
A Journey of Madhubani Art: From Village Walls to Global Galleries

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Abstract: Madhubani art, originating from the Mithila region of Bihar, India, has transcended its regional roots to become a global artistic phenomenon. The evolution of Madhubani art started as a localized folk tradition, primarily decorating the walls of homes and community spaces. The introduction of paper and canvas as mediums for Madhubani art marked a pivotal transition, making it accessible to a broader audience. Globalization played a significant role in accelerating Madhubani art's reach and influence. The journey of Madhubani art reflects the broader discourse on cultural identity and authenticity in a globalized world. While globalization brought new opportunities and recognition, it also raised questions about the preservation of traditional values and the impact of commercialization. The tension between preserving heritage and embracing innovation is a recurring theme in this journey. As Madhubani art continues to evolve and adapt to global contexts, its narrative becomes a microcosm of the broader dynamics of cultural exchange in a rapidly changing world. This journey from village walls to global galleries is not only a testament to the resilience of cultural traditions but also an exploration of the creative possibilities that arise when tradition meets globalization.

Keywords: Commercialization, Globalisation, Environment. Folk tradition, Madhubani Art.

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Introduction

During the pre-British period, India had a rich cultural tradition that has undergone significant changes with the emergence of westernization, Sanskritization, modernization, and ultimately, globalization. The globalization of production in the world economy has opened up Asian markets to global competition and exchange, affecting all levels of producers and workers, as

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well as the socio-cultural environment. The impact of globalization has been far-reaching, with some individuals gaining employment in offshore transnational enterprises or migrating to urban centres for wage work. However, many others, including artisans and craft workers, have faced displacement as their skills and products become less in demand. Artisans, who constitute a relatively large group of skilled or semi-skilled workers, have been particularly vulnerable to the economic changes brought about by globalization and economic liberalization policies in Asia and other developing regions. Many traditional crafts and art forms, including Madhubani art, have faced challenges in sustaining their cultural significance and economic viability in the face of globalization. The shift towards mass-produced and standardized goods has diminished the uniqueness and cultural value associated with artisanal products. Moreover, the rising costs of raw materials have made it increasingly difficult for artisans to continue their craft practices. However, amidst these challenges, there are efforts to preserve and promote traditional art forms. Organizations, initiatives, and platforms have emerged to support artisans, create market opportunities, and preserve the cultural heritage associated with their crafts. By leveraging technology and digital platforms, artisans can reach wider audiences and connect with potential customers globally, thereby revitalizing interest and demand for their unique creations. Globalization and economic changes have significantly impacted artisans and craft workers, including those involved in Madhubani art. The mass production of standardized goods, rising costs of raw materials, and changes in market demand have posed challenges to the sustainability and preservation of traditional art forms. Nonetheless, there are ongoing efforts to support artisans, promote their work, and preserve cultural heritage in the face of globalization. It is crucial to recognize the value of traditional craftsmanship and implement policies that foster the preservation and promotion of these unique cultural expressions.

Madhubani painting, also known as Mithila painting, has undergone a remarkable journey from its humble origins as a folk-art form to achieving the status of fine art. Originating in the Mithila region of Bihar, India, Madhubani painting was traditionally practiced by women, who adorned the walls of their homes with intricate and vibrant designs during festive occasions. Over time, Madhubani art has experienced a shift in its purpose and usage, evolving from its earlier ceremonial and private use to predominantly decorative or commodified applications. The original meanings and cultural significance associated with Madhubani paintings have been diluted as they adorn the walls of houses, serving primarily as aesthetic additions to home decor. This raises important questions about the concept of "local" in the era of globalization. Should the notion of "local" be limited to a specific geographical location? In the case of Madhubani paintings, while it is geographically rooted in India, its original local essence has undergone transformation, and some argue that it may have even been lost.¹ The growing interest in traditional art forms like Madhubani can be seen as part of a global movement where local cultures leverage technology and the globalized world to sustain and popularize their art forms. An illustrative example is the emergence of e-retailer eMithilaHaat.com, an initiative by a young entrepreneur, Akita Jha, who was moved by her aunt's financial struggles and the neglect of Madhubani painting.² In response, she established an online retailing service for Madhubani paintings and similar products, using technology and the global reach of the internet to provide a

