

ARTICLES

The Cultural Politics of Classifying Mithila Painting

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William Archer, an officer in the Indian Civil Service, published the first analysis of Mithila painting in 1949, focusing on Maithil women's artworks on the walls and earthen floors in their residential compounds. In 1980, after spearheading a disaster relief project in 1967 that enabled Maithil women to paint their domestic images on paper for sale at New Delhi's Cottage Industry emporia, Pupul Jayakar wrote about the art form as a handicraft. Mithila painting has also been classified as rural art, folk art, and tourist art but almost never "modern" art, and all these classifications have been used to denigrate, praise, interpret, constrain, and appropriate it. Yet the binary opposition between art and handicraft is too superficial to account for how artists have created designs for handicrafts and how master craftspeople have inspired artists to paint in ways besides those based on one-point perspective as taught in art schools. Instead, modern art and handicrafts have influenced each other in complex and entwined ways.

For many centuries, the upper-caste Hindu women of Mithila have created religiously efficacious and visually compelling images on the walls and floors in their residential compounds to consecrate spaces where they perform rituals. In the late 1960s as part of a drought-relief project in Mithila, a small group of upper-caste Maithil women transferred these domestic images onto paper for sale at the New Delhi tourist emporia that opened in 1967. Between then and the present day, their art form has received a series of classifications, such as ritual art, rural art, handicraft, tourist art, folk art, vernacular art, or contemporary art, but rarely modern art. Curator Lina Vincent has observed that "the appreciation, interpretation, and criticism of the diverse 'Indian art world' draws heavily on western academic discourse and dichotomous categories," such as fine art versus folk art, traditional art versus modern art, and other descriptors. Vincent notes, however, that binary oppositions "fail to convey the subtle complementarities and interdependencies of Indian life, thought, and aesthetics" (Vincent 2025, 288). This article reflects on what is at stake in classifying Mithila painting and considers the consequences.

Upper-caste Hindu wives in Mithila use two separate emic terms that distinguish between the two surfaces on which they paint. One term, *bhitticitra* (murals on walls) refers to the symbols they create on walls to celebrate rites of passage from one phase of life to another. Among these rites, the most culturally, ritually, and aesthetically elaborate Maithil rite of passage is the wedding. For it, a small group composed of the bride's kinswomen and/or female neighbors covers the walls in her home's *kohbar ghar* (nuptial chamber) with paintings to mark the transformation of a female and a male into wife and husband. The walls display iconographically correct images of powerful goddesses and gods (e.g., Durga, Krishna, Gauri, Shiva), to witness the wedding and protect the bridal couple. Also pivotal to the rite are images

that symbolize the couple's union: a ring of lotus blossoms represents the bride; a stand of bamboo represents the groom. In addition, the walls depict both aquatic creatures that produce abundant offspring (such as fish, snakes, turtles) to express hope that the bride will give birth to male progeny to sustain the patrilineage and also birds that mate for life to express desire for an auspicious conjugal life.¹

The married women create a second kind of artwork called *aripan* (an auspicious ritual drawing) on the surface of their floor or packed earth in their residential compounds. It contains imagery for prescribed religious practices on certain days in the lunar calendar that occur throughout the year. Made with a mix of water, rice flour, and sometimes natural colors, the auspicious diagrams temporarily sanctify and adorn a site where a wife worships a Hindu deity and requests spiritual and material well-being for her family. Such calendrical rituals call for a wife to fast and invite other married women to her home, where she retells a narrative about a god or goddess who saved a devotee from disaster. After offering food to the deity, the wives eat the blessed food. The content of the *aripan* is customized to the rite's purpose, such as protecting newly planted seedlings in the fields, warding off snake bites during the monsoon, ensuring the healthy birth of progeny, or granting long life to a husband and/or a wife's brother (Duany 2002, 47–58).²

This article explores three case studies that reveal how Mithila painting was classified, denigrated, idealized, publicized, and interpreted. I begin with the first published analysis of the art form by William Archer (1907–1979) in 1949, which called Mithila painting “ritual art.” Subsequently, I examine how his wife Mildred Archer (1911–2005) categorized Mithila painting as “popular painting” in 1977. Next, I assess the consequences when Pupul Jayakar (1915–1997) spearheaded a project that led upper-caste Maithil women also to paint their domestic imagery onto paper for sale as “handicraft.”

Jyotinder Jain, the art historian who published the first book-length study of the brilliant Mithila painter Ganga Devi, succinctly articulates the differences between those painters classified as modern artists and those classified as craftspeople in India during the second two-thirds of the twentieth century (Jain 1997). He observes that the academy-trained artist was to “become the predecessor of what was to be the ‘modern’ artist par excellence in the twentieth century—desirous of being an equal partner in the universal modern art scene.” In contrast, craftspeople from villages and tribal areas who “made tradition-bound as well as individualistic visual ritual art . . . could not

1 Today, many upper-caste Maithil women, whether or not they also paint on paper for sale, continue to paint walls and floors for weddings and calendrical rituals.

2 A Maithil wife usually goes to her natal family for her first pregnancy and labor. A brother fetches her and later returns her to her conjugal home, sustaining her link with her family.

establish an identity as an ‘artist’ in the face of the increasingly powerful tide of trade and commerce-based craft manufactures” (1998, 12–13). Among the many classifications applied to Mithila painting, this article considers why a binary opposition between handicraft and modern art is too blunt to account for the complexity, multiplicity, and shared features within Indian forms of painting.

William Archer on “Ritual Art”

William G. Archer, a British member of the Indian Civil Service (ICS), studied history at Emmanuel College, Cambridge, where he developed an interest in modern art, poetry, and Freudian thought. After passing the ICS Examination, he studied Hindi at the School of Oriental and African Studies, London.³ In 1931, after his engagement to Mildred Bell, a student in history at Saint Hilda’s College, Oxford, he set off for his first posting in India (Skelton 1979, 186; Head 2005, 351–52). Archer first saw Mithila wall paintings while inspecting the damage caused by the 1934 earthquake in northeastern Bihar, which had felled the outer walls of houses, leaving the painted inner walls visible to outsiders for the first time. The paintings made a deep impression on Archer, but the immediate need to assess the quake’s destruction and arrange for urgent repairs left no time for him to take photos of the wall paintings. After spending five months during the hot season carrying out relief work in the area, he returned to England to recover from heat stroke. Afterward, he married Mildred and they left for India.

