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Short history of Mithila

Mithila (other names: Mithilāñcal, Tirhut, Tīrabhukti, also Videha with reference to antiquity) is a historical region, which is currently divided between India (Bihar and Jharkhand states) and Nepal (Madhesh province). The region has been known since ancient times as rich and significant for the history and culture of India. It is in ancient Mithila that one of the first great kingdoms (mahājanapada) was created, it was also the birthplace of Siddhārtha Gautama (Buddha) and Vardhamāna (Mahāvīra), founders of two important religions — Buddhism and Jainism, as well as of Aśoka, ruler of the Mauryan empire.

The name 'Mithila' itself comes from Antiquity. It was originally the name of the capital of the Videha kingdom, later the name was used to denote the whole region. However, for centuries other names were more popular and the range of areas covered by them also changed.

Today there are many movements reinventing Maithili identity by emphasising the region's distinctive and unique cultural heritage dating back many centuries — the Maithili language and its literature, as well as art. These movements are often politically motivated and aim to separate Mithila as an independent Indian state.

Mithila spreads north of the Ganges, which provided fertile soil and agricultural development on the one hand and marked the most important trade routes on the other, thus supporting the exchange of goods and thoughts in the whole northern part of the subcontinent. The mild climate, appropriate soil, multitude of big rivers and continuous access to water were conducive to agricultural development in the region (Jha 1997, 29) and, consequently, the rich kingdoms of antiquity. This is why Mithila could become increasingly affluent and develop its art and culture. Rivers have also influenced the local culture and traditions, rich in water animal motifs, particularly fish, crabs and turtles. The cultural heritage of this region is one of the most valuable in the whole of India, although Bihar is currently one of the poorest states, challenged by droughts and famine. Paradoxically, this has caused a revival of local art, treated as a source of livelihood and an important export. Besides Mithila Painting these are, among others, Sikki grass crafts and embroidery.

The Eastern Regions or Eastern India, which Mithila is part of, denote a geographical and, at the same time, cultural area. This category is not strictly defined and so different areas are described as forming part of Eastern India depending on the context. They include Bihar, West Bengal, Odisha, Jharkhand, often also Assam and the eastern part of Uttar Pradesh. The most capacious term — the Eastern Regions — also includes Bangladesh. Visual production from these regions displays numerous common features, which distinguish it from the other parts of the subcontinent. For this reason, the term 'Eastern India school of painting' has been coined with reference to art.

Antiquity — Videha and the beginnings of Mithila

Videha 9th–6th c. BCE[1]

The beginnings of Mithila are associated with the Kingdom of Videha. It is first mentioned in the Sanskrit text *Śata-patha-brāhmaṇa* (8th–6th c. BCE), which describes the expansion to the east of the Kingdom of Videgha, the older version of the name Videha. The Videha Kingdom existed between the 9th and the 6th centuries BCE (Kulke 2004, 51–53). From the south, it bordered the Ganges, from the north — the Himalayas. The capital was located in Mithila, hence the future name of the region. It was probably today's Janakpur (in present-day Nepal).

According to ancient Sanskrit texts, such as *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* (4–5th CE)[2], one of the first rulers of the kingdom was Janaka Videha Mithi, grandson of Manu, the progenitor of all mankind. His name inspired the name of the dynasty — Janaka, the country — Videha and the capital (and later the region) — Mithila (VP 4.5.11–12 quoted after: Pathak 1999)[3].

Videha's most famous ruler was king Sīradhvaja, appearing in literature most often as simply Janaka. He was the father of princess Sītā, whose story was described in the epic *Rāmāyaṇa* created between the 5th c. BCE and 3rd c. CE[4]. Mithila is described in Book One[5]. Various references paint a picture of a rich and cosmopolitan kingdom. Prince Rāma of Ayodhya arrived in the capital of the Videha kingdom and took part in Sītā's svayamvara, a ceremony during which a woman chose her husband. When he successfully passed the trial, the nuptials took place. To this day, it is said in Mithila that King Janaka ordered the decoration of the walls of every house in the capital on that day. And although it is not mentioned in *Rāmāyaṇa*, this story is quoted as the first known example of Mithila painting.

The *Rāmāyaṇa* epic (literally 'the journey of Rāma') is one of the most important texts for Hinduism and the art and culture of South and South-East Asia. It was written in the period between 5th c. BCE and 3rd c. CE and it tells the life story of Rāma — a prince of Ayodhya, an incarnation of the god Viṣṇu, born on Earth to defeat the demon Rāvaṇa. As a young man, he was travelling with his brother and sage Viśvāmitra. One day they reached the city called Mithila. It was a capital of the Videha Kingdom, ruled by King Janaka. Today this city is identified with the present-day Janakpur in Nepal. That day saw the svayaṃvara (literally 'own choice'), i.e. the procedure of choosing a husband by Princess Sītā. The candidates had to string Rudra's (Śiva) bow and no one apart from Rāma was able to achieve this. As a result, he married Sītā, while his brother Lakṣmana married Sītā's younger sister Ūrmilā.

Mithila was a centre of science and arts. The royal court was home to the legendary sage Yājñavalkya (8th–7th c. BCE), traditionally thought to be the most distinguished scholar of his times and the supposed author of many philosophical texts from the Yoga and Vedānta school. Scholars from all over northern India travelled to Mithila, which is described in one of the important contemporaneous texts — *Bṛhad-āraṇyakaôpaniṣad* (Houlton 1949, 98, Singh 1922, 9). The text also mentions women of Mithila, which is particularly interesting in the context of Mithila painting. It testifies to women's great erudition as they led discussions with the sages (ṛṣi) (Singh 1922, 10–11). Also, the fact that the

1. The dates accompanying the names of dynasties or kingdoms refer to the dates of their reign in Mithila, not dates of the dynasty itself.
2. Dates after McComas 2021, 4–5.
3. A slightly different, but very similar, version is provided by *Rāmāyaṇa* — King Nimi had a son named Mithi, and he had a son named Janaka (RA 1.70.3–4).
4. Dates after Goldman 2021, 27.
5. Fragments describing Mithila: RA 1.30.5–12; 1.47.9–10; 1.49.1–25; 1.65.20–25

events of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, a great ancient epic, were set in Mithila proves that it was one of the most important countries in those days.

Vṛji (Vṛjji, Vajji) 8th–5th c. BCE

Intense urbanisation, the establishment of major urban centres and trade routes, and increased conquests led to the formation of large states throughout the northern part of the subcontinent (Kulke 2004, 52). Around the 8th century BCE, the Vṛji state, which was a federation of eight clans and was referred to as a republic (gaṇa sangha) began to take shape in the Mithila region. One of the clans were the Videhas, then already losing its importance. Among the most important clans were also the Licchavi, based in Vaishali, which also became the state capital.

In ancient literature the Vṛji state is considered one of the sixteen mahājanapada — great states. Back then, Vaishali was already a major metropolis on the subcontinent, a centre for art and science, and it was to become a centre for thought and philosophy, and the birthplace of two major religions. For many centuries, this important and affluent city was of even greater cultural significance than Pataliputra, the capital of a powerful kingdom on the southern bank of the Ganges. Thanks to marriages with the most important rulers of the region, the Licchavis managed to maintain their influence and the unique status of the capital city. Unfortunately, by 635 CE Vaishali and the former capital of Janaka were in ruin, which we know from the account of Buddhist monk Xuanzang (Houlton 1949, 99; Singh 1922, 52).

Magadha 490–413 BCE

At the end of the 5th c. BCE, king of the bigger and more powerful Magadha Ajātaśatru of the Haryanka dynasty defeated the federation army and took control of the region, although the real power was still in the hands of clans. During that time, Mithila and the neighbouring regions saw the activity of Vardhamāna and Siddhārtha Gautama, founders of two great religions — Jainism and Buddhism.

Vardhamāna Mahāvīra was born in Vaishali in 497 BCE into a Kṣatriya family at a time when his maternal grandfather was a ruler managing the former kingdom, then under the reign of Magadha. When he was around 30 years old, he abandoned all worldly possessions and left home in pursuit of truth. For 12 years he practised asceticism and as a result, attained omniscience (kevala jñāna). For the rest of his life he preached, until in 425 BCE he attained liberation (mokṣa). He is considered to be the 24th Tīrthaṅkara — a preacher and a guide who helped people attain liberation.