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platform for promoting and selling these traditional artworks. This example highlights how globalization and technological advancements can be harnessed to support and sustain local art forms. While the commercialization and commodification of Madhubani art may have led to a loss of its original cultural context in some cases, it has also provided opportunities for economic empowerment and wider exposure for Madhubani artists. While the commercialization and commodification of Madhubani art have altered its original meanings and shifted its usage towards decorative purposes, the global interest in traditional art forms like Madhubani presents opportunities for sustaining and popularizing local cultures. The case of eMithilaHaat.com exemplifies how technology and the globalized world can be harnessed to empower artists and promote traditional art forms. However, it is crucial to strike a balance between commercial viability and cultural preservation to ensure the authenticity and integrity of Madhubani art in the face of globalization.

The Turning Point of Madhubani Art

The turning point came in the 1960s when Jagdamba Devi, a talented artist, began painting on paper to support her family during a severe drought. Her work caught the attention of a local collector and sparked recognition beyond its traditional context. With increasing exposure, Madhubani painting gained national and international acclaim.³ Artists like Jagdamba Devi, Sita Devi, and Ganga Devi played pivotal roles in popularizing the art-form. Their participation in exhibitions and galleries in India and abroad brought attention to the distinctive style and captivating motifs of Madhubani painting. This exposure not only elevated its status but also introduced it to a broader audience. Government support and patronage played a crucial role in the journey of Madhubani painting. Institutions such as the All-India Handicrafts Board and the Madhubani Research Institute were established to provide training and support to Madhubani artists.⁴ The Indian government also organized exhibitions and cultural events to showcase Madhubani painting as a significant part of the country's artistic heritage. As the art form gained recognition, artists began to experiment with new techniques, styles, and themes, blending traditional motifs with contemporary elements. This led to a diversification of Madhubani art, expanding its range and appeal. Artists explored different mediums such as canvas, silk, and handmade paper, pushing the boundaries of the art form. Through these developments, Madhubani painting gradually transitioned from being solely a folk-art form to being recognized as fine art. It found its place in prestigious galleries, museums, and private collections worldwide. The unique cultural significance and aesthetic appeal of Madhubani painting solidified its position as a valuable part of India's artistic heritage. Today, Madhubani painting continues to evolve and thrive. Artists from different backgrounds and generations are contributing to its growth and preservation. The journey of Madhubani painting from a traditional folk art to a respected and celebrated fine art highlights the power of artistic expression, cultural heritage, and the ability of an art form to transcend boundaries and gain global recognition.

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Madhubani painting has its roots in the folk-art traditions of the Mithila region. It was primarily a domestic art form practiced by women who would decorate the walls of their homes with intricate paintings on various occasions such as festivals, weddings, and births. These paintings were created using natural pigments and dyes, often derived from plants and minerals found in the local surroundings. The art-form was deeply intertwined with the daily lives and cultural rituals of the people. Traditionally, Madhubani painting served various purposes. It was practiced during auspicious occasions such as weddings, festivals, and births, where it was used to celebrate and embellish the surroundings. The paintings would often depict mythological stories, religious motifs, and scenes from nature and daily life. The technique of Madhubani painting involved using twigs, fingers, or brushes to create intricate patterns and designs.⁵ The paintings were characterized by their bold outlines, vibrant colours, and intricate detailing. The themes and motifs were deeply influenced by the cultural and social fabric of the region, reflecting the customs, beliefs, and folklore of the Mithila community. Madhubani painting was primarily practiced by women, who would pass down the art form from generation to generation. It was a form of creative expression and a way for women to showcase their skills and artistic abilities. The art form also held a significant social and cultural importance, as it was a means for women to communicate their thoughts, emotions, and narratives within the confines of their homes. The Madhubani painting tradition remained largely localized and confined to the Mithila region for many years. However, its distinct style and cultural significance gradually caught the attention of the wider world. With increasing exposure and recognition, Madhubani painting transcended its folk-art origins and evolved into a recognized and celebrated art form that gained popularity both within India and internationally. The folk-art origin of Madhubani painting remains a vital part of its identity and heritage. Even as the art form has expanded and diversified, artists today continue to draw inspiration from the traditional techniques, motifs, and storytelling traditions that have been passed down through generations. The rich folk-art roots of Madhubani painting continue to shape and influence its contemporary manifestations, keeping alive the cultural legacy and artistic traditions of the Mithila region.

