

Mithila Painting as Eco-Aesthetic Practice: A Study in Environmental Humanities

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Abstract

Mithila painting, also known as Madhubani art, is not just a decorative folk art but a meaningful way of expressing life, nature, and culture. It started in the Mithilanchal region of Bihar and Nepal as paintings on walls during rituals and festivals, but today it is known all over the world. This paper examines Mithila painting from the perspective of the environmental humanities, showing how it reflects a close relationship between humans and nature. It explains how the art is based on ideas like respect for nature, simple living, and balance in life. The paper also looks at how this art changed over time—from being a local tradition to becoming globally popular—especially after it was discovered and documented during the colonial period. It also highlights the roles of artists, institutions, and important places such as Jitwarpur village and institutions in Saurath in preserving and promoting this art form.

Keywords: Mithila Painting (Madhubani Art), Environmental Humanities, Human–Nature Relationship, Folk Art and Cultural Heritage, Sustainable Living Traditions

1. Introduction: Eco-Aesthetics and Indigenous Knowledge

Environmental humanities is a field of study that examines how human life, culture, and nature are closely interconnected (Buell, 1995; Garrard, 2012). It brings together ideas from literature, art, history, and environmental studies to understand how people think about and interact with the natural world. Instead of seeing nature as something separate from humans, this approach shows that human life and the environment are deeply linked and affect each other in many ways (Buell, 1995).

Eco-aesthetics, a part of environmental humanities, focuses on how nature is represented and experienced through art and culture. It studies how artistic forms

express respect for nature, harmony, and balance. In simple terms, eco-aesthetics asks how art helps us understand and care for the environment. It moves away from seeing art only as decoration and instead views it as a way of thinking about life and nature together (Alaimo, 2010).

Mithila painting is a strong example of this eco-aesthetic practice. In Mithila, art is not something separate from daily life—it is part of rituals, festivals, and everyday living. The paintings are created using natural colours made from plants, soil, and other local materials, showing a sustainable way of making art (Memeraki). This itself reflects a deep respect for nature. The themes of Mithila painting also show this connection clearly. Artists paint the sun, moon, rivers, trees, animals, and birds, as well as gods and goddesses. These elements are not shown as separate; they exist together in harmony. This reflects a simple but powerful idea—that humans are not above nature, but are a part of it. The absence of empty space in these paintings further shows that nature is full, alive, and interconnected (Memeraki).

Mithila painting also carries indigenous knowledge, meaning knowledge that comes from local traditions and lived experiences. This knowledge teaches balance, respect for natural resources, and sustainable living. Through generations, women have passed this art and its meanings orally, keeping both culture and ecological understanding alive. Mithila painting thus becomes more than an art form—it becomes a visual expression of environmental thinking, showing how culture, nature, and human life can exist together in harmony.

2. Origins: Ritual Ecology and Sacred Geography

Mithila painting is an ancient art form that originated many centuries ago in the Mithila region of Bihar and Nepal. According to local belief, this art began during the time of King Janak, when paintings were made to celebrate the wedding of Sita and Ram. Over time, this art became a regular part of daily life. It was passed down from one generation to the next, primarily through women in the family (Government of India, Ministry of Textiles).

Traditionally, Mithila paintings were made on mud walls and floors of village homes. These were not just decorations but were deeply connected with rituals like marriages, births, and festivals. Women painted these designs to invite blessings, happiness, and prosperity into their homes. The process itself was very natural and eco-friendly. Colours were made from things found in nature—like turmeric for

yellow, indigo for blue, rice paste for white, and leaves or flowers for green and red shades. Even tools were simple, such as fingers, twigs, or small sticks (Memeraki). The themes of these paintings show a deep connection with nature and belief. Common images include the sun, moon, trees, animals, rivers, and gods and goddesses. These are not drawn randomly; each symbol has meaning. For example, fish represent fertility, the sun represents energy, and trees represent life and growth. This shows how people in Mithila see nature as something sacred and important in everyday life. Another important feature of Mithila painting is the absence of empty space. Every part of the surface is filled with patterns, lines, and designs. This reflects a simple idea—that nature is always full, connected, and alive. Nothing is separate; everything is part of one system. Overall, Mithila painting is not just an art form. It is a way of life that shows respect for nature, strong cultural values, and a deep understanding of how humans and the environment are connected (Memeraki).

3. Discovery and Global Transition: From Earthquake to Exhibition

The journey of Mithila painting from a local tradition to global recognition began unexpectedly. In 1934, a major earthquake struck Bihar, causing widespread damage in the Mithila region. Many houses collapsed, and as a result, the inner walls of these homes became visible. On these walls were beautiful, detailed paintings that had previously remained hidden inside households and were known only within the local community (Sarmaya).

During this time, a British officer named William George Archer, who was working in the area, noticed these paintings while visiting the villages for relief work. He was deeply impressed by their beauty, detail, and unique style. Realising their importance, he began to photograph and document them carefully. This was one of the first times that Mithila painting was recorded and preserved in a systematic way (Archer, 1966). Later, Archer wrote about these paintings and published his observations in the well-known art journal *Marg*, which introduced Mithila painting to a wider audience (Sarmaya). These publications helped bring this local art form to artists, scholars, and viewers outside India. For the first time, people across the world became aware of this rich and unique folk tradition.

