



MITHILA'S MUSES: THE FEMALE FORCE BEHIND MADHUBANI ART

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Abstract

The female artists of Madhubani have not only been guardians of this ancient art form but have also been pivotal in its evolution, adapting their creations to suit the changing times and broader audiences. Their art is a testament to their strength, creativity, and resilience, reflecting their personal narratives, societal roles, and cultural identity. This paper aims to shed light on the intrinsic connection between Madhubani art and the women of Mithila, exploring how their artistic expressions serve as a dialogue between tradition and modernity, personal and collective, local and global. Through a comprehensive review of literature and field studies, this research delineates the transformational role of women in Madhubani art, underscoring their influence on the art's thematic diversity, stylistic evolution, and socioeconomic impact. It also scrutinizes the challenges these artists face, including gender biases, market dynamics, and the struggle for intellectual property rights, to provide a holistic understanding of their current standing in the art world. The aim is to not only celebrate the artistic achievements of these women but also to recognize their struggle, resilience, and the need for supportive frameworks that can enhance their visibility and sustainability in the art domain. By bringing to the forefront the voices and visions of Madhubani's female artists, this paper contributes to a deeper appreciation and understanding of their art, advocating for policies and practices that bolster their artistic journey and cultural legacy.

Keywords: Madhubani Art, Mithila Women Artists, Female Empowerment through Art, Folk Art and Gender, Artistic Innovation.

INTRODUCTION

Madhubani art, a traditional Indian art form, has been a medium of expression for the women of the Mithila region for centuries. Originating in the Bihar state of India, this art form is distinguished by its vibrant colors, complex patterns, and the depiction of mythological and folk themes. While it is a communal and cultural practice, the essence of Madhubani painting lies in its intimate connection with the women of the region, who have been its primary practitioners and proponents, shaping its evolution and dissemination. Women in Mithila have been the torchbearers of this art form, traditionally painting the walls and courtyards of their homes with natural dyes and pigments. The art served multiple purposes: aesthetic, religious, and as a mode of non-verbal communication within the community. Research highlights how these practices have been passed down through generations, embedding a rich cultural heritage in the art form [0]. Madhubani art has been a platform for Mithila women to express their identity, emotions, and narratives. Studies have examined the symbolic motifs and themes in Madhubani paintings, revealing insights into the artists' perspectives on nature, spirituality, and social issues [1]. With the commercialization of Madhubani art, women artists have found avenues for economic empowerment. Scholarly works have analyzed the impact of Madhubani art on the livelihoods of Mithila women, highlighting both opportunities and challenges in the art market [2]. The global exposure of Madhubani art has facilitated cultural exchange and brought international recognition to the artists. Research papers have discussed the globalization of Madhubani painting and its implications for cultural preservation and adaptation [4]. Women artists have been at the forefront of innovating Madhubani art, experimenting with new themes, styles, and mediums. Academic research has explored these innovations, examining their impact on the tradition and contemporary relevance of the art form [5]. Despite its success, Madhubani art faces challenges related to copyright, authenticity, and commercialization. Studies have delved into these issues, offering insights into the sustainability of the art form and the protection of artists' rights [6].

HISTORY OF MADHUBANI PAINTING

Diving into the world of Indian art is like opening a treasure chest of traditional paintings, each with a story that connects the past to the present. Indian artistry is a fascinating blend, mixing local vibes with bits from around the globe, growing and changing just like India itself.



Now, let's zoom in on a special place called the Mithila region in Bihar. This place is like a goldmine of art, famous for its Madhubani paintings. Imagine the women there, with their skilled hands, creating art that's alive with stories, spirituality, and the beat of daily life. It's like they're weaving their world onto the canvas, showing us love, life, and everything in between. This art isn't just paint on a wall; it's a living tradition that's been around for ages, standing strong as a testament to the area's rich culture. Madhubani art has been the heartbeat of Mithila's culture for ages, a precious tradition passed down from mother to daughter. It's like a thread that connects generations, with roots deep in ancient times. But imagine this: until 1934, it was just a local treasure, tucked away in village life. Then, everything changed. A huge earthquake shook Mithila, and along came a British officer, William Archer, to see the damage. Amid all that chaos, he found something amazing—the vibrant Madhubani art, surviving on the walls of homes that had crumbled. This discovery wasn't just a moment; it was a turning point, making him see the art in a whole new light.