However, in recent decades, Madhubani art has gained widespread recognition and undergone a remarkable revival, transforming from a regional folk art into a globally celebrated art form. Madhubani art has a deep historical context, with its roots traced back to ancient times. The art form finds mention in various ancient texts and scriptures, such as the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, which refer to the beautiful murals and paintings adorning the walls of palaces and temples. The journey of recognition for Madhubani art began in the 1934 when a severe drought hit the Mithila region, causing economic hardship for the local communities.⁶ Collectors like William G. Archer and G.H. Bhattacharya played a significant role in documenting and collecting Madhubani artworks. They recognized the unique style and cultural significance of the art form and brought it to the attention of the art world. The exhibition of Madhubani art played a crucial role in its recognition and revival.⁷ As Madhubani art gained recognition, artists began to experiment with new techniques, styles, and themes. Traditional motifs and techniques were blended with contemporary elements, resulting in a more diverse range of Madhubani art. Madhubani art's recognition extended beyond India's borders, gaining popularity and fame in

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international art circles. The art form attracted attention from collectors, galleries, and museums worldwide. Madhubani artworks found their place in prestigious institutions, private collections, and international exhibitions, further enhancing their visibility and market value. This recognition led to commercialization, with Madhubani art being reproduced on various merchandise and gaining commercial success.

Efforts have been made to educate and train aspiring artists in the techniques and traditions of Madhubani art. Art schools and organizations provide workshops and training programs to nurture talent and preserve the authenticity of the art-form. These educational initiatives help in passing down the traditional knowledge and techniques to future generations, ensuring the continuity and integrity of Madhubani art. The recognition and revival of Madhubani art from a traditional folk-art form to a celebrated and globally recognized art form can be attributed to various factors. The efforts of collectors, scholars, anthropologists, and artists themselves played a pivotal role in bringing Madhubani art to the forefront of the art world. Government support, national and international exhibitions, and educational initiatives have contributed to its preservation and promotion. The journey of recognition and revival of Madhubani art highlights the power of artistic expression, cultural heritage, and the ability of an art-form to transcend boundaries and gain global recognition. The journey continues, with Madhubani art evolving and adapting while remaining deeply rooted in its traditional origins.

Contemporary adaptation and experimentation have played a crucial role in the evolution and continued relevance of Madhubani art. While rooted in traditional techniques and motifs, Madhubani artists have embraced new artistic approaches, themes, and mediums to expand the possibilities of the art form. Madhubani art has a long and rich history, deeply rooted in the cultural heritage of the Mithila region of Bihar, India. In recent years Madhubani art has involved the exploration of new styles, techniques, subject matter, mediums, and collaborations, while still retaining the essence and cultural significance of the traditional art form. One of the new styles and techniques is that while the traditional Madhubani style was characterized by flat forms and bold lines, contemporary artists have introduced more intricate detailing, shading, and layering techniques to add depth and dimension to their compositions. They have experimented with different brushwork and line variations, creating a greater sense of movement and texture in their artwork.⁸ This experimentation with styles and techniques has allowed for a more nuanced and diverse expression of Madhubani art.