Siddhārtha Gautama (480–400 BCE), later known as Buddha Śākyamuni, was active at a similar time. He also came from a Kṣatriya family. He was born as a prince and successor to the throne, but at the age of 29 he abandoned his life in the palace and left home in pursuit of truth. He practised drastic asceticism for 6 years but he rejected it and finally attained enlightenment under the Bodhi Tree. He preached for the rest of his life, until he attained the highest Nirvāṇa — liberation from worldly suffering — in 400 BCE.

Buddha was born in the Śakya kingdom (in present-day Nepal), bordering Tirhut in the northwest, and he was mostly active in the southwest of the Ganges. Sources contain descriptions of his stay in Vaishali at the end of his life. It was there that the Second Buddhist Council took place in 383 BCE.

Both these stories show us that Mithila and Magadha were prosperous regions where science and philosophy were at a high level and vigorously developed. It should also be noted that the descriptions of Jain and Buddhist philosophical discussions and other events fundamental for the organisation of religions mention women as their active participants (Singh 1922, 42–43). In the various states of the Ganges valley, coins were minted according to one standard, which shows us how strong the trade links and exchange of goods were (Kulke 2004, 54). State-supported centres of thought, philosophy and literature were established in the rich urban centres. Most schools of philosophy trace their origins back to this period.

Subsequently, Mithila came under the rule of great imperial dynasties — from the Śaiśunāga dynasty to the Nanda state, which conquered a major part of northern India and located its capital at Pataliputra (i.e. near Mithila) (Kieniewicz 2003, 60). The state had an enormous army at its disposal, which testifies to its great wealth (acquired from the spoils of war and high tributes from conquered lands). This also gave rise to the legend of the treasures hidden in the Ganges, which was repeated in various literary works for many centuries (Kulke 2004, 59).

Mauryan Empire 321–185 BCE

The Nanda state was taken over by Candragupta Maurya, who also conquered other areas of northern India and created not only a vast empire but also one of the most important dynasties of the subcontinent. He was married to princess Kumārī Devī from the Licchavis clan — her image was featured on coins alongside that of her husband's. This was a unique situation, as coins featured exclusively rulers, so this testifies to the importance and high status of the Licchavis who ruled Mithila (Houlton 1949, 99).

The capital of the Mauryan state was still located in Pataliputra and this is where the Greek ambassador Megasthenes resided, describing the wealth of the Mauryan Empire and calling its capital the largest then existing city in the world (Kulke 2004, 59–62). It was also at the court of Chandragupta that a treaty on statecraft *Arthaśāstra* was authored by the royal minister Kauṭilya. One of India's most famous kings, Aśoka, who ruled almost the whole subcontinent, also derived from this dynasty.

The proximity of the empire's capital, Pataliputra, to Mithila brought many economic and cultural benefits to the region. It is there that transport and trade routes to Nepal led. Pillars of Ashoka have been found in four locations within Mithila (Vaishali, Rampurva, Lauriya Nandangarh and Lauriya Araraj). These were royal edicts written on stone monoliths and decorated with elaborate stone sculptures — the oldest we know of in India (erected between 268 and 232 BCE). These unique monuments, which are a valuable source of knowledge to us, have also become the symbol of contemporary India — the lion capital from one of the pillars is now featured in the State Emblem of India.

From the point of view of the development of art, the reign of the next dynasty, the Śuṅga (185–73 BCE), was particularly fruitful. Many examples of sculpture from this period have survived, and their craftsmanship shows that public and private (among the aristocracy) patronage of the arts was very generous. Little is known, however, about Mithila during this reign and over the following centuries. It is suspected that the rule of Mithila and the Pataliputra area was taken over by the Licchavis from the southern part of Mithila. In 320 CE the Gupta dynasty seized the throne and its first king, Candragupta, married a princess from the Licchavi family. The Gupta empire again extended over almost the entire northern part of the subcontinent and went down in history as a golden age of culture and art (Kulke 2004, 87, Houlton 1949, 13).

After the fall of the Gupta dynasty, the empire disintegrated into many minor kingdoms. Little is known about Mithila in the following centuries. In the thirties of the 7th century, Mithila was conquered by king Harṣa of the Vardhana dynasty. Although the Harṣa empire was mighty and renowned for its peace and prosperity which enabled the growth of the arts, it did not survive long. After Harṣa's death in 647, one of the royal ministers, Arjuna of Tirhut, recaptured the Mithila territories and ruled them. However, again not for long — two years later, he was captured by the Tibetan army of Songtsen Gampo who had invaded Nepal and Mithila. Songtsen married a Licchavi princess Bhṛkutī Devī and the Nepal and Tirhut areas came under Tibetan rule until the early 8th century (Singh 1922, 51–54).

From the late 8th c. to the early 11th c. Bihar and Bengal remained under the rule of the Pāla dynasty, forming one of the most powerful kingdoms of northern India. Its founder, Gopāla, is believed to have been chosen by the people, so in a modern sense he could be referred to as an elective king. His successors, Dharmapāla and Devapāla, managed to build the most important political power in the north and yet again Pataliputra became a capital for a short time. Fine arts, particularly sculpture, also flourished then and the common features in the fine arts of Mithila and Bengal are still evident today. Sculptures from this period will often form the basis of our iconographical analysis, as it was then that various patterns of religious representations became established. At that time, local themes and traditions stemming from the religiosity of native inhabitants, such as anthropomorphic snakes (see), were already well established in the public sphere. After this period, however, the kingdom lost its importance and fell to the status of a regional state troubled by invasions from the west, east, and even the south.

The medieval period — Mithila culture in bloom

Karṇāṭa Dynasty (Simrāon) 1097–1324

At the beginning of the 10th century, the Pāla were waging a war against the Maithilis, the Gauḍa (Bengal) and the Cedi (central India). The latter won at the beginning of the 11th century and conquered Mithila, which they ruled for about a hundred years. It was then that an army led by the Karṇāṭas (the Nānyupa family) arrived in Mithila from the central part of Southern India , eventually taking over the region and becoming one of the most important dynasties for the culture and what we can call Maithiliness. The capital founded in 1097 by the first Karṇāṭa king Nānyadeva was Simraon (Śivarāmapura, today's Simraungadh). Today, the city is located in Nepal, close to the Indian border. Due to the introduction of an innovative taxation system, the kingdom was rich enough to support the development of literature and the arts. The culture became heavily Sanskritised, science blossomed and many philosophical and religious texts of importance to India as a whole were written during this period (Singh 1922, 54–55, 69, Sinha 1969).

In the 12th century, a period of struggle for influence in Mithila began. Although still ruled by the Karṇāṭas, it first came under the influence of the Sena dynasty of Bengal (Singh 1922, 56–57), and then — since the first Muslim invasion of today's Bihar took place around 1197 (Houlton 1949, 16) — it remained strongly influenced by the politics and activities of Muhammad Ghūri and then the Delhi Sultanate. The last king of the Karṇāṭa dynasty was Harasiṁha Deva, defeated by the troops of Ghiyath al-Din Tughluq. The period of Harasiṁha Deva's reign is referred to as pivotal in consolidating the Maithili identity. It was then that the system of classification and social organisation of Maithil Brahmins[6] was introduced. His descendants, who fled north after the Muslim invasion, established the Malla dynasty in Nepal and supported the Maithili language (Singh 1922, 59–64). Mithila, on the other hand, was ruled by the Oiṇīvāra dynasty who were enthroned by the victorious Tughlaqs.

