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The Transnational Field of Mithila Paintings Multi-scalar Mediations in the 1970s

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“Mithila painting” is an umbrella term for ritual and art forms practiced in northern Bihar and the Nepalese Terai. The paintings began as auspicious images painted by women on the walls and floors from at least the 14th century. When Mithila suffered the Bihar drought, the All India Handicraft Board encouraged shifting the artwork to paper so that it could be sold in to support families during the drought. This artwork on paper flourished as the government commercialized handicrafts for development goals and highlighted them at World Fairs. The painting tradition went through many changes including new tools, pigments, mixing of styles, recognition of artists’ identity, thematic diversification. Marketing the art brought transnational cultural mediators to India to purchase and sell the paintings during a period of Indophilia in Europe, the USA, and Japan. The resulting globalization of the art also coincided with the development of gender and postcolonial studies.

This paper examines the circulations of the main transnational mediators within a bourdieusian cultural field. The interactions among the artists and the agents worldwide reshaped the field by re-defining the paintings through categories external to Mithila: from ritual art, to folk art, to contemporary art, and from local, to national, to global. Yet, the artists retained a commitment to an aesthetic and praxis that has allowed Mithila painting to remain distinctive.

The global reception of Mithila paintings can be divided into three phases in line with the *Zeitgeist*:

1. the late colonial and post-independence period, shaped by the universal aesthetics of William and Mildred Archer;

2. the “hippy” or “flower power” decades, embraced a period of Indophilia, during the *kairos* of the 70s. Then the actors internationalized the tradition;
3. the postmodern moment of late globalisation, when scholars of gender and cultural studies rejected male Westerners’ interpretations.

This paper focuses on the *kairos* of the 70s, when local development through cultural marketing and the transformation of gender relations converge with countercultural Indophilia and Orientalism. The transfer of ritual wall paintings to paper coincided with the promotion of the paintings as artwork by transnational mediators transforming a local field into a transnational one. Five people internationalized Mithila painting: Bhaskar Kulkarni, a “hippy” artist and designer from Bombay; Yves Véquaud, a French journalist, writer, novelist, curator and contributor to the *Nouvelle Revue Française*; Erika Moser-Schmitt, a German “art ethnologist” and film maker; Raymond Lee Owens, an American social anthropologist; and Tokio Hasegawa, a Japanese poet, musician and museum director. This paper will focus on the two Europeans: Véquaud and Moser-Schmitt.

About (transnational) cultural fields

The struggle for recognition and power among multiple mediators takes place within what Bourdieu called a “cultural field” to transform the prevailing relation of force. But these actors may also ignore each other and express mutual appreciation.

While Bourdieu’s conception of fields was developed within the nation-state, more recent research on global fields suggests that they are linked to a form of “symbolic capital” and institutions, perpetuating a vision. In late globalization, struggles often appear both “within national cultural fields but increasingly between actors and institutions in different countries”. Transnational cultural fields may be characterized by “vertical” autonomy, relatively autonomous from the national-state-centered field. Where then is Mithila painting? Being both domestic and global, to what extent can it meet Bourdieu’s conception of a cultural field and its declinations as “transnational cultural fields”?

Before commodification: mural paintings as local ritual

The domestic ritual wall paintings did not circulate as commodified objects. Integrated into caste-specific rituals, the paintings had no monetary value. Their commercialization conflicted with the principles of orthodox communities. After the 1934 Nepal-Bihar earthquake, William G. Archer “discovered” paintings on the interior walls of damaged homes. As a humanistic graduate of Cambridge University, he was excited by the parallels he

saw to modern art. Later he photographed the paintings, guided by upper caste male informants.

In 1949 he published “Maithil Paintings” in *Marg*, focusing on the ritual and formal aspects, setting the paintings in an unchanging tradition with caste styles based in women’s anonymous practice, an account often repeated.

