

Documenting the Image in Mithila Art

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This article traces the documentation of ritual wall paintings by Maithil Brahmins and Kayasthas through the collecting practices of private individuals, libraries, and museums, the commercial practices of producing and marketing cultural products, and the interpreting practices of scholars and critics. These practices have come to focus on the output of a handful of celebrity artists in a few villages around Madhubani, gifted artists but not representative of the wide distribution of wall painting at all levels of the two castes. This paper turns to the oldest extant documentation—the 1940 photographs of William Archer and the previously undocumented 1919 paintings for the marriage of the daughter of Maharaja Rameshwar Singh—to demonstrate the importance and quality of wall paintings among all strata of Brahmins. [Key words: Mithila, William Archer, Maithil Brahmins, Kayasthas, indigenous painting]

Ultimately it is the gods who are first imagined, then portrayed, and finally mirrored, over and over again, in medium after medium, by faithful worshippers, by producers of cultural knowledge about gods and worshippers, by craftswomen seeking income from patrons of cultural knowledge, by art worlds making artists out of craftswomen seeking income, and so forth in infinite regress. The medium changes with each level: frescoes on walls, photographs of frescoes on walls, copies of frescoes on paper, gallery shows with paper images once again on walls, books with illustrations of frescoes on paper. All that is stable, perhaps, are the Hindu gods in their unmanifest forms. (Are we being used by them for their manifestation?)

Even the Hindu gods are social actors, caught in webs of social interaction and exchange (Gell 1998). In their manifest forms, the gods see and are seen in *dārśan* (Eck 1981), and—in the cases I am interested in here—summoned to the walls of nuptial chambers of brides of the Maithil Brahman and Kayastha castes in North Bihar, India. The gods are imagined—and imaged—for social purposes. The point of this paper is to trace a certain class of images of the gods through their visual incarnations in the projects of various classes of social actors.

As this journal article, too, is a derivative form, and (full disclosure) I am engaged in the social practice of

producing cultural knowledge about the production of cultural knowledge (are the gods at play here, too?), I cannot present the first level of image production—the wall images themselves—other than with a reproduction of a reproduction. Figure 1 is a copy of a photograph of the oldest extant example of Mithila¹ art in an original setting. Painted over the mantel in the *kohbara ghar* (nuptial house) of a princess of Darbhanga Raj is ten-armed Durga as dominatrix in vivid red robes and gold crown; she has her husband Shiva by a trident in one arm, the tail of a cobra around his chest in another, and a foot on his shoulder. Shiva is smaller, dominated, and pretty badly flaked out by the ravages of time. These images were created in the household of the richest and most powerful man in Mithila at the time: Maharaja Rameshwar Singh, the holder of Darbhanga Raj, the largest zamindari estate in north India, who was a Śrotriya Maithil Brahman.

The images of Durga and Shiva are survivors of one of the worst earthquakes in Indian history. To me, their survival is something of a miracle. Their presence in this context answers a number of questions about the source and distribution of Mithila art. This article is the first documentation in print of this important source, and in presenting the paintings here, I am completing an episode of knowledge production begun by William Archer in 1940.



FIGURE 1. Ten-armed Durga presides over the nuptial chamber from her central location above the fireplace mantel, providing *dar an* for the royal newlyweds. *Kohbara ghar*, Rajnagar Palace, Madhubani District, 1919. All photos by Carolyn Brown Heinz except as noted.

Earthquake

On January 15, 1934, a typical mid-winter day in North Bihar—sunny, but with cold air rolling down from the Himalayas—the earth shook violently for five full minutes. Then it simply split open, spewing water in 30-foot geysers and extruding sand in huge mounds over rice fields and pastures. When it stopped, the air was dark with the dust of fallen buildings. The sound of roiling earth and tumbling walls was replaced with the cries of the injured and bereaved. At least ten thousand people were killed (Andrews 1935; Sinha 1936). The poor, for once, may have suffered least. Their single-story, mud-walled homes with thatched roofs broke apart, but unless they caught fire, a person could survive. It was the rich in their two-story pakka homes who died in a crush of brick. The Maharaja of Darbhanga and his family were luckily vacationing in Calcutta as their palaces crumbled to the earth in the heart of Darbhanga Raj (Figure 2).

This disaster provided a chance encounter for a young British official named William Archer (1907–79) who visited villages in the vicinity of Madhubani town, charged with assessing the damage in rural Bihar. By ripping open village compounds, the earthquake rudely broke the *pardā* of Brahman and Kayastha women who lived in seclusion behind those walls. It was not their faces that astonished the young official but the beauty of the images adorning the inner walls of their courtyards. There, he saw polychrome goddesses waving tridents or blossoms and mounted on tigers or ringed in flames. Water lilies, snakes, turtles, parrots, bamboo, sun, moon and stars, all in natural pigments over beige cow dung, looked down on interior rooms. The young officer marveled and remembered.

An activity that helped justify empire, i.e., rescue and recovery following a natural disaster, led to another: documenting the arts and culture of Bihar where Archer served in the Indian Civil Service from 1931–46. In 1940, as superintendent of the census operations for North Bihar, Archer had opportunity to revisit the villages in which he had seen the beautiful wall art six years earlier. Neither his preparation for this trip, nor the trip itself have been documented in narratives of his discovery (W.G. Archer 1940), which focused only on his reproductions of the images (M. Archer 1977), with little contextualization.

When the images of the gods began to be put on paper by a small group of painters from a handful of villages in the 1960s and 1970s, little was known outside of Mithila about the original distribution of the wall art or its social uses, and there was surprisingly little interest in it. The project at hand was the development of a market in and for the paper art, not the production of knowledge about the wall art. As a result, a great deal of misinformation has now accumulated. For example:

From surviving living traditions, and after several conversations with the Kayasths and Brahmins of Mithila, it becomes apparent that the convention of elaborately painting the walls of the kohbar-ghar was primarily a Kayasth custom, and that the Maithil Brahmins adopted it from them in recent times...Ganga Devi maintained that it was primarily during the 1960s, when paper was widely introduced in Mithila to convert the traditions of ritual floor-and-wall-painting into a portable “craft” yielding both prestige and income, that Brahman women began to paint more elaborate *kohbar* walls. [J. Jain 1997:28]

Others have suggested that because a few of the villagers producing paper art, especially Jitwarpur, are Mahapatra Brahmins (low ranking among Brahmins because they specialize in funeral rites), the wall paintings were narrowly limited to this small subgroup of Maithil Brahmins and their Kayastha neighbors. Finally, little attention has been paid to the power structures and the social projects that have given us “Mithila art” in its two principal incarnations. The paper art was the result of newly independent India’s drive to develop its rural economies; the marketing of culture was one of the thrusts of development from the 1950s on. But the original “discovery” of Mithila art was a product of the imperial project of knowledge production about peoples and cultures under British control. Both of these projects differed from the original social purpose of producing the wall paintings, which was to summon the gods to witness and bless the wedding rites, inducing love and fertility in two young strangers who were becoming husband and wife.

Because of what it tells us about the widespread distribution of the actual wall paintings among Mai-

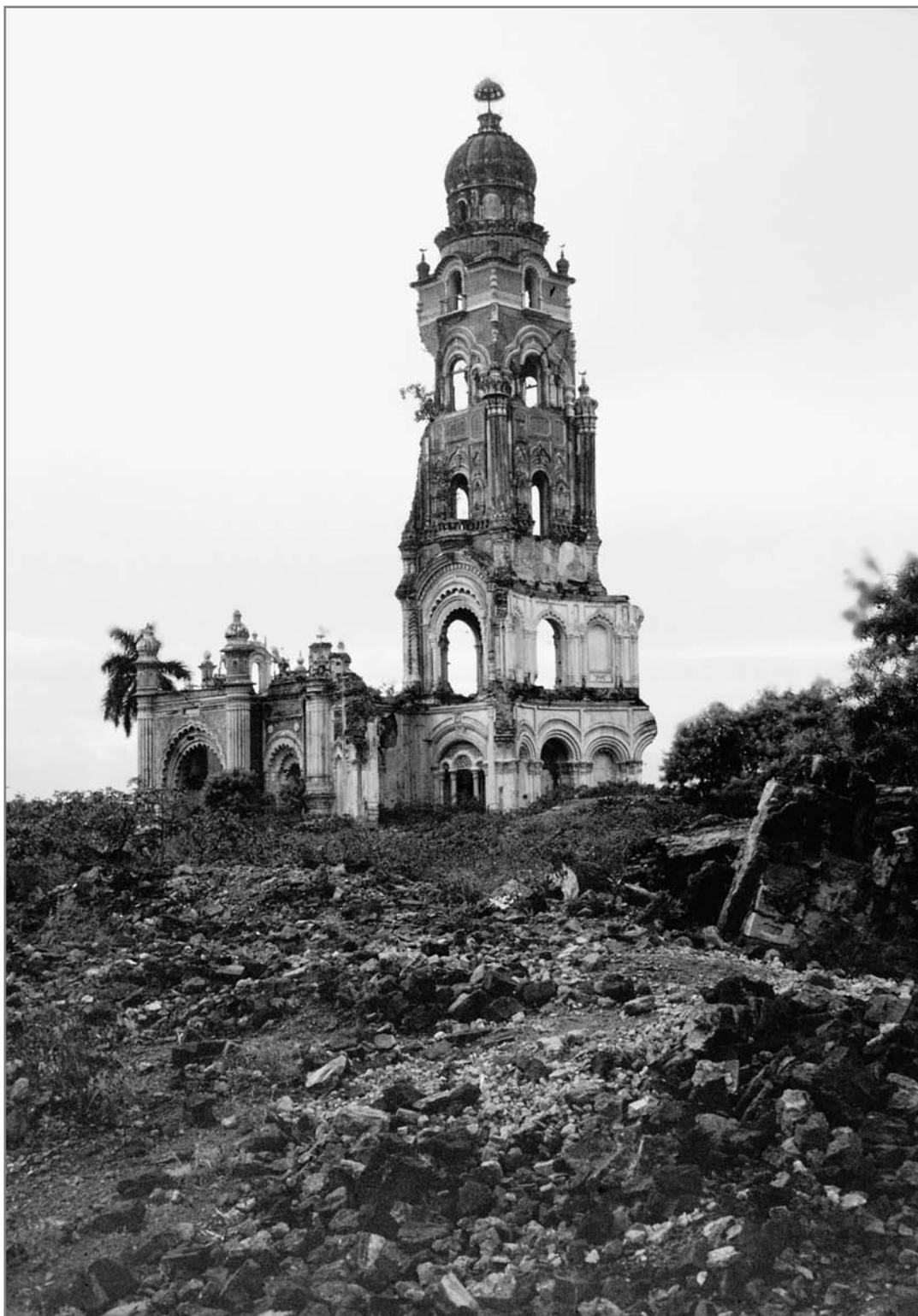


FIGURE 2. Section of the ruined palace at Rajnagar, Bihar. Maharajadhiraj Maheshwar Singh invested millions of rupees in the early decades of the 20th century in a new capital near his ancestral village. The construction was not yet complete when all was destroyed by the 1934 Bihar Earthquake. The effort was abandoned, and little more than ruins remain. Photographed in 1984.

