



Fish Design

Sanjul Mandal

Not on display

Title/Description: Fish Design

Artist/Maker: Sanjul Mandal (Artist)

Born: 1983

Object Type: Painting (mithila)

Measurements: h. 558.8 x w. 762 mm

Accession Number: 50897

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

Sanjul Mandal's painting of fish swimming in a pond amidst lotuses and flowers is a rare example of what Neel Rekha refers to as the *Geru* (ochre) style of paintings. In her historiographical analysis of Mithila paintings, Rekha examines Pupul Jayakar's *The Earthen Drum*, [1] suggesting that Jayakar attempted to correct some of the colonial paradigms introduced by William Archer and sustained by later writers. In doing so, Rekha implies that Jayakar was wise not to base her categorisation of Mithila's paintings on the basis of caste. Instead, "the differences in the stylistic techniques and colour were used by her as the determinants in explaining and classifying the various types of paintings prevalent during that period [1980s]. Of special significance is the reference to the *Geru* style of painting in view of the total extinction of this style in the present times and absences of references in any other literary source." [2] Rekha lists six different styles developed in Mithila art post commercialisation (some discontinued): *Bharni*, *Kachni*, *Geru*, *Gobar*, *Godana* and *Tantric*. [3] As Jayakar had begun to do, Rekha characterises them predominantly on the basis of colour, linework and compositional arrangements, so while *Bharni* refers to densely filled compositions in profuse colours, and *Godana* adopts a tattoo aesthetic, *Gobar* and *Geru* are characterised by the materials (cow dung and red ochre respectively).

Mandal uses mostly *geru* here, though she highlights the burnt sienna-like red ochre with yellow, teal, a deep indigo-violet (used very sparingly) and a brilliant magenta that pops and makes the whole painting come alive. Her lines are fluid, and the small, interspersed flowers provide a foil to the dominant, broadly painted lotus plants. Note the striking eyes of the fish, which are mirrored by the centres of the small flowers all around. Fish are a favoured theme in Mithila paintings, which often show ponds brimming with fish and turtles, with birds and flowers around them creating a life-affirming scene.

Based on clarifications offered to him by Kaushik Kumar Jha in personal correspondence, the art historian John H. Bowles writes that prior to marriage, the artist was known in her community as Sanjul Kumari. In Mithila, it is customary for unmarried girls to be referred to as *kumari* (literally translating to virgin). After marriage, *kumari* is replaced by *devi* (goddess). “Sanjul’s father, Ramdev Mandal, worked as the cook for the American anthropologist Raymond Owens, who was then living in Jitwarpur, and it was Owens who first referred to Sanjul as ‘Sanjul Mandal’— the name he ascribed to her paintings later exhibited and published through the Ethnic Arts Foundation. The family belongs to the Dhanuk caste, and Sanjul’s husband’s surname is also Mandal.” [4] According to Kaushik Kumar Jha, who has met the artist, Mandal painted for just a few years during her father’s time as Owens’ cook. As only Owens appeared to be significantly interested in her art, she stopped painting but has recently expressed interest in resuming such work.

See Szanton and Bakshi [5] for another example of her art.

Aurogeeta Das, June 2024

[1] Pupul Jayakar, *The Earthen Drum: An introduction to the Ritual Arts of Rural India*, (New Delhi: National Museum, 1980)

[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] *Ibid.*, p.22

[4] John H. Bowles, “Trees of the Honey Forest” in *India’s Mithila Painting*, eds. David L. Szanton and Paula Richman (Seattle: University of Washington Press, forthcoming, 2025)

[5] David Szanton and Malini Bakshi, *Mithila Painting: the Evolution of an Art Form* (Berkeley: Ethnic Arts Foundation in association with Pink, 2007), pp.24-25
