



Godna (Tattoo) Painting

Mohanma Devi

Not on display**Title/Description:** Godna (Tattoo) Painting**Artist/Maker:** Mohanma Devi (Artist)**Born:** 1988**Object Type:** Painting (mithila)**Measurements:** h. 558.8 x w. 762 mm**Accession Number:** 50899**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
