

Mithila – A Folk Style of Painting

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Abstract

Mithila was the capital of ancient kingdom-Videha-Home of Sita .It existed in the eastern Gangetic plain in areas. Spread over more than half of Bihar and parts of Nepal .This city is identified as modern Day Janakpur in Dhanusa District of Nepal. God Rama & Sita are said to have been married here.Mithila is given its name after the name of king Mithi . Mithili culture has its own language and rich tradition. Mithila Folk Art has acquired its name from the kingdom of Mithila .Tradition states that Mithila art is very old and was born when king Janak commissioned artists to prepare art work at the time of Sita's marriage to Lord Rama .It is dead sure that Mithila art primarily expresses cultural identity. It also encompasses a range of utilitarian ,decorative & symbolic medias. So we can say that Mithila art is the traditional & indigenious art of Maithili people .This art belonged to the periods 3000 years before when Aryans settled in India and started to paint over walls for decoration. So the people of Mithila have developed their tradition of painting which is also known as Madhubani [a district in Mithila] The specialty about the tradition is that it dates back to 7th century A.D. and is prevalent even today. Mithila was one of the first kingdoms which established in Eastern India. The present District of Muzaffarpur, Vaishali, Champaran ,Madhubani, Samastipur etc. cover Mithila. It is sacred land where founder of Buddhism & Jainism and several scholars as Gautam, Kapil, Yajnavalkya, Vachaspati were born.

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Mithila art is completely related to the living culture of Mithila. So the subjects depicted in these paintings belong to social or religious life. As we all know that this art form was firstly practiced by the folk Women expressing their feeling in so many different moods. They are often illiterate, a few of them mark their creation with their identity. Primarily this art is concerned with the belief that villagers should decorate their houses with paintings on walls and doors as Higher Majesty visit each house daily in the Morning. Traditionally Mithila Folk art was created on the eve of rituals & several ceremonies such as wedding, Pujas etc. It can commence with story of Sita's marriage to Lord Rama, Krishna-Radha episode. People of Mithila also worship 'shakti' with the influence of Tantric rituals and Durga, Kali Ravana, Shiv-Sakti and Hanuman also appear in these paintings. According to few critics these paintings may have had their origin in Tantric rituals, as Mithila has been a seat of Tantrism [It is fact that by 12th cen.A.d. Vamachara school of Tantra was popular in this region. Even the main theme of Mithila or Madhubani paintings are Hindu Gods & Goddesses supported by traditional, geometrical pattern. As the worshippers want to be one with the image ⁽¹⁾ except these other subjects were natural objects like sun moon, religious plants, deities like Lord Rama, Shiva Durga, Lakshmi or motifs of different religions revolving around any deity or 'Oom', social subjects such as wedding scenes, children playing, carrying cattle etc. also can be seen through these paintings. Generally no space in the background is left empty,; this gap is filled by geometrical motifs of flowers ⁽²⁾ birds and animals, symbols of fertility and prosperity like fish, elephant, parrot, sun, moon, bamboo, turtle, lotus etc. are prominent. so we can definitely say religion has been the dominant influence in the art of Mithila in Bihar and painting created by these illiterate women. They decorate their house as well as huts and enclosure with simple geometrical figures and motifs from nature.

Characteristics

Special characteristics of these paintings are ornate floral pattern, abstract figure with bulging eyes and jolting nose double line border with a specific gap between two line: filled by small triangles, tiny or crossed lines with a perfect hand though not trained in any art school, and applying bold colours ⁽³⁾

Techniques

Mithila Paintings are done on floor, walls, clothes, papers or canvas etc. Primarily these paintings were being created on fresh plaster on the walls of huts but after the development and support of Government these paintings graduated to cloth, canvas or handmade paper. Firstly a layer of paste made with mud and cow dung was applied to the walls and floors so that the surface could be smooth to work on ⁽⁴⁾ So due to cow dung mixture the background of these creations are mostly black on

which picture was drawn with white paste made of rice or vegetable colors. These colours are obtained by following ways; black by mixture of soot with cow dung; white from rice powder ;orange from palasha flower; red from red sandalwood or flowers; blue from Indigo; Yellow from pollen or turmeric; green from the leaves of the wood apple tree. These colours are applied onto the surface in flat method without any mixing or shading .A special kind of home-made brush was made of bamboo twigs with cotton rags wrapped around its tip.^{5}Raw materials were applied by mixing of goat juice from bean plants and gum Arabic. In additions a wide range to these techniques the artists also practiced tradition of floor painting known as ‘Aripana’ ;wall paintings on festive occasions and wedding ceremonies as ‘kohbar’ or ‘godana’ as body paintings..To make ‘Aripana’ a woman grinds rice with some water into a paste called Pithar ...dipping two fingers into the pither she makes graceful lice-like designs on the mud floor of her huts or courtyard. She then dots the design with red powder .Women have a repertoire of such designs that may be drawn for worship of the house ,deity or for rituals related to marriage or a particular full moon day .This style is done by women of Brahmins & Kayasthas caste. The spaces which are available to these artists were floor, wall or movable objects. ^{6}

