



Shiva's Wedding

Heera Devi

Not on display

Title/Description: Shiva's Wedding

Artist/Maker: Heera Devi (Artist)

Born: 1978

Object Type: Painting (mithila)

Materials: Ink on handmade paper

Measurements: h. 558.8 x w. 762 mm

Accession Number: 50883

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.: International Arts and Artists (IA&A), pp. 18-25

TO-BE-REPLACED-WITH-A-GAP

In this monochromatic drawing depicting the Hindu god Shiva's wedding, various elements relate to Shiva's iconography whereas others relate to a wedding ritual. Shiva is shown at the top (off centre, towards the left), sporting a snake around his neck and holding the *damroo* (handheld drum) and *trishul* (trident) in two of his four hands. He is said to have created primordial sound with the *damroo* and the trident variously symbolises three worlds, three *guna* (qualities), etc. The snake around his neck symbolises dissolution (as he is the god of destruction and dissolution); due to their ability to shed their skins, snakes symbolise regeneration and rebirth. Below Shiva is the bull, both his *vahana* (vehicle or mount) as well as his animal form. Four other snakes can be seen (one above Shiva, two flanking the bride and a fourth towards the right, middle). These may be reinforcing Shiva's symbolism (as above) and additionally might be referencing his avatar as Pashupatinath (king of animalia), as might be the elephant (seen behind the *shehnai* player to the right).

The bride Parvati, indicated by her tasselled headdress, is directly below the bull. On either side of the groom are *shehnai* players. The *shehnai*, a reeded woodwind instrument typically played at weddings, was considered a folk instrument until it was elevated to classical concert status by Ustad

Bismillah Khan. Among the many wedding guests are some gods and goddesses (generally indicated by the multiple arms and crowns). Behind the *shehnai* player, to the right, is Vishnu, identifiable by his attributes: the conch, the club and the mace. Behind Vishnu is possibly Lakshmi (shown in what appears to be a semi-kneeling position). Behind Lakshmi is the multiple-faced Brahma, the Hindu god of creation. It is unclear who the deity to the extreme right is (possibly Durga). At the bottom right corner is a tiger or lion, Durga's mount. It is possible that the female figure with tasselled headdress in between Parvati and the big cat is also Durga (whose mount is variably a tiger or lion), since Durga is considered to be an avatar of Parvati, but this is unclear. At the top, behind the *shehnai* player to the left, a woman holds aloft a ceremonial platter with consecrated offerings. Above Shiva, we see two decorated pots, one painted with the sun (left), and another painted with the crescent moon (right) looking like a *kalash* (consecrated pot filled with water or grains and topped with auspicious fruit and leaves), possibly with a coconut at its neck. These form a part of wedding symbolism. To the right, between the top and bottom rows of figures are some mysterious wedding guests, three of which are shown with one leg only partially visible. It's possible these are meant to be dancing figures, shown as wedding celebrants.

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). [1]

Aurogeeta Das, June 2024

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