Unfortunately, Archer was unaware of the wall paintings in the Rajnagar palace of Rameshwar Bahadur, the Maharajah of Darbhanga, done for his daughter’s marriage. Shortly before, Maharajah published an article detailing a Brahmin marriage. He did not mention the murals of the *kohbar-ghar*, although the wall paintings for the marriage of his daughter were particularly sophisticated. His article assigns no primary function to these paintings. As a women’s, non-Sanskritic, and non-written element of the ritual, they seem to have been marginal to male dominant Brahminical religious values. The commodification of the paintings, 50 years later represented a reconfiguration within a startling new economic and cultural field.

Commodification of Mithila paintings in India (1952-69)

First, Mithila paintings were included in a post-Independence development project, in which government officials and transnational actors stressed the importance of cultural marketing. During the First Nehruvian Plan, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya chaired the All India Handicrafts Board, with a specific charge:

to study the problems confronting the development of handicrafts, to advise Government to develop techniques and designs, and to promote marketing in India and abroad.

Among governmental measures to revive handicrafts were public emporia, and local and foreign exhibitions. By forming cooperatives, the Handloom Board insured employment, and created outlets bringing handicrafts to the market. Mulk Raj Anand, Indian novelist who wrote about lower-caste life and founded *Marg*, urged a “resurrection of handicrafts,” updating designs to adapt them to “Industrial civilization”. In this context, in 1956, Pupul Jayakar, chair of the All India Handicrafts Board, wrote to Archer, asking him how to find Mithila art and village painters. In his reply, Archer gave her the name of the villages and recommended her “to go by car from Darbhanga to Madhubani and there enquire from Maithil Brahmans and Kayasths”.

Although Jayakar only saw a few Mithila paintings in 1956, 10 years later, in 1966 she began a project to make economic use of them during and after the drought. She supplied Bhaskar Kulkarni with paper and pigments to distribute to women in Madhubani and charged him to help them transfer their wall paintings on smaller sheets of paper for sale. Kulkarni continued in his role during a decade. Jayakar also supported Upendra Maharathi, a leader of Patna's Buddhist community, the founder of a Handicraft Institute of Design in Patna, and a collector of folk art, to collect, grade, and find markets for Mithila paintings, and other local handicrafts.

Colorful and transportable paintings were more compatible with modern society than easily erased wall paintings, even if they were marketed to the urban art world as traditional. The paintings were disseminated in India through exhibitions. The Handicrafts and Handlooms Export Corporation of India was charged with developing new markets for the Central Cottage Industries Emporium in New Delhi and consumers abroad.

The first works collected by Kulkarni were exhibited and sold in New Delhi in 1967 with profits going to relief funds for the drought-affected areas. Under the aegis of the Indian State, the international dissemination of the paintings spread rapidly. By 1972, Mithila paintings had been featured along with Indian crafts and popular contemporary artworks in Expo 67 Montréal, in Expo 70' Osaka, as well as in exhibits and sales in luxury department stores such as Globus in Zurich and Bloomingdale's in New York City. Universal exhibitions were rooted in a humanist philosophy focusing on Peace, as reflected in the themes of Expo 67 Montreal ("Man and his World") and Expo 70' Osaka ("Progress and Harmony for Mankind"). ____ Unlike the humanist discourse of international fairs, the government report on the Indian participation in Expo 67 focused on a concept of "total marketing" and ____ a vision of counter-cultural Western youth as an Indophilian community ripe for cultural marketing. ____ This image of youth is in line with the notion of "counter-culture" popularized by Theodor Roszak.

Beyond these issues, the painters taking part in the exhibitions were often inspired by their experiences visiting other countries, as Ganga Devi painting her "Moscow Hotel" and her "Ride on a roller coaster" in her *America Series*.

At first, Mithila paintings were a part of a government development project within the planned economy: it wasn't an autonomous field of crafts, making the painters agents of a politico-economical field, defined on a national level, but open to transnational cultural exchange and redefined to fit the presumed needs of non-Maithil outsiders.

