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Women, Real and Imagined, In Asian Art
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Ritual Origins of Mithila Art
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Long before the women artists of Mithila began putting their works on paper, they covered the walls of their village compounds with vivid portrayals of goddesses, natural symbols, and brides and grooms, most of it on the occasion of weddings. This talk will examine both developments, the wall art and the paper art, using the Asian Art Museum's own collection of Mithila art and the author's personal photos, collections, and conversations with women artists themselves.

The region known as Mithila is famed for the wealth and power of Darbhanga Raj, a Brahman family who long controlled the region. And for a much longer time, Brahman men of Mithila were renowned as philosophers and scholars. Yet their women were not allowed an education until recent decades, expressing themselves instead in a visual medium of great beauty on important ritual occasions. The transformation of this art into a marketable commodity has wrought very significant changes, empowering women, opening the genre and the market to all local castes, establishing a middle class pride in the fame of this art, and bringing an ironic reversal of esteem from male philosophical brilliance to female artistic genius.

Suggested Reading:

Archer, William C., 1985. *Songs for the Bride; Wedding Rites of Rural India*. Barbara Stoler Miller and Mildred Archer, Eds.,

Brown, Carolyn Henning (Heinz), 1996. "Contested Meanings: Tantra and the Poetics of Mithila Art," *American Ethnologist* 23:4:717-737.

Heinz, Carolyn Brown, 2006. "Documenting the Image in Mithila Art," *Visual Anthropology Review*, 22:2:5-33

Jain, Jyotindra, 1997. *Ganga Devi: Traditions and Expressions in Mithila Painting*.

Vequaud, Yves, 1977. *The Women Painters of Mithila*

Szanton, David and Malini Bakshi, 2007. *Mithila Painting, The Evolution of an Art Form*