



ISSN Print: 2394-7500
ISSN Online: 2394-5869
Impact Factor: 5.2
IJAR 2015; 1(11): 736-738
www.allresearchjournal.com
Received: 04-08-2015
Accepted: 07-09-2015

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Madhubani Painting: Women Dominated Folk Art

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Abstract

Since ancient times art has been an integral part of human life. Folk art is such a form of art which is associated to common man. One such folk art Madhubani paintings which is Hindu style of painting attained worldwide distinction adept mainly in Mithila and northern parts of region of Bihar and Nepal. The Artists of this art are simple housewives, who have never been to any school of art. The women of Mithila decorated the walls and floors of their houses for every social and religious festival. These paintings are executed in a very simple manner. These paintings have been breathtaking beautiful and have always mesmerized the on-lookers. There is hardly any one country except India where folk paintings were initiated by females and were presented on the international stage in a developed form. These paintings not only aesthetically appreciated but also won critical acclaim.

Keywords: Mithila, Madhubani Painting, Folk Art, Women Artist.

1. Introduction

There is an emotional urge behind every creation which gives a form to the feelings or experience. While perceiving a form of art, an artist passes through a deep experience. This realization followed by a creative process which helps the artist to experience a unique satisfaction. In this way the art gets directly reflected on his mental canvas and he does not remain in any doubt. This knowledge enables the artist to give a clear form to his creation like poetry, painting, musical symphony, sculpture and dance etc ^[1]. Since ancient times art has been an integral part of human life. Man has always depicted his secular and religious feelings through his art. Folk art is such a form of art which is associated to common man. Folk art is related to a particular society, caste and religion. Human being gives a form to any of kind art for their entertainment, decorations and special rituals which later on become enduring art of that particular area. Some Folk arts acquire international fame due to their recognition. One such folk art is Madhubani paintings.

“Madhubani (formally the sub-divisional headquarters of the district of Darbhanga but now a full-fledged District) is the heartland of Mithila, the ancient country of Maithilas, which is bounded on the north by Himalayas and on the east, south and west by the rivers Kosi (Kausiki), the Ganga and The Gandaki, respectively. There is a delightful rhythm in the sound of the word Madhubani (meaning the forest of honey), a name to the conjure with in the history of Indian Painting: fascinating landscape, green pigeons, parrots, roofs of mud-houses, Majestic *bodhi* and *peepal* trees etc.” ^[2] This is a Hindu style of painting attained worldwide distinction adept mainly in Mithila and northern parts of region of Bihar and Nepal ^[3]. This form of painting is practice as a ritual.

Each nation has a self-expression. The people of Mithila expressed the feelings of beauty in such a way which suited their temperament and ideals. Folk art is always practiced by a group with in the periphery of a society. But the geographical and cultural factors of Mithila did not collaborated for creative activities. Consequently the people of Mithila developed an entirely different form of art catering to their needs and taste which presented the primitive impetuous and conventional survivals in a distinctive manner. The study of Folk art establishes a deep relationship between art and culture other than the aesthetic deliberation ^[4].

The Artists of this art are simple housewives, who have never been to any school of art. The art was exclusively the domain of females. Every girl learnt this art from her mother or from her relatives at a very young age. Two kayastha painters, Ganga Devi and Mahasundari Devi, and two Brahmin painters, Sita Devi and Jagadamba Devi were recognized as astonishing

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artists. They illustrated on the conventions of the wall paintings. Some other women Maha Savitri Devi of Ratni village, Smt Bua Devi Jha made invaluable contribution to the history of Madhubani Paintings. Due to their style and technique they gained immense fame and recognition in the world. This technique of paintings was practiced by all the females belonging to different religious sects. But the wall paintings made by the females of Brahmana and Kayastha communities were entirely different. Some of the skill used for Indian miniature paintings like juxtapositioning human figures, animals and birds with towering figures to create vastness, creating the impression of the one scale has also been used by these female painters. Despite various economic constraints these artists made these wall paintings on every religious and social occasion. These paintings have been breathtaking beautiful and have always mesmerized the on-lookers^[5].

