



S. C. SUMAN CONTINUITY AND CHANGE IN MITHILA PAINTING

Prof. Dr. Ramawatar Yadav

Just as it was a *firangi* none other than Sir George Abraham Grierson who first used the label 'Maithili' for the cross-border language of that name spoken in Nepal and India, so it was a *firangi* named William Archer who discovered 'Mithila Painting' in 1934 and immortalized it in his 1949 article of that title in *Marg: A Magazine of the Arts* wherein he published a number of photographs of Mithila wall paintings taken in 1940. Sadly, none of the wall paintings that Archer photographed exist today – the sole exception being a black and white photograph of a 1919 wall painting commissioned by Maharajadhiraj Rameshwar Singh of Darbhanga to decorate the *kohbar ghar* 'nuptial house' of the Rajnagar Palace for the marriage of his only daughter. The 1919 wall painting, photographed much later, happens to be the single oldest extant sample of Mithila painting to date.

Soon after the introduction and availability of white paper and paint for painting during the late 1960s, the Mithila paintings tended to receive universal acclaim and Maithil women's paintings fetched enviably higher and yet higher prices.

A cursory perusal of the literature of art-writing on Mithila paintings reveals a total of three broad strands: a) paintings done by Mahapatra Brahmin women, b) paintings done by Kayastha women, and c) paintings done by Dusadh women. Sita Devi, a Mahapatra Brahmin, epitomized the Brahmin women's style of wall painting that is now dubbed the *bharni* 'filled' style: her paintings were "generally of large, elegant, often elongated figures in bright colours, using a straw or bamboo stick, either frayed at the end, or with a rag or wad of cotton at the tip, to serve as a reservoir for the paint" (David L. Szanton, 2007). Ganga Devi, who is immortalized by Jyotindra Jain's 1997 book titled *Ganga Devi: Tradition and Expression in Mithila Painting*, on the other hand, shot to fame with her "extremely detailed *kachni* or "line" paintings using fine nib pens and only black and red ink" (David L. Szanton, 2007). In sharp contradistinction as it were to the Brahmin and Kayastha women, the Dusadh women drew heavily upon auspicious *godana* 'tattoo' images that their arms and legs were densely filled with; instead of painting the traditional Hindu gods and goddesses, they focused on painting their own deities such as Raja Salhes and his coterie. Dusadh women painters such as Chano Devi, Lalita Devi are eminently famous today, and currently the 'tattoo' paintings pass as distinctively and uniquely Dusadh painting. Presently, *gobar* paintings and *geru* paintings have been appended as two additional newer facets to the Dusadh painting. In spite of the marked stylistic variations, the paintings done by Brahmin, Kayastha, and Dusadh women continue to remain quintessentially Mithila painting.

MITHILA COSMOS IV
KALPAVRIKSHA

S. C. SUMAN

FEBRUARY 3RD - MARCH 2ND 2016

My knowledge of Mithila painting is minimal; I have consented to pen these words at a very short notice upon a fervent, nay, persistent request from S. C. Suman. I was also emboldened in this act by virtue of having visited an exhibition of his paintings “Mithila Cosmos: Circumambulating the Tree of Life” held during December 10, 2013 – January 6, 2014. Needless to say, I was awe-struck and very favorably impressed with his paintings.

S. C. Suman is one of the few but famous male painters of Mithila painting. We have come to learn that he was a precocious child painter and that he was initiated into the trade by his grandmother – a constant source of encouragement and inspiration. No wonder he bagged a number of awards in school and college competitions.

S. C. Suman, himself a Kayastha by birth, tends to inherit all the traits of the *kachni* style, but he does not stop there. Not only did he excel in the "line" painting with an insatiable appetite and a penchant for very minute and miniscule details of line, but he also succeeded in creating an exemplary amalgamation of and a synthesis between the *bharni* and the *kachni* styles of Mithila painting. On top of it, he has a singular distinction of adding a new dimension to Mithila painting by espousing textile design thereby incorporating amazingly intricate textural details of lines – surpassed perhaps only by the Thangka painting.

S. C. Suman has got a real knack for using natural pigment in his paintings: *singarhar* flowers for orange, *gena* flowers for tamarind yellow, *poro* seeds for purple/deep red dye, cow dung for greenish texture, bougainvillea flowers of many hues for crimson red and/or magenta reddish purple color – to name only the famous few. Suman's discrete use of vegetable dye, no doubt, lends credence, authenticity, and naturalness to his paintings.