Multiple mediators constructing a transnational cultural field (1970s)

Delhi celebrated Mithila paintings in a “mystique of Indian soil” embodied in crafts as popularized by Jayakar, considering them to be national icons for countries experiencing Indophilia. The programme to “survey indigenous arts”, in the Fourth Plan, expanded their dissemination: the Maithil Brahmin Lalit Narayan Mishra projected as Minister of Foreign Trade and Commerce, to adorn the Jayanti-Janata Express, and the Madhubani and Varanasi train stations with Mithila paintings.

Kulkarni brought Sita Devi’s paintings to Delhi where they were exhibited at the Chanakya Art Gallery, owned by a friend of him: they met with great success and were even purchased by Indira Gandhi. Sita Devi and her son Surya Dev gave there daily painting demonstrations, and were invited to Indira Gandhi’s residence to do a painting. She and other Mithila painters did in situ-works in hotels and embassies. The press reception was enthusiastic. Kisher Malik, art critic of the *Hindustan Times*, considered Mithila art “a deeply personal relationship of an individual [artist] to myth, lore, legend.” Presented thus to an urban art world as a folk form of expression, the paintings were essentialized as homogenous, stable, rural, and an immemorial expression of Hindu women’s rituals. The perfection of this art was attributed to a timeless village and its holistic community, embodied by charismatic women painters who shared holiness and genius. Transnational figures like Véquaud acting as counter-culture brokers, expanded these interpretations based on global sixties’ *Indophilia*.

Véquaud: cultural diplomacy, the Maithil village utopia, Indophilian (dis)enchantment?

Yves Véquaud and Bruno Caye travelled by van for two years in Nepal, India, and Ceylon. Véquaud first encountered Mithila paintings in New Delhi in the spring of 1970, following Sita Devi’s successes and broad press coverage, and thanks to his friendship with Pupul Jayakar and Ratna Fabri. There Véquaud also met the French filmmaker, Georges Luneau. During this trip Véquaud and Caye went twice to Madhubani to meet the painters. They returned there later with photographer and friend, Edouard Boubat.

Although Véquaud was a writer, translator, film director and curator, today he is mostly known for his book *L’Art du Mithila*. His writings and projects with his circle of friends were recognized for their artistic value. Scholars have criticized his publications for ethnographic inaccuracies, lack of fieldwork methods, and because he did not provide the names of the painters.

Véquaud’s first article on the paintings, “The Women-Artists of Mithila,” won the attention and friendship of the writer and former French Minister of Cultural Affairs André

Malraux, who had learned of the paintings from Indira Gandhi during his trip to South Asia. Malraux supported *Mithila*, a documentary film by Véquaud and his friends.

Véquaud also mounted exhibits in France, Belgium, and Spain, by far the most widely exhibited collection during the 70s. After its opening, the Musée National d'Art Moderne set up a year-long travelling exhibition in more than 30 sites across France. Véquaud and his circle were both agents, products, and sources of the counterculture. His documentary *Mithila* exemplified the wave of films “as lived experience”, familiarizing the broader public with hippie culture.

If Véquaud had an aptitude for capturing the counterculture's *air du temps*, he was also constructing a cultural and diplomatic Indo-French network: Malraux, the novelist Marcel Arland, as many others in the French literary, cinematic, and photographic worlds, as Cartier-Bresson, Boubat, and his collaborators on *Mithila*. In 1975, Véquaud organized an exhibition of Mithila paintings at the Museum of Decorative Arts in Paris. That 20 ambassadors attended the opening of the exhibit suggests the strength of Véquaud's network. The show drew large crowds and media coverage. In India, in addition to Ratna Fabri and Pupul Jayakar, Véquaud and his set were close to Delhi-based French diplomats.

Véquaud and his circle presented an ahistorical and timeless vision of the Maithil universe. Inspired by *Mithila*, Véquaud's set produced multiple artistic works, creating an artistic commentary on Maithil painting; “art echoing art.”

