

A Details Study on Madhubani Painting (Bihar)

Assistant professor- Dr. Anu Devi

Palpal Goyal

MFA- Drawing and Painting

Shri Ram Group Of College, Muzaffarnagar

Abstract

Madhubani painting, also known as Mithila painting, is a traditional art form originating from the Mithila region of Bihar, India. This paper explores the historical evolution, stylistic features, materials, cultural context, and the role of women in sustaining this art form. Through literature review and visual analysis, the study aims to highlight Madhubani's relevance in contemporary art and its transformation from ritualistic expression to global recognition. Madhubani artists are achieving fame in the contemporary art world.

Keywords: Madhubani painting, Mithila, global .

Introduction

Madhubani painting, also known as Mithila art, is one of the most celebrated forms of Indian folk painting, originating from the Mithila region of Bihar and Nepal. Characterised by intricate patterns, vibrant colours, and symbolic motifs, Madhubani art reflects the deep cultural, spiritual, and social values of the communities that have preserved it for centuries. Traditionally created by women on the walls and floors of their homes during religious occasions, marriages, and festivals, the art form has now found expression on paper, canvas, textiles, and other modern surfaces.

The origins of Madhubani painting are believed to date back to ancient times, with some legends tracing it to the era of the Ramayana, when King Janaka of Mithila commissioned artists to decorate the town for his daughter Sita's wedding. Over time, what began as a ritualistic practice evolved into a vibrant visual language, deeply interwoven with daily life and mythology.

This research aims to explore the historical evolution, stylistic diversity, cultural significance, and contemporary relevance of Madhubani painting. By examining its transformation from domestic ritual to a globally recognised art form, the study also investigates the role of Madhubani in empowering rural women, preserving intangible cultural heritage, and contributing to India's folk art legacy. characteristics

Madhubani painting is distinct for its vivid style, symbolic motifs, and deep cultural meanings. It follows a set of traditional principles that have been passed down through generations, often orally and through observation within the community. Below are the key characteristics that define this unique art form:

1. Style and Technique

Madhubani paintings are typically two-dimensional with no perspective or shading, which gives them a flat, decorative appearance.

Artists use bold outlines usually made with natural dyes, charcoal, or ink, and then fill the enclosed areas with colours and intricate patterns

2. Themes and Motifs

Common themes include mythological scenes, especially from Hindu epics like the Ramayana and Mahabharata, as well as depictions of Hindu deities like Krishna, Rama, Lakshmi, Shiva, Durga, and Saraswati.

Nature plays a central role—trees, birds, fish, sun, moon, and flowers are often used symbolically. The art also covers social themes, fertility symbols, and ritual events like marriage, especially in the traditional Kohbar (nuptial) paintings.

3. Use of Colour

Traditionally, Madhubani artists use natural dyes and pigments derived from plants and minerals. For example:

Black from burnt rice soot

Yellow from turmeric or pollen

Red from sandalwood or vermilion Blue from indigo

Colours are typically applied flat, without blending, to create a high-contrast visual effect.

4. Geometric Patterns and Fills

The background and clothing of figures are filled with geometrical patterns such as lines, dots, waves, and checkerboards.

These patterns serve both an aesthetic and symbolic purpose, reflecting themes of balance and cosmic order.

5. Medium and Materials

Originally, Madhubani was painted on mud walls and floors.

Later, artists shifted to using handmade paper, cloth, and canvas to increase accessibility and commercial viability.

Brushes are often handmade from twigs, matchsticks, or fingers

6. Five Main Styles

Madhubani painting is divided into five distinct styles, each associated with a particular community or caste:

Bharni – Filled with vibrant colours, often depicting deities (traditionally by Brahmin women).

Katchni – Characterised by fine line work and minimal use of color.

Tantrik – Centred on symbolic and religious motifs, especially of tantric deities.

Godna – Inspired by tattoo patterns, uses simple motifs and monochrome palettes.

Kohbar – Created as marriage murals with fertility and love symbols.

Madhubani Artist

Madhubani painting has been nurtured and preserved largely by women from the Mithila region for centuries. In recent decades, several artists have gained national and international recognition for their contribution to this folk art. These artists not only upheld traditional techniques but also adapted the form to reflect social themes, contemporary issues, and personal creativity.

1. Sita Devi (c. 1914–2005)

One of the earliest and most well-known Madhubani artists.

Known for her mastery of the Bharni style, featuring vivid colours and mythological themes.

Awarded the Padma Shri in 1981.

Her works are held in major collections, including the National Museum in New Delhi and international galleries.

2. Ganga Devi (1928–1991)

A pioneer of the Katchni style, using intricate lines and minimal colour.

Gained international fame and painted a Mithila Room at the Crafts Museum, Delhi.

She brought personal and social experiences into her work, including a poignant series on her battle with cancer.

Awarded the Padma Shri in 1984.

3. Baua Devi

Began painting at a young age and rose to fame in the 1960s when the art form began to be recognised outside Mithila.

Known for powerful storytelling, often featuring feminist themes and reinterpretations of mythology.

One of the few women to be awarded the Padma Shri (2017) for her contribution to Indian folk art.

