



Many Visions, Many Versions

Art from Indigenous
Communities in India

Detail of Jamuna Devi, *Raja Salhesh with his two brothers and three flower maidens*, circa 2000, natural dyes on paper, © 2015, Courtesy of BINDU Modern Gallery, Photo credit: Sneha Ganguly



2

Detail of Japani Shyam, *Jungle Scene*, 2011, acrylic on canvas, © 2015, Courtesy of BINDU Modern Gallery, Photo credit: Sneha Ganguly



MANY VISIONS, MANY VERSIONS : Art from Indigenous Communities in India

Many Visions, Many Versions: Art from Indigenous

Communities in India is the first comprehensive exhibition in the United States of contemporary artists from four major indigenous artistic traditions in India. The exhibition includes art from the Gond and Warli communities of central India, the Mithila region of Bihar, and the narrative scroll painters of West Bengal. Featuring 47 exceptional paintings by 24 celebrated artists including Jangarh Singh Shyam, Ram Singh Urveti, Bhajju Shyam, Jivya Soma Mashe, Baua Devi, Sita Devi, Montu Chitrakar, and Swarna Chitrakar, among others, ***Many Visions, Many Versions*** reflects an aesthetic that remains deeply rooted in traditional culture, yet vitally responsive to the world at large.

India's rise as an Asian power on the global scene has focused the world's attention on the country and its culture. For Western audiences eager to know more about Indian art, ***Many Visions, Many Versions*** offers an opportunity for viewers of all ages to learn about life and culture in India through these remarkable artworks. Focusing on four of the most prolific indigenous art traditions of the country, this exhibition showcases the diversity and richness of Indian culture and offers a new vision of traditional art in contemporary India.

GOND ART

Gond art refers to paintings made by a subgroup of the Gond tribe, the Pardhans, who traditionally paint on mud walls and floors during weddings and festivals. Their wall paintings are mostly geometric and composed of auspicious symbols for celebrating the occasion. Jangarh Singh Shyam (1962–2001) was the first prominent Gond artist to paint on paper and canvas, rather than directly on the earth or on the walls of homes. As Jangarh's popularity grew, he invited his clan members to help him with his work so they could

benefit from his success. In time, his apprentices, such as Ram Singh Urveti and Bhajju Shyam, became professional artists and today about 40 Gond artists comprise what some refer to as the Jangarh Kalam School of Art. What unifies the work of Gond artists is the pervasive presence of nature in their storytelling, their portrayals of fantastical animals and trees, and their pantheon of deities. The rich repertoire of Gond mythical and genealogical tales has readily transferred to their paintings.

“ Born in the Gond tribe, [Jangarh Singh] Shyam is credited with inspiring other artists to shift from wall murals to painting on canvas. His finely detailed, pointillist paintings of gods, birds and leaping tigers use both traditional themes and modern symbols like airplanes and cars. ”

-Kavitha Rao

“Rural Art Gets Respect at Two Mumbai Exhibits,” in *New York Times*, August 18, 2009



Detail of Ram Singh Urveti, *Woodpecker and the Ironsmith*, 2011, acrylic on canvas, © 2015, Courtesy of BINDU Modern Gallery, Photo credit: Sneha Ganguly



6 Detail of Manisha Jha, *The Jackfruit Tree* (*Tree of Life series*), 2012, acrylic and ink on canvas, © 2015, Courtesy of BINDU Modern Gallery, Photo credit: Sneha Ganguly

WARLI ART

The Warli tribe lives in the Thane district of Maharashtra, situated north of Mumbai. Similarities between Warli art and cave paintings in central India have led some historians to believe that Warli art dates back to traditions from the Neolithic period. Wall paintings in Warli homes depict ritual icons, religious beliefs, harvests, livelihood, and human relationships, and show close links to their deities and to nature. The paintings accompanying their festivities and

rituals make symbolic references to their religious beliefs and practices. Humans and animals are composed of triangular or hourglass-shaped figures and gain movement and life by subtle alterations to their alignments, angles, and shapes. Warli artists continue to only use red/brown and white pigments. Jivya Soma Mashe has emerged as an internationally recognized Warli artist, thanks to his elegant and ethnographically rich images of Warli daily life.