Véquaud's essentialized vision of Mithila art seems to borrow the Indian press coverage f.e by Kisher Malik. Véquaud championed a canonical form of counterculture, presenting the Maithil village as a communitarian utopia, a model for a back-to-the-land-movement to counter mass and technocratic society with unchanging tradition: his romantic vision is inspired by a quest to re-enchant the world, where the women painters are presented similarly as prophetic figures of legend presumed creating when in a yogic state even though there is no evidence. Sita Devi “appears to him as a saint,” withdrawn from the world, in a “refuge of inner peace and trust that nothing can disturb”. He created a literary fantasy, a picturesque vision of India within an Orientalising episteme.

Véquaud envisioned a sort of Maithil Republic of Arts, through a pastoral myth and a religion of art, reflecting a male view of painters, rooted in a crisis in Western self-representation. It corresponds to an individual crisis and a collective primitivist vision.

Véquaud's life can be characterized as professional indecision and mourning of illusions. When counter-cultural context was declining, Véquaud seems to have found himself in a

situation of dashed aspirations and desperation. He opted for an alternative social trajectory to combine his quest for artistic recognition with his nonconformist ideals. Their rare successes provoked social downgrading. So his spiritualised vision of Mithila painting seems an effort to sublimate his own artistic failures.

Véquaude's view of the painters shows the persistence of primitivist stereotypes. As the nation could be imagined as a divinized Mother India, leading to debates between authenticity and imitation, Véquaude extolled a "rural" Mother India in opposition to so-called "Western" rationalism, as the opposition of hippie values to "cold knowledge" presumed stemming from colonialism. The rise of the "Information Age" was accompanied by nostalgia for older ways of making things. As romantic critics of the Victorian Age, Véquaude championed a return to a pre-industrial community. While the West standardized production including cultural productions, a vision of rural India remained the place of spiritual creations.

The utopia of the self-sufficient Indian village was rooted in the Arts & Craft movement, and its development in a national cult of crafts promoted by Indian intellectuals and politicians. By celebrating a "mystique of Indian soil," Jayakar followed paths opened by artistic nationalists. Véquaude contributed to an urban essentialized vision of art close to the tendency to exoticize rural India, based on a timeless character, a pre-capitalist holistic community, that praised return to organic unity, and heroized painters as charismatic figures.

Erika Moser-Schmitt: visual anthropology, feminism, and research on Dalits

German visual anthropologist, Erika Moser-Schmitt studied at the University of Fine Arts in Berlin and the University of Heidelberg's South Asia Institute linked to expansion of area studies. Her dissertation analyzed ornaments and folk art in Pakistan. She initiated a project on the "commercial development of the traditional folk arts of women in Mithila".

During her first stay in Mithila, she purchased 80 paintings and mounted exhibitions and sales in West Germany, from which she accrued sufficient funds to purchase land and build a structure in Jitwarpur that included space for women to paint during the monsoon.

Moser-Schmitt made at least three major contributions:

1. in Jitwarpur she encouraged artists in the Dusadh community (ex-*harijan* and mostly very poor farm laborers, now self-identified as "Dalits,") to develop the *godana* style of painting derived from decorative and protective tattoos. The *godana* paintings earned recognition of Dusadh artistry and their own mythology (focused on Raja Salhesh), enabled the women to obtain income and claim a higher social status;

2. Moser-Schmitt shot 14 short mostly black-and-white ethnographic films. Most of them deal with Mithila painting by women of different castes. The films demonstrate the women's techniques and creativity, and are an early example of sensitivity to gender issues, and strong evidence to counter a prevalent sexist stereotype that contrasts the creative behavior of men with the imitative behavior of women;
3. Moser-Schmitt dealt with development projects concerning Mithila paintings as an advisor on arts and crafts for the Department of Industries (Patna), and for the Marketing Section of the Handicrafts Board. She mounted exhibitions of Mithila paintings in German cultural institutions, whose sales produced a net profit of twenty to thirty thousand D-Mark and led to an Indo-German cultural-commercial development program. In a workshop at the Crafts Museum in Delhi, Moser-Schmitt made a presentation on marketing issues in conjunction with the German Research Council.