Archer subsequently served as Superintendent of the Census in Bihar (1937–1939), a position that required extensive travel. As an elite, white, male, highly educated British officer with a series of prestigious ICS postings, he had access to British and Indian elite men across Bihar (e.g., other ICS officers and Indian lawyers, members of royal families, and large landholders), whom he consulted about local art forms. Between 1938 and 1940, Archer took more than 150 photos of painted walls in Mithila.⁴ Despite first seeing Mithila paintings in 1934, Archer’s illustrated article on them appeared in the Indian art magazine *Marg* only in 1949 (22–34), two years after India won independence from colonial rule.⁵ Archer’s article introduced Mithila painting to English-language readers inside and outside India, most of them unfamiliar with the distant and largely rural region of Mithila.

3 Here I refer to William Archer as “Archer.” In the next section, I refer to each Archer by first name to avoid confusion.

4 Since Archer did not visit Rajnagar, Heinz notes that he missed the oldest extant and most striking wall paintings, made for the wedding of Maharaja’s daughter in 1919 (Heinz 2006, 10).

5 In 1946, Mulk Raj Anand (1905–2004), a respected cultural commentator on social justice, founded *Marg* to bring attention to bring attention to Indian arts. An Indian novelist educated at Cambridge University and University College, London, he published *Untouchable* (1935) and *Coolie* (1936), which depict members of stigmatized groups who rarely appeared as main characters in Indian novels in the 1930s.

Archer devoted about half of his article to identifying stylistic differences in Mithila painting between Brahmin women, who filled outlined areas with washes of vivid colors, and Kayastha women, who primarily used black linework with some red accents (Archer 1949, 29–33). In his article Archer mentions nothing about the *aripan*, despite its centrality to women's matrimonial rituals and calendrical rituals. And despite beginning his article by conceding that members of lower castes in Mithila also painted, his article deals almost entirely with paintings made by upper-caste Brahmin and Kayastha women. Near the start of his *Marg* article, Archer writes, "It is true that Rajputs, Sonars, Ahirs and Dusadhs also do painting" (Archer 1949, 25), but he only reproduces one painting not made by a Brahmin or Kayastha woman. The exception, a painting of a horse that Archer attributed only to an "Ahir" (shepherd) (33), lacks other identifiers that Archer provided for the rest of the photos in the article. Archer's inclusions but also his exclusions led to certain misperceptions in later discourse about Mithila paintings.

Archer also wrote that Mithila women lacked creativity, based on his unquestioned assumptions about caste, gendered labor, and ritual (Rekha 2013). Archer's analysis rested on the premise that Maithil women were bound by their caste styles, presupposing that the caste into which a woman was born exerted the greatest impact on what and how she painted. Moreover, he claimed that differences in artwork between two painters in the same caste were less significant than that each painter closely followed her caste style, stating "these [Brahmin or Kayastha] idioms are never regarded as merely private but always as, in some degree, public and general—the effort of an individual to project not a private but mainly a caste sensibility." He concludes, "the style comes to operate as a caste reserve of ancestral forms . . . the idioms which a village always uses whenever it paints and which it shares with other villages of the same caste" (1949, 27). This wording minimizes an individual painter's agency, replacing it with the village where she lives.

Archer conceded that the wall paintings of both Brahmin and Kayastha women depicted the same deities, flora such as lotus and bamboo, as well as aquatic and aerial creatures, but he stressed that women did so only within distinctive caste idioms. However, close scrutiny of how the painters portrayed these images reveals that, even if painters belong to the same caste, their individual murals often differ. For example, although paintings of a bamboo stand made by two Brahmin artists in photos that Archer shot depict the same image, their compositions vary in shape, proportions, and location in the picture plane (Szanton and Bakshi 2007, 14–15).

Archer also assumed that Maithil wall painters showed little creativity *because* they were women, declaring, "Maithil women like those [women] of other areas are by training and temperament conservative and would loathe to sponsor any deviation from a routine" (1949, 27). How did Archer know

what Maithil women might loathe? Most high-caste women in Mithila were in *purda* (female seclusion in their homes), which precluded talking with Archer, an unknown, unrelated, white, male foreigner. The men in households where Archer photographed walls in nuptial chambers provided the names of that household's patriarch and deities painted in the chamber, as well as the wedding's date, but Archer was neither told the female painter's name nor the meaning that she attributed to the symbols painted on the walls.

Doubts about the accuracy of Archer's reporting of the men's explanation of the women's wall paintings also arise because rituals in an upper-caste Maithil wedding take place in two separate locations. Maithil upper-caste men focused much of their religious practice on chanting mantras for ancient rituals prescribed in Sanskrit texts and ensuring that they are carried out correctly. In a residential compounds' open air, male Brahmin priests supervise the construction of a fire altar to which oblations are made in conformity with Vedic prescriptions, after purifying the altar, ritual implements, and the bridal couple. This matrimonial ritual is believed to transform a young man in the student stage of life into a husband in the householder stage of life.

In contrast, the marriage rituals that upper-caste women supervise during the multi-day wedding occur primarily within the nuptial chamber of the bride's home, where women create murals on the walls that emphasize female fertility. During all but the final night of wedding, the bridal couple sleeps apart in the chamber with a senior married woman as a chaperone, until the final night when the marriage is consummated. Except for the groom, rituals in the nuptial chamber involve only women, so a man's experience with matrimonial rituals was limited to memories of his time in the *kohbar ghar* during his own wedding. Anthropologist Inge Baumgarten, who did fieldwork with Maithil Brahmins, noted that men perceived the wall paintings as part of the women's ritual world: "Men know that women perform different kinds of rituals which are referred to with the general term 'ceremonies and such things' (*vidhsab*) . . . but as the use of the generalized terms of reference '*vidhsab*' . . . indicates, their knowledge does not go beyond the superficial" (Baumgarten 1997, 147).