S. C. Suman also distinguishes himself with a flair for incorporating issues of contemporaneous political conflict and social disharmony prevalent in Nepal after the April 25, 2015 earthquake in his recent paintings. This affords an extended range, an elaboration, and an international appeal as it were to the contemporary paintings of S. C. Suman.

I may wish to close my remarks by describing S. C. Suman as a rather seasoned and iconic painter of Mithila paintings.



Village Story I (Mixed Media on Nepali Paper, 57" X 36")

Kalpavriksha, the great wish-granting tree, which in Hindu mythology surfaced from primal waters during the churning of the cosmic ocean, is said to blossom at the summit of Mt. Meru in the centermost of Indra's five paradise gardens. Each of these gardens possesses its own central wish-granting tree, which are known as harichandana, kalpa, parijata, mandara, and santana. It is on account of the wish-granting tree that the asuras wage a perpetual war with the devas or gods, as the heavenly gods freely partake of its divine flowers and fruit, whilst the jealous demigods dwell in comparative poverty at the lower level of its trunk and roots.

Beer, Robert

The Handbook of Tibetan Buddhist Symbols (2003)

MITHILA COSMOS IV : KALPAVRIKSHA | THE WISH GRANTING TREE

The ancient and vast Mithila Kingdom was surrounded by the Ganges River to the South, the Himalayas to the North, and the now non-existent Koshi and Gandaki Rivers to the East and West, whose territory extends to present day Bihar, India. The Nepali city Janakpur was the capital of this ancient Kingdom. The epic Ramayana makes mention of this area as King Janak and his daughter Sita the consort of Lord Rama, hailed from this great kingdom. Today Janakpur is still the epicenter of Maithili culture in Nepal.



Village Story II (Mixed Media on Nepali Paper, 57" X 36")



Kalpavriksha (Mixed Media on Art Paper, 22" X 30")

For over three thousand years, the genre of Mithila painting has remained within the bastion of its womenfolk, who inherited their traditions, skills and expertise from their mothers or grandmothers. Their art was an integral part their domestic day to day ritual. Mithila women have drawn on the walls of their humble abodes and on their mud floors to avert natural disasters, protect their crop, and pray for the well being of their husband and children. Housewives fashioned images out of clay, mud and cow dung of Hindu Gods for worship on diverse occasions, when they observed fasts for the prosperity and longevity of their family members. Dr. Ram Dayal Rakesh , a Nepali expert on Mithila Art of Nepal writes that Mithila art is inseparable from religion, and that the Mithila artist still 'dedicates her talent and skill to God, meditating long before transforming a spiritual aesthetic vision on to a mud wall'. However these wall paintings have always been impermanent, as the annual monsoon torpor destroys the painted images. A fresh mixture of mud and cow dung is applied over the old images to provide a fresh surface for new paintings, which are in keeping with the festivities.

The Great Earthquake of Bihar in 1934 caused much destruction in both India and Nepal. Interestingly the destruction in India brought Maithili art to the public gaze for the very first time. Today the winds of change have brought about transformation in the lifestyle of the rural and indigenous folk in both India and Nepal. This change has challenged the artistic and cultural moorings of the Mithila cosmos. However, it is interesting to note that the mud walls, courtyards, textiles, household objects, paintings and handicrafts, still rest upon the age-old repertoire for ornamental patterns and designs, motifs, symbols and themes.

In Nepal the practice of painting on paper is a recent phenomenon, which was introduced by Claire Burkert of the Janak Women's Development Center in 1990. From this historic moment, the artistic motifs used by Mithila women were transferred on to paper. The Janakpur Women's Development Center was established to promote the inherent skills of these women, uplift their lives through the sales of their beautiful artworks and to introduce Mithila expression to the rest of the world. Today Mithila art in Nepal has taken a direction of its own and is a source of inspiration for national and international artists.

