, where she welcomed us very warmly and made us comfortable. She bought a few paintings from me at good prices. Which was a great help for us. Because we were running out of money. She also arranged a video call with John Bowles. After some time, a few trains were started again by the Government. So, I bought tickets for Rajdhani Express and reached Patna with all of my family members. From Patna we got on a bus which took us to Madhubani. The bus conductor was then charging double the earlier fare. Somehow we finally reached our village. In my Lockdown series of nineteen paintings, I have tried to depict what I experienced during a lockdown stay in Delhi.*

41a Ranjit Paswan (left) and his brother Pradip (right) hold a painting in the *godana* (tattoo) style by their mother Mahanama Devi (center) during their 2020 lockdown in Delhi (Photo by R. Bordia).



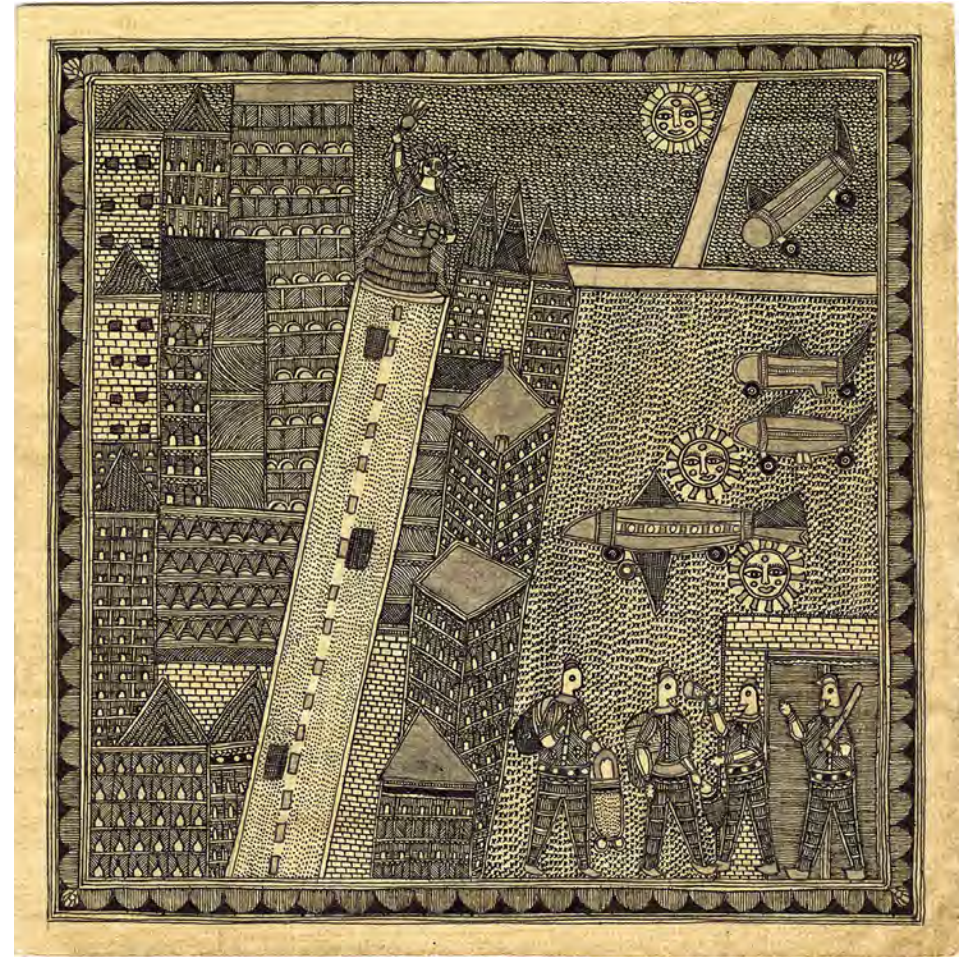
41•1 In my first painting I have depicted Wuhan City of China. In the left top, I have shown a biology laboratory from which the Corona Virus started spreading. Next to the lab, I have drawn a Dragon, symbolizing China, spreading Covid-19 around the world—which I have shown as a globe, on the right top of the painting. Five round faces around the globe are symbolizing the dreaded disease of Corona. In the left middle there is a scientist working in a lab and synthesizing the Corona Virus. There is a round face—in front of scientists—symbolizing Corona. In the middle of the painting, one person is already infected by this virus and he is spreading it to the others.



41•2 In this 2nd painting I have shown Italy, which was one of the nations in the world worst affected by Covid-19. I have shown a high-rise building in its background. On top, two faces symbolize Covid Virus, which is spreading throughout the country. On the right side I have shown a river which is also containing the Corona Virus. Because of this, the river is also contaminated. In the bottom, one person is infected by a virus and he is spreading the virus to two other persons. None of them are wearing masks.



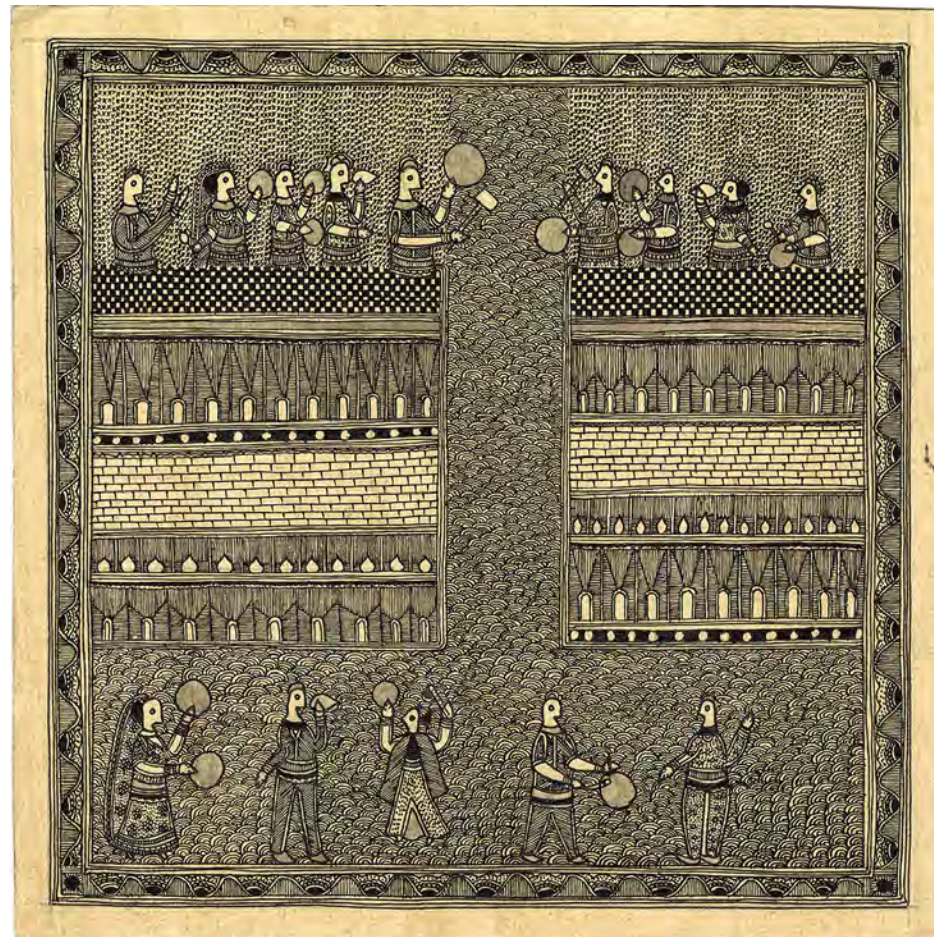
41•3 In this painting, I have shown Paris which is the capital of France. On the left side I have shown the Eiffel tower, and on the right side there is a hotel which is closed due to the pandemic and lockdown. Small faces around the painting are depicting Corona Virus, which is spreading all around the city. In the lower left, people are still coming out without wearing masks during the lockdown, and thus spreading the virus to each other. I have also shown roads without vehicles because of lockdown.



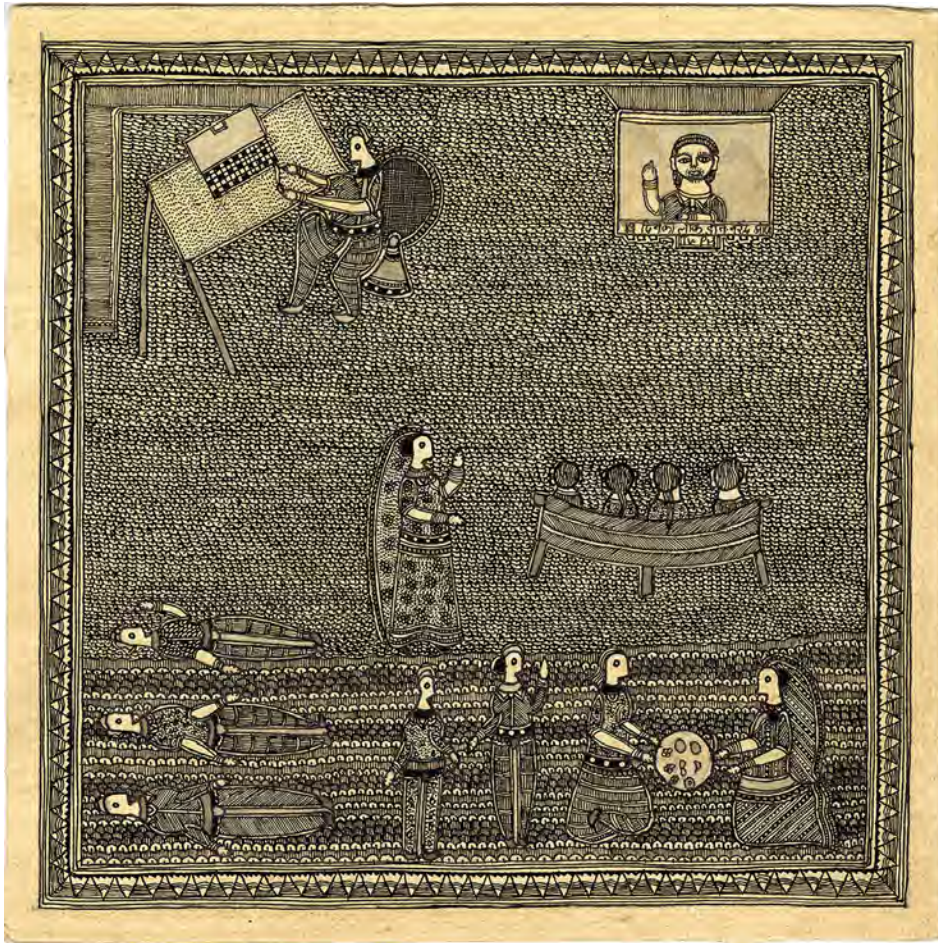
41•4 I have depicted New York City in the USA, which is also getting affected by this virus. On the left side I have shown the high-rise building of New York City. In the centre of the painting, I have depicted the "Statue of Liberty." Just below this I have depicted the ring road with few vehicles on it. On the right side of the painting, I have shown the New York Airport. Planes are landing at this airport with a large number of people from other countries. In the right bottom two passengers are being tested for Covid-19. In the extreme right there is a policeman with a lathi stick in his hand, ensuring that everything is going smoothly. Three small faces around the painting are symbolizing Corona Virus.



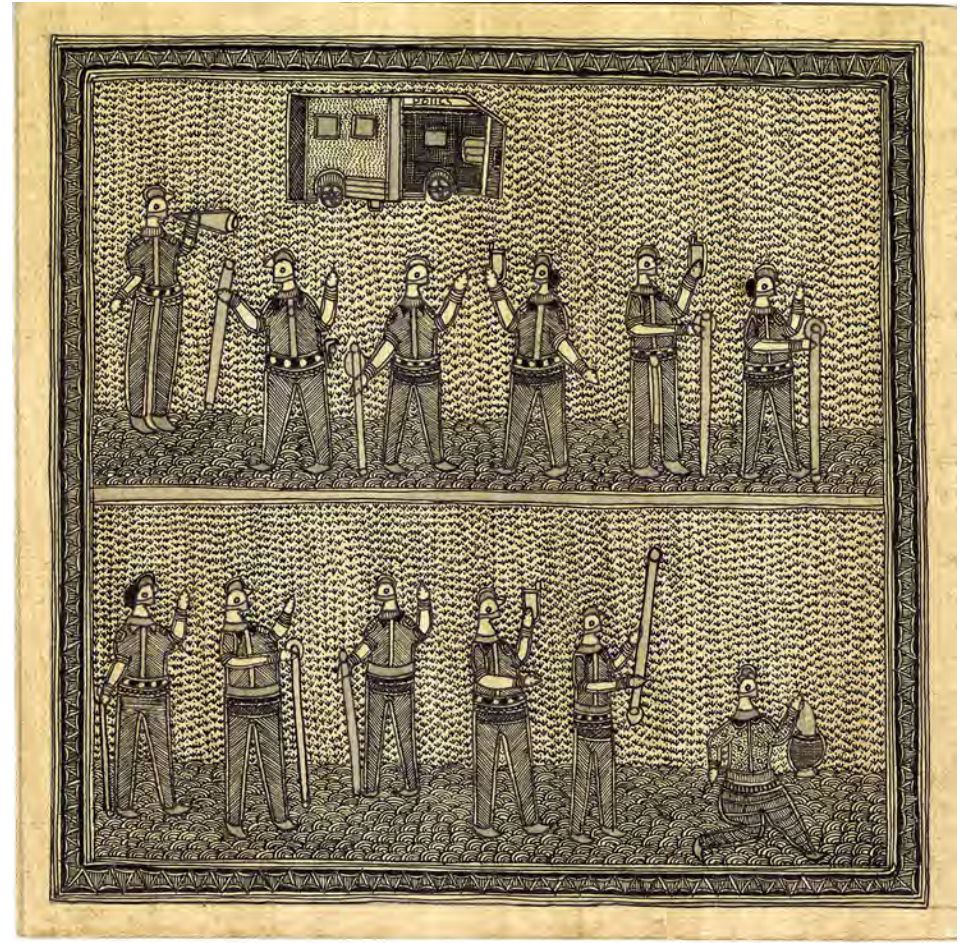
41•5 On the 21st of March, 2020, the honorable Prime Minister Modi has announced a one day 'Janta Curfew' [a one day public curfew/lockdown]. I have shown Prime Minister Modi addressing the nation on Zee News television. Actually, I wanted to show two announcements by Prime minister Modi on two consecutive days. First day was the announcement of one lockdown and the next day P.M. Modi announced 21 days of complete lockdown in the whole country. In the center four people are listening to this news on TV at home. On the top right I have depicted a window of the house. In the bottom I have shown people who are travelers, who are also listening to the announcement from wherever they are—and are shocked by this news of a 21-day lockdown. During his announcement, P.M. Modi is saying that there will be no means of transportation for the next 21 days. Shopping malls, markets, schools and cinema halls, everything will be closed during the lockdown.



41•6 In this painting, I have depicted the evening scene of 'Janta Curfew'—the first day of the lockdown. During his 21st of March speech, Prime Minister Modi called upon the people of the nation to bang steel plates, and hit bowls with spoons, etc. [to ward away the pandemic]. He also blew the conch at 5pm on the lockdown's first evening. You can see that people are banging steel plates, bowls & blowing a conch on their roof. Some people are doing the same in the bottom of the painting. In the middle I have also depicted their houses.

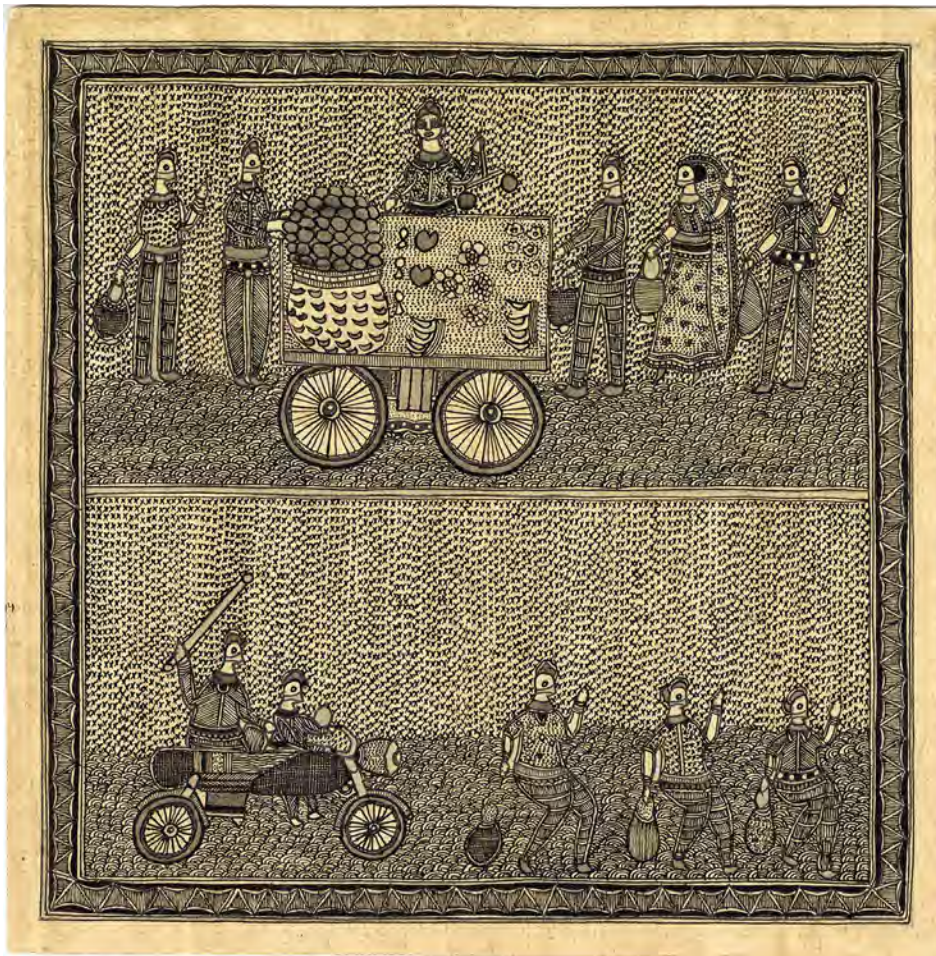


41•7 In this painting, I have depicted a joint family inside their house. On the right top, P.M. Modi is addressing the people on television. He announced another lockdown of 19 days after the completion of the previous 21 days lockdown. Some are watching the news sitting on a sofa. All family members are listening to the news. On the bottom right a mother is serving food to her family members. On the left top, a family member is sitting on the chair and working on the computer doing his office work from home.

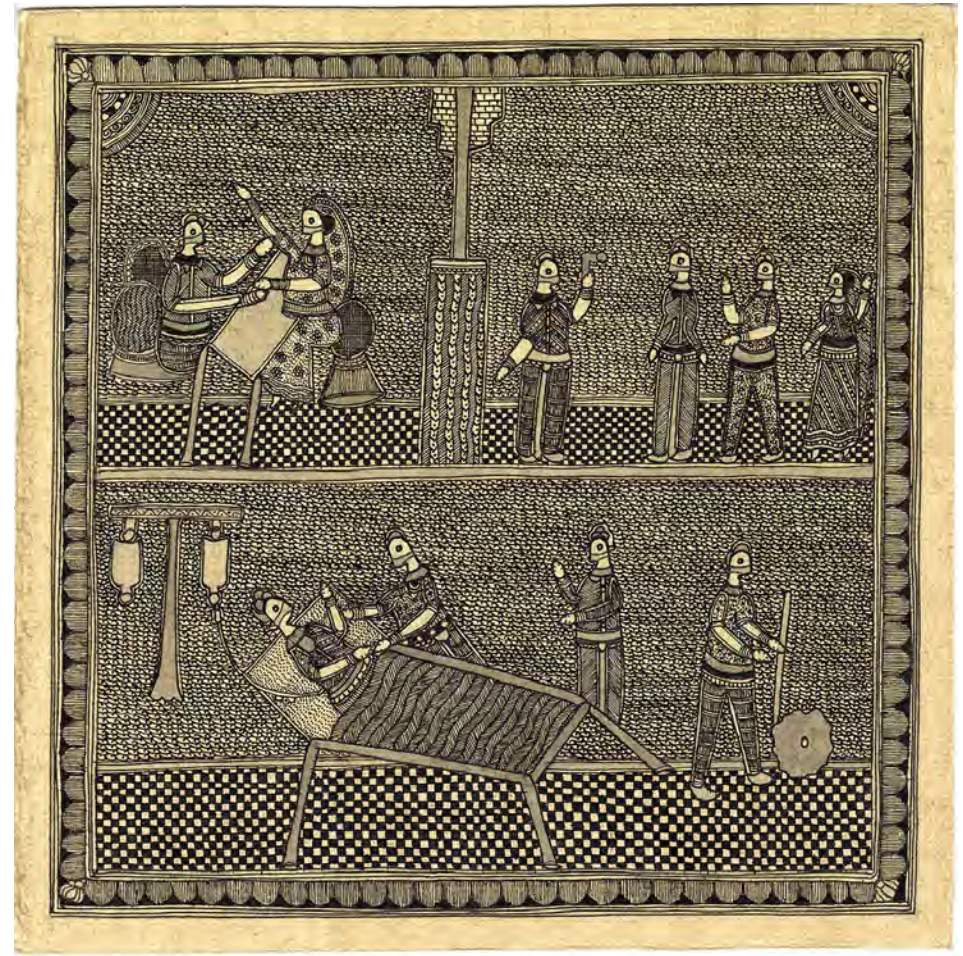


41•8 In this painting, I have depicted the police administration fully executing the enforced lockdown. No one was allowed to go outside of their home. At the extreme left of the top of the painting, one policeman is telling people through a microphone to remain in their houses. Other policemen are patrolling their areas with lathi sticks, and some policemen also have mobile phones in their hands. In the bottom scene, police are on patrol. In the bottom right, they are chasing a person who came to the market to buy vegetables. You can see in this painting that everyone is wearing a mask. There was also a provision for fining anyone going out without a mask. On the top, there is a police van on patrol.