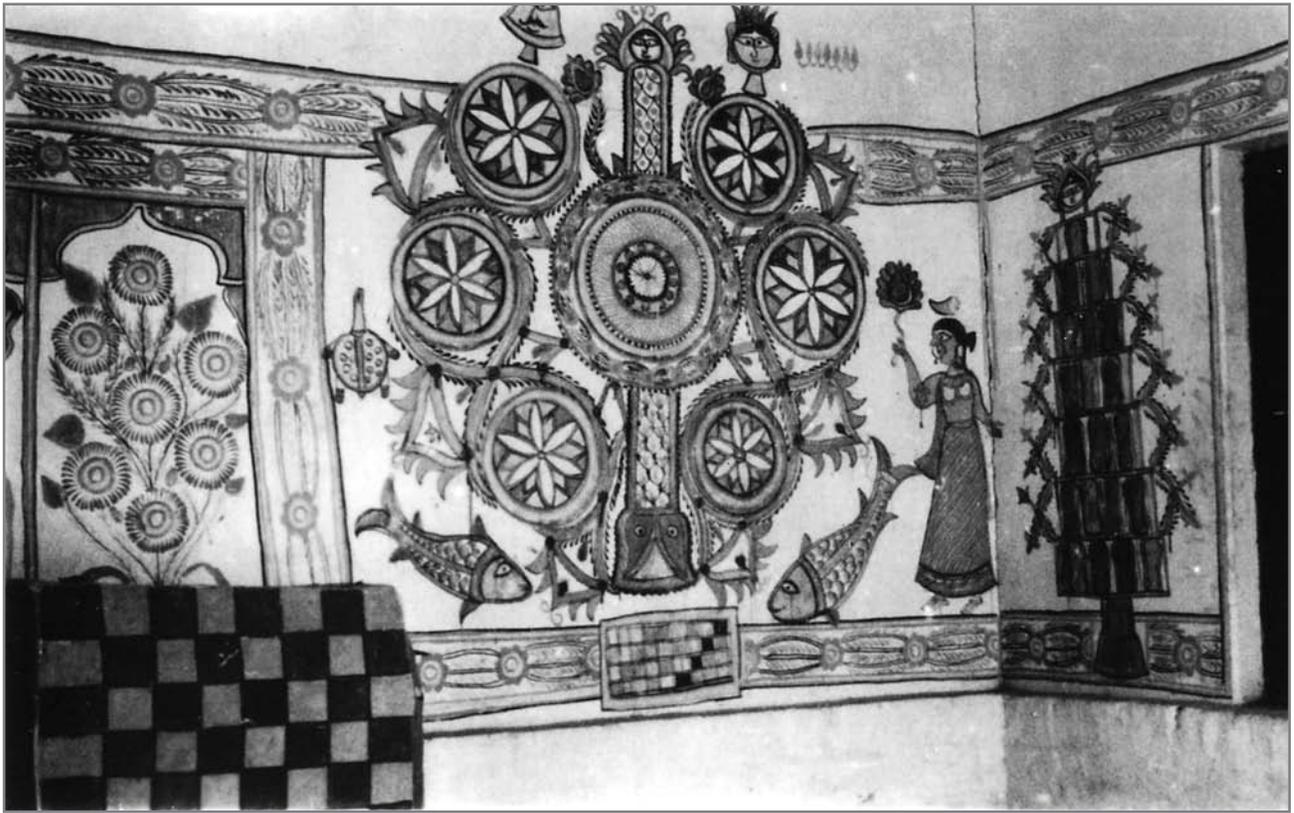


FIGURE 3. *Kamalbans* (the dominant circular figure representing lotus leaves, blossoms and other pond life), *naina yogin* (the woman holding the fan who provides magical protection for the bride and groom) and *bans* (bamboo) painted for a 1935 marriage in home of Pt. Vaidyanath Jha, a rotriya Maithil Brahman of Pahitol village, Darbhanga District. Identical figures are still painted on walls today. Photographed in 1940 by W. G. Archer. Courtesy of the British Library and used with permission.

thil Brahmins and Kayasthas throughout the region, I describe Archer's plans and itinerary in some detail. In preparation for this trip, he wrote letters requesting assistance to local elites who worked for Darbhanga Raj: to Jagdish Jha, a law inspector working in government offices in Darbhanga, Pandit Shiva Shankar Jha, an advocate at Madhubani (both Maithil Brahmins), and Rai Saheb Mahabir Prasad, sub-divisional officer in Madhubani. Assuming that what he had seen after the earthquake was a Brahman tradition, he only mentions visiting Brahman households in his letters. To Pt. Shiva Shanker Jha, he outlines his plans:

I am hoping to come to Madhubani early in February and would like to spend three or four days in visiting Maithil Brahmin villages and photographing the wall paintings which the ladies of the household do on the occasion of marriages. Would it be possible for you to let me have a list of villages in Madhubani and Benipatti thanas (or elsewhere

if that is possible) where there are large groups of Maithil Brahmin families and the houses contain such paintings? Chanda, with whom I have also discussed this in Patna, said that he was afraid that in some villages the practice was dying out and that it could not be assumed that, in every Maithil Brahmin village, paintings would be found, but at the same time he thought that there would be many villages in which paintings could be seen. [W. G. Archer N.d.]

The theme of saving a "dying art" was to prove a constant discourse for several decades, justifying excursions to document what was assumed to be disappearing; yet it was always possible to find outstanding examples of Mithila wall art. It depended on where there were recent marriages, since that was the principal occasion for producing the art. The men Archer contacted drew on their own personal networks and knowledge of households where recent marriages had occurred. From

Jagdish Jha, he heard back: "I know only a few villages here in the Sadar, i.e. Pindaruch, Painchobh, Kansi and Rambhadrapur, where you could find paintings on walls done by ladies." Rai Saheb wrote that he had asked two police inspectors to prepare lists of villages, and he had worked out a tour program for him. Of the 17 villages Archer visited on his 1940 trip, only one, Rahika, is currently famous as a producer of Mithila Art. His route through these villages can be determined from the film roll code system he used. He assigned a letter from A through G to each of his seven rolls of film, numbered each shot and kept a log on the village and household. Photos A 3–14 were taken in Sagarapur, A 15–19 in Pandaul, A 20–23 in Bacchi. Roll B 1–34 was shot in Birsair, etc.

It is worthy to note how little has changed since Archer's day in the cultural status of Mithila villages. Driving north out of Darbhanga past the palaces and mansions on the northern edge of the city, one quickly reaches open country on the main highway to Madhubani. At Sakri the road veers north, but a side road leads east to the 36 sleepy villages of the Maithil Brahman elite, the Śrotriyas. In villages like Pahitol, Ujan, Sarb-sima, Hati, Gangauli, and Behat (collectively known as Sotipur) live the very highest ranking Brahmans, almost all of whom have provided brides and grooms for the maharajas of Darbhanga, and who still enjoy the use of land gifted to them by earlier rajas. On his first day out, Archer stopped at villages near Sakri on the main road north, visiting Birsair, Sagarapur, Pandaul, and Bacchi. In Pandaul, an old sugar refining village, he photographed the wall paintings of a wealthy Kayastha family. Two days later he went to Sotipur, visiting Pahitol and Ujan. These families identified themselves as "Sotri" (Śrotriya), rather than as Maithil Brahmans, and were the only ones to give the lineage name (Sarbanā Amat mulgram) by which they are identified in the written genealogies (Figure 3).

Carrying on directly north, Archer reached Madhubani on the second or third day of his expedition. The villages around Madhubani, the "Honey Forest," collectively known as "Yogyapur," rank just below the Śrotriyas in the Brahman status hierarchy. Archer began his day with Kakraur (Kakraul), the ancestral village of the Raj Panjekar Harinandan Jha (my principal genealogical informant),² whose father was one of Archer's guides and informants in 1940 (M. Archer 1977). Every June, thousands of Brahmans gather at nearby Saurath for a great *sabha* in order to find spouses of good rank and bloodlines for their sons and daughters. (This event is another source of misinformation: that Maithil brides pick their own husbands at fairs). Here, too, are the villages of Ranti, Rahika, and above all, Jitwarpur, all now

famous producers of Mithila art. A little to the northeast of Madhubani is the ruined palace and town of Rajnagar, a major miss for Archer. He returned on his last day to three villages a little to the west of Madhubani: Samaila, Baujparaul and Simri. This is the core area of Mithila—its orthodox heart—and not surprisingly the area within which Archer's connections led him from village to village in search of outstanding examples of wall painting.

The geographical distribution of Mithila Art has never been adequately studied, but there is reason to think that it has been coterminous with the distribution of Maithil Brahmans and Kayasthas themselves. While he was District Magistrate in Purnea in 1937–39 Archer came across a number of Maithil villages on the western side of the district, around Forbesganj, whose Brahmans did superb wall paintings which he photographed, and in recent years, Janakpur in Nepal has also become a major center of the paper art (C. Davis 1997).

To my knowledge, and with a single exception discussed below, Archer's 1940 photographs are the oldest available examples of Mithila art. There are over 200 of them in the British Library, almost all of them painted for marriages between 1935 and 1940, and they merit close scrutiny. None of the wall paintings he photographed still exist; the only exception is from the ruins of the Rajnagar palace which Archer did not visit, painted in 1919 for the marriage of Rameshwar Singh's only daughter.

The Rajnagar Ruins

In the last decade of his life, Maharajadhiraj Rameshwar Singh spent millions of rupees on magnificent new palaces far to the north of Darbhanga on the banks of the Kamla River, where he intended to build a new capital called Rajnagar. A massive secretariat building was not yet finished at the time the earthquake struck. All was destroyed. The roof over Durga Hall caved in, and its *mūrti* broke into pieces. Sand and water burst through deep fissures in the floor of Darbar Hall. The poorly engineered new palace suffered the worst damage of all the buildings in Darbhanga Raj. And because most of Darbhanga had to be rebuilt at great cost, the new palace was simply abandoned. Its remains still stand, looking like some ancient ruin on the grassy plain, although they are a mere seven decades old.

One of the rooms of this abandoned palace was the nuptial house, the kohbarā ghar, of the only king's daughter to be married in the 20th century (Figure 4).



FIGURE 4. The inner residential compound of the Rajnagar Palace largely survived the earthquake. It was built in the form of a traditional Brahman four-house compound with a raised platform, or *mandap*, in the center where Vedic rituals take place. The southern house, shown here, is the *kohbara ghar*, or nuptial house. The house in the west, opening to the east, is the house of the family goddess, *kul devi*. Small lumps in the foreground were fissures created by the 1934 earthquake. Photographed in 1996.

The year was 1919, and she was 14 years old. This *kumari* had enjoyed a life of wealth and privilege, although she was also raised as a conservative Brahman girl who had to be married in caste according to the many rules guarded by the genealogists and deriving from Yajñavalkya. Rameshwar Singh was performing *kanyadān*, giving the “gift of a virgin,” the best gift a man has to give, a fully religious act. He instructed the royal genealogist to identify the single highest ranking unmarried man of the caste, reckoning by all the refined gradations of *laukit* and *śreni*. This person, by definition, would be the “best of Brahmans” to whom a king’s daughter should be given. The best of Brahmans turned out to be a poor boy from Bittho village in Sotipur, educated only to the eighth grade. His single attribute as potential son-in-law to the maharaja was his rank; he was *pratham śreni*, first rank. And so the offer was made and accepted, and the formal chanting of genealogies known as *siddhānta* was performed.

A more normative marriage process can hardly be imagined. Guided at every turn by the *rāj purohit* and the *panjikārs* (genealogists), the maharaja allowed no mistakes. The groom’s party (*barāt*) came, according to custom, to the wedding rites at the girl’s “village”—in this case, the newly completed palace complex at Rajnagar. Much of the non-Vedic aspects of these rites focused on the *kohbarā ghar*, the marriage room. Painted with magical symbols intended to create attraction between husband and wife and insure a fertile union, the groom is brought here first to worship. Afterwards, he pays his respects to his bride’s lineage goddess in the *gosaun ghar*, and only then moves to the Vedic rites themselves in the *mandap* in the courtyard.

Within 15 years of these rites, the earth shook, and the palace complex at Rajnagar was literally shaken apart. The ceremonial heart of the doomed palace, however, was less severely damaged. This was a royal version of the traditional four-house compound of a village



FIGURE 5. Corner of painted interior of *kohbara ghar* of the daughter of Maharaja Rameshwar Singh for her 1919 marriage. The wall has been divided into four tiers, each divided into rectangular panels that contain complete paintings of one or two themes. Broad borders of scrollwork and vines separate individual paintings. Photographed in 1996.

Maithil Brahman. These rooms were simply padlocked when life in the palace became impossible. For 70 years, the *kohbara ghar* of the young *kumari* has remained undisturbed, still painted for her wedding to the best of Brahmans.

I first visited Rajnagar in the summer of 1984 when Babu Arvind Singh, a kinsman of the late king, drove me to the site in his old Daimler. That trip proved inconclusive, for the single person who had possession of the key to the padlock on the *kohbara ghar* was “out of station.” Nevertheless, it was apparent that the exterior walls of this house, protected all these years by a deeply recessed verandah, were lavishly ornamented with scenes from the *Ramayana*. The high wall had been divided horizontally into two tiers by a floral border, with scenes above and below. The divine couple and archetypal bride and groom, Ram and Sita, are seated on a throne on the upper tier. Musicians, acrobats, and wrestlers entertain them. Hanuman appears at least three times, once presenting the mountain of Govardhan, another

time in worshipful attendance on Ram. Shiva is there, meditating on a leopard skin, and four-headed Brahma floats nearby.

