

Painting Is My Everything

ART FROM INDIA'S MITHILA REGION



LARGE PRINT LABELS

Ceremonial wrapper (*puria*), approx. 1945

Ink on paper

Gift of Malini Bakshi Leveque, R2018.11.2

This wrapper is a rare survivor and is the closest we can come to the ritual function of Mithila paintings in a museum setting. Before the wedding begins, the groom's family sends the bride packages of vermilion (*sindoor*) to be used during various ceremonies. The red powder is wrapped in paper decorated with auspicious motifs signifying prosperity and fertility. These are typically painted by a female member of the groom's extended family. Similar motifs are painted on the wall in the bridal chamber (*kohbar ghar*) at the homes of the bride and groom.

This wrapper is decorated with the lotus plant motif at its center, a bamboo grove at the upper right, depictions of devotional rituals at the bottom, and auspicious motifs such as flowers, fish, tortoises, birds, and peacocks. These designs and their arrangement are also seen on Mahasundari Devi's *kohbar* painting displayed nearby.

An ephemeral object that would typically be thrown away after it was used, this wrapper was made for the wedding of artist Godavari Dutta (now in her early eighties), who preserved it.

An auspicious diagram (*kohbar*), 1983

By Mahasundari Devi (Indian, b. approx. 1935)

Ink and colors on paper

Museum purchase, 1999.39.37

Mahasundari Devi represents here the most traditional and distinctive subject of Mithila art. Celebrating a wedding, powerful and festive wall paintings temporarily transform the bridal chamber (*kohbar ghar*) from a communal domestic space into a consecrated private one.

This work on paper includes specific symbolic motifs from wall-painting tradition. At center, a large lotus plant with an upright stalk bearing shoots, flowers, and leaves symbolizes female fertility and denotes the presence of the bride. Male regenerative energy is represented by a bamboo grove, abstracted into a motif of intersecting lines (upper right). Birds, fish, bees, snakes, and flowers suggest nature's fertility and abundance.

The bride and groom arriving in palanquins are shown in the lower corners, and at left are depicted marriage rituals that take place in this room. A protective semidivinity (*naina jogin*) appears on the four corners. Hindu deities (lower right) add divine auspiciousness to the image.

Artist in Focus: Shalinee Kumari, 2014

Duration: 4 min.

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Monuments in Washington, DC, 1977

By Sita Devi (Indian, 1914–2005)

Ink and colors on paper

Museum purchase, 1999.39.4

Sita Devi was among the earliest village artists to paint on paper in 1966, and her work immediately attracted public attention. By 1969, she had participated in a solo exhibition in Delhi and been invited to tea with then–Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. She went on to receive several private and public commissions in India’s major cities and earn national awards.

In summer 1976, Sita Devi and her son Surya (also an artist) traveled to the United States. They were invited to participate in the Smithsonian’s annual Festival of American Folklife in Washington, DC, where they offered painting demonstrations in the program series “Old Ways in the New World.”

Sita Devi subsequently created several paintings to document her travels. In this work, we see her recollections of the American capital city, featuring the Capitol Building (pink building), Lincoln Memorial Reflecting Pool (blue stripe), and Arlington National Cemetery (yellow tombstones). Here these iconic monuments are personalized and transformed.

Japanese Hippies, 1983

By Gopal Saha (Indian, b. approx. 1940)

Ink and colors on paper

Museum purchase, 1999.39.31

A lively group of women and long-haired men dressed in Indian clothing are shown here drinking and smoking. We do not have the artist's explanation for this painting, but the title's specificity suggests he is depicting Japanese students that he observed traveling through Bihar. After the Japanese Buddhist order Nipponzan-Myohoji built a Peace Pagoda stupa south of Madhubani town in 1969, many travelers, especially Japanese students, visited the region.

In Gopal Saha's painting, we cannot identify the figures either as Japanese or as tourists by their facial types or dress. In addition to the work's title, only the free interactions between men and women, and their smoking and drinking in a public setting, signify their foreignness and set them apart from the more conservative Indian provincial world. It is unclear whether the artist is here neutrally observing, celebrating, or critiquing their behavior.

***Snakes Praying [to] the Sun*, 1983**

By Gopal Saha (Indian, b. approx. 1940)

Ink and colors on paper

Museum purchase, 1999.39.34

In this striking painting that reads as a celebration of nature, Gopal Saha includes a deeply personal experience—that of a dream he had. The exact nature of his dream is not known, and the reference to the event comes from a brief archival note. Clearly discernible in this painting, however, is that the force of nature and the semidivine snakes and serpents (*nagas*), who dwell in rivers, forests, and dense vegetation, are subjects that hold personal resonance for the artist.