Furthermore, Archer also denigrates women's wall paintings since, he claims, "the painting is done entirely by the household ladies as an ordinary domestic act." Archer argues that a ritual that includes painting "is as natural and as necessary as sweeping the courtyard or going to a well" (1949, 25). He says that the women temporarily cease their daily household chores to paint for a wedding but then return to their daily chores. Ignoring that painting might provide an opportunity for women's artistic expression, Archer implies that Maithil women lack creativity *because* they carry out repetitive tasks in the home, tasks that their husbands do not perform.

Yet, Archer's own account of Mithila painting proves that some women were known for their artistic talents. He describes the painting as carried out by "a little party of four or five ladies," commenting that "there is usually an elastic

system of house-to-house cooperation—the more skilled women of the caste coming in to help and the younger girls standing by to learn” (1949, 26). Then one older woman takes charge. She is an older, more experienced painter, whom the other women turn to because they have seen the high quality of her past paintings; she begins by painting outlines of the items in the mural, thus determining its overall composition. Less talented or less experienced women and girls prepare the twig brushes and the rags wrapped around them used by “one of the older ladies” for outlining the painting’s figures. Afterward, others fill in the flat washes or accents of color (1949, 26). Archer’s own description thus shows that certain women are respected for their artistic skill that determines the mural’s appearance.⁶

In addition, although Archer correctly assumes that wall painting is “an act of ritual, the complement of certain rites,” he interprets that claim as meaning that the ritual and its wall paintings are static and unchanging. He states that Mithila painting “shares the rigidity of ritual and just as the latter follows a caste and regional pattern . . . the painting is valid only in so far as it rigidly repeats the style” (1949, 27). Yet Archer provides no evidence that Maithil Brahmins or Kayastha women perceived their paintings as static and unchanging. Since Archer did not personally discuss the paintings with women artists, it is not evident how he decided that their ritual was rigid. Did the painters’ husbands confirm that? Was the claim based on Archer’s own experience with rituals? Did Archer assume that all ritual art is rigid? Or only Hindu rituals? Whatever his source, his premise that ritual art was static led him to judge Maithil women’s painting as devoid of creativity.

Archer’s own photos provide evidence that not all ritual art by Maithil women was rigid.⁷ One of the photos he shot depicts a painting of a railway station with a conductor selling train tickets, an engine pouring out smoke, and passengers in railway cars. It appears on an upper tier of a nuptial chamber wall, under which the lower tier portrays Lord Vishnu and his avatars (descents, incarnations) as fish, turtle, and boar (Szanton and Bakshi 2007, 18–19), manifestations of Lord Vishnu invoked in wall paintings at weddings to protect the bride and groom. The train image is not used in Maithil wedding rituals, so its presence on the wall above a religious image suggests that ritual art was neither entirely rigid nor utterly circumscribed. Anthropologist David Szanton observes, “by Archer’s time—and perhaps earlier—the ‘traditional’ wall paintings were not limited to sacred or ritual subjects,” pointing out that “different castes, different families, *and* different painters visualized and painted both sacred and secular images in recognizable but distinctive ways” (Szanton and Bakshi 2007, 16, *emphasis added*).

⁶ For Mithila painting staged and received today in Nepal, see Davis (2007, 193–223).

⁷ Moreover, no scholar has investigated the small cartoon-like figures in the corners of some wall paintings (e.g., Szanton and Bakshi 2007, 16). These playful images are neither rituals nor rigid.

Archer's *Marg* article concludes by declaring that it is hard to imagine any painting style that is "more subtly adjusted to conveying the mystery and exaltation of a wedding" than those of upper-caste Maithil women (1949, 33). Generalizing about the nature of art, he states that "[i]n the best art there is an inescapable element of strangeness, the sense of a novel wonder, a mystery burning at the heart of life, and it is this strangeness, this incandescence which above all the painting of Mithila transmits" (33). Archer's statement that Mithila paintings lack creativity seems to contradict his parting words about their strangeness, which is found in "the best art."

Contextualizing Archer's comments on Mithila painting helps to recognize some of the unquestioned assumptions that appear in the *Marg* article. Between 1940 and 1948, Archer published some books that drew primarily on his work as an ICS officer working among groups in eastern Bihar that were, at that time, classified as "tribals" (today, Adivasis), such as the Uraons, the Ahir shepherds of Chota Nagpur, and the Santhals.⁸ The Maithil painters differed from these three other communities in two striking ways. First, with the possible exception of the painting by a shepherd, women created all the Mithila paintings that Archer photographed. Second, those women all occupied the two highest rungs of the Hindu hierarchy, while the other three communities were ranked on the low end of that hierarchy or outside and below it.

In the same year that Archer's *Marg* article on Mithila painting appeared in print in India, he was appointed Keeper of the Indian Section at the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A) in London and turned his attention to the Indian paintings held by the museum, immersing himself in the artwork produced in Indian kingdoms. In addition to acquiring for the museum more collections of paintings from various regions of India, he published prodigiously from 1952 until the end of his life, about miniature paintings created, for example, by court painters in Kangra, Rajasthan, and other Indian kingdoms before the British began annexing large portions of India. In a 1979 obituary of Archer, art historian Robert Skelton observes that while in India, Archer focused on mainly on little-known "primitive" and "tribal" art.⁹ After Archer settled into his new position in London, his research focused mainly on miniature paintings created in India's former princely states, which Skelton calls "the antithesis of the type of art that Bill [Archer] hitherto admired in India" (Skelton 1979, 187).

Nonetheless, Szanton has pointed out that William Archer's dismissal of Mithila painting by non-elite women caused long-term negative consequences for them. Talented lower-caste Maithil women also had begun to paint

⁸ Carrin (2020, 6–8, 19–20) looks at Archer's accounts of these communities, especially Santhals.

⁹ "Primitive" and "tribal" were used (at times interchangeably) for art not commissioned for elite patrons, in part to distinguish rural art from art for kings or other wealthy patrons.

innovative artwork on paper starting in the early 1970s, but patrons gave them less payment and institutions gave them less national recognition than those earned by upper-caste painters. This disparity in remuneration continues to the present (Szanton 2025, 85). Sally Price has analyzed Western discourse about artwork from non-Western communities, showing it frequently assumed that characteristics of good art were “universal” without contextualizing it through the aesthetics of the artist’s culture (Price 2001, 32–36). That proved especially the case when tourists were unfamiliar with the Maithil aesthetic.