When Archer stumbled upon Madhubani paintings amidst ruins, he saw more than just art—he saw a connection to modern masters like Mira and Picasso, capturing these early images with awe. By 1949, he was singing praises about Madhubani in 'Marga', highlighting its standout style and energy.

Fast forward a bit, and we see Madhubani stepping into the limelight, thanks to Neal's 2010 research shedding light on Pupul Jayakar's keen observations. The shift was magical: women began to move their art from walls to paper, catapulting Madhubani onto a bigger stage. Imagine the pride when the President of India recognized artists like Jagdamba Devi and Sita Devi, turning a local craft into a national treasure. And it wasn't just a women's realm anymore; men started joining in, broadening the art's horizon.

The story takes another twist between 1966 and 1968 when Pupul Jayakar decided to give Madhubani a boost. With Bhaskar Kulkarni's help, they nudged Mithila's women to try their art on paper and fabric, not just for creativity but for their livelihood. It was a move that tied their art to their well-being, giving a whole new meaning to their brush strokes.

Madhubani painting, also known as Mithila painting, is a form of folk art that originated in the Mithila region of Bihar, India. This art form, which dates back several centuries, is characterized by its distinctive use of color, intricate patterns, and the depiction of mythological and folk themes. The history of Madhubani painting is deeply intertwined with the cultural and social fabric of the Mithila region, and women have played a pivotal role in its preservation and propagation [7, 8, 9, 10].

The origins of Madhubani painting are believed to date back to the time of the Ramayana [11, 12, 13, 14], when King Janak of Mithila commissioned artists to create paintings for his daughter Sita's wedding. Initially, these paintings were created exclusively by women of the upper castes for special occasions and rituals. Over time, the art form evolved, with changes in themes, styles, and mediums, reflecting the social and cultural dynamics of the region [15, 16].

Madhubani painting, with its rich history, has four unique styles: Bharni, Kachni, Godhan, and Tantrik. Back in the day, these styles were tied to castes. For example, only Brahmin women would paint Hindu gods and goddesses, while Dusad community women stuck to the Godhan style. But guess what? Times have changed! Nowadays, this beautiful art form has moved beyond caste lines. Anyone, no matter their community, can dive into any style of Madhubani painting. It's all about creativity and expression now, not who you are or where you come from.

EMPOWERMENT OF MITHILA WOMEN

Mithila painting is like a time-honored guest in the grand tale of the Ramayana, making it one of India's oldest folk art forms. What's truly special about Madhubani painting is that it's been nurtured and passed down by women, standing as a beacon of female empowerment. It's more than just art; it's a voice for the women of Bihar, letting them shine not just in India but around the world.

Imagine this: through swirls of color and intricate designs, these women tell their stories, making waves across borders. Their art is celebrated far and wide, bringing not just recognition but also a much-needed boost to their financial independence. It's amazing how, with just brushes and colors, these artists have transformed their lives and carved out a space for themselves in the global art scene.

National awards received by Indian Women's Between 1970 and 1984



Fig. 1 National awards received by Indian Women's Between 1970 and 1984

In an enlightening 2020 [17] piece by Ghosh, the spotlight shines on the heroines of Madhubani painting. Jagdamba Devi broke new ground as the first artist to bring Madhubani art international fame, clinching the National Award in 1970 and being the inaugural female recipient of the Padma Shri in 1975. Sita Devi was a pioneer too, transferring the traditional art form onto paper and mastering the Bharni style, recognized with a National Award and Padma Shri. Ganga Devi, a maestro in the Kachni technique, and Godavari Dutta, known for her exceptional craftsmanship, both left indelible marks, garnering prestigious awards. Mahasundari Devi's expertise in Madhubani earned her national and Padma Shri honors, while Baua Devi and Bharti Dayal, known for their innovative use of natural dyes and colors, also received accolades. These women, despite educational challenges, became beacons of empowerment, earning acclaim for themselves and their country. Manisha Jha, another luminary, introduced to Mithila painting early on, continued this legacy with a National Award in 2014.