Mithila paintings are sometimes related to occasions or to castes etc .Like ‘Aripana’ the Women also make ‘Kohbar’.The Kohbar refers to the elaborate painting painted in the nuptial chamber of bride .These include a stylized symbolic lotus flower encircled by moon, sun. bamboo grove, NainaJogin or symbols of fertility .The central theme of *Kohbar’ paintings is love which are designed in chamber to bless the couple .Objects depicted in the wall of Kohbar Ghar are symbols of sexual pleasure & procreation .^{7}

In modern era the paintings are done on hand-made bleached white paper using pen nibs,brushes or bamboos sticks with cotton rag tips to apply the color ,all the paintings done by this method are deeply rooted in the tradition of Mithila and each and every moment is connected with their day to day life and livelihood with their custom and feelings of joys or sorrows. The technique of painting is perfect to deliver their message.

Styles of Mithila Paintings

Stylistically .the paintings have been characterized by caste differences -

Three styles of paintings can be distinguished corresponding to three different castes

(1) Brahmins

Brahmins developed the Bharni style .Bharni literally means “filling’. This style of painting is specially practiced by the community known as Brahmins and

belonged to Jitwarpur. This style employs bold black outline to clearly define figures. Different areas of main figures are enclosed with outline and filled with bold and vibrant colors. There is no attempt to show three-dimensional effect, Sita Devi developed this style. Her paintings were large, elegant in which elongated figures were drawn in white color. They find inspiration from rituals and sacred text and can select a variety of colors. Brahmins used bright hues and were liberal to their limits.

(2) Kayasthas

This caste finds inspiration from sacred text but they can only be limited to the use of black and red color. Kayasthas prefer muted hues. 'Kachani' literally means 'line'. Kachani style of painting employs only one or two colors; black and vermilion. The artists rely on delicate fine lines with different patterns as zigzag, triangular, or crossed etc. This art is mainly practiced by Kayasthas or belonged to scribe community. This style belonged to Ranti. In 1976 Ganga Devi, a Kachani artist, was conferred the National Award for Master craftman by the president of India, as she did extremely detailed Kachani or 'line' painting with the help of fine nib pens and only black and red ink.

(3) Dusadh

They were not allowed to represent divinities and can only find inspiration from animal or vegetal world. This type of style is 'Godana'. The motifs drawn by Dusadh were directly inspired by tattoos. Godana style is also known as 'tattoo' paintings. This style is mainly attributed to Dusadh community who were traditionally agricultural labourers. Channo Devi is regarded as pioneer of Godana style. She is one of the well-known artists of National and International fame. 'Salhesa' is an important divinity in Dusadh community. This God of strength can be drawn by Dusadh artists. It is said that Godana art can never die and beautify the body of women. This Godana is also known as 'khonanam', 'khodana' or 'godana': sun, moon and other folk deities are engraved on the body. It is believed that only these symbols accompany the persons to Heaven even after the death. In paintings done in this style we can see small stick-like figures, geometrically arranged in space. Some area of painting is colored while others simply drawn in black and white. It gives a contrast but harmonious effect. These artists also use a 'Gobar' wash on paper to an effect of wall painting.

Mithila paintings first have been documented by Mr. William & Mr. Mildred Archer. He collected few Madhubani Paintings and sent them to India records Office in London. Specialists of this office study these creative symbolic paintings. All India handicrafts Board encouraged the women artists to produce this type of art and since then this art style has become a primary source of income. W.G. Archer

,a great scholar, also brought these paintings to the attention to art admirers after the earthquake in Bihar in 1934. We should also be obliged to foreign scholars for promoting this style .Vequad, a french Novelist & journalist visited Mithila in 1970s and produced a film and a book depicting the art theories of Mithila .Since 1990s Japanese were also interested in Mithila art and Tokyo Hasegawa set up Museum in Tokamachi where Mithila Paintings specially Madhubani are executed.Mrs. Sita Devi of Jitwarpur and Ganga Devi have been known as pioneers in developing & transforming the Mithila Paintings from village walls onto paper and canvas .Several artists were conferred the National as well as state level Awards by our Government . Few National Awardees are-Mrs. Jagdamba Devi[1970];Mrs. Sita Devi [1975];Mrs. Ganga Devi[1976];Ms Godavari Dutta [1980];Mrs. Mahasundari[1981];State Awardees-Mrs. Karpoori Devi [1980-81];Mrs. Hira Mishra [1981-82] Certificate of Excellence -Shri Swaroop Lal Paswan,Mrs Pavitra Devi; Mrs. Vina Devi etc All this shows that due to our Government’s motivation & help this style has become so popular that it has widened its era and entered into the field of globalization. It has widened its branches to the field of textile, crafts ,house hold articles, done with advance colours & modern tools. Its market value also has been increased and most of the folk women artists of Mithila are able to earn a decent income .⁽⁸⁾ We will be surprised to know that even these simple artists had also gained world fame .The NGO known as JWDEC established in 1992 ,is promoting women artists to keep their brush alive .this NGO is giving training to use mediums and re-create their traditional design with other media such as ceramic painting.