41•9 In this painting, I have shown the condition of the people during the lockdown. Government has allowed people to go outside of their houses to buy essential goods only. In the upper half, I have shown a vegetable seller who is selling vegetables from his push-cart. And people are on both sides of this cart. They are maintaining social distance and wearing masks—except for the vegetable vendor. In the lower half [of the painting], I have shown two policemen who suddenly arrived there on motorcycles and started chasing these people. So, three people are fearfully running away from the police. The man closest to their bike has even dropped his vegetable bag.



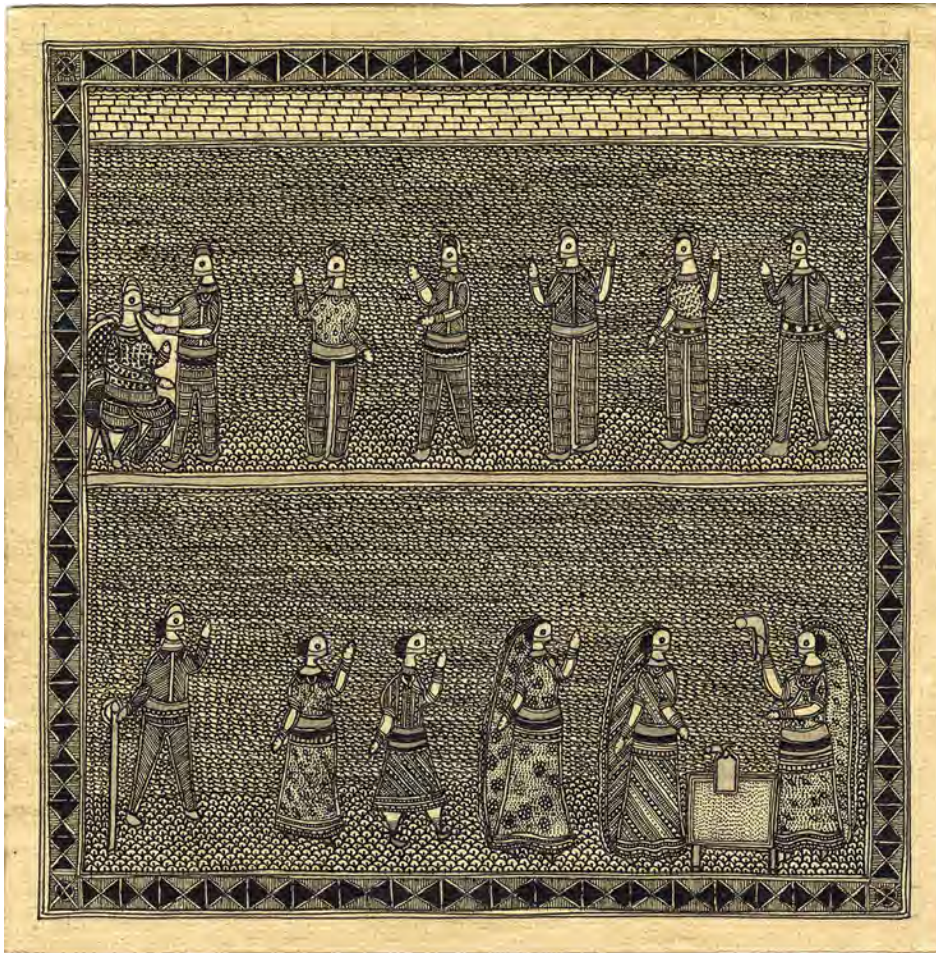
41•10 In this painting, I have depicted a scene of a hospital. During this period, many people were getting sick due to the virus. So, they started to visit the hospital for treatment and checkup. In the right top, one hospital attendant is checking the body temperature of the people one by one. People are standing in a queue, wearing masks and maintaining social distance. One doctor is Covid testing a woman on the left top. In the bottom of the picture, a patient is lying on the hospital bed. He has been diagnosed Covid-positive. So, he is on the ventilator. A doctor is checking the patient with a nurse. There is also a sweeper cleaning the floor.



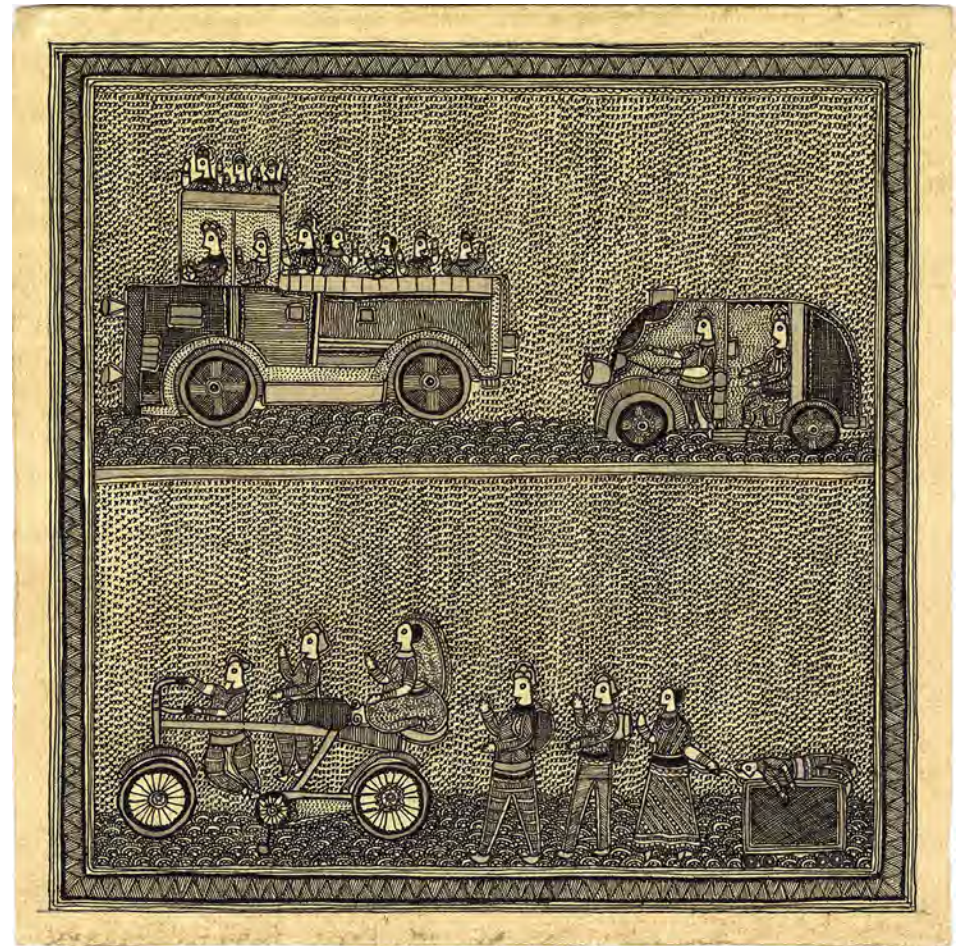
41•11 In this painting, I have depicted the PDS [Public Distribution System]. Through this system the food grains like rice, lentils and flour are distributed by the government officials. I have shown the registration process facilitating this for citizens. People are standing in a queue with their aadhar [identity card]; it's called 'Unique Identity Number' (UID)—a 12-digit number based on biometric-related information. People go to the counter one by one and get themselves registered and receive a coupon. At bottom left, a policeman is standing to ensure that everything goes smoothly. In the upper side of the painting, people are again standing in a queue wearing masks and maintaining social distance. They are also carrying bags with them to receive the food grains. One by one they get free grains from the counter by showing their coupon to the official person. At top left, an official is distributing food grains from the bag which is full of grains behind the counter. He is also using a weighing scale. At top right, two people have received the grain and they are going back to their houses.



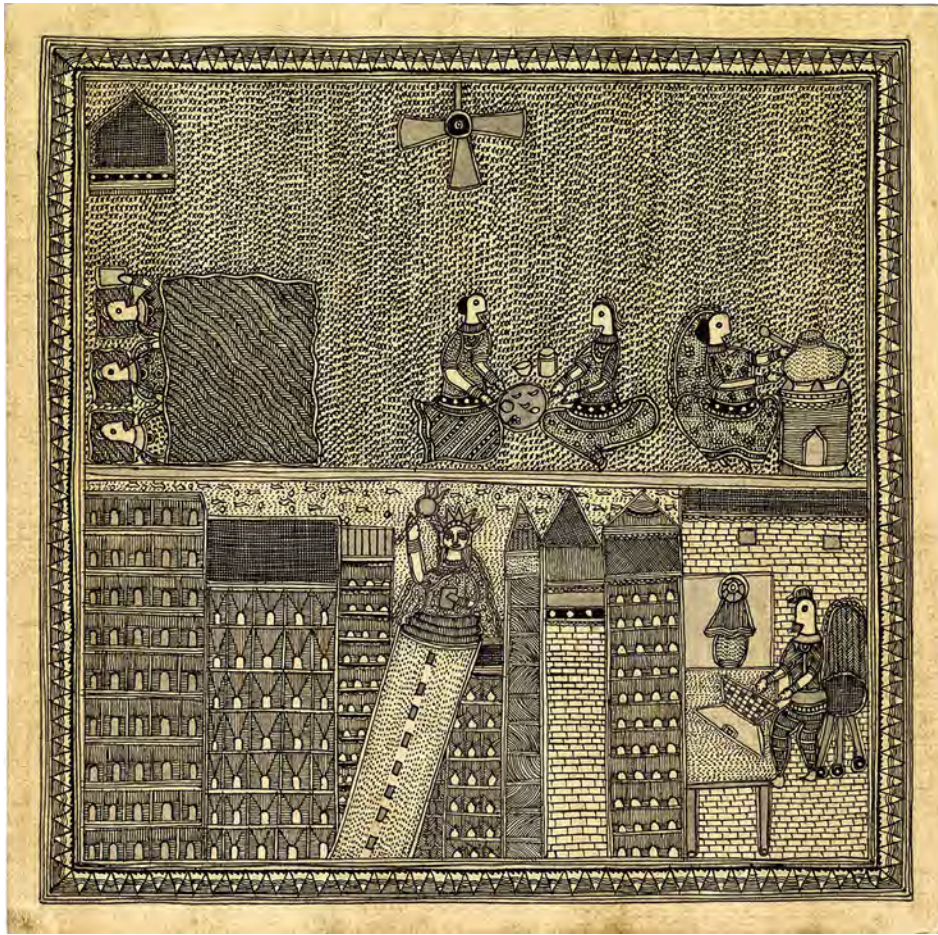
41•12 In this painting, I have depicted my and my family's experiences during the lockdown, when we were staying in one small rented room in Delhi. In the top left, my mother is cooking food and just beside her one of my brothers is eating. After him, I am teaching my niece. Behind me two of my brothers are standing and watching us. There was a single window in the room which I have depicted on the top. On the right side there is a rack in which utensils were placed. There is a fan in the middle of the room. In the lower half [of the picture], my brothers & my niece are playing carrom board to pass our time during our stay at home, because no one was allowed to go outside. On the left side my mother is washing the dishes in the sink.



41•13 In this painting, I have depicted a scene from a school campus in Delhi, where a camp was held for Corona testing. Our landlord told us to visit this camp to get ourselves tested. In the upper part, there is a queue for men only. People are waiting in a queue for their turn. At the top left, a doctor is standing and testing a seated patient for Covid. In the lower half, I have shown the line which was for women only. They are also waiting in queue for their turn. In the extreme right a lady doctor is giving them the sanitizer and taking their temperature. A bottle of sanitizer is placed on the table. She is also holding the temperature meter in her hand. In the extreme left there is a lady constable standing with a lathi stick in her hand, to ensure that everything goes smoothly.



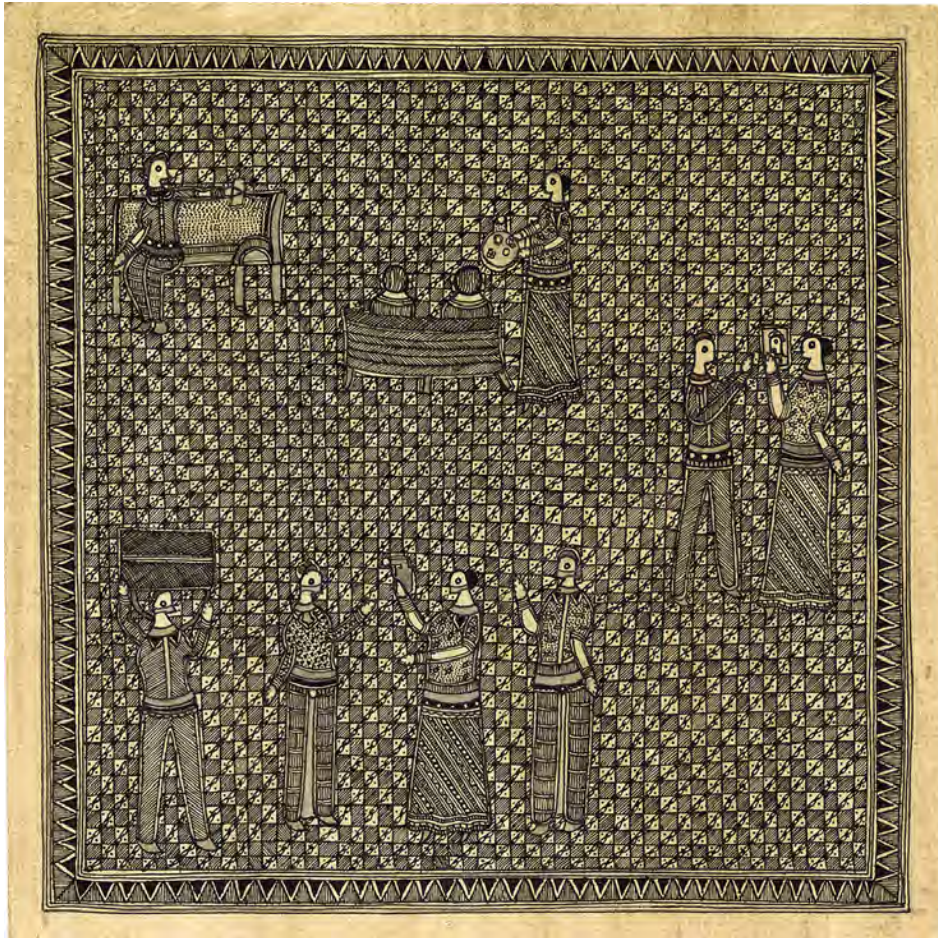
41•14 In this painting, I have depicted the mass movement of laborers from Delhi traveling to their native places. As there were no jobs, no income, it was the only way for them to survive. In the top left, people are going by truck. Behind the truck, there is an auto-rickshaw carrying two people. On the lower left, three people are going on a rickshaw. Behind the rickshaw, three people are going by foot—because they had no other means of traveling. In the extreme right a woman is pulling her trolley bag on which her child is sleeping. By watching these happenings, I also got scared and started thinking that we will have to go [home] by foot.



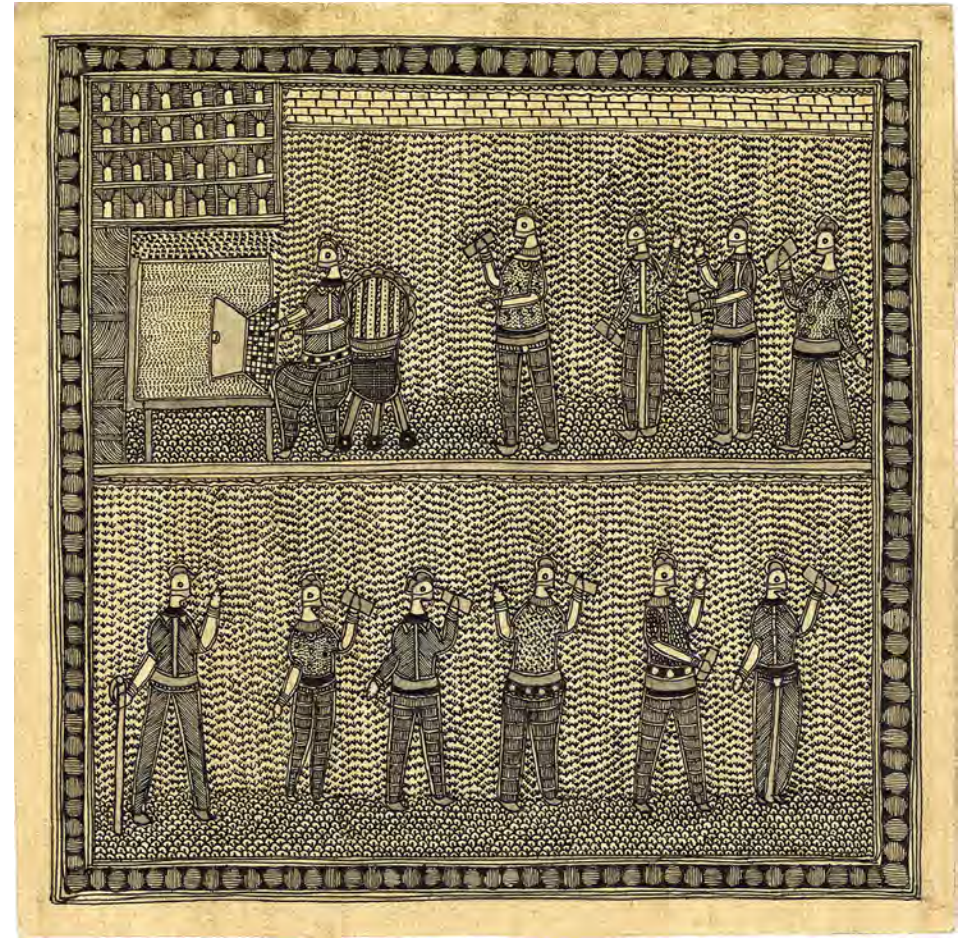
41•15. In this painting, I have shown two places. In the upper half I have shown my Delhi room. On the right side, my mother is cooking on the stove. Just behind her my niece and one brother are having dinner. On the left side, there is the bed on which I am trying to sleep alongside my two brothers. I was so worried about how we would return to our village. Suddenly John Bowles's name came to my mind; he has always supported us. My brothers were sleeping but I was awake. I wrote a letter to John on my mobile. I wrote the situation from which we were facing and asked him for help. In this picture I have shown the window and fan of my room. It was summer and it was very difficult to live in such a small room. In the lower half I have depicted multi-storey buildings and the Statue of liberty of the USA. On the right side John sir is reading my email on his computer. John is sitting on the chair; a table lamp is also placed there.



41•16 In this painting I have depicted our family conversation after receiving reply mail from John sir. I am at the extreme right, I am sharing the good news with my family and telling them that John sir is willing to help us. One of my brothers is teaching my niece, shown at the left bottom. My mother and other brother are eating together in the upper half. At the same time, I got a call but the sound was not clear due to the poor network. So, I went to the roof for better connectivity. I am at the right top of this painting. Again, my mobile started ringing. I received the call. There was a lady on the other side. She said that she is a good friend of John and she is contacting me at his request. Her name was Radhika [Bordia]. She showed interest in buying paintings from us. She invited me to visit her house.



41•17 This shows my meeting with Madam Radhika. In the lower half of this scene, I show myself arriving at her place with my brother, who carries a bag full of paintings on his head. Madam Radhika welcomed us warmly and offered us snacks and tea. In the top left I've shown Madam Radhika's husband, seated upon a sofa. On the right side of the painting, she is arranging a video call for me with John Bowles. Thereafter Madam Radhika bought some paintings from us—at a good price. It was a great help for us because we were running out of money.



41•18 In this painting I have shown how I got the train ticket for our return journey. The railway ticket counter was so crowded that I went to a cybercafé to book our tickets online. But that place was also very crowded. In this painting you can see that everyone is standing in a queue while maintaining social distance. A policeman is also shown, standing in the lower left corner. At top left a man is on the computer booking an online ticket. I am standing just next to him. Finally, I got confirmed online tickets on the Rajdhani Express, which runs from New Delhi to Patna Junction in Bihar. Every person in the queue is holding a mobile in their hand.



41•19 In this painting, I have shown how we started our return journey from Delhi to Patna. We all reached New Delhi railway station to catch our train. In the bottom scene we are entering on the platform. There is a man [shown at lower right] who is selling tea. In the middle of the painting, we are waiting with our luggage for the train, which is going to arrive at the station soon. In the upper scene, the 'Rajdhani Express' arrives on the platform. Finally, we got on the train and started our journey to our village.



