



Unleashing the Talents of Mithila Painters

*How an Ancient Tradition can Evolve and Thrive in
the Modern Commercial World*

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When Mithila paintings on paper were first exhibited in New Delhi in 1968-69, they caused a sensation. The brilliant colors, stunning line work and striking images of Hindu deities excited critics, politicians and the larger public. For centuries, village women in the Mithila region of Bihar had painted large images of the deities on the walls of their homes for domestic rituals—especially elaborated for marriages. But during the fierce north Indian drought of 1966-67 Pupul Jayakar, the head of the All India Handicrafts Board, sent a Bombay artist to Madhubani in Bihar to encourage the women to transfer their wall paintings to “Imperial” size paper (22 x 30 inches) for sale as an income-generating project.

The small group of women accepted the challenge who turned out to be astonishingly talented. It was their paintings that triggered the early excitement in New Delhi. The women were celebrated, received awards, private and government commissions (from postage stamps to railway stations) and several were sent to Europe, Russia, the USA and Japan to represent India at cultural fairs. Soon many other village women began adapting their ritual wall paintings to the new requirements and the commercial possibilities of

painting on paper.

But there was a problem, Maithila society was (and remains) deeply patriarchal and conservative, making it difficult for women to travel to Delhi or else where to sell their paintings. Dealers in Delhi, however, soon recognized that there were urban and tourist markets for the paintings and started coming to their villages demanding 20 to 50 paintings of a few familiar images but offering only three or four rupees each. Given these paltry sums, in order to generate useful income most women were forced to produce repetitive paintings as rapidly as possible. As a result, by the late 1970s—just 10 years after the brilliant beginning—the market was glutted with crude work, the creative impetus was gone, and the painting tradition was growing stale and dying.

Totally unaware of this, a young American anthropologist, Raymond Owens, came to Madhubani in 1976 to study water issues. A few weeks earlier he had heard a talk by the great Indian anthropologist, M. N. Srinivas, arguing that anthropologists should not just study villages, but should also be of use to villages. Moved by this idea, and hearing about the problems with the dealers, Owens shifted his project from water to working with the painters. Going around the villages he encouraged women to take their time, do their best work, paintings they really cared about, and out



of respect for them and the quality of their work, he agreed to pay the prices they set, often 20 to 30 times what dealers would pay. In addition, he explained he would bring the paintings to the US, try to sell them there, and promised the artists the profits from the sales of their paintings – in effect, a second payment for their work.

When Owens returned to the US in 1977 with the first 35 paintings he had bought, he and several friends stunned by their beauty, founded the non-profit pro bono Ethnic Arts Foundation (EAF) to sponsor exhibitions of the paintings and to hold the funds until Owens' next trip to Madhubani, when he would distribute the profits to the painters whose paintings had been sold and would buy more paintings. Over the next 23 years the EAF organized numerous exhibitions at US colleges, universities, museums and professional meetings. They also organized talks at gatherings of potentially interested people. During that period Owens made six more extended trips to Madhubani using his personal and grant funds. He also made two films about the painters ("Five Painters" and "Munni"). Unfortunately, there was a nine year gap in the 1990s when he was

caught up in other projects but he finally got back to Madhubani for six months, October 1999 to March 2000. Again he encouraged the artists, purchased more paintings—now for the much higher prices they requested, Rs. 300 to 2,000 and distributed a lakh of rupees in second payments to the artists.

Owens died in July 2000. The artists were dismayed. They had a lost a friend, a supporter, and access to the high priced US market for their paintings. However,

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in late 2001, the EAF learned that Owens had left a small bequest to continue what he had been doing. Three close EAF colleagues, Prof. Parmeshwar Jha, Rutgers University; Prof. Joseph Elder, University of Wisconsin; and myself, just retired from the University of California, Berkeley, went to Madhubani for two weeks in December 2001 and January 2002 to participate in a memorial to Owens and to discuss the current situation with the artists. Listening to the artists it became clear that several major problems had developed during Owens' nine year absence and had grown worse since his death. Dealers had again taken over the market and were again exploiting the artists, paying little and at times only with promises for their paintings. The very



poorest women had no choice but to continue making the mass produced images, many of the earlier leading artists had died or were infirm, and few young women were still interested in learning to paint the traditional way from their mothers, older sisters, or aunts.

Thanks to the increased educational opportunities and greater access to the media the young women were far more interested in studying commerce, English and moving to the city.

As an initial response we agreed to re-establish Owens' practice of paying good prices for good paintings, organizing exhibitions in the US and elsewhere and returning the income minus expenses to the artists as a second payment for their work.

Troubled by the lack of younger painters, promising a rapid decline of the painting tradition, we proposed to establish a free art school, the Mithila Art Institute (MAI), in Madhubani. The idea caught on immediately - though with little assurance the school would last for more than 2 or 3 years. Santosh Kumar Das, the one local artist with a BFA from Baroda and having some idea of an art school curriculum, was selected as the initial instructor. An Advisory Board of local artists and educators met to help plan the school.

Thus in early 2003 one floor in a modest building across from the local women's college was rented, basic furnishings and materials were gathered and Santosh visited the surrounding villages urging young people 16 to 25 to apply to the MAI. The students were selected through a "blind" competition. On an announced day, applicants gathered at the MAI at 10am. Each was assigned a number, given a sheet of paper marked with that number, and four hours to do a painting on the spot using whatever drawing or painting pens and colors they wished to. After four hours the paintings were collected and passed to a panel of senior artists to select the 25 paintings that showed the most talent.

The applicants who had painted them were then interviewed to insure they understood that it would be a four-hour-a day, five-days-a-week, year-long program taught by senior Mithila artists.

That first year, 113 young people applied (108 young women). Now in its 11th year, the MAI is still running, with 250 to 300 applicants annually, still 95-99% young women, coming from over 60 villages as far as 50 kilometers away. Young people may not want to learn their ancient traditional home, but are certainly excited to do so in a serious school taught by and serious artists.

The MAI is entirely free: working space, materials, instruction, and a collegial atmosphere are all provided, gratis. Unlike most government training programs, no stipends are offered. The MAI provides travel costs between home and school but students are expected to come full time because they are serious about learning their own tradition. The first six months are devoted to control of the materials, drawing, and the traditional iconography. During the next six months, with continuing instruction and guidance, the students are free to paint whatever they wish; the classic images or contemporary paintings using traditional iconography. Many do both. At the end of the year the most talented and serious students are offered a second year and a very modest monthly stipend.

The talent and skill unleashed by the MAI has been extraordinary. The graduates' paintings are in exhibitions, private collections and numerous publications - most recently in a February 2013 "New Generation" exhibition at Arpana Caur's New Delhi Academy of Fine Arts and Literature and a 12 page "Thematic Portfolio," in the Spring 2013 issue of *Marg*, India's most prestigious art journal.

Closer to home many graduates are teaching Mithila painting in schools and workshops in nearby villages and stimulating new work and new energies among the older village-based painters. Others are moving to major cities like Delhi, Hyderabad and Jaipur to establish themselves as contemporary artists.

The continuing evolution and vitality of the Mithila painting tradition derives most fundamentally from the reservoir of skill and talent in the community. However, it has been sustained and reanimated by three modest, inexpensive, and replicable innovations: respect for the artists, reasonable returns for their work and a serious school taught by the local artists themselves. How many other vulnerable rural aesthetic and cultural traditions could be re-energized by similar efforts? ■