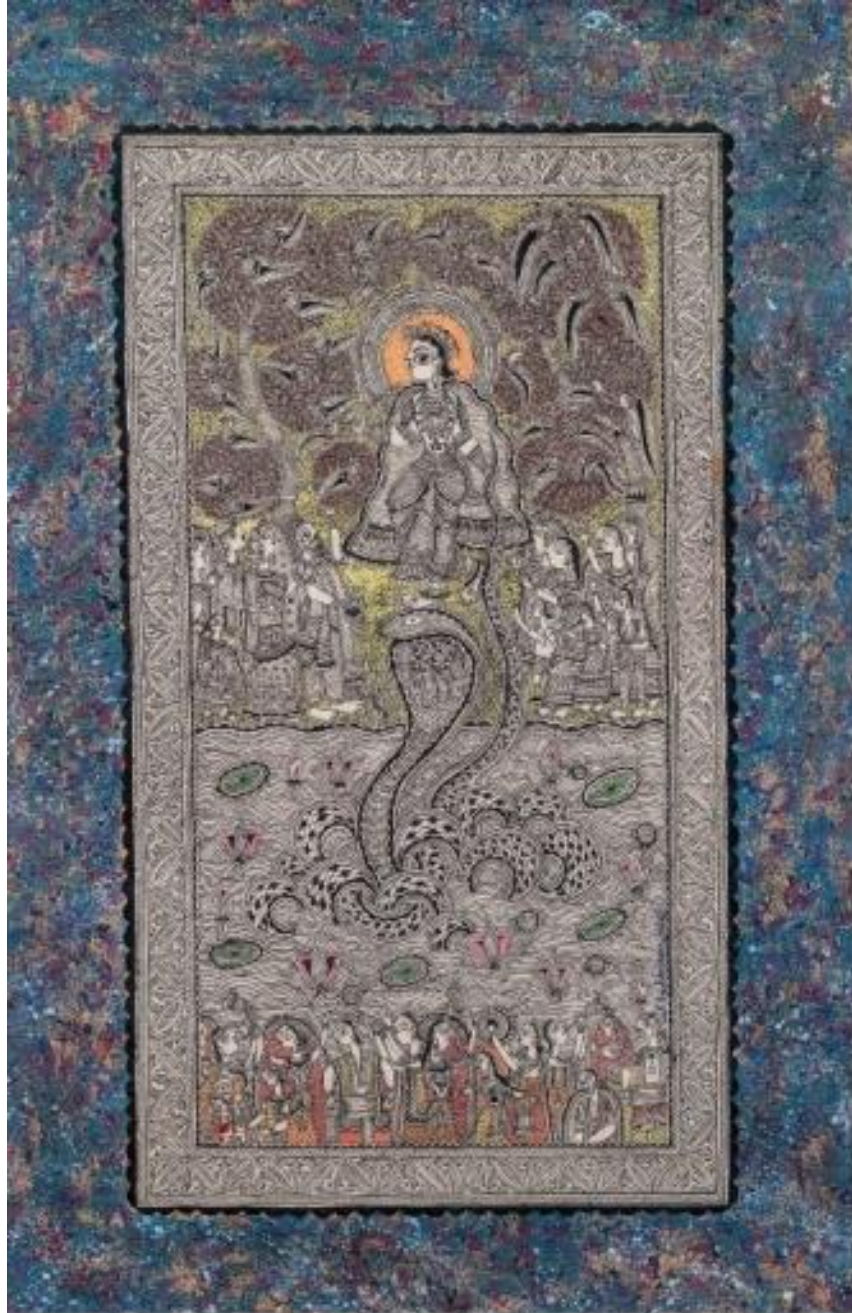
Traditionally three castes are associated Mithila art: Brahmin, Kayastha and Dusadha. Though Mithila art forms vary from caste to caste, the art forms that emanate from this region are associated with religious ceremony and local rituals. The Kayastha women of the Mithila region have traditionally been engaged with this art form since time in memorial. The artist S.C. Suman, who hails from Siraha, is a Kayastha. He learnt to make ritual aripans for the various festivals and pujas from his grandmother in their family home. Suman recalls that his grandmother would grind rice with some water into a paste called pithar and use this mixture to make the delicate patterns on the mud floor and in the goshai ghar or prayer room each day. These intricate ornamental but profoundly symbolic patterns would be incomplete without adding the final touches with abir, sindoor and kesari powder. Suman also remembers helping his grandmother make wall paintings or Bhatti Chitras and waiting for the right season to gather flowers, creepers, herbs and leaves that would be ground and distilled to make the natural pigments for the paintings. The stem of the parijat flower, bougainvillea, pulp of the bel fruit, oil, milk and turmeric would be used to make organic pigments. Mud, cow dung and certain grasses were used as earth tones for the paintings. Kajol and soot would be coated on to fine hand hewn bamboo sticks with which his grandmother would draw the fine images of their spiritual and natural cosmos.

No other art form in Nepal shares such a close affinity to nature and celebrates the holistic involvement of all the senses: sight, sound, smell, touch and taste.