Raymond Lee Owens: an art development project and the Ethnic Arts Foundation

Raymond Lee Owens completed a PhD in anthropology at University of Chicago with a dissertation on entrepreneurship in Bengal. He received a Fulbright-Hays grant to conduct research in Bihar on water issues, but his combined interest in art and small-scale entrepreneurs led him to shift his focus to the potentials of the Mithila painting tradition. He organized an artists' cooperative, the Master Craftsmen's Association of Mithila that briefly included over 180 painters, and founded with US colleagues the Ethnic Arts Foundation (EAF) to mount exhibitions, manage sales of paintings, and remit the profits from sales to the artists. They initiate a fair-trade system for exhibiting and marketing the paintings.

Owens, Véquaud, and Moser-Schmitt were of the same generation, born shortly before the Second World War, and were part of the counterculture movement, yet its influence on each of them was quite different. Véquaud's thinking was permeated by the ideals of the hippie and Orientalist movements. Owens was more of a pragmatic idealist concerned with the artistic development and economic wellbeing of the artists and their families. Moser-Schmitt combined these but focused her strong commitment on addressing social and political issues of gender and Dalits.

Each of them had a unique vision, understanding and influence on Mithila painting. Although Véquaud's countercultural and romantic view of the upper caste artists and village life was based on the notion of an unchanging traditional society, his interpersonal skills enabled him to unite artists, diplomats, and politicians around his projects. Moser-Schmitt

concentrated on documenting on film differences in caste, and on enhancing the lives, art and income of Dalit Dusadh women, building for them a collective workspace. Owens viewed the painters as individual artists working in an expanding tradition moving from folk art to contemporary art which he supported with aesthetic advice, a cooperative organization, and economic incentives.

Tokio Hasegawa and other mediators

By the 80s, when Moser-Schmitt and Véquaud were rarely present, another key mediator entered the field: Tokio Hasegawa. Born after the war, he joined the counterculture movement in Japan as a member of the Taj Mahal Travelers, an experimental Japanese music group (1969). Around 1980, Hasegawa was fascinated by Mithila paintings shown to him by an acquaintance. He traveled several times to Madhubani to purchase paintings, and later sent colleagues to do so. In 1982 he creates The Mithila Museum, the only one in the world dedicated to Mithila Painting. It also includes a studio for artists-in-residence. The Museum brings them to exhibitions of their work in Japan. The museum includes approximately 2000 Mithila artworks and has mounted numerous exhibitions in Japan.

Aside from these major figures who expanded the transnational field of the paintings, many other foreign visitors to Madhubani have played brief roles in expanding appreciation and markets for the paintings. Visitors mostly stayed at Sita Devi's home.

All these purchases contributed to a new private, non-governmental globalization of the painting tradition, and a growing circle of agents increasing interest in "collecting, publishing, setting up exhibitions in the USA and Europe".

Dissension, cooperation, and interaction between global agents

These developments were all significant and underscored the differences between Véquaud and Owens. Owens, a trained social anthropologist, claimed to have found 72 errors in Véquaud's film, book and articles. Owens critiqued Véquaud's presentation of the painters and their paintings as "traditional" and exotic. Véquaud's non-ethnographic perspective separated their work. In contrast to Véquaud's fantasy of an enchanted elsewhere, Owens was concerned with adapting a Canadian fair-trade model that would benefit the Mithila painters. Moser-Schmitt and Owens promoted the art as a viable economic alternative reflecting the links among area studies, applied anthropology, and development programs in the USA and Germany.