I did not see the inside of the *kohbara ghar* until many years later. Driven from Bihar early by a monsoonal flood in the summer of 1984, I did not get back to Rajnagar again until 1998. I had time to meditate again on the exterior walls, in worse condition than when I first saw them, while the guardian of the key was tracked down in his home, awakened from his nap, and brought to unlock the door. Holding my breath, I walked into the gloom of the princess’s *kohbara ghar* to finally see the oldest extant example of Mithila wall painting (Figure 5). Every inch of all four walls was covered with paintings, still vivid after all these years. Here the goddesses had the prominent positions: Durga presided from a painted arch over the fireplace mantel (Fig. 1), one of her golden feet on a white lion, the other on her husband, Lord Shiva. The broad expanses of wall had been divided into dozens of rectangles in three tiers

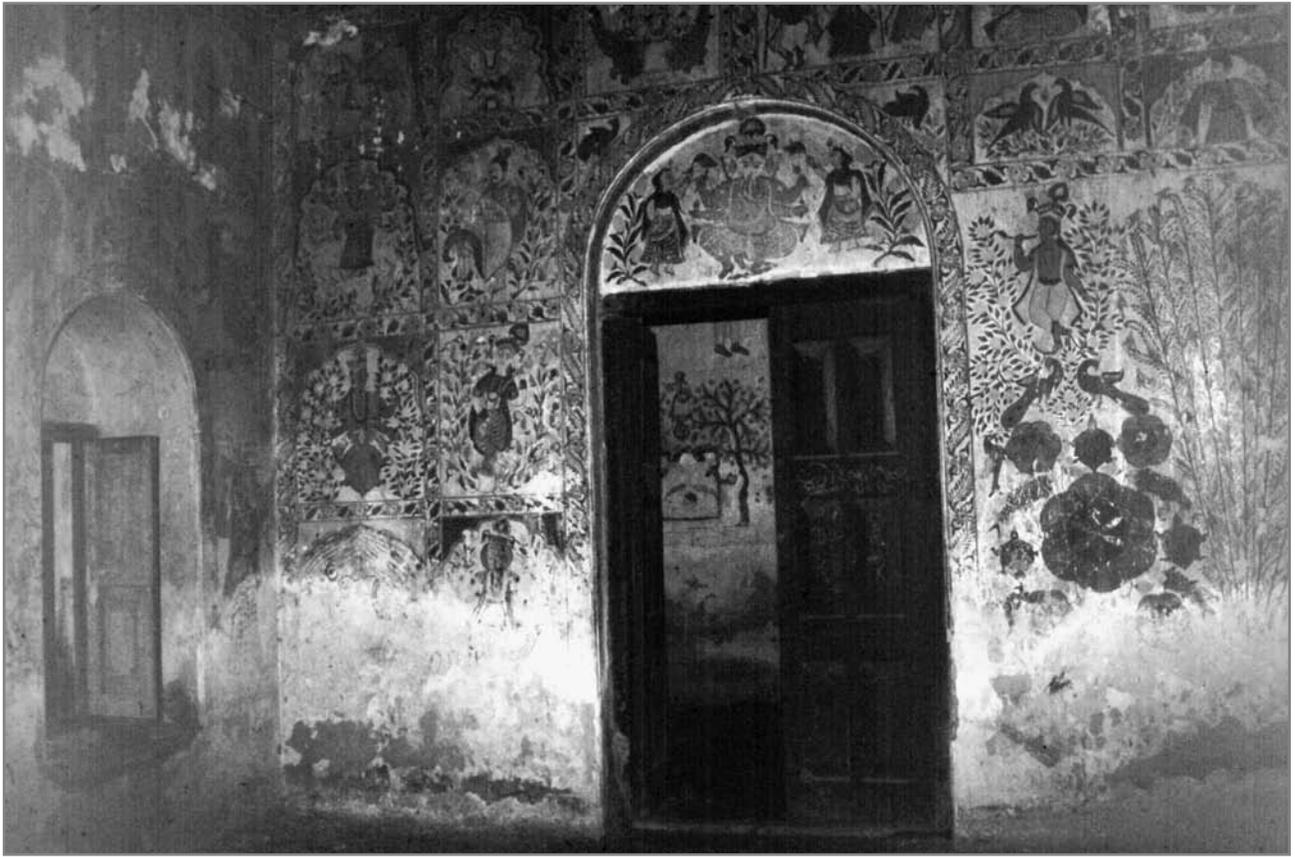


FIGURE 6. All four walls of the kohbara ghar were lavishly painted. These buildings have been padlocked since the devastating earthquake of 1934, tended by a retainer of Darbhanga Raj.

(Figure 6), each edged with a three-inch floral border, exactly like a piece of paper art from recent periods. In each rectangle was enshrined a deity—Krishna, Vishnu, Saraswati, Mahadev, Ganesh—or a pair of parrots or other image from poetry and nature. Every spare inch was filled with a profusion of vines, creepers, flowers, and leaves.

At the narrow end of the room, beside a doorway leading into a smaller adjacent room, was *puren* (Figure 7), a geometric pattern representing leaves of water lily as they appear on the surface of a Mithila pond. A large stand of bamboo rustles beside it. In every corner of the room a mysterious woman holds a basket over her head, and at one of these corners, a bride and groom are portrayed sitting at her feet. Finally, just around the corner from the seated groom, stands a woman carrying a pot filled with leaves on her head (just visible on the left hand side of Figure 6). These items that I have just described are the essential and invariable figures to appear in kohbara ghar throughout the region and fre-

quently make their way into the paper art, as well. This example answers the question of whether Maithil Brahmins painted the walls of their kohbara ghar prior to the development of a market for Mithila art on paper.

Archer's Interpretations: Artwriting 1

If Archer only spent three or four days on his photographing expedition, as was his plan, visiting 17 villages was quite a feat. Just moving around on Mithila's rural roads is slow work; finding the right house, meeting the *malik*, sipping a hospitable cup of tea on the verandah, photographing the walls, and getting on to the next village does not leave much time for interviewing artists about the significance of their art. From file slips accompanying his photographs in the British Library (Figure 3) we can see that he was careful to identify the caste, village, district, and name of head of household for each photograph:

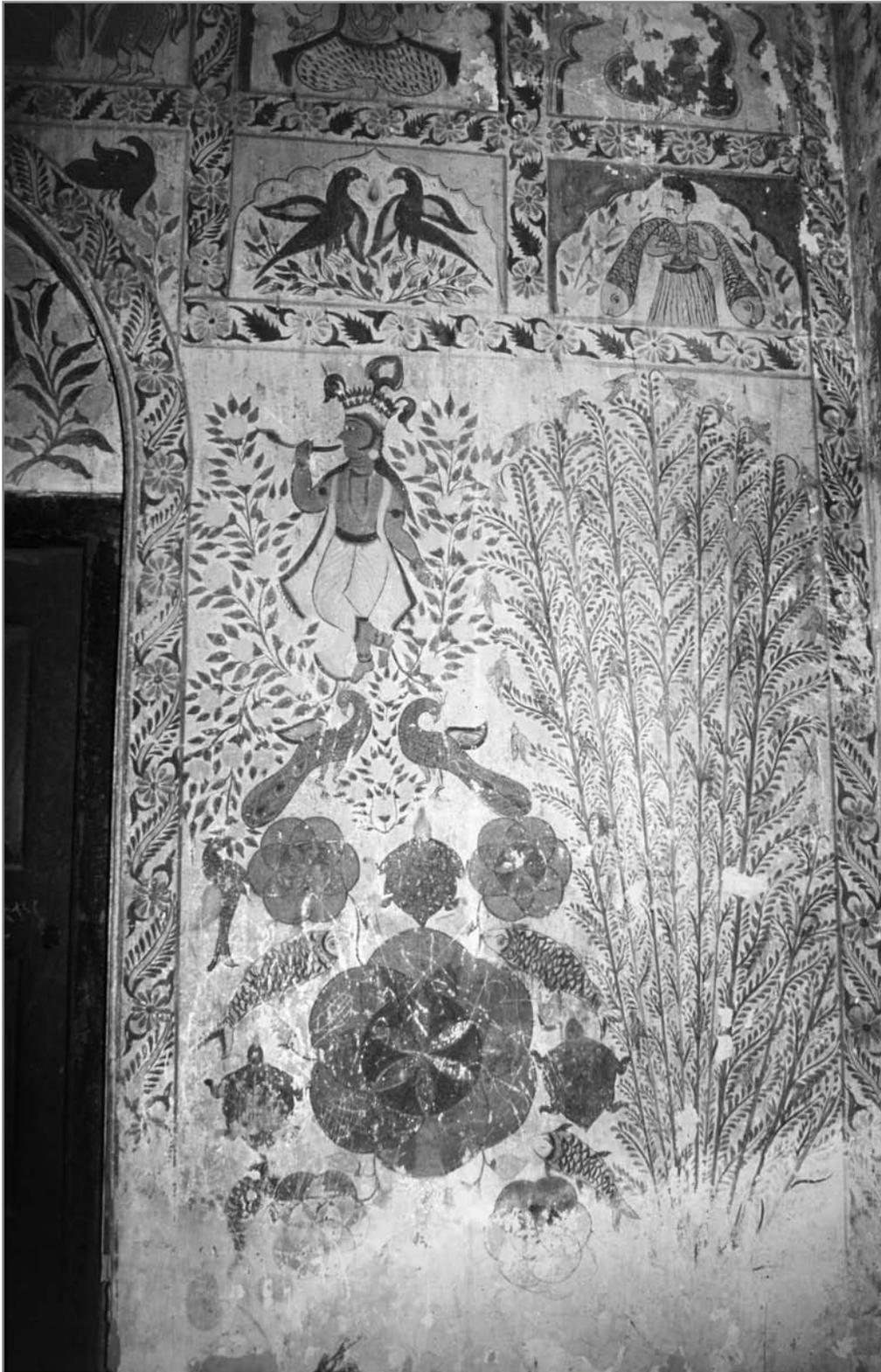


FIGURE 7. The section adjacent to the door in the southern wall contains ubiquitous themes of kohbara ghar paintings: *puren*, here in a geometric design, with aquatic life: turtles, fish, and parrots. Nearby grows a stand of bamboo (*bans*). Krishna sits above.

MAITHIL BRAHMAN, (KUMHAR)

(Sotri)

Village: Pahitol

District: Darbhanga

House of Pt. Vaidyanath Jha 1935

Kohbar 0-5

First Marriage

Subject 0. Purain

1. Purain & Bans (Shown in Fig. 8)
2. Ram & Lahskman on an elephant
3. Krishan milking a cow. Crocodile catching an elephant.
4. Rasa. Circular dance. Krishan playing flute with Gopis
5. Mahlain with fish on head.

[W.G. Archer N.d.]

The entry indicates that the images were found in the kohbara ghar for the occasion of the “first marriage” of a daughter³ (as were 95% of the art that he photographed).

Archer’s notes do not go beyond this specific information. He was, therefore, limited in what he could say when in 1949, having retired from the ICS and become Keeper of the Indian Section of the Victoria and Albert Museum, he finally had time to attempt to write a scholarly paper on the art he had discovered and photographed. Perhaps he felt that he knew all he needed to know about it, having been there and seen the art *in situ*. There is no evidence that he witnessed any marriage rites in association with the images, or that he gathered information about the meaning of specific representations. He could not have had time to interview the women artists. Even if he had time, it is likely that they were hidden away while the Englishman was busy photographing their work. He would have had to rely on the explanations offered by male informants for an art tradition that was solely by the women’s (Heinz 1996).

In an article he published in *Marg*, he had little to say ethnographically about the wall paintings, but he tried to make a case for their importance as fine art. He argued that the “types of sensibility they express” qualify these paintings as art. So, in discussing the functions and circumstances of the artistic style, he tried to explicate the underlying sensibility that, in his opinion, qualified Mithila wall paintings as “art.”