The painting's frame barely seems to contain the power of the massive tree with its lush canopy of leaves and branches. Snakes twine around the branches and rise boldly from the underbrush as though trying to reach the sun or pay homage to it. Surya, the sun god, plays an important role in devotional practice of Mithila, and perhaps the image of the sun here refers to the deity.

Prime Minister Modi arriving in a village via helicopter, 2015

By Dulari Devi (Indian)

Ink and colors on paper

Acquisition made possible by the George Hopper Fitch Bequest, 2016.123

Dulari Devi uses this painting to document Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's campaign visit to Bihar during the lead-up to the 2014 national election. He and his entourage are seen arriving in an imaginatively depicted helicopter.

Reflective of Bihar's electoral landscape, we see here the politician's female supporters. Women constitute forty-six percent of the state's electorate, and in recent elections they turned out to vote in higher numbers than did men, thereby influencing political and policy changes in the state. Bihar is India's third most populous state but suffers from poverty and inadequate infrastructure. In Bihar, the lower-caste Dusadh community, to which Dulari Devi belongs, plays a significant political role. Gaining support in Bihar was critical for Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which organized several preelection rallies for Modi in the region, where he promised economic prosperity for all.

Daughters Are for Others, 2006

By Shalinee Kumari (Indian, b. 1985)

Ink and colors on paper

Museum purchase, Mortimer-Harvey Fund, 2018.7

Shalinee Kumari comments here on social roles of Indian women as daughters, wives, and daughters-in-law. Tinged with emotions of loss and resignation, the painting's title evokes the perspective of parents of girls: they raise their daughters with love but often become bystanders in the lives of their married daughters.

The young bride's expression and posture (left) convey her trepidation in the move from her familiar parental world to a new home and life with her husband and his family. The orange and yellow footprints with henna patterns (right) reference the Hindu marriage rite of circumambulation of the sacred fire. Yet their tight arrangement feels like an impenetrable barrier. Two women, their conjoined form recalling powerful goddess images, constitute the center and axis of a mandala-like circle—here a domestic space that confines them.

The artist deftly combines decorative qualities and serious content. The resulting tension between these elements gives this painting its power.

The death of Baua Devi's daughter, 1980

By Baua Devi (Indian, b. 1944)

Ink and colors on paper

Museum purchase, 1999.39.18

This haunting autobiographical painting depicts the death of Baua Devi's six-day-old baby girl, a tragic event in the artist's life that occurred when she was nineteen. This painting, made more than a decade later, suggests that the pain of Baua Devi's loss did not lessen over time.

Married at age twelve, Baua Devi had a difficult life: her husband was abusive, her mother-in-law domineering. As drought ravaged the Mithila region, the impoverished family often went hungry. Baua Devi became pregnant a few years into her marriage, but the much-awaited baby was born feeble and survived only for a few days.

Baua Devi's artistic talent changed her life and role in the community, giving her a powerful voice. Fame and financial and personal independence followed: she bought a house and farmland, and her husband began to work with her as a colorist.

Artist in Focus: Rani Jha, 2014

Duration: 4:08 min.

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The Hindu deity Krishna overcoming the serpent Kaliya, 1988

By Baua Devi (Indian, b. 1944)

Ink on paper

Museum purchase, 1999.39.16

Baua Devi, today one of the Mithila region's senior artists, paints in a distinctive style with bold compositions and strong graphic qualities (see three other works by her in this exhibition). Here, she depicts a well-loved story of the Hindu god Krishna overcoming the five-headed serpent king Kaliya.

In this painting, Baua Devi's serpent king—rather than Krishna—becomes the painting's central focus. The artist's imaginative rendering of her subject, along with her arrangement of negative spaces rhythmically balanced by heavy and fine black lines and delicate filler motifs, transforms the serpent king into a majestic being.

Nagas (serpents or snakes) prominently appear in many paintings by Baua Devi and other Mithila artists (see Gopal Saha's *Snakes Praying [to] the Sun* in this gallery). Snakes, especially the hooded cobra, are considered dangerous yet auspicious semidivine beings, and they occupy an important place in Mithila's devotional practices.