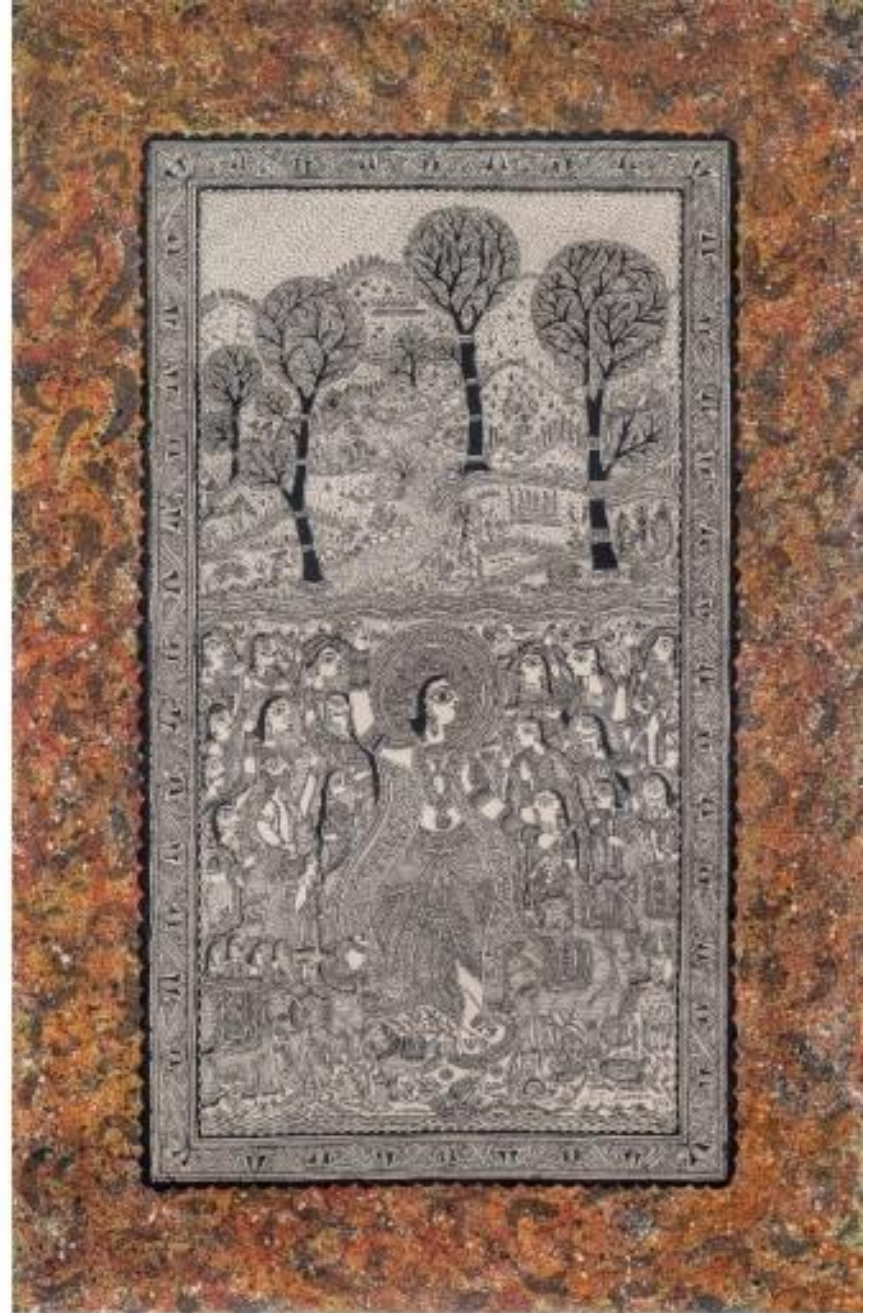
Cognisant of the artworks created at Women's Development Center, the fine Madhubani paintings of Bihar, the Worli paintings of Madhya Pradesh along with the local Tharu and Rajbanshi imagery, S.C Suman is both an oddity and an icon, as he has gone against the tide and established his name as one of the finest painters in this genre. Though he trained as a textile designer in Bombay, he returned to his roots and began to paint in the Mithila tradition, stating that he did not believe that the issue of gender should restrict the innate creativity of an artist. S.C. Suman crafts his own painting tools and prepares his own colors. He also uses acrylic and oils with equipoise on Nepali paper, linen and silk. In 1991, he was the first artist to exhibit his Mithila paintings and that too in his hometown Biratnagar.