Oiṇīvāra Dynasty (Ainwar, Sugaon, Sugauna) 1324–1526 (~1530)

The first ruler was Kāmeśvar Ṭhākura. During the rule of the Oiṇīvāra Dynasty, Mithila was under the sovereignty of various states vying for control of the land: the Delhi Sultanate, the Jaunpur Sultanate and Afghan kings of Bengal. Despite this, Mithila was a relatively peaceful state and was not an arena of major warfare. As a result, the court was wealthy enough to shelter many scholars and writers including those from Bengal and Gujarat. The dynasty eagerly supported Sanskrit, literature, science and philosophy. During its reign, Jagaddhara, Vidyāpati, Śaṅkara, Vācaspati Miśra and others were active in the court (Singh 1922, 81–82). Vidyāpati wrote poems and songs firmly rooted in Maithili culture. These are still recited and sung today and are also vehicles for local traditions and customs. Royal patronage made Mithila an important academic centre, and there is even talk of a Mithila school of philosophy, whose representative was Gaṅgeśa Upādhyāya, founder of the Navya Nyāya school. It supplanted the previously dominant Tantric school of philosophy. The dynasty also had two queens, ruling, admittedly, during the regency period but nevertheless for many years. These were Lakhimā Devī and Viśvāsa Devī, who ruled after their husbands.

Eventually, sovereignty over the region was taken over by the Mughals and so Mithila was brought under the jurisdiction of the province (subah) of Bihar. In the first quarter of the 18th century, under Governor Murshid Quli Khān, Bengal, along with Bihar and Orissa, seceded from the empire. In 1765, the state came under the rule of the East India Company (Singh 1922, 102) and from 1858 it became part of the British crown. Only in 1911 were Bihar and Orissa detached from Bengal and a separate province established (Kulke 2004, 289).

Colonial period and the present day

Bihar was one of the first territories to come under British influence. The first British traders reached Patna in 1620, and by 1657 the first British saltpeter factories were established (Houlton 1949, 16–17). In 1793 the law of 'permanent settlement' was introduced. The influence of the British was particularly evident in matters relating to changes in the law . Together with Bengal, Bihar became a major exporter of indigo, saltpeter, opium and jute (Kulke 2004, 269–270).

6 More regarding this topic can be found in the "Society" chapter.

Raj Darbhanga (Khaṇḍavalā dynasty) 1577–1947

The Raj Darbhanga became the largest landowners in India under British rule. The origins of their estate were traced to a land grant of 1577 bestowed by the Mughal emperor Akbar to the King of Madhubani, who thus became the governor of the whole of Mithila (Rorabacher 2016, 260–263). They were not rulers in the state sense, but functioning within the zamīndāri system, they exercised control over most of Mithila. When the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb granted the dynasty the privilege of private land ownership in 1684, this elevated the Raj Darbhanga to independence. This was because, in practice, it excluded their lands from the rule of the Mughal Empire and then the British Empire. They refused to pay taxes and tributes, which further increased their wealth and facilitated the acquisition of more landed estates (Rorabacher 2016, 264–266). But this fortune also translated into culture. They were patrons of Maithili literature, music and culture. Though not a royal family, they adopted the title of 'Mahārāja' (or Mahārājadhirāja), inherited by male descendants even after India's independence. The Maharaja was also the head of the Maithil Brahmins' śrotriya group,[7] making them in practice the leaders of all Maithil Brahmins (Rorabacher 2016, 259–260).

It was in Mithila (in Champaran, in its western part and thus already extending beyond the historic Videha) that Gandhi carried out his first campaigns (Kulke 2004, 293). Bihar was an agricultural and rather poor region, so the ideas preached by Mahatma Gandhi fell on fertile ground and led to various riots (1917). This economic situation continued even after India's independence and was indirectly responsible for the popularisation of Mithila painting, which we will discuss later in the book.

Mithila lies at the foot of the Himalayas, an area prone to frequent earthquakes because two tectonic plates meet there — the smaller Indian plate pushing against the Eurasian plate. The result of this process is the world's highest mountains — the Himalayas — which continue to rise. The year 1934 brought an earthquake as strong as happens once in a century. In the early afternoon of 15 January 1934, Mithila was hit by an earthquake with a magnitude of 8.00, similar to the one that devastated Kathamandu and many other cities in Nepal in April 2015. The epicentre was located near the towns of Sītāmarhi and Madhubani, close to the Nepalese border. The earthquake destroyed not only buildings, but also created fissures and geysers in the ground. It claimed 7,250 lives, and people lost not only their homes, but also their farmlands and crops — their source of livelihood (Houlton 1949, 111–114).

Among the British officials who arrived to assess the damage was William G. Archer. The ruined walls of the houses revealed what was hidden inside — rich wall paintings. The young official saw them for the first time and became so enthralled by them that he began to document and study them. The material he collected and photographs of the murals from the 1940s are now in the British Library in London. In 1949, he published Maithil Painting, the first academic description of Mithila painting.

Today

Mithila is a primarily agricultural area and land cultivation was the main source of income for most of the population. It is therefore not without reason that the largest estate in the whole of colonial India owned by a single zamīndāri family — Raj Darbhanga — was established in Mithila.

The years 1966 and 1967 brought drought and famine of enormous proportions. One of the programmes to support the local people that the government of India undertook at that time was to support and develop Mithila Painting. This was initiated by Pupul Jayakar, chairperson of the All India Handicrafts Board. The main force behind the programme was Bhaskar Kulkarni, who persuaded Pupul Jayakar, chairperson of the All India Handicrafts Board, to go ahead with the project. The government provided paper and paints and then bought the paintings. In this way, women were able to provide an income for their families. It was as a result of this activity that sets of Mithila paintings found their way to the Andrzej Wawrzyniak Asia and Pacific Museum in Warsaw, the Victoria & Albert Museum in London and the Hopp Ferenc Ázsiai Művészeti Múzeum in Budapest in the 1970s.

The first mentions of Mithila hail from ancient times. It was never a dominant state, conquering other areas, but its immediate proximity to Pataliputra — the capital of many powerful empires — provided it with many economic and cultural advantages. Because of its natural

7 Social system and division into groups — see chapter on "Society".

conditions — a dense network of rivers and marshes — it was a land that was difficult to access, as well as fertile (in the *Mahābhārata* it is even called Jalodbhava, meaning literally 'made of water') (Mishra J. 1949, 11). It was therefore a rich and relatively peaceful place where art could flourish. The unique style, charged with symbolic and spiritual content, also testifies to the fact that philosophical and religious debates permeated the culture and reached a wider audience.

What is the relevance of the ancient history of the region for contemporary painting? Cultural continuity is undoubtedly preserved — the *Rāmāyaṇa* is still a popular text today, widely known, and elements of history are among the most popular motifs in art. Geographic names of cities allude to this history, and are commonly believed to attest to their continuity.

On the other hand, painting, which is the subject of this book, always belonged to the private sphere of home life. It served as a background to the celebrations and festivities held in the most private part of the house where guests did not enter. Mithila Painting had not been a form of public art supported by the state, the court or temples. Therefore, cultural policies of rulers did not affect this genre of art. However, it developed in a specific environment and under the influence of ideas widespread in the whole of Mithila and poetry and literature created under royal patronage.

Present-day Mithila encompasses the whole area of the Vṛji state, not just the historic Videha, which can be considered the nucleus of Maithiliness and the centre of cultural and historical identification. It includes the kingdoms we know as Videha, Vaishali or later Tirhut. The most famous centres of Mithila Painting today are the Madhubani and Darbhanga districts in India and the Dhanusha district in Nepal. However, this art has been practised in the whole Mithila.

We also know from many other cultural areas of the world that cultural continuity in the visual arts is a common phenomenon. Forms, means of artistic expression, themes, motifs or symbols have a long life span and contemporary visual culture is founded on an ancient base. Therefore, knowing the broad context, the long history, but also, above all, the cultural, historical and social tradition that is still alive, allows us to better understand contemporary art.

Mithila Painting is primarily the domain of women. Of course, there are male painters and their number has increased in modern times, but women still prevail. From the ancient texts, a picture emerges where women had strong active participation in culture and social agency. While this does not mean that Mithila was an ideal equal state (a 1980 study in Nepal shows us that Maithili women had an extremely low social status [Acharya 1980 after Burket 2004, 263]), in ancient texts we do have traces of some subjectivity — Sītā's svayaṃvara in the *Rāmāyaṇa*, participation in Jain philosophical discussions or the establishment of Buddhist women's orders.