He notes the impermanency, the evanescence of the wall paintings. These are not permanent frescoes. Mud walls fade, crack, crumble and are re-coated with whitewash or cow dung, and so the life expectancy of the most elaborate and vivid painting is only five or ten years. The painters are women of the household who have many other demands on them. Even in Archer’s

time, the paints were commercial products bought in the larger bazaars. The pink, yellow, blue, red, and green powders are mixed with goat’s milk; black is made at home from burnt straw, white from powdered rice. Thus the palette is limited. For brushes, a small bamboo twig with a frayed end produces a narrow line, while a stick with a piece of cloth tied to one end can be used for larger washes.

The paintings are functional in that they only exist as a requirement of the marriage ritual. The images of gods and goddesses create an “auspicious scene and charges the house with blessings.” The pictures decorate a chamber with line and color; they continue a pattern of ancestral usage; they link the private hopes of individuals to the beneficence of the deities; and they invoke the “sympathetic action of natural forces” (W. G. Archer 1949:29).

Archer was puzzled by the prominence and ubiquity of a particular feature of the wall art. This is a large, intricately detailed and interconnected ring of six circles surrounding a center circle, sometimes depicted with a perpendicular bar in the middle. The form of the design without the bar is called *puren* (Figure 7), which means “lotus leaf,” and with the bar is *kamalbans* (Figure 1), a compound of “lotus” and “bamboo.” This aquatic imagery is supported by other life forms found in and around Mithila’s hundreds of ponds: fish, turtles, insects, and parrots. His hosts in the villages no doubt told him, as they also told me and everyone else who visits, that painting life forms that proliferate rapidly represents the hope is that the new couple will similarly reproduce quickly.

But the design of *puren* is so abstract (and often even geometric, as in Figure 7), and generally so prominent, that it cries out for interpretation, and Archer plunged on in his symbolic analysis. Circles and rods: these were surely sexual symbols; he probably had in mind the *lingam* and *yoni* found widely in Hindu temples that were of such interest then. These ubiquitous figures, he asserted, “are diagrams of the sexual organs” (1949:29). He provides no evidence from local commentary for such a startling claim. In keeping with the perceived universality of true art, he was not reluctant to turn to the 17th century English metaphysical poet, Robert Herrick, for tongue-in-cheek illumination:

Now barre the doors, the Bridegroom puts
The eager Boyes to gather Nuts.
And now, both love and Time
To their full height doe clime;
O! give them active heat
And moisture, both compleat;
Fit Organs for encrease,

To keep, and to release
That which may the honour'd Stem
Circle with a Diadem. [W.G. Archer 1949:29]

Archer saw an "honored stem circled with a diadem" in the kamalbans, the lotus leaf and bamboo figure. However, he allowed, the sexual symbolism is latent in the bamboo depicted as "driven through the centre of a clinging circle." The turtles frequently seen near puren were also "diagrammatic of the lovers' union," for the "head and the tail emerging from the shell are the exact counterparts of the bamboo plunging in the lotuses" (1949:29).

Archer's first effort at art talk about Mithila wall paintings created an enduring discourse. The phrase "diagrams of the sexual organs" appears repeatedly in published work over the next half-century to explain the significance of puren, hardly ever with attribution (e.g., Jayakar 1990:129). Later writers would add a Tantrik overlay to the sexual symbolism first proposed by Archer. The parallels found in Herrick raised Mithila wall art to a universal level, thus justifying taking it seriously, as did comparisons to Joan Miró and Paul Klee. Nowadays, we would prefer to position the art more confidently in its own setting. Archer later published a set of poems by Mithila's own Vidyapati illustrated by Rajput paintings (W. G. Archer 1963). Apparently it did not occur to him in 1949 to interpret the wall art in light of Vidyapati's poems.⁴ Some of his photos finally appeared illustrating his *Songs for the Bride; Wedding Rites of Rural India* (W. G. Archer 1985), published posthumously and edited by Barbara Stoler Miller and Mildred Archer. Thirteen of the 1940 photos are reprinted along with a collection of wedding songs from a different part of Bihar, the Bhojpuri speaking Shahabad District.

Another lasting contribution of the *Marg* article was the distinguishing of a Brahman and a Kayastha style. Brahmans emphasize color, Kayasthas line. This distinction can be overstated but was an important realization. The 12 photographs Archer took of the Visheshwar Kant house in Balat, painted for a 1936 marriage, are possibly the finest examples of Kayastha line drawing in this set. Unfortunately, the photographs are in black and white, so we can only guess how color might have been used, but the dominance of line over broad washes of color is obvious. A final insight offered by Archer's photographs for present-day researchers is evidence of continuity of style and theme. Many of the wall paintings Archer photographed appear in almost identical form in the paper art in Yves Vequaud's *Women Painters of Mithila* (1977), a translation of *L'Art du Mithila* published the previous year by George Robinson, and in other collections, including my own.

We also see from the early examples that some properties intrinsic to the wall art facilitated the transition to paper. When Mithila artists painted the broad walls of their homes, they did not typically produce a single large mural but a sequence of tiered, framed, smaller images, as in Figures 5 and 6. This practice of subdividing large wall spaces into tiers of rectangular images with ornamental borders made transfer to the paper medium less conceptually difficult than it might have been. Contemporary museums and hotels frequently attempt to reproduce on their wall spaces what they assume must have originally been broad, multi-part wall murals on the order of a Diego Rivera; the Mithila artists they have commissioned sometimes go along with the request and sometimes resist. But these 1919 and 1940 images show how broad expanses of wall were actually filled: with a sequence of discrete, partitioned, bordered, single-theme images.

Aides-memoire: The Transition to Paper

Archer was aware that the art in which he was interested was occasionally put on paper, and he was eager to collect some examples, since it was only these portable pieces that he could actually take back to England in a form other than a black-and-white photograph. He referred to them as *aides-memoire*, since their function was to preserve samples of the most important images for a household in between marriages, which might be decades apart. If an older woman with great knowledge and talent were to die before passing on her gift, this could be a significant cultural loss to the family, since her successors were all in-marrying wives who would not know the family's traditions, although they might bring *aides-memoire* with them into the marriage from their own homes.⁵ These images, then, constitute a special category: these are the idealized, preserved forms of which a given set of wall paintings for a given wedding is merely an instantiation.

Archer was able to acquire 20 *aides-memoire*, now all in the British Library. Six were by Maithil Brahmans, and the rest were Kayastha. What was considered essential to the painters is clear from these 20 images. Five of the images are puren or kamalbans. At least six of the *aides-memoire* are misidentified as brides in the catalog by Mildred Archer (M. Archer 1977). Rather, these are the mysterious veiled women with fans and baskets known as *naina yogin* who appear in all four corners of every kohbara ghar. Maithil women cite two functions for these figures: to protect against the evil eye or witchcraft and to hypnotize the groom, who comes in as an unknown outsider, and put him under the spell of the bride. During the marriage rites, a kinswoman enacts

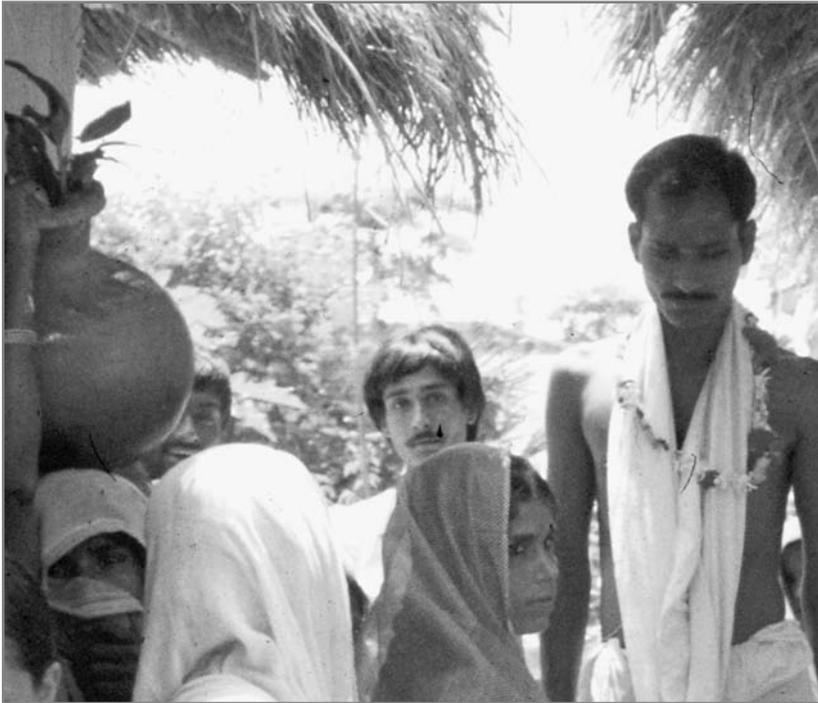


FIGURE 8. Among the women greeting the arrival of the groom at a Maithil Brahman wedding is a women enacting naina yogin, visible on the left with a pot on her head and her veil drawn across her face. Naina yogin protects the bride from the evil eye of witches and attempts to bring the unknown groom under the magical control of the bride. Photographed in 1980.



FIGURE 9. Naina yogin is also represented as a figure on walls of the *kohbara ghar*, the nuptial house.

this figure with a pot on her head and a veil drawn over one eye exactly as in the paintings (Figure 8). This is part of the process of casting the spell on the groom, who later uses the substances in the pot, known as *siri soma*, consisting of betel nut-shaped earth, an arathak leaf and a betel leaf, to offer to the image of naina yogin. Of particular interest are three aides-memoire that attempt to preserve the arrangement of panels in a multi-part wall mural such as those seen in the Rajnagar ruins. There are two nine-panel sketches and a six-panel sketch. These are always pantheons of deities: Kali; Durga; Vishnu as tortoise; Vishnu as fish; Vishnu as boar; Shiva; Brahma; Kartikeya; Hanuman; Ganga; Krishna, Ganesh.

The aides-memoire, together with the photographs we have examined, provide us with a means of identifying the syntax of *kohbara ghar* art. The following elements are crucial:

1. A bride and groom, together with an attendant or two (generally the *vidkari*, the woman who guides the bowed and veiled bride through her ritual actions), are the central actors toward whom all other images are pointed, surrounded by a clutter of ritual objects: kalash, pots containing water and mango leaves; *sabran patiya*, a specially decorated mat on which bride and groom worship Gauri; the *nagahar*, a decorated framework in which bride and groom

sit chastely before *kul devi* prior to consummation of the marriage; *hati* the elephant who bears the goddess Gauri in the form of a betelnut; the sedan chair in which bride and groom are carried to the groom's house.

2. Puren, kamalbans, bans, and other images from Mithila ponds, together with sun, moon, and stars, are depicted close around them, imparting cosmic powers.
3. Naina yogini guarding all four corners.
4. The gods who witness, protect, provide *dārsan* from their locations above the human level; they may be arrayed in orderly tiers, or they may free-float cross-legged above the fray; or a particular deity, most often Durga or Krishna, will be granted pride of place with a lavish portrayal, such as Krishna in the kadamba tree or Durga stabbing Maisasur.

The Post-Independence Project: Economic Development

It is ironic that the aides-memoire, intended to convert a transitory art into a permanent ideal form, proved to be the vehicle for transcending traditional forms and

individualizing artistic expression. Yet, this is what happened. The agent of change was not Archer but Pupul Jayakar, then chair of the All-India Handicrafts Board. Charged with developing India's crafts for both national prestige and local economic development, she wrote to Archer in 1956, asking how to find Mithila art. His reply to her letter has been preserved:

Dear Pupul,

Many thanks for your letter of the 19th April. Maithil Brahman and Maithil Kayasth wall paintings are to be found very widely in the Madhubani police station area of Madhubani subdivision and in the Darbhanga Sadr police station of the Sadr subdivision—both in Darbhanga district. As they are mainly painted for weddings, exact villages possessing the best examples will naturally vary from year to year but 20 years ago the following villages had very exciting examples: Bacchi, Balat and Ramnagar in Madhubani p.s. and Keoti, Samaila and Darema in Darbhanga sadr. If you are interested in preserving a visual record of them, the best thing to do would be to go by car from Darbhanga to Madhubani and there enquire from Maithil Brahmans and Kayasths. They would soon direct you to the best houses and villages. Whether you would be able to collect some paintings on paper I am not certain. These were rather unusual and scarce in my time and I think the usual practice was for the ladies of the house to paint from memory instead of using paper “models.” But there would be no harm in asking and perhaps you would have the good luck to hit upon some families who still preserved paper “models” and who would part with them to you. If you go, do let me know how you get on and give my enduring affection to everyone in the Madhubani subdivision. [W. G. Archer N.d.]