The locals of this area feel that the custom of Madhubani paintings started when Raja Janak of Nepal invited local artists to paint the walls of his palace on the occasion of his daughter Sita's wedding with lord Rama. During the initial stages of Madhubani paintings congregation of symbolic images of the lotus plant, the bamboo grove, fishes, birds and snakes in union were depicted. These images represented productiveness and creation of life^[6].

The women of Mithila decorated the walls and floors of their houses for every social and religious festival. These paintings are executed in a very simple manner. First of all the walls are layered with cow dung. In some houses the paintings are directly made on mud walls. There were three main mode of paintings of these folk artists to depict their artistic expressions: wall-painting or mural paintings (*bhitti-chitra*), canvas-painting (*pata-chitra*) and the floor-painting (*bumi-shoba* or *aripana*). They created a magical effect with their beautiful paintings which gave them aesthetic satisfaction. This style of paintings revolutionized the world of painting and carved a niche for itself in the fashion industry. The pattern used in this style of painting moved from floor and walls to the female apparels and also created beautiful motifs for *sarees*^[7].

There is no place for the outside world in the paintings of Mithila's artists who decorates the walls and floors with their imagination and creativity. The choice of colours and subject matter depicts the finesse with which these artists perform this complicated task. It can be done only by Mithila's deft women artists. Artistic expressions should not only satisfy the creative urge of an artist but it should also have practical utility. Madhubani paintings satisfy these criteria of practical efficacy which is used by local people in different festivals. Beautiful eye catching geometrical patterns in these paintings on every occasion like various *sanskaras* and rituals connected with different *pujas* and seasons, birth of child, marriage, Holi, Surya Shakti, *Kalipuja*, Upanayanam, Durga *Puja* ect. These paintings are made by using natural dyes and pigments with the help of brushwood, brushes, nib pens and matchsticks. These born artists neither have any set principles and rules to follow nor any instructions from books. Their imagination and ideas played a very significant role in the form of art^[8].

“Subject matter of these paintings generally falls into two groups-(i) a series of heavenly forms to which are sometimes added the more mundane figures of the bride and bridegroom along with members of their wedding-train and (ii) a series of strictly selected vegetables and animals forms. Although

there seems to be no manifest relation between these two groups, the fact remain that ‘just as the painting owes its origin to a ritual need, it is ritual that determines the two groups and charges them with import’^[9]. “Drawing on their personal knowledge and experience- an expand version of Arche's *regional reservoir of Idiom*- these artist painted the full array of marriage and other rituals, extended narratives of their own lives, episodes from local oral traditions and classic texts, as well as description and wry critiques of contemporary life despite-expanding the repertoire, they insisted upon working within the severe aesthetic conventions of Mithila painting; two dimensional imagery, no horizon, line or use of perspective, no modeling of figures, deities facing forward, human in profile, open spaces filled with flowers, plants and tree, and a frame painted on papers itself often reflecting the theme of the painting and most strikingly, deposit the aesthetic constraints, each painters work much like that of Miro, Klee, Picasso or Chagall-was distinctive and immediately recognizable as her or his own”^[10].

If we look at socio-economic background then it would be adequate to say that this art came under the exclusive command and domination of the women artist of the Mithila. There is hardly any one country except India where folk paintings were initiated by females and were presented on the international stage in a developed form. These paintings not only aesthetically appreciated but also won critical acclaim^[11]. “Thus these wall paintings have an exquisite simplicity and irresistible attraction. The variety and inventiveness make them perhaps most sophisticated and elegant of all popular paintings in India.”^[12]

2. Conclusion

Man has always depicted his secular and religious feelings through his art. Folk art is such a form of art which is associated to common man. This art is related to a particular society, caste and religion. This form of painting is practice as a ritual. Folk art is always practiced by a group with in the periphery of a society. But the geographical and cultural factors of Mithila did not collaborated for creative activities. Consequently the people of Mithila developed an entirely different form of art catering to their needs and taste which presented the primitive impetuous and conventional survivals in a distinctive manner. The study of Folk art establishes a deep relationship between art and culture other than the aesthetic deliberation. Due to their style and technique they gained immense fame and recognition in the world. Despite various economic constraints these artists made these wall paintings on every religious and social occasion. If we look at socio-economic background then it would be adequate to say that this art came under the exclusive command and domination of the women artist of the Mithila. The variety and inventiveness make them perhaps most sophisticated and elegant of all popular paintings in India

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