

## Landscape, Religion and Folk Art in Mithila: An Indian Cultural Region

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**ABSTRACT.** *Folk art portrays aspects of cultural geography that have been frequently ignored. Important aspects of the cultural geography of Mithila are illustrated through folk paintings and songs. By understanding the symbolism in folk art, cultural geographers can discover fresh meanings in landscapes and culture, thus gaining a deeper knowledge of the aspirations and behavior of a specific group.*

American cultural geography has been concerned with the study of cultural practices and technologies as they have developed in particular regions of the world through time by specific populations conceived as culture groups. The spectrum of cultural geographic work in America has included studies on the relationship between landscape and culture with emphasis on the role of beliefs and value systems in the evolution of landscapes through work that concentrates on particular communities, religious attitudes, spatial patterns of pilgrimages and the investigation of given cultural patterns and processes.<sup>1</sup> Traditionally, emphasis has been on the study of cultural forms on the landscape, such as field patterns, settlements, house types, barns and fences.<sup>2</sup> In recent years the focus has begun to shift toward cross-cultural investigations and the study of cultural artifacts such as folk art, which reveal the experiential and aspirational aspects of specific culture groups.<sup>3</sup>

Cotton Mather is a pioneer in this intellectual shift in cultural geography. His studies on folk art have added another dimension to cultural geography because they give insight into the folk culture of an area. Cultural geographers have done little to identify and record folk art as a cultural imprint. Yet it is as much a part of the cultural record as other man-made imprints such as houses, fences or field patterns. In recent studies Mather has shown that folk art is inspired by indigeneous cultural traditions and geographic settings.<sup>4</sup> It represents both culture and region and provides insight into a society's aspirations, thereby giving a better understanding of social behavior.

This essay is concerned with the landscape, religion and folk art

of Mithila, a distinctive cultural region in the Middle Ganges Valley.<sup>5</sup> It is based on Mather's premise that folk art brings the landscape and cultural traditions of the people together. Mithila is one of the few places in the Indian subcontinent where the forces of change have not obliterated the distinctive folk art of the area. Here, traditional folk art reflects the region's geography and provides an unbroken link with the past. It can be observed in everyday family ceremonies and village festivals.

The term "folk art" is often used as an umbrella for numerous artistic forms and utilitarian objects crafted in a wide variety of mediums. It has been variously defined over the years, mostly because folk culture is a relatively new field of study in which discoveries are constantly being made. As used in this essay, folk art refers to local paintings, songs and crafts having the traditional cultural characteristics of a particular region. It is primarily a regional art originating in villages.

Folk art is the art of ordinary people. It is characterized by a direct style, bold colors, strong design and an immediate, uncomplicated meaning. Folk artists in India often select religious themes for their paintings and songs. Although sometimes considered a "post script" to Indian fine art, folk art represents the mainstream of Indian culture. Its appeal is based on decorative, bright colors and simple forms. Folk art is original, exciting and a true representation of regional cultural geography.

Folk art is one of the most promising research fields in Indian cultural geography. Whether a painting or sculpture, a decorative drawing on a wall or a handmade object (all are colorful and evocative expressions of the rich and diverse Indian cultural mosaic). The "art of the common man" as folk art is sometimes called, is remarkably varied in type, material and style from one part of India to another. The range of Indian folk art includes not only murals, textiles and pottery works, silver amulets, metal masks of deities, hand-made boxes and other country-style objects, but also decorative accessories and the drawings on the walls and floors of rural households.

Appreciation of Indian folk art calls for a perceptive eye from the cultural geographer. The traditional criteria for judging art must be set aside since the subtleties of formal composition, sophisticated techniques, realistic detail and perspective are seldom, or only accidentally, achieved by folk artists.

In Mithila a vigorous style of folk art has evolved over the centuries. The artists there may lack technical know-how, but they display a keen power of observation and an intuitive sense of design. Religious objects are the most popular subjects of Mithila folk paintings. To express their religious devotion, artists record in paintings and poetry

every aspect of religion (mythology, deities and heroes from popular epics). The most common paintings are idealized drawings of gods and goddesses which cover the walls of small houses in tiny villages where folk tradition is strong.

### *The Mithila Cultural Region*

Flanked by the Himalayan foothills in the north and the Ganges River in the south, the Mithila region lies between the Gandak and Kosi rivers in northern India. Physically, the region merges imperceptibly with the Kosi Plain to the east and the Gandak-Ghaghara Doab to the west.<sup>6</sup> Historical cultural elements provide unity and a geographic personality to this area. It was settled by the Aryans toward the end of the Vedic period.<sup>7</sup> In ancient times the Gandak River separated the region from the Kosala empire to the west while the Ganges formed the boundary with Magadh to the south.