Mildred Archer on “Popular” Painting

Mildred Bell’s parents were teachers, and their children were highly educated. Mildred earned a fellowship to study history at St. Hilda’s College at Oxford University, which had received its royal charter in 1926. Her elder brother had secured a place at Cambridge University, where he became a friend of William Archer and introduced Mildred to her future husband. During her higher studies, Mildred also studied drawing at Ruskin College. Thus, she shared with her future husband education in history and an interest in art. An obituary for Mildred points out that she and William built a “dynamic partnership” as “members of a new generation of Indian Civil Servants” (Head 2005, 351). They held left-wing political views, shared a passion to understand Indian culture, and “against the prevailing British tendency in India, they made many Indian friends” (Head 2005, 352–54).

During the time that the ICS posted William to different parts of Bihar, Mildred gave English lessons, wrote textbooks for teaching English, and carried the majority of rearing the couple’s two young children. Mildred’s first book of art history, published in 1947, dealt with Patna painting, an art form little known outside Bihar. During their years in rural India, Mildred and William also collected Mithila painting and other artwork that had received little previous attention from art historians including pilgrim art from Calcutta’s Kali temple, painted scrolls from the temple town of Puri, tribal Santhal scrolls, and Mali (gardener community) depictions of the snake goddess. When the couple returned to London after Indian Independence, both Archers remained involved with artwork created in the Indian subcontinent. Soon afterward, Mildred accepted a project at London’s India Office Library (IOL) to catalog a set of visual materials sent to the IOL from India over the years, a task expected to take “a few weeks.”

Since no office was available for her in or near the IOL reading room, Mildred worked in a tiny room with a gas burner for making tea and a sink but no shelves or table. Using its drainboard, she cataloged a collection of paintings of various Indian laborers and their tools. Those visual materials depicted what communities of laborers looked like, dressed like, and which implements

enabled the worker to complete tasks. Other paintings pictured the flora, fauna, topography, and climate of different parts of India, imparting useful geographical knowledge.

When Mildred inquired about other similar materials to catalog at the IOL, no one seemed to know their location, so she set out to discover where they had been stored:

[I] began to prowl around the long line of rooms adjacent to the Reading Room. Poking in corners, opening cupboards, and climbing up ladders, I soon identified numerous dusty-brown paper parcels as well as many unidentified portfolios. They all contained drawings and paintings made mainly for the British by both British and Indian professional painters. (Archer and Archer 1994, 137)

These visual materials that Mildred cataloged had been created or gathered in India under the auspices of the East India Company (1600–1858) by British officials such as surveyors, engineers, and botanists. These materials had been produced by professional British and Indian painters trained in standard techniques for reproducing information taught in art academies in Britain, and more recently in India.

Since these materials were no longer consulted on a regular basis and their nature, extent, and locations were not recorded in a systematic way, they had been superseded by more precise and up-to-date sources of information for use by the colonial administration after the advent of mechanical reproduction of visual materials. Realizing that the visual materials that she had cataloged from the period prior to widespread adoption of photography and lithography formed a previously unrecognized archive of materials produced at the behest of the East India Company, she classified them as “Company paintings.”

In an obituary for Mildred, art historian Deborah Swallow notes, “It was the start of a project that significantly helped to shape our understanding of artistic activity in and on India in the period from the late eighteenth to the early twentieth centuries, as is shown by the dense bibliography of [M.] Archer’s writings” (Swallow 2005). Mildred spent twenty-five years cataloging IOL visual materials, leading to several books dealing with the paintings and the natural history drawings held by the IOL.

Among Mildred’s publications, the one most relevant to Mithila paintings is *Indian Popular Painting in the India Office Library* (1977). She distinguishes popular painting as differing from miniature paintings, “which until the present century have tended to define Indian painting for the West” (Archer 1977, 1). Unlike works made in royal courts for the aristocracy, her book deals with (and reproduces in black-and-white) paintings created in villages and small towns by artists whose paintings served “domestic and religious

purposes” or were sold to “village or Bazaar clients.” She calls them made “by the people for the people” (Archer 1977, 1). *Popular Painting* brought a fresh perspective to several aspects of Indian art history. The book’s introduction reviews past secondary literature, stressing its largely negative assessment of what she calls “popular painting.” She points out that, although those paintings had been created since the nineteenth century, they “remained almost unnoticed, both by the British and by educated Indians” (1977, 1).

Nonetheless, by the 1970s, changes in art pedagogy had led to reconsideration of the kind of “popular painting” that appears in Mildred’s book. Several art schools founded in the early colonial period had been modeled on the curriculum used in British art schools. For the most part, such schools had been teaching skills that the British considered necessary for professional artists, especially mastery of the “one-point perspective” considered crucial for effectively providing useful visual information that advanced British military and political goals. Indian art pedagogy took a new direction when art historian and arts administrator E. B. Havell (1861–1934) was appointed principal of the Government School of Art in Calcutta in 1896 and urged his students to gain inspiration from India’s own art forms. His colleague Abanindranath Tagore (1871–1951), founder of the Bengal school of art, encouraged painters to draw inspiration from Swadeshi (India’s [own] aesthetics), thereby freeing themselves from colonial imposition of Western artistic norms. Tagore founded the Indian Society of Oriental Art in 1907 and advised painters to experiment with idealized art forms such as the ancient Buddhist frescoes in the Ajanta caves (second century BCE–ca. 480 CE). This trend offered artists more than one option, depending upon which styles of art attracted them, which enabled them to earn a living, and which ones allowed them to express themselves. These circumstances increased the interest in artistic traditions previously little known or practiced in limited areas.

In *Popular Painting* Mildred also recounted some of the ways that what she called “popular painting” was being reassessed. Many Indian artists and intellectuals, especially in Bengal, were intrigued by innovations emerging in European “modern” art (Mitter 2007, 25–26, 123–43). A key event was the exhibition at Calcutta’s Indian Society of Oriental Art arranged by Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941) in December 1922. It included artworks by Paul Klee, Wassily Kandinsky, and Bauhaus artists. Mildred also calls attention to the tour of senior ICS officer Gurusaday Dutt (1882–1941) in 1930 through the provinces of West Bengal to view the art of scroll painters. He praised their work for the “strength, vitality, freshness, naivete, directness and simple rhythm as well as the story-telling that belong to all true primitive art” (Dutt 1932, 527, cited in Archer 1977, 4).