In historical times, Mithila was a peaceful and wealthy state. In colonial times, it was home to some of the largest land estates and a large number of factories. Today, however, Bihar is the poorest state in India — with the highest population density, with almost 90 percent living in rural areas, and the lowest literacy rate. However, it is also a state with high economic growth (Rorabacher 2016, 81–83), which brings hope for Mithila's renewed prosperity.

2

Society

The social world view of Hinduism divides people into five groups — the four varṇas (socio-religious classes) and all those remaining outside the system. The four varṇas are: the Brāhmaṇas (priests), the Kṣatriyas (warriors), the Vaiśyas (merchants and farmers), and the Śūdras (servants). The outcastes are people remaining outside the system, e.g. Dalits (or the untouchables), and also all those who do not belong in this system, e.g. worshippers of other religions. Part of this system is also a caste system, which distinguishes smaller units of social organisation which most often determined the profession that a particular group performed.

In colonial times, the British created a register of castes, where they entered groups of the lowest social and economic status. At the government level, these registers (updated) are also in place in independent India, and in theory, they are aimed at bridging gaps in opportunities. According to these lists, half of the population in Bihar belongs to the 'other backward castes', 14% of whom are Dalits, commonly referred to as the untouchables (Brown 2013, 32–33).

The caste was important to the formation of the styles of Mithila Painting, which is why the subject of classes is taken up in this book to place this genre in a historical and social context.

The collection analysed here consists of paintings created in the 1970s. Nowadays, art, in general, is much more egalitarian, not least because of mass media and social media, which popularise Mithila Painting while giving access to the artist's workshop. Local art genres are becoming more 'Indian' than 'regional'. In Mithila itself, too, casteism has less of an impact on creativity anymore, i.e. it does not lock artists into a style assigned to their caste, although Bihar is one of states where the caste system is still very much alive (Brown 2013).

Many descriptions of Maithili society feature the opinion of the exceptional conservatism of the Maithilis, which also stemmed from a sense of superiority of their own culture. It resulted in an aversion to influences from other lands and various measures to preserve the essence of Maithiliness. The local dynasties strongly supported Sanskrit literature and culture. Sanskrit was not a language used in everyday life, so only educated and therefore wealthy people knew it. 'Maithiliness' was thus very much Sanskritised and narrowed down to the court culture represented by Brāhmaṇas and Kāyasthas. During the reign of the Karnat dynasty, hundreds of books were written in Sanskrit codifying rules and social relations. The dynasties ruling Mithila from the 14th century onwards (both Oiṇīvāra and Khaṇḍavalā) were Brāhmaṇas. This meant that official art — court art, supported by the rulers and state patronage — was also linked to the Brāhmaṇa varṇa culture.

The consequences of this were evident in the 20th century as well. It was the art and culture of the high castes — Brāhmaṇas — that was considered 'truly' Maithili and it was this art that was chosen to represent Mithila. It was this art that became public, exhibited in India and worldwide, and became the definition of culture. This is why the Asia and Pacific Museum's collection acquired in the 1970s contains only examples of Bharni and Kachni styles and religious themes.

The 1990s saw socio-cultural changes in both the Indian and Nepalese parts of Mithila, which are reflected in painting. An alternative path formed which allowed Brāhmaṇas and Kāyasthas to broaden their understanding of culture (Burket 2004, 261–262). Art became more egalitarian and styles of Mithila Painting lost their affiliation with castes. An important role in this process was played by the Mithila Art Institute in Madhubani, which taught all the styles. Currently female and male artists mix styles and create paintings using all three styles: Bharni, Kachni and Godna. All these styles are also represented in the newly opened Bihar Museum in Patna. The regional art gallery, which was curated by artist Pratik Prabhakar, features four commissioned large-scale Mithila paintings by Godawari Dutta (Kachni), Dulari Devi (Bharni), Vinita Jha (Kachni) and Śivan Paswan (Godna).

It must be noted, however, that the majority of the murals adorning walls in the centre of Patna (and there are indeed many) are created in a manner resembling the Bharni style.

↑ Murale na budynkach Muzeum Patny, Patna, 2020 r.

↑ Mural w centrum miasta zachęcający do wzięcia udziału w wyborach, Patna, 2020 r.

Since belonging to a particular varṇa and caste is associated with practising specific customs and traditions, we will discuss the history and organisation of these two groups to trace the influence of this environment on the art and work of women artists.

The last of the kings of the Karṇāṭa dynasty, Harasiṁha Deva, established the system now known as the Pañjī (Pañjī Prabandha). This is an elaborate genealogical system of Maithili Brāhmaṇas and Maithili Kāyasthas, defining the kinship, relationship and status of each person, used to issue marriage permits. It was created to ensure that all marriages complied with religious laws, i.e. there were no prohibited 'mixed' marriages (of people from different places in the socio-religious hierarchy) or closely consanguineous marriages. It was written down by the scholar Harinātha Upadhyāya in 1313 and has been continuously updated. Along with the genealogical register, a division of Brāhmaṇas and Kāyasthas into different subclasses according to their role and religious practices was introduced (Thakur 1956, 358–360).

Some scholars indicate that this system contributed to a significant deterioration in the social situation of women (Thakur 1956, 364–365). It was then that their activities became confined to the home, they were removed from education and cultural life (regarded in this situation as unnecessary expenses). As described by Burket (2004, 263), even in the 20th century women still strongly adhered to the purdah (a veil — this could be a curtain in the home separating men and women, but also a shawl covering the face and body). She also notes that nowhere did

she encounter such a considerable and clear dichotomy between the inner and the outer. Adult women were almost completely isolated from the outside world. Researchers point out that it was this conditioning and organisation of social life that contributed to the development of Mithila Painting.

Both Maithil Brāhmaṇas and Kāyasthas do not follow the religious precept of a vegetarian diet.[8] The consumption of fish is common, as well as other aquatic creatures, waterfowl and goat meat. This is a diet characteristic of the followers of Śāktism living in Mithila, Bengal, Odisha, Assam, among others (Jha 1998, 108–109). These are also areas situated by water — on the banks of great rivers and the ocean coast — where fish was the most readily available food. And Mithila's geographical setting is unique — the network of rivers that make up the North Bihar Plain is exceptionally dense. It is no coincidence, therefore, that in Mithila Painting fish are the most important symbol of fertility, prosperity, and wealth.

Maithili Brāhmaṇas

The Maithili Brāhmaṇas are one of the five groups of Pañca-gauḍa Brāhmaṇas.[9] The Gauḍa Brāhmaṇas come from the area north of the Vindhya mountains (roughly the Indo-Gangetic Plain area) and do not follow the principle of vegetarianism (Deshpande 2015, 29–36). They belong to the traditions of the schools of the *Yajurveda* (the Śuklapakṣa tradition, the Mādhyandina branch) and the *Sāmaveda*.[10] According to their social role, religious duties and social hierarchy, they are divided into groups, which are also related to the lineage's place of origin (mulagrama). Thus, four hierarchical groups emerged, from the highest: Śrotriyas (Śrotiya), the Yogyas (Yog), the Pañjīs (Pañjībādha) and the Jayavāras (Jaibāra, Jayvār)[11] (Jha 1997, 32–33; Thakur 1956, 360).

The pañjī system underwent various reforms and gradually became more complex. Today, the Maithili Brāhmaṇas identify themselves by as many as seven different classifications to select the eligible spouse[12]. Maithili Brāhmaṇas are strictly exogamous, i.e. marriages within the same order and a certain degree of kinship are forbidden, while the degree of hierarchy of the different classifications must be maintained (Rorabacher 2016, 283, Jha 1998, 113).

The most common names of Maithili Brāhmaṇas are primarily Jha, Singh, Thakur, Mishra. It is commonly believed that the surname 'Jha' is borne by Brāhmaṇas whose families have lived in Mithila since the Videha kingdom.

Maithili Kāyasthas

In some regions of India, including Mithila, another distinct caste exists: the Kāyasthas. As far as the varna hierarchy is concerned, the Kāyasthas position themselves between Brāhmaṇas and Kṣatriyas, i.e. according to this system — among 'the upper classes'. Today, they make up about 12% of society. However, their position in the varṇa-caste system is not as unambiguous as the Kāyasthas themselves would wish it to be.