The Hindu deity Kali, 1988

By Baua Devi (Indian, b. 1944)

Ink and colors on paper

Museum purchase, 1999.39.20

Depictions of Kali, the fierce mother goddess, are common in Mithila painting. For her devotees, Kali (the Timeless One or the Black One) represents the force that controls time and also the divine wisdom that ends all illusion. She is seen as the personification of both the creative and destructive powers of time: everything comes from her and she devours everything.

Baua Devi captures the power of Kali through her compositional and color palette choices. The goddess's face is the focus of this painting. Kali's large eyes grip the viewers' gaze, and her prominent tongue suggests the goddess's potential for destruction. Kali's suprahuman abilities are expressed here through a four-armed form, and her beauty is suggested by elegant clothing and jewelry. This image could possibly be read as a representation of women's assertiveness and power.

Painting Competition, 1982

By Mahasundari Devi (Indian, b. approx. 1935)

Ink and colors on paper

Museum purchase, 1999.39.36

Beginning with the Indian government's support of Mithila artists in the late 1960s, a growing number of the region's residents began to paint professionally in response to the medium's potential to generate income. As the title of this work indicates, we are seeing here a local painting competition. Mahasundari Devi completed this painting nearly twenty years before the Mithila Art Institute was established.

Here, boys and girls are intent at their work; the girls work inside their homes and the boys in open courtyards. Older women supervise and guide the young artists. All work on sheets of paper instead of on walls, the traditional surfaces for paintings. This suggests the shift of focus and function of painting in Mithila society from ritual and personal to salable art.

Artist in Focus: Dulari Devi, 2014

Duration: 3:33 min.

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Radha and Krishna under a kadamba tree, 1985

By Karpoori Devi (Indian)

Ink and colors on paper

Museum purchase, 1999.39.47

Karpoori Devi shows here the charming flute-playing Hindu god Krishna flirtatiously teasing Radha, his favorite among the village cowherds, by knocking down the pitcher she carries. The romantic exploits and divine play (*lila*) of Krishna and Radha are central themes in devotional stories and songs, where their relationship represents the love between god and his devotees. Stories about Radha and Krishna have long been popular subjects for artists.

Here we see the elegant divine couple in a lush forest setting. Karpoori Devi pays particular attention to, in addition to the resplendent Krishna and Radha, the auspicious *kadamba* tree under which they stand. The tree, with its distinctive round yellow flowers, takes on a vibrant life of its own; its branches become frames for the figures and homes for the birds that seem to be spectators to Krishna's delight and playfulness.

The man-lion Narasimha, approx. 1980

By Lalita Devi (Indian)

Ink and colors on paper

Museum purchase, 1999.39.10

Here Lalita Devi depicts Narasimha, the Hindu god Vishnu's fourth avatar. In the form of a man-lion, Vishnu destroys a proud, tyrannical demon king who had received divine protective power so that he could not be killed either by man or animal, by night or day, indoors or outdoors, on earth or sky. This near-immortality made the demon king cruel, and to punish him Vishnu appeared as part man and part lion, emerged from a pillar on the portico at twilight, and killed the demon by lifting him off the ground.

Lalita Devi's image includes all the story elements associated with Narasimha. Additionally, through her compositional choices, the artist connects the mediums of painting and sculpture. She uses architectural elements of arches, columns, and tiled floors to frame the god's image (and includes the figure of a devotee) to create the format typical for devotional sculptures seen in temples.

The Hindu deity Ganesha, 1983

By Jogmaya Devi (Indian)

Ink and colors on paper

Museum purchase, 1999.39.40

The beloved elephant-headed Hindu god Ganesha is a favorite subject for many Mithila artists. Representing the god allows artists to express personal devotion, and the theme also enjoys enduring popularity with art lovers and collectors.

Here Jogmaya Devi paints an exuberant and colorful Ganesha, although the deity is not easy to identify at first glance. Ganesha does not have an elephant's large ears or the chubby belly seen in most representations; even his trunk is barely distinguishable. The god is shown as a humanlike, standing figure, holding his usual attributes in his four arms: a lotus, axe, scroll of text, and dessert (*laddoo*). Brightly colored lotus plants, buds, and flowers frame the god's figure and give the painting an energetic and cheerful quality.

Ganesha with Chaturdal Kamal, 1982

By Krishna Nand Jha (Indian, 1938–2018)

Ink and colors on paper

Museum purchase, 1999.39.44

The figure of Ganesha wearing a long scarf, seated with legs crossed, and leaning against a bolster fills the picture frame. The reddish four-petaled lotus (*chaturdal kamal*) identifies this painting as a representation of the *muladhar chakra*, the root energy center in the tantric system of physiology. Ganesha is the deity often associated with this chakra.