4. Mahasundari Devi (1922–2013)

An influential figure in preserving traditional Mithila art and training younger generations.

Recognised with multiple awards, including the Padma Shri and Shilp Guru Award.

Played a crucial role in the transformation of Madhubani painting from wall art to portable formats.

5. Jagdamba Devi

The first woman to receive the National Award for Madhubani painting (1969).

Her contributions were instrumental in bringing the art form to the attention of the Indian government and cultural institutions.

6. Contemporary Artists

A new generation of artists is innovating within the Madhubani tradition:

Shanti Devi – Known for blending social issues with traditional imagery.

Duller Devi – Former domestic worker turned acclaimed artist; her autobiography “Following My Paint Brush” is widely appreciated.

Manisha Jha – Trained academically and uses Madhubani to address environmental and feminist issues

MADHUBANI PAINTING : in a present scenario

In the contemporary era, Madhubani painting has transcended its traditional role as a ritualistic and domestic art form to become a globally recognised symbol of India’s cultural heritage. While it remains deeply rooted in the folklore, spirituality, and rural life of the Mithila region, its expressions have evolved to suit modern tastes, global markets, and social commentary.

1. Commercialisation and Global Reach

Madhubani art is now showcased in international art exhibitions, craft fairs, and museums.

It has found a place in urban homes, fashion, stationery, and home décor, creating new markets for artisans.

E-commerce platforms and social media have allowed artists to sell their work globally, increasing visibility and income.

2. Contemporary Themes

Many modern Madhubani artists are incorporating current social, environmental, and political themes into their work.

Topics such as women’s rights, climate change, deforestation, and education are depicted alongside traditional motifs.

This fusion of the ancient and the contemporary has broadened the scope of the art form.

3. Women’s Empowerment and Socio-Economic Impact

Madhubani painting has become a tool of empowerment for rural women, providing them with financial independence and identity.

NGOs, government initiatives, and cooperatives support these women through training, materials, and market access.

It has also been included in skill development programs under initiatives like “Make in India” at

“Atmanirbhar Bharat”

4. Educational and Institutional Support

Madhubani painting is taught in art institutions and cultural workshops across India and abroad. Institutions like the Crafts Museum (Delhi) and Mithila Art Institute help document and preserve the art form.

Researchers and scholars increasingly study Madhubani in the context of folk art, gender studies, and visual anthropology.

5. Challenges

Despite its growing popularity, the art faces several challenges:

Mass production and cheap imitations threaten authenticity and quality.

Some artists struggle with copyright and recognition, especially in online platforms.

The need for sustainable sources of natural dyes and traditional materials remains critical.

MADHUBANI PAINTING :in a past scenario

Madhubani painting in a past scenario refers to how this traditional art form was practiced historically, especially in its place of origin—the Mithila region of Bihar, India. Here's a look at how Madhubani painting existed in earlier times:

Historical Context of Madhubani Painting

1. Origins in Ancient Rituals

- Madhubani painting dates back to at least the 14th century, though some believe it began during the Ramayana period.
- Legend says that King Janaka (father of Sita) commissioned artists to create paintings for his daughter's wedding to Lord Rama.
- These artworks were traditionally drawn by women on the walls of homes, especially during festivals, marriages, and religious rituals.

2. Tools and Materials

- Natural dyes and pigments were made from local plants, charcoal, turmeric, flowers, and rice paste.
- Artists used fingers, twigs, bamboo sticks, and handmade brushes.
- The paintings were done on freshly plastered mud walls and floors of huts.

3. Style and Symbolism

- Art was highly symbolic, representing themes like:
- Marriage (Kohbar Ghar) – love, fertility, union
- Mythology – gods like Krishna, Shiva, Durga, and Ram
- Nature and cosmology – sun, moon, fish, birds, and trees
- Geometric borders and symmetry were used to maintain harmony and balance.

4. Social and Cultural Role

- Painting was an integral part of daily life for women in the Mithila region.
- It was not for sale—created for family celebrations and religious devotion.
- Passed down through generations orally, with daughters learning from mothers.

CONCLUSION

Madhubani painting is not merely a form of artistic expression — it is a living tradition that embodies the cultural identity, spiritual beliefs, and social life of the Mithila region. From its ritualistic origins on the mud walls of rural homes to its contemporary presence in global art galleries, Madhubani has shown remarkable resilience and adaptability. The art form's intricate designs, symbolic motifs, and use of natural materials reflect a deep connection with nature, mythology, and everyday life. Importantly, Madhubani painting has played a transformative role in empowering rural women, offering them a voice and a means of life in patriarchal society.

In the present day, Madhubani continues to evolve—embracing modern themes, digital platforms, and cross-cultural influences while preserving its traditional essence. However, the challenges of commercialisation, loss of authenticity, and the need for sustainable practices remind us of the importance of conscious preservation efforts.

As a vibrant piece of India's intangible cultural heritage, Madhubani painting remains a testament to the power of folk art in shaping identity, community, and resistance. Its continued relevance depends on a delicate balance between honouring its roots and embracing innovation.

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