Sanskrit texts from the 7th century CE onwards indicate that Kāyasthas were scribes (one of the most important functions at court) deriving from various varṇas (Kṣatriyas, Vaiśyas and Brāhmaṇas), sometimes referred to as being multi-varna. Over time, they formed a smaller class of their own, completely transcending the varna tetrad and applying strict class endogamy and family exogamy. Essentially, they considered themselves a fifth varna along with a founding myth according to which they descended from Citragupta, who was created from the soul of the god Brahma to record the history of the people. Citragupta had two wives — Irāvatī and Nandinī — who gave birth to 12 sons and hence the origin of the 12 castes of the Kāyasthas, the most numerous being the Karna (Karn Kāyastha) (Kaminsky & Long 2011, 404).

The Maithili Kāyasthas are divided into two subclasses: kulīna and gṛhastha or pacchima. They trace their ancestry to the Kāyasthas of Karnataka (South India), from where the Karṇāṭa dynasty that ruled Mithila from the 11th century also originated, and it was with them that they came to the North.[13] They were renowned for their excellent education and intelligence, so they usually became high court and government officials (munṣi) or teachers (Mishra 1979, 303, Jha 1997, 33).

The most common surnames include Karn, Das and their variations (Jha 1997, 33).

Religious beliefs

The majority of Mithila's population are Hindus, whose faith centres around a triad: the goddess Śākti, the god Śiva and the god Viṣṇu.

8 The status of the Kāyasthas and their place in the varna system has repeatedly been questioned. In Vidyāpati's times (14th century), they did not enjoy a good reputation. Although they dressed like the Maithili Brāhmaṇas, practised respectable professions and enjoyed high social standing, in the religious context they were regarded as Śūdras (i.e. the fourth, lowest varṇa) (Mishra 1979, 304). In colonial times, they had to prove their status as a dvija for legal and administrative reasons before the colonial administration (Bellenoit 2022).

9 In Sanskrit texts, we find a division of Brahmins into Gauḍa and Drāviḍa, i.e. northern and southern (the boundary here being the Vindhya mountains). Each of these groups is a pentad, i.e. we can distinguish five subgroups in each of them (Deshpande 2015).

10 The Vedas, a collection of ancient texts that date back to around 1800 BCE, are the ritual and theoretical foundation of Hinduism. They comprise four books: *Ṛgveda*, *Yajurveda*, *Sāmaveda* and *Atharvaveda*. They were passed down orally from father to son or teacher to student. Each adept learnt only one text assigned to his family and, on completion of his course of study, became a priest, who was assigned duties and rituals related only to that particular text.

11 A wider description of the socio-political history and the consequences of the division into groups can be found in Rorabacher 2016, 281–286 and Mishra 1979, 285–303.

12 These are: shakha, gotra, pravara, mula, grama, laukit, shreni.

13 See Jha 1998, 112 for more information on various Kāyastha groups and lineages.

14 Jha 1997, 38: Tripur Sindhuri

Together with the gods Ganeśa and Surya (the Sun), they form the pañca devata, or the pentad of Mithila gods (Jha 1997, 38). Another pentad indicated by people is Surya, Ganeśa, Śiva, Durgā and Agni with Viṣṇu as the sixth god (Jha 1998, 108). And although Śivaism and Viṣṇuism are pan-Hinduism's most popular streams, in Mithila they are secondary to Śāktism (Jha 1998, 108).

Śākti is Sanskrit for 'power, strength, ability, energy', and above all 'female causal power', which all goddesses, and consequently earthly women (due to their gender), possess. This did not automatically provide women with a special — or even equal to men — place in society, but it does give them the potential for subjectivity and agency. Some scholars indicate that the popularity of Śāktism in a given culture positively influenced the role and place of women in that culture (Menon 2002, 140–141).

Śāktism

The Supreme Being in Śāktism is Devī, or Goddess (or Mahādevī — the Great Goddess), who is the embodiment of pre-primordial energy, the source of existence, and controls all the forces and potentials of nature. This current developed from the pre-historic worship of the Mother Goddess, in which the qualities of fertility and creating life played key roles (Bhattacharya 1974, 1–5). Reminiscences of these foundations are also found in contemporary Mithila painting.

During the Mughal (Muslim) dynasty, Śāktism acquired a warrior trait — Śākti became the embodiment of power, supporting the local Hindu dynasties in their struggle first against the Muslim invaders and then the British. It was then that all forms of the warrior goddess, such as Durgā and Kālī, became revived (Bhattacharya 1974, 152–153).

Devī-Śākti manifests herself under various forms which symbolise different aspects of power: the goddesses Durgā, Kālī, Sarasvatī, Lakṣmī, Pārvatī, etc., who are also associated with Daśa Mahāvidyā, the Ten Great Wisdoms, and the Mātṛkās, or divine mothers. Some of them are presented in the catalogue section. Each family also has its own family or household goddess, or gosāun (gosāuni) (Jha 1997, 38). The most common forms of the goddess in Mithila are Kālī, Durgā, Ṣodaśī (Tripura Sundarī),[14] and Jvālāmukhī.

Religious festivals are often Śākti and Tantric in nature, and even if they are all-India festivals, they may be celebrated differently in Mithila and have different stories and meanings attached to them.

Hinduism in Mithila follows the tantric tradition. Many daily rituals and annual festivals or customs are associated with tantra, including the painting of Āripanās, or Yantras, or other auspicious designs on the floor, which is the oldest form of Mithila painting (Mishra J. 1949, 21).

Tantra

The word 'tantra' in Sanskrit is used to describe a theoretical text, doctrine or method, a practice of conduct. Tantra is not a separate religion but a tradition, a pattern of conduct which is used in both Hinduism and Buddhism. In Mithila, Śākti Tantrism is the most popular. There may be many minor sects within each tantric thread.

What tantric traditions have in common is the belief that "women embody the mystery of the universe and hold the key to liberation, since every woman is an incarnation of the śakti (female power), the manifestation of the Supreme's creative energy" and that "(…) "the body is a microcosm of the universe in which the Supreme resides, and that it is the only instrument for gaining liberation and conquering death" (Salomon 2020, 187–208). Many rituals are thus led by women.

Many of the tantric texts were written in Mithila, and among them are those written by the philosopher Vācaspati (9/10th c.) and the poet Vidyāpati (14/15th c.). Maithili artists strongly emphasise the role of tantra in Mithila Painting and religious life. The ideological foundations of art are very much rooted in this tradition and many theoretical elements and practices find their justification and reflection in the tantric world view.

Local religious practices

A festival unique to the Biharis is Chath pūjā, celebrated four times a year (early April and May and late October and November). It is dedicated to the god Surya — the Sun. Women, who enter the rivers carrying food as gifts, are the most important actors in this ritual. This is why the Sun appears in many Maithili paintings. Another group of festivals in which women play a central role is the Tīj dedicated to Pārvatī and her love for Śiva, and taking place during the monsoon. It is then that stories and celebrations associated with snakes appear. They take a prominent place in the culture and religiosity of Mithila. Nag Kanya, or snake girls, are a popular motif in

painting, as well as Kṛṣṇa defeating the serpent Kaliya. Madhuśrāvaṇi and Naga Pañcami are also important festivals.

Śāktism co-exists very well with Śivaism and Viṣṇuism, where Devī in the form of Pārvatī or Lakṣmī is partnered with Śiva and Viṣṇu respectively. In Mithila Painting, the male gods are often portrayed together with their female partners: Rāma and Sītā, Kṛṣṇa and Rādhā, Śiva and Pārvatī, Viṣṇu and Lakṣmī. This form of religiosity is expressed through the shape of the tilaka, a mark painted on the forehead. In Mithila one often encounters a triple one, where a semicircle reaching to the hairline signifies Viṣṇu, with an elongated drop in the centre signifying Śiva and a cinnabar dot symbolising Śākti (see MAP ????, Mishra J. 1949, 19). During our conversations, Maithilis often emphasised the role and place of Śākti in their religious lives. In Mithila, the name of the goddess or female partner is mentioned before the name of the god, so it is said as: Sītā and Rāma, Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa, Pārvatī and Śiva.