Pupul Jayakar did visit Mithila in the late 1950s, but found little trace of the art. We do not know if she followed Archer's directions. Perhaps it is true that the art was beginning to die out, as everyone was saying. On the other hand, you have to know who has had a wedding recently and have an insider's knowledge of the Maithil Brahman and Kayastha communities. It was not until the Bihar Famine of 1966–67 that Brahman and Kayastha wall painting was reinvented as “Mithila Art”—on paper.

I turn to the social system of that world as it created a class of artists, consciously attempted to professionalize them and successfully turned some into international celebrities; continued to develop a discourse of artwriting about the art; and established a system of circulation

and exchange for the art. In all these developments, anthropology and anthropologists, along with art historians and collectors, have played a central role.

The movement from wall to paper has had enormous consequences for the region. It has brought income into a deeply impoverished part of Bihar; it has provided a source of income to women who previously had none, especially women of high caste; it raised a cultural product of women in a highly patriarchal society to national and international esteem; it empowered women by giving widows a means of independence and wives a source of prestige to which husbands had to make adjustments; it drew foreigners with serious interests in the culture to a part of Bihar that had scarcely seen a European since the British departed; it detached the art from its dense ritual meanings by catering to the tastes of foreign buyers with limited curiosity about its significance and no means of learning it; and it turned a handful of women artists into international celebrities.

Celebrity Artists

One such woman is Sita Devi (Figure 10), perhaps the most famous and certainly the longest lived of the first generation of celebrity artists. Her household is near the entrance to Jitwarpur, and the men of her family function as village hosts, greeting the frequent visitors who arrive unannounced on the dusty road, having unknowingly followed Archer's route to the heartland of Mithila. The men take the visitors on guided tours of the village lanes and households where women, and a few men, are invariably at work on painting. On my first two visits to Jitwarpur, Sita Devi was in Delhi working on the great mural at the airport and at the Craft Center, but by 1996, when this photo was taken, her days of travel were over and she could usually be found in her open-sided thatched house beside Jitwarpur's largest pond. For this photo, her son, Surya Dev Jha, brought out all the awards she has won over the years and assembled them in front of her. Most prestigious is the Padma Sri, an annual award for achievement in the arts by the Government of India. It is inscribed: “for superior art, this national award of 1975 has been given to Srimati Sita Devi for keeping the ancient culture alive through her art.” She has won the state of Bihar's Bihari Ratan; the President's Award; and others. The photographs on display form another class of trophies, which portray a younger Sita Devi with Indira Gandhi and other dignitaries.

Along with the awards and photographs documenting Sita Devi's career as a celebrity artist is the work that has become the bible of Mithila Art: Yves Vequaud's *The Women Painters of Mithila* (1977). Every village



FIGURE 10. Celebrity artist Sita Devi Jha of Jitwarpur, shown with her various awards in 1996. She has been much photographed, including in the frontispiece of *Women Painters of Mithila*, though identified there only as "an artist in one of the world's most ancient traditions of painting." One of the outcomes of the professionalization of the paper art has been the individuation of the women artists. Sita Devi has traveled extensively in Europe and India, and been photographed with Indira Gandhi and other Indian leaders.

painting class these days has a copy of this book, or if they cannot afford the book, at least they have photocopied pages from it. Sita Devi was one of a handful of its gospel-makers. Her kinsmen show me page 55, the glorious Ardanarishwar, half-Shiva and half-Shakti in one body, that she painted in 1974. On page 83 is the painting for which she won the Padma Sri. It is the famous *Sita svayamvār* scene, showing Sita choosing Ram as her husband by presenting him with a garland, while King Janaka, Lakshman, and Visvamitra look on. An undulating ornamental border demarcates heaven and earth, above which Vishnu, Brahma, and Shiva float munificently, their hands opening downward, showering blessings. It is a vivid four-color palette of scarlet, orange, yellow, and blue.

In 1977, the year in which *The Women Painters of Mithila* was published, a tradition of anonymity still characterized Mithila painters. None of the paintings in the book are attributed, although the names of the artists can be detected on half a dozen of the paintings themselves. Even the photograph of Sita Devi, the book's frontispiece, does not identify her. In the late 1970s women artists themselves began the process of claiming their work by putting their names on the back to be sure they received credit and payment. This process formed part of the transformations of subjectivity and identity that accompanied the transformations in the art itself (Heinz 1997). When I returned to Sita Devi two years later in 1998 (the last time I saw her) she had learned the value of her signature. She was no longer

painting, but as a personal gift to me she took a work on silk painted by her son and laboriously wrote her name below it, Sita Devi Jha.

The 1966–67 Famine and Creation of an Artist Class

All the artists tell the same story about the beginning: there was a drought in 1966; someone in the village died of starvation. The central government sent Bhaskar Kulkarni, a young artist, to Madhubani to inquire about Mithila wall art. He did not know specifically where to find this art, but he drove around to villages near Madhubani and came to Jitwarpur. There he saw paintings on Sita Devi's wall, and he asked her to reproduce these on paper. He asked other women to do this, too, providing paper and paints, but no one could draw as beautifully as Sita Devi. The first time she painted on paper, she says, she did it for Kulkarni.

Kulkarni was sent to Madhubani by Pupul Jayakar, chair of the All-India Handicraft Board. After the long imperial project of collecting India's great art, particularly sculpture and paintings, and lodging it in private collections and museums in the West, the government of post-independence India recognized that Indian culture was a potential export commodity. The Board was established in 1952 to advise the central government on ways to develop and market culture. The charge to the board included suggesting measures for the "improvement and development" of handicrafts. This meant formulating plans for marketing cultural products, financing their production, and organizing the requisite social and economic arrangements to facilitate the new market. Inevitably, this required working with the state governments where such schemes would be localized. In 1962, The Handicrafts and Handlooms Export Corporation of India was established to develop new markets and expand traditional ones "for the needs of the consumers abroad." This would include making wholesale orders, publicizing and promoting crafts, establishing retail shops abroad, and participating in major international exhibitions. The Central Cottage Industries Emporium at Janpath in New Delhi became the premier sales organization for Indian handicrafts (All-India Handicraft Board 2006).

Thus, there was a structure in place that could respond to the crisis of 1966–67, the famine that has been called the worst in living memory. While the rains failed in south Bihar, heavy floods destroyed the crops in north Bihar. As much as 80% of all crops were lost, and 66% percent of the population suffered either scarcity or famine conditions. Per capita consumption of grain

dropped to 6.3 oz. per day, compared to the national standard of 17.5 oz (Brass 1986). The state and central governments, and international agencies came to the aid of Biharis with relief efforts ranging from free food to its subsidized distribution in "fair price shops," as well as longer term development efforts. Among these was Kulkarni's effort in Madhubani.

Famine is an old story in north Bihar. There were severe famines in 1873–4, 1906–07, and 1908–09 caused by catastrophic combinations of drought and flood. Official and unofficial writings of colonial officers provide a sad picture of life during these periods. In 1874 a young Englishman named Henry Kisch, posted to Madhubani to oversee relief works for 110,000 people under his jurisdiction, wrote to his sister Emma: "It is impossible to describe to you the condition of some...The very colour of the bone was visible through the thin black film that surrounded it." (Kisch N.d.)

Tons of grain were shipped in from other parts of India and Burma, while relief works were set up to enable the people to earn the income necessary to purchase grain. The digging of water tanks was the preferred public works project. These can still be seen. Driving through Mithila today, visitors are struck by the beauty of literally thousands of ponds, most of them filled with water lily or lotus or (worse) water hyacinth. Almost all are man-made, as is evident by their unnaturally square or rectangular geometry. Some are centuries old, for digging ponds, building temples, and supporting Brahmans were considered pious acts (*rājadharmā*) for Hindu kings. They were an essential protection against drought and central to the premodern irrigation system, serving as reservoirs to collect rainfall or, if dug deep enough, as wells. Channels fed water from the tanks to nearby fields for irrigation during the winter rice crop. But during severe droughts, tanks often dried out, and then it made good sense to pay local workers to re-excavate them, deepening them until the water table was finally reached. Many of the reports of famine commissioners are tour diaries of their visits to tank excavation projects. On the Gausa tank, for instance, 567 laborers were men, 1,140 were women, and 18 were children. Women worked with men, often in family units. Naturally, caste and class enter into the labor picture. Nearly all the laborers on public work projects, even under the duress of famine, were members of the cultivating castes or landless castes who depended on irregular paid labor. The occupational hierarchy during the British period was extremely complex, but since it has a bearing on Mithila art and the creation of a class of professional women painters from the Maithil Brahman and Kayastha castes, I turn to it briefly.

Rank and Work

The maharajas of Darbhanga came into possession of their estate during the 16th century under Akbar, and proceeded to act as the Mughals had before them, granting whole villages to relatives, supporters, priests, and temples as they saw fit. This created a large landed ruling class throughout the region consisting principally of Brahmans and Kayasthas. The British supported the emergence of a salaried bureaucratic hierarchy that again favored these two castes.

Brahmans and Kayasthas were thus allied as both a political-economic and a cultural elite. For Brahmans, the North Bihar economy depended on the old endowments of land which provided them with rice and income that vary a great deal with the situation and with the newer occupational opportunities for men with English educations in law, government, education, and, less frequently, business. During a period of famine, a Brahman family could be as distressed as the *raiya*s who worked their land and shared the harvest. If the harvest failed, all went hungry. However, the *raiya*t could work on government relief projects, while the Brahman could not.

Kisch, noticing that Brahman women were sometimes more willing than their husbands to “take charity,”⁶ attempted to find ways to reach these women with relief projects without forcing them to break *pardā*. His remarks suggest the difficulty Archer may also have encountered in trying to document Brahman wall paintings:

Now that I have got my relief system in good order I am going in largely for giving out cotton to women of high caste who will spin thread and then return it and receive wages. Of course neither I nor any of my officers will ever see these women who are “*purvah nisheem*” (sitters behind the curtain) but we know they are in great distress and we give them cotton through their husbands. Many of the Brahmans are too proud to take charity and the women certainly would take it in the majority of cases...We procure a large quantity of unspun cotton and then give it out in small amounts to women; the women spin the cotton into thread and return [it]...This thread is then again given out to be woven into cloth and lastly the cloth is distributed to persons who are also in need of clothing. The manufacture of the cloth thus goes on through two classes of relief laborers and is thus very well adapted for relief works. Besides it affords assistance to women of the highest castes who have not even to leave their houses as we give out the cotton threads to their husbands. [Kisch N.d.]

These historic patterns shed light on activities in response to the famine of 1966, when again relief projects suitable to women in *pardā* were sought. Strongly held prejudices against women working and earning money militated against most women who might have been interested in taking up Kulkarni’s paper and paint. This was true of most Brahmans and Kayasthas; the intensity of the opprobrium corresponded to the rank of the household in the regional hierarchy. Śrotriya Brahmans above all would not allow their women to participate in income-producing work. The Mahapatra Brahmans of Jitwarpur and Rahika, however, were low-ranking and already engaged in a priestly specialty that required receiving gifts from others at funerals and *shrāddhas*.

The Circulation of Goods and the Gift (*dān*)

The ritual wall paintings that were of interest to Kulkarni, Jayakar, and the All-India Handicraft Board did not circulate⁷ as distinct objects and were not remunerated. They were fully incorporated into the ritual system of Brahmans and Kayasthas and did not have a separable existence in a world of circulating objects and monetary exchange. They were not “art” in that sense. The plans that the All-India Handicraft Board had for this art went directly against some of the deepest principles of north Bihar’s orthodox communities.