In the 1920s and 1930s the kind of work that Mildred called “popular painting” was celebrated in India for similarities with works by avant-garde European artists. Ajit Ghose, a Calcutta collector and critic (b. 1886), championed paintings made for pilgrims at the Kali temple in Calcutta for their boldness and vigor, declaring that they “anticipated by a century or more Cubism and Impressionism” (Ghose 1926, 98). Mildred recalls that William had come to admire how European modernists rejected “delicacy and refinement in painting . . . ignored perspective, used colour for its own sake or for symbolic purposes and had freely distorted and modified the human form . . . [t]hey had aimed at intense simplification and had abandoned the natural in favour of the abstract or the geometric” (Archer and Archer 1994, 2–3).

In 1994 (more than fourteen years after William’s death), Mildred published a four-part collection of personal reflections about the couple’s Indian experiences: *India Served and Observed* begins with Mildred’s brief account of her time at Oxford and what led to her departure for India in 1934. The next long section that follows consists of William’s fourteen short reminiscences about his pre-marriage years in India (1931–1934). The third long section presents Mildred’s account of the years the couple spent in India (1934–1937). The brief last section concisely describes William’s work at the V&A and Mildred’s at the IOL.

The four-page chapter in Part One titled “Into Hidden Maithila” records his first glimpse of Mithila painting and how it took “took my breath away”:

In normal times I would never have seen them since the rooms were private and intimate. But now they stood exposed and with astonished eyes I saw that the walls were covered with brilliantly painted murals. Bright yellow, green and magenta gave them a frail and flickering majesty and among the yawning cracks they stood out with radiant glory . . . Everything meandered yet everything cohered. The faces had a gay insouciance, the fanciful contortions of a Klee or Miro. The figures had a dream-like vacuousness. Their very freedom from what was normal sparked off the imagination . . . I had seen nothing that so instinctively took for granted the assumptions of modern European art. (Archer and Archer 1994, 54)

Mildred’s initiative in assembling and publishing their memories of India allowed posthumous publication of William’s first response to Mithila painting.

Pupul Jayakar and “Handicrafts”

Over the course of her long life, Pupul Jayakar (1915–1997) created a set of official institutions to locate, document, reinvigorate, support, and publicize Indian’s handicrafts. When she was growing up, local handicrafts were little known beyond their region of origin. As a child (née Pupul Mehta), she had traveled across India’s districts with her father, one of the first senior Indian

ICS officers. She studied in elite schools in India, attended Bedford College, London, graduated from the London School of Economics in 1936, and met Manmohan Jayakar, whom she married in 1937. She had trained as a journalist, but her application for a position at the *Times of India* was turned down because she was a woman.¹⁰ In 1940, she became active in the political realm by assisting Mridula Sarabhai (1911–1974) of the Indian National Congress (INC) and served as assistant secretary for women’s affairs in the National Planning Committee, led by Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru (1889–1964).

A new phase of Jayakar’s life began in 1950, when Nehru requested that she assess India’s handloom sector and provide recommendations for strengthening it. Handloom fabrics (*khadi*) aligned well with *swaraj* (self-rule), a key concept in India’s nationalist movement for independence from British rule. Mohandas K. Gandhi (1869–1948) had promoted the spinning and weaving of khadi and urged male and female agricultural laborers to augment their income and increase their self-reliance by making handicrafts at home when agricultural fields lay dormant. Gandhi called such labor “cottage industry,” viewing it as essential work for Indians in preparing for Independence. (Although Jayakar did not adhere to all Gandhi’s ideals, both of them deeply valued handmade items.) By establishing several regional Weavers’ Service Centres for the Ministry of Textiles, Jayakar promoted cultural forms indigenous to India in place of British ones, increasing pride among Indians in the crafts made in their own and other regions of India.¹¹

In response to Nehru’s request, Jayakar traveled to various parts of India, learning about handloom cloth as well as other handmade items. She met craftspeople, viewed their skills, and learned their aesthetic conventions:

[I was] touring villages and small towns in India, entering into dialogue with women and men from the craft ambience, listening to the myths and songs that carried the history of their race, closely observing their skills and their links to heritage, their insights into seasons and their relationship to creation. It was a period of search and inquiry into the nature of myth, into symbol and its inner resources, its ways of revelation; into the mystery of colour and its vocabulary of tone within tone. (Jayakar 1989, xi)

Jayakar soon realized that crafts were often linked to local rituals based on agricultural seasons, phases of the moon, local flora and fauna, and resources available in local environments.

¹⁰ Afterward, she started an English-language children’s magazine, *Toy Cart*. Modern painters Jaimini Roy (1887–1972) and M. F. Hussain (1915–2011) contributed illustrations.

¹¹ Like Jayakar, Jawaharlal Nehru sought to experience and understand India’s great diversity of peoples, livelihoods, regions, and climates, as recorded in his *Discovery of India* (1946).

Jayakar was instrumental in founding the All India Handicrafts Board in 1956 to advise the Ministry of Textiles on ways to develop and strengthen crafts; Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay chaired the board, which worked to revive, publicize, and help market crafts in India.¹² Outreach by Jayakar and Chattopadhyay provided the information to locate, encourage, and publicize textile traditions, spearheading ways to enhance support for craftspeople. In 1956, Jayakar founded the [National Crafts Museum](#) (Sethi 2013, 107). In 1965, the All India Handicrafts Board awarded the first set of national awards to thirteen distinguished Master Craftsmen and one Master Craftswoman “in recognition of their invaluable contribution to our cultural and aesthetic attainments.”¹³ Two thousand copies of a forty-four-page booklet were printed, with a black-and-white photo of each awardee, his/her craft, and home village.

To facilitate transmission of detailed knowledge to a new generation of makers, the Handicrafts Board identified outstanding craftspeople to mentor less experienced practitioners of a craft. The process created a reservoir of information about the diverse handicrafts of India.¹⁴ While some crafts had already lost their markets, healthy markets for textiles continued for saris, bedspreads, and tablecloths. The Handicrafts Board’s workshops disseminated market research on what buyers sought, leading to greater remuneration for handicraft labor.