Krishna Nand Jha's style is distinctive among Mithila artists. He favors a pastel color palette and a painted surface tightly covered with delicate line work. The meticulousness, density, and variety of patterns in his works suggest that the very act of painting is one of meditation and devotion for the artist.

A comparison of Ganesha images as rendered by Krishna Nand Jha, Jogmaya Devi, and Dulari Devi (see video) remind us of the role of originality, individual style, and unique expression that each artist brings into his or her conceptualization of familiar and oft-depicted subjects.

***Khatchakra*, 1982**

By Krishna Nand Jha (Indian, 1938–2018)

Ink and colors on paper

Museum purchase, 1999.39.42

Krishna Nand Jha is one of the senior male artists represented in this exhibition. Son of a tantric priest and himself a practitioner of esoteric Hinduism, he favors tantric representations of ascetics and deities as his subjects.

In this painting, we see a highly stylized figure of a meditating ascetic seated on an animal skin. The beast's head and two paws appear at the painting's lower frame, and its other two legs frame the ascetic's head. The ascetic is in a cross-legged posture; his legs and feet are rendered in pinkish hues near the bottom of the image. His eyes are wide open, suggesting his state of heightened awareness. Seven energy centers (chakras) of the body are marked along the center of the figure, and a radiant halo crowns his head.

A holy man in the forest (or Shiva as Lord of the Animals), 1981

By Jogmaya Devi (Indian)

Ink and colors on paper

Museum purchase, 1999.39.39

Jogmaya Devi's central subject here is an ascetic holy man surrounded by wild animals. He is seated in a posture of meditation and is holding a string of prayer beads. In other representations in Indian art, a sage surrounded by four animals (who here look more charming than ferocious) also refers to a form of Shiva as Lord of the Animals.

The horizontal mark across the figure's forehead identifies him as a devotee of the deity Shiva. Ascetics, like Shiva, are often depicted with long, stringy, matted hair, shown here as colorful sinuous locks around his head. This image may be read doubly as an ascetic meditating in the forest, and as the god Shiva. Bright colors, repeated patterns, dots, and floral motifs lend it a cheerful quality reminiscent of ritual wall painting.

Shiva in the Mountains Mourning Parvati, 2017

By Shikha Jha (Indian, b. 1995)

Ink and colors on paper

Museum purchase, Mortimer-Harvey Fund, 2018.9

This delicately and intricately detailed painting shows Shiva riding on his mount Nandi in a mountainous landscape setting. The artist Shikha Jha here conflates different attributes and stories associated with Shiva to create a single powerful image of the deity.

Shiva is shown with the attributes usually associated with him: an ascetic's animal-skin robe, a trident and drum, and a crescent moon in his matted hair. The skull attached to his hand recalls his form as Bhairava; the river flowing through his hair refers to Shiva's role in the descent of the Ganges River from the heavens to the earth. The landscape is that of his celestial abode of Mount Kailasha. The columnar form of rocks in the background call to mind linga sculptures in a Shiva temple, while the ovoid shape of those in the foreground resemble linga found in the natural environment.

Testing the royal couple's devotion to Vishnu, 2015

By Vinita Jha (Indian)

Ink and colors on paper

Acquisition made possible by the George Hopper Fitch Bequest, 2016.124

Religious stories about the gods and tales from the Hindu epics are among the favored subjects for artist Vinita Jha. Here, she depicts what may be a local story derived from an episode of the Sanskrit epic Mahabharata, describing a royal couple's deep devotion to the god Vishnu. The narrative is organized in four compartments and is read clockwise from the upper left.

The first panel shows the king and queen in the palace with their small son between them. In the next panel, a holy man comes to them and tests their faith by asking for their son as a sacrifice. He demands they cut their son in two. After the parents dutifully comply, their son is restored to them and they rejoice with a feast (last two panels). Stories such as this advocate and celebrate values of religious piety, personal sacrifice, and selflessness and promise rewards from such conduct.

A pregnant cow, 1981

By Shanti Devi (Indian, b. 1926)

Ink and colors on paper

Museum purchase, 1999.39.28

Observation of domestic, cultural, and political everyday life often serves as subject matter for Mithila artists. Shanti Devi is among the most educated and most continually innovative artists among the lower-caste Dusadh community (once called “untouchable”). Here she transforms the simple rural subject of a pregnant cow into an image of nature’s bounty and fertility by adding blooming flowers, sprouting buds, and bees around the animal.