The ancient kingdom of Mithila, founded about 1000 B.C., lost its political supremacy to the more strategic Magadh Kingdom. During the weak period of the Gupta dynasty, the area was occupied by the kings of Bengal, with local rajas or clan chiefs exercising powers over the area. In the late medieval period it was ruled by the Nawabs of Bengal. The Battle of Plassey (1757) brought British supremacy into the area. The British organized the region into districts, with some modification of the old, ancient administrative patterns.

In this essay the Mithila region has been delimited on the basis of the frequent use of the name "Mithila" in businesses as well as the perception of the culture area by a selected sample population.<sup>8</sup> The Mithila vernacular region lies within the Madhubani, Darbhanga, Samastipur, Vaishali, Muzaffarpur, Sitamarhi and Purba Champaran districts of India (Fig. 1).

The Mithila region is a fertile alluvial plain with a population of 15 million people who speak the distinctive Maithili language. Its population density is over 722 persons per square kilometer, much above the national density of 220 for India as a whole. Settlements are small and scattered; the region is dominantly rural. The southwestern part of Mithila has a more diversified economy with sugar factories, oil refineries and the recent petro-chemical complex at Barauni. Darbhanga and Muzaffarpur are the two principal towns.

The cultural center of the region is the Madhubani district. This is one reason why Mithila art is sometimes referred to as Madhubani art. The important Sanskritic traditions are deeply rooted in Mithila and many notable Sanskrit scholars are found there today. A continuous spell of Hindu rule in Mithila from 1097 to 1550 facilitated the maintenance of traditional customs and rituals which have lost their importance in other parts of northern India.