MITHILA PAINTINGS

The Mithila region covers a large part of northern Bihar. Literary references reveal that women in Mithila have been painting gods and goddesses on the interior walls of their homes since the fourteenth century. The images are intended to create auspicious spaces for domestic rituals and to promote fertility, marital felicity, and general family well-being. Using vivid colors made from local, organic, and mineral pigments that are applied to their cow-dung and mud-plastered walls with simple bamboo and raw cotton brushes, the women create a vigorous and distinctive wall

painting tradition. In the late 1960s, in the midst of a severe drought and encouraged by the government, a few women, including Baua Devi, began transferring their wall paintings to paper for sale to supplement family income. With this transition, the thematic repertoire expanded from Hindu deities to episodes from the epic poem Ramayana, local tales, rituals, and autobiographies. Since the late 1990s, it has included powerful feminist critiques of patriarchy and gender inequality, as well as global events.

“ Using vivid colors applied with simple brushes made of bamboo and raw cotton, Mithila women produced an astonishing vigorous and distinctive art. ”

-Umesh Gaur and Aurogeeta Das, "Recent Indigenous Art of India," *Arts of Asia* 43, no. 6

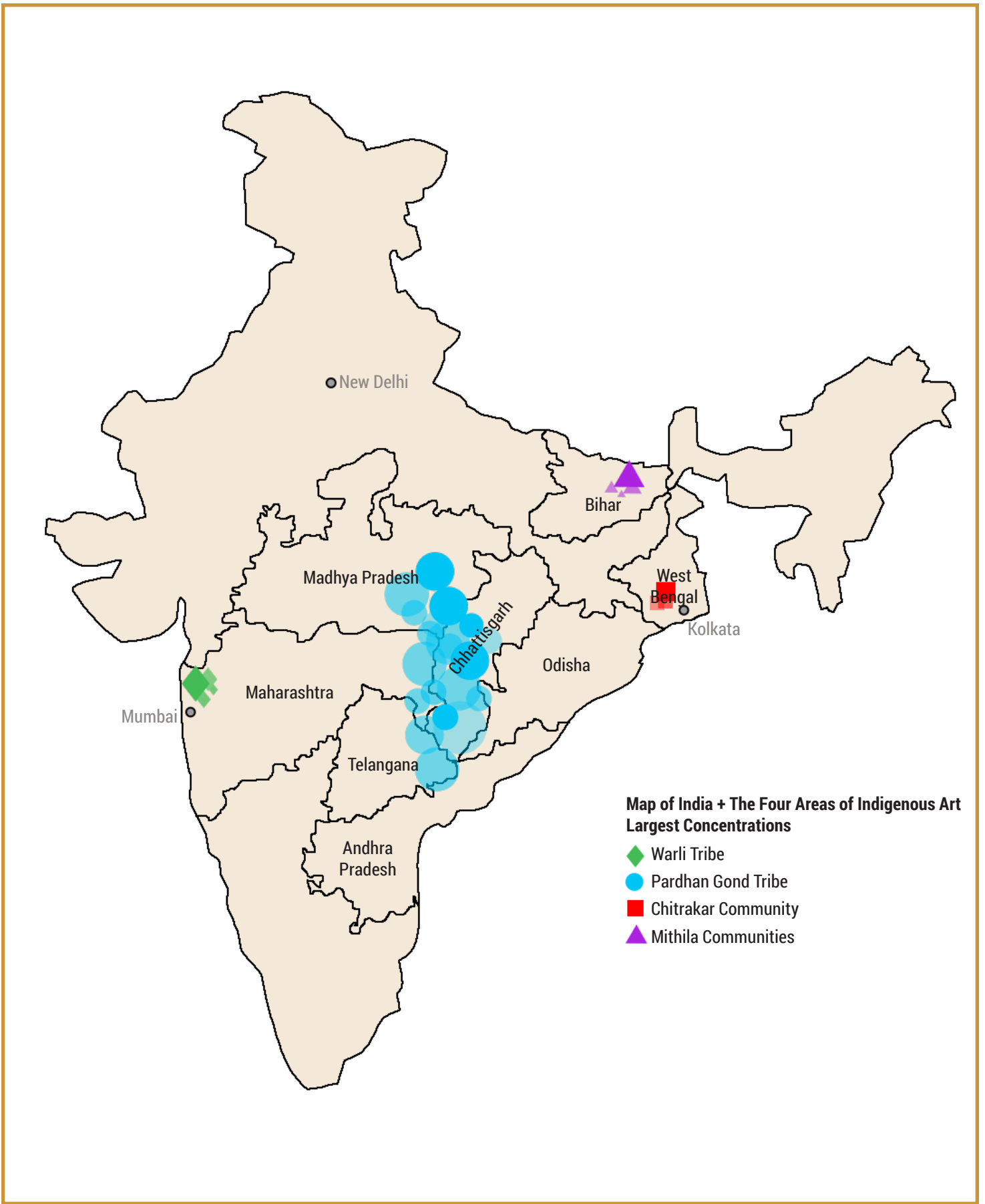
BENGALI *PATUA* SCROLLS

The painter-singer community in eastern India is known as Chitrakar, meaning “one who makes images.” Their tradition of singing and painting stories on *patuas* (long vertical scrolls) goes back several centuries. Currently, most of the Chitrakars live in Naya, a village near Kolkata. Traveling from village to village, itinerant Chitrakar painter-singers recount stories and legends in song, while unrolling scrolls one

frame at a time, and pointing to the corresponding depiction of the events. *Patua* scrolls reference mythological and religious themes, socio-political topics, and local, national, and world events. In Swarna Chitrakar’s 2005 work, *Tsunami*, the artist depicts the 2004 Asian tsunami by reworking traditional *patua* mythological icons to offer a recounting of a contemporary event with global implications.