Rahu Puja  
by Mahanma Devi

41b Ranjit Paswan and his mother Mahanama Devi—after safely returning with their family to Village Jitwarpur—here shown in a still photo taken from the 2022 video documentary *Dalit Artists of Mithila* (see Catalog page 74 and view the video at: <https://vimeo.com/761034480>).

## 42 Tank with Fish and Snakes

(2017)

Acrylic on paper primed with diluted *gobar*  
(cow dung; 30" x 22")

by Mahanama Devi (Born 1969)

Village Jitwarpur, District Madhubani, Bihar

Collection of John H. Bowles, Radford

State awardee Mahanama Devi paints in a wide range of styles. This depiction of *Fish and Snakes in Tank* is exceptionally spontaneous and loose in its brushwork compared to her other works. The art historian Aurogeeta Das has observed how the multiple rectangles of the tank (its outer border and possible depiction of partitioned inner filters) suggests multiple perspectives—dramatically ‘pierced’ by the water snakes swimming from one zone to another (see Essays page 6). Schools of fish dart about in various directions, animating the entire picture. Another work by Mahanama (FIG.7) shows an entirely different style, in her black silhouette rendering of a tree, that seems to explode against a colorful background of multicolored birds. She has also worked in a *godana* (tattoo) style very similar to that of her son Ranjit (compare CAT.37.3 with 41a). The two often work together in their joint family home, and at times clearly influence one another. A photograph taken of Mahanama in 2018 shows her at her home, proudly standing next to a sign originally displayed at a 2017 government-sponsored crafts fair, in which she participated as a “Master Craftsperson” (and thus—as displayed on the sign—eligible to receive an honorarium of 25,000 rupees a month, the approximate equivalent of US \$10 a day). More recently, she has gradually come to recognize the potential value of her work, and now prices it at increasingly higher rates.



42.a Mahanama Devi at her home in Jitwarpur, 2018 (Photo by J.H. Bowles).

### 43 Two *Ramayana* illustrations

Acrylic on paper (30" x 22" each)

by Naresh Paswan (Born 1983)

Village Kunwar, District Madhubani, Bihar;  
now residing in Muscat, Oman

43.1 *Hanuman and Surasa* (2014)

Collection of Mr. & Mrs. Pankaj Mishra, London

43.2 *Hanuman and Sita*

in *Ravana's Palatial Garden* (2014)

Collection of John H. Bowles, Radford

These must surely be some of the most remarkable depictions ever made of popular episodes from the *Ramayana*—one of Hinduism's great epic legends, originally composed in Sanskrit sometime between the 7th-4th centuries BCE, and attributed to Valmiki. Certain publications of the *Ramayana* total around a thousand pages, and there are many oral as well as written versions of it in numerous South Asian languages. Like Homer's ancient Greek epics *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, the *Ramayana* tells of a woman's abduction and rescue—and the aftermath and subsequent adventures of its protagonists. Both of the episodes exhibited here involve the Hindu monkey god Hanuman. In one scene (CAT.43.1) he is shown flying across the ocean—to the island of Lanka (Sri Lanka)—to search for the god Rama's kidnapped wife Sita. In an attempt to test his strength and intellect, Surasa (the all-devouring Mother of *Nagas* [snakes]) transformed herself into a giant demoness—but Hanuman succeeds in cleverly outwitting her. According to Makhan Lal Sen's translation of Valmiki: "...*Surasa, eager to test* [Hanuman's] *valour, said, 'Formerly Prjapati Brahma* [the god of creation] *granted me this boon that whoever shall come near me I shall devour him. Now, if you have the power, you may come out of my jaws.'*" *At this, Hanuman was highly enraged and said, 'O Rakshasi* [Demoness], *then open your mouth in proportion to my size*" [and] *expanded his body to ten yojanas* [a single yojana is approximately eight miles]. *Surasa gaped her mouth twenty yojanas. That hideous mouth looked like the abyss of hell. Hanuman then extended his body to thirty yojanas and Surasa her mouth to*

*forty yojanas, then Hanuman to fifty yojanas and Surasa to sixty, then Hanuman to seventy and Surasa to eighty, thereupon Hanuman to ninety and Surasa to a hundred. Then Hanuman suddenly contracting his body like a cloud entered into Surasa's mouth and instantly came out of it and rising into the sky said, 'Dakshayani* [daughter-of-Daksha]! *I have come out of your mouth [...]* *Now I go to Janaki* [Sita]."<sup>1</sup>

The *Ramayana* narrative continues thereafter, with Hanuman's discovery of Sita imprisoned in the palatial garden of her captor Ravana (CAT.43.2, shown on next page). Hanuman, splendidly attired and regally bejeweled, appears perched astride the branches of the garden's peepal tree (*Ficus religiosa*). The tree's black limbs and aerial roots are symmetrically configured into the distinctive cordate shape of a peepal leaf. The surrounding sky is a fan of radiating stripes converging on Hanuman and the tree. Each stripe is precisely banded to weave arcs of concentric semi-circles, adding further resonance and focus to the central tree and deity. Sita appears seated on a white mat at the base of the tree, confronted by Ravana, who dramatically approaches her on a black diagonal path. They are surrounded by Ravana's swordwielding demoness guards, standing on a patio floor composed of tiny squares, flatly drawn with no attempt to suggest linear perspective—thus seeming to perform on a shallow stage. Four smaller trees appear in the background, as if painted on stage flats. The whole scene is sumptuously framed with a richly decorated band of stripes and lozenges.

Such meticulous work requires extraordinary discipline, and Naresh regards his art as a form of yoga. He daily devotes long hours to his paintings, working indoors during evenings and in cold weather (using a bare ceiling lightbulb augmented by a battery-powered lamp), but in hot weather his favorite workplace is upon a mat under a nearby mango tree. The modesty of his home and circumstances starkly contrasts with his opulent imagination. Naresh was only twenty-one years old when he painted these masterpieces, one of which was acquired soon thereafter by the renowned Indian author Pankaj Mishra, and is here on loan from Mishra and his wife's collection in London.



43-1





43•2



43a Naresh Paswan (2014, photo by J.H. Bowles).

## 44 Two scenes featuring Krishna

Acrylic on paper

by Naresh Paswan (Born 1983)

Village Kunwar, District Madhubani, Bihar;  
now residing in Muscat, Oman

44.1 *Krishna Steals the Gopis' Clothes*  
(2014; 30" x 22")

44.2 *Krishna Saves Draupadi's Honor*  
(2014; 22" x 30")

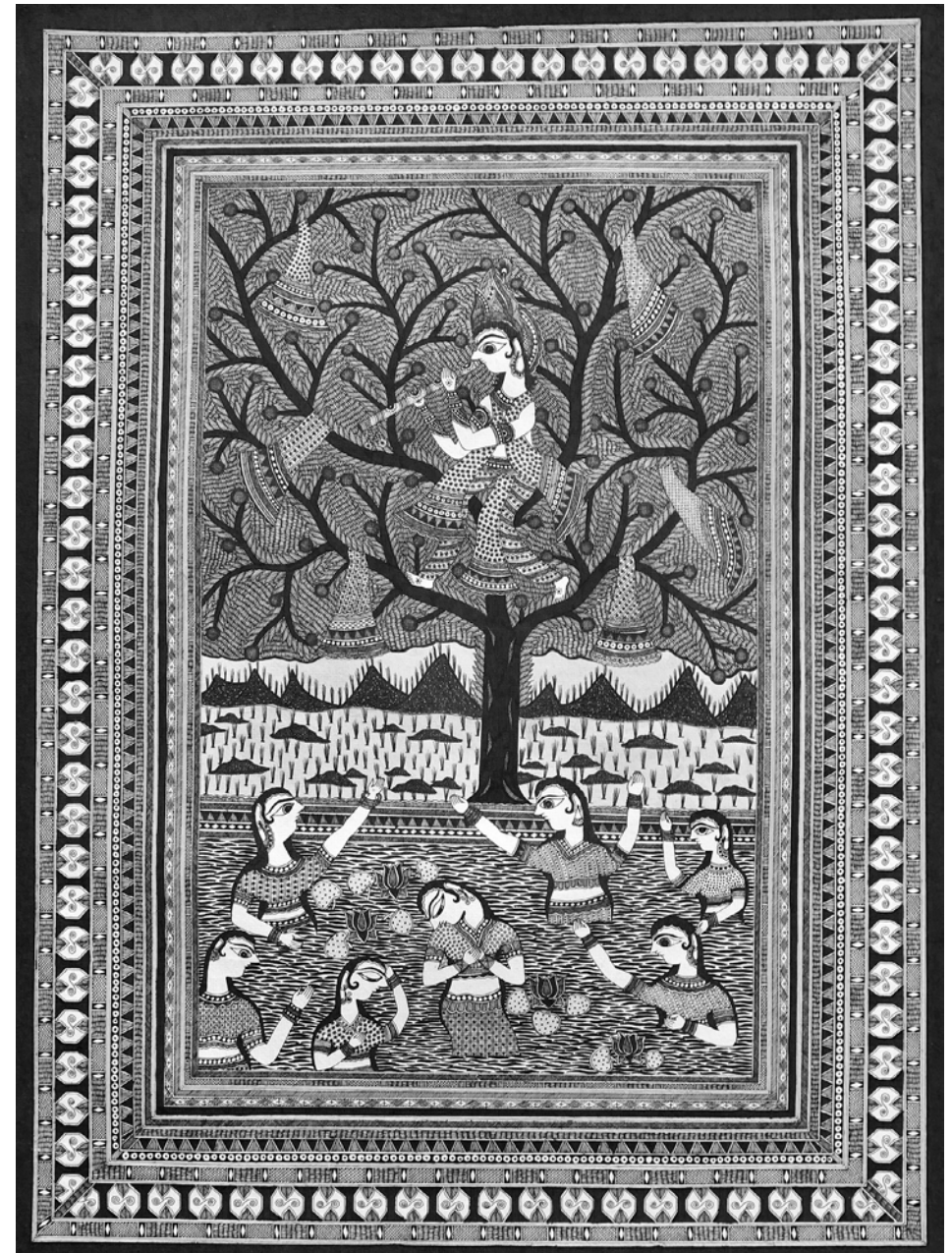
Collection of John H. Bowles, Radford

These two paintings show famous episodes in the life of the Hindu god Krishna. One depicts a pivotal episode (CAT.44.2, shown on next page) in Hinduism's *Mahabharata* epic, wherein Draupadi (shown at center)—the wife of five royal brothers (shown in the lower right corner)—has just been wagered and lost in a game of dice played by her husband Yudhishtira—an inveterate gambler. Having bet and lost all else to his cousins, she then became his final wager. Yudhishtira's distress is shared by his four brothers—who are also (polyandrous) husbands of Draupadi; all five of them are shown bereft of their crowns (depicted above the dice board), while one of them clutches his head in dismay. One of their victorious cousins, Dushasana, decides to humiliate them further by disrobing Draupadi. He starts unwinding her *sari*, (a woman's garment traditionally made from a single long piece of cotton or silk), but fails to strip her—as Krishna (shown intervening from above) answers her prayers to be spared, by endlessly extending the length of her *sari* (its magical extension here depicted as "invisibly" descending from his hand). This single painting conveys the full range of this *Mahabharata* episode's diverse drama—from Draupadi and her husbands' despair and the assembled court's astonishment, to the arrogant lechery and/or awed amazement of Dushasana's bug-eyed expression.

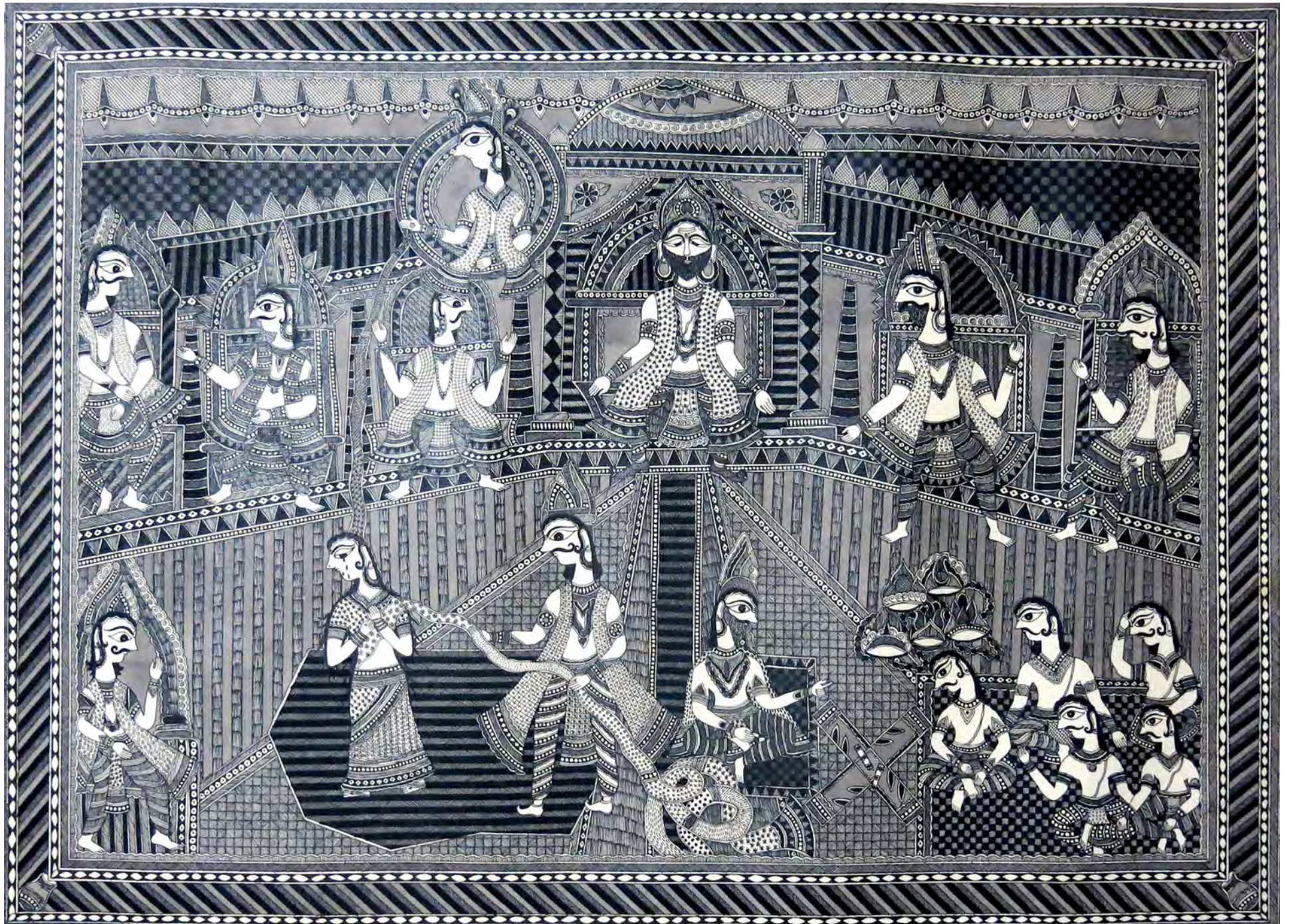
In his wondrous myths and legends Krishna often plays the role of a mischievous trickster—so as to teach certain moral lessons to his devotees. One

of his especially popular pranks occurred when he noticed a gathering of *gopis* (his milkmaid devotees) skinny-dipping in a river. Although written and verbally transmitted accounts are explicit about the *gopis* swimming naked, in deference to Mithila's conservative mores, the region's artists avoid depictions of nudity. Thus, while Naresh and other artists in Mithila depict Krishna's theft of the *gopis'* clothes (shown hanging from tree limbs), they still feel compelled to show them fully dressed while swimming. Despite Naresh's *gopis'* modest decorum, they are still shown as strikingly beautiful: all have large lotiform eyes, and the one in the center is endowed with an especially graceful swan-like neck. Another depiction and fuller account of this prank by Krishna (and its metaphysical/moral import) can be savored in a colorful painting (CAT.26) by Naresh's late sister, Lalita Devi.

Naresh Paswan's paintings can be found in collections of prominent connoisseurs and institutions across Europe and America—including San Francisco's Asian Art Museum and Princeton University. In conjunction with Radford University Art Museum's *Raja Salhesh's Garden* exhibition, Blacksburg's Miller-Off-Main Street Gallery hosted Naresh Paswan's first solo exhibition (September 6 – October 14, 2022).



44•1



### 45 *Raja Salhesh's Puja* (2020-2022)

Acrylic on twenty-one sheets of paper  
(ranging from 9" x 9" to 20" x 20")

By Naresh Paswan (Born 1983)

Village Kunwar, District Madhubani, Bihar  
(now residing in Muscat, Oman)

Collection of John H. Bowles, Radford

Throughout Mithila, Raja Salhesh is worshipped by Dalit and low caste devotees. A short video documentary filmed for the inauguration of this exhibition—titled *Dalit Artists of Mithila* (produced by Radhika Bordia and co-directed by M. Habib Ali and Kaushik Kumar Jha)— includes scenes of devotion and spiritual possession in a Salhesh *puja* (worship) that occurred in Village Jitwarpur last August, 2022 (CAT.45b-m on next page). Devotees also perform his *puja* at Raja Salhesh's *gahwars* (shrines) containing painted sculptures—and occasionally murals—depicting Salhesh and his entourage (CAT.45a). This exhibition's triptych display of Naresh Paswan's *Raja Salhesh Puja* is the most elaborate and detailed painting on paper to feature such imagery. It was expressly conceived and commissioned for display in this exhibition, and took over two-and-a-half years to complete and frame. The devotional image in the center of the triptych depicts a display of offerings to Raja Salhesh, who is shown with his mahout mounted on an elephant and surrounded by his entourage. The triptych's two side panels feature sixteen narrative paintings depicting religious activities—including ritual preparations, devotional offerings, and Raja Salhesh's spiritual possession of a *bhagat* (holy man / shamanic priest)—as proved by various supernatural feats (especially his resistance to being injured by fire, as well as exorcisms of evil spirits and curing of physical maladies). Here follows Kaushik Kumar Jha's translation of Naresh Paswan's full account of the triptych's imagery.



45



45a A Salhesh *gahwar*  
(shrine) in Mithila (Photo by  
Kaushik Kumar Jha).



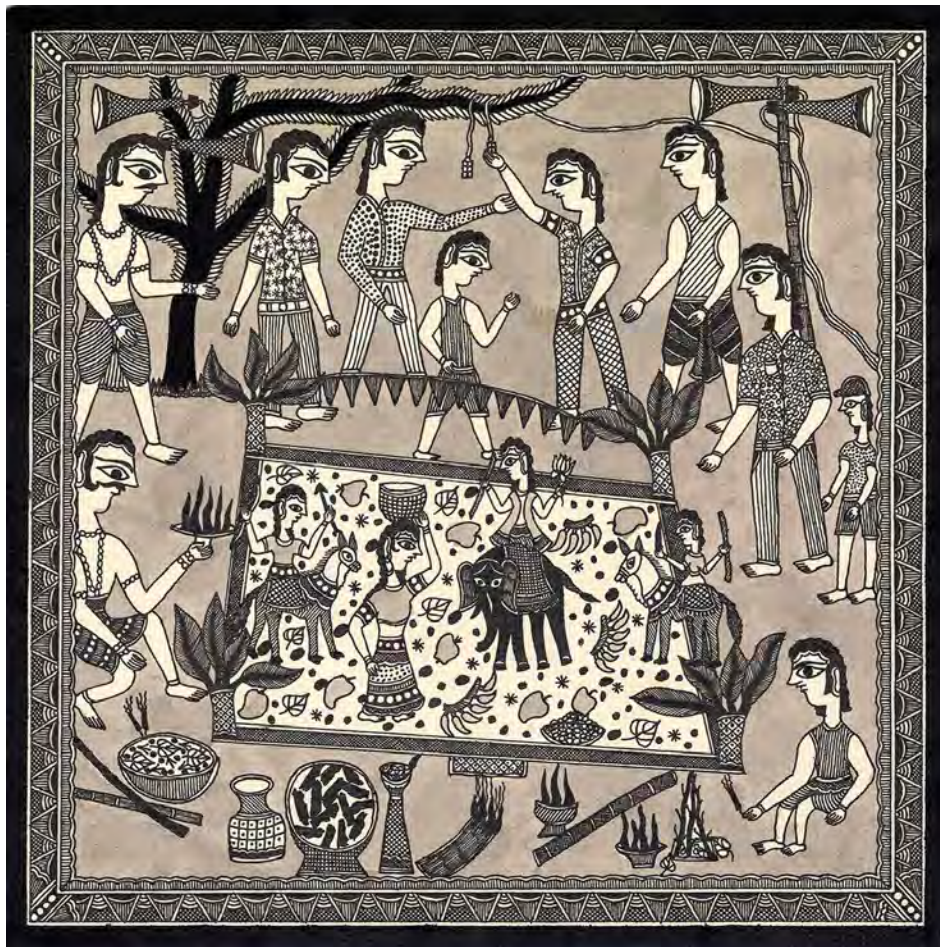
45b—m A short video documentary filmed for the inauguration of this exhibition—titled *Dalit Artists of Mithila* (produced by Radhika Bordia and co-directed by M. Habib Ali and Kaushik Kumar Jha; see Catalog page 74 and view the video at: <https://vimeo.com/761034480>).