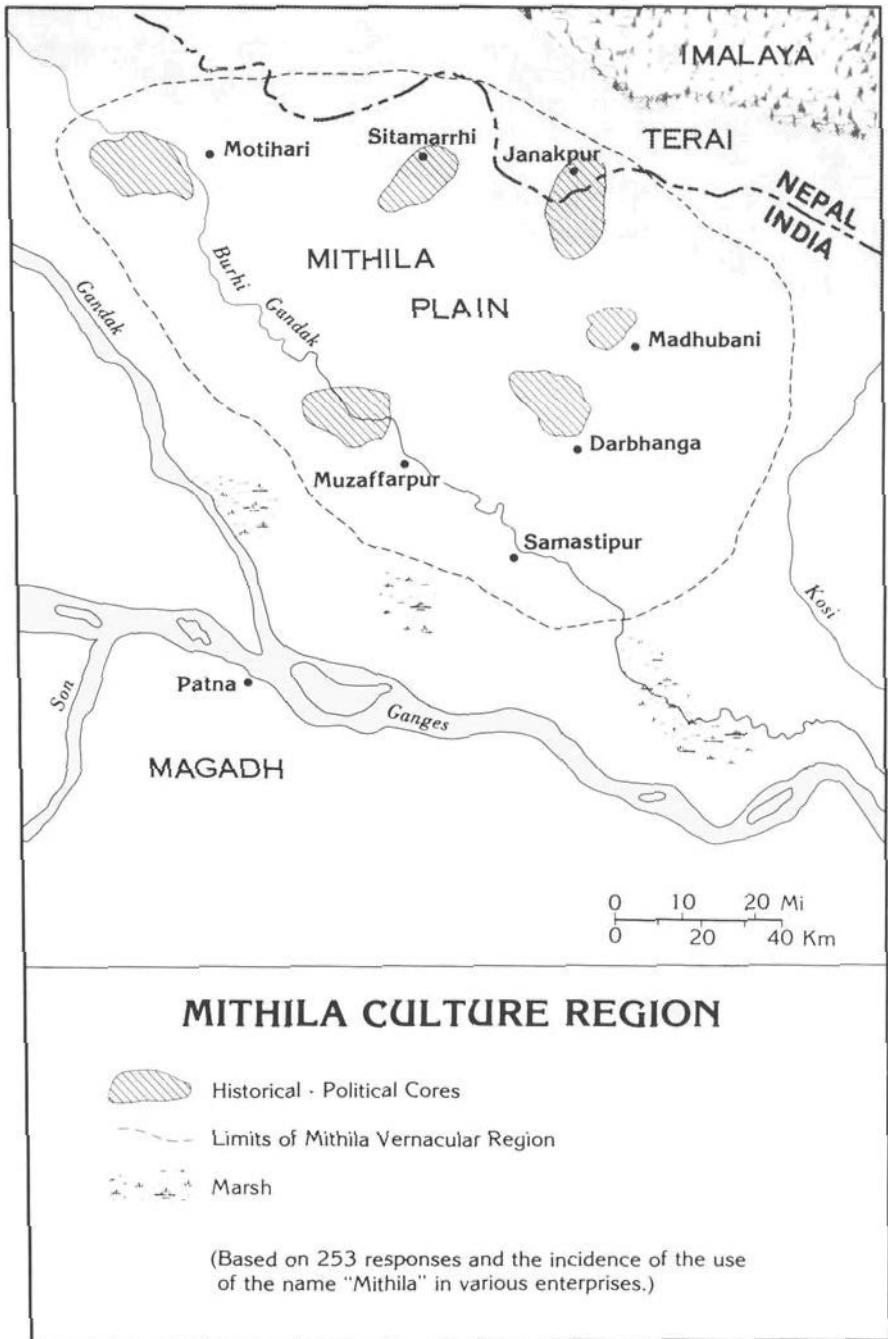


Fig. 1. Mithila Culture Region.

The magnificent beauty of the landscape and the Vedic Hindu religion have exerted a pervasive influence on the cultural geography of Mithila. The region displays a landscape of remarkable color; the wet rice fields and rivers change coloration and mood with the day and season of the year (Fig. 2). The bright, clear air and the vivid colors are among the most stimulating features of the region. Green, red or yellow foliage, groves and orchards of ripening lichees and mangoes, bananas and coconuts cultivated in fields hedged with bamboos dominate the countryside.

The visual appeal of the region is immediate, intense and enduring. The vast scope and the seeming timelessness of the forces of nature have become fundamental themes in the folk art of the region. A sense of eternal, elemental structure and innate order are qualities of the environment and culture which challenge creative efforts. In Mithila geometric forms which are prominently displayed in rural landscapes (village huts, rice fields, tree-lined river banks) serve as a stimulus for the creation of folk compositions:

Obviously the eternal color of the Mithila landscape (dress, art and architecture) provides a stimulating visual experience. However, the appeal of Mithila is more firmly grounded in a deeper admiration for various qualities inherent in the traditional customs, beliefs and ceremonies. For the people of Mithila, religion transcends all other aspects of life. Art, drama, social organization, architecture and even everyday activities of life are affected.

The central tenet of the Maithilis' religion is its unique concept of man's unity with nature. The Maithilis believe in a oneness of life as manifested in all things. Plants, animals, clouds, the sky and water share the life force equally with man. Within this concept the people remain in the proper relationship with their surrounding environment and both a complex, extensive ceremonial life and social structure have evolved.

Although Mithila is the birthplace of the founders of two great religions (Buddha and Mahavira, the founder of Jainism) the region was unmoved by the teachings of the two reformers and remained faithful to the old Vedic religion, which has inspired, enriched and helped perfect much of the folk art of Mithila. The Mithila cultural milieu is built around religion. The origins of many forms of folk paintings are rooted in the rituals of worship.

This concept of the interrelatedness of all the elements of creation also affects the Maithili's relationship with his fellowman. Beliefs create a sense of community with other people as well as with nature. This communal spirit is clearly manifested in relationships within the immediate village community. Of particular importance is the family which for all Mithila is an extended family unit, including grandparents



Fig. 2. Rice fields of the Mithila Plain.

and married children. Individualism exists, but the final responsibility is to the group and the Maithili conceives of himself as at once and inseparably both an individual and a community member.

Indeed, the sense of unity with nature is reflected in the architecture of the village. Formed from the region's clay soil, the mud huts echo the natural forms which surround them. Individual lives are lived as an integral part of the whole. The Maithili's bond with his people and with nature, a natural outgrowth of the region's religion, is thus reinforced by the physical structure in which he lives.

The self-sufficient Mithila villages have grown around a pond or lake. Each caste lives in a separate and geographically distinct area. The agricultural labor castes (Chamar, Dusadh, Kamkar) continue at their traditional occupations or work as day laborers. They are usually segregated in marginal locations on the edge of the village. The Kayasthas, who are slightly inferior to Brahmins in the caste system, are landowners and maintain land records. The Kayasthas and other higher castes occupy a compact neighborhood in the center of the village. Brahmins live on a separate site. Businessmen, artisans (Lohar, Barhi, Kamar) cultivating castes (Yadav, Koiri), service castes (Dhobi, Nai, Kami) and fishermen (Machhua) show distinct clustering. Traditional social values and economic organizations influence the distribution of various castes in the villages. Depending upon the dominance of a particular caste, the village may be referred to as Brahmin or Kayastha or as a Yadav village.