In addition to the evolution of style and technique, contemporary Madhubani artists have expanded the range of subjects and themes they explore in their artwork. While religious and mythological narratives still feature prominently, artists have begun incorporating contemporary elements, social issues, and personal experiences into their paintings. This expansion of subject matter allows for a broader exploration of themes and an engagement with current realities. Madhubani art is now used as a means of social commentary, addressing topics such as gender equality, environmental concerns, and cultural identity. The introduction of new mediums has been another significant aspect of contemporary adaptation in Madhubani art. Traditionally, Madhubani art was created on walls, floors, or handmade paper using natural pigments and

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dyes.⁹ However, contemporary artists have embraced a possibilities for artists to create diverse art forms, including sculptures, installations, and mixed media artwork.

The new trends in the art have been significantly influenced by collaborations and the application of interdisciplinary approaches. Madhubani artists have joined forces with designers, fashion houses, and fellow artists to infuse Madhubani motifs and designs into modern products and installations. This fusion of traditional art with other creative disciplines has given rise to fresh and innovative interpretations of Madhubani art. It has provided a platform for exploring novel techniques, materials, and applications, thus pushing the boundaries of this art form beyond its conventional confines. Furthermore, artists have embraced a spirit of innovation by incorporating new materials and tools into their artistic process. While natural pigments and dyes remain fundamental to Madhubani art, artists have also begun to incorporate acrylics, watercolors, and other contemporary mediums to enhance their artwork. This willingness to embrace modern materials and techniques while preserving the essence of the art form has allowed Madhubani art to evolve and stay relevant in today's ever-changing artistic landscape. They have incorporated brushes, pens, and other tools alongside traditional twigs and fingers to create intricate details and achieve different effects.¹⁰ This experimentation with materials and tools has added a contemporary touch to Madhubani art while preserving its essence. Contemporary adaptation and experimentation in Madhubani art have not only expanded the artistic horizons of the art form but also made it more accessible to a wider audience.

Furthermore, contemporary adaptation and experimentation have had a significant impact on the economic empowerment of Madhubani artists and the local communities. With increased exposure and recognition, the market demand for Madhubani art has grown significantly. Artists have gained opportunities to exhibit and sell their artwork nationally and internationally, generating income and supporting their livelihoods. This economic growth has also benefited the local economy, as it has created a market for art supplies, facilitated the growth of art galleries and studios, and fostered cultural tourism in the Mithila region.¹¹ Contemporary adaptation and experimentation in Madhubani art have not been without challenges. Some artists have faced criticism from purists who argue for strict adherence to traditional techniques and motifs. However, many artists and art critics believe that adaptation and experimentation are essential for the growth and survival of the art form. They argue that while it is important to preserve the cultural roots and integrity of Madhubani art, allowing it to evolve and adapt to contemporary contexts ensures its relevance and longevity. Contemporary adaptation and experimentation have breathed new life into Madhubani art, allowing it to thrive in the modern art world. Through the exploration of new styles, techniques, subject matter, mediums, and collaborations, Madhubani artists have expanded the possibilities of the art form while preserving its cultural significance. The contemporary adaptation of Madhubani art reflects the dynamic nature of artistic expression and the ability of a traditional art form to evolve and resonate with diverse audiences. It ensures the continued relevance and vitality of Madhubani art as a cherished cultural heritage of the Mithila region and a celebrated form of artistic expression.