Jur Shital (Nava Barsa)
(Mixed Media on Art Paper, 24" X 36")



Krishna Leela - Kalia Naag Mardhan
(Natural Pigment on Nepali Paper, 29" X 45")



Krishna Leela - Gobardhan Parbat
(Natural Pigment on Nepali Paper, 29" X 45")

In 2007, S.C. Suman held a successful exhibition at the Siddhartha Art Gallery. Entitled Mithila Cosmos, this exhibition brought attention to the enduring iconography of the Mithila Kingdom. In 2011, his exhibition Mithila Cosmos - New Narratives, included both traditional forms and a body of work which were socio-political in content, thus demonstrating how the Mithila gaze reads the world today. Suman believes that traditional art can become dynamic and robust when it embraces contemporary issues. His exhibition Mithila Cosmos – Circumambulating the Tree of Life – was inspired by nature and the symbolism of the tree which is a recurring motif in Mithila art, poetry and folk songs. Even a 700 year old folk song written by celebrated Mithila poet Kokilkavi Vidyapati which is sung at weddings elucidates this deep connection to nature and ecology. The Tree of Life concept is sacred to most cultures. Jasleen Dhamija, an Indian writer and expert on the arts and crafts of India elaborates that the significance of the tree of life “transcends conscious reality, touching the subconscious and beyond. Even if the original meaning is obscured, the symbol retains an unconscious link with our primeval memory and becomes a source of strength. Its roots plunge deep into the three worlds: its branches reach upwards towards heaven and support it. The trunk is the means of ascending upwards and reaching beyond, thereby connecting three worlds. The presence of a tree signifies water, growth, and fecundity.

Specific trees and flowers are objects of worship and are sacred : kadamaba, pipal, bar, banyan , sandalwood, rudrakshya, parijat, mango and mahua tree and it is a taboo to cut these trees, as their very being is associated with myths and gods; hence the custom of offering libations to them”. Even today young men and women from the Mithila culture get married to both the mango-mahua tree before they are formally married to their betrothed. It is interesting to note that these species of trees were and are still regarded as Kalpavriksha or sacred wish granting trees. Today one can speculate that these trees, flowers and fruits were awarded a special status due to the beauty and fragrance of their blossoms which were offered during ritual ceremonies. There is also no doubt that the medicinal, nutritional and ecological value of these trees and plants was understood by them.



Herd of Elephants (Mixed Media on Nepali Paper, 57" X 36")

The cultural, artistic and literary tradition of the Mithila genre is deeply rooted in nature. Verses from the sacred Ramayana and the Mahabharata are replete with texts that pay homage to sacred trees, plants, flowers and nature. Taking its cue from these sacred texts Mithila imagery captures the exile of Rama and Sita in exile in the forest, Sita sitting under the Ashoka tree, Radha and Krishna exchanging garlands with a Kadamba tree in the backdrop, the cheer haran story where a gleeful Krishna sits on a sturdy branch of the Kadamba tree overlooking a pond where 108 gopinis are bathing oblivious to the fact that Krishna has taken away their clothes and hung it on the branches of the tree. Even today married women conduct the Batsavitra puja , or the tulsi hom as it is believed that these pujas add longevity to the lives of their husbands.



Rural art forms are an indelible link between the artistic output and nature. Suman's paintings reflect images of a myriad plants and life forms of the Terai which encapsulate a host of meanings: lotus (seat of the unblemished and pure feminine form), bamboo (lineage, roots, male form), kadamba tree (love) fishes and crocodiles (fertility), turtles (lover's reunion and stability), parrots (teacher, intelligence), peacocks (beauty), elephants (wealth and prosperity), tigers (power associated with the Goddess), snakes (associated with Shiva for protection and the ultimate union), fishes and crocodiles (fertility), sun, moon and the nine planets (power of nature). Ravindra Kumar and Anupama Sirivastav write that Mithila women believed the Sun had the power to "fertilize and impregnate, while the Moon was regarded as the heavenly source of amrit or nectar, thus symbolizing life and giving qualities".

Kalpavriksha (Tattoo Inspired)
(Mixed Media on Nepali Paper, 24" X 36")

In his new series Suman draws inspiration from Kalpavriksha-the wish granting tree which is an artistic and literary theme common to the Hindu Bhagavatas, the Jains and the Buddhists. His paintings are a therefore a continuous exploration of a deeply rooted relationship with nature. His intricate and detailed trees are heavy with luscious ripe mangoes, symbolic of sexual yearning and fulfillment, some bear imaginary medallions of desire. Suman paints birds perched on a tree, partaking in its abundance and seeking refuge in its leafy bower. He draws beasts such as the elephants and deer that come to these trees for sustenance and for shelter. He paints wedding processions, men and women celebrating Chhat and a multitude of festivals in which the Kalpavriksha tree is a focal point of an intricate Mithila aripan or cosmos. In some paintings a lascivious sun looks on at women bathing from above the tree tops, while in others the fleeting desires of man, animal and bird are nurtured in Suman's forests, glades and groves.