The acceptance of gifts is a highly charged issue for orthodox Brahmans. According to the Shastras, it is a Brahman’s duty to accept gifts from kings and others of suitable rank, by implication to allow the givers to shed their sins by passing them to Brahmans, who are pure enough to absorb them, just as the gods can accept gifts from mortals. But, in Raheja’s vivid phrase, there is some “poison in the gift” (Raheja 1988): the giver’s impurities and sins. Such gifts are particularly essential at the time of death, when gifts are given to Mahapatra Brahmans, such as the Brahmans of Jitwarpur, to facilitate the transformation of a malevolent ghost into a benevolent ancestor at the 12th day mortuary rites. Parry (1984, 1989) writes about how obsessed with this the funeral Brahmans of Banaras were, likening themselves to a sewer through which the moral filth of their patrons pass, while they endlessly accumulate sin. The Brahman who is the endpoint becomes a veritable cesspit. The highest ranking Brahmans resist accepting any gifts if they can. However, in a world in which money and exchange are necessary for survival, it was generally the wealth of Brahmans as landholders that allowed them the freedom to decline gifts. Most of these land holdings, passed down through generations, and frequently

reduced in size to pay for weddings and funerals, are now small, and the proceeds do not go far, leaving many Śrotriyas impoverished.

This is the cultural context that initially militated against allowing women to engage in the kind of income-producing labor that the first stages of the paper art entailed. It was only the low-ranking villagers around Madhubani who took up Kulkarni's challenge. The most conservative families in the region are still very reluctant to accept any kind of gifts or let their women work for pay, as I found when I attempted to employ female assistants in 1980. But it is easy to overstate the control such views exercise over the behavior of Maithil Brahmins and Kayasthas. Later, when the monetary benefits became clear and regional pride in the growing fame of the art began to develop, more women were willing to participate in the paper art movement.

Still, the typical woman who took up Kulkarni's offer was a widow from the lower ranks of Maithil Brah-

mins. Jagdamba Devi, shown in Figure 11 with one of her signature paintings—a bride and groom being carried to the groom's house—was one of the five or so most famous early painters. She was a Kayastha who had been married at the age of eight. Before her "second marriage" (*durāgoman*, or *gauna*), however, the groom died. She was, therefore, condemned to the life of a widow without ever having known her husband and never having left her father's village. Ganga Devi of Rashidpur was an abandoned wife and later a widow (Jain 1998). Sushila Devi of Rahika was a widow. At the age of eight she had been married to a 50-year-old man who had survived his three previous wives. When he died, she struck out on her own in an impressive act of personal agency. Hearing that some women were earning money by painting on paper and selling the pictures to the Handicraft Board, she borrowed six hundred rupees to travel to Madhubani, Darbhanga, and Patna to see what women were painting and what these pictures



FIGURE 11. Celebrity artist Jagdamba Devi Das with one of her paintings. Photographed in 1980 by the author. Married at the age of eight and widowed before taking up residence with her husband, she lived out her life in her father's village, Jitwarpur, and was one of the first of the artists to receive national recognition. She died in 1984.



FIGURE 12. By the mid-1970s, women of Jitwarpur and neighboring villages were being professionalized by the promise of an international market for their work and with the encouragement of anthropologists and other development workers. As a result painting became a serious economic activity for women and a few men. Photographed in 1980.

were selling for in urban areas. She then returned to her village and began to paint.

Not all early Mithila artists were widows, however. Sita Devi's husband was still alive, and she said that in the early years she had trouble with him over her new work. He never directly forbade her from painting, but he would start a quarrel whenever buyers approached her. She understood his reluctance. "After all," she remembered, "they used to bring the bride, all wrapped in *pardā*, and put her inside the four walls of her compound which she was seldom allowed to leave, and in a few years the same women were going to Patna, Delhi, and even foreign countries." Eventually, however, her husband found a role as her agent and assistant, negotiating deals and filling in the colors on art work that she had outlined. Baua Devi, now the most esteemed of the younger generation of artists, also still has a living husband, Sita Devi's husband's nephew.

Anthropologists, Folklorists and Jitwarpur Village

The practices of anthropologists and folklorists working in Mithila have impacted Mithila art by emphasizing activism over the production of knowledge. Unlike some scholars who are merely interested in the production of knowledge, Erika Moser and Ray Owens devoted themselves to creating a production system and international marketing plan for Mithila art. In 1973 the first foreign scholar since Archer came to Mithila to study the new paper art that was showing up in handicraft shops in Delhi. Erika Moser, a German folklorist and filmmaker, lived in Jitwarpur for four months and collected eighty paintings from the villages around Madhubani, mostly from Jitwarpur, Ranti, Rahika, and Rashidpur, to take back to Germany. They sold quickly, and Moser returned the profits in a form that would help the women of Mithila and encourage the professionalization of Mithila

art. She used the profits to buy a small house site in Jitwarpur on which to build a center for the women artists. On her second trip, she also arranged to take Sita Devi to Germany for a large exhibition she was organizing. The exhibition toured seven European nations from 1974–76, with Sita Devi as the featured artisan.

Ray Owens went to Madhubani in 1976 funded by a Fulbright Grant. Like Erika Moser, he settled in Jitwarpur, where he established a long-term relationship with the village, citing M. N. Srinivas' admonition to scholars to "not just study a village, but adopt it, and treat its problems as his own" (Owens 1983:24). The combined efforts of Moser and Owens provided this rural village unprecedented and sustained international attention and support. Both Moser and Owens employed a local Maithil Brahman woman, Gauri Mishra, as their Maithili interpreter and cultural broker. She was married to a physician, and her English was impeccable because she had lived for several years in the United Kingdom. She was also among the first Maithil Brahman women to attend college and earn a graduate degree.

For several years, the triangulation of Gauri Mishra, Erika Moser in Europe, and Ray Owens in the United States raised the profile of Mithila art internationally. Together, Gauri Mishra and Ray Owens founded the Master Craftswomen's Association (MCA) in 1977. A center was built on the land donated by Erika Moser with the explicit goal of helping to "professionalize" the artists, train interested, needy women in painting, and increase the income women could earn by eliminating the intermediaries who were making large profits (Figure 12). In the early years of paper art production, artists were paid Rs. 5 to 15 per painting by buyers who would take the paintings to Delhi and sell them for Rs. 50 to Rs. 350. Bhaskar Kulkarni of the Handicraft and Handloom Export Corporation began by paying by size: Rs. 5 for small paintings, Rs. 10 for bigger ones, and Rs. 20 for the largest ones (20" x 30"). Gradually the prices began to rise, especially for work by the better known artists. Jamuna Devi of Jitwarpur was earning Rs. 50–60 in the 1970s, and, by the 1980s, was earning over Rs. 100 for a large painting. A painting for which a middleman paid Rs. 50 would typically sell for Rs. 250 or more in Delhi.

Ray Owens wanted to insure that artists received more of the profit for their work. He developed an agreement with Jitwarpur artists to pay them a flat amount per piece, take the pieces to the United States for sale, and return to the artists half of what he received there. For instance, Lalita Devi, a Mahapatra Brahman from Simri, began painting scenes from the Ramayana, for which she had been receiving Rs. 15 each. Owens purchased fifteen paintings at Rs. 25 apiece, a windfall for her. In the United States he sold them all at an exhibi-

tion, and sent her an additional Rs. 700 (Vohra 1988). In 1980 when I visited Jitwarpur, Rahika, and Ranti, the artists told me that Indians pay Rs. 15 to 25, while foreigners pay Rs. 30 to 40. Therefore, I paid Rs. 25–40 for a number of paintings on paper and cloth. When I returned in 1984, Owens' arrangements had produced a welcome inflation in prices for the artists. Baua Devi, a rising star, was already specializing in the snakes (*Nag Kanya*) for which she is now famous. She had a private arrangement to sell Owens all of her work. He had commissioned 25 Puranic stories from her, but she was willing to sell me some of these for his price of Rs. 75 apiece. Owens was also sending her 50% of whatever he got for these pieces in the United States. In nearby Ranti, Mahasundari Devi, famous for Kayastha line drawings, was asking even more: Rs. 150–200 each. Thanks to the efforts of Moser, Owens, Gauri Mishra, and organizations like the Master Craftswomen's Association, the women artists had learned to negotiate higher prices for their work.

When Owens returned to the United States, he founded the Ethnic Arts Foundation (EAF) which he hoped would be the agency to market folk arts from a number of developing nations. With plans to open outlets in a number of urban areas, he established a board and made arrangements to increase the supply from Jitwarpur over the next several years. He then went to Bangladesh, where his next project was with hand-made quilts that EAF was also going to market.

The benefits of the international spotlight were quickly apparent in Jitwarpur and the region, followed soon after by complicated local politics. Gauri Mishra had established herself as a local broker between the talented and needy local women and international development sources. The Master Craftswomen's Association, through Ray Owens and Gauri Mishra, appealed for funds from the Ford Foundation. Representatives visited the headquarters in Jitwarpur and, as a result Rs. 48,000 were promised to aid in the expansion of the association's work. This was contingent on the association's achieving income tax exemption status. It is not clear why this exemption was delayed. Gauri Mishra claims that the cause was their refusal to pay the bribes needed for the exemption to be processed and approved. Perhaps there were other reasons. In 1982 the Ford Foundation sent Viji Srinivasan to sort things out on the ground. They met in Jitwarpur, at the association headquarters. Srinivasan saw that some women artists were benefiting from their personal links with buyers like Ray Owens, but the vast majority were still deeply impoverished. She recommended that these poorest women should receive the benefit of the Ford Foundation investment in the Master Craftswomen's Association (Vohra 1988).

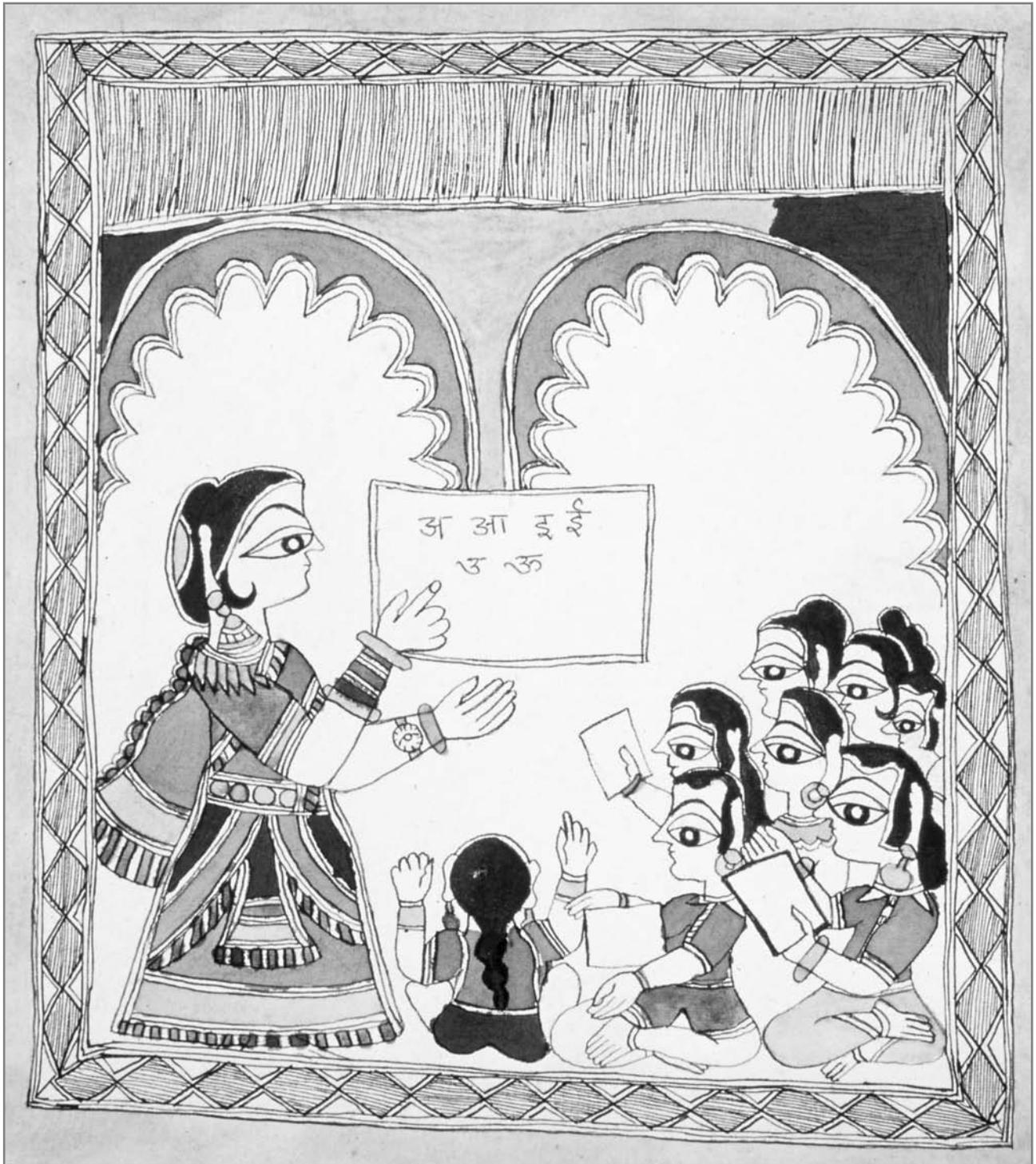


FIGURE 13. SEWA Madhubani, under the direction of Gauri Mishra, has developed new local uses for Mithila art, such as advocating women's literacy, nutrition, prenatal care, breast feeding of infants, and religious tolerance. Note stylistic similarities to the panels on the walls of the royal kohbara ghar, painted in 1919 (Figs. 5 and 6).