This moment became a turning point in the history of Mithila painting. What was once a private, ritual-based art practised by women inside homes slowly began to gain public attention. Over time, it moved from walls to paper and canvas, making it easier to preserve, sell, and display. This shift helped the art form travel beyond Mithila and reach national and international platforms. Thus, the 1934 earthquake,

though tragic, played an important role in bringing Mithila painting into the global spotlight. It marked the beginning of its journey from a local cultural practice to a recognised form of world art (Sarmaya).

4. Economic Transformation and Women's Agency

In the 1960s, Mithila painting went through an important change that shaped its future. Earlier, this art was made only on the walls and floors of homes during rituals and festivals. But due to poverty and lack of income in the region, new efforts were made to turn this traditional art into a source of livelihood. Artists were encouraged to paint on paper and canvas so that their work could be sold in markets. This shift brought significant changes to the lives of rural women. For the first time, their art became a way to earn money and support their families. What was once seen as a household activity slowly became a respected profession. This gave women financial independence, confidence, and recognition in society. In many cases, women who had never stepped outside their villages became known artists at the national and international level (Ministry of Textiles).

This transformation also helped Mithila painting reach a wider audience. The artworks could now be transported, exhibited, and sold in cities and even abroad. As a result, local artists gained global recognition, and Mithila painting became an important part of India's cultural identity. Many Madhubani artists have been honoured with the Padma Shri award, including Jagadamba Devi, Sita Devi, Ganga Devi, Mahasundari Devi, Baua Devi, Dulari Devi, Shanti Devi, Godavari Dutta, Shivan Paswan and his wife Shanti Devi, showing how this traditional art has gained national and international recognition. This period marked a powerful shift—Mithila painting was no longer just a cultural practice, but also a tool for women's empowerment, economic growth, and global cultural exchange (Ministry of Textiles).

5. Jitwarpur: The Living Laboratory of Mithila Art

The village of Jitwarpur in the Madhubani district is known as one of the most important centres of Mithila painting. It is often called the heart of this art because many well-known artists have come from this village, and the tradition is still very much alive here. Jitwarpur has been recognised as Bihar's first craft village (Shilpgram), which shows its importance in preserving and promoting this unique art form (Government of Bihar). What makes Jitwarpur special is that the art is not limited to galleries or exhibitions—it is a part of everyday life. Many houses in the village are still decorated with Madhubani paintings on their walls. These paintings

are made during festivals, weddings, and other special occasions, just like in the past. This shows that the tradition has been passed down from one generation to the next, especially through women, who have played a major role in keeping it alive (Memeraki).

The village is also known for producing many famous artists, including Jagdamba Devi, Sita Devi and Baua Devi, as well as other award-winning painters who have taken this art to national and international levels. Despite gaining global recognition, the artists of Jitwarpur remain connected to their roots and traditional methods. Jitwarpur can be seen as a living example of how art, culture, and nature come together. Here, painting is not just a profession but a way of life. The use of natural colours, local materials, and traditional designs shows a deep respect for the environment. Jitwarpur represents a living cultural ecosystem where art, daily life, and ecology exist together in harmony.

6. Institutions and Cultural Infrastructure

Different institutions and cultural centres have played an important role in preserving and promoting Mithila painting, both in India and across the world. One important institution is the Mithila Chitrakala Sansthan and Mithila Lalit Sangrahalaya in Saurath, Madhubani, Bihar, which trains new artists, helps preserve traditional styles, and supports exhibitions and research on this art (Government of Bihar). It acts as a bridge between old traditions and new generations. Another important place is Mithila Haat, a modern cultural centre in Madhubani. It operates like a marketplace where artists can sell their paintings and handicrafts directly to visitors. It also promotes tourism and local culture by showcasing Mithila art, food, and traditions in one place (Ministry of Tourism).

One of the most interesting examples of the global reach of Mithila art is the Mithila Museum in Tokamachi, Japan. This museum was started in 1982 by a Japanese artist named Tokio Hasegawa. It is located in a quiet, natural area and is built inside an old school building. The museum has a very large collection of Mithila paintings—around 2,000 artworks—and even includes paintings created by Indian artists who travelled and worked in Japan (Hasegawa; Mithila Museum, Tokamachi). The museum is not just a place to display art. It also invites artists from India to stay, work, and create new paintings, helping cultural exchange between India and Japan. Some famous works by artists such as Ganga Devi and Godavari Dutta are also preserved there. Overall, the Mithila Museum shows how a local village art from

Bihar has reached the global stage and is appreciated worldwide. It also proves that traditional art can grow internationally without losing its original identity. Together, these institutions—Mithila Chitrakala Sansthan, Mithila Haat, and the Tokamachi museum—show how Mithila painting is preserved, promoted, and connected to the world while still staying rooted in its cultural traditions in villages like Jitwarpur and Ranti (Ministry of Textiles; Ministry of Tourism).