In this exhibiton S.C. Suman incorporates the images from Mushahar, Jhaangar, Dhimal, Sataar and Tharu indigenous communities of the Tarai into his paintings. The Bhatti Chitra or Mokha (mul-dwaar or main gate) paintings that embellish the façade of a Tharu home with decorative elements around the main gate and windows also find expression in this series.

Salhesh Lok-katha is another example of how the artist has deftly used Dusadha elements in his recent work.



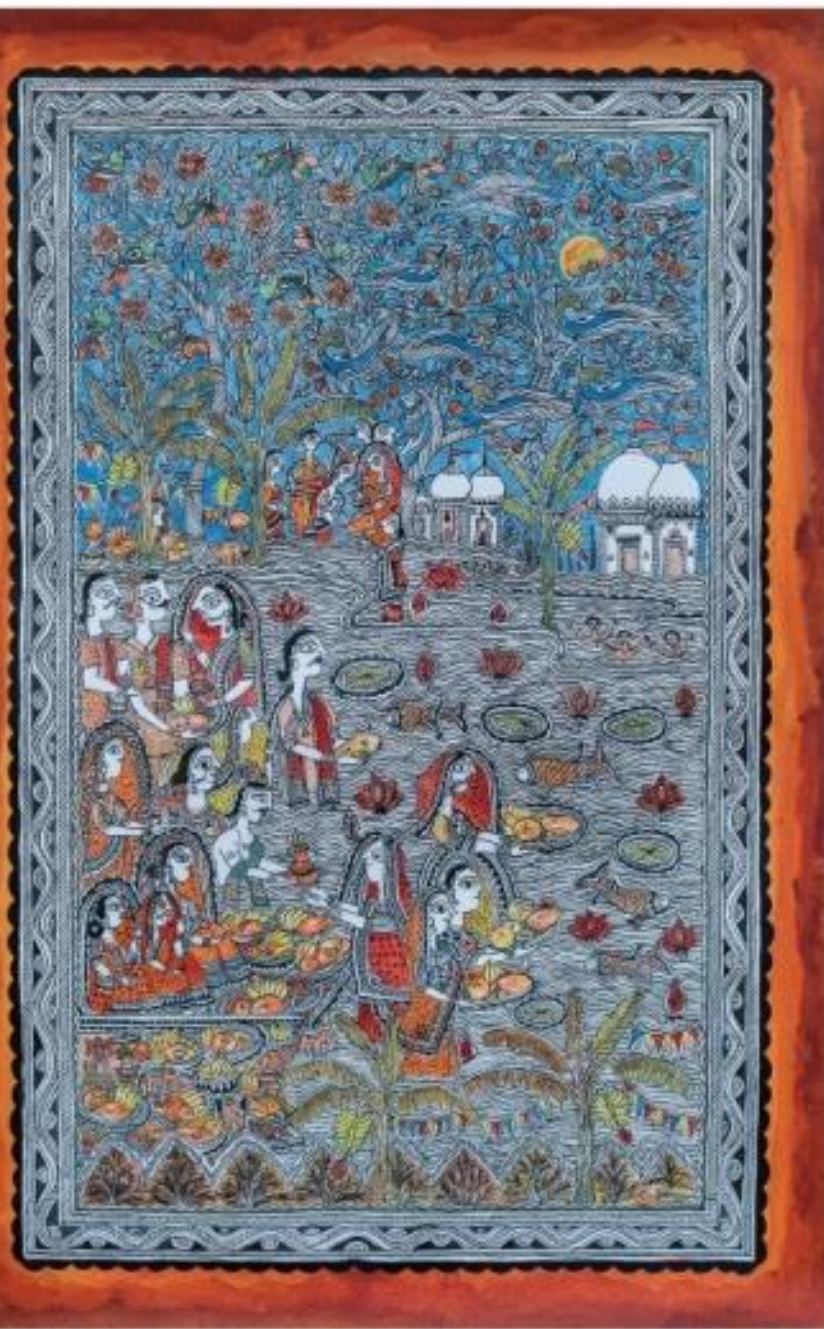
Salhesh Lok Katha
(Acrylic on Nepali Paper, 28" X 37")



Rebuild Nepal
(Mixed Media on Art Paper, 26" X 40")