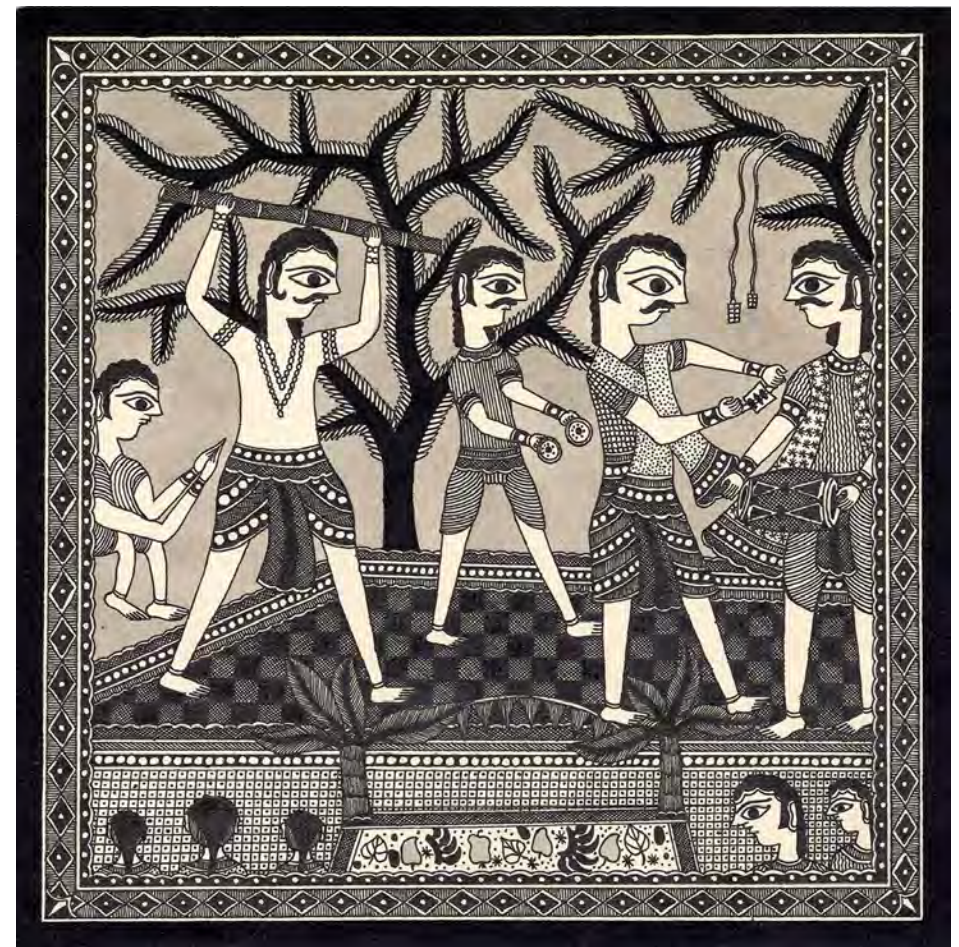
45.1 First of all, the Paswan community makes a Puja [worship] Committee. Then members of that Committee collect donations from other Paswan villagers. Standing at left appears the bhagat [holy man / shamanic priest]. On a pathiya [bamboo platter] he carries wholesome, devotional food: betel leaf, betel nut, fruits, sweets—and two sticks, one thick and the other thin, that will be ritually used by the bhagat. The other three men are making music and singing Salhesh songs while collecting donations. Their musical instruments are the dhol and tabla [two kinds of drum] and a jhail [aka jalra —hand-sized clash cymbals].



45.2 After collecting donations, a few committee members go to market to buy devotional items for worshipping Raja Salhesh. This picture shows four men returning from the market. Two of them carry daliya [aka pathiya—bamboo baskets] on their heads, in which you can see clay sculptures of Raja Salhesh, his malin [flower maiden devotee], two horses [the mounts of his brothers], and Salhesh's elephant, and other items. A third person carries on his head a jute bag full of arwa chawal [unboiled/unroasted paddy rice]. The fourth person carries a handbag full of sweets, joss [incense] sticks, a match box, bidi [Indian hand-rolled cigarettes], cannabis, milk, sugar, tea leaves and tea cups.



45.3 After collecting these devotional items, the bhagat makes a marwa [bamboo hut]—decorates it with four banana trees—and places therein all devotional paraphernalia. At bottom left, the bhagat is shown burning an aahuti [sacrifice pot]. There is a lota [water jar] filled with Ganges water into which two sticks are placed. Another bamboo basket is filled with betel leaf, betel nuts, flowers, rice and sweets. A third basket is filled with jau [barley], sesame seeds, prickly water lily, fragrant gum, etc. Another small marwa, covered by cotton cloth or dhoti [a long loincloth worn by men in south Asia] is also used [but not depicted here]. A devotee worshipping Salhesh with incense is shown [in the lower right corner]. A group of singers hang loudspeakers and a microphone for their performance of songs honoring Raja Salhesh and Vishara [lit. “possessor of poison”—a naga (snake) deity included in Raja Salhesh’s puja (worship)].



45.4 This painting shows the marwa [bamboo hut]—prepared with betel leaf, betel nut, and sweets—is ready for worshipping Salhesh. At left stands a bhagat holding a baton on which he’ll ride when possessed by Raja Salhesh’s spirit. At this point in the ceremony the bhagat loses control of himself [by entering into a trance and becoming spiritually possessed]. Salhesh God is now on him with all his power, and the bhagat starts jumping back and forth. He orders the musicians and singers to increase their volume. As the drum and other instruments play louder, the bhagat starts to jump more quickly. Everyone has started singing songs about Kusuma-Maliniya [Salesh’s maiden devotees]. At far left a crouching young boy prayerfully watches the bhagat. A microphone hangs down from a tree [at right].



45.5 In this painting the bhagat appears [at far right] holding up his baton. While jumping, the bhagat approaches the mandali [group of singers]. Thereafter they together circumambulate the marwa. People are shown happily watching. In the lower left corner, a man gives money to his son, so that he can enjoy the fair near the place of puja [worship]. Three girls watch the bhagat and others, as they sway back and forth. The fair held near the puja place is where local villagers find opportunities to meet each other.



45.6 In this scene, the boy shown standing in the lower left corner suffers from epilepsy. Standing next to him is a woman, who came to this puja [worship] place with her daughter-in-law, who's possessed by a malevolent ghost. On the far right stands another woman suffering from possession. Now the bhagat uses a stick to draw a magic, divinely powerful circle around the afflicted women and boy. No ghost can enter that circle. The bhagat puts his hand on that woman's head and recites a mantra [powerful chant]. The bhagat's assistant stands right behind him holding a basket containing rice, arhul [hibiscus] flowers, basil leaves, and kanil [yellow oleander] flowers. The bhagat begins his mantra recitation having rice in his hand. Ultimately, he feeds that rice to the sick women and boy.





45.7 This painting consists of six bhagats sitting on the floor; all of them are black magicians. The pramukh bhagat [lead holy man/ devotee] is worshipping Vishhara. He holds a big clay bowl from which rises an intense flame. If any outsider tries to perform black magic, then the six bhagats completely destroy his magic's influences with their powerful mantras. The pramukh bhagat blows the smoke rising from the fiery bowl over a woman sitting in front of him [shown with her hand touching her chin]—to cure her by banishing the influence of jadu tona [black magic]. Behind the afflicted woman two other women converse [under a tree]. Above them a man hands his son a samosa to eat on this occasion of Salthesh Puja. One of the two women [shown in the upper right corner] is uneducated, and shows a note of money to an educated woman, and asks her the value of the note. The educated woman says its value is 500 rupees.



45.8 The painting above depicts a group of mochis [cobblers] in a band playing rattles, dhol and taasha [two kinds of drum], and other musical instruments. In the lower right corner appears a woman poisoned by snake venom, which she spreads to whoever comes close to her. The Vishhara bhagat treats her using a stick used for jhaad phunk [invoking the deity] and waves it all over her body—from head to toe—to cure her illness. He is of a different caste and does not belong to the same community of the mochis. Behind him four kneeling men use the powers of their mantras while inching their hands across the line.



45.9 This painting depicts a group of destitute shoe makers making music as the one at center dances while holding a prop stick. The shoe makers on the bottom left and right are playing the nagara and tasha [two kinds of musical/percussion instruments]. They play in rhythm along with the two musicians shaking rattles above. They are finally serenaded by two musicians [in upper right and left corners] playing the shehnai [an Indian oboe].



45.10 In this painting the bhagat worships Vishara by swinging aahuti [fireballs] from his hands. At left stands another person holding a bamboo stick—which will later be worshipped. The bhagat's helper, called a dhalwaha, stands with a metal plate in the bottom center of the painting. This metal plate contains flowers, akshat [sacred rice], and Ganges water in a metal cup. The dhalwaha dips the flower into the Ganges water, which he then sprinkles onto the bamboo stick to purify it. The bhagat [in the center of the painting] is also purifying the bamboo stick with aahuti. The person holding the bamboo stick stands in a circle which is drawn by the bhagat. The circle has divine power now—protecting the person holding the bamboo stick from witchcraft. A small round brass lota [pot] full of Ganges water is placed on the ground in front of the dhalwaha. After being purified, the bamboo stick is invested with divine power, and thereafter will be kept in the brass pot. Then it will spin around by its magical power. On the right bottom of the painting two cobblers are playing drums. On the top of the painting, two cobblers are playing the piphi [a type of clarinet] and two other cobblers shake jhunjhuna [rattles].



45.11 On the top corners of this painting appear two cobblers playing the phipi [a type of clarinet]. Between them other musicians play the rattles and taasha [a special kind of drum]. These musical instruments are only played by cobblers during the Salhesh Puja. In the center of the painting the bhagat Vishara dances and jumps with joy while holding great, flaming sandalwood fireballs in clay pots with his bare hands. The burning of any other kind of wood in these ceremonies is totally prohibited. Although the clay pots become extremely hot, the bhagat Vishara doesn't feel any pain due to divine power. You can see that the bhagat's hands remain wide open while he dances. A person [at left] stands in a circle while holding a brass lota [pot] in which the ritually purified bamboo stick is placed. The untouched stick spins around by the power of magic. Someone crouches below him, ready to catch him if he starts to fall. The moment he's seized the stick will stop spinning—but it must not fall to the ground, as that would be inauspicious. The dhalwaha holding a metal plate stands in the painting's lower right corner. The plate contains flowers, rice, and Ganges water in the metal cup. He dips the flowers into the Ganges water and then sprinkles the water onto the dancing bhagat. Another cobbler sits next to the dhalwaha while playing a drum. The whole atmosphere is filled with loud, echoing music.



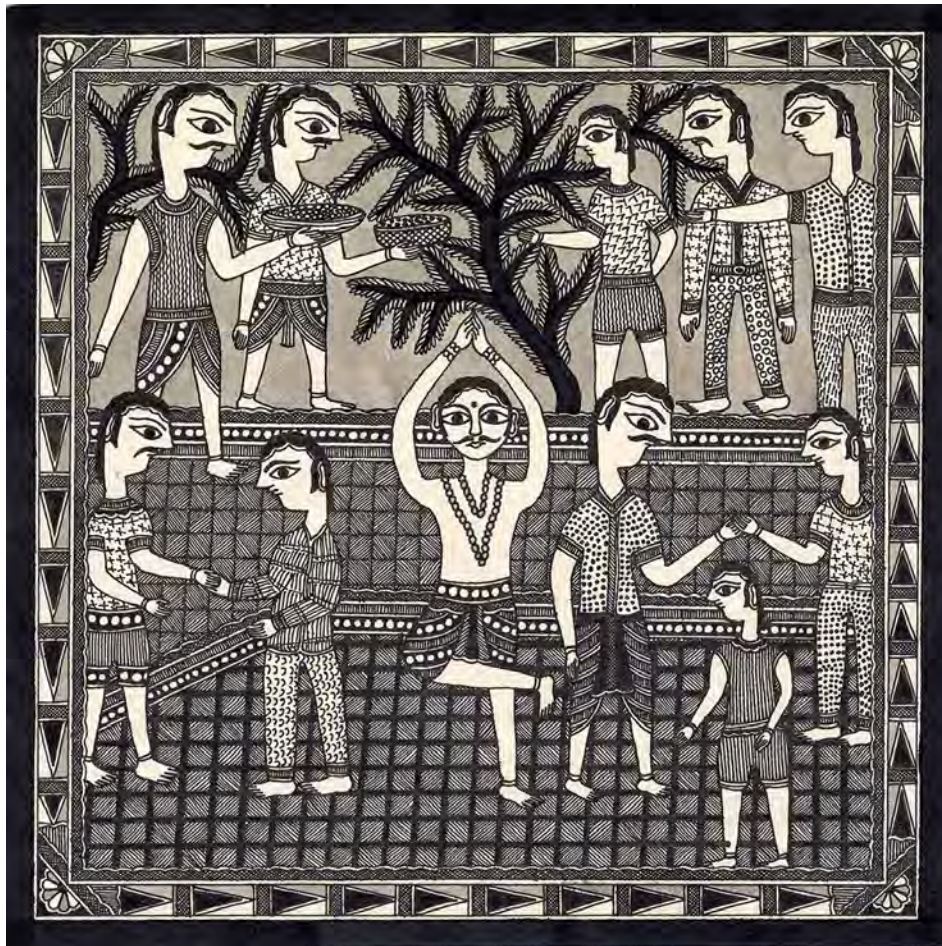
45.12 Here another bhagat dances with the bamboo stick on his shoulder [at center left]. The bhagat Vishara shows the fire balls to him. The dhalwaha stands between both bhagats, holding a metal plate containing akshat [sacred rice], flowers and a cup of Ganges water. He is also purifying another bhagat dancing with bamboo on his shoulder. Both bhagats are dancing and jumping. Vishara bhagat and the dhalwaha are purifying the other bhagat because later he must dance with five gharas [earthen pots]—shown in the lower left corner. The cobbler musicians are busy playing the phipi [clarinet], tasha [a percussion instrument], and rattles. The puja [worship] is on full swing when the bhagats dance to loud music—to which everyone swings and sways.



45.13 At the top left and right two cobblers are playing the piphi [clarinet] and in the middle others play the taasha [a special drum] and jhunjhuna [rattle]. Members from my [Paswan] community are singing and playing the nagara [a kind of drum], jhal [hand cymbals], and jhallar [a handheld percussion instrument]. These musical instruments are used by the Paswan community only during Salhesh Puja [worship]. Another bhagat is now holding the fireballs with both hands, his arms widely spread in opposite directions. There are five clay pots stacked on his head. He is balancing it without any support and fluently dancing. All the pots on his head are empty and it has many small holes,<sup>1</sup> and his dance is like the jhijhiya [a type of dance performed by women—involving the balancing of clay pots on their heads—during Diwali, [the Hindu festival of lights celebrated in autumn]]. The bamboo stick, which he was carrying on his shoulder in a previous painting, has now been placed on the ground. The dhalwaha is standing with the metal plate which contains sacred rice, flowers, and a cup of Ganga jal [sacred Ganges water]—which he sprinkles on the dancing bhagat to purify him. Everyone is dancing, playing musical instruments and engrossed in their puja.



45.14 In the top corners of this painting two cobblers play the piphi [clarinet]; between them another plays the taasha [drum] and a fourth shakes rattles. In the lower left corner a fifth plays the nagara [another kind of drum]. The bhagat who was dancing with five earthen pots has randomly placed them on the ground—as their work has been finished. The chief bhagat [here shown as the largest figure] circulates around the bhagat who stands on one leg. In the lower right corner sits another bhagat, called “Chuharmal bhagat.” He smokes hashish. There are five bidi [hand-rolled Indian cigarettes], two tobacco leaves and some pini [ground tobacco stems], shown inside a pot placed on the ground in front of the “Chuharmal bhagat.” Again the dhalwaha [assistant] of the main bhagat is purifying the “Chuharmal bhagat” by sprinkling Ganges water on him.



45.15 Now the Salhesh Puja is ending. The main bhagat is standing on one leg and bowing down to God Salhesh at the end of the puja. In the lower left corner, two friends discuss the now-completed puja, and how they will have to wait till next year for another such puja. But they note that they don't know what will happen by that time—whether they will be alive or not because of the Corona pandemic. In the lower right corner a father talks with his two sons. He tells them to go home after taking the prasad [holy offerings]. On the top left two elderly people hold two bamboo baskets full of prasad of laddu [oil- or ghee-fried balls of flour, sugar and various flavorings] and betel nuts. They ask three young boys to distribute the prasad among the people.



45.16 After the puja, some young boys distribute prasad among the people. In the top left corner a boy gives betel nuts to a man. To the right someone distributes paan [a savory of chopped areca nuts, slaked lime and other flavorful ingredients wrapped in betel leaves]; behind him a youngster waits his turn. At bottom left, another person distributes laddo to a man who attended the puja with his son. At bottom right, a boy distributes kheer [a dessert made of milk, sugar and rice], which he serves hot from a steel bucket onto banana leaves. A youngster also wants kheer. This scene concludes my series depicting the Raja Salhesh Puja.

45.17 *The sacred place of King Salhesh—where he is worshipped—is not made of brick or stone, but an open space in the middle of the forest —where four banana trees create a kind of large, natural marwa [more widely known as a mandap: a ritual structure that has many forms, ranging from a temple’s front entry to a marriage tent or canopy]. I’ve shown two of the banana trees here, and in the background a boundary wall decorated with murals of two elephants. Behind that wall is a flowering tree, on which sit two or three types of parrots. In the middle of the painting, Raja Salhesh is seated on an elephant, right behind its mahout [elephant driver]. To the left of the king’s elephant stands Kusuma Malin [Raja Salhesh’s devoted flower maiden] carrying on her head a bamboo basket filled with flowers. Between Kusuma Malin and the king’s elephant, four karchi [short lengths of bamboo] have been made into a second, small marwa. According to my bhagat [holy man / shamanic priest], this small marwa is where the Malangiya Dusadh community worships Chuharmal—who is Salhesh’s cousin and a member of their caste. The Malangiya Dusadhs eat all sorts of meats, and thus may not worship at the large marwa. The small marwa where they worship is usually draped with a chaadar [bed cover or thick winter quilt] or a dhoti [a single piece of cloth worn by men as a lower garment]—thus putting all things in purdah [visual seclusion]; but in this picture it is shown undraped. Chuharmal—who here serves as Raja Salhesh’s bodyguard—kneels on one knee to the right of Salhesh’s elephant. Two men are massaging Chuharmal to increase his strength—and he shouts at them to massage harder. After his massage, he will drink the bowl of milk placed in front of him.*

*Raja Salhesh is also flanked by two other guards holding spears [shown at the far right and left of the picture]. Between the guards and Raja Salhesh appear his two brothers astride their horses. Motiram holds a lathi in one hand and their younger brother Budheshwar holds a sword. Next to the banana tree [at left], aromatic smoke rises from a smoldering gobar [cow dung] patty and pieces of fragrant wood.*

*Next to the other banana tree [at right] burn five types of wood: mango, ber [gooseberry], chirchiri [aka “chaff-flower” or *Achyranthes aspera*], sahoor and sarr [fragrant woods]. Ritual fireballs are made by burning these five woods, which are considered pure. Various other offerings appear in front of Raja Salhesh’s elephant, including: an aahut [sacrifice pot] containing more fragrant wood emitting aromatic smoke; a bowl of milk; a lota [round metal pot] containing water, and a glass of Ganga jal [sacred Ganges water].*

*Devotional offerings have been placed below [in the white triangular area], upon five small plates made of betel*

*nut leaves, appear: supari [betel nut], flowers, more paan [a savory of chopped areca nuts, slaked lime and other flavorful ingredients wrapped in betel leaves], and ladoos [oil- or ghee-fried balls of flour, sugar and various flavorings]. Nearby five small pairs of bundled incense sticks have been lit [three undulating lines emerging from their upper tips indicate aromatic smoke]. Five servings of kheer [sweet rice pudding] have been placed*



*on leaf plates [shown as cross-hatched rectangles surmounted by a dark mound— to the right of each paan leaf plate]. Between the paan leaf offerings and mounds of kheer, small offerings of ganja [cannabis] have been placed on papers [shown here as tiny cups]. Three chilams [small, tube-like pipes used for smoking ganja] appear at the far right [upper corner of the triangle]. Also shown carefully placed about the five sets of offerings are oranges, mangoes, apples, guavas, bananas, bunches of grapes, flowers, bidis [small hand-rolled cigarettes], more laddos, and five janeu [sacred threads worn by upper caste orthodox Hindu men—here depicted as tied into small butterfly-like bundles, shown below the paan plates].*

*Two bamboo lathis—one straight and the other slightly curved [both used as ritual paraphernalia, here shown together demarcating the lowermost triangular area]—appear above five offerings of jilebi [a sweet made by soaking deep-fried flour in sugar syrup], a jhaanp [lidded basket containing offerings] and other leaf plates heaped with ladoos appear next to a jackfruit [shown at the very bottom of the picture]; to the left of the jackfruit is a mound of pini [refined tobacco].*

*I’ve tried to show everything; anyone will understand that I have worked hard on this painting.*



45.18 In this picture I have shown a village in daylight. A husband and wife are talking on the left and their young daughter is standing in the middle. The husband points ahead and tells his wife that King Salhesh is being worshipped—and a fair is held—in that direction: “Our daughter and I are going to see the fair; get ready quickly and join us!” His dog stands next to him. Another couple and their son are also going to the fair. I have depicted the sun too—which is very strong at this time, and thus the husband holds a parasol to avert the hot sunshine. His other hand is in his pocket. While his wife covers her head with her pallu [the loose end of a sari, worn over one shoulder and the head] to avoid the sun, but their son walks comfortably even in the heat. Two crows fly in front of them [shown at far right].