The deep and continuing appeal of the landscape and the religious concepts of the local people of Mithila were not the only factors which contributed to the development of the cultural region. The vitality of the people combined with the relatively slow process of "modernization" and the geographic isolation allowed the Mithila culture to maintain its traditional identity.

#### *Mithila Folk Painting*

Folk painting in Mithila is an integral part of the rural life of the area. It is characterized by extreme simplicity, which is the essence of the life of the rural people.<sup>9</sup> Folk paintings are essentially wall paintings, drawn on the walls or floors by women of the household using simple materials (generally a bamboo reed tipped with a piece of raw cotton or lint) and locally made color. The subjects vary according to the occasion (a wedding or religious festival) but gods and goddesses are usually included so as to invoke their blessings.

Folk painting is rich in religious symbolism and Sanskrit iconographic vocabulary. It is only in Mithila that for every major domestic

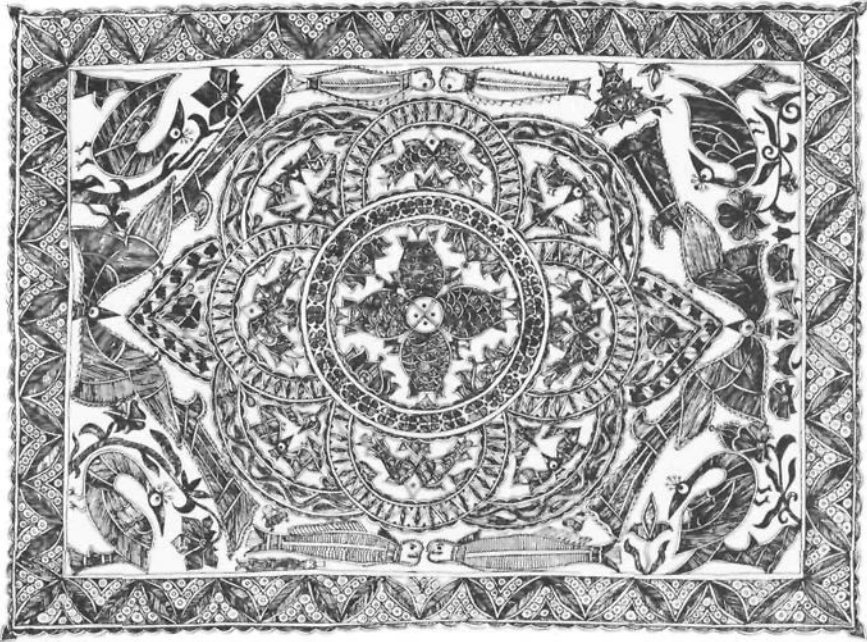


Fig. 3. This drawing is what is called an *aripana*. It symbolizes the dwelling of a god, a psychic representation of the universe. The Mithila women draw designs on the floor of the verandah or in the courtyard or in front of the household altar on occasions such as a birthday, the beginning or end of the harvest season, a child's initiation and entry into a new phase of the life cycle. These designs may cover an area as large as six square feet. The symbol of four fishes, whose heads form the circle in the center of the drawing, demonstrates Vishnu's absolute power over the four quadrants of space.

life cycle rite such as a first haircut or sacred thread ceremony, which a household is bound to perform in every generation, a particular kind of *aripana* (floor painting with ground white rice) is drawn (Fig. 3). The authentic form of *aripana* is maintained in every household. Girls learn to paint from their mothers and grandmothers at an early age. The favorite subjects are figures of Hindu gods and goddesses like Ram and Sita (Fig. 4), Shiva and Parvati (Fig. 5), Radha and Krishna, and peacocks (Fig. 6), flowers and symbolic designs. Themes evoking the myriad moods of Lord Krishna are painted, sometimes with elaborate ornamentation and decoration (Fig. 7).