The pantheon of the Hindu Gods: Krishna and Durga are also depicted in S.C Suman's new series. Apart from these sacrosanct visual narratives, the cycle of the seasons, fairs and dances, fertility rites, folk and tribal lore, marriage, other ritual ceremonies and cultural activities associated with the annual festivals based on the cycles of the moon and sun are themes that Mithila women immortalized in their paintings. Some of the enduring images of Mithila art include agrarian village scenes and village activities. Suman is well versed in these visual narratives. The artist also pays attention to jewelry of the women, the tattoos that Mithila women receive on their bodies, in some instances the embroidered motifs, fine needlework and quilting stitches which are used to make blankets, becomes an integral motif embodying the Mithila narrative.

The Great Earthquake of 2015 that devastated Nepal, also finds expression in this series. Titled *Rebuild Nepal*, the triptych expresses the pain felt by the artist and the people of Madhesh over the death and destruction caused by the earthquake. His works mourn the loss of an ancient heritage that drew Mithila sages and pilgrims to the Valley. Suman also portrays the humanitarian assistance provided by Madhesh to those affected by the earthquake.



Kalpavrisha - the Wish Granting Tree - drives home the point that the very passage of life in the Mithila Cosmos is very deeply rooted in rituals that pay obeisance to nature. This reverence can be interpreted as the collective wisdom of the Mithila people who understood the importance of establishing and maintaining an ecological balance and harmony in their very cosmos or world. The earthquake has disrupted the ecological balance which is eulogised in Mithila painting. This ecological balance is a source of inspiration for Mithila and traditional Paubha artists. The paintings in this exhibition are marked by imaginative use of space, lucid lines, a naïve sense of anatomy, dynamism and the intuitive use of color. It is this 'untutored' aspect of Mithila painting that gives it a distinctive edge and indescribable charm.

Sangeeta Thapa

Art Curator/Director

SIDDHARTHA ART GALLERY

Chhaith Puja (Mixed Media on Art Paper, 24" X 36")

Solo Exhibitions

- 2016 *Mithila Cosmos* - Kalpanikaha Siddhartha Art Gallery, Kathmandu Nepal.
2013: *Mithila Cosmos - Circumambulating the Tree of life*, Siddhartha Art Gallery, Kathmandu, Nepal.
2012: *S. C. Sunzan Microcosm: A Moment of Delight in Contentment* Maithil Sewa Samiti, Biratnagar, Nepal
2011: *Know Thyself* Maithili Sewa Samiti, Biratnagar, Nepal.
2011: *Mithila Cosmos – New Narratives* Siddhartha Art Gallery, Kathmandu, Nepal.
2007: *The Mithila Cosmos* Siddhartha Art Gallery, Kathmandu, Nepal
2007: *Mithila Art Exhibition* Everest Souvenir Adelaide, Australia.
2006: *Mithila Paintings – A view* Mithila Mahotsav Janakpur, Nepal.
2004: *Image of Terai* Indigo Gallery, Naxal, Kathmandu, Nepal
2002: *Synthesis of Terai* Indigo Gallery, Naxal, Kathmandu, Nepal.
2002: *Tradition and Expression of Mithila Painting* Mithila Mahotsav Janakpur, Nepal.
1998: *Maithili Art* Indigo Gallery, Naxal, Kathmandu, Nepal
1998: *Mithila Art Exhibition* Netherlands Leprosy Relief Association, Netherland.
1997: *Mithila Art: A Living Tradition* Koshi Mahotsav, Biratnagar, Nepal
1991: *Maithili Art Exhibition* All Nepal Medical Conference of Nepal Medical Association in Biratnagar, Nepal

Group Exhibitions

- 2015: *Karmaphul Folk Treennial*, Santara Art Organization and Sipkala Academy, Bangladesh.
2015: *Exhibition of Print and Paintings*, Artist Proof Gallery, Kathmandu, Nepal
2014: *Inter-Linkage between Art & Environment (BP Koirala Foundation)*, Nepal Art Council, Kathmandu, Nepal.
2009: *1st Kathmandu International Art Festival*, Siddhartha Art Gallery, Kathmandu, Nepal.
2008: *Stop Violence Against Women – An Art Exhibition* OHCHER – Nepal (Eastern Regional Office, Biratnagar and Lalitkala Sangam, Biratnagar, Nepal).
2008: *AMALAGAM - 2008* Siddhartha Art Gallery, Kathmandu, Nepal.
2008: *Mithila Group Art Exhibition* Mithila Ariel Society, Kathmandu, Nepal
2005: *Art Exhibition in Nagoya, Japan*, Artist Association, Japan.
1998-2004 : 29th - 35th *National Art & Craft Exhibition* Nepal Association of Fine Art, (NAFA), Kathmandu, Nepal
2000: *Art Exhibition in France* Asian Artist Agromax – French Cultural Association, Kathmandu, Nepal
1998: *Group of Exhibition* All Nepal Commercial Artist Association, Biratnagar, Nepal.
1996: *Mithila Art Exhibition* Birgunj Jaycees, Nepal.