Detail of Montu Chitrakar, *Osama*, 2010, natural dyes on paper glued to fabric, © 2015, Courtesy of BINDU Modern Gallery, Photo credit: Sneha Ganguly



EXHIBITION THEMES

The conventional approach to mounting an exhibition of these four distinct indigenous artistic traditions, widely separated geographically and historically across India, would be to divide them into sections distinguished by tribal and cultural affinities. Instead, the curators have opted for a more ambitious and original approach, intentionally mounting the paintings thematically to demonstrate the shared cultural features and contemporary concerns of these four communities, while emphasizing the diversity of their artists' unique expressive forms, techniques, and styles. The exhibition is divided into four broad categories:

Myth and Cosmology: In some ways the central theme of the exhibition, this section illustrates the rich imagery and diverse pictorial languages used by artists in the four groups to express the continuing prominence and power of myths, symbols, icons, spiritual traditions, and religious beliefs that are often an amalgam of both Hindu and indigenous worldviews.

Nature—Real and Imagined: Reflecting the centrality of nature in the life, myth, religion, culture, and society of

the four groups, this section explores the many ways in which conceptions of nature are manifested in the lives and imaginations of the artists and their communities.

Village Life: Many indigenous artists continue to live in rural India, or maintain close ties with their native villages. This section includes paintings that intimately convey the rhythms and realities of village life, and also reveal how the village retains its influence on the hearts and minds of the artists who have made their homes in cities.

Contemporary Explorations: No matter how rooted in rural villages most of the artists are, they are also keen observers and original commentators on contemporary urban life and modern realities. Current events, feminist issues, and sociopolitical concerns characterize the works in this section.

Collectively, these themes evoke the unity, diversity, and continuing vitality of the four distinctive painting traditions, which are simultaneously deeply rooted in Indian civilization and culture, and yet fully engaged with the contemporary world.