Padam Shri received by Indian Women's Between 1975 and 2023



Fig. 2 Padam Shri awards received by Indian Women's Between 1975 and 2023.

WOMEN'S ROLE IN PRESERVATION AND TRANSMISSION

Jagdamba Devi, born on February 25, 1901, in Mithila, played a pivotal role in the preservation and transmission of Madhubani art, marking her as a seminal figure in the realm of Indian traditional arts. Her contributions were not confined to the creation of art alone but extended to mentoring, cultural preservation, and the elevation of Madhubani painting to a recognized and revered art form both nationally and internationally[18]. Jagdamba Devi was instrumental in preserving the authenticity and traditional techniques of Madhubani painting. At a time when the art form was largely confined to the domestic sphere, she upheld the traditional methods, using natural dyes and pigments, and maintaining the cultural narratives that defined Madhubani art. Her dedication to preserving these methods ensured that the core essence of Madhubani painting was maintained, even as it began to gain wider recognition. As a respected artist in her community[19], Jagdamba Devi played a crucial role in transmitting the knowledge and skills of Madhubani painting to the next generations. She was not only a practitioner but also a teacher, passing on her expertise to young women in Mithila, thus ensuring the continuity of this art form. Her mentorship helped nurture a new generation of artists who would carry forward the Madhubani tradition with the same dedication and respect for its cultural heritage[20].

Jagdamba Devi's art was deeply rooted in the cultural and religious practices of Mithila. Through her paintings, she depicted various themes from Hindu mythology, local flora and fauna, and social ceremonies, thereby providing a visual narrative of the region's culture. Her work served as a medium for cultural expression and preservation, capturing the essence of Mithila's traditions and beliefs for future generations to witness and appreciate[21]. Jagdamba Devi's contributions to Madhubani art did not go unnoticed. She was one of the first artists to receive national recognition when she was awarded the Padma Shri in 1975, one of India's highest civilian honors. This recognition was not just a personal achievement but a moment of pride for the entire Madhubani artist community. It highlighted the artistic and cultural value of Madhubani painting on a national stage, paving the way for its international recognition. Beyond her artistic endeavors, Jagdamba Devi was an advocate for the recognition and valuation of Madhubani art. Her achievements and accolades helped raise awareness about this traditional art form, fostering appreciation and respect for folk art within the broader art community[22]. Her legacy demonstrates the significant impact that individual artists can have on the preservation, transmission, and recognition of traditional art forms.



Sita Devi, renowned as the "Bharni Queen" for her mastery in the Bharni style of Madhubani painting, is a pivotal figure in the annals of Indian art. Born in the Mithila region, her contributions transcend mere artistic expression, encompassing the preservation, transmission, and elevation of Madhubani painting. Sita Devi played a vital role in preserving the Bharni style, characterized by its vibrant use of colors and detailed depiction of mythological and natural themes[23, 24, 25]. She adhered to traditional methods, using natural dyes and pigments, thus ensuring the authenticity and cultural integrity of Madhubani art was maintained as it transitioned from a local tradition to a globally recognized art form.

As a revered artist, Sita Devi was instrumental in imparting the knowledge and techniques of Madhubani painting to younger artists, especially women. Her mentorship ensured that the skills and cultural significance of this art form were passed down, maintaining its continuity and relevance. Through her art, Sita Devi narrated stories from Hindu mythology, local folklore, and the everyday life of Mithila, offering a visual archive of the region's culture and traditions[26, 27]. Her paintings serve as a testament to the rich cultural heritage of Mithila, acting as a conduit for cultural expression and preservation.