Work Shop & Exhibitions

- 2013: *"Paintings On Nepali Story"* Art Work Shop & Exhibitions Organized by Kalra and Yumna Fine Art Academy, Dharan, Nepal.
2012: *Work Shop, Demonstration & Exhibitions of Paintings in Tharu Community at Hathimuda Village, Morang* Organized by Chetana Sarvakochhan Prastishan, Nepal
2012: *"Nalika Ko Khoj"* National Art Shop & Exhibitions Organized by WAGON, Kathmandu, Nepal
2011: *"National Art Work Shop & Exhibitions"* Organized by Arohan, Gurukul, Biratnagar, Nepal
2002: *"National Art Work Shop & Exhibitions"* Organized by Lalit Kala Sangam & Rotary Club, Biratnagar, Nepal.

Awards & Certificates

2013: *Subhash Baral Smriti Vani Smman* presented by Vani Prakashan Biratnagar.
2013: *Certificates of Excellence* presented by KU & American Embassy Kathmandu, Nepal.
2012: "Samman" presented by Kalrab and Yumma Fine Art Academy Dharan, Nepal.
2011: "Samman" (Certificates of Honor) presented by Maithili Bikash Abhiyan, Biratnagar, Nepal.
2011: "Samman" (Certificates of Excellence) presented by Maithili Sewa Samiti, Biratnagar, Nepal.
2008: *Rastriya Pratibha (National Talent) Puraskar* presented by Nepal Government.
2004: *Special National Award* in the 35th National Art & Craft Exhibition, presented by Nepal Association of Fine Art (NAFA), Nepal.
1999: *National Award – Second Prize* in 30th National Art & Craft Exhibition presented by Nepal Association of Fine Art (NAFA), Nepal.
1988: *National Award* in the 29th National Art & Craft Exhibition presented by Nepal Association of Fine Art (NAFA), Nepal.
1997: "Special Consolation Prize" in Koshi Mahotsav, Biratnagar, Nepal.
1994: "Consolation Prize" in Greetings Card Design Content, Bhaktapur, Nepal.

Travel

France, Saudi Arabia, Bangladesh, Germany. The artist has also travelled extensively between Nepal and India to conduct research on artistic traditions of the ancient Mithila Kingdom.

Membership

Siddhartha Art Foundation, Nepal
Lalit Kala Sangam, Biratnagar, Nepal
Chitransh, Sewa Parishad, Biratnagar, Nepal.
Chetana Sanrakchhan Pratisthan, Nepal.
Rita Memorial Trust, Rajbiraj, Nepal.

Adviser

Mithila Kalakar Samaj, Kathmandu, Nepal.
Maithili Sewa Samiti, Biratnagar, Nepal.
Birat Mithila Natya Kala Parishad, Biratnagar, Nepal.

Collection

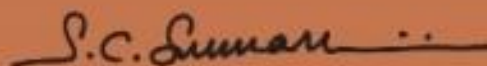
Nepal, India, USA, UK, Japan, Denmark, Canada, Netherlands, France, Kenya, Switzerland, Italy, Russia, Egypt, Korea, Mexico, Australia.

As a Writer

Articles on Fine Arts and Culture published in National Daily Papers, Weekly and Monthly Magazines.
Aesthetics of Mithila Art, Siddhartha Art Foundation Education Initiative.

In General

Subodh Chandra Das is a Council Member and Head of Department of the Folk Arts Department at Nepal Academy of Fine Arts. He is actively working in different organizations for the development of art and artists for more than 20 years. He has served as a "Chief Judge" during different art competitions. He has organized national level Art Workshops in Biratnagar in 2002 - 2015. He participated in the 1st Kathmandu International Art Festival. He has been researching on Mithila, Tharu, Santhal, Dhimal, Folk Art & Culture which was facilitated by Chetana Sanrakshan Pratisthan, Nepal.



Subodh Chandra Das

Anmol Home, Bakhari, Biratnagar - 16

Suman's Studio

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