45.19 In this picture, Kusuma Malin [Raja Salhesh's devoted flower maiden Kusuma] is picking flowers in the garden. Within the tree from which she plucks flowers appears a squirrel, parrot, and butterfly. There are two peacocks under the tree at left. Some of the trees' old leaves and flowers have fallen to the ground.

45.20 In this picture I have depicted a forest inhabited by various wild animals: lion, rabbit, snake, elephant, deer, camel, birds, monkey, and a weasel in a tree [at left]. In the forest there are also wild fruit and flower trees. Mountain rocks appear at the bottom of the picture.

45.21 In this picture I have shown the main gate of the palace of Raja Salhesh. In front of which two guards are standing. Without their permission no one can enter the palace. Both gatekeepers vigilantly guard the palace's security. King Salhesh's palace is in Masutha, a village in Nepal. From the palace one can view its garden. There is also a garden shown below the palace, where a parrot is perched in a tree. This is a night scene, in which the moon appears. Two more parrots are perched next to the moon.

## 46 *Medni Tree* (2019)

Acrylic and natural colors (30" x 22")

by Rama Devi (born 1985)

Village Satghara, District Madhubani, Bihar

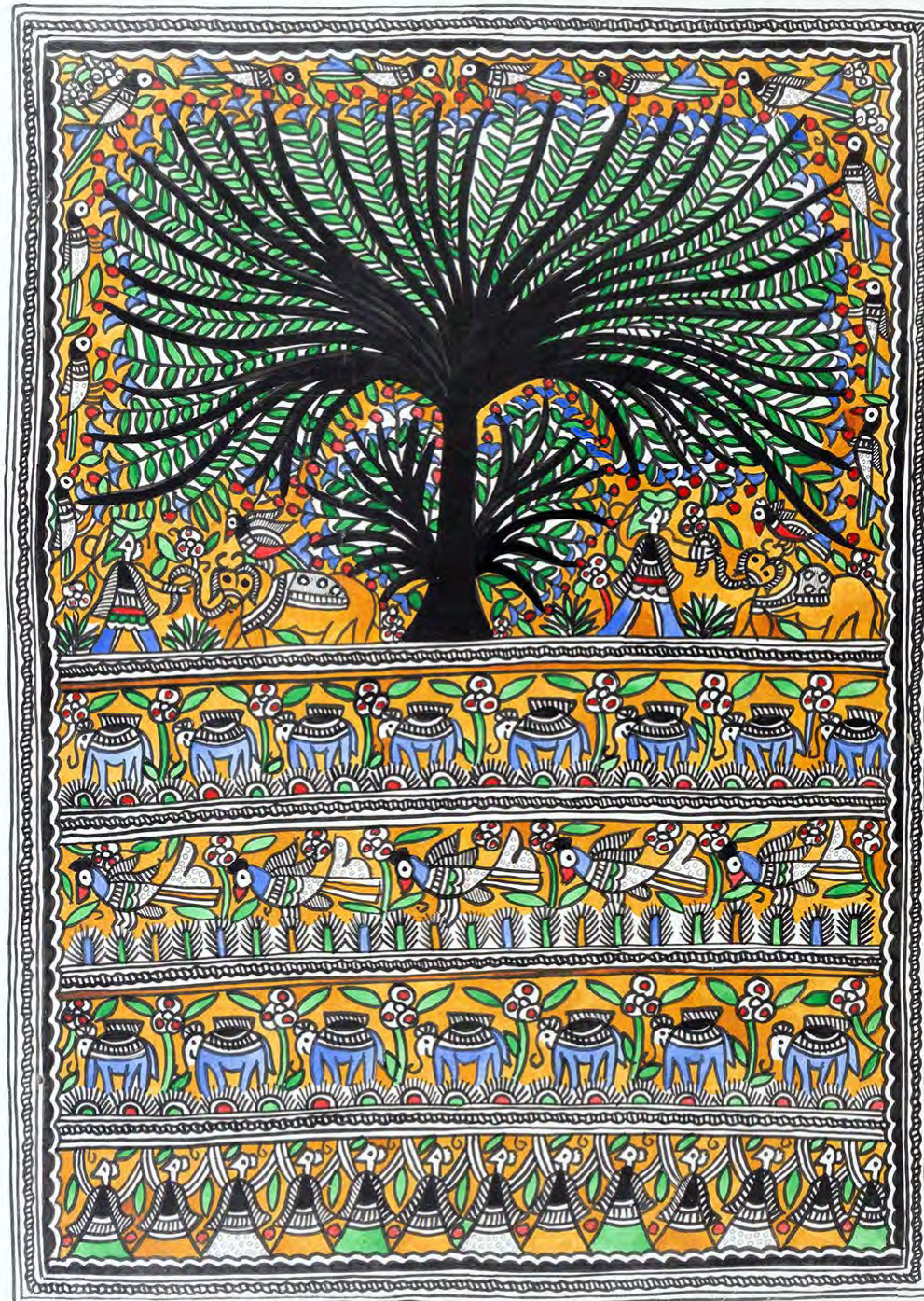
Collection of Dr. & Mrs. Carl Pechman,

Washington, D.C.

According to the artist Rama Devi:

*At the top of this painting I have made a medni flower tree.<sup>1</sup> I have never seen this tree, but my father was always saying that you can only find it in Raja Salhesh's garden. Under it I have shown two natins [gypsy women], leading their buffaloes. Below them are four bands of godana [tattoo] designs. In the first band I have depicted elephants, and in the second band parrots. In the third I have depicted elephants again, and in the last row a group of natins going somewhere together. I have made this picture from my imagination. (Translation by Kaushik Kumar Jha)*

Rama Devi was born in Village Jitwarpur as the daughter of the late Roudi Paswan (a savvant of Salhesh-related oral histories) and the late Chano Devi (the first Dalit artist to win a national award for *godana* [tattoo] style painting). Rama started learning to paint when she was twelve years old— instructed by her mother, often accompanying her to Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata, and Chennai to vend their paintings at exhibitions and art fairs. After marrying in 2004, she moved to her husband's home in Village Satghara, where they now live while raising their two daughters and a son. Eventually Rama Devi became individually recognized for her own artistry, winning a Bihar State Merit Award in 2020.



46a Rama Devi (2019 photo by J.H. Bowles).



## Documentary Expressions of Mithila Art

by Kathryn Myers

Although ample video documentation exists on mainstream Indian artists who mostly reside in urban areas, material on indigenous artists living in village or rural locales is still comparatively scarce. It is thus of great significance that the four exhibitions in Virginia's New River Valley featuring Mithila art—*Raja Salhesh's Garden: Contemporary Dalit Art & Ancient Myths of India*; *Mithila Medley: Contemporary Arts from an Ancient Culture in North India*; *Martine Le Coz: A French Homage to the Ancient Myths & Contemporary Artists of Mithila*; and a solo exhibition by *Naresh Paswan*—included superb audiovisual resources that contribute to growing scholarship and appreciation for Mithila art.

Included in several of the exhibitions were videos from a series produced and edited by two Syracuse University Professors, anthropologist Susan Wadley and filmmaker Tula Goenka. Their video interviews with Rani Jha, Vinita Jha, Shalinee Kumari, and recent Padma Shri awardee Dulari Devi, (among others in this marvelous series) provide essential information about the inspiration for the artist's traditional and contemporary themes, and, particularly for women artists, social challenges or discrimination they might have endured. Often recorded in the artist's homes with views of the villages they live in, these videos offer a wonderful sense of immediacy and connection while providing essential understanding of the work's content, context and atmosphere.

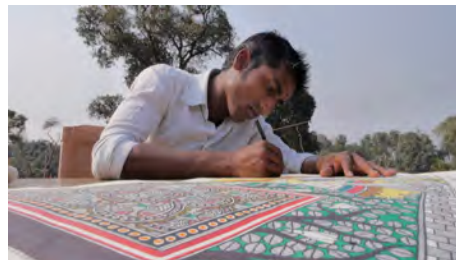
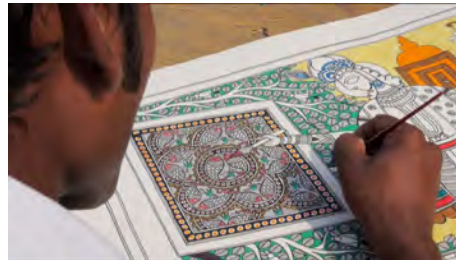


Still from *Vinita Jha* by Tula Goenka and Susan Wadley.



Still from *Rani Jha* by Tula Goenka and Susan Wadley.

A remarkable new film still in production premiered at Radford University. *Sama in the Forest* features Mithila actors and artists in a traditional folktale that dramatizes how women's stories can subversively challenge male patriarchy. Produced by Bucknell University Women and Gender Studies Professor Coralynn Davis with Colombian filmmaker Carlos Gómez as director, the film skillfully intersperses the performance of the tale, set within a haunting palatial



Stills of Ranjan Paswan painting on his rooftop in Jitwarpur from *Sama in the Forest* by Coralynn Davis.

ruin and forest, with response to the film's multiple meanings by actors, artists, and members of the community. Footage of a celebratory annual festival alternates with the darker story of the disruption of a young woman's life through possessiveness, gossip, rejection, and eventual redemption. Throughout the film we witness Mithila artists creating stunning paintings illustrating the narrative. *Sama in the Forest* inventively weaves together Mithila's multiple creative art forms to tell a heartbreaking tale that has continued relevance.

While the documentation of Mithila art has duly celebrated the work of upper caste Brahmin and Kayastha artists, there has been comparatively less attention focused on Mithila's Dalit artists. Between 1973 and 1976, German anthropologist, folklorist, art activist and ethno-cinematographer Erika Moser-Schmitt made several extended visits to the village of Jitwarpur where she is credited with encouraging artists to develop a new style of painting based on their tattoo designs, called *godana*. Although Moser created a series of fourteen short videos of daily activities and art-making in the village, which would no doubt be extremely valuable in tracing the history of Dalit art, these videos unfortunately are not widely known or easily accessible.

Radford University Art Museum's lavish exhibition, *Raja Salhesh's Garden: Contemporary Dalit Art & Ancient Myths of India*, aimed at redressing this imbalance with an immersion in Dalit art. (Another satellite exhibition at Blacksburg's Miller-Off-Main Street Gallery featured a solo exhibition by the Dalit



Still from *Dalit Artists of Mithila*; showing photo by Radhika Bordia.

artist Naresh Paswan.) To introduce Dalit art to the *Raja Salhesh's Garden* exhibition visitors, the Delhi based journalist Radhika Bordia was commissioned to produce a video documentary, co-directed by M. Habib Ali and Kaushik Kumar Jha (of Patna and Madhubani, respectively). *Dalit Artists of Mithila* includes rare and mesmerizing footage of a *puja* (worship) for Raja Salhesh, the same *puja* illustrated



Still from *Dalit Artists of Mithila*, filmed by M. Habib Ali.

in Naresh Paswan's extraordinary triptych (CAT. 45), one of the highlights of the *Raja Salhesh's Garden* exhibition. Through Bordia's gripping footage, featuring the award-winning artist Ranjit Paswan and his family, we witness the inhumane conditions artists endured during Covid-19 when—due to India's nationwide lockdown—they were unable to return from New Delhi to their home village in Mithila. Thereafter, Ranjit Paswan created a series of nineteen works for the *Raja Salhesh's Garden* exhibition, which depict pivotal and painful episodes from their "Lockdown" ordeals (CAT.41.1-19). Bordia's video concludes with Ranjit's and other Dalit artists' moving accounts of how Covid brutally uprooted their lives and livelihoods. For instance, Urmila Devi recounts that Dalit artists were so enmeshed in the financial and emotional stress of living with Covid—something they could not fully comprehend at the time—that they have largely been unable to process or depict their experiences into works of art, as upper-caste artists have done. Bordia's outstanding video is an important contribution to a greater understanding and appreciation Mithila's Dalit artists; moreover, to our knowledge this is the first time a Salhesh *puja* has ever been filmed.

In 2012 I was invited to Mithila by John H. Bowles and the Berkeley-based anthropologist and longtime president of the Ethnic Arts Foundation David Szanton who came to know of my ongoing video series on contemporary Indian art, *Regarding India*. I repeatedly visited the remarkable Mithila Institute of Art, and was grateful to interview Santosh Kumar Das, a brilliant Kayastha artist whose powerful work was long familiar to me. However, the primary purpose of my visit, initiated by Bowles, was to interview the superb but comparatively underrecognized Dalit artist Urmila Devi. Being welcomed by Urmila, her son Shrawan Paswan and granddaughter Abhilasha Kumari to their home in the village of Jitwarpur was a profound experience and a fortuitous entrée into the unique identity, style and mythologies of Mithila's Dalit art. The *Regarding India—Urmila Devi* video was my first collaborative project and recounts a moving story of her early struggles and later triumph as a successful, award-winning artist. Along with Szanton and Bowles, our “team” included the art historian Aurogeeta Das and the sociologist Sandali Thakur—who both composed and conducted the interviews—as well as the book publisher S. Anand. As my video series until that point featured only mainstream contemporary urban artists, visiting Mithila appropriately broadened the range of my series which now includes these two highly regarded artists representing different caste-based stylistically indigenous traditions.

While these four seminal and sumptuous exhibitions of Mithila art have ended, their significant audiovisual contributions to the scholarship of Mithila art will endure—to inspire and instruct generations of art lovers, students and scholars for years to come.



Still from *Regarding India – Urmila Devi* by Kathryn Myers.



S. Ananda, John Bowles, David Szanton and Sandali Thakur admire the work of Urmila Devi.



Urmila Devi Film crew John Bowles, Sandali Thakur, Aurogeeta Das, Kathryn Myers and S. Anand with Urmila Devi, Shrawan Paswan and Abhilasha Kumari.

## Aripans in Appalachia: Mithila Art-Inspired Satellite Exhibitions and Educational Outreach

by John H. Bowles

This community-wide celebration of Mithila art was originally inspired by a major exhibition program produced over four decades ago: the Philadelphia Museum of Art's 1981 *Manifestations of Shiva* exhibition and its related events.<sup>1</sup> That exhibition—curated by the museum's renowned Sanskritist and Indian art doyen Stella Kramrisch—entailed many years of careful preparation. Never before had a major exhibition of Indian art been devoted to a particular deity, and also been expanded to include related events at other institutions in such diverse ways. The exhibition itself focused on representations of the Hindu god Shiva, rendered over the course of centuries with a remarkable variety of myths, iconographies, media, and styles broadly ranging from elaborate, ancient temple sculptures to more contemporary depictions by folk and tribal artists. Philadelphia itself was temporarily transformed as various other museums and institutions coordinated their own India-related complementary exhibitions and events—thus giving new resonance to its founders' original vision of establishing a “city of brotherly love.” Some days after the exhibition's inauguration, Dr. Kramrisch kindly invited me to her apartment on Rittenhouse Square where—upon extracting a large bundle of papers stashed under her bed—she treated me to an unforgettable glimpse of contemporary indigenous paintings from India.<sup>2</sup> Little did I then realize how, decades later, the vivid memories of experiencing Indian art in Philadelphia would spur me into curating (on a more modest scale) multi-venue indigenous art exhibitions in Virginia's New River Valley.

The New River Valley is nestled in southern Appalachia, which—like Mithila—has long been recognized for its deeply rooted conservative traditions and values. Yet, in both Appalachia and Mithila, the rich cultural heritage of dominant communities has often overshadowed recognition

**RAJA SALHESH'S GARDEN**  
CONTEMPORARY DALIT ART & ANCIENT MYTHS OF MITHILA, INDIA  
Radford University Art Museum's Covington Gallery  
October 13 – December 3, 2022

**MARTINE LE COZ**  
A FRENCH HOMAGE TO THE ANCIENT MYTHS & CONTEMPORARY ARTISTS OF MITHILA, INDIA  
Radford University Art Museum's Tyler Gallery  
September 14 – November 18, 2022

**MITHILA MEDLEY**  
CONTEMPORARY ARTS FROM AN ANCIENT CULTURE IN NORTH INDIA  
Floyd Center for the Arts, Floyd, Virginia  
August 13 – December 1, 2022

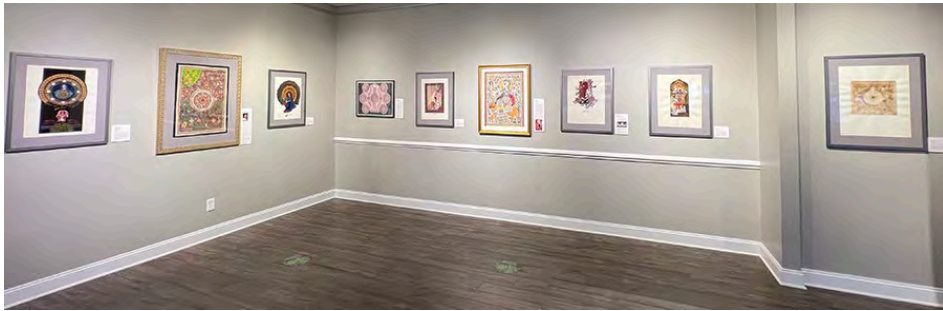
**NARESH PASWAN**  
A SOLO EXHIBITION  
Miller-off-Main Street Galleries, Blacksburg, Virginia  
September 6 – October 14, 2022

**MITHILA MUSINGS**  
CONTEMPORARY ARTS FROM AN ANCIENT CULTURE IN NORTH INDIA, AN INTERNATIONAL SYMPOSIUM  
October 13, 2022  
9:30-11:30 a.m. Floyd Center for the Arts, Floyd, Virginia  
2:30-4:30 p.m. Covington Center, Radford University, Radford, Virginia

All images on this poster are details of larger paintings, protected by copyright belonging to their respective artists, and reproduced here with their permission; photography courtesy of Poppi Miller. Center image: "Medhi Tree," by Rama Devi, 2019 (collection of Dr. & Mrs. Carl Pechman, Washington, D.C.). Upper right: "Portrait of Urmila Devi," by Martine Le Coz, c. 2014. Upper right: Urmila Devi's "Raja Salhesh's Rebirth," c. 2018 (collection of Martine Le Coz, Amboise, France). Lower right: "Covid," by Naresh Paswan, 2021 (collection of Dr. A. S. Arbury, Radford, Virginia). Lower left: "Yak," by Sharda Devi, c. 1972 (collection of Radford University Art Museum).  
For information regarding gallery locations and hours, see websites for Radford University Art Museum, Floyd Center for the Arts, and Miller-Off-Main Street Galleries. Radford University is committed to making its programs, services, and activities accessible to persons with disabilities by providing accommodations. Call 540.531.5264 to make a request. The Floyd Center for the Arts is an equal opportunity provider supported by the National Endowment for the Arts and the Virginia Commission for the Arts.  
Floyd Center for the Arts es un proveedor de igualdad de oportunidades.

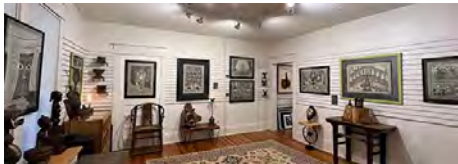
of diverse sub-communities and minorities. Useful correctives to such neglect have been made by Radford University, which offers classes and workshops in Affrilachian and Native American literature, exhibitions of indigenous and tribal arts, classes researching family traditions of coal miners and other marginalized regional communities, etc. This larger, institutional commitment to recognizing and nurturing diversity also motivated Radford University Art Museum's support of these ambitious, interdisciplinary and community-wide celebrations of Mithila art.

While this ebook/catalog describes and illustrates in detail the museum's *Raja Salhesh's Garden* exhibition, three related and roughly concurrent satellite exhibitions likewise warrant additional mention here. The museum's own off-campus Tyler Gallery featured an exhibition of Martine Le Coz's original illustrations inspired by Mithila's art, artists, and cultural heritage. Titled *Martine Le Coz: A French Homage to the Ancient Myths and Contemporary Artists of Mithila*, this exhibition (co-curated by Aurogeeta Das and me) offered the first public display of Le Coz's exquisite original illustrations, as well as an aesthetic and conceptual bridge helping visitors better understand and appreciate the museum's *Raja Salhesh's Garden* exhibition of Mithila's Dalit art. In past centuries, such “intercultural bridges” (especially those connecting France with Africa and Asia) have proven remarkably effective and influential.<sup>3</sup> In the more recent case of Mithila painting, Yves Véquaud popularized upper caste painters in the 1970s—through publications and exhibitions romantically emphasizing their spiritual devotion and collective talents without identifying them as individuals. Thereafter, Jean-Hubert Martin curated the famous 1989 Paris exhibition *Magiciens de la Terre* which gave individual recognition to the unique genius of Mithila's master Brahman artist, Baua Devi.<sup>4</sup> When it came time for Radford University Art Museum to prepare the first international exhibition of Mithila's Dalit art, once again it was a French citizen—Martine Le Coz—whose written and pictorial interpretations offered an ideal introduction to Mithila's Dalit artists and their

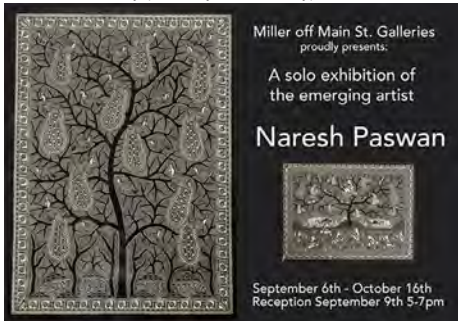


A view of the *Martine Le Coz* exhibition (photo by Steve Arbury).

beloved hero-deity, Raja Salhesh. The *Martine Le Coz* exhibition juxtaposed some of her illustrations with the very Mithila paintings that had originally inspired her. Midway through the exhibition's two-month run, her latest book was re-released in Paris—in a lavishly illustrated French edition (titled *Le roi de la montagne: L'épopée du roi Salhesh*, published by Victor Le Brun, 2022)—reproducing her original illustrations then on display in RU's Tyler Gallery. Cultural distances between Appalachia and Mithila seemed—magically if momentarily—to dissolve, as sometimes happens when the simultaneous occurrence of far-flung events creates a hopeful sense of transnational fraternity.



