



Men Drink, No Food at Home, Children Die

Dulari Devi

Not on display

Title/Description: Men Drink, No Food at Home, Children Die

Artist/Maker: Dulari Devi (Artist)

Born: 2005

Object Type: Painting (mithila)

Materials: Ink and acrylic on handmade paper

Measurements: h. 558.8 x w. 762 mm

Accession Number: 50884

Production Place: India, Ranti

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

The tree at the centre that divides the scenes flanking it is not just any tree with nesting birds. The figure shown climbing it, harnessed to its trunk, with pots slung over the shoulder, is a toddy palm harvester, which suggests this is a coconut palm (*Cocos nucifera*), thus reinforcing the painting's subject. To the tree's left, men are shown frequenting drinking houses, enjoying liquor and plates of food (including fish). Dulari Devi hails from the Dalit Malaah caste (traditionally fisherfolk), so fish would have been a staple in her family home. To the tree's right, we see a home with empty utensils (top right), the corpse of a child (bottom right) and several women in tears over the child's death. The artist was married at thirteen but returned to her parents' home aged eighteen, after the death of her child, so this painting's subject is autobiographical.

In 2011, Devi published an acclaimed visual autobiography *Following my Paintbrush*; the text by its publisher, Gita Wolf, transcribed the artist's oral account of her life. It presents a moving narrative of how she was a cleaner when fate, determination and talent led to her becoming an artist.

The simplicity and pithiness with which she describes the creative impulses that marked these transitions, is poignant: 'Then one day, when I was passing the village pond, a strange thing happened. As I stood and looked at the children playing, the scene turned into a picture in my mind. It came alive, bright and lively, telling stories. I was happy the whole day, thinking of my picture.' [1] When she started cleaning for Mahasundari Devi, a well-known upper caste Mithila artist, watching the artist paint reignited a desire to create, but when she returned home, she had neither paints nor paper. Not wanting to lose that spark, 'I looked around and found some mud near my hut. I took up a handful and began to knead it, smoothing and looking at it from all sides... slowly, an idea formed in my mind and I began to turn the mud into something else. It was a bird... I had made a bird!' [2]

The next day, she mustered up the courage to ask Mahasundari Devi whether she could learn painting and to her surprise, her employer agreed to teach her. In *Following my Paintbrush*, Dulari Devi recalls that when first confronted with a brush, she struggled to learn how to hold one. She chose to paint fish for her first attempts on paper, as she recalled the strange patterns on fish that she and her mother used to sell. Although she has expressed a preference for the *bharni* style of Mithila painting (which tends to be colourful and dense, with the term's etymology meaning 'to fill'), the artist is equally adept at the *kachni* (line drawing) style.

Dulari Devi was awarded the Padma Shri in 2021. She received the State of Bihar Award for Excellence in Art in 2013.

Aurogeeta Das 2024

References:

[1] Dulari Devi and Gita Wolf, *Following my Paintbrush* (Chennai: Tara Books, 2011), n.p

[2] Ibid.

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

Everyday Extraordinary - Researching, Collecting and Living with Indian Art, Jorgensen Center for the Performing Arts, University of Connecticut, Storrs (USA), 2024

Martine le Coz: A French Homage to the Ancient Myths and Contemporary Artists of Mithila, Tyler

Gallery (Radford University Art Museum), Radford (USA), 2022

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

Tradition and Transformation: Mithila Art of India, William Benton Museum of Art, University of Connecticut, Mansfield (USA), 2022

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