7. Globalization and Cultural Mobility

Since the 1970s, Mithila painting has gradually gained popularity outside India and spread to many parts of the world. Countries such as Japan, France, the United States, and Germany have shown particular interest in this art form. People in these countries appreciate its bright colours, detailed designs, and strong connection with nature and culture. Over time, exhibitions, museums, and art shows helped introduce Mithila painting to international audiences. Many artists were invited abroad, and their work started being displayed in galleries and cultural centres across the world (World History Encyclopedia). Japan, in particular, has played a very important role in promoting this art. The Mithila Museum in Tokamachi has helped preserve and showcase thousands of Mithila paintings, creating a strong cultural connection between India and Japan. Similarly, art lovers and collectors in Europe and America have also supported this tradition by buying and promoting these artworks.

In recent years, digital platforms and online marketplaces have made this process even faster and easier. Today, artists can sell their paintings through websites, social media, and e-commerce platforms without leaving their villages. This has opened new opportunities for them to reach global buyers directly (Madhubani Arts India). Because of this, Mithila painting is no longer limited to local markets—it has become a part of the global art economy. At the same time, it continues to carry its original cultural meaning and traditional values, showing how a local art form can successfully connect with the modern world (Madhubani Arts India).

8. Eco-Aesthetics and Environmental Activism

Mithila painting has a strong connection with nature, both in the way it is made and in what it shows. Traditionally, artists use natural materials like plant-based colours, mud, and handmade tools. These methods are simple, eco-friendly, and do not harm the environment, showing a sustainable way of living (Memeraki). The themes of Mithila painting also reflect a deep respect for nature. Artists often draw

the sun, moon, trees, rivers, animals, birds, and gods together in one space. This shows that humans and nature are closely connected and interdependent. The paintings remind people that nature is not separate from us but is an important part of our lives.

In recent years, Mithila painting has also been used to spread awareness about environmental issues. One powerful example is the tree painting movement in Bihar, where artists painted Madhubani designs on tree trunks. This helped protect trees from being cut, as people began to see them as valuable and sacred. In this way, art was used as a tool to save nature. Because of these features, Mithila painting is more than just decoration. It teaches people to respect nature and live in balance with it. This is why it is connected to modern ideas in environmental humanities, which focus on the relationship between humans and the environment. Mithila art demonstrates that traditional knowledge can offer simple, meaningful ways to care for the planet.

9. Challenges and Critical Concerns

Even though Mithila painting has become popular in India and around the world, it still faces some serious challenges. One major issue is the growing commercialization of the art. As demand increases, some artists and sellers focus more on making quick profits rather than maintaining the traditional style and meaning. This sometimes affects the originality and cultural value of the paintings. Another challenge is the use of synthetic colours instead of natural dyes. Earlier, artists used colours made from plants, flowers, and other natural materials, which were environmentally safe. Today, many artists use chemical colours because they are cheaper and easier to use. However, this change is slowly affecting the eco-friendly nature and traditional beauty of Mithila art.

There is also a decline in traditional knowledge among the younger generation. Many young people are moving to cities for education and jobs, and fewer are learning this art from their elders. As a result, some traditional styles and techniques are at risk of being lost. In addition, not all artists benefit equally from the global success of Mithila painting. While some well-known artists earn a good income, many rural artists still struggle to get fair prices for their work. Intermediaries and market systems often take a large share of the profit. Because of these issues, it is important to find a balance. Mithila painting needs to grow and adapt to modern times, but at the same time, its original traditions, techniques, and values must be protected and preserved.

10. Conclusion

Mithila painting is much more than a simple art form—it is a way of life that shows how people, nature, and culture can live together in harmony. From its beginnings on village walls during rituals to its presence in galleries and museums around the world, this art has come a long way. Yet even after becoming globally popular, it has maintained its deep connection to nature, tradition, and community. This art clearly reflects the ideas of eco-aesthetics and environmental humanities. It teaches us to respect nature, use resources wisely, and understand that humans are a part of the environment, not separate from it. The use of natural colours, themes of trees, animals, and the sun, and even modern efforts like tree-painting campaigns, all convey a strong message of environmental awareness.

At the same time, Mithila painting has also supported social and economic growth. It has given many rural women a source of income and recognition, helping them become independent and confident. Villages like Jitwarpur, Ranti, institutions like Mithila Chitrakala Sansthan, and global spaces like the Mithila Museum in Japan have all played an important role in preserving and promoting this tradition. However, challenges such as commercialization, the loss of traditional methods, and a lack of interest among the younger generation remind us that this heritage requires careful protection. The future of Mithila painting depends on maintaining a balance—keeping its traditional roots strong while allowing it to grow in modern ways. In the end, Mithila painting offers an important lesson for today's world. It shows that true development is possible only when we respect our culture, protect nature, and move forward together. It is a living example of how tradition and modern life can coexist, creating a more sustainable and meaningful future.

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