Meanwhile, Gauri Mishra was developing her own vision of the best ways to help the impoverished women of north Bihar. This privileged Brahman woman had seen the poverty of her area through the eyes of Moser and Owens, and she recognized that all the benefits of Owens' work—and access to the American market for Mithila art—was monopolized by Jitwarpur, “Owens' village” and the site of the Master Craftswomen's Association's headquarters. Gauri Mishra's primary commitment was not to Jitwarpur, the art world or Mithila art. Mithila art happened to have caught the imagination of the All-India Handicrafts Board and a cadre of international development workers; it had prestige as “art.” But she thought this prestige could benefit humbler activities as well. Mithila art was one among many potential vehicles for economic development for poor women of all castes throughout the region. This insight was probably underscored by the fact that in addition to the income potential for Mithila art, there were other funding sources such as the Ford Foundation.

In order to broaden the scope of the development efforts, Gauri Mishra attempted in 1983 to move the Master Craftswomen's Association out of Jitwarpur. The people of Jitwarpur resisted this movement and matters got so intense between her and the villagers that she had to have a police escort into the village to collect MCA materials and leave. She reestablished the MCA headquarters on the outskirts of Madhubani in a rented building in a more central location. Next, she got a court judgment against Ray Owens for buying directly from the women painters without paying 25% into the MCA that she had requisitioned, arguing that this amounted to theft because he was then selling what he had not purchased from the association (Interview with Gauri Mishra, July 13, 1984. See also D. Jain 1980 and Vohra 1988). The question turned on whether Owens was entitled to private arrangements with individual artists, or if he must work through the organization. It was never resolved, but he never returned to Mithila, and his special relation with Jitwarpur dissolved.

In July 1983, Gauri Mishra established SEWA Madhubani, a branch of the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA), and within the year had secured a grant of Rs. 22,000 from Oxfam America. I visited SEWA Madhubani a year later, in July 1984, arriving late on a busy day as they were preparing for a visit from Srinivasan from the Ford Foundation. Gauri Mishra described a dazzling array of activities: a recently completed survey of dozens of villages, to discover the true needs of women. A carefully selected sample of women from these villages was invited to join SEWA, most of them neither Brahmans nor Kayasthas. A staff of ten persons was serving about 50 salaried artists who were receiv-

ing Rs. 200 per month for their painting efforts, which were marketed by SEWA Madhubani. A savings scheme had been started, with bank books intended to prevent the women's savings being taken by their menfolk. EAF sponsored a calendar greeting card project. Gauri Mishra was teaching women to sew. SEWA Madhubani was also undertaking social activist efforts such as an anti-dowry campaign. Forty placard-waving women had crashed the all-male Saurath Sabha, where Maithil Brahmans meet every June or July to arrange marriages. SEWA Mithila has appropriated Mithila Art stylistics in a campaign to improve the lives of women and children. Among these are literacy, prenatal care, nutrition, breast feeding and religious tolerance (Figure 13).

Twelve years later, in 1996, when I again visited Jitwarpur, things had changed for them. The connection with Owens was over. They had not seen him for ten years. Many of the foreigners who used to come to Jitwarpur to buy directly were now being diverted by Gauri Mishra. But Jitwarpur's fortunes have not declined. There is now a national market for Mithila Art among India's growing middle class, and Jitwarpur's international fame has turned it into an exhibition village for Mithila Art.

Jitwarpur's fame draws occasional serious travelers to its dusty lanes: art collectors, anthropologists, photographers, reporters, development workers, students. Ray Owens and Joseph Elder from the University of Wisconsin have made two films here. Erika Moser made several films, Yves Vequaud made a film, and in 1996 a Japanese film crew also visited the village. These visitations offer a motivation to wall painting that never existed before. Art appreciators want to see the wall paintings that are the source of the paper art, and Jitwarpur takes care not to disappoint them. I happened to visit on two occasions just after a film crew had been on site. Figure 14 is a wall of Sita Devi's house that I photographed in 1984, shortly after Vequaud's filming. But the village exceeded all previous spectacles in 1996 for the Japanese film crew. The Japanese paid villagers to paint their village for the camera, and so wall decorations went where they had never gone before, along exterior walls of compounds, down lanes, and along the steps of ghats leading to the bathing area of Jitwarpur's largest water tank (Figure 15).

The body of work that has come out of Jitwarpur over four decades has been astonishing, not only for its abundance but for its creative ingenuity. There is an unmistakable Jitwarpur style, so distinctive that it merits separate discussion that I do not attempt here. I do not dispute Szanton's suggestion that it is “folk art no longer” (Szanton 2004), nor do I deal with Ray Owens' vast personal archive, to which I have had only



FIGURE 14. As Jitwarpur's fame has spread, it has become a model village for Mithila Art, hosting film crews from Germany, France, the United States, and Japan. This Jitwarpur wall was painted in 1984 not for a marriage but for a French film.

cursorious access. At his death, Ray Owens left a collection of over 600 paintings to the University of California, Berkeley, and there are large collections elsewhere in the United States and abroad, from Germany to Japan. The art has indeed transcended its ritual settings, becoming something else entirely, and increasingly it has been art historians who have taken up its analysis (e.g., Jain 1997). My primary interest has been in the original wall art and its social and cultural significance, absent from or misconstrued by so many published sources.

Artwriting 2

Throughout these years there has been surprisingly little effort to elicit art talk from the women artists themselves. I suspect there are a number of reasons for this lack, some of them conceptual, others practical. Most collectors do not spend more than a few days in Mithila if they go there at all; many pick up interesting pieces in Delhi or Patna and only talk to any artists who may be

there. The women painters are not very articulate about their painting in the ways outsiders expect, and too-close interrogation leaves the questioner uneasy about the shallowness of their explanations. Ask them about the rituals that accompanied the pieces in their wall art incarnations, and they will go on indefinitely, but ask them to produce "art-talk" about the paper pieces and you won't get much. The wall art was signifier for complex ritual and cultural ideas, but any artist who has given serious thought to trying to explain any of this to a foreigner who does not speak her language and has only an afternoon to spend in her village finds the task of even locating a starting point simply impossible.

But if Mithila Art is not folk art but fine art none of this really matters. For does not true art stand alone above its cultural particularities, objects to be reacted to unmediated in any way?

The prestige of particular pieces is more frequently upgraded through a reduction in the label copy; ethnographic artifacts become masterpieces of

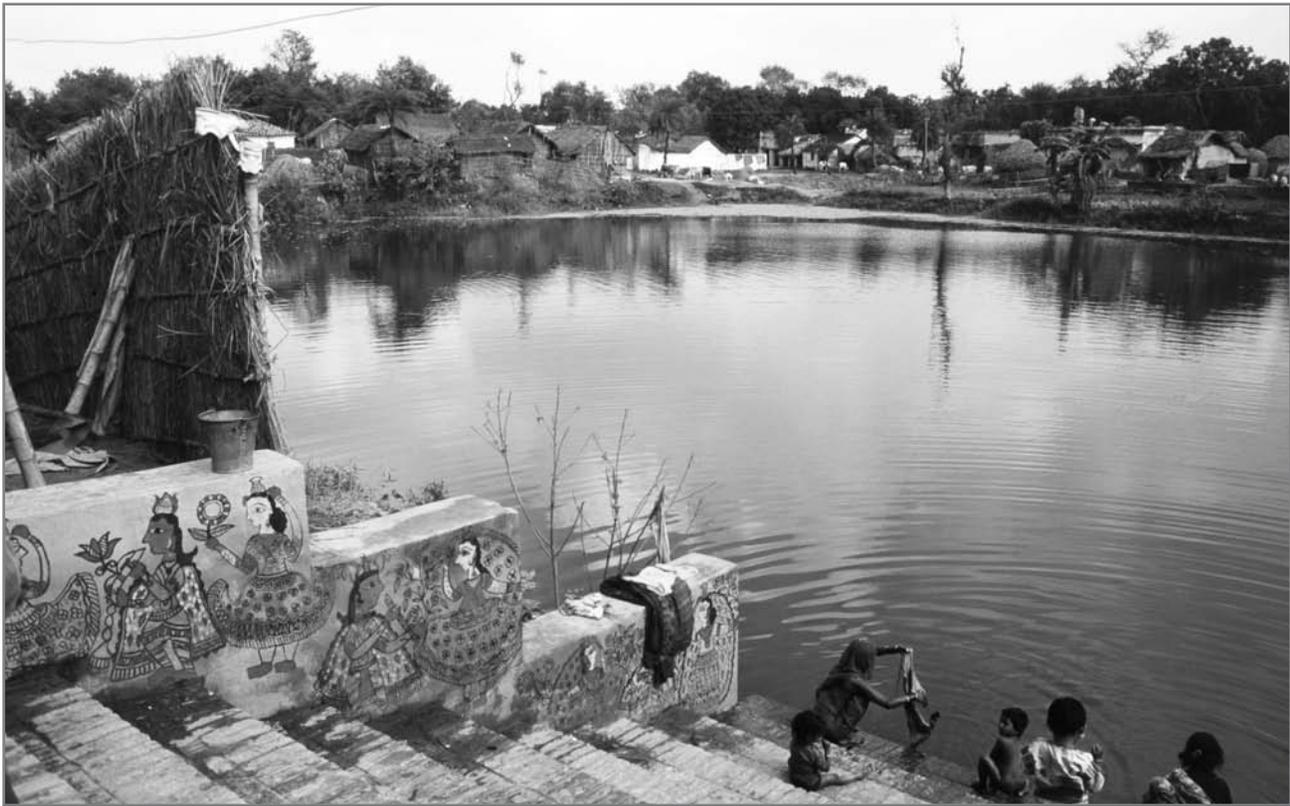


FIGURE 15. In the summer of 1996 a Japanese film crew paid Jitwarpur village to paint itself for their cameras. As a result, wall paintings went where they had never gone before, beyond the Brahman and Kayastha neighborhoods, along exterior alleys, and even down the steps to the pond.

world art at the point when they shed their anthropological contextualization and are judged capable of standing purely on their own aesthetic merit. [Price 1989:86]

To the extent this is true, there is no real need to document the meanings and ritual uses of the art in any complex way. A different kind of discourse is produced about objects for whom the status of fine art is claimed, a form of discourse that Carrier (1987) has called “art-writing.” Yet artwriting, he argues, should not be viewed as external to the art itself, but as an intrinsic part of artistic activity, and Marcus (1995) has noted that the verbal images about art are frequently much stronger than the art itself. Promoters of Mithila art have adopted strategies from the art world to gain its approval. Recognition for particular artist-personalities, gallery and museum shows, and interpretive writing (artwriting) have all been part of this strategy.

