

Exploring the Different Indigenous Communities in *Many Visions, Many Versions*

Melissa Boyer, Susquehanna Art Museum Intern, Fall 2019

The Western world when thinking about India often imagines the Taj Mahal, vibrant saris, and Bollywood. However, in one of the most densely populated countries, with exceptionally strong roots to their traditional past, there is multitude of different religions, languages, and cultures that often go unnoticed. This exhibit contains artists from four separate communities: Mithila, Warli, Gond, and Chitrakar. These four areas were selected for the representation of indigenous cultures that have gone nearly unchanged by colonization, industrialization, and urbanization (Das 19). The key characteristics for each people group will later be explored, but it is “important to realize these artists are individuals, and while they be rooted or influenced by their cultural context they do not represent or encapsulate the mindset or art of their community” (14). While this exhibit contains four distinct indigenous cultures, they share common themes in myth and cosmology, nature – real and imagined, village life, and contemporary explorations.

The **Mithila** people began incorporating art into their everyday life through wall paintings. As early as the 14th century, Mithila women have covered interior sections of homes with images to “create auspicious spaces for domestic rituals and to promote fertility, abundance, marital felicity, and family well-being” (21). Traditionally they utilize vibrant colors made from organic pigments combined with cow dung and mud. Examples of Mithali work include:



Krishna, c. 1970's by Sita Devi



A Mithila artist at work

Originally, artists were females in the upper castes (the social hierarchy in India), but now they represent all castes who all claim the same artistic roots. Mithila painters are currently the most prolific indigenous painters, a result of their distinctive style appealing to the art market's current aesthetics (15). To conform to modern convenience, most artists have traded their traditional creative surfaces of wall for paper. While this new medium loses the historical intent of bringing art as a blessing into daily life, it allows artists to make a better wage as pieces are easier to sell and transport.

The **Warli** have also started using paper as a medium in order to meet the art market's demands. The Warli traditionally painted on walls like the Mithila, but their style of markings

are considered older than Mithila art due to connections with cave paintings dating to the Neolithic period. Their wall art shares many similarities with the paintings of the Mithila, except that the Warli only use two colors “red ochre sourced locally (or brown from cow-dung) for the base, and white from rice-flour or lime” (22). Although they used only two basic colors, they crafted potent compositions such as:



Coal Mining Process, 2011, Jivya Soma Mashe



Warli art is being replicated in popular art and fashion

Modern Warli artists continue to use their ancestors’ limited color palette and consider painting on paper “principally [as a way] to conserve and document traditions that seemed to be disappearing” (23). Historically most Warli artists have been female, but currently the most popular artist from their community is Jivya Soma Mashe. He has earned international praise for “his elegant and ethnographically rich images of Warli daily life” (23). His success stems from his style that translates traditional imagery into themes of interest for contemporary audiences.

The **Gond** culture is the widest group represented in the exhibit, occupying areas of forest, farmland, and rural housing areas. The Gond also followed the tradition of wall paintings, but furthermore allowed their art to spread onto the floor. They would cover entire rooms in houses to celebrate weddings or festivals in geometric patterns that included symbols to represent the event without using “figurative or narrative depictions” (23). This geometric style can be seen in the work of:



Woodpecker and the Ironsmith, 2011, by Ram Singh Urveti



Jungle Scene, 2011, Japni Shyam

Most artworks represent the “pervasive presence of nature” that shapes the Gond view on history, animals, and religious deities (23). These themes are prevalent in the icons used as foundational elements in the geometric patterns. While most Gond artists still find inspiration in the same themes that inspired their ancestors, some have begun exploring different subject matters. Their artistic vocabulary has evolved to include new symbols used by modern artists, creating a broader range of the appearance of their works.