BHAJJU SHYAM (B. 1971)

Bhajju Shyam became an apprentice to his uncle, the artist Jangarh Singh Shyam, at the age of 16. Jangarh noticed his nephew's talent and encouraged him to work as an artist. Within a few short years, Bhajju's works were shown internationally and in 2001 he received the Madhya Pradesh State Award for Best Indigenous Artist. Drawing upon his experiences visiting London in 2002, Bhajju created a stunning visual travelogue, rendering London as an exotic bestiary in which the Underground appears as a giant earthworm, Big Ben merges with a giant rooster, and English people are depicted as bats that come out to play at night. These drawings were published in a book, *The London Jungle Book*, and became the subject of a special exhibition at the Museum of London in 2004. Bhajju lives and works in Bhopal.

SELECTED EXHIBITIONS

The London Jungle Book, Museum of London, London (2004)

The Night Life of Tree, Rebecca Hossack Gallery, London (2006)

Painted Song and Stories: Contemporary Gond Art from India, Radford University Art Museum, Radford, VA (2015)



JANGARH SINGH SHYAM (1960–2001)

Jangarh Singh Shyam is considered the leading Gond artist and the creator of a new school of Indian art, which some call “Jangarh Kalam” in his honor. Born in the village of Patangarh in eastern Madhya Pradesh, he attracted the attention of talent scouts from Bhopal’s multi-arts complex, Bharat Bhavan and its first director, the modern artist Jagdish Swaminathan, who showcased Jangarh’s first paintings at Bharat Bhavan’s inaugural exhibition in 1982. Just five years later, Jangarh was awarded the Shikhar Samman, the highest civilian award given by the Government of Madhya Pradesh. In 2001, during his residency at the Mithila Museum in Tokamachi, Japan, Jangarh committed suicide.

SELECTED EXHIBITIONS

100 Magiciens de la Terre (100 Magicians of the Earth), Pompidou Centre, Paris (1989)

The Other masters: Popular arts in India, Musée du Quai Branly, Paris (2010)

Sakahàn: International Indigenous Art, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa (2013)

JAPANI SHYAM (B. 1988)

Japani Shyam is the daughter of Jangarh Singh Shyam. Encouraged by her father, Japani started painting while still very young and at the age of 11, she was awarded the Kamala Devi Award. Japani's primary subjects are the lives of animals and birds. Japani lives and works in Bhopal.

SELECTED EXHIBITIONS

Jangarh Singh Shyam and Family, Gallery Chemould, Mumbai (2009)

Tribal Contours, India Habitat Centre, New Delhi (2011)

MAYANK SHYAM (B. 1987)

Mayank Shyam was initiated into painting by his late father, Jangarh Singh Shyam. He is one of the youngest members of the Jangarh Kalam School and one of the first Gond artists to develop a distinctive contemporary style, infusing urban themes with a Gond ethos. His subjects vary from cityscapes to nature to folklore. In 2006, Mayank received the Madhya Pradesh State Award for rural arts. Mayank lives and works in Bhopal.

SELECTED EXHIBITIONS

Painted Songs and Stories: Pradhan Gond Art from India, Davis Museum, Wellesley, MA (2010)

Sakahàn: International Indigenous Art, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa (2013)

RAM SINGH URVETI (B. 1970)

Ram Singh Urveti is one of the first Gond artists to transition from ephemeral art to painting on canvas in the early 1980s. His paintings celebrate the spirits of his tribe and, as with many tribal artists, the tree is omnipresent in his paintings. In 2001, he received the prestigious Kalidas Award for the arts and in 2008, his illustrated book, *The Night Life of Trees*, received the Bologna Ragazzi Award for children's books in Italy. Urveti lives and works in Bhopal.

SELECTED EXHIBITIONS

Expéditions Indiennes, Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Paris, France (1998)

The Night Life of Tree, Rebecca Hossack Gallery, London, UK (2006)

BALU JIVYA MASHE (B. 1963)

Balu Jivya Mashe is the son of the renowned Warli artist Jivya Soma Mashe. His pictorial style is rooted in the tradition of the Warli, with rhythmic, simplified forms representing the complexities of the world around him. Balu lives and works in Kalambipada.