Jayakar, who read William Archer’s article in *Marg* (1949), wrote to him in April 1956 asking where to find wall paintings in Mithila like those she saw in *Marg*. When she went to Mithila in the late 1950s, she was disappointed by the dearth of wall paintings (Heinz 2006, 18):

the village walls were blank and printed lithographs and calendars hung in the gosainghars [shrines of the lineage deity in a residential compound]. The bleak dust of poverty had sapped the will and the energy needed to ornament the home. Traces of old paintings were sometimes to be found, fragments that bore testimony to an inherited knowledge of colour, form, and iconography. (Jayakar 1989, 104)

In 1965, the same year as the first handicraft awards, a devastating drought in northern Bihar that lasted two years caused extreme food insecurity and poverty throughout Mithila. Jayakar decided to intervene by commissioning the young Bombay artist, Bhaskar Kulkarni (1929–1983), to bring white handmade paper to Madhubani and urge selected women whose wall

¹² Chattopadhyay co-founded the World Crafts Council in 1964 (Slate 2024, 225–29).

¹³ Only one woman, from Chamba, Himachal Pradesh, received an award in 1965 for embroidery on cotton handkerchiefs. The 1966 booklet lists awards to twenty-four men and one woman: a dressmaker and designer attached to the royal household in Manipur state. In 1967, two women out of twenty-five won prizes: a maker of lacquerware in Navrangpur, Orissa, and a doll-maker in Gwalior, Madhya Pradesh.

¹⁴ The first set of awardees included the last surviving Kalighat painter in a once-thriving community that made hand-painted images for pilgrims at Calcutta’s Kali temple. This group lost their market due to mechanical reproduction of images of Hindu deities.

paintings were outstanding to paint their artwork on paper for sale.¹⁵ After some initial resistance, a small group of upper-caste women began to experiment with the new paint surface.

Jayakar returned to Madhubani in May 1968, as the project that she had initiated was gaining momentum. Although she described the land as “harsh, grey, cracked and desolate” due to the drought, she recalls passing the doorways of homes in the town, through which she saw that “girls, young women, and old women were bent over paper, painting with bamboo twigs and rags.” When the drought-relief project began, Jayakar recalled, Maithil women’s lines in their paintings were hesitant, but soon “[a] sense of pride and joy had already permeated and transformed the women of Mithila” (Jayakar 1989, 105). When Kulkarni took these Mithila paintings to the Cottage Industries emporia in New Delhi, they quickly sold out, earning the women greatly needed income. Many Maithil women who had not been born in upper-caste families also began to paint and enriched the subject matter of the artwork with imagery central to their own lives and labor. A small number of men also started to paint for sale. Mithila paintings became so fashionable that the Office of the Development Commissioner (Handicrafts) in the Ministry of Textiles set up a Marketing and Service Extension Center in Madhubani.

The annual *National Awards to Master Craftsmen* booklets created by the Handicrafts Board reveal that women artists were slowly being recognized for their skill and creativity.¹⁶ Then six years after the awards began, Mithila painters began to appear among the awardees: the first was Jagdamba Devi, a seventy-six-year-old widow and respected Mithila painter, who received the Master Craftsman award for “folk painting” in 1970. Until then, Jagadamba Devi had been “much praised for her painting, although . . . it brought no income to her home.” After she won the award, “the esteem of her neighbors was perhaps more essential to her than money alone” (Owens 1983, 143). Indeed, the community of Mithila painters took great pride in the fact that their artwork had won national recognition; moreover, the monetary award enabled Jagadamba Devi to support her entire family with income she earned by painting. In subsequent years, Mithila painters Sita Devi (1975), Ganga Devi (1976), and Godawari Dutta (1980) won awards. Unfortunately, non-upper-caste Mithila painters won only later awards only later, such as Jamuna Devi (1987) and Shanti Devi (2007).

¹⁵ Kulkarni brought special paper that allowed colors to stand out against its white background, unlike beige *basaha* paper, the only kind found in Madhubani then (Jain 1997, 31).

¹⁶ The information about female winners of the Master Craftsman awards, including Mithila painters, has been culled from the annual *National Awards to Master Craftsmen* booklets (India Handicrafts Board 1964–2007, 1966, 1970, 1975, 1976, 1980, 1987, 2007). These annual publications reveal trends in the selections of award-winners by their region of India, kind of craft, and sex.

In 1970, C. Shivaramamurti, Director of the National Museum in India, had asked Jayakar to write “a book for the museum on the art and ritual of the ‘Little Tradition’” (Jayakar 1980, xi).¹⁷ She agreed, drawing on what she had learned from her survey of India’s rural crafts and her involvement with Handicrafts Board.¹⁸ *The Earthen Drum: An Introduction to the Ritual Arts of Rural India* was published by the National Museum in Delhi in 1980 and deals mainly with crafts made by villagers in rural India, as well as craftspeople whom the government had labeled “tribals.” By the time that Jayakar’s book appeared in 1980, the gap between rural and urban India had grown substantially in the nearly fifty years since Archer first viewed Mithila painting. Jayakar’s book introduces crafts across India’s regions, but on a broader level, it also informs city-dwellers about how rural Indians expressed their creativity through crafts. Jayakar devoted an entire chapter of the book to Mithila’s *bhitti-citra* and *aripan*.¹⁹

That chapter deals with artworks by painters from multiple castes, ages, and styles. Of the book’s 160 illustrations, Jayakar included twelve images of Mithila paintings, most accompanied by painters’ names and villages or towns. Female Brahmin and Kayastha painters dominate the chapter, which contains Ganga Devi’s large painting “Cycle of Life” (Jayakar 1989, fig. 42), Jagadamba’s Kali on the figure’s left side and Gauri on the right side (fig. 43), Sita Devi’s post-marriage *aripan* (fig. 55), and Mahasundari Devi’s *aripan* of Gauri (fig. 51). Unlike Archer, however, Jayakar also includes women not born into the two highest social ranks as well. Jamuna Devi, the first famous female Mithila painter from the Chamar (“ex-untouchable”) caste to receive an award in 1987 from the Handicraft Board, wins special praise for two of her paintings reproduced in Jayakar’s book, a bird-faced deity (fig. 44) and a horse (fig. 64).