The **Chitrakar** broaden their definition of art by combining painting and singing to achieve their ultimate goal of storytelling. For centuries they simultaneously sang narratives while painting on long vertical scrolls. The scroll then acts as a map for the story to be told again and again. The storyteller slowly unravels his tale, “pointing to the relevant picture to visually dramatize each event” (24). This key element of traditional use, communal story-telling, has been lost due to modern consumerism. The artists have adapted to the art markets demand and begun using paper or canvas in order to be easily sold. Displaying or purchasing a Chitrakar painting comes with the expense of sacrificing the intended performative aspect. Traditionally the pieces were meant to be a communal activity, a time to gather and share. Their society used art as a fundamental way to foster unity, the importance being evident in their name, Chitrakar, which means “one who makes images” in honor of their story-scrolls (24). But now most contemporary pieces are removed from their indigenous context and hung on walls to be quietly appreciated such as:



Tsunami, 2005, by Swarna Chitrakar



Montu Chitrakar working on a scroll

While the original structure has survived with minor changes, the subject matter is constantly evolving to represent contemporary stories. While older scrolls are valued for their insights into traditions, modern pieces strive to be relevant by covering international events such as natural disasters, media, and politics.

These four communities may have diverse histories, styles, and mediums, but they all share common themes such as myth and cosmology, nature (real and imagined), village life, and contemporary explorations. **Myth and cosmology** have been on artists’ minds for generations as their society imagined how the world was formed. These indigenous

communities are more spiritually centered than most of the Western world since science has become the main source of explanation. For centuries the indigenous people created stories to explain mysteries of the world around them, which were passed on to the next generation until they become myth and tradition. The contemporary artists exhibited in this show continue the tradition of exploring the narrative of myths through symbols, icons, and religion (often mixing Hindu, Muslim, Christian, and indigenous beliefs). Myth is humanity's way of endowing everyday things with narrative and meaning; the river becomes a god's tears, the bird our brother, and the sun the soul of the universe.

Nature provides the foundation for indigenous communities' livelihoods, beliefs, and society. Their reliance and relationship with nature is an essential foundation of their worldview. While the paintings can reflect a community's perception of nature, they are also filtered through the individual's imagination that might choose to depict it "realistically, interpreted narratively, or ritualized and exalted through myth and deification" (24). Like their forefathers, they rely daily on the earth for their needs; making nature a very sacred and vital topic. Throughout the collection themes of animism (attributing a soul to vegetation/animals) can be noticed in several artworks that personify nature. Overall, there is a general awareness to the interconnectedness of life: that man is not elevated but a part of the same planet as other animals and plants that also rely on the earth to sustain them.

Several pieces depict the artists' **village life**, which even when not obviously portrayed still dominates their consciousness and worldview. They were raised in the village-mentality, being taught the importance of community and local values that form the basis for how the artists interact with the world. While some artists represented in the show have moved to cities, mostly to increase access to the art world, but the "village lives on in the hearts and minds" (25). Village life acts as the cornerstone for the two previous themes (myth and nature). It is in the village setting that the artists were instructed in the traditions of their culture and their societies' ties to the earth. The teachings that are prominent in indigenous villages acts as the soil that all these paintings grew out of, even though the artworks blossomed in diverse ways.

The world today experiences an unprecedented level of communication between communities that allow local Indian artists to use global **contemporary** events as inspiration. While still heavily immersed in the local village mindset, artists explore global events such as movies, disasters, fashion, etc. in their development of aesthetics and depiction. These contemporary events are usually translated into their traditional style that combines their unique heritage with modern realities.

Many Visions, Many Versions is the first significant collection of indigenous Indian art in America since 1968 (13). In 1968 when the first show of this subject occurred at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the "makers of non-mainstream artworks were rarely identified as the 'artists' of their work. They were usually referred to as 'craftsmen' or as makers of 'handicrafts.' They worked in self-contained communities, and the objects they produced were

viewed and consumed as tourist art or as decorative objects” (13). Traditionally the Western world considered styles and mediums that were not being utilized in their own art centers as crafts- a creative product but devalued as not being Art. Furthermore, during the early stages of non-mainstream art being included within galleries, artworks were often attributed to a region or community instead of an individual artist. After the 1968 exhibition, the Western art scene underwent a transformation due to the 1970’s quilt movement to broaden culture’s definition of what distinguishes craft from high Art. This exhibit reflects modern developments of better representation and equality of treatment of artists, the “process of indigenous artist recognition by name has happened gradually over the last few decades, owing to changes in the sensibilities of institutions worldwide” (14). While contemporary indigenous art experiences better treatment and recognition than before, there is still more room for the artworld to grow while welcoming them into equal representation.

