



# Krishna on Kaliya

Baua Devi

**Not on display**

**Title/Description:** Krishna on Kaliya

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

**Born:** 1972

**Object Type:** Painting (mithila)

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

**Accession Number:** 50889

**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

Baua Devi's paintings are readily recognisable for their bold, fluid lines, vibrant colours and wave-like borders; they often feature *naga* (serpents or snakes). Other themes include the sun, the moon and Hindu deities. She was one of five Indian artists who participated in the seminal exhibition *100 Magiciens de la Terre* at Centre Georges Pompidou (Paris, 1989), and the only Indian 'folk' artist, the preferred classification for Mithila art. Her participation in *Magiciens* made her the first Mithila artist to gain international recognition. Until her art brought her fame and financial independence, she had a difficult life: married at 12, suffering an abusive husband, an overbearing mother-in-law, drought, poverty and hunger. She experienced tragedy a few years into her marriage, when she lost her 6-day-old daughter, born too feeble to survive.

Baua Devi shows Kaliya, a mythological, multi-hooded snake in the Yamuna River, whom the infant god Krishna fights and intends to kill. When Kaliya's many wives - who do not wish to become widows - plead for mercy, Krishna instead dances Kaliya into submission. Kaliya's story first appears in the *Bhagavata Purana*; different iterations present Kaliya's misdeeds variously, most frequently as poisoning the river. River pollution is a major issue in India; according to the art historian John H.

Bowles, the legend of “the giant, venom-spewing cobra” is “generally considered [to be] one of the world’s most ancient anti-pollution myths”. [1] “[A] story first told in the *Mahabharata* (circa 300 BCE), [presents] a tale of the ancient enmity between the mother of the snakes and the mother of the birds. In that sequence, Garuda\* gobbles up all the snakes until one of them [Kaliya] takes refuge on a protected land... [Kaliya] reappears in Krishna mythology as the inhabitant of the swimming hole in Krishna’s village.” [2] Krishna then subdues and exiles Kaliya to the island that protects him from Garuda.

Here, Krishna is dwarfed by the powerful, striking snake, the contrasting delicacy and boldness of Baua Devi’s lines underscoring the drama of the scene.

It is uncertain which natural colours the artist would have used. Based on a comprehensive list compiled by Vidyanath Jha, of pigments that the Mithila painters obtain from seeds, roots, rhizomes, leaves, wood, flowers, bracts, and fruits, one could surmise that she might have used black from the *jau* seed (*Hordeum vulgare*), ochre from the *katahar* root (*Artocarpus heterophyllus*), green from the bel leaf (*Aegle marmelos*), chocolate brown from the *khair* wood (*Acacia catechu*) and yellow either from turmeric or from the *genda* (marigold) flower (*Tagetes erecta*). [3]

Baua Devi was awarded the Padma Shri in 2017 for her contributions to the arts; she had previously received a National Award in 1984, both from the central Government of India. Baua Devi lives and works in Delhi.

\*In Hindu mythology and iconography, Garuda is Vishnu’s *vahana* (mount or vehicle, upon which a deity rides); he is most often described as an eagle-like bird.

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] Aurogeeta Das *et al*, *Many Visions, Many Versions: Art from Indigenous Communities in India* (Washington D.C.: International Arts and Artists (IA&A), 2017), p.34

[3] Vidyanath Jha, "Indigenous Colours in Mithila (North Bihar) - A Historical Perspective" in *Indian Journal of History of Science*, 37:1, pp. 37-55, (New Delhi: Indian National Science Academy, 2002), pp.42-42.

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

*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

*Many Visions, Many Versions: Art from Indigenous Communities in India*, multiple venues in the USA and Canada, 2017-2020

*Women's Paintings from the Land of Sita*, Seattle Asian Art Museum, Seattle (USA), 2012

*Vernacular in the Contemporary - Parts I & II*, Devi Art Foundation, Gurgaon (India), 2010-2011

*Mithila Painting: The Evolution of an Art Form*, Museum of Craft and Folk Art, San Francisco (USA), 2005

*Baua Devi and the Art of Mithila*, Berkeley Art Museum, Berkeley (USA), 1997

*100 Magiciens de la Terre (100 Magicians of the Earth)*, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris (France),  
1989

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