Naresh Paswan: A Solo Exhibition at Blacksburg's Miller-Off-Main Street Gallery (Photo by Steve Arbury)



Printed Invitation to Naresh Paswan's solo exhibition at Blacksburg's Miller-Off-Main Street Gallery. (The painting of peacocks roosting in a tree [shown at left] is now in the collection of Dr. Punam Madhok, Prof. of Art History at East Carolina University.)

To date, none of Mithila's Dalit artists had ever been recognized with a solo exhibition. Fortuitously, Blacksburg's Miller-Off-Main Street Gallery offered that opportunity to Naresh Paswan. (One of his paintings displayed in that exhibition appears in this volume [FIG.6]; further information and other examples of his work exhibited in Radford and Floyd are featured in other catalog entries [FIG.24 and CAT.43-45]). A fuller account of Naresh Paswan's astonishing career will appear in a forthcoming essay, to be jointly written by the author and Kaushik Kumar Jha for this catalog's second volume.

Full appreciation of the uniqueness of any pictorial style, be it of an individual artist, or a community of artists, requires some degree of contextualization. Thus another satellite exhibition—held at the nearby Floyd Center for the Arts, titled *Mithila Medley: Contemporary Arts from an Ancient Culture in North India* (and co-curated by me and University of Connecticut Professor of Art Kathryn Myers)—was organized to include paintings by artists belonging to various Mithila communities and castes. *Mithila Medley* featured works by seven of the artists represented in this catalog (i.e., Jamuna Devi, Shanti



A view of the Floyd Center for the Arts' *Mithila Medley* exhibition (Photo by J.H. Bowles).

Devi, Lalita Devi, Urmila Devi, Shrawan Paswan, Ranjit Paswan, and Naresh Paswan) alongside paintings by upper caste artists, such as the Brahman artist Dr. Rani Jha's representation of a recent earthquake in Nepal, and narrative paintings by Vinita Jha and her daughter Nisha (members of the same community as Rani Jha's) depicting women's responses to Covid, the burdens of dowry, idyllic depictions of village life, and a traditional allegory explaining the decay of morals over time. As described in this



The Brahman artist Nisha Jha's 2021 *Hungry Man of Dowry*, displayed at the Floyd Center of the Art's *Mithila Medley* exhibition. (Collection of Prof. Kathryn Myers, Mansfield, Connecticut).

volume's essay by David Szanton, depictions of the same subject matter (e.g., weddings or COVID-19) are handled in distinctive ways by artists from different communities and remarkable variations can also occur within the same community. For example, *Mithila Medley* included paintings depicting different aspects of gender relations: Baua Devi's idealized and harmoniously colorful celebration of Sita and Rama's marriage, and the Kayastha artist Bimla Datta's iconic *Ardhanarishwara* (The Lord Who is Half-Woman) starkly contrasted with depictions of the woeful neglect of female children shown in Vinita Jha's *A Calf is Better Than a Girl*, a dowry-related murder appears in Shantanu Das and Mahalaxmi Karn's *Burning of the Bride*, and prevalent harassments of young women are allegorically presented in Priya Kumari's *Eve Teasing*.<sup>5</sup> To date, Mithila's Dalit artists have not attempted (or dared) to depict such highly controversial and sensitive topics. Instead, they feel inclined (or compelled) to confine themselves to more traditional subjects,

and only occasionally express their community's self-assertion and egalitarian ideals with subtle understatement (e.g., CAT. 16 and 21). Such discreet messaging can be hard to detect, and even more difficult to explain to foreign audiences—especially here in the US, where protest imagery and identity politics have become increasingly overt and explicit.

One theme of both local and universal relevance—the love of nature and concern for its welfare—offers many examples demonstrating the wide range of responses throughout Mithila art. For instance, while the Kayastha artist Santosh Kumar Das and the Brahman artist Bacchadai Devi's elegant paintings of Krishna subduing the giant, venom-spewing cobra Kaliya (generally considered one of the world's most ancient anti-pollution myths) evince no overt environmentalist concerns, certain Brahman artists have graphically decried deforestation and global climate change—such as Nutan Mishra's *Amrita's Sacrifice* (an homage to India's historical and contemporary



The Brahman artist Shalinee Kumari's 2009 *Weeping Mother Earth Prays to the Sun God to Spare the Earth*, displayed at the Floyd Center of the Art's *Mithila Medley* exhibition. (Collection of Dr. and Mrs. Carl Pechman, Washington, D.C.).

women's *Chipko*/tree-hugging movements) and Shalinee Kumari's powerful *Weeping Mother Earth Prays to the Sun God to Spare the Earth*. Exhibited works by students of the Mithila Art Institute likewise depict concerns over environmental degradation and deforestation—as seen in Anamika Kumari's 2016 *Saving the Forest* and Nishi Kumari's *Save the Tree*.<sup>6</sup> The exuberant celebration of nature one finds in the “timeless” *Toddy Palm Harvest* scenes painted by the Dalit master artist Lalita Devi (CAT. 24 and below) contrasts with the critical representation of



Lalita Devi's c. 2006 *Toddy Palm Harvest*, displayed at the Floyd Center of the Art's *Mithila Medley* exhibition. (Collection of J.H. Bowles, Radford, Virginia).

alcohol's impact on the community—showing both the hospitalization of drunkards, juxtaposed with their womenfolk and elders later thanking Bihar's Chief Minister Nitish Kumar for his 2016 statewide liquor ban—in a painting titled *Prohibition* by Dulari Devi, a member of the Mallah (fishing) community.

*Mithila Medley's* display of such varied paintings, by artists from different castes and communities, offered a rich point of departure for the October 13, 2022, *Mithila Musings* symposium jointly hosted by Radford University Art Museum and the Floyd Center for the Arts. Papers originally presented at that symposium are now being revised and edited for this publication's forthcoming second volume.

These exhibitions were also well utilized by Radford University's faculty, students, and neighboring communities. For example, Prof. Margaret Carneal reports how her first-year design students



*Size*, by RU design student Sam Farmer.



*Rhythm*, by RU design student Caitlin Guenther.

“...were tasked with expressing principles and elements of design using the art and culture of the Mithila region as inspiration. Each student completed a shadow box representing one of the principles or elements of design that incorporated a thoughtful display of the term, considering font and language, while pairing the term with an image that reflects meaning and perception.”

Their creations were displayed in an exhibit titled *Inspired by Mithila: Shadowboxes by Radford University Design Students*—featured in RU's McConnell Library's Andrew W. Ross Student Art Gallery. Three introductory studio art classes, taught by Prof. Eloise Philpot, research cultural themes in



*Fish*, by RU studio art student Michell Hernandez.



*Lilly*, by RU studio art student Mary Burnette.

the creation of two-dimensional imagery, and—in response to the Mithila paintings—appreciated and explored new modes of applying repeated motifs. According to Dr. Philpot:

“The exhibitions provided a wonderful opportunity for students to engage with the original works and regional motifs of Mithila. Through lively discussion and drawing, the students demonstrated a positive and enriching experience that enhanced their own work and understanding.”

As Guest Curator, I had the pleasure of touring numerous groups through the exhibitions (ranging from RU anthropology faculty and students to senior citizens from a local retirement community), and presenting illustrated lectures at the Floyd Center for the Arts, Radford's Rotary Club, etc. Even after the exhibition had officially closed, it was briefly reopened to faculty, students and staff as part of a holiday celebration hosted by Dr. and Mrs. Bret Danilowicz, Radford University's new President and First Lady (who now display a recently donated painting by Binda Devi [FIG.15] in their home's dining room).

Finally, some of the most gratifying responses to these exhibitions have been generated by various educational outreach workshops and projects. Radford University's Art Department and Selu Conservancy, together with Radford University Art Museum, have annually presented day-long Professional Development “Sprigs of the Tree” art education workshops attended by dozens of art teachers from public schools in the City of Radford and five surrounding counties. This year they toured both the *Raja Salhesh's Garden* and *Martine Le Coz* exhibitions and then reconvened at Selu Conservancy, where they watched a lesson plan demonstration presented by the Radford artist and art educator Nikki Pynn. Such lesson plans aim to use readily available, low-cost materials and be executed within the time limitations of a 50-minute class period. Pynn's simple yet effective techniques for creating Dalit-inspired tree imagery (compare “Sprigs of the Tree” depictions [shown on the next page] to FIGS. 6, 7, and 18, and CAT. 19, and 20). uniquely enhanced the region's high school curriculum. At the Floyd Center for the Arts, Pynn taught seventy-five local high school students how to create *aripans* (auspicious floor paintings created with either chalk or diluted rice paste applied by hand); and thereafter she and Katlynd Fields, an RU Senior majoring in education, created yet more *aripans* at the entrance to RU's Covington Center to celebrate



Radford University's *Sprigs of the Tree* art education workshop.

the *Raja Salhesh's Garden* exhibition opening. Aurogeeta Das notes how "...due to pedestrian traffic, a floor-drawing can often last for little more than an hour, so it is truly ephemeral." So too were these brief but enthusiastic celebrations held during the autumn of 2022. Yet perhaps—like Shiva's manifestations in Philadelphia—depictions of Salhesh, his entourage and other traditional or innovative Mithila imagery have left some lasting impressions on the minds and hearts of our exhibitions' attendees here in the New River Valley. To them, and to those who could not attend in person, we now offer this post-exhibition catalog.



Local high school students create an *aripan* at the Floyd Center for the Arts—where the *Mithila Medley* exhibition was displayed. (Photo by Brandon Phillips).



Radford artist and art educator Nikki Pynn and RU student Katlynd Fields after creating one of their *aripans* at the entrance to Radford University Art Museum's Covington Center gallery—in preparation for the *Raja Salhesh's Garden* exhibition's gala premiere on October 12, 2022. (Photo by J.H. Bowles).

## NOTES

1 Philadelphia's Free Library displayed Indian miniatures from its own collections, and its Children's Department offered readings of Indian stories; the Philadelphia Zoo and the Academy of Natural Sciences highlighted the subcontinent's wildlife; the Franklin Institute exhibited kites (originally an Indian invention) and developed a special planetarium presentation on Indian art and astronomy; the Please Touch Museum produced various India-related family programs anchored around an exhibition titled *India: Ganesha's Children*; the Balch Institute screened documentary films on India, and the University of Pennsylvania's Museum opened its then newly renovated South and Southeast Asian Gallery, and hosted an international symposium on Shaivite arts. (See the author's "Manifestations of Shiva," *Orientalism*, vol.12, no. 7; Hong Kong, 1981:8-24).

2 For a vivid account of Kramrisch's appreciation of contemporary Mithila art, see: David L. Szanton's "Mithila Painting: The Vital Tradition," *Tradition and Transformation: Mithila Art of India*, ed. Kathryn Myers (William Benton Museum of Art; Storrs 2022:8).

3 Aurogeeta Das—who curated the Le Coz exhibition—notes how late 19th-century *Japonisme* expressed and enhanced Western appreciation for East Asian arts (see Essays, pg. 22). Thereafter Cubist artists in France first awoke international awareness to the genius of Africa's aesthetic traditions.

4 Baua Devi later received India's prestigious Padma Shri award in 2017. She resides in village Jitwarpur—and thus neighbors most of the artists represented in this catalogue.

5 "Eve teasing" is a British colonial era euphemism—still used throughout India—for the sexual harassment of women. Volume two of this catalogue will include an essay, by the Virginia Tech anthropologist Dr. Suchitra Samanta, which further explores this and other related feminist concerns depicted in Mithila art.

6 To appear in the author's "Tree of the Honey Forest" within a forthcoming illustrated anthology of essays on Mithila art being co-edited by Paula Richman and David Szanton for the University of Washington.

7 Aurogeeta Das's (unpublished) PhD dissertation, "Exploring Traditional and Metropolitan Indian Arts Using Muggu Tradition as a Case Study," University of Westminster, London, 2011:12.

# CATALOG ENDNOTES

## CATALOG 1

1 Documentation regarding exactly when Jamuna Devi and other Dalit artists of Mithila first started painting on paper, and who from outside of their community initially encouraged them to do so, remains scant and ambiguous. In a (to date unpublished) doctoral dissertation, Neel Rekha notes from her January 2001 interview with Jamuna Devi that she was encouraged to paint on paper by Bhaskar Kulkarni (which may perhaps have been as early as the late 1960s to early 1970s; (see: Neel Rekha's *Art and Assertion of Identity: Women and Madhubani Paintings* thesis, University of Patna, 2004:141-142). By the mid-1970s, the German anthropologist Erika Moser-Schmitt was encouraging Jamuna Devi's neighbor, the Dusadh artist Chano Devi, to invent a new style of painting that could be distinctly associated with her community—and thus Chano Devi created the now-famous *godana* (tattoo) style of painting (see page 143 of Rekha's aforementioned thesis)—as extensively described and illustrated elsewhere in this volume.

2 David Szanton's "Mithila Painting: The Dalit Intervention," *Dalit Art and Visual Imagery*, ed. Gary Michael Tartakov (Oxford University Press, New Delhi) 2012:224.

3 Although the *geru* style wasn't initially popular with customers, and thus only briefly flourished between the late 1970s and early 1980s (see David Szanton's "Mithila Painting: The Dalit Intervention," *Dalit Art and Visual Imagery*, ed. Gary Michael Tartakov [Oxford University Press, New Delhi] 2012:229), it is now increasingly appreciated by connoisseurs. The *geru* style is often erroneously conflated with the technique of applying *gobar* (diluted cow dung) onto paper. Although most *geru* paintings feature some use of *gobar* coloring, diluted *gobar* is also applied as a primer to paintings done in the *godana* (tattoo) and other styles.

## CATALOG 2

1 Quoted from a draft of Alfred Gell's unpublished paper, titled "Tattooing in India: marriage, death and property," presented at the 1994 World Archaeological Congress meeting in New Delhi. The authors and co-editors of this volume are grateful to Simeran Gell for kindly providing this to date unpublished draft of her late husband's paper, from which these quotations have been extracted.

## CATALOG 3

1 Aurogeeta Das, "Myth and Cosmology" Plate Section of *Many Visions, Many Versions: Art from Indigenous Communities in India*, (International Art and Artists, Washington, D.C.) 2017:53. This painting was illustrated, with Das's accompanying text, in that publication.

## CATALOG 4

1 Quoted from Mani Shekhar Singh's "Melody of Repetition in Paintings of Chano Devi, Jamuna Devi and Sita Devi"—scheduled to be published in the University of Washington Press's 2024 collection of essays on Mithila art, co-edited by Paula Richman and David L. Szanton. This painting has been twice published previously (with different titles): David Szanton and Malini Bakshi's *Mithila Painting:*

*The Evolution of an Art Form* (Ethnic Arts Foundation and PinkMango, Berkeley, 2007:32) and David L. Szanton's "Mithila Painting: The Dalit Intervention," *Dalit Art and Visual Imagery*, ed. Gary Michael Tartakov (Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2012: 229).

## CATALOG 5

1 Quoted from Mani Shekhar Singh's "Melody of Repetition in Paintings of Chano Devi, Jamuna Devi and Sita Devi"—scheduled to be published in the University of Washington Press's 2024 collection of essays on Mithila art, co-edited by Paula Richman and David L. Szanton.

2 Quoted from Aurogeeta Das's extended label accompanying a painting by Jamuna Devi, displayed in Radford University Art Museum's exhibition entitled *Martine Le Coc: A French Homage to the Ancient Myths & Contemporary Artists of Mithila, India*, (shown at the museum's Tyler Gallery, September 14 - November 18, 2022).

## CATALOG 7

1 See David Szanton and Malini Bakshi, *Mithila Painting: The Evolution of an Art Form* (Ethnic Arts Foundation and PinkMango LLC) 2007:32. In that publication, the painting's title appears as *Korikanha, Lord Salhesh's Nephew in the Forest*. This and other titles for paintings in Szanton and Bakshi's text were mostly drawn from notes made by the American anthropologist Raymond Owens, who originally acquired these works directly from the artists. By contrast, the title and explanation shown here were provided by the artist to Kaushik Kumar Jha in 2021. Memories fade, evolve and change with time; here we offer Shanti Devi's more recent title and explanation of the work—for both their own inherent value, and perhaps also as examples of her ability to improvise fresh explanations.

2 Neel Rekha. "Harijan Paintings of Mithila," (*Marg*, 54:3, Bombay) 2003:69.

## CATALOG 8

1 David Szanton and Malini Bakshi, *Mithila Painting: The Evolution of an Art Form* (Ethnic Arts Foundation and PinkMango LLC) 2007:62.

## CATALOG 10

1 A detailed account of traditional *kohbar* imagery can be found in Jyotindra Jain's *Ganga Devi: Tradition and Expression in Mithila Painting* (Mapin: Ahmedabad) 1997:23-68. In recent years, Dalit artists outside of Mithila have likewise been improvising with *kohbar* compositions and motifs—such as can be seen in certain works by the Patna-based Dalit artist and designer, Malvika Raj. Raj spent time studying the works of Dalit artists in Jitwarpur in order to develop her own Mithila-style imagery—which she innovatively employs to depict Buddhist subjects, Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar (modern India's great champion of Dalit rights), and various topics pertaining to current social issues. Raj's paintings will be further considered in *Raja Salhesh's Garden* Vol. II.

2 This painting was included in an international touring exhibition titled *Many Visions, Many Versions, Art from Indigenous Communities in India*, and appears in that exhibition's catalog—of the same title (International Arts and Artists, Washington, D.C.) 2017:55 (Plate 18).

3 See catalog's endnote 2.1 and CAT.1.

## CATALOG 12

1 This quote was drawn from an essay by Mani Shekhar Singh, titled "The Melody of Color and Repetition in Paintings of the Dalit Artists in Mithila," to be published in a forthcoming anthology of essays on Mithila art, co-edited by Paula Richman and David Szanton for the University of Washington Press.

## CATALOG 13

1 Quoted from Sunita Nair's *INDIGENIUS ARTISTS: INDIA* (Sunita Nair, Mumbai; 1 2018:80) and illustrated on pg. 21. Thakur uses the "godhana" spelling for what appears in this catalog as "godana" and elsewhere as "godna." All these transliterations are acceptable. This painting was originally published in: *National Award for Master Craftsmen and Weavers*; 2007:19.

## CATALOG 14

1 This painting has been published in: David Szanton & Malini Bakshi's, *Mithila Painting: The Evolution of an Art Form* (Ethnic Arts Foundation & Pink Mango LLC) 2007:67; and as Fig. 9.6 in David Szanton's "Mithila Painting: The Dalit Intervention," *Dalit Art and Visual Imagery*, ed. by Gary Michael Tartakov, New Delhi, Oxford University Press) 2012:227. It will be published again in Mani Shekhar Singh's "Melody of Repetition in Paintings of Chano Devi, Jamuna Devi and Sita Devi"—scheduled to be released in 2024 by the University of Washington Press's collection of essays on Mithila art, co-edited by Paula Richman and David L. Szanton.

## CATALOG 15

1 David Szanton & Malini Bakshi's *Mithila Painting: The Evolution of an Art Form* (Ethnic Arts Foundation & Pink Mango LLC) 2007:74 Sarup Lal Paswan's 2004 Insects in the Garden of Raja Salhesh is now in the permanent collection of San Francisco's Asian Art Museum (see: <http://onlinecollection.asianart.org/view/objects/asitem/search?swg%0022Insects%20in%20the%20Garden%20of%20Raja%20Salhes%0022%0?r.state:flow=6e7ae172-c76e-4742-9036-119d3deee41f> )

2 See Mani Shekhar Singh's "Melody of Repetition in Paintings of Chano Devi, Jamuna Devi and Sita Devi"—to be published by the University of Washington Press in a collection of essays on Mithila art, co-edited by Paula Richman and David L. Szanton (scheduled to be released in 2024).

## CATALOG 16

1 Uttam Prasad Paswan further explained how he came to know this extraordinary myth: *I learned this story from a book, which [a visiting scholar] took from me and never returned. Once I read that book, I painted all the scenes onto papers the size of a long notebook. He checked the correspondence between the stories and the pictures, and found that they were exactly accurate. I praise him for supporting me a lot thereafter. The book's name was Reshma aur Chuhar Mal ki Kahaniya [The Stories of Reshma and Chuhar Mal]. I tried to find it [again] in the market, in Bombay, Delhi and even in Nepal—but without success. I don't know all the songs, like Seevan Paswan does, but I know the stories, and I enjoy them!* (This account by Uttam Prasad Paswan of *The World and Deities Dance to Raja Salhesh's Drum Beat* was recorded on January 12 2018, by Kaushik Kumar Jha, who

continues to search for the aforementioned book that inspired many of the artist's paintings. The authors invite those with information about -or access to—this publication to contact them directly: John H. Bowles [jhbowles@radford.edu] &/or Kaushik Kumar Jha [jhakkaushik@gmail.com]).