In this painting, Shanti Devi makes use of a style that was traditionally employed only by members of her caste. It is distinctive both for its linear bands filled in with dots and for its paper that is coated with an auspicious cow dung wash that recalls a mud wall. Shanti Devi is one of a few artists who consistently use organic pigments rather than industrially produced colors, or “bazaar paints.”

Railway Station, 1983

By Gopal Saha (Indian, b. approx. 1940)

Ink and colors on paper

Museum purchase, 1999.39.35

Everyday subjects, strong, clear line work, and a simple palette of bright colors (often red, yellow, and black) make Gopal Saha's works immediately recognizable. He is among Mithila's few male artists; he took up painting to earn a living after a snakebite incident left his legs paralyzed and he was no longer able to run the tea shop he owned in Madhubani.

In many of Gopal Saha's paintings, one can sense the role of artist as observer. Here a family of four is shown buying tickets at the railway station as a passenger-laden train pulls in (or out) of the station. In 2017, in a local government-led initiative, the Madhubani train station became a canvas for more than one hundred artists who ornamented its ten thousand square feet of wall space with lively paintings. Gopal Saha, who has stopped painting because of old age and poor health, was not among the participants.

A wedding, 1981

By Lalita Devi (Indian)

Ink and colors on paper

Museum purchase, 1999.39.9

This painting depicts a wedding ritual particular to Mithila that takes place in the bridal chamber. This ceremony for blessing the couple is conducted in private and is witnessed only by its participants who are the bride, groom, and some of the bride's female relatives.

Here the couple in the painting's center is being blessed by the bride's female relatives, who hold auspicious objects: a fan, incense, and lit lamps. The half-veiled figure with one eye visible and standing frontally (at right) represents the *naina jogin* (eye goddess), a semidivine being believed to possess magical powers. She averts bad luck and protects the newlyweds from the evil eye. In the ceremony represented here, the bride's four female relatives also act as *naina jogin* as they stand in relation to the wall painting in the bridal chamber, where her image would have been placed in the corners (see "An auspicious diagram" painting nearby).

The Hindu deity Shiva in half-male, half-female form (Ardhanari), 1988

By Bachha Dai Devi (Indian)

Ink and colors on paper

Museum purchase, 1999.39.48

The combined form of Shiva and Parvati as Ardhanarishvara (the Lord Who Is Half Female) is a popular subject with several Mithila artists. Here, the right half of the six-armed figure shows Shiva in his male form, and the left half represents the female aspect (note the female face in yellow and the long skirt). In this densely packed painting, Bachha Dai Devi reserves space for four prominent snakes (*nagas*), a reference to local beliefs in snakes as semidivinities.

Ranti, a female ghost, 1981

By Karpoori Devi (Indian)

Ink and colors on paper

Museum purchase, 1999.39.46

Karpoori Devi depicts a figure from folklore: a ghostly spirit or *bhuta*. This female ghost, Ranti, is an example of the terrifying, otherworldly spirits believed to coexist with the human world. The power and complexity of such beings, who are venerated and pacified through ongoing rituals, are expressed by their menacing and sometimes repulsive attributes.

While Karpoori Devi shows Ranti dressed in the clothing and jewelry of a village woman, the figure's overall appearance is threatening. The ghost has hypnotic oversized eyes and a disturbing, fanged grin; she has horns on her head and her hair forms a halo, standing on end as though enlivened by electricity. Her feet and hands are clawlike, and blood drips from her hands. Karpoori Devi's use of a minimalist color palette (black with touches of red) and absence of background decoration focuses attention on the figure of the female ghost.

Women's Power, 2017

By Shalinee Kumari (Indian, b. 1985)

Ink and colors on paper

Museum purchase, Mortimer-Harvey Fund, 2018.8

A celebration of Devi (Great Goddess) — and of women — Shalinee Kumari's painting interprets and inventively combines traditional visual references to make new meaning, one particularly resonant in today's world.

A three-headed and multi-armed goddess emerges from a lotus. Conveying her immense and numerous powers, she holds symbolic objects associated with various Hindu deities: a conch and discus (with Vishnu, considered the supreme god by devotees), a lamp (with Lakshmi, goddess of good fortune), and a book (with Sarasvati, goddess of knowledge). The goddess's lower half incorporates the image of Ardhanarishvara, who is Shiva combined with the goddess Parvati as "The Lord Who Is Half Female." The goddess is shown standing on male corpses — a type of image seen in esoteric tantric goddess worship (especially as Bhadrakali, the auspicious form of Kali).

