



Ecstatic Mermaid

Santosh Kumar Das

Not on display

Title/Description: Ecstatic Mermaid

Artist/Maker: Santosh Kumar Das (Artist)

Born: 2014

Object Type: Painting (mithila)

Materials: Ink on handmade paper

Measurements: h. 558.8 x w. 762 mm

Accession Number: 50895

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

Santosh Kumar Das learned Mithila art first from his mother and later from his aunts, acclaimed Mithila artists Karpoori Devi and Mahasundari Devi. Das became the first 'Mithila' artist to study art formally, gaining a BFA from Maharaja Sayajirao University (Baroda). After completing his studies, he returned to Ranti to develop his vision for Mithila painting. He was the first director of the Mithila Art Institute in Madhubani town. His subjects have been diverse: politics, natural disasters, cinema, music and religion. He tends to create themed series; this work is from his series on water.

Das creates expressive drawings in an elegant, graphic style, working exclusively in black and red ink (reportedly preferred by Kayastha artists). Some contemporary writers suggest that Kayastha women artists initially used black and red inks since these were readily available to them, as the men in their households were accountants or scribes. This seems unlikely to be the only reason; as early as 1966 (before the transfer to paper had fully occurred), Mildred Archer described how domestic murals in Kayastha households were frequently monochromatic: "Kayastha paintings, on the other hand, employ only one or two colours - black and sometimes a dull blood red. They rely on strong lines enlivened with hatching and spotting, and the figures, often set in panels, are firmly ranged in long processions round the wall." [1] These colours might have become an aesthetic preference for many contemporary Kayastha artists. However, the writer Neel Rekha has pointed out how Pupul Jayakar began to believe that previous stylistic categorisations by caste were inadequate, that such aesthetic choices stemmed from individual artists' creative preferences rather than their adherence to caste-based traditions. [2] Whichever theory one subscribes to, if Archer's was correct, there has in any event been a blurring of aesthetic idioms among distinct castes.

Das shows a graceful mermaid wearing bangles on her wrists, a large nose ring and *jhumka* (dangling, bell-shaped earrings). Her long hair is adorned with flowers and a multitude of lotuses can be seen in the water all around her. Her body is covered in subtle, fish-scale patterned skin and her forked fishtail and arms show more pronounced scales along the edges. While lotuses are a symbol of female fecundity in Mithila art, fish are a common symbol of abundance. "[Mithila] captures much of the snowmelt from the Himalayas, as well as runoff from the annual monsoon. The region is basically flat, with many rivers flowing south to the Ganges. The soil is rich but also readily subject to floods. Its thousands of natural and dug ponds are filled with both lotus blossoms and schools of fish that are a major source of protein. In their abundance, the fish have become symbols of fecundity and elegance of form, and - along with other forms of water life - are frequent subjects in Mithila paintings." [3] Mithila consists of two regions: hilly and Terai (foothills), hence the flatness alludes to the Terai.

Aurogeeta Das, June 2024

[1] Mildred Archer, "Domestic Arts of Mithila: Notes on Painting" in *Mārg: A magazine of the Arts*, 20:1, ed. Mulk Raj Anand (Mumbai: National Centre for Performing Arts, December 1966), p.47

[2] Rekha, Neel, "Maithil Paintings: An Enquiry into its [sic] Historiographical Trajectory (1947-1997)" in *Folklore and Folkloristics*, 4:2 (Howrah, December 2011), p.8

[3] 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.78

Filmography:

<https://regardingindia.com/portfolio/santosh-kumar-das/>

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

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

Rerouted Realities: The Work of Santosh Kumar Das, Ojas Art, New Delhi (India), 2019 (Solo exhibition)

Traversing Traditions - India, Charter Oak Cultural Center, Hartford (USA), 2016

Vernacular in the Contemporary Part I, Devi Art Foundation, Gurgaon (India), 2010

The Extraordinary Evolution of Mithila Painting: From Ritual to Politics, India Community Center, Milpitas (USA), 2008

Mithila Painting: The Evolution of an Art Form, India Habitat Centre, New Delhi (India), 2007

Edge of Desire- Recent Art in India, Asia Society, New York (USA), 2005

Beneath the Banyan Tree, Syracuse University, Syracuse (USA), 2001