One of the best-known literary genres are the nacāri songs (hymns of praise) and maheśvani songs (songs of life and love) dedicated to Śiva and Pārvatī, and the more important festivals are those commemorating the weddings of Śiva and Pārvatī (Mahāśivarātri) and Sītā and Rāma (Vivāhapañcamī) (Jha 1998, 108).

Śivaism itself is also widespread. Its presence since ancient times is also indicated — in the *Rāmāyaṇa*, the bow that Rāma had to string to win Sītā's hand was gifted to the Mithila kings by Śiva (Rudra). It is commonly believed that Śākti provides favours in temporal existence, but it is through Śiva that liberation can be achieved (Mishra 1979, 127).

The functioning of Viṣṇuism in Mithila is very interesting. Although Rāma and Kṛṣṇa are very popular motifs in Mithila painting, they function in parallel, so to speak. 'Viṣṇuite' in Maithili (as well as in some other contemporary languages) means a person who follows a vegetarian diet, does not eat the prasāda of the goddess and wears a tulasi necklace (Mishra J. 1949, 23). And it is a practice that is still followed today and is relatively popular.

3

Short history of Mithila's cultural and artistic heritage

The depictions of Mithila's history and culture emphasise the remarkable conservatism and orthodoxy of its inhabitants, which, as researchers explain, is due to the geographical seclusion limiting cultural influences, the rich scholarly heritage from ancient times, the intense Sanskritisation of culture, literature and science since medieval times, the strong grounding in Brahmanical legislation, the complex codification of kinship degrees and sub-grouping among Maithili Brāhmaṇas and Karṇa Kāyasthas, and the dominance of their castes in public life. Most of the literature and research on Mithila revolves around the cultural products and life of only these two social groups. Other groups occasionally appear as a focus, most often the Dalits, but this too only in recent years (Burket 2004,).

Today, this conservatism has been undermined, and even partly overcome, but the subject of this book is a collection of paintings from the 1970s, when the opening up processes in society were just beginning. This is why it is important to include so many classifications and descriptions that are less relevant today but were vital at the time when the paintings discussed in this book were created.

Calendars

There are different systems of periodisation of time in Mithila, which should be kept in mind, especially when reading annual dates. Both in the past and today, in texts, image captions, or colophons of manuscripts, annual dates were written according to one of three calendars, plus today also a fourth — the Gregorian calendar.

Tirhutā pañcāṅg or Mithilā pañcāṅg
a Maithili solar calendar indicating months. It is used to determine the dates of religious festivals and ceremonies (e.g. weddings).

Śaka Era
forms the basis for counting years in the Śaka calendar (Indian National Calendar). The first day of the Saka era falls on 3 March 78 CE according to the Gregorian calendar.

Vikrama Samvat
an official calendar of Nepal, also used locally in India. Its beginning falls in 57 BCE according to the Gregorian calendar.

Lakṣmana Era
it begins in the year of the birth of King Lakṣmana Sena in 1119 CE according to the Gregorian calendar (Beveridge 1988, Kielhorn 1890).

Language

Mithila has its own language — Maithili — and its own script. Just as in other regions of India, other languages are spoken there, too. They are not native for this region, though.

Maithili is an Indo-European language still used today in both Indian and Nepalese parts, with official status in both countries and constitutional status in India as well. It belongs to the same group as the other languages of East India, namely Bengali, Oriya and Assamese. It is spoken by about 34 million people in India, making it the second most spoken language of Bihar. Maithili has several different dialects; the one originating from Madhubani and Darbhanga, i.e. the centre of Mithila Painting, is considered the standard or literary dialect (Grierson 1909, xii-xiii).

Historically, Maithili was written in the Tirhuta abugida[15] (also called Maithili, because it was used exclusively to write down the Maithili language) and Kaithī (other name: Kāyasthī); today it is mainly written in Devanāgarī script with a few special characters. Both scripts are derived from Brāhmī, but Tirhuta belongs to the same family as the Bengali, Assamese and Oriya scripts, while Kaithī to that of Devanāgarī (Mishra J. 1949, 22, 71).

15 Abugida is a syllabic script, in which a character corresponds to a syllable.

The Kāyasthī script owes its name to the Kāyastha caste, who were scribes and clerks, which is why this script is most often found in legal and state documents. The signatures on the backs of paintings in the Asia and Pacific Museum collection are written in both Kāyasthi and Tirhuta, as well as in Devanāgarī and Nepali.

Literature and music

The Maithili language has very rich literature dating back to the 8th century. It was supported, alongside Sanskrit, by the royal court from the Karṇāṭa dynasty onwards (13th–14th century). Jyotirīśvara Ṭhākura (c. 1280–1340), the court poet of King Harasiṁha Deva, is the author of the oldest known example of prose, the *Varṇa-ratnākara*, which describes life in Mithila. Chapter six of his work is devoted to the description of the arts — poetry, music, dance — and, as researchers point out, there was also a description of the visual arts, alas not preserved to our time (Mishra J. 1949, 123).

Music was inextricably linked with poetry. In fact, it was so important in Mithila that one can distinguish a Maithili school of music. Jayadeva (c. 1170–1245), a 12th-century poet from East India, best known for his poem Gītagovinda about the love of Kṛṣṇa and Rādhā and his poetry accompanied by music, is considered crucial to its formation. According to some sources, he arrived in Mithila and influenced the creative output of local authors. One person whose work was strongly influenced by Jayadeva was the poet Vidyāpati. The aforementioned King Harasiṁha Deva was not only a patron but also a great lover and connoisseur of music and dance. When he fled with his court to Nepal in 1324, the centre of Mithila music and art moved with him and it was there that the most famous works and theoretical treatises were created. The royal patronages continued even later, until the establishment of the republic.

The Oiṇīvāra dynasty supported the Maithili language so strongly that until the 20th century it was the only Maithili language to have its own written literature (Thakur 1956). It was during their reign, at the turn of the 14th century that the most famous Mithila poet, Vidyāpati Thakur (c. 1360–1440), wrote his works, which are important for understanding and appreciating Mithila painting.

Vidyāpati's poetry — around a thousand poems and songs — is still popular today. Its themes centre around the love stories of Kṛṣṇa and Rādhā or Śiva and Pārvatī, but there are also many hymns praising the goddesses Durgā and Gaṅgā. In addition to songs related to religion, there were also some that described the daily life and customs of the Maithilis. He also wrote several treatises in Sanskrit — on morality and local geography. His work had a strong influence on East Indian literature, that is, apart from Maithili, Bengali and Oriya.

The story of Sītā and Rāma is widely known in Mithila. Women told stories to their children and grandchildren and thus they were handed down from generation to generation. In the 19th century the first written version in Maithili was published by Chandha Jha (1831–1907) in a style that combined strands of classical and local literature. In his version, the poet focused extensively on the perspective of women, their stories and their emotions (Jha D. 2004, 1–3). In the 20th century and today the most popular literary version has been the one by Tulsidas (about 1511–1623). But what popularized this story the most was the 1987 *Rāmāyaṇ* TV series, which many of my interviewees have told me about. The series consisted of 78 episodes, which are still shown today.

Scientific, philosophical, and legal literature was written in Sanskrit. Fiction — prose, poetry, drama — was composed primarily in Maithili. Some of these texts were also written in Sanskrit, but were often then translated into Maithili. Sanskrit was also the domain of the Brāhmaṇas,

while Maithili was used by the Kāyasthas, thanks to whom literature moved beyond the court and aristocratic circles (Mishra J. 1949, 19, 74–77). There were also female poets and writers. The two best known were Lakimā Ṭhākurain (scholar, writer) and Candrakalā. The latter also composed music for her songs.

There are many genres in Maithili literature, but here we will only recall those that may have influenced painting. These are mainly songs sung during celebrations, meetings or everyday activities. Repeated for centuries, mainly by women, they are an important cultural element even today. We can divide them into two types — songs of a devotional nature and songs about life.

