



Shiva

Bacchadai Devi

Not on display

Title/Description: Shiva

Artist/Maker: Bacchadai Devi (Artist)

Born: 1977

Object Type: Painting (mithila)

Materials: Ink on handmade paper

Measurements: h. 558.8 x w. 762 mm

Accession Number: 50898

Production Place: India

Credit Line: Donated by The Ethnic Arts Foundation

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.:

TO-BE-REPLACED-WITH-A-GAP

Bacchadai Devi almost exclusively uses black and red ink; occasionally, she judiciously adds yellows, oranges, magentas or blues as highlights or accents. Her work is easily recognisable both for the limited palette as well as due to her slightly elongated bodies. The prevalent (most likely erroneous) theory that a palette of black and red is traditionally used by Kayastha artists might lead one to believe that Bacchadai Devi is a Kayastha artist, but administrator of the Mithila Art Institute Kaushik Kumar Jha identifies her as Brahmin (as stated by the art historian John H. Bowles. [1] The style here is typical of her early work, where delicate hatching in black and red contrast with thick black lines or small areas filled densely with black ink. She often depicts Hindu deities.

Here, she portrays Shiva, the Hindu god of destruction and dissolution. She shows two snakes flanking his feet and, consistent with Shiva iconography, a third loosely draped around his neck. One of the explanations offered for snakes being a part of Shaivite iconography is their ability to shed their skin, hence constituting a symbol of dissolution – regeneration and rebirth. In his left hand, Shiva appears to be holding a conch. This is somewhat unusual, as the conch is generally associated with Vaishnavite iconography. Just above his right hand, floats a *damru* (handheld drum), generally held by Shiva who, it is believed, used it to create primordial sound. In his lower right hand, Shiva holds a highly stylised *trishul* (trident); this is also consistent with Shaivite iconography. His hair appears to be wavy or curly, and he is shown sporting a topknot. In Hindu mythology, Shiva created a topknot with his long hair, to stem the force of the river goddess Ganga (The Ganges), as she descends onto the earth from the heavens, to prevent her powerful waters flooding the world. The background is filled with flowers.

Upendra Thakur asserts that in Mithila, the adoration of – and devout reverence for – the Hindu trinity (Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva) have immensely influenced its literature and art (in particular, painting). [2] According to Thakur, at the region's *yajnapovita samskara* (sacred thread ceremonies) and the dedications or renovations of the family shrine, a tableau of murals consists largely of deities, including Shiva and his consort Parvati. [3]

Bacchadai Devi's later work would see colour used more boldly, though still only as highlights in largely monochromatic works. The artist is relatively underrated, considering the subtle yet significant changes in her artistic evolution.

Examples of Bacchadai Devi's work can be found in the collections of the Asian Art Museum, San Francisco (USA), Radford University Art Museum (USA), Ipswich Museum (UK) and Mithila Museum (Japan). A painting executed in the same year (i.e., 1977), depicting the marriage of Shiva, appears in Szanton and Baksh. [4] Another artwork, executed in 1980, appears in Perdriolle. [5] Several of her paintings also appear in Anand (1984: 26, 53-56, 58-59).

Aurogeeta Das, June 2024

[1] John H. Bowles and Andrew S. Arbury (eds.), *Raja Salhesh's Garden: Contemporary Dalit Art and Ancient Myths of Mithila - Volume 1* (Radford: Radford University Art Museum and Radford University Foundation Press, 2022, eBook), Catalog 77

[2] Upendra Thakur, *Madhubani Painting* (New Delhi: Abhinav Publications, 1982), p.47

[3] Ibid., pp.68-69

[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.47

[5] Hervé Perdriolle, *Art contemporain indien: Contemporain, un mot, plusieurs cultures* (Milan: 5 Continents (in French), 2012), p.197

[6] Mulk Raj Anand, *Madhubani Painting* (New Delhi: Government of India, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, 1984), pp.26, 53-26, 58-59

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

Mithila Medley: Contemporary Arts from an Ancient Culture in North India, Floyd Center for the Arts, Floyd (USA), 2022

Painting is my Everything: Art from India's Mithila Region, Asian Art Museum, San Francisco (USA), 2018