There are three distinct styles of folk paintings based on caste. The Kayastha women mostly do outline paintings, often with the most exquisite details (Fig. 8). The Brahmin women work by drawing a rough outline of the picture in ink and filling it in with flat color. The third style is that of the lower caste women who draw an outline with



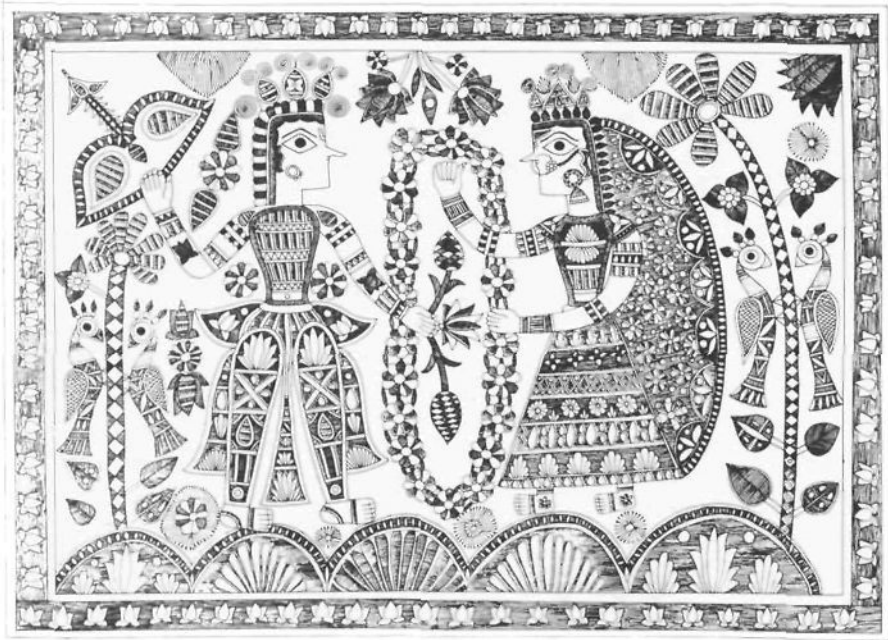


Fig. 4. The story of Ram and Sita is one subject of Mithila art which appeals to all. Ram came to Mithila to take part in an archery contest which he won. His reward was the hand in marriage of Sita, Mithila's beautiful princess. On this mud wall painting Sita offers a garland of flowers to Ram.



Fig. 5. Shiva and Parvati as portrayed in Mithila folk painting. Shiva, the benevolent, in contemplation with his companion Parvati, the manifestation of creative, vital Energy.

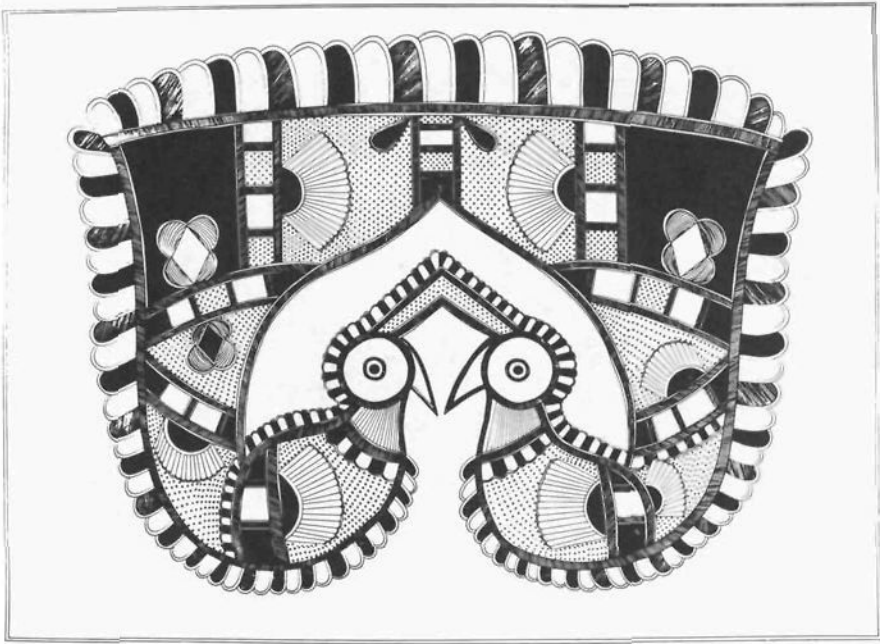


Fig. 6. The peacock, a symbol of eternity, is portrayed in many Mithila paintings.

cowdung and water, then superimpose black dots on these brown lines, giving a hazy and impressionistic effect.

Traditionally, the painters used only three colors (black, made from soot, red obtained from local clay, and yellow, produced from carnation pollen).<sup>10</sup> These materials were mixed in goat's milk, gum arabic, or the juice of bean plants. Now the popular colors are yellow, green, blue, orange and red. One reason for the survival of this art is the impermanence of the medium and materials used. Mud walls, floors, paper and natural colors decay or disappear, so that each occasion demands a fresh painting.