SELECTED EXHIBITIONS

Warli Paintings, Grosvenor Gallery, London, UK (2013)

Birth of the Painted World: Jivya Mashe and the Warli Tradition of India, Penn State University - Robeson Gallery, University Park, State College, PA (2015)

JIVYA SOMA MASHE (B. 1934)

Jivya Soma Mashe is currently the most prominent Warli artist. Born in the village of Dhamangaon in Maharashtra, the shock of losing his mother at the early age of seven rendered him mute for several years, during which time he communicated only by drawing pictures on the floor. His talents were discovered by government officials in charge of preserving and documenting rural arts. Jivya demonstrates a heightened sensitivity and an unusually powerful imagination, perhaps the legacy of his early introspective period. He is the first Warli artist to step beyond ritualistic paintings, not only by painting everyday village life, but also by painting on canvas. He received the National Award for the Tribal Art in 1976 and in 2011 he was awarded the Padma Shri, one of the India's highest civilian honors. Jivya lives and works in Kalambipada.

SELECTED EXHIBITIONS

100 Magiciens de la Terre (100 Magicians of the Earth), Pompidou Centre, Paris, France (1989)

Dialog: Richard Long – Jivya S. Mashe, Museum Kunst Palast, Düsseldorf, Germany (2003)

The Tales we Tell, Victoria and Albert Museum of Childhood, London, UK (2015)

BAUA DEVI (B. 1944)

Baua Devi belongs to the younger generation of women who began transferring their wall paintings to paper in the late 1960s. With a bright palette, clear and elegant figures, usually surrounded with a wavelike border, her distinctive paintings of Hindu deities, the sun, moon, and snakes gained her immediate appreciation and many followers. She was the first Mithila artist to receive international recognition after her paintings were selected to be shown at the Centre Pompidou in 1989. She received the National Award in 1984. She lives and works in New Delhi.

SELECTED EXHIBITIONS

100 Magiciens de la Terre (100 Magicians of the Earth), Pompidou Centre, Paris, France (1989)

Baua Devi and the Art of Mithila, Berkeley Art Museum, Berkeley, CA (1997)

Women's Paintings from the Land of Sita, Seattle Asian Art Museum, Seattle, AW (2012)

JAMUNA DEVI (1915-2011)

Jamuna Devi was born in Jitwarpur to a family of "untouchables" (members of a low-caste Hindu group). In the late 1960s, she was involved with the first group of women who began to transfer their wall paintings to paper. Working in the brightly colored painting style of Sita Devi, Jamuna began painting deities and daily life, and quickly developed her own unique style. In the 1970s, she innovated again by preparing the paper with a light brown gobar (cow dung) wash so that the images would appear like those on traditional mud wall. She was the first "untouchable" to receive a National Award for her paintings.

SELECTED EXHIBITIONS

Baua Devi and the Art of Mithila, Berkeley Art Museum, Berkeley, CA (1997)

Mithila Painting: The Evolution of an Art Form, Museum of Craft and Folk Art, San Francisco, CA (2005)

MANISHA JHA (B. 1970)

Manisha Jha is perhaps the first Mithila artist to be considered a mainstream contemporary artist. Trained as an architect, Manisha incorporates elements of so-called "outside" influences but identifies herself as a Mithila artist who straddles both worlds. The artist currently runs the Madhubani Art Centre, which she established to teach other artists and to promote their work nationally and internationally. In 2015, she was selected to represent India at ART Santa Fe and also received the National Award for excellence in Mithila painting. She lives and works in New Delhi.

SELECTED EXHIBITIONS

Aspects of Collecting, Essl Museum of Contemporary art, Vienna, Austria (2009)

Traditional to Contemporary - The Journey of Madhubani Painting (Manish Jha and Others), Gallery Time and Space, Bangalore, India (2010)

RANI JHA (B. 1964)

Although born into a conservative family where girls traditionally received little education, Rani Jha went to school and completed her PhD at Darbhanga University with a thesis on women and art in Mithila History. She is also the first woman in her family to work outside the home, previously with a non-governmental organization shelter for abandoned women and now as a master painter and teacher at the Mithila Art Institute. As a feminist painter, her work draws inspiration from her experiences at the shelter where her job was to document incidents of abuse against women. She not only wants to tell their stories, but also hopes that her paintings may have some small effect in changing the social conditions for all Indian women. She lives and works in Madhubani.