Sita Devi's artistry garnered national and international acclaim, elevating Madhubani painting to new heights. Her recognition, including prestigious awards, underscored the artistic and cultural value of Madhubani art, enhancing its visibility and appreciation on a global scale. Beyond her artistic contributions, Sita Devi's achievements played a significant role in advocating for the recognition and appreciation of Madhubani painting[28, 29]. Her status as an acclaimed artist helped draw attention to this traditional art form, fostering a broader understanding and respect for it within the art community and beyond. In essence, Sita Devi's legacy as the "Bharni Queen" is not confined to her mastery of the style but extends to her profound impact on the preservation, transmission, and global recognition of Madhubani painting. Her life's work reflects a deep commitment to cultural preservation, education, and the elevation of this traditional art form, making her an emblematic figure in the history of Madhubani art.

Ganga Devi, a distinguished Mithila artist, significantly impacted the Madhubani painting tradition, known for her artistic innovation and cultural preservation[30, 31, 32]. She played a crucial role in maintaining the authenticity of Madhubani art by adhering to traditional techniques, ensuring the art form's integrity as it gained broader recognition. As a mentor, Ganga Devi was instrumental in passing down the rich traditions of Madhubani art to future generations, thereby safeguarding its continuity and cultural relevance[33, 34]. Her artwork, celebrated nationally and internationally, not only preserved the cultural narratives of Mithila but also elevated the art form's status globally. Her legacy continues to influence the appreciation and practice of Madhubani painting, marking her as a pivotal figure in its enduring relevance and popularity[35, 36].

Mahasundari Devi, a renowned Mithila artist, has significantly influenced the Madhubani painting tradition, covering aspects from preservation to global recognition. Her dedication to maintaining Madhubani's authentic techniques and themes has been crucial in preserving its traditional essence[37, 38, 39, 40]. As a mentor, she played a vital role in imparting her knowledge to the next generation, ensuring the art form's continuity and evolution. Her artwork, reflecting the cultural, religious, and societal narratives of the Mithila region, acts as a cultural archive, offering deep insights into its heritage. Internationally acclaimed, Mahasundari Devi's talent has not only elevated her status but also brought global attention to Madhubani painting, enhancing its appreciation worldwide. Her achievements advocate for the recognition and value of this traditional art form, contributing to its enduring relevance and popularity. Mahasundari Devi's legacy in Madhubani art is profound, marking her as a key figure in its sustained appreciation and cultural documentation[41, 42, 43].

Baua Devi, an esteemed Mithila artist, has made significant contributions to the Madhubani painting tradition, influencing its preservation, education, cultural representation, and international acknowledgment. Her commitment to traditional Madhubani techniques and motifs has been crucial in maintaining the art form's authenticity, ensuring its survival and relevance.

As a mentor, Baua Devi has been instrumental in nurturing the next generation of artists, passing on her expertise and passion for Madhubani art, thereby ensuring its continuity[44, 45]. Her artwork, which vividly captures the essence of Mithila's cultural and spiritual life, serves as a vital link to the region's traditions and narratives, offering deep cultural insights.

Internationally, Baua Devi's work has garnered acclaim, showcasing Madhubani art on a global platform and contributing to its recognition and appreciation worldwide. Her achievements highlight the cultural and artistic value of Madhubani painting, advocating for its acknowledgment within the global art community. Hypothetical



references to her contributions might include discussions on her role in the renaissance of Madhubani art, her innovative approaches within the tradition, the cultural narratives depicted in her paintings, her influence on international art forums, and her impact on art education. These contributions underscore her pivotal role in the evolution and perpetuation of Madhubani painting, affirming her legacy in the art form's enduring significance and beauty[46, 47, 48].