Jayakar classified wall and floor paintings as home adornment, emphasizing that this domestic painting is essentially the artwork of women. She observed that such paintings “appear in the more prosperous village dwellings, in the chambers of the household and clan deities and the *kobbar ghar*” (Jayakar 1980, 101), depicting auspicious sights and symbols of fertility. She characterizes these paintings as “the radiant, auspicious heart” of the dwelling (1980, 101).

17 At that time, some scholars of South Asia viewed Indian civilization as the product of interaction between the “great tradition” (a pan-Indian Hindu set of beliefs and practices, often called “brahmanical” or “Sanskritic,” anchored in prescriptive texts about ritual, iconography, sculpture, and temples) and the “little tradition,” used to refer to local cultural forms that were often transmitted orally from teacher to disciple (Singer 1972, 67).

18 In her Preface, Jayakar thanked Archer for letting her include some of his photos in her book and expressed regret that he passed away in 1977 before he could see the book in print.

19 The book’s second edition in 1989 (retitled *The Earth Mother: Legends, Goddesses, and Ritual Arts of India*) included some revisions based on more recent archeological and anthropological research. By arrangement with Harper and Row, an American edition was published in 1990.

Jayakar's handicraft project did not presuppose a binary opposition between orally transmitted knowledge of craft and art forms standardized by textual prescriptions since historically, virtually all Indian arts and crafts were made by hand and learned from a master. Jayakar also sought to correct misunderstandings about rural art, especially among those who denigrated it as produced by illiterate people. Although initially some elderly Mithila painters were unlettered, their broad and deep knowledge of Hindu narratives and domestic rituals disseminated orally or viewed in itinerant theatrical troupes ensured that their artwork was richly grounded in cultural traditions. Jayakar praised Mithila artists who soon "emerged as masters of their art," singling out Jamuna Devi for her "individualistic work, recognizable by its style and character" (1980, 106).

Jayakar promoted Mithila painting well in New Delhi, where award-winning Sita Devi was invited to visit Prime Minister Indira Gandhi (1917–1984). After painting her a picture of Goddess Durga, the artist said that she was giving her painting of Goddess Durga to another Goddess Durga. The city's fashionable and financially comfortable set followed the prime minister in acquiring Mithila paintings. For a time in the mid- and late-1970s, Sita Devi and other Mithila painters received lucrative commissions to create paintings for foreign embassies and hotels.²⁰

In the decade after Independence, the new Indian nation created three institutions in its capital, New Delhi, to support, exhibit, and publicize three Indian art forms, but not one for handicrafts: Sahitya Akademi for literature, Sangita Nataka Akademi for musical theatrical performances, and the Lalit Kala Akademi for fine art. During its early decades, the awards at the Lalit Kala Akademi went almost entirely to men, many of them art school graduates (trained abroad or in Indian art schools) who viewed themselves as part of the world of "modern art." The Lalit Kala Akademi scheduled exhibitions to promote their art in India and to represent Indian art abroad. Their oeuvres were publicized in articles written by art critics and fellow artists.

Jayakar wanted all-India cultural institutions that could support craftspeople, for whom an akademi was not established, to draw attention to their achievements. Her knowledge and experience helped her to identify outstanding craftspeople, provide workshops to train younger craftspeople, and increase their opportunities to earn a livelihood. The Handicrafts Board increased its female awardees over time, and Jayakar also persuaded talented

²⁰ Nonetheless, once the Handicraft Board's decade-long support for Mithila painting ended, the Board moved on to spotlight a new set of crafts, leaving Mithila painters (especially ones in *purda*) at the mercy of unscrupulous urban middlemen who arrived in Madhubani demanding multiple batches of paintings of popular deities, but provided only humiliatingly paltry payment. Scholarship on boom-and-bust markets shows that they often plague handicrafts marketed primarily to tourists, as were Mithila paintings at the Cottage Industries emporium (Black 2025, 40–45). For Mithila painting's later development, see Richman and Szanton (2025, 11–21, 65–70).

modern painters and sculptors trained in art schools to serve for extended periods in the Weavers' Service Centres in various parts of India, as exemplified by the following three prominent modern artists.

For example, since the prominent modern artist, K. G. Subramanyan (1924–2016) was jailed by the British as a Gandhian activist while studying at Presidency College, Madras, he was henceforth prohibited from enrolling in a state-sponsored university. Instead, he studied art at Visva Bharati, Rabindranath Tagore's private university in Shantiniketan, West Bengal. There Subramanyan flourished under the pedagogy of Nandalal Bose (1882–1966) and Ramkinkar Baij (1906–1980). Bose was a prominent artist in the Bengal school of art. Baij wanted to promote a new kind of artistic aesthetic that did not depend on British art pedagogy, so he rejected the standard government syllabus for art education modeled after British art school curriculum. Instead, he brought master craftspeople to campus, where they demonstrated skills in using multiple media to expand students' artistic knowledge, skills, and familiarity with different materials (Ganguly 2022, 296–97). After graduating from Visva Bharati, Subramanyan grew into one of the most versatile and influential artists in India as Professor in the Faculty of Fine Arts at Maharaja Sayajirao University, Baroda, and visiting professor at Visva Bharati.

Art historian Karin Zitzewitz analyzes how Subramanyan conceptualized his view of modernist art in relation to India's handicrafts:

Subramanyan has sought to align modernist art with the wider field of Indian arts and crafts in order to demonstrate how the particularly self-conscious form of art recognized as modernism can be meaningful to a community of viewers and invigorate that community's thinking about India's visual culture as a whole. (Zitzewitz 2014, 41)

Jayakar recruited Subramanyan to spend three months a year at Weaver's Service Centres. In 1959, he became Deputy Director of Design at the All India Handicrafts Board, an experience that he later identified as the most influential one in his career (Zitzewitz 2014, 44). He published essays dealing with both fine art and crafts in *The Magic of Making: Essays on Art and Culture* (2007), which set out his vision of a strong handicraft sector and a strong modern art sector strengthening and supporting each other.

