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***Painting Is My Everything: Art from India's Mithila Region***

**Asian Art Museum highlights vibrant arts movement with a surprising impact on women's lives**



San Francisco, May 31, 2018 — Opening Sep. 7, 2018, *Painting Is My Everything: Art from India's Mithila Region* is an original exhibition at the Asian Art Museum featuring 30 large-scale contemporary works on paper from Bihar state, the subcontinent's rural northeast. This will be the first major exhibition in more than a decade to explore how a previously private, age-old tradition of women's domestic

decoration has, since the 1960s, become a vibrant arts movement with a surprising social impact. A number of the Mithila paintings on view are newly acquired by the Asian Art Museum and have never been on display before.

For centuries, Maithil women have painted gods and goddesses, richly ornamented icons of fertility and protection on the walls and floors of their homes. Located within family compounds, these exuberant artworks created dramatic settings for religious rituals and helped bless family relations. A devastating earthquake in 1934 shattered homes and revealed this colorful world to British colonial officials who, captivated by these paintings, began documenting what had once been hidden from public view, sparking interest in the paintings beyond Mithila for the first time.

Prime Minister Modi arriving in a village via helicopter, 2015, Dulari Devi (Indian). Ink and colors on paper. Acquisition made possible by the George Hopper Fitch Bequest, 2016.123. © Asian Art Museum.

A drought in 1966 prompted a government-led initiative to encourage women to paint more on paper in order to sell their work commercially, resulting in a life-and-community-changing source of female-generated income. Over the years, vocational and training systems took root. Often led by women, these opportunities allowed new generations of artists — including some men — to express their creative voices through painting, and in the process, find paths to financial independence.

*“Painting Is My Everything* shares a fascinating story about how art in provincial India can be a vehicle for personal empowerment and a way of keeping local expressive traditions relevant,” says Qamar Adamjee, exhibition organizer and Malavalli Family Foundation associate curator of art of the Indian subcontinent. “The exhibition title is a quote from Dulari Devi, a featured artist whose personal life experience — from hardship to global recognition through her art — mirrors the changes in the practice of painting in the Mithila region.”

### **Traditional Techniques Blend with Contemporary Themes**

“Compressing a wall painting onto a much smaller sheet of paper takes considerable imagination and skill,” explains Mithila painting expert David Szanton, University of California, Berkeley Professor Emeritus and president of the Ethnic Arts Foundation. “Yet for all this, the paintings remain deeply rooted in ancient iconographic systems with a coherent aesthetic. A painting from Mithila is instantly recognizable almost no matter the subject — even abstract compositions that some younger artists are experimenting with.”

Characterized by a density of line and texture, bold aesthetics based on strong figurative outlines of brush and ink, fine detailing and elaborate borders, the artworks showcased in *Painting Is My Everything* offer audiences a chance to discover the nuances of an eye-catching art form often overlooked because of its association with the commercial souvenir trade.

Mithila's artistic conventions derive from different sources: traditional high-caste Brahmin designs that employ multiple colors, including vibrant blues and yellows, or clerical-caste *Kayastha* linework, characterized by black-and-white and occasionally red pigmentation. *Dusadh* (low-caste) painters have integrated patterns from their small protective tattoos, often seen on arms and legs and typically consisting of geometric arrangements of floral and other motifs, as well as stories of their own heroes and deities. However, as artists from across the region have begun to work alongside each other, there has been a mixing of artistic styles.

As techniques and styles once associated with specific castes and by artists from historically marginalized backgrounds merged over the years, the range of subjects of paintings have also expanded. Images of gods and goddesses, everyday village life and ceremonies continue to feature in the artistic repertoire, alongside expressions of deeply personal experiences — dreams, the death of a child, or travel abroad — and comments on broader social and political issues such as the election campaign of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, domestic violence, or the environment.

## Artistic Insights into Globally Relevant Topics

With their skill and artistic vision, the 17 artists included in this exhibition offer us a glimpse of life in an economically challenged region of provincial India, traditional in several respects yet engaged with modern viewpoints. Through painting, artists express ideas and themes that are at once local and global, personal and universal. These works are today available in India's major cities and beyond, and held in private and public collections. The voices of these artists ring out well beyond the boundaries of their rural villages.



To help demonstrate what makes Mithila painting a robust “living” tradition, the Asian Art Museum will be hosting a week-long artist-in-residence program with Shaline Kumari, a young, Mithila-based painter who will lead public artist demonstrations and small-scale workshops in October. Kumari’s recent interests address the position of women in their everyday lives: inequalities in marriage and education, the heavy workloads and domestic responsibilities they continue to face — as well as celebrations of female friendship and personal milestones.

“We want our audiences to question how and why artistic traditions continue to evolve, and Mithila painting provides a colorful, resonant, deeply humanist voice in this conversation,” says Asian Art Museum Director and CEO Jay Xu. “Moreover, with British-Pakistani sound-and-light artist Haroon Mirza’s new installation, *The Night Journey*, on view next door to *Painting Is My Everything* — not to mention the historic works in our collection galleries — this fall truly presents a unique opportunity for visitors to draw connections between diverse contemporary South Asian and diaspora art practices. The types of connections only possible at our museum.”

## **Exhibition Organization**

*Painting Is My Everything: Art from India's Mithila Region* is organized by the Asian Art Museum. Presentation is made possible with the generous support of The Akiko Yamazaki and Jerry Yang Fund for Excellence in Exhibitions and Presentations, John Maa, M.D. and Society for Art and Cultural Heritage of India (SACHI).

## **About the Asian Art Museum**

The Asian Art Museum—Chong-Moon Lee Center for Asian Art and Culture is one of San Francisco's premier arts institutions and home to a world-renowned collection of more than 18,000 Asian art treasures from throughout Asia spanning 6,000 years of history. Through rich art experiences, centered on historic and contemporary artworks, the Asian Art Museum unlocks the past for visitors, bringing it to life while serving as a catalyst for new art, new creativity and new thinking.

**Exhibition Hours:** Tuesdays through Sundays from 10 AM to 5 PM. Thursdays open until 9PM. Closed Mondays.

**Admission:** FREE for museum members and children (12 & under), SFUSD students, and active members of the U.S. armed forces and their families. \$25 for adults and \$20 for seniors (65 & over), youth (13–17) and college students (with ID). On weekends, \$25 for adults and \$20 for seniors (65 & over), youth (13–17) and college students (with ID). On Target First Free Sundays admission to the exhibition is \$10. On late Thursday evenings (5-9PM through 9/27), admission to the museum is \$10, with tickets including admission to the exhibition \$20.

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