Gosāunika gīta
Other names: Devi-pada, Bhagavatīka gīta
Śākti songs in honour of the Goddess of a tantric nature. They accompany all auspicious religious ceremonies.

Nacāri
Hymns of praise in honour of Śiva. They accompany religious ceremonies and are meant to help devotees enter a state of total devotion to the god during prayer.

Maheśa-vāni
Songs about life and love dedicated to Śiva, often about the love story and wedding of Śiva and Pārvatī — then usually addressed to Pārvatī's mother Menakā.

Sammara
Poems depicting love stories of Rāma and Sītā, Kṛṣṇa and Rādhā and others.

Gīta-kathā
Romantic stories.

Tirahuta
The most popular type of sung poetry. These are primarily love songs. Many paintings in the collection illustrated these songs. Subtypes include:

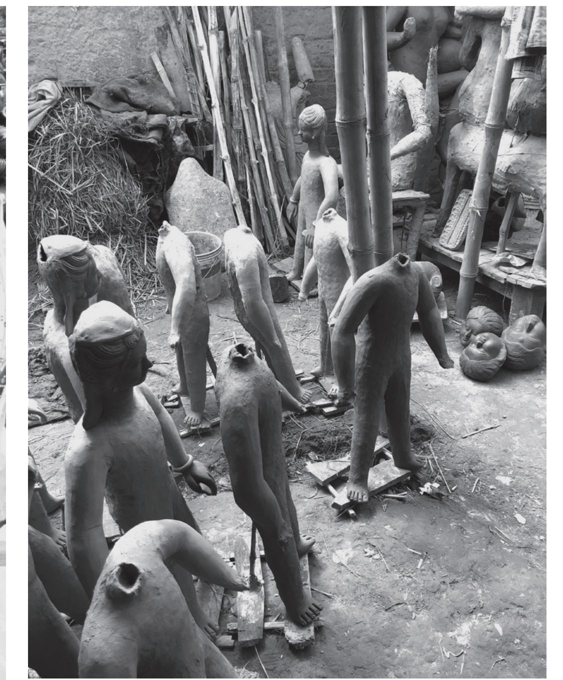
1. baṭagamanī — the heroine going to meet her lover;
2. goālarī — adventures of Kṛṣṇa, when he lived in a shepherds' village;
3. rāsa — the pleasures of Kṛṣṇa and milkmaids, particularly rāsa-līlā, i.e. a dance in a circle;
4. māna — a lovers' quarrel;
5. samadāuni — farewell, especially when a daughter leaves for her husband's home and during the Navāratri festival, bidding farewell to the goddess Durgā;
6. laganī — songs accompanying women in everyday work;
7. caita, caitābara — love songs in the Caitra month (late March and early April);
8. malāra — songs for the rainy season and dry season;
9. joga — tantric songs for the groom or a lover to tie him to his chosen one;
10. ucitī — songs in which the host compliments his guests;
11. sohara — songs celebrating a birth, particularly of Kṛṣṇa and Rāma
12. barahamāsa, chaomāsa, caumāsa — separation of lovers
13. (Mishra J. 1949, 76–80, 187).

Sanskrit literature also included musical treatises. In his treatise *Rāgatarangiṇī*, Locana Śarmā, one of the most important musicians and music theorists active in the 17th century, decisively consolidated and codified the Maithili school of music. The period between the 16th and the 19th centuries was a time of the greatest splendour and development of this art. Songs — a combination of music and poetry — were very popular, and Mithila became a central influence for the rest of East India (Mishra 1979, 224–230).

Dance and theatre

Music was also associated with dance. We know from the writings of Vidyāpati, among others, that the *Naṭya-śāstra* was an important text for the performing arts in Mithila. It is a Sanskrit treatise (2nd c. BCE — 2nd c. CE) describing mostly the principles of theatre, but also the composition of drama, dance, music and, to a small extent, the visual arts. For centuries it was the basis for the development of many art genres in the whole of India. In Mithila the most popular type of dance was kīrtaniyā, which was part of the drama genre of the same name, originally associated with the god Viṣṇu. Theatrical productions of kīrtaniyā were strongly based on music and dance, which were their key elements. Literary works repeated the same stories and motifs, as it was not the content that was most important but the visual and musical form and interpretation. Again, this was an art genre which originated at court for the educated high classes, and later on spread, changed and developed for a wide audience. After the fall of the Oiṇīvāra dynasty, Maithili court art developed in Nepal, and meanwhile in central Mithila, popular art began to occupy a key cultural position (Mishra J. 1946, 254–255, 287–289).

Today the most popular dance is the Jāt-Jatin, which tells the story of separated lovers — Jāt and Jatin. Today it is also adapted to refer to important current social issues.



↑ Taniec Dżat Dżatin. Tancerki ubrane są w strój trzyczęściowy, często spotykany w malarstwie mithilskim.
↑ Aripan na święto Nawaratri w domu Urmili Devi w Dżitwarpurze
↗ Warsztat rzeźbiarski w Madhubani, niedaleko świątyni Ramy i Dżanaki.

Visual arts

Music, literature, theatre, dance — it was public art, i.e. supported through royal patronage, created and presented at courts or staged in cities and towns for the general public on open stages. There was, however, a second type of art — private art. Created in homes, confined to family spaces, inaccessible to strangers. In the case of Mithila, this is primarily painting, and its adepts were mainly women.

Āripanā (or aipana) is a genre of floor painting (bhūmi-citra). It consists of a variety of symbols for auspiciousness and protection and is part of many festivals and rituals. It has a devotional character as well as a decorative function. There are at least 22 types of Āripanā, each associated with a different occasion.[16] This form of art has developed strongly under the influence of the Tantric tradition, as the symbols are associated with Śākti and tantric Yantras, and the women who paint them thus invoke the causal power (Mishra 1979, 233–242).

The compositions are linear, based on contour. In the past they were painted with rice paste and cinnabar (Mishra 1979, 238), but today mainly with acrylic paints, resulting in paintings created with white lines and red elements. Elements of Āripanās also permeated Mithila Painting on paper.

Clay sculptures are also produced in Mithila. They usually represent goddesses and gods, heroes from local myths and horses. They are often painted and placed in temples or domestic shrines. They have oblong and delicate forms, figures have elongated bodies and big almond-shaped eyes.

This visual landscape undoubtedly influenced Maithili painters. Each conversation about their work featured a story about Āripanā painted for festivals. Santosh Kumar Das was one of the artists who told me about his fascination with sculpture, its form and its formative influence on his painting practice.

Architecture

Similarly to painting, architecture in Mithila was also quite ephemeral. It was built mainly of wood, bamboo, and clay, as stone had to be imported. That is why few architectural monuments have survived to the present day. The fragility of the materials available did not allow for the erection of monumental buildings — they were all low and inconspicuous. This gave rise to a style of religious buildings called the 'Tirhut temple style'. They were small, with a square garbhagryha (the place where the main image is placed) and a narrow portico (Mishra 1979, 249). An example of this style is the 1435 Surya temple in Kandaha, which has been restored several times and has thus survived to the present day.

Closer to modern times, construction began to use new materials. Buildings became larger and more durable. Here are three of the greatest

16 This number was given to me by Durali Dutta and Pratik Prabhakar from the Mithila Ćitrakala Sansthan in Saurath (the Madhubani district).

examples of monumental architecture which have survived until today:

The Navlakha Palace

a palace complex of the Raj Darbhanga dynasty between 1884 and 1929, built as an administrative centre in Rajnagar (India). It features the oldest known example of Mithila wall painting. The architecture bears references primarily to the Mughal style.

Janaki Mandir Temple

a temple dedicated to Sītā, built in 1910 in a style combining the features of Nepalese and North Indian architecture. It is located in Janakpur (Nepal).

Darbhanga Fort (Ram Bagh Fort)

another complex founded by Raj Darbhanga and referring to the Mughal style. Built between 1934 and 1947 in Darbhanga (India).

From generation to generation, women passed down knowledge and skills related to singing and painting. Today, Maithili women still have their own unique musical tradition, although it is slowly disappearing as it cannot withstand the competition of Bollywood (Henry 1998 after Brown 2013, 42). However, many Maithili women still sing Vidyāpati's songs (Mishra J 1949, 31–38) and others which they learnt from older women in their families.