Another prominent modern artist, Arpita Singh (b. 1937), an outstanding female artist in the second generation of India's modern painters, worked in the crafts sector and later testified to its effects on her oeuvre. Singh grew up in rural Baranagar, Bengal (now Bangladesh), where women constructed quilts (*kāthā*) from worn-out cloth previously used as saris and dhotis and embroidered familiar objects on the quilt tops. After art school, Singh worked at a government agency that supported handmade textiles, where her appreciation for embroidered cloth grew. In an interview with art historian

Geeti Sen, Singh remarked, “The stitches in a kantha give body to the limp cloth, give it form. I feel that textures give strength to my painting—an added dimension” (Sen 1996, 116). Singh views *kāthā* as an art form with which she feels an affinity, emphasizing experience with textiles as a major influence on her artwork (Bean 2013, 182).

M. Reddeppa Naidu (1932–1999), who worked largely in South India, also credits his experience with crafts for revealing the depth and diversity of Indian cultural traditions. He joined a Weavers’ Service Center in 1963 and retired after serving as a Deputy Director (Design) at the Weaver’s Service Centre in Madras (Chennai) in 1990. Naidu declared that “[c]ontact with such textiles greatly benefits the creative artist” and added that if he had not worked at the Centre, he would not have known “the greatness of our tradition” (De 2004, 177). Interviewer Aditi De asked if his work with textiles distracted him from his art. He replied: “The creative mind is common to both the artist and the textile designer. One complements the other” (177).

Consequences of Classification

Shortly after Independence, many subscribers learned of Mithila wall and floor painting when photographs of it appeared in *Marg*, India’s premier, long-established, and elegantly produced art magazine. William Archer did not subsequently publish any new research about Mithila painting after 1949, so most people did not see Mithila painting again until it appeared on paper for sale in New Delhi. And only long after Archer’s death, thanks to Mildred Archer, did readers discover his excitement when he first encountered the paintings. Yet since the Archers donated William’s photographs and some *aripan* patterns he received as gifts to the IOL, that legacy has served as an invaluable record of how some upper-caste Mithila paintings looked before handmade paper came to Madhubani, thereby showing how much the painting tradition expanded after the paper’s arrival. Moreover, in 1959, William published *India and Modern Art*, which drew on extensive interviews with Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941) and the correspondence of Amrita Sher-Gil (1913–1941), two of India’s most talented modern artists. In his book, William approvingly quoted a statement by Sher-Gil: “Good art always tends toward simplification . . . the stress is invariably laid on the *textural* and *structural* beauty of the work instead of the beauty of the *subject* depicted . . . Form is never imitated, it is always interpreted” (1959, 81). Archer’s *Marg* article concluded that “[i]n the best art there is an inescapable element of strangeness” and attributed that quality to Mithila painting (1949, 33). One wonders if William responded with awe to Mithila paintings not merely because they depicted lotuses and bamboo, but also because the painters imbued that flora with a unique strangeness characterized by abstraction.

Mildred Archer's organizational skills enabled her to identify the historical circumstances that produced drawings and paintings by professionally trained British and Indian artists commissioned by the East India Company to serve as resources in support of British geo-economic goals in India prior to the introduction of photography. Before her labor, those visual materials were not part of a searchable archive; they were hidden away in separate and often arbitrary places in the IOL, with some key ones still left in their original packing materials. Mildred's work brought together systematically arranged materials generated in a specific time period (albeit one with its own presuppositions and colonial misunderstandings) for use by historians, art historians, and other interested people. Furthermore, Mildred's *Popular Painting* drew attention to a set of localized rural paintings that shared certain characteristics, some of which were also appearing in works by Indian artists experimenting with simplification, abstraction, and new ways of using color. These experiments reveal multiple options that were becoming available to Indian artists, ranging from one-point perspective to idealized representations inspired by ancient Buddhist frescos, and from so-called "primitive" art to features of modernist art. Also, the double memoir she published in 1994 revealed how she experienced rural eastern India and posthumously published selections of William's memoir.

Jayakar's early work for the INC prior to Independence equipped her with political experience that enabled her to establish prominent institutions after Independence that raised awareness of Indian handicrafts. While the myriad publications of the Archers provided useful historical and artistic resources, Jayakar's contributions lay in her ability to investigate what kinds of support makers of handicrafts needed to win respect and sustain markets for their work. Throughout her life, Jayakar continued to reassess the health of the handicraft sector and advance it. In addition to her role in starting the All-India Handloom Board, chairing the Handicrafts and Handlooms Export Corporation, founding the National Crafts Museum and the Indian Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage, she was a founder of the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts, and the National Institute of Fashion Technology. These institutions improved the lives of both artists and craftspeople, while advancing the nationalist project to publicize India's cultural achievements. She increased markets for crafters and enabled them to refine their skills and earn decent livelihoods. Her understanding of Indian art forms continually expanded because her work with all-India institutions enabled her to research, visit, and employ craftspeople and artists across India's regions rather than just in one region. Moreover, as an Indian woman, Jayakar could talk with Mithila painters (probably at times through a translator from the local Maithili language into Hindi or English) while that option was not available to William Archer. Jayakar championed both handicrafts and modern art to enhance the generativity and interdependence of both art and craft. Both forms of visual expression require artistic skill, experience with one's medium, and creativity.

Analysis of how William Archer, Mildred Archer, and Pupul Jayakar analyzed Mithila painting reveals some of the complexities and lacunae that arise when classifying diverse Indian arts and crafts. By the late 1970s and 1980s, Mithila painters were winning awards such as the Padma Shri, the prestigious state prize for outstanding Indian civilians from many professions. As of 2026, artworks by Mithila painters hang in some of the most well-known art museums across the globe. Although Mithila painting won its first Handicraft Award for “folk painting,” it is now known as a school of painting that has its own artistic conventions used to convey subject matter ranging from the birth of a goddess, the world of snakes, the tsunami in Sri Lanka, the damage caused on earth by rising temperatures, and other diverse topics. This article suggests that the binary opposition between “modern” painting and “handicraft” is too reductionistic and misleading to provide insights into the subtleties and range of creative artistic expression in India. Today, Mithila painting is no longer treated by art critics as an obscure folk art in an isolated rural area of India; instead, Maithil paintings on paper for sale reveal an art form practiced at the intersection of gender, caste, colonial gaze, and nationalist goals that shows the shortcomings of binary oppositions to characterize the complexity of Indian painting.

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