The Western world has experienced a gradual evolution of respecting diversity in cultures. While colonization and appropriation may seem like problems of the past, we perpetuate new injustices often through subtle and passive means like stereotyping. India is composed of hundreds of distinct people groups that can not be accurately confined to one culture. The exhibit attempts to respectfully depict the commonalities and differences of the four indigenous communities, while realizing that the artwork reflects, not encapsulates, their culture. Culture consists of too many abstract complexities to be fully represented by one painting or artist, but through looking at several works a fuller, multi-sided perception can be gained into the indigenous communities represented. The entire collection can be celebrated for creating a space of conversation and contemplation that might allow viewers to find unexpected insights into a different part of humanity.

Works Cited

Das, Aurogeeta, et al. *Many Visions, Many Versions: Art from Indigenous Communities in India*. International Arts & Artists, 2017.

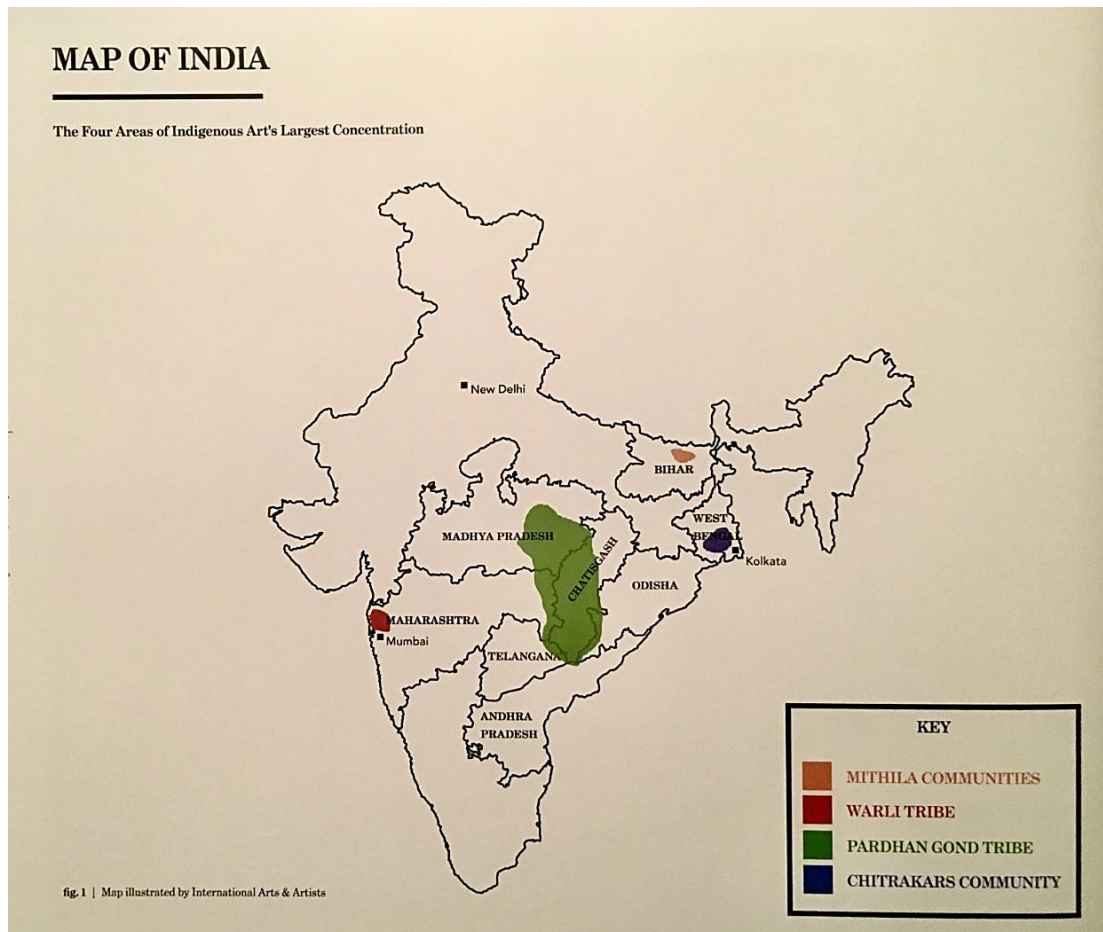


Figure 1: Map of India with location of communities (20)