Another integral part of folk painting in Mithila concerns astrological themes. Astrology is a major aspect of social and religious life. Educated as well as uneducated people believe in the efficacy of astrology. Astrologers are consulted for every important event, whether it is religious or secular. Domestic rites are performed on astrologically auspicious days because as the planets change places the destinies of man are made. Since they are a major aspect of cultural life, astrological themes have been used frequently in art.

The planets most common in Mithila folk art are the Sun (*Surya*),

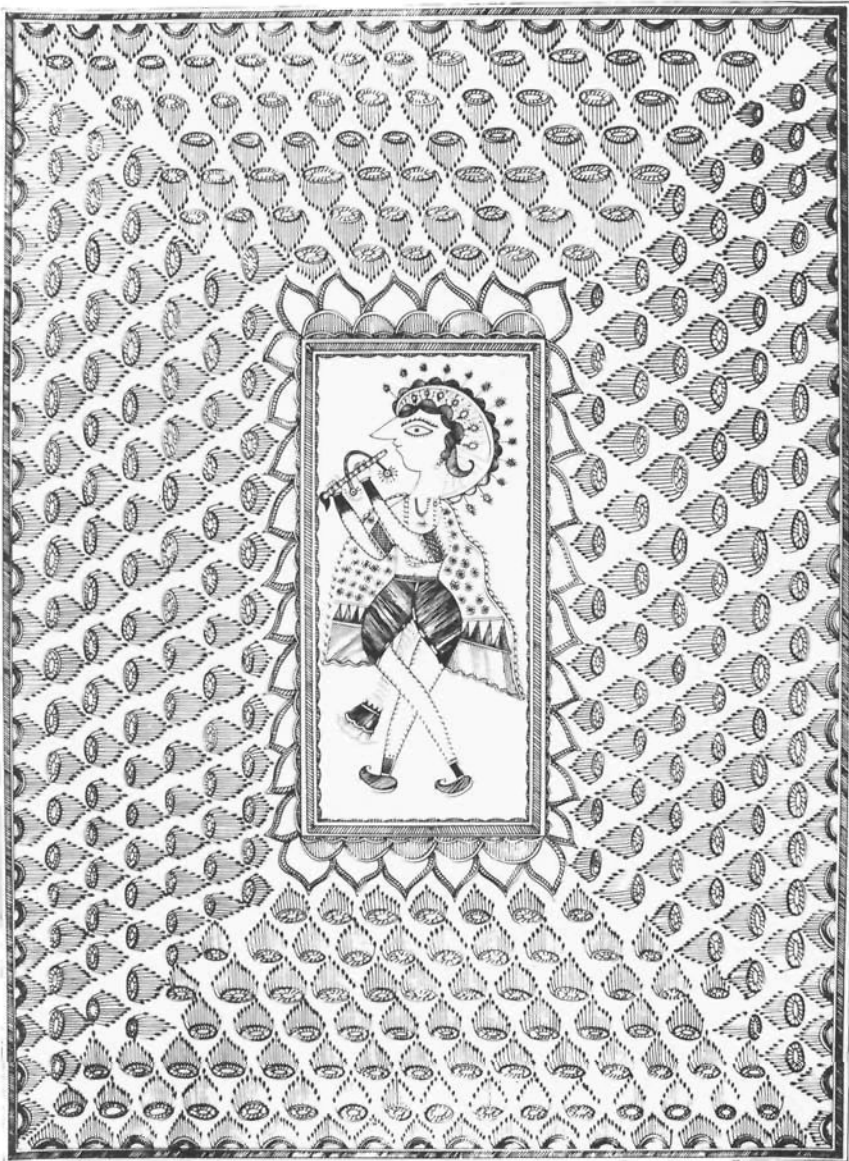


Fig. 7. Krishna, the central figure of many Mithila paintings. As the cradle of the Krishna cult, glorified in the songs of Vidyapati, the celebrated poet of Mithila, this painting was inspired by religious traditions.



Fig. 8. The gods and goddesses of the Hindu pantheon give artists a vast range of subjects to paint. Sita, the heroine of the Indian epic *Ramayana*, is picking flowers. Sita, the daughter of King Janak of Mithila, is also called Maithili.



Fig. 9. This illustration depicts the Sun and Moon. The Sun is represented as a handsome man with a high nose, forehead and cheeks framed in a large round disc. The Moon, framed in a silver crescent, appears smaller and less awesome.

Moon (*Chandra*), Mars (*Mangla*), Mercury (*Budha*), Jupiter (*Guru* or *Brihaspati*), Venus (*Shukra*) and Saturn (*Shani*). The sun, brightest and largest luminary, is worshipped and represented in bold forms (Fig. 9). The moon shines with light from the sun and is generally painted in smaller and less awesome form.