References

1. Anand, Mulraj. “The feeling, or energy, or emotion, or invisible stirring, is sought to be imaged as a vital flourish of lines and colours which enshrines the powers of the divinity and can be contemplated with a view to receiving those vitalities into oneself. In fact, the whole basis of Indian creativeness seems to have been to evolve images through which the worshipper desires to become God or Goddess. Madhubani Paintings Publication Division Ministry of Information & Broadcasting Govt of India. Pg. **10**.
2. Anand, Mulraj. “Flowres are Gods, as are Human and animals. So each part of the foliage bursts into smiles. The painter gets out of the naturalistic expression by the twist and turns of stems and flowers, which give the paintings stylistic consistency and symbolic form” Madhubani Paintings’ Publication Division Ministry of Information & Broadcasting Govt. of India. Pg. **39**.

3. Suri, Isha. (2009). ‘The patterns and designs in Madhubani Paintings revolve around Hindu deities, nature and mythological stories.....Different kind of geometrical patterns, floral designs, animals & bird motifs are made to fill up the gap between lines and other spaces in the paintings. These patterns are the hallmark of Madhubani paintings and more over use of earthly bright colours give these paintings a highly vibrant look” retrieved www.eworldtradefair.com/madhubani-paintings-a72.html. posted on 12th September.
4. Rao, Narayan. “The surface for these paintings are the mud walls of their huts and the implements of daily use .Wood from the forest provides the brush, mud ,cowdung, pounded rice flour & sindur are other materials .The surface on which they paint is first cleaned and smeared with cow dung.After the cowdung paste dries up, it receives a ‘gheroo’[red mud] coating”. “Madhubani; Warli Paintings” *Rooplekha-XLIII*. No.1-2. Pg. **42**.
5. Rao, Narayan. ‘They [Mithila Artists] use indigenous colours ,gum and in place of brush they use thread match stick or bamboo sticks wrapped in cotton .The tradition is kept alive by the pleasant custom that every bride should have with her a collection of these paintings done by herself when she goes to her husband’s house ... “Madhubani; Warli Paintings” *Rooplekha-XLIII*. No.1-2. Pg. **41**.
6. David, L. Santon. (2007). “The kohbar is a large colourful image painted on the east wall of a designated bridal chamber (kohbar ghar) in the bride’s home where marriages are consummated. The central element of the kohbar is a large circle of lotuses denoting female fertility, immediately surrounded by paired fish, turtles, snakes, and love birds. Circling around them are another set of images; a stylized bamboo denoting male fertility, the sun, the moon, the nine planets, the pan house, the mat on which the marriage will, on the fourth day, be consummated, guardian spirits, the figure of bride (with the groom behind her) doing Gauri Puja, and either an image of Shiva and Parvati as the ideal couple, or of the bride in a palanquin being carried to her new husband’s home. Other gods and goddesses are often painted on the other walls of the kohbar ghar. In all, the ensemble is intended to ensure a productive and successful marriage.” ‘Mithila Paintings-The Dalit Invention Draft paper of 3/5/2007. prepared for a volume on Dalits and Visual Imagery being edited by Professor Gary Tartakov, to be published by the Indian Institute of Dalit Studies: Delhi.

7. Mishra, Dr. Kailash K. “The Mithila paintings is more of the living creative activities of the women of this region; it is famous folk painting on paper, cloth readymade garments ,movable objects etc. Mainly by the village women of Mithila. Originally it is a folk art, practiced by the women of all castes and community, including the Muslims on walls & floor using the natural and vegetable colors. Later some people took interest in it and motivated the women to translate their art from walls and floor to the canvas and now the new form has given this a very distinct identity in the art world as well as in the market. “Mithila Paintings: Past, Present and Future” retrieved. <http://ignca.nic.in/kmsh0002.htm>.
8. “Commercialization of the paintings has had tremendous impact the lives of the Dalit Painters of Mithila.They have been able to assert -they have created for themselves a space in the region which has always been deeply hierarchical. [sojourner sandal@gmail.com/’Dalit Mithila Paintings’ magazine Archive. INSIGHT YOUNG Voices-a dalit Youth Magazine ,Fri.26*’ Feb.archive.insightyr.com/?p=318.