## CATALOG 17

1 Other examples of Uttam Prasad Paswan's non-*godana* style art can be seen in Jyotindra Jain's "The Bridge of Vermillion: Narrative Rhythm in the Dusadh Legends of Mithila" in *Indian Painting: Essays in honour of Karl J. Khandalavala*, eds. B. N. Goswamy and Usha Bhatia (New Delhi: Lalit Kala Akademi, 1995); and Neel Rekha, "Harijan Paintings of Mithila," (*Marg*, 54:3, Bombay) 2003:71.

## CATALOG 20

1 The authors thank Drs. Rani Jha and Mani Shekhar Singh for information regarding the *kachbachia* birds' identity and significance.

## CATALOG 21

1 The artist's own full account of this painting, along with brief accounts by other Mithila artists of their tree paintings, will appear in an essay by John H. Bowles, titled "Trees of the Honey Forest"—to be published in 2024 by the University of Washington Press in an anthology of essays on Mithila art, co-edited by Paula Richman and David Szanton.

## CATALOG 24

1 Personal communication with J.H. Bowles via email: 26 Dec 2015.

## CATALOG 25

1 [https://www.business-standard.com/article/news-ians/district-level-flood-maps-for-bihar-ready-116091700438\\_1.html](https://www.business-standard.com/article/news-ians/district-level-flood-maps-for-bihar-ready-116091700438_1.html). First Published: Saturday, September 17 2016.

2 See Rohin Kumar's "Bihar highly vulnerable to climate change, says study, but lacks action plan" at: <https://india.mongabay.com/2021/05/bihar-highly-vulnerable-to-climate-change-says-study-but-lacks-action-plan/>

## CATALOG 26

1 P. Banerjee's *The Life of Krishna in Indian Art* (Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, New Delhi) 1997:27.

## CATALOG 27

1 Neel Rekha's "Harijan Paintings of Mithila," *Marg*, 54(3):70.

## CATALOG 31

1 David L. Szanton, "Mithila Painting: The Dalit Intervention," *Dalit Art and Visual Imagery*, ed. G.M. Tartakov; (Oxford University Press, New Delhi) 2012:223.

## CATALOG 32

1 Badri Narayan, "Documenting Dissent," *Life as a Dalit: Views from the Bottom on Caste in India*, eds. Subhadra Mitra Channa and Joan P. Mencher (Sage Publications, Los Angeles, London, New Delhi, Singapore and Washington, D.C.) 2013:323.

### CATALOG 33

1 <https://regardingindia.com/portfolio/urmila-devi/>



2 This painting is illustrated in See David Szanton and Malini Bakshi's *Mithila Painting: The Evolution of an Art Form* (Ethnic Arts Foundation and PinkMango LLC, Berkeley) 2007:33

### CATALOG 34

1 <https://regardingindia.com/portfolio/urmila-devi/>  
Urmila Devi explains her painting of Raja Salhesh in 2014 video interview, filmed by University of Connecticut Professor Kathryn Myers.

2 Quoted from Mani Shekhar Singh's "Melody of Repetition in Paintings of Chano Devi, Jamuna Devi and Sita Devi"—scheduled to be published in the University of Washington Press's 2024 collection of essays on Mithila art, co-edited by Paula Richman and David L. Szanton.

### CATALOG 36

1 John H. Bowles, "Tradition and Modernity: A Two-Way Street," *The Magic Makers: Folk and Tribal Art*, ed. P.C. Jain (Academy of Fine Arts and Literature, New Delhi), 2009:264-281.

### CATALOG 37

1 <https://collections.lacma.org/node/197421>.

2 Translation by Sauraabh Sharma—as posted in his "Navagraha Rite of the Krsna Yajurveda" essay at: [https://www.academia.edu/85918689/Navagraha\\_Rite\\_of\\_the\\_K%E1%B9%9B%E1%B9%A3%E1%B9%87a\\_Yajurveda](https://www.academia.edu/85918689/Navagraha_Rite_of_the_K%E1%B9%9B%E1%B9%A3%E1%B9%87a_Yajurveda). The authors thank Dr. Stephen Markel for bringing this translation to their attention."

3 See page 8.

### CATALOG 40

1 Unfortunately, despite the growing recognition of Kulkarni's seminal role in initiating two major contemporary indigenous art movements (both among the Warli tribal peoples of Maharashtra as well as Mithila's women artists), extant records accounting for his activities are meager, and there is much ambiguity, conjecture, and some disagreement about certain key aspects of his life and work. Efforts are now underway to gather and consolidate as much published information as possible about Kulkarni—and reach out to those who can recall and record their memories of him (as Donald Stadtner has done for this volume). In an attempt to gather, consolidate and share such information and insights as widely as possible, those having memories of Kulkarni, and/or access to documents related to him (such as his long-missing/meticulously diaries), are requested to contact John H. Bowles ([jhbowles@radford.edu](mailto:jhbowles@radford.edu)) and/or Kaushik Kumar Jha ([jhakkau-shik@gmail.com](mailto:jhakkau-shik@gmail.com)).

### CATALOG 43

1 Makhan Lal Sen's translation of Valmiki's *Ramayana* (Firma KLM Private Limited, Calcutta) 1976:171-172.

### CATALOG 45.13

1 It is believed that when the *bhagat* [holy man/shaman] dances with these five earthen pots on his head, black magicians try to count these holes. If they count correctly, then the *puja* [worship] will be less effective. (Kaushik Kumar Jha)

### CATALOG 46

1 Rama Devi further clarified that: *This is a medni* [मेदनी] *not mehendi* [मेहेंदी—the henna plant, *Lawsonia inermis*]. She added that: *I have also made paintings showing the mehendi tree. Henna is very auspicious for ladies; both during marriage ceremonies and Madhushravani* [a festival in Mithila involving rituals performed by newly-wed women, held over the course of about fifteen days in the month of Sawan (mid-July through mid-August)] *women put henna designs on their palms and feet.* (Translation by Kaushik Kumar Jha)



## APPENDIX



FIG.13 Gathering of scholars and students at the Mithila Art Institute, Madhubani, January 4, 2018

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| 1. Dr. Rani Jha (Madhubani)                              | 17. Coralynn V. Davis (Bucknell University)             |
| 2. Dr. David L. Szanton (Berkeley, California)           | 18. Dr. Hélène Fleury (Paris, France)                   |
| 3. Dr. Tracey M. Black (London, UK)                      | 19. Annu Kumari (Pursaulia, District Madhubani)         |
| 4. John H. Bowles (Radford, Virginia)                    | 20. Ashwini Rajput (New Delhi)                          |
| 5. Vinita Jha (Ramnagar, District Madhubani)             | 21. Reena Thakur (Madhubani, District Madhubani)        |
| 6. Dr. Vinita Sinha (New Delhi)                          | 22. Rani Kumari (Ranti, District Madhubani)             |
| 7. Dr. Paula Richman (Wellfleet, Massachusetts)          | 23. Kanchan Kumari (Kakraul, District Madhubani)        |
| 8. Dr. Sandali Thakur (Mumbai)                           | 24. Prerna Jha (Kakraul, Dist. Madhubani)               |
| 9. Dr. Katie Lazarowicz (Austin, Texas)                  | 25. Rakhi Thakur (Madhubani, District Madhubani)        |
| 10. Dr. Pranjali Sirisao (Berkeley, California)          | 26. Vibha Kumari (Madhubani, District Madhubani)        |
| 11. Ayushi Kumari (Madhubani, District Madhubani)        | 27. Binita Kumari (Madhubani, District Madhubani)       |
| 12. Anjali Kumari (Pariharpur, District Madhubani)       | 28. Raj Nandini (Jitwarpur, District Madhubani)         |
| 13. Runjhun Kumari (Baharban Belahi, District Madhubani) | 29. Anamika Mishra (Pipraun, District Madhubani)        |
| 14. Alka Mishra (Tarauni, District Madhubani)            | 30. Vishal Kumar Paswan (Jitwarpur, District Madhubani) |
| 15. Nisha Kumari (Madhubani, District Madhubani)         | 31. Priti Kumari (Madhubani, District Madhubani)        |
| 16. Kaushik Kumar Jha (Madhubani, District Madhubani)    |   |



CAT.33a Urmila Devi and family

1. Urmila Devi
2. Ajnu Devi
3. Rakhi Kumari
4. Naagmani Kumari
5. Gobin Kumar
6. Ansu Kumari
7. Pawan Paswan
8. Ujala Kumari
9. Abhilasha Kumari
10. Sulekha Devi
11. Subham Kumar



The Mithila region of India.



## Covid (2021)

By Naresh Paswan (see FIG.24)

According to the artist Naresh Paswan: *In the center of this painting, I have depicted the Coronavirus A. The black spots in the face of Corona represent the virus which is affecting the whole world. I wanted to show the global effect of this virus in the painting's central image, and the surrounding scenes show its impact on India. In every state of the nation, people are rushing towards their home because of 'Lockdown.' The news of this pandemic and lockdown spreads like forest fire, causing everyone to want to rush home as soon as possible.*

*Above the central face of Corona I have shown those Indians who were working abroad B. Because of Corona and the lockdown, these people became*

*worried and anxious about their families in India. At the same time, they also started losing their jobs. So, they decided to return back to India. I have shown an Indian Airways plane, landing from abroad at Delhi airport, bringing Indians back home. After landing, they are being checked by a doctor at the airport exit. The doctor is holding a stethoscope in one hand and three members of a family are standing in a queue to be checked. The husband—who's the head of the family—is getting checked while holding a bag of food in his hand; his wife and son are standing behind him.*

*To the right of them is a scene titled 'Lockdown—Covid-19.' A woman drags her trolley bag upon which her son is sleeping C. She holds a water bottle in her other hand, and is followed by her husband, who holds a food packet in one hand and carries a bag on his head. Next to that woman is a man receiving food from a person distributing food packets from a table*

*behind him. A girl named Jyoti Paswan is carrying her father on a bicycle, peddling home to Bihar from Gurugram. She travelled around 1200km [almost 750 miles] in seven days carrying her father on her cycle. Shown below her cycle is a handicapped man on his wheel cart. He is sitting on the cart and using his hands to move forward. He also wants to go to his village. In the right part of this scene, people wearing masks sit in a bus and are being driven, free of charge, from Delhi to UP [Uttar Pradesh] and Bihar.*

*Below that scene is another in which appears [at left], a man and his wife sit, resting and eating samosas under tree—exhausted from their long journey D. Their child plays in front of them, and the mother asks the child to come sit on her lap. Standing behind them is a mad lady, hungrily staring at them—wanting to eat a samosa. But the couple can't see her.*

*Shown beneath them is a milk tanker in which people are riding back to their homes because they have no other means of transportation. Their heads emerge from the tanker to look outside E. Shown below [in the lower right corner] are two people sleeping after their long walk. They are going to UP, which is another 700 km [435 miles] ahead F.*

*A train has been depicted at the bottom of the picture in a scene showing Delhi during the lockdown. Shown above the train G two persons ride a motorcycle without wearing helmets. The traffic policemen try stopping them with lathi sticks, but—instead of obeying—the motorcycle driver accelerates to escape. The policeman behind them tries to hit them with his lathi.*

*The passenger train is about to depart Delhi's railway station for Bihar. Inside the train sit laborers wearing masks.*

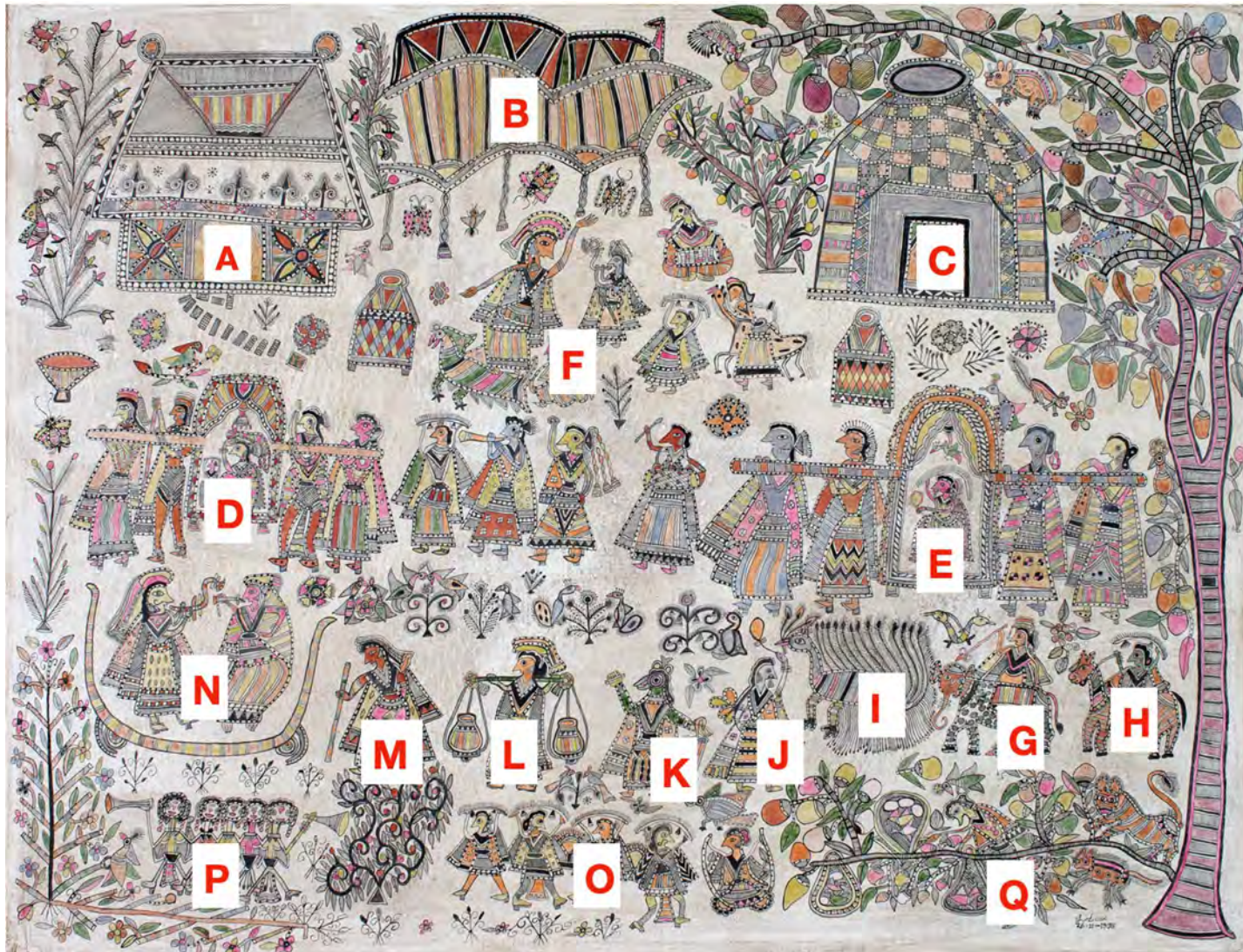
*The scene to the left of the train shows a man carrying his parents back home during lockdown. His parents, being too old to walk long distances, sit in two big bamboo baskets suspended by ropes from a bamboo pole braced across his shoulders. In one of his hands he holds a walking stick H. In front of him walks a lady and her son, carrying household utensils in bags on their heads I. The lady and her son see a girl sitting under a tree, resting beside her bags. They too will rest for a while, before resuming their journey. Behind the lady appears a seated brother and sister, who are also resting; he's eating a samosa and his sister drinks water from a bottle. They gave food to a couple of street dogs [shown just above the picture's bottom margin].*

*In the lower left corner a big concrete mixing machine appears in front of the dogs. Some people are sitting inside the mixing tank while it's being driven J.*

*The final scene [at center left K] shows a truck in which people are traveling to Patna—about a 900 km [560 mile] journey. Below the truck appear people with their luggage who are about to board. One lady drags her son onto the truck. In a parking lot above the truck sits a man and his son having a conversation.*

*In this painting I depict the struggles people face trying to get back home during lockdown.*

(Translation by Kashik Kumar Jha)



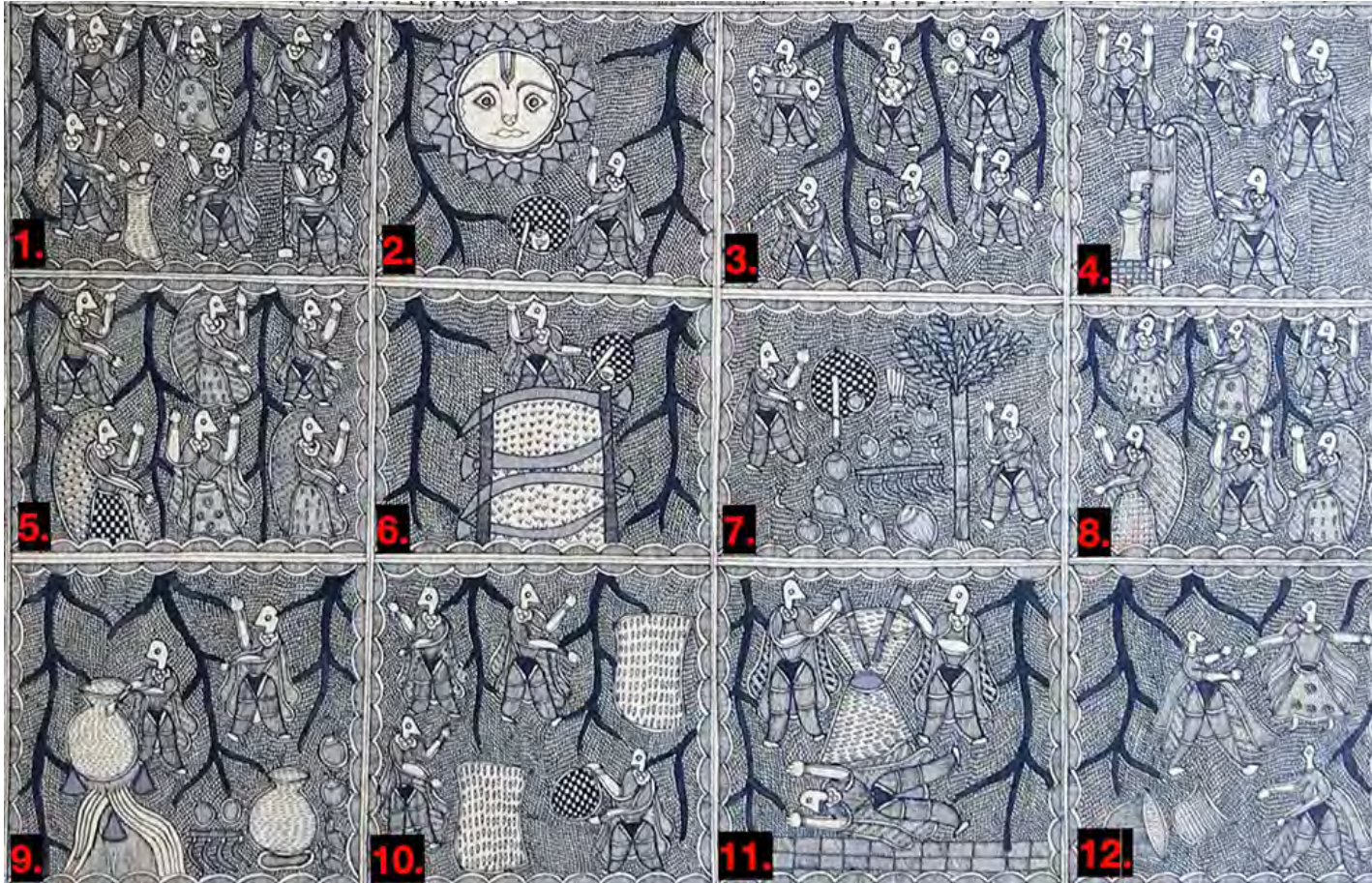
### **Love Marriage of Raja Salhesh and Rani Chandravati (1997)**

By Shanti Devi (see: FIG.22)

According to the artist:

*In this painting, there is the house of King Salhesh in the top left, **A** followed by the marwa [a canopied area where wedding rituals are held—called mandap elsewhere in India **B**] and after that is the gahbar [small temple or shrine **C**] of Raja Salhesh. This painting depicts the marriage of Raja Salhesh and Chandravati. Raja Salhesh is seated in palanquin [at upper/center left **D**] on his way to his wedding. After the wedding, Chandravati goes to Raja Salhesh's palace in the other palanquin [shown at right **E**]. In between the two palanquins, Malin [one of Raja Salhesh's most ardent lady devotees] dances in the wedding procession **F**. All of them are tossing their dupattas [long scarves] into the air while dancing. In the third row down, Raja Salhesh [mounted on his elephant—shown in the lower right quadrant] goes to do puja [worship] following the wedding **G**. Riding on a horse behind him is Motiram [Raja Salhesh's brother **H**], and in front of them is a peacock **I**, a lady balloon vendor **J**, and Sugga Hiranman [Raja Salhesh's parrot messenger **K**—who holds an umbrella in one hand and a letter in the other. Before them walks a lady bhariya [porter **L**], taking curd and kheer [rice pudding] in earthen pots from Chandravati's palace to Raja Salhesh's palace. Next to her—holding a walking stick—is Motiram again **M**. Two dancers—a male dancer named Irni and a female dancer named Birni—spontaneously dance with joy upon a wheelbarrow [shown at far left **N**]. Together Malin, Kusuma [another of Salhesh's flower maiden devotees] and everyone proceed happily. The male and female dancers in the bottom line all joyously throw dupattas over their heads **O**. In front of them musicians play a song on the dhotuhu [a horn-like instrument played in earlier times **P**]. At the far right is a mango tree from which a beekeeper **Q** plucks mangoes—the favorite fruit of Salhesh Maharaj. Among the tree's branches appear monkeys, birds and their egg-filled nests.*

(Translation by Kaushik Kumar Jha)



Detail of CAT. 37.3 Ranjit Paswan's *Rahu Puja*.