Maithili astrologers make varied horoscopes in order to chart and study each birth or particular event in detail. These horoscopes are made in a square or circular format and when made for aristocratic patrons they are lavishly decorated with bright colors, geometric and/or floral designs, icons of planetary deities and zodiacal constellations.

Icons have an important magico-religious function. Since the image is thought to contain some of the qualities of the original subject, the inclusion of planets and constellations is believed to summon the essence of the original subject and attract its favorable influence. Therefore, many folk paintings of deities and particular events are not works of art for art's sake; they are charms and diagrams of religious concepts.

#### *Mithila Folk Songs*

It is a common sight in a Mithila village to see a pair of singers, a man and a woman, carrying a simple drum or *dholak*, heralding a change in the season. They perform outside the front door of a house, singing in loud, clear voices, radiating a special cheer about the new season. They attract children who listen with a mixture of curiosity and excitement. The singers receive small gifts (a piece of cloth, two fistfuls of rice, or possibly some *gur*, brown sugar) from the families in the village. The singers then move on. This kind of folk singing happens with the advent of each season as it comes in the yearly cycle.

The seasons are manifested in both folk music and painting in Mithila. The feeling for the beauty of the different seasons remains strong. Mithila poets or chroniclers compose songs in praise of each season (wonderfully detailed, evocative descriptions of a season). Through folk songs, a kind of conditioning takes place, and one becomes sensitive to the moods of nature as it changes and slowly unravels to reveal itself.

Sensitivity to nature and to its changing moods has its roots in Maithili literature. Folk songs detail the seasons in a wonderfully sensuous manner. There are vivid descriptions, rich in sight and sound, of what one sees in the different seasons (the end of winter, spring with mango trees in bloom, the blazing sun and sultry winds of summer, lands parched by the heat, dark monsoon clouds gathering in the sky, the fragrance of the first drops of rain water on the dry earth, bees hovering around flowers, the green rice fields, the jewelled colors of the foliage and the mirror-like surfaces of ponds). All of these themes

occur in Mithila folk songs.

The Mithila artists developed styles of their own: a lover and beloved are placed in the foreground of a folk painting (he often dark, she fair, as if referring to Krishna and Radha savoring the season of the year). Here a kind of reversal of the poetic situation takes place (nature, which has precedence in folk poetry, is treated in painting as the background while the lovers assume prominence). Painting and poetry come delightfully together in Mithila folk art to capture the cultural traditions and landscape of the region.

### *Epilogue*

This short essay in honor of Cotton Mather capsules one of his interests in cultural geography (art and geography). Cotton retired from active teaching in 1983. Some of us had the good fortune to attend his public lectures and seminars. Many others have known him professionally as a colleague. Everyone studying cultural geography is familiar with some aspect of his contributions to the field.

Cotton is one of the few American geographers to explore vigorously the subfield of cultural geography and to bring his wide range of interests and unwavering humanism to geographic work in the United States, Latin America, the Himalaya and elsewhere. From early field research in the Middle West and the South to later concerns with foreign areas, Cotton's writings convey an unusual sensitivity to various cultures and places. An appreciation of the concrete reality of folk life and culture is the hallmark of his style.

This essay was motivated by one aspect of Cotton's conceptual contribution to cultural geography. It attempts to apply his ideas to examine the rich cultural information in folk arts in order to discover the central features of the Mithila Culture Region.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Lester B. Rowntree and Margaret W. Conkey, "Symbolism and the Cultural Landscape," *Annals, Association of American Geographers*, 70 (December, 1980), pp. 459-474; Cotton Mather and Matti Kaups, "The Finnish Sauna: A Cultural Index to Settlement," *Annals, Association of American Geographers*, 53 (December, 1963), pp. 494-504; E. Joan Miller, "The Ozark Culture Region as Revealed by Traditional Materials," *Annals, Association of American Geographers*, 58 (March, 1968), pp. 51-77; Elaine M. Bjorklund "Ideology and Culture Exemplified in Southwestern Michigan," *Annals, Association of American Geographers*, 54 (June, 1964), pp. 227-241; Donald W. Meinig, *Imperial Texas: An Interpretative Essay in Cultural Geography* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1969); James R. Shortridge, "Patterns of Religion in the United States," *Geographical Review*, 66 (October, 1976), pp. 420-434; Mary Lee Nolan, "Irish Pilgrimage: The Different Tradition," *Annals, Association of American Geographers*, 73 (Sep-

tember, 1983), pp. 421-438; I. Shair and P.P. Karan, "Geography of the Islamic Pilgrimage," *GeoJournal*, 3 (December, 1979), pp. 599-608; Wilbur Zelinsky, *The Cultural Geography of the United States*, (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1973).

