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Having seen Madhubani paintings at every inter-state art exhibition and display, for years on end, made it very interesting to meet two of the four thinking heads that put together *Mithila Art - A 360 Degree Review of Madhubani Painting*. Interesting because while one hails from the region of its origin, Mithila, the other engaged with the project because she “fell in love with the narrative of Mithila art”. Dr Prashant Das, Managing Editor of the book, and Dr Minu Agarwal, one of the editors besides Binita Mallik and Dr Laura Zizka, share the vision and reason behind this book that released in Delhi some days ago. While Das is a professor at Indian Institute of Management Ahmedabad, Agarwal teaches at Centre for Environment Planning and Technology. Conceptualising and compiling a book that is as much for lovers of the art form as it is for scholars, *Mithila Art* lets you absorb stories as you move from one painting to another, reinforcing its primary concept of ‘living in the moment’ to express it naturally, honestly and instinctively. With Mallik based in Delhi and Zizka in Switzerland, here’s catching up with the Ahmedabad-based editors.

As Professor of Real Estate (Account and Financing) at Indian Institute of Management Ahmedabad, how did the idea of writing and compiling a book on Madhubani art take seed?

Prashant Das: My parents grew up in the villages of Mithila region, where Mithila art is deeply woven into everyday life. Even after moving to the city, my mother’s passion for the art stayed on. Although not highly educated, she had a strong intellectual curiosity and always encouraged us to embrace the art form, which as a tech-savvy millennial, I resisted.

Two decades hence, as I lived in various parts of the world, my perspective began to change. I observed how different cultures cherish their ethnic artifacts. Whether at flea markets across Lausanne in Switzerland, the Louvre in Paris, the bazaars of Istanbul, or exhibitions in Atlanta, one thing was clear: amid the uniformity of urbanisation, people longed for a connection to their cultural roots.

Around the time, I also began hearing concerns about how Mithila culture was losing its precious art form – known as Madhubani – to the forces of urbanisation. I felt a sense of responsibility to help document and preserve this tradition.

So, was the team formed right then or did it build gradually?

PD: Binita Mallik from New Delhi works closely with Mithila artists and Dr Minu Agarwal from CEPT, a scholar with deep appreciation for the art, agreed to serve as editors for the book. I reached out to international scholars as well, including Dr Laura Zizka, a colleague from EHL Lausanne, who helped position the book for a global audience and joined as third editor. Minu introduced design entrepreneur and NID alumna Shreya Sarda who transformed the



Editors Minu Agarwal and Binita Mallik with Managing Editor Prashant Das



INTERVIEW OF THE WEEK

PRASHANT DAS AND MINU AGARWAL

Mithila art, for all times



Devotthaan Ekaadashi by Sarita Das

An attempt to preserve Madhubani painting art, that stems from close observations in childhood coupled with desire to document and preserve it years hence, led Prashant Das to form a team of scholars and present its 360 degree review

book into a visual masterpiece along with her team.

How did nine authors in the book collaborate to take on this project?

Minu Agarwal: We designed some of the chapters, like for example, we asked Binita for an insider’s, detailed, descriptive first-hand narrative. Swiss graphic designer Nathan Lopez gave us his spontaneous and first reaction to Mithila art. Other authors like Satish Mallik suggested writing on Mithila painting losing its sanctity owing to excessive public access, and that appealed to us. Tammi Ovens and Helene Fluery brought in brilliant narratives from the world of art-history.

Is there a readership you aim at?

MA: We wanted to write the book in English to reach the current generation even though some chapters were not so easy to translate over to English. Given the international appeal of Mithila art, the audience could be wide.

How was the experience of sifting chapters by varied authors?

MA: It was absolute joy and an honour to receive the chapters that we did. Working with the design team was cherry on the cake. They even ventured into designing a custom Mithila inspired font for the book!



Book jacket

PD: To achieve a comprehensive 360-degree perspective, it was essential to capture the views of everyone involved: the creators of the art, its consumers, and those who exist at the intersections. We sought insights from both – those deeply familiar with the art form and those who had no prior knowledge but possessed the ability to critique it. The task of blending diverse perspectives into a cohesive volume did feel daunting but the journey has been worth it. Once you begin reading the book, you will find it hard to put down.

Where do you hope to see the book reach?

PD: We expect the book to be read internationally. Art/ culture enthusiasts, research scholars, litterateurs, households: the book

fits well with all. You will find it as popular as well as scholar bookshelves.

People in Mithila and India will get an authentic perspective on their very own art form. People outside will use it as a tool for art appreciation.

What was the most important and interesting aspect about compiling this book?

MA: Like with any project, we had challenges at every phase. From telling a cohesive story, chapter sequence to creating a narrative that ebbs and flows, finding supporting artwork, it was a lot of work, co-ordination, patience and grit at each stage.

Do you believe Indian art has good compilation, complete with research, for future generations to turn to?

PD: To distinguish between history and tradition would help us appreciate and preserve our heritage better. While sites like Bhimbetka are well-documented, they are no longer part of living practices, making them more about history and archaeology. In contrast, ancient art forms like Pithora (Gujarat), Mithila (Bihar/Nepal), Sohrai (Jharkhand), and Warli (Maharashtra) have withstood the test of time and are invaluable artistic treasures. However, relying solely on culture and tradition to

As a professor of communication, I was approached to collaborate on this project that required nuanced understanding of cross-cultural communication. My task, that of preparing text for a global audience, meant ensuring its resonance and accessibility on an international scale. At the time my familiarity with Mithila Art was superficial but I embraced the challenge. Through the process of co-authoring the first chapter, I delved into this rich art form, uncovering layers of meaning and cultural significance.”



– Laura Zizka, editor

“I inherited my love for art and literature from my parents, who also instilled in me the importance of using time wisely. I was invited to collaborate on this book project, and from choosing topics to ensuring it was authentic and comprehensive encompassing various branches and trends of this art form, I connected at grass-roots level along with selecting the best designs from a vast pool of work. My husband Adhir arranged for several books from libraries and markets that proved invaluable. The goal clearly was to take Madhubani painting knowledge to the world beyond Mithila region.”

– Binita Mallik, editor

safeguard these is not enough.

Generations ahead must be excited to keep them alive and thriving.

The first step is building awareness, a goal that we have made some progress toward, as a nation. The next crucial step involves scholarly and scientific documentation to not only preserve these art forms but also explore ways to help them thrive. These art forms are not merely aesthetic pieces but symbols of resilient cultures and traditions. Our book is a humble effort in this direction.

While Madhubani art seems popular, tell us a couple of things about it that people at large wouldn’t know.

MA: There are so many things I did not know but learnt while creating this book. Mithila art, for example, is meant to be spontaneous and celebrates the urge to create. It is ideally prepared in one sitting. Artists also resist the urge to “correct” any lines that go off course. The art was meant to be ephemeral, made on walls, to be erased one day or painted over. It is also an art that the artists typically make for themselves and not for the onlooker. It’s a bit like the Mandala that Buddhist monks make – rich and intricate like real life, but made in-the-moment, to celebrate and be in the now.

Each painting has a story to tell and captures much more than what is drawn. Mithila art cannot be read literally. The meanings, songs and stories are the hidden third dimension to this seemingly 2D artform. My favourite is the ‘Bharund’, the two-headed mythical bird and ‘Kohbar’ is perhaps the most famous Mithila painting.