SELECTED EXHIBITIONS

Sita's Sisters: Mithila Painters of India, Norbertellen Gallery, Los Angeles (2010)

Mithila Painting: The Evolution of an Art Form, Chazen Museum of Art, Madison, WI (2013)

SITA DEVI (1914-2005)

Sita Devi is considered a pioneer in Mithila painting. In addition to being proficient in the Bharni style painting, which emphasizes strong, vibrant colors, she worked to encourage the development of her native village Jitwarpur by raising concerns about the lack of basic infrastructure with visiting dignitaries. Over the course of her long life, Sita Devi brought national and international attention to Mithila. In 1981 she was awarded the Padma Shri by the Government of India. Her work is in the permanent collections of the Victoria & Albert Museum in London, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, and the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

SELECTED EXHIBITIONS

Baua Devi and the Art of Mithila, Berkeley Art Museum, Berkeley, CA (1997)

Mithila Painting: The Evolution of an Art Form, Museum of Craft and Folk Art, San Francisco, CA (2005)

MONTU CHITRAKAR (B. 1984)

Montu Chitrakar was born in the village of Naya in Bengal to a family of *Patuas*. Her repertoire includes narratives of traditional religious and folk tales, as well as issues such as the earthquake in Gujarat, religious riots, women's rights, AIDS, and the environment. Montu lives and works in Naya.

SELECTED EXHIBITIONS

Village of Painters: Narrative Scrolls from West Bengal, International Museum of Folk Art, Santa Fe, NM (2006)
Telling Tales: The Art of Indian Storytelling, World Museum, Liverpool (2013)

SWARNA CHITRAKAR (B. 1974)

Swarna Chitrakar was born to a family of *Patuas* residing in the village of Naya. Swarna is the most well-known Chitrakar artist and has participated in major festivals in Australia, China, England, France, Germany, India, Sweden, and the United States. Her body of work depicts incidents such as the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami and the 9/11 terrorist attacks, social themes including AIDS and child trafficking, as well as issues related to women's empowerment. Over the years, Swarna has also emerged as a role model for the women of Naya. Swarna now paints on a diverse range of media, including cloth, clay, and ceramic. She lives and works in Naya.

SELECTED EXHIBITIONS

Edge of Desire – Recent Art in India, Asia Society, New York, NY (2005)
Village of Painters: Narrative Scrolls from West Bengal, International Museum of Folk Art, Santa Fe, NM (2006)
Singing Pictures: Art and Performance of Naya's Women, National Museum of Ethnology, Lisbon, Portugal (2007)

EXHIBITION SPECIFICATIONS

Number of Works:

47 paintings

Organized by:

BINDU modern, New Jersey

Curators:

Dr. Aurogeeta Das, art historian and scholar of Indigenous Indian Art, London, UK; Dr. David Szanton, anthropologist and President of the Ethnic Arts Foundation; former Executive Director of International and Area Studies at the University of California, Berkeley; and Jeffrey Wechsler, former Senior Curator of the Rutgers University Zimmerli Art Museum

Requirements:

Moderate security; approximately 350 - 400 linear feet

Participation fee:

Please inquire

Shipping:

IA&A makes all arrangements; exhibitors pay outgoing shipping costs within the contiguous U.S.

Booking Period:

12 weeks

Tour:

September 2017–September 2020

Publication:

Fully illustrated exhibition catalogue, forthcoming

Contact:

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Detail of Jivya Soma Mashe, *Coal Mining Process*, 2011, acrylic on paper, © 2015, Courtesy of BINDU Modern Gallery, Photo credit: Sneha Ganguly

19