Here follows the artist Ranjit Paswan's explanation for the depictions of rituals that appear in his *Rahu Puja* painting (fully illustrated on page 41 [as CAT 37.3]—here translated by Kaushik Kumar Jha):

*In this painting I have depicted the scene of Rahu Puja [the worship of the god Rahu]—shown here beneath a banyan tree, which is cleaned and coated with cow dung. I have shown two peacocks on either side of the tree. [featured in the upper half of the painting; see CAT 37.3].*

#### 1st Scene

*In the first picture I have depicted the scene of a fair. Wherever Rahu is worshipped, a fair is also held there. Some people are selling balloons, while others sell murhi [puffed rice] and kachri [a small striped green and yellow melon]. People are gathering at the fair.*

#### 2nd Scene

*The bhagat [holy man/shamanic priest] asks Surya [the sun god] for permission to start Rahu Puja. Only then can the worship begin. In this picture, bhagat places barley, sesame, akshata [uncooked coconut*

*rice mixed with turmeric] and water in a lota [globular metal container] on a bamboo branch and thus worships the sun.*

#### 3rd Scene

*At times of worship, people dance, sing Rahu Puja songs, and play musical instruments—such as various drums, the piphi [a type of clarinet] and jhal [hand cymbals].*

#### 4th Scene

*In this scene I have shown the preparation for making prasad [devotional foods, offered first to the divinities and thereafter consumed by the*

*worshippers]. One man plies a hand pump for water while two others make the prasad. A fourth calls out for more ingredients.*

#### 5th Scene

*In this picture, women and men from nearby villages are coming to attend the Rahu Puja and fair.*

#### 6th Scene

*In this picture the bhagat is walking on [a ladder of] swords while holding a bamboo basket in one hand from which he showers akshata. The bhagat's bare feet are not harmed by the bare swords.*

#### 7th Scene

*The bhagat and his dhalwah [assistant or servant] are shown placing ritual objects into proper place: fruits, flowers, jackfruit, akshata, sesame etc.*

#### 8th Scene

*In this picture, the men and women who know Rahu Puja songs gather to sing.*

#### 9th Scene

*In this picture the bhagat is cooking kheer [sweet rice pudding] on an earthen stove. The bhagat stirs the hot kheer with his bare hand, which remains unharmed. He removes and shows his hand to the people. The cooked kheer is kept in the second pot.*

#### 10th Scene

*In this picture, the bhagat holds a bamboo basket in his hand in front of his dhalwah and two other assistants. All of them are going to bathe in the Kamla River before performing the Rahu Puja. The worship will start only after this bath.*

#### 11th Scene

*In this picture, the bhagat is lying on the ground while two men are pounding paddy in an okhalee [mortar] placed on his chest. People come in turn to pound the paddy—but this has no effect on the bhagat.*

#### 12th Scene

*This picture depicts the end of Rahu Puja, in which three men prepare the prasad for distribution.*

## CONTRIBUTORS' PROFILES

**Andrew S. Arbury** Steve Arbury is Professor of Art History and Director of the Art Museum at Radford University. He also served as Chair of the Art Department for over seven years. Dr. Arbury completed his B.A. degree at Albion College, which included a year of study abroad in Spain where he developed his interest in art history. He then went on to earn his M.A. and Ph.D. in Art History from Rutgers University. Previous places of employment include Rutgers University, the Ponce de Leon Foundation in Madrid, Spain, and Roanoke College. Dr. Arbury was a founding editor of the *Rutgers Art Review*, a scholarly journal of art history. He has published articles on various art historical topics and image cataloging as well as an art appreciation textbook, and he has organized sessions and presented scholarly papers at numerous professional conferences. Dr. Arbury has been the recipient of various awards and fellowships including Phi Beta Kappa, the Mary Bartlett Cowdrey Fellowship, the Louis Bevier Graduate Fellowship, and a Fulbright Scholarship, which took him to Spain to research his doctoral dissertation on Spanish catafalques of the 16<sup>th</sup> & 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. Since 2009, Arbury has served as Head of the Arts and Culture Unit of the Athens Institute for Education & Research (ATINER).

**John H. Bowles** received his B.A. and M.Ed. from Harvard, and was initiated into exhibiting Indian art by assisting preparations for inaugurating the Philadelphia Museum of Art's 1981 *Manifestations of Shiva* exhibition. In the 1980s he collaborated with the Mexican ethnographer Juan Negrín to produce various exhibitions of contemporary art by the master yarn painters of Mexico's indigenous Wixárika (aka "Huichol") communities—including the first such exhibition to tour internationally (including six European museums and Mexico City's Museum of Modern Art). He also curated the first United States touring exhibitions of paintings and sculpture by central India's Pardhan Gond *adivasi* (tribal) artists, and authored its catalogue, titled

*Painted Songs & Stories: The Hybrid Flowerings of Contemporary Pardhan Gond Art* (INTACH, 2009). Bowles has written essays, articles and reviews for various journals and catalogs, including *Primera Mesa Redonda de Palenque*, *Biblio, Marg*, *Orientations*, *Temenos Academy Review*, *Grandes Maestros del Arte Wixárika*, and *Resurgence & Ecologist*. He served as Exhibitions Director for Plaza de la Raza in East Los Angeles, and is now based in Radford, Virginia, where he co-founded Radford University's Selu Conservancy and periodically produces nature-themed and indigenous art exhibition programs as Guest Curator at Radford University Art Museum and other regional art centers.

**Kalyan Kumar Chakravarty** is a retired ranking Secretary of the Government of India. He received his Ph.D. in Fine Arts from Harvard University in 1992 and thereafter further distinguished himself as an academic and administrator charged with leading national institutions—at various times serving as Director General of India's National Museum, Chairman of the Lalit Kala Akademi (National Academy of the Arts), Executive-cum-Member Secretary of the Indira Gandhi National Center for the Arts (in Delhi); Director of the National Museum of Mankind (Bhopal), etc. He is known for his interdisciplinary research and field initiatives promoting Indological research, a community museum movement, cultural survival, environmental self-determination, and sustainable knowledge systems of marginalized communities. He has published on a broad range of subjects, from prehistoric rock painting, ancient and medieval heritage sites, contemporary metropolitan, folk and tribal arts to his recent two-volume *Walking with Siva: Cognitive Roots of Indian Art, Archaeology and Religion* (Aryan Books International, 2018) and an ongoing/multi-volume *Historiography of Indian Art & on Public Policy* (Routledge). He currently serves as an honorary advisor to a broad

range of initiatives—including: establishing tribal freedom fighters' museums; developing archaeology projects in West Bengal and Chattisgarh; advancing interdisciplinary programs at the Kolkata Centre for Creativity; and facilitating collaborations between Medinipur's Vidyasagar University and the University of East Anglia, UK.

**Aurogeeta Das** has a PhD in Indian art from the University of Westminster, London. Her writings on Indian art have appeared in the journals *Wasafiri*, *Arts of Asia*, *Etnofoor* and *First City*, and in the books *Bhumijan: Artists of the Earth* (Mitchell S. Crites, New Delhi, 2022), *Many Visions, Many Versions: Art from Indigenous Communities in India* (International Arts and Artists, Washington D.C., 2018, a catalog of a traveling exhibition she co-curated in the USA and Canada, 2015-2020) and *Warli: An Artist's Exchange* (Singular Publishing, Norwich, 2016). She authored the monograph *Jangarh Singh Shyam: The Enchanted Forest, Paintings and Drawings from the Crites Collection* (Roli Books, New Delhi, 2017, which served as a catalog for an exhibition she curated at Bikaner House, New Delhi, 2017). She was also a consultant curator for *Ábadakone: Continuous Fire/Feu Continuel*, a quinquennial of indigenous art at the National Gallery of Canada (Ottawa, 2019-2020). Das has previously taught at Sotheby's Institute of Art, London and at the Universities of East Anglia, Hertfordshire and Westminster. In 2013, she was Chercheur Invité at the Institut National d'Histoire de l'Art (INHA), Paris. A trained printmaker, she has shown her work in various solo and group exhibitions in India and the UK; most recently, she held a solo exhibition of her paintings at Hadleigh Old School (Suffolk, 2022). In 2015, the Tagore Centre in London published her limited edition artist book, *If only I were a bird...* Das is currently Senior Curator for Cultural Policy at Ipswich Museum.

**Wendy Doniger** is the Mircea Eliade Distinguished Service Professor *Emerita* of the History of Religions in the Divinity School of the University of Chicago. She received her PhD in Sanskrit and Indian Studies from Harvard University, and a DPhil in Oriental studies from Oxford University. Her more than 40 books include: *Asceticism & Eroticism in the Mythology of Shiva* (Oxford University Press, 1973); *The Origins of Evil in Hindu Mythology* (Motilal Banarsidass, 1976); *Dreams, Illusion and Other Realities* (University of Chicago Press, 1984); and *Other People's Myths: The Cave of Echoes* (University of Chicago Press, 1988). Doniger has previously written about Mithila arts in her *The Hindus: An Alternative History* (Penguin Press, 2009), and her essay titled "Myth and Narrative in Indigenous Indian Art" (in *Many Visions, Many Versions: Art from Indigenous Communities in India*, [International Art and Artists, 2017]). Doniger's books on Indian caste-related texts and issues include a translation of and introduction to *The Laws of Manu* (Penguin Books, 1991), and co-editing with Martha C. Nussbaum *Pluralism and Democracy in India: Debating the Hindu Right* (Oxford University Press, 2015).

**Kaushik Kumar Jha** received his Master's degree in Economics from Bihar University, Muzaffarpur in 1995, and thereafter served as Director of Madhubani's Mithila Art Institute from 2003-2019. He has facilitated exhibitions organized by the Berkeley, California-based Ethnic Arts Foundation (at New Delhi's India Habitat Centre in 2006, Mumbai's Warli Art Center in 2008, and New Delhi's Aparna Caur Art Gallery in 2013), and has likewise assisted curators elsewhere in the US (Syracuse University [New York, 2021], The University of Connecticut [Storrs in 2022], and Radford University and the Floyd Center for the Arts [SW Virginia, 2022]) and France (Église Saint-Florentin, Amboise [2014] and Mairie du XXe Arrondissement, Paris [2015]). In 2017 Jha assisted Prof. Coralynn Davis (Bucknell

University) and the Colombian filmmaker Carlos Gómez in the making of a full-length documentary film titled *Sama in the Forest*. Jha also co-directed, with the Patna-based videographer M. Habib Ali, a 2022 documentary film titled *Dalit Artists of Mithila*. Jha's publications include *Les Filles de Krishna, prennent la parole* (Fauves Editions, 2016)—co-authored with Martine Le Coz and Rani Jha; and an essay, titled “Saraswati Smiled: The Mithila Art Institute,” for a forthcoming collective volume of essays titled *Mithila Painting: The Work of Art* (University of Washington Press). Jha is currently producing a series of online painting workshops, led by various Maithil awardee artists, and attended by more than 80 participants throughout India and abroad.

**Martine Le Coz** is a distinguished French author and illustrator, and a longtime resident of Amboise. Her writings broadly range from poetry (e.g., *La Beauté* and *Le Chagrin du Zèbre* [Le Rocher, 2000 and 1998]), to essays and fifteen novels (e.g., *L'Appel des Eléphants* [Michalon, 2015], *Le Jardin d'Orient* [Michalon, 2008], and *Céleste* [Le Rocher, 2001])—for which she received the Prix Renaudot). Le Coz's non-fiction writings include *Turner et les peintres* and *Velázquez* (Télérama hors-série, 2010 and 2015), and *Les Filles de Krishna prennent la parole* (co-authored with Rani Jha and Kaushik Kumar Jha [Fauves, 2016]). *Les Filles de Krishna* is one of her four latest books inspired by—and focusing on—the art, mythology and cultural heritage of Mithila: the other three are *Mithilâ, l'honneur des femmes* [l'Harmattan-Michalon, 2013], *Mithila Reverie: Meditations on the Devanagari Script* (Ethnic Arts Foundation Press, 2014), and *Le roi de la montagne: L'épopée du roi Salhesh* (Massot Éditions, 2019)—which was recently released again as a lavishly produced edition, fully illustrated by Le Coz (published by Victor Le Brun, 2022). In 2016, upon learning that she would be inducted into France's

Legion of Honour, Le Coz responded by modestly proclaiming: “. . . *c'est un peu de lumière qui tombe, pas sur moi, mais sur tout le travail que nous menons envers les femmes indiennes qui pratiquent l'art du Mithila.*” [. . . it's a bit of light that falls, not on me, but on all the work we do for Indian women who practice the art of Mithila.]

**Kathryn Myers** received a BA from St. Xavier College in Chicago and her MFA in painting from the University of Wisconsin-Madison. She is a painter, photographer, and videographer whose creative practice for the past two decades has been deeply engaged with the art and culture of India. She is Professor of Art at The University of Connecticut (Storrs) where she has been teaching since 1984. Three Fulbright fellowships to India—in 2002, 2011, and 2020—allowed her to teach and conduct research on Indian art. In 2011 she inaugurated a video interview series on contemporary, and more recently, indigenous Indian artists which can be viewed at [www.RegardingIndia.com](http://www.RegardingIndia.com). Myers has had video screenings, and exhibitions of her paintings and photographs in India and the United States, and has curated and co-curated many exhibitions of Indian art including: three at the University of Connecticut's William Benton Museum of Art (*Tradition and Transformation—Mithila Art of India* [2021], *Convergence—Contemporary Art of India and the Diaspora* [2012], and *Masala—Diversity and Democracy in South Asian Art* [2004]); *Rerouted Realities—Santosh Kumar Das* at Ojas Gallery in New Delhi; and most recently a co-curated exhibition (with John H. Bowles) *Mithila Medley* at the Floyd Center for the Arts in Virginia. A forthcoming exhibition on Mithila Art will be featured at UConn's Avery Point campus art gallery in 2023. She lives and works in Mansfield, Connecticut.

**Donald M. Stadtner** received his Ph.D. in Indian art history at the University of California, Berkeley, and thereafter became an Associate Professor at the University of Texas in Austin. His dissertation focused on the post-Gupta brick temples of ancient Dakshina Kosala (now modern Chhattisgarh). In the course of field research in 1973, he became acquainted with late Gond Maharaja of Saranagarh—His Highness Naresh Chandra Singh—who encouraged Stadtner's appreciation of the key roles played by *adivasis* (tribals) and Dalits in the cultural history of India. Stadtner's articles on Indian and Burmese art have appeared in *Ars Orientalis*, *Artibus Asiae*, *Orientalions* and *The Art Bulletin*. Other works include *Ancient Pagan: A Buddhist Plain of Merit* (2005) and the *Sacred Sites of Burma: Myth and Folklore in an Evolving Spiritual Realm* (2011), both issued by River Books (Bangkok). He also co-authored *Buddhist Art of Myanmar*, a catalogue accompanying an exhibition at New York's Asia Society (Yale University Press and Asia Society, 2015), and a catalogue—published by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art—to accompany its 2018 exhibition titled *The Jeweled Isle: Art from Sri Lanka*. His forthcoming *Sacred Sites of Sri Lanka* will be published by River Books.

**David L. Szanton** is a social anthropologist with a lifelong interest in art history and the relationship between art and social change. He received his PhD in Anthropology from the University of Chicago (1970) and thereafter worked as a Ford Foundation program officer in the Philippines and Thailand (1970-75), on the professional staff of the Social Science Research Council (1975-91), and as Executive Director of International and Area Studies at the University of California, Berkeley (1991-2001). Introduced to Mithila's arts by his colleague and friend Dr. Raymond Owens in 1977, they and

others co-founded the Ethnic Arts Foundation (EAF) in 1980. As its President since 2002, Szanton has: made seventeen trips to Mithila to meet with the painters; curated numerous exhibitions of their work; helped establish the free Mithila Art Institute in Madhubani; and written extensively about the painting tradition—with the aim of advancing its recognition, appreciation and life-sustaining income for the Mithila painters. His Mithila-related publications include: *Mithila Painting: The Evolution of an Art Form* (co-authored with Malini Bakshi; EAF and PinkMango, 2007); “Mithila Painting: The Dalit Intervention” (*Dalit Art and Visual Imagery*, ed. by G.M. Tartakov, Oxford University Press, 2012); co-editing/co-curating the exhibition-cum-catalog *Many Visions, Many Versions: Art from Indigenous Communities in India* (International Art and Artists, 2017), and essays in various Indian journals (such as *Marg* and *Biblio*). He is now co-editing, with Dr. Paula Richman, *Mithila Painting: The Work of Art*, a collective volume of essays forthcoming from the University of Washington Press.

## PHOTO CREDITS

M. Habib Ali: CAT. 45b-m; and photo at top of column 4, pg. 74.

Steve Arbury: Cover; Dedication page; FIGS.11, 14, 15, 17, 18, 19, 20; CATALOG section's title page; CAT.#s: 1, 5, 7, 8, 14; 21, 22.2, 30, 30a, 33, 36, 36a, 37.3, 38, 40, 41.1-19, and 45.1-16.

Radhika Bordia: CAT.41a; and photo at bottom of column 3, pg. 74.

John H. Bowles: two photos on Forward Pg. 1; FIGS.1 and 7; ESSAYS pp. 21; 29; 32; 39; CAT.2a, 2b; 8a, 10a, 16, 17, 17a, 18, 18a, 19, 22.3, 22.4, 24, 24a, 25, 26, 27.1, 27.2, 28, 28a, 29, 31a, 33a, 34a, 35a, 39, 39a, 42a, 43a; and pg. 78's photos of Sarah ("Sam") Farmer's 2022 *Size*, and Caitlin Guenther's 2022 *Rhythm*.

Courtesy of Binda Devi: CAT.3a, 5a, and 6a.

Courtesy of Indu Devi: CAT.13a.

Courtesy of Shanti Devi: CAT.8b.

Tula Goenka: two photos in Kathryn Myers's essay, pg. 74: one photo at the bottom of column 1; and one photo at top of column 2.

Carlos Gómez: three photos at bottom of column 2, pg. 74

Courtesy of Amrita Jha: 27a

Kaushik Kumar Jha: CAT.9b, 22a, 29a, and 45a; pg. 75 bottom group photo.

Mary Lanius: CAT.31b.

Courtesy of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art ([www.lacma.org](http://www.lacma.org)): CAT.4a and CAT.37a.

Pippi Miller: Acknowledgements Pgs 1&2, FIGS.2a, 2b, 3a, 3b, 4, 5, 6, 8, 9, 10, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 30, 31, 35, 36; CAT.3, 9, 11, 13, 31, 32, 34, 35, 37.2, 42, 43.1, 43.2, 44.1, 44.2, 45, 45.17-45.21, 46; and pg. 77's *Shalinee Kumari's Weeping Mother Earth Prays to the Sun God to Spare the Earth*.

Courtesy of the Mithila Museum (Tokamachi, Japan): FIG.22.

Michele Modglin: 26a.

Kathryn Myers: FIG.18; CAT.9a; pg. 75 top group photo, pg. 77 photo of Nisha Jha's Hungry Man of Dowry; pg. 81."

Courtesy of Ranjit Paswan: CAT.38.a.

Hervé Perdirolle: 36b.

Courtesy of Eloise Philpot: pg. 78's photos of Michell Hernandez's *Fish* and Mary Burnette's *Lotus*.

Krishna Prajapati: CAT.20a.

Mani Shekhar Singh: Detail on Table of Contents Page; FIGS.37 & 38; CAT.1a, 7a, 10b.

David Szanton: FIGS. 21, 23, 25a.

TIB Screenshots from Erika Moser-Schmitt's 1973 *Traditional and Commercial Art of Brahmin and Harijan Women at Jitwarpur and its Social Background* (North Bihar, Mithila): D 1196—provided by *Technische Informationsbibliothek* (TIB): FIGS. 16a-h and on this page.



Stills from Erika Moser-Schmitt's documentary film, see ESSAYS page 16.

Unidentified Photographer of photograph captioned "Bhaskar Kulkarni," featured on ESSAY Pg. 10. This rare photograph of Kulkarni was obtained from: <https://aalekhan.in/baat/folk-art/bhk/>. The editors of this volume have shown due diligence trying to identify the photographer, but to date without success. We welcome any information regarding the photographer's identity, and will make amends for its unauthorized appearance here.

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