Through composition and symbolism, Shalinee Kumari's mighty goddess embodies the power of women, as the painting's title suggests.

Mother Nature, 2008

By Shalinee Kumari (Indian, b. 1985)

Ink and colors on paper

Museum purchase, Mortimer-Harvey Fund, 2018.6

Rich in symbolism, Shalinee Kumari's painting celebrates nature and women, central subjects in her work. The goddess and nature are here one and the same: her robe contains the rain, mountains, forests, animals, and the human world. Her scarf is a flowing, fish-filled river; her hair is leafy vines; and a ring of flaming clay lamps makes her halo. The yellow background suggests the luminosity of the sun, and delicate line work seems to pulsate with subtle energy.

Shalinee Kumari includes further Hindu references here. The fish supporting the earth recalls Vishnu's Matsya avatar, where Vishnu assumes a fish form to save mankind. The goddess's river-like hair invokes the story of Shiva, who lets the river goddess Ganga (Ganges River) flow through his own hair. The peacock-like bird and book held by celestial beings are attributes associated with Sarasvati, the goddess of wisdom, knowledge, and the arts.

Tree of life with Krishna, 2015

By Ranjan Paswan (Indian, b. 1989)

Ink and colors on paper

Museum purchase, Mortimer-Harvey Fund, 2018.10

A large tree with charming birds in its dense foliage dominates the composition of this painting. A highly stylized figure of the flute-playing Hindu god Krishna occupies the foreground beneath the tree, with a cow and its calf behind him, and a large peacock and butterfly nearby. The image of the god here becomes secondary to the fantastic tree.

Artist Ranjan Paswan conveys a sense of nature's lush bounty in this painting. The sinuous and intertwining bird-filled branches give the work movement and dynamism; the simple yet bright color palette and detailed line work attract and hold the viewer's eye.

LEFT

Birds in the garden of Raja Salhesh, 2003

By Sarup Lal Paswan (Indian, d. 2004)

Ink and wash on paper

Museum purchase, 2016.165

RIGHT

Insects in the garden of Raja Salhesh, 2004

By Sarup Lal Paswan (Indian, d. 2004)

Ink and wash on paper

*Acquisition made possible by the George Hopper Fitch
Bequest, 2016.125*

Birds in the garden of Raja Salhesh, 2003

Insects in the garden of Raja Salhesh, 2004

By Sarup Lal Paswan (Indian, d. 2004)

These two monochrome ink paintings by Sarup Lal Paswan stand out for their high degree of abstraction among paintings from Mithila, which are typically figurative works featuring images of gods, people, and animals rendered in bright colors.

Like several other artists from the lower-caste Dusadh community, Sarup Lal Paswan draws inspiration from stories about Raja Salhesh, a semidivine Dusadh hero. Stories in oral literature describe the lush, beautiful gardens of Raja Salhesh. There, birds and insects of all varieties swarmed, along with a profusion of trees, flowers, and fruits.

In the painting on the left, the garden has been divided into four vertical plots, each separated from the other by a narrow channel of water. The entire surface is covered with tiny ink strokes suggesting birds. The painting on the right represents insects.

This pair was among the last works made by the artist before his death.

Chhath festival scene with anthropologist and camera, 1983

By Baua Devi (Indian, b. 1944)

Ink and colors on paper

Museum purchase, 1999.39.15

Baua Devi depicts here the Chhath festival, a four-day celebration distinct to the Bihar region. She captures the festival's energy and intimacy; small details include a mother disciplining her child by pulling his ear.

The artist includes, at bottom right, the American anthropologist Raymond Owens (1934–2000) with his video camera, giving this painting a journalistic quality. Owens went to Mithila in 1976–1977 to study flood control and irrigation. Captivated by local paintings, Owens abandoned his research project and devoted the rest of his career to working with village artists, establishing the Ethnic Arts Foundation and leaving a bequest that helped establish the Mithila Arts Institute.

This painting furthermore explores the politics of vision: we see an artist's depiction of an "outsider" documenting a regional festival. Baua Devi thus becomes an "inside" observer, rendering her familiar world for an audience whom she knows will be nonlocal, whether Indian or Western.