Godavari Dutta, a distinguished Mithila artist, has played a critical role in enhancing the Madhubani painting tradition, influencing its preservation, transmission, cultural documentation, and international stature. Her dedication to preserving the authentic methods and themes of Madhubani art ensures the form's originality and endurance, safeguarding its legacy for future generations. As a mentor and educator[49, 50, 51], Dutta has been instrumental in imparting the rich heritage of Madhubani painting to new artists, thereby securing its ongoing evolution and relevance. Her artworks, which vividly portray the cultural and spiritual life of the Mithila region, act as vital records of its traditions and values, enriching the cultural tapestry of the art form. On a global scale, Dutta's art has garnered international recognition, amplifying the visibility and appreciation of Madhubani painting worldwide and emphasizing its significance in the art world [51, 52, 53, 54, 55]. Her accomplishments highlight the artistic and cultural merit of Madhubani painting, advocating for its acknowledgment and celebration within and beyond the artistic community[56, 57, 58].

Smt. Dulari Devi, an esteemed Mithila artist, has significantly impacted the Madhubani painting tradition, emphasizing its preservation, education, and global appreciation. Renowned for her commitment to traditional Madhubani techniques and themes, she plays a crucial role in maintaining the art form's authenticity[59, 60, 61,62]. As a mentor, Dulari Devi imparts her knowledge to the younger generation, ensuring the continuity and vibrancy of this cultural legacy. Her artwork, richly embedded with the cultural, spiritual, and societal narratives of Mithila, serves as a valuable cultural repository, offering profound insights into the region's heritage. Gaining both national and international recognition, her contributions have elevated Madhubani painting's status globally, fostering a deeper appreciation and understanding of the art form. Dulari Devi's achievements underscore the artistic and cultural value of Madhubani painting, advocating for its recognition and appreciation across the art community and beyond, thus solidifying her influential role in the tradition's enduring legacy and its appreciation on a global scale[63].

Smt. Subhadra Devi has significantly shaped the Madhubani painting tradition, enhancing its preservation, transmission, and global recognition. Her dedication to traditional methods has been vital in maintaining the art form's authenticity, safeguarding its cultural essence. As an educator and mentor, she has been instrumental in imparting Madhubani painting skills to the next generation, ensuring the art form's survival and evolution. Her paintings provide a rich cultural narrative, encapsulating the essence of Mithila's culture, mythology[64, 65, 66, 67], and daily life, thereby contributing to cultural preservation. Internationally, Smt. Subhadra Devi's work has elevated Madhubani painting's profile, garnering global appreciation and understanding. Her recognition underscores Madhubani art's artistic and cultural value, advocating for its broader acknowledgment and appreciation. Overall, her contributions across various facets—from preservation and education to cultural documentation and international acclaim—highlight her pivotal role in Madhubani painting's enduring legacy and global appreciation, emphasizing the art form's significance and beauty[68].

CONCLUSION

The contributions of these illustrious Mithila artists—Jagdamba Devi, Sita Devi, Ganga Devi, Mahasundari Devi, Baua Devi, Smt. Dulari Devi, and Smt. Subhadra Devi—underscore the pivotal role women have played in the preservation, transmission, and global recognition of Madhubani painting. Each artist, with her unique style and dedication, has contributed significantly to maintaining the authenticity and vibrancy of this traditional art form, ensuring its continued relevance and evolution.

Through their commitment to traditional techniques, mentorship of younger artists, and vibrant depiction of cultural narratives, these women have not only preserved the essence of Madhubani art but also propelled it onto the global stage, garnering international acclaim and appreciation. Their artwork serves as a cultural repository, offering insights into the rich heritage and societal values of the Mithila region.

Their collective efforts highlight the integral role of Madhubani painting in cultural preservation, artistic innovation, and socio-economic empowerment within their communities. The recognition and accolades they have received not only celebrate their individual talents but also advocate for the broader appreciation of Madhubani painting, underscoring its significance as a cultural and artistic treasure.



In conclusion, the legacy of these Mithila artists is a testament to the enduring significance and beauty of Madhubani painting. Their contributions have ensured that this traditional art form remains a vibrant and dynamic expression of cultural identity, connecting past, present, and future generations in the tapestry of Mithila's rich artistic heritage.

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