Yet despite their differences, Owens and Véquaud sometimes followed similar paths. For example, when Véquaud was earning little from writing, he sold paintings from his collection

at Musée d'Art Moderne's shop in Paris. Owens invited also Véquaud to give a public lecture about the paintings along with a screening of his documentary *Mithila* at Owens' exhibition at the University of Texas. These lectures drew on the work of the main international mediators and the screening of their films. Véquaud also agreed to be MCAM's French representative to open markets in Europe, as Moser Schmitt for Germany, although in neither case did it materialize.

Véquaud and Owens cooperated briefly during the late 1970s. But in the early 80s the situation deteriorated given their divergent visions and goals, and the collapse of MCAM. It was also when the propitious "hippie moment" was in decline, even if Hasegawa entered the scene with the foundation of the Mithila Museum, which maintained interest in Indian art and remains active. Since the early 80s, the Ethnic Arts Foundation, the Mithila Art Institute, and the Mithila Museum, have been leading institutional actors in the transnational field.

That underscores the gradual shift from a government-dominated economical field to a private transnational field, in which non-governmental structures prevailed until recently. The Indian government is now dominant again: the Bihar government in 2019 opened its own art school and plans for a Museum of Mithila Art.

Sometimes the external mediators had an impact on artistic production. Maharathi graded paintings from A++ to D for sale, and both he and Véquaud made recommendations for the painters' choice of colors. Owens urged the painters to paint local and classic narratives as well as their own life histories. Ratna Fabri gave Sita Devi and Surya Dev recommendations about color balance, encouraging them to use mostly warm bright colors: which became distinctive.

Combinations of cooperation and dissension among mediators are characteristic of Bourdieusian fields. In Mithila, the cooperation between mediators and the institutions were mostly transcultural, and relatively autonomous from national fields. After 1976, the Indian government's withdrawal may well have allowed the emergence of transnational actors and structures with distinct but overlapping interests. In theory, transnational fields are relatively autonomous from national-state-centered fields. But the transnational cooperation between the mediators and their shared concerns to expand the potentials of the paintings transcends the sole wish for autonomy from national structures.

The years around 1976 played a major role in the construction of the Maithil transnational field. During that period, the human and institutional landscapes were radically transformed. The All Indian Handicrafts Board and the Handloom Handicraft Export Corporation were no longer active. Kulkarni left to work for the development of Warli

paintings in Gujarat. Maharathi, the director of the Technical Institute in Patna retired. Maithil villages were becoming less isolated from the rest of the world. It was no longer possible to believe like Jayakar or Thakur that the isolation of Bihar's painting villages would preserve the painting tradition. The withdrawal of the Indian government institutions enabled individuals and non-governmental structures working on a glocal scale to establish a transnational field of Mithila paintings.

Conclusion

The first commodification of Mithila paintings took place within a nation-state-centered economic field. The situation changed when external attention derived from the main transcultural mediators rooted in the counterculture, Indophilia, and applied anthropology, followed by visitors and art dealers. Even though some found themselves in the field almost inadvertently, they contributed to the emergence of a non-governmental internationalization of Mithila art.

The disengagement of Indian government institutions, coincident with the state of emergency declared by Indira Gandhi, paved the way for structures developing a transnational field of Mithila painting. The transnational field of Mithila painting was characterized by the conjunction of cooperation, difference, and dissension among its mediators.

In the late 1960s the primary nexus existed among Indian government institutions, individual painters and foreign mediators. After 1976, in accord with what Buchholz identifies as characteristic of global fields, the transnational field of Mithila painting became more autonomous from the national state centered field. The recent well-funded re-turn of the economic production-oriented governmental interest, not to mention the impact that the Covid 19 pandemic, raises questions about the future of the transnational field of Mithila painting. Yet, the Mithila painters and paintings have always shown, beyond crises, an aptitude to renew themselves through evolving networks, forms, and techniques. Their vitality and durability remain their perennial strength.