



# Lakshmi

Jagadamba Devi

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**Not on display**

**Title/Description:** Lakshmi

**Artist/Maker:** Jagadamba Devi (Artist)

**Born:** 1972

**Object Type:** Painting (mithila)

**Measurements:** h. 558.8 x w. 762 mm

**Accession Number:** 50891

**Production Place:** India

**Credit Line:** Donated by The Ethnic Arts Foundation

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The Mithila region covers a part of the northern state of Bihar in India and extends into the Terai lowlands of southern Nepal. Most Mithila artists today live in the Indian town of Madhubani and its surrounding villages, so Mithila art is sometimes termed Madhubani art. Literary references indicate that Mithila's women were painting gods and goddesses on their homes' interior walls at least as early as the 14th century. The images created for domestic rituals promoted fertility, abundance, marital felicity and family wellbeing. Mithila's women used colours made from organic and mineral pigments, applying them to cow-dung and mud-plastered walls with simple bamboo and raw cotton brushes.

In 1934, following an earthquake near Madhubani, collapsed walls in the region revealed interior murals to the British colonial official William G Archer. Archer photographed many of these paintings through the 1930s, and in 1949 published an article about them in the Indian art journal, *Mārg*, bringing wider attention. In 1966-67, in the midst of a drought in Mithila, Pupul Jayakar came up with the idea to commission Mithila women to paint on paper, for sale, to support dwindling family incomes. Jayakar, at the time director of the All India Handicrafts Board and also Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's cultural advisor, employed Bhaskar Kulkarni, a Bombay-based artist, to encourage Mithila's women to transfer their wall paintings onto paper. This formed the genesis of what is known as Mithila art today. While initially centered on women from the upper castes (Kayastha and Brahmin), today, the practice extends to male artists and to many castes, including especially the oppressed Chamar and Dusadh castes.

Note: This text draws upon an essay by Aurogeeta Das and David Szanton in Das, Aurogeeta *et al* (2017) *Many Visions, Many Versions: Art from Indigenous Communities in India*, Washington D.C.: International Arts and Artists (IA&A), pp. 18-25

TO-BE-REPLACED-WITH-A-GAP

Jagadamba Devi's work, like many by the earliest Mithila artists who transferred their paintings to paper, is easily recognisable. Her penchant for Hindu goddesses with outstretched arms, the repetition of certain colours (oranges, pinks, reds, yellows, an inky blue) and recurrent checkered and striped patterns on her figures' clothing, combined with floating background motifs (often floral), make her works stand out. According to the anthropologist and Mithila art scholar David Szanton: 'The first paintings on paper that [Bhaskar] Kulkarni brought back to New Delhi for exhibition in 1967 caused a sensation. Almost immediately, two Kayastha painters, Ganga Devi and Mahasundari Devi, and two Brahmin painters, Sita Devi and Jagadamba Devi, were recognised as extraordinary artists. They drew on the conventions of the wall-paintings, yet each quickly developed her own distinctive and immediately recognizable style.' [1]

Here, Lakshmi, the Hindu goddess of wealth, is flanked at the top by two elephants and at the bottom, by two female attendants. The attendant on the left holds a lotus (an intrinsic symbol in Lakshmi iconography, repeated here against the inner borders) as does the goddess herself, while the attendant on the right fans Lakshmi. The elephants, called Gajalakshmi, symbolise strength and

productivity. The bejewelled Lakshmi, with bangles adorning her wrists, danglers in her ears and a large nose ring, is seated on a disproportionately small lotus, which is Lakshmi's seat in Hindu iconography. Shown just below her knees are most likely *laddu*, arranged in mounds (*laddu* are gram flour sweets traditionally consecrated at temples and thereafter consumed by devotees). These mounds of *laddu* also sometimes recur in Jagadamba Devi's paintings.

When shown thus as icons to be worshipped, Hindu deities are generally portrayed facing the viewer, rather than in profile. This painting is therefore a little unusual for depicting Lakshmi as an icon yet in profile, but it is in keeping with the artist's convention in her other paintings.

This rather striking painting is executed in natural colours most likely prepared by the artist herself. Based on a comprehensive list compiled by Vidyanath Jha, of pigments that Mithila painters obtain from natural materials including from seeds, roots, rhizomes, leaves, wood, flowers, bracts, and fruits, she might have used shades of red from the *katahar* root (*Artocarpus heterophyllus*), blue from the nil leaf (*Indigoferia tinctoria*), yellow from the *genda* flower (*Tagetes erecta*), and a shade of light pink from the *kadamba* fruit (*Anthocephalus cadamba*). [2]

For her contributions to Mithila art, Jagadamba Devi received a National Award from the Government of India in 1970.

It is possible that an early illustration of her work appears in *The Earthen Drum* [3] but as Jayakar states that the illustrated painting is by Jagadamba Devi of Ranti village and both the style and signature are markedly different, it may be that the two villages (i.e. Ranti and Jitwarpur) had distinct artists by the same name. The illustration of Durga, executed in 1977, which appears in Szanton and Bakshi [4], is by the same artist.

A similar work executed during the same period, titled *Gajalakshmi*, can be found in the collections of the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

Aurogeeta Das 2024

References:

[1] David Szanton 'Mithila Painting: 1949-2014' in *Marg: A Magazine of the Arts* (66:1, Mumbai: National Centre for Performing Arts, September 2014), pp.35-36

[2] Vidyanath Jha, 'Indigenous Colours in Mithila (North Bihar) - A Historical Perspective' in *Indian Journal of History of Science* (37:1, New Delhi: Indian National Science Academy, 2002), pp.37-55

[3] Pupul Jayakar, *The Earthen Drum: An introduction to the Ritual Arts of Rural India* (New Delhi: National Museum, 1980), p.227

[4] David Szanton and Malini Bakshi, *Mithila Painting: the Evolution of an Art Form* (Berkeley: Ethnic Arts Foundation in association with Pink Mango, 2007), p.24

Selected exhibitions (that the artist's work has featured in, not this particular artwork per se):

*Embodied Change: South Asian Art Across Time*, Seattle Asian Art Museum, Seattle (USA), 2022

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