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Government Initiatives to Promote Madhubani Art

Both the Central Government and State Government have been actively involved in organizing a multitude of competitions and events aimed at showcasing the intricate beauty of Mithila folk art. These initiatives have been carried out at various times and locations across the country, demonstrating the government's commitment to preserving and promoting this unique cultural heritage. These events include "APNA UTSAV" in Mumbai in 1989, which celebrated Mithila folk art, highlighting its significance and contribution to Indian culture. Additionally, there was an event in 1990 in New Delhi, focusing on the role of schools in protecting natural and cultural heritage, underlining the importance of education in preserving traditions. In 1991, events like "Srijnotsava" in Udaipur, "Shilpa Grain" in Rajasthan, and "Panchmadhi Utsava" in Panchmadhi, Madhya Pradesh, further contributed to the recognition and promotion of Mithila folk art. These events not only showcased the art but also brought together artists and enthusiasts from different parts of the country, fostering cultural exchange and appreciation. The year 1992 witnessed the "Lok Katha Paramparik Kalakar Shibir" in Patna, where artists and storytellers came together to celebrate the rich oral traditions and artistic expressions of the region. "Shilpa Bazar" in New Delhi in the same year provided a platform for artists to display and sell their work to a wider audience, facilitating economic opportunities for them.¹² The "Manila Samridhi Utsav" in Patna in 1994 and a demonstration by the Bihar State Women's Development Corporation in 1996 underscored the government's commitment to empower and support local artists, particularly women, who have been instrumental in carrying forward the legacy of Mithila art. These initiatives were not limited to India alone. In 1995, "Lok Nritya Utsav" and "Kasta Shilpa Mela" were organized in New Delhi, showcasing the cultural and artistic diversity of the region on a national stage. "Portrait and Vanvass" in Calcutta, "Paramparik Lok Kalakar Shibir" in Calcutta, and "Chitra Kala Evam Hasta Kala Pradarshani" in Patna in the same year emphasized the significance of art in cultural preservation and promotion.¹³ The late 1990s continued to witness a series of events, including "Karo Evam Sikho" in Bhopal, "Shilpa Mela" in Madras, "Mithilanchal Lokotsava" in Madhubani, and "Granishree Mela" in Patna, all of which played a pivotal role in raising awareness about Mithila art and providing a platform for artists to exhibit their work. Furthermore, the "Usha Abhilasha" event in New Delhi in 1996, "Rachna Prasanga" in Bhopal in 1996, and "Paryatak Gram" in Sonapur in 1996 highlighted the intersection of art, culture, and tourism, contributing to the economic upliftment of local communities.¹⁴ In 1997, the Bihar Rajya Mahila Chitrakar Kala Pradarshani in Patna and the Yuva Sanskriti Mahotsava in Patna showcased the contributions of women artists and young talents in keeping the Mithila art tradition alive. The "Lok Chitra Kala Shibir" in Bhopal, "Women Enterprises" in Patna, and "Mahila Udyog Mela" in Patna, all held in 1997, underscored the government's commitment to women's empowerment through art and entrepreneurship. Further afield, the "Purvanchal Paramparik Kalakar Shibir" in Brahmapur, Orissa in 1997, "Shilpa Mela" in Allahabad in 1997, and "Lokotsava" in Gandhi Nagar, Gujarat in 1998, contributed to the national recognition and appreciation of Mithila art. "Madhubani Boutiqua Mishrit Shibir" in

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Madhubani in 1998 showcased the fusion of traditional art with contemporary aesthetics, and "Madhubani Paintings Mahila Prashikshan Shivir" in Patna in the same year emphasized skill development for women artists. The "Barshik Mahila Udyog Mela" in Patna in 1998 and "BoudhaMahotsava" in Bodh Gaya in 1998 underscored the economic opportunities that art can bring, especially in regions with rich cultural heritages.¹⁵ In 1998, the "Kala Mela" in Allahabad, and "Shilpa Kala Kaushal Pradarshani" in New Delhi in 1999, continued to provide a platform for artists to showcase their skills and reach a wider audience. These government-sponsored events and initiatives have been instrumental in recognizing, preserving, and promoting Mithila folk art. They have not only celebrated the art but have also provided artists with opportunities to earn a livelihood and showcase their work to a diverse audience, both nationally and internationally. The government's involvement has played a vital role in empowering artists and ensuring the preservation of this unique cultural heritage for future generations.