Yves Vequaud’s *The Women Painters of Mithila* has been the authoritative work on Mithila art ever since

its publication in 1977. In Mithila, its illustrations are regarded as a kind of canon of the great masters, and young girls copy from it in learning to paint. Yet almost no one reads the text. Outside India, however, the text has become the authoritative source on the cultural context of the art, its assertions showing up in exhibition texts and websites with little critical engagement (except in Heinz 1984 and 1996). The following summarizes the themes of this second-stage, post-Archer effort at an exemplar of folk-art writing:

1) The timelessness of an ancient culture

Artwriting has aimed to romanticize the cultural setting of Mithila through appeal to the timelessness of its culture. It is said that the women have been painting like this for 3000 years, a date stretching back to the supposed writing of the *Ramayana* by Valmiki, and perhaps to a historical Rama and Sita. Both Valmiki’s original 3rd century BCE version of the *Ramayana* and Tulsidas’ 16th century version mention the beautifully painted city of Mithila. Of

course there is no way to substantiate these assertions that contemporary Mithila art is a direct descendant of paintings mentioned in the Ramayana.

2) Family and village, not caste

This incredible three-thousand-year continuity has been possible because of a social organization based on the village community. Nostalgic references to village and extended family appeal to Indians and non-Indians alike, supported by photos showing women working in the fields, carrying bundles of grain and harvesting rice—activities almost no Brahman or Kayastha woman would do. In the cultural imaginary of international art appreciation, these villages are pastoral habitations around a pond, where social solidarity is reinforced by “village ceremonies and rituals” in which the wall art somehow figures. This romanticization of extended family and village life avoids mention of the critical unit of caste or *jāti*. This contrasts with another body of literature in which authors disdainfully write about the dominance of the Maithil Brahmins of North Bihar (e.g., Das 1992). No one wishes to acknowledge the cultural significance of the actual caste-based community in which the art played so central a role. Only in the distinction between color and line styles are caste distinctions raised.

3) Spiritual significance

Another trope is the spiritual power of the art, described in generalized terms: “Mithila painting is a product of communal spiritual experience...a manifestation of a collective mind, embodying millennia of traditional knowledge.” “Each painting is a prayer and an accompaniment to meditation.” “The artist ought not to work unless she is in a yogic state” (Mookerjee 1977). This language conveniently elides the fact that currently Mithila art is a commercial enterprise, that most women are trying to paint their way out of poverty, that the market they are attempting to reach is mostly a non-Hindu one whose tastes they are willing to appeal to if only they could find out what they are.

4) Tantra and sexual symbolism

To the extent artwriting about Mithila art references specific ritual practices, Tantra has been the cult of choice: “...rituals in which the faithful participate while red-robed priests drink preparations of *bhang*, hashish, or palm-wine, eat meat, and perform sexual rites with some of those attending, thus celebrating the mystery of life” (Vequaud 1977:21).

The women painters have “knowledge of the symbolism and arcana of tantrism” (1977:25). Vequaud writes of the kohbar image:

The kohbar’s basic design and composition is heavily charged with tantric symbolism, and in its centre a lingam, the phallus, penetrate the circular beauty of a yoni, the symbol of the female genitals, often drawn as a fully opened lotus. [1977:15]

5) Line, color, horror vacui

A verbal descriptive palette and a classification scheme begun by Archer continues in Vequaud and later writers. Compositions are described as rhythmic, with bold coloring and “simple, childlike directness.” The colors often seem “too bright” to Westerners, even violent, though they are suited to the brilliant light of India (1977:26). Faces drawn in profile are compared to Minoan art and Southeast Asian shadow puppets.

6) Matriarchy

The most startling—and erroneous—assertions of Vequaud’s book is that Mithila is a matriarchal society. Something or someone led him seriously astray here, but there it is, in the authoritative work on Mithila art: “Mithila’s is a matriarchal society, and there are regular gatherings of young men to which girls who want to marry come.” “In the matriarchal society of Mithila, young women propose marriage to young men of their choice” (1977:68). In fact, there could scarcely be a more patriarchal society in India, when both Brahmins and Kayasthas are rigidly organized by means of recorded patrilineages of great depth—24 generations—and many women are still kept in *pardā*.

Artwriting 3

A new generation of scholars is now shifting the discourse in more valuable directions. Chief among these is Jyotindra Jain’s close analysis of the work of Ganga Devi, the Kayastha painter from Rashidpur, based on lengthy interviews apparently in New Delhi prior to her death in 1991 (1997:19–22). Abused by her husband’s family, robbed by her co-wife, and childless, Ganga Devi’s sufferings were sublimated in her art. Jain chronicles her evolution from folk painter to artist, as she broke free from “the constraints inherent in the making of ritual-bound, static, magical images” resulting in “a new conceptualization of images and unprecedented narrative pictorial



FIGURE 16. The growing fame of Mithila Art has brought pride to the entire region, and the art has developed new social meanings. Painting schools have sprung up in urban Darbhanga, such as this afternoon rooftop school, where middle class girls from many castes learn by copying the canonical pieces from Vequaud's *The Women Painters of Mithila* (1976).

devices (coming) to the fore, leading to drastic changes in the formal structure of the painting itself" (1997: 9). The bulk of Jain's analysis is an important contribution to the kind of interpretive analysis of iconographic detail and re-uniting image and ritual that has been missing, the approach of an anthropologist trained in ethnographic field research. However, the new discourse of "freedom" and "self-expression"—the language of fine arts—now contrasts with the dismissive discourse of outsider folk-art talk: "ritual-bound," "static," "magical," "self-imitating," "lifeless copies," "mindless replicas," "conventional," "fettered." The agency is now all with the globalized artist and her location in an admiring transnational establishment. We seem even to have lost the ability to imagine what it was once like, when divinities were social beings summoned to brief but vibrant murtis, and darśan flowed between their blazing all-seeing eyes and the downcast "devotional eyes" (Davis 1996) of brides and grooms. It is unlikely that Ganga Devi herself had forgotten this.

Conclusion

I have attempted to relocate the art in the social and historical setting which gave it birth and life, a much broader sweep than the handful of professionalized villages around Madhubani. The art has always been central to the ritual life of two specific castes distributed widely across North Bihar and politically dominant for centuries because of the control exercised by Darbhanga Raj and its ruling family. The movement of these images out of intensely private household interiors into a public life of markets, archives, galleries, and books half a world away testify to the widespread dissolution of cultural borders that has characterized our period in history. The collecting practices of individuals, libraries and museums, the commercial practices of producing and marketing cultural products, and the interpreting practices of scholars and critics have come together around this corpus of visual images, altering their shapes, functions and meanings.

There has been further regime change in Mithila with the emergence of “Laloo Raj” in 1990, widely considered to be India’s most corrupt and incompetent state government, making Bihar the worst state to live and work in at a time when all other parts of India are flourishing. As part of its drive to reduce the influence of the old privileged castes of north Bihar, the state government has shifted support away from Brahman and Kayastha arts to those of the lower castes of Mithila, such as tattooing. Prejudice against Brahmans is severe enough these days that Brahman boys are dropping their giveaway surname, Jha, in public schools. In this environment, something of a revitalization movement has emerged around Mithila art.

While art production carries on as before in the commercialized villages around Madhubani, Mithila art has become a class marker for middle class girls from professional and business families in more urban Darbhanga. For example, Chhabi Jha, a Śrotriya woman whose family tradition long disapproved of women working or making money, now plays a significant new role as one of many women teaching Mithila art classes several days a week to young wives in their courtyards and rooftops (Fig. 16). These days they may wish to sell some of these pieces, but that is not the main point. Chhabi makes it clear to me that in addition to teaching *all* the images that have been part of this tradition—not just the popular ones from Vequaud’s book and the commercial trade—she also teaches the “theory” of the art. By theory she means all the matters I used to interrogate her about the art: what goes in the kohbara ghar? Why must this and that be there? What is the meaning of puren and kamalbans and naina yogin? The women are developing a discourse about this art and teaching it to young women.

The new local discourse about the images includes contesting the published assertions of outsiders. Aside from Yves Vequaud, whose pictures are endlessly copied but whose text is never read, little outside scholarship has made the reverse trip to the source of Mithila art, and I held my breath when I gave Chhabi a copy of an article I published in 1996. Apparently, the whole family read it because various members began delicately bringing up issues they had with my interpretations. Bhoganath Jha, Chhabi’s husband and the head of the household where I have stayed on many visits beginning in 1980, has been my cultural advisor since the beginning. “Madam,” he began formally, clearing his throat, “you have made one grave error in your article.” My heart sank. “You have said nothing of *arpana*.” It was true. I had notes and illustrations of the dozens of designs that are made on the floor in rice powder in association with rituals that also called for wall paintings, but

my article was focused around a particular controversy dealing with the wall paintings, and I had felt I could not try to write about everything in a single paper. But his point was legitimate: I had not really captured the import of the paintings if I did not show how the entire space is prepared for the visitation of the gods and the creation of sacred spaces for principal actors in specific rituals. Instead, I had filled my paper with theories of interest to academics and controversies that were, from his point of view, irrelevant. And, coming full circle, Chhabi’s daughter, Putul, who often laughed off my questions about the meaning of this or that, calling them *paripāti*, (literally “carried on” from mother to daughter) with no further interpretation available, found Archer’s “diagrams of the sexual organs” a fresh and interesting insight: “Since the elders don’t have the courage to speak it out, they put it in the form of symbols there.” I remembered the point Clifford Geertz often made: that members of a culture are themselves trying to interpret what it is that they are up to.

These developments demonstrate that the documentation project has now been taken up by Brahmans and Kayasthas themselves, surely an interesting and important movement. Some of this will come from Mithila University, where a chair has been established for Mithila Art Studies. It will also come from the rapid expansion of the education of women, who are now learning rhetorical arts as well as visual ones. There is much still to be said about the women’s art, and finally the women will say it.

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Notes

- ¹ Mithila is a cultural region located north of the Ganges in the state of Bihar and in the Nepal terai. It has had a continuing identity dating to early Sanskrit texts from at least

the first few centuries BCE. In the Ramayana, Mithila is the name of the capital city of King Janaka, the father of Sita. In recent centuries, Mithila has been associated with the culture of its two dominant castes, the Maithil Brahmins and Kayasthas, whose art is the topic of this paper. The images in this article can be viewed in color on VAR's website: <http://etext.virginia.edu/VAR/>.

- ² Harinandan Jha of Kakraur village, 18th in a line of genealogists (*panjikars*), was the official genealogist to the Kharore Bhaur lineage of the maharajas of Darbhanga. He was my teacher for five months in 1980 when I went to his house daily for instructions in the arcane rules of panji that governed appropriate marriages and the genealogical method of the panjikars of the Maithil Brahmins. His father had hosted W. G. Archer on his 1940 trip.
- ³ The Anglo-Indian terms, "first marriage" and "second marriage," refer to the principal marriage (*vivāha*) with, in Archer's time, child brides, and the secondary rites (*durago-man*), when the bride has become mature enough to take up residence in her husband's household. The most elaborate art is generally done for *vivāha*.
- ⁴ In addition to the many deities of the Hindu and the nature scenes of which kamalbans and purens are the most extravagant examples, there is another class of figures that have not been widely discussed and were identified by Archer with limited success. A ubiquitous figure in the wall art is a "woman holding a fan" that is invariably found in all four corners of every kohbara ghar. Archer calls her *naina yogin*, but a great deal more can be said about the significance of this figure. Another is an abstract figure called *bans* (bamboo) that takes many forms and alludes to the patrilineages unknown to Archer. Elephants appear frequently on wall paintings or as ornamented clay models. A small structure often appears with a male and female figure inside. Archer generally identifies these as Shiva and Parvati, but the structure itself is an actual part of wedding night ritual when bride and groom are associated with Mahadev and Gauri. A mysterious female form, her face half covered with a veil and carrying a jug, is sometimes identified as the bride, or as female attendants. All of these figures have a place in the symbolism of marriage, and many serve instrumental or agentive functions. I have discussed much of this in Heinz 1996.
- ⁵ In-marrying wives incarnate the *kul devi*, or lineage goddess, of the household; the worship practices associated with this goddess, who assures the fertility of the patrilineages, are passed down with each generation from husband's mother to son's wife. It was the continuity of the patrilineal culture that was at stake and was preserved in the *aides-memoire*.
- ⁶ These attitudes are also discussed in an earlier issue of VAR (Jhala 2004).
- ⁷ There was a different kind of circulation in the *aides-memoire*. They circulated along with wives in the marital exchange system of Brahmins and Kayasthas.

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