Scholarly studies

In ancient Sanskrit literature we can find descriptions of the Videha kingdom as an academic centre. This information is uncorroborated by archaeological sources, but it testifies to Mithila's reputation as a place where philosophy and literature could flourish. The *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Bṛhad-āraṇyakaôpaniṣad* mention that at the time of the kingdom of Videha, at the court of King Janaka lived the legendary bard Yājñavalkya. There are also descriptions of debates with two prominent female thinkers, Maitreyī and Gārgī (Jha 1998, 2–3).

The tradition of keeping scholars and philosophers at the royal court continued through successive dynasties until the rise of the republic. Kings were described as scholars and experts in religious texts. Thinkers came to the capital from all over the subcontinent, especially from war-torn areas, as Mithila was always a relatively peaceful land. Moreover, according to legends, a university founded by King Janaka operated in the capital for many centuries in antiquity.

In India, it is common to find villages where all the inhabitants are engaged in a particular genre of art. The same was true in the case of Mithila's scholars — there were villages inhabited by scholars engaged in specific fields, e.g. the study of particular Vedas, the development of various philosophical schools. The homes of experienced specialists became schools at the same time (Mishra 1979, 138).

Classical Brahminical Indian philosophy is divided into six schools (ṣaḍ-darśana), and two of them — Nyāya and Mīmāṃsā — had their main centres in Mithila.

↑ Kompleks pałacowy Nawlakha, Radźnagar (Indie)

↑ Świątynia Dźanakimandir (Nau Lakha Mandir), Dźanakpur (Nepal)

↑ Fort Darbhanga (Fort Ram Bagh), Darbhanga (Indie)

17 A sari is a type of draped dress consisting of a length of fabric about 5m long and 1m wide. It is tied around the waist like a skirt and then draped over the arm to cover the upper part of the body. It can also cover the head — depending on the style, being draped in front of or behind the shoulder.

18 According to The Sari Series — a project documenting various styles of sari — this is the Madhubani Drape, https://thesariseries.com/how-to-drape-films/no-13-madhubani-drape/ accessed: 7.02.2022

19 Circ. 179–1969, Circ. 181–1969, Circ.183–1969

Attire

Mithila inhabitants point to a unique feature in their appearance — almond-shaped eyes. According to a popular story, the goddess Pārvatī broke into pieces and her eyes fell on Mithila — hence the almond-shaped eyes in Maithilis (Burket 2004, 251).

The figures in Mithila paintings wear costumes in several different styles. Some of these are typically local, while others are found throughout India whether in art or everyday life. A character's costume tells us about his or her role in the scene depicted and also allows for identification.

Women's dress

Married women applied cinnabar (seṁdur, sindūr) to the parting and forehead. On the forehead and between the eyebrows they also made marks and dots of various sizes, in red, silver, or gold (īṁgur, tikulī, bindī, benī). Around the eyes they painted a contour with kājal and surmā, a type of black dye. They coloured their feet, hands and fingertips red with altā (alatā) produced from lac, which is typical of East India (i.e. also Bengal and Odisha), but also encountered in other regions.

Sari

The most common dress in India is the sari.[17] One of the oldest examples of the draped sari in art dates from around 100 BCE from the Śuṅga kingdom (to which the Mithila region also belonged). A terracotta sculpture depicts a woman wearing a sari in the kaccha style and draped over her left shoulder (Lyndon 2002, 10).

Kaccha style

The fabric, tied around the waist, is passed between the legs — creating a drape that resembles trousers at the front. The loose end is put over the shoulder and wrapped around the waist, covering the upper body. There are many ways of draping in the kaccha style — both the lower and the upper parts of the outfit may look different — its distinguishing feature is specifically the passing of the fabric between the legs. Until the 20th century, this was the most common style, superseded by the niwi style, which is still the most fashionable today. Thus, in painting, the kaccha-style sari is worn by goddesses (the 'old' style emphasises the eternal or ancient nature of the figures and their images) (Lyndon 2002, 17).

Mithila style[18]

It is encountered throughout Mithila to this day. The outer end of the sari — añcar (añcali, āṁcar; Hindi: pallu) — is draped forward over the shoulder, with the edge reaching to the waist. This makes the part running down the back very voluminous which allows it to be worn over the head, forming a veil. The lower part of the sari is draped like a skirt. Also popular today, in painting the Mithila-style sari is worn by most of the female characters.

Draping the sari in such a way that the end was brought forward covering the breasts was popular throughout northern India; in the 20th century it was largely supplanted by the niwi style with the pallu falling down the back (Lyndon 2002, 14–15).

Under the sari a top (colī) is worn and it can be short and end just under the bust or long and reach the navel (this one was worn by lower castes). In paintings from the 1970s we can often see a top with a triangular opening exposing the navel. This is not a realistic representation of an actual cut, but a painting convention. In the older paintings from the 1960s from the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, we can see women whose upper part of the garment consists of a wide sash tied between the breasts.[19] It formed a sort of top come bra which created a triangular shape exposing the navel. Over time, the tops in paintings became increasingly long, but their cut repeats the patterns from earlier representations.

A three-part outfit

A three-part outfit worn by maidens was popular as early as the second millennium (with influences from western Asia). It consists of a long skirt cut from a circle (lahanga, ghaghra), a blouse (kasani — down to the waist or angiyā, colī, kancol — ending below the bust, tied at the back with ribbons) and a shawl (oḍhnī, cādar). One or both ends of the shawl are tucked behind the waistband of the skirt, with the central part worn over the head. In the half-sari, the odhni is draped in such a way that a triangular cut-out is formed at the front (one end is tucked in below the navel, then the shawl is wrapped around the waist and spread diagonally over the shoulder, covering the torso) (Mishra 1979, 351; Grierson 1885, 149).

Covering the hair

Shawls covering the head were found throughout northern India. Already in the *Mahābhārata* we can find passages stating that women should wear them as a sign of respect in the presence of the elderly or those of higher social status (Lyndon 2002, 12). In Mithila, women drape their saris in Mithila style, which

is when they put it over their heads or wear an additional shawl to the sari, the caddar (or cād-dar), which is worn on the head, let down the back and tied at the side. In the past, when a woman met a strange man, she would pull the shawl over her face.

Shawls with a coloured edge — which are most commonly found in Mithila painting — are cunrī or cuṁdrī (Grierson 1885, 147–148).

Jewellery

Lahṭhī, or thin bangles made of lac guā mālā, auksī are made by craftsmen called laheri and are typical of Mithila.

A hairpin is called coṁtī. A type of hair jewellery consisting of three strings extending forward in the parting and to the sides is maṁgṭīkā or bannī. A pendant is called caukṭhā. An ornament applied to the forehead is tikuli (other names are sispūl, cāṁd). Nose jewellery includes: chucchī piercing, nath hoop (or smaller nathiyā) (Grierson 1885, 152).

↑ Obrazy bywają ilustracją mithilskich pieśni. Baua Devi śpiewa tę o Krysznie.

Men's dress

Men wore dhoti and uttarī, or long pieces of cloth called lungi tied around the hips as loose trousers with wide legs or long straight skirts. As upper garments they wore long tunics called angarkhā or mirjayi with ties at the waist, chest and around the neck.

On their heads they wore caps called pag (pagā) (Mishra J. 1949, 21, Mishra 1979, 351). These used to be turbans rolled up from a special piece of cloth. Today they are round stiff hats with a cylindrical head and a small peak in front. The frame is usually made of paper (e.g. old newspapers) covered with silk or cotton. The most popular colours are pink and yellow, and today they are often hand-painted with Mithila-style ornaments, in which case the fabric may also be white.

Mithila style

Rectangle cloth is tied around the waist and passed between the legs so as to form loose fitting trousers (dhoti). The two ends of the fabric are folded into decorative pleats — one tucked in at the waist at the front (from the top and bottom, forming a decorative belt or horseshoe at the front), and the other at the back after being passed between the legs.

↑ Mithila to kraina poprzecinana licznymi rzekami i stawami