The diversification of painting techniques followed suit, as art enthusiasts from all corners of the globe developed a fascination for rural tourism and India's vibrant cultural heritage, propelling Madhubani painting to new heights of popularity beyond Mithila's borders. Madhubani art gained immense international recognition, surpassing its popularity within India, particularly in countries like Japan, Germany, France, and America. The Mithila Museum in Tokamachi, Japan, stands as a testament to this, established by Hasegawa, a renowned patron of Madhubani art. It proudly exhibits around 1000 traditional Madhubani paintings, representing various art-forms and themes.¹⁶ The allure of Madhubani painting has attracted numerous authors, both Indian and foreign, who have penned books and research papers, delving into the intricacies of this unique art-form. The Master Craftsman Association of Mithila, founded by an American in 1977 A.D., has played a vital role in supporting Madhubani artists by organizing exhibitions and facilitating the sale of their artworks.¹⁷ Moreover, Madhubani paintings have adorned the government buildings of Madhubani city, transforming spaces such as the railway station, town hall, administrative offices, and government bungalows into vibrant showcases of artistic expression. The artistic vision has even extended to the decoration of long-distance trains in India, reflecting the collaborative efforts of women, men, and youth who willingly contributed their skills to these impressive projects.

On a national scale, Madhubani art has received substantial recognition through its participation in numerous exhibitions, cultural festivals, and art events throughout India. The Indian government has taken note of the profound artistic and cultural importance of Madhubani art, and as a result, has actively supported exhibitions and cultural initiatives aimed at preserving and promoting this unique art form. These platforms have not only served as opportunities for Madhubani artists to showcase their creations to a broader audience but have also enabled them to engage with art enthusiasts and establish connections with fellow artists and experts in the field. This heightened national exposure has not only contributed to the increased popularity of Madhubani art within India but has also solidified its status as an invaluable component of India's rich artistic heritage.

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Conclusion

Internationally, Madhubani art has gained immense popularity and acclaim. The distinctiveness of its style, vibrant colours, and intricate designs have captivated art enthusiasts, collectors, and curators worldwide. Madhubani artworks have been featured in renowned international galleries, museums, and exhibitions, exposing the art form to a global audience. This international exposure has not only introduced Madhubani art to diverse cultures but has also facilitated cross-cultural exchanges and collaborations. It has helped in fostering a greater understanding and appreciation of the rich cultural heritage of the Mithila region and the artistic traditions associated with it. The international recognition of Madhubani art has also led to commercial opportunities and collaborations. Madhubani designs and motifs have been incorporated into various merchandise, including textiles, home decor, fashion accessories, and stationery, making it accessible to a wider consumer market.¹⁸ The commercial recognition and exposure of Madhubani art have brought about significant economic benefits for the artists and simultaneously elevated the art form's prominence on a global scale. Additionally, artists and experts from the Madhubani community have received invitations to participate in various international art residencies, workshops, and cultural exchange programs. These opportunities have facilitated the exchange of ideas, artistic techniques, and experiences between Madhubani artists and their counterparts from different corners of the world. Such collaborative efforts have not only enriched the practice of Madhubani art but have also allowed it to be seamlessly integrated into contemporary art movements and dialogues. In essence, the combination of national and international exposure has played a pivotal role in extending the recognition and appreciation of Madhubani art beyond its traditional boundaries. This exposure has provided Madhubani artists with expansive platforms to showcase their exceptional talents, fostered cross-cultural exchanges, and made a substantial contribution to the preservation and promotion of this remarkable art form. The ongoing presence of Madhubani art on both the national and international stages ensure its enduring legacy and relevance within the global art landscape. This continued exposure not only enriches the art form but also solidifies its place in the world of art and culture, ensuring that it thrives and evolves for generations to come.

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