<sup>2</sup> Marvin W. Mikesell, "Tradition and Innovation in Cultural Geography," *Annals, Association of American Geographers*, 68 (March, 1978), p. 5; John Fraser Hart, "Field Patterns in Indiana," *Geographical Review*, 58 (July, 1968), pp. 450-471; James E. Landing, "Geographic Models of Old Order Amish Settlements," *Professional Geographer*, 21 (July, 1969), pp. 238-243; John C. Everitt, "Mennonites in Belize," *Journal of Cultural Geography*, 3 (Spring/Summer, 1983), pp. 82-93; William K. Crowley, "Old Order Amish Settlement: Diffusion and Growth," *Annals, Association of American Geographers*, 68 (June, 1978), pp. 249-264; Robert W. Bastian, "The Prairie House Style: Spatial Diffusion of A Minor Design," *Journal of Cultural Geography*, 1 (Fall/Winter 1980) pp.50-65; Fred B. Kniffen, "Folk Housing, Key to Diffusion," *Annals, Association of American Geographers*, 55 (December 1965), pp. 549-577; Matti Kaups, "Finnish Log Houses in the Upper Middle West: 1890-1920," *Journal of Cultural Geography*, 3 (Spring/Summer, 1983), pp. 2-26; Allen G. Noble, "Evolution of American Farm Silos," *Journal of Cultural Geography*, 1 (Fall/Winter, 1980), pp. 138-148; Allen G. Noble and Gayle A. Seymour, "Distribution of Barn Types in Northeastern United States," *Geographical Review*, 72 (April, 1982), pp. 155-170; John Fraser Hart and Cotton Mather, "The American Fence," *Landscape* 7 (Spring, 1957) pp.4-9 and Cotton Mather and John Fraser Hart, "Fences and Farms," *Geographical Review*, 44 (April, 1954), pp. 201-223.

<sup>3</sup>Yi-Fu Tuan, *Topophilia: A Study of Environmental Perception, Attitudes and Values* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1974); Pradyumna P. Karan and Wilford A. Bladen, "Perception of the Urban Environment in a Third-World Country," *Geographical Review*, 72 (April, 1982), pp. 228-232; R.L. Heathcote, "The Artist as a geographer: landscape painting as a source of geographical research," *Proceedings, Royal Geographical Society of Australasia, South Australian Branch*, 73 (1972), pp. 1-21; Ronald Rees, "Geography and Landscape Painting: An Introduction to a Neglected Field," *Scottish Geographical Magazine*, 89 (December, 1973), pp. 147-157 and Hugh Prince, "Landscape through Painting," *Geography*, 69 (January, 1984), pp. 3-18.

<sup>4</sup>During a graduate seminar at the University of Kentucky in 1970 Cotton Mather, in response to a student's question, indicated that geography of art may be one of the most promising areas of future research in cultural geography. An opportunity to travel in the Himalaya a few years later resulted in the paper Pradyumna P. Karan and Cotton Mather, "Art and Geography: Patterns in the Himalaya," *Annals, Association of American Geographers*, 66 (December, 1976), pp. 487-515. It represents Cotton Mather's conceptions of the relationship between art and geography. Among other contributions on this topic is Cotton Mather and Pradyumna P. Karan, "Geography of Folk Art in India," in *India: Cultural Patterns and Processes*, ed. by Allen G. Noble and A.K. Dutt (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1982), pp. 165-194.

<sup>5</sup>C.D. Deshpande, "The Cultural Core Region of Mithila and Magadh," *New Perspectives in Geography*, ed. by L. R. Singh (Allahabad: Thinker's Library, 1981), pp. 171-176.

<sup>6</sup>R.L. Singh, ed., *India: A Regional Geography* (Varanasi: National Geographical Society of India, 1971), pp. 247-248.

<sup>7</sup>R.R. Diwaker, ed., *Biher Through the Ages* (Bombay: Orient Longmans, 1959), pp. 94-95.

<sup>8</sup>I am indebted to S. Jha for assistance with field work in Mithila during 1983 and



in taking photographs of the folk paintings from which illustrations have been selected for this essay.

<sup>9</sup>William G. Archer, "Maithili Paintings," *Marg*, 3 (January, 1949), pp. 24-33.

<sup>10</sup>Mildred Archer, *Indian Popular Painting*, (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1977), pp. 85-104.

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