



Baua Devi, Untitled, about 1983

Baua Devi's paintings on paper explore an array of personal and mythological themes. One of her favorite subjects is the *nag kanya*, or snake maiden, a creature with the torso and head of a beautiful woman and the lower body of a snake. The *nag kanya* resembles, as well, the snake goddess Manasa, whose attributes include the powers of destruction and regeneration. While such attributes echo those of the key Hindu god Shiva, they also may derive from the actual snakes that occupy the watery region where Baua Devi lives.

The strength implicit in the image of a snake maiden—an image which Baua Devi has come to adopt as her own—evokes her own remarkable story of survival, perseverance, and success. Born into the Mahapatra caste—the lowest of the five Brahmin castes, who traditionally perform ceremonies on the occasion or anniversary of a death—Baua Devi was married at the age of twelve to a man selected for her by her father, as was the norm in India in the 1950s. Her husband abused her, growing even more violent when she became pregnant at the age of nineteen. Her child died within a few days of birth.

During this period of Baua Devi's life, the Mithila region, a normally fertile area between the Himalayas and the Ganges River, was undergoing a blistering drought. Already one of the poorest parts of India, Mithila in the mid-1960s faced widespread starvation. In 1965, an aid worker for the Indian government, Mr. Bhaskar Kulkarni was sent by Mrs. Pupil Jayakar, a close friend of Indira Gandhi, to encourage the idea of executing on paper the paintings traditionally created by Mithili women on the walls and floors of their mud homes, a practice known as *bhitti chitra*. He supplied materials and helped to sell the resulting works through government handicraft

shops in Delhi and other major Indian cities.

Baua Devi was one of the youngest women to work with Kulkarni and was particularly influenced by his admonitions to paint freely, from her imagination. Whether Kulkarni was projecting Western models of individual artistic style or whether he promoted individuation because he felt it would increase sales, is unknown. In any case, the effect on Mithili culture was the emergence of a remarkable number of exceptionally talented artists with distinct and recognizable artistic visions.

This exhibition focusses on Baua Devi, by now one of the most respected artists in the Mithila community and certainly one of the most successful.

Baua Devi's style is notable for combining exquisite draughtsmanship, dynamic yet austere compositions, and brilliant coloring. (Much of the coloring in her work is now actually done by her husband, Jagannath.) Besides painting the *nag kanya*, Baua Devi's imagery includes scenes from folk tales and Hindu myths, images of gods and goddesses, and religious symbols such as the Shiva *lingam*. This exhibition includes two large, mural-scale paintings by Baua Devi, one depicting the life of Krishna and the other, the Festival of Chait taking place around a village pond. Baua Devi continues to live in Jitwarpur, the village where she was born. Her paintings have been exhibited widely throughout India as well as at the Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, and at the Mithila Museum in Tokamachi, Japan. This is her first one-person exhibition in the United States.

The exhibition also includes a number of works by other Mithila artists including Krishnanand Jha, Leela Kumari, Gopal Saha, Karpoori Devi, Mahasundari Devi, Batohi Jha, and Chaturanand Jha. These works sug-

gest the wide range of styles and subjects utilized by Mithila artists. Krishnanand Jha, who is a practicing Tantrika, or Tantric priest, uses an extraordinarily fine line and a limited palette to create stylistically lyrical, if imaginatively hideous, images of various Hindu gods. One of his works depicts Chinnamasta, an incarnation of Kali who, having decapitated herself, drinks her own blood which also feeds a positive and a negative attribute of herself, thereby symbolizing the resolution of opposites. Leela Kumari's image of Kali, Goddess of Divine Energy, is remarkable for its directness and intensity. The painting by Batohi Jha depicts Ram, Sita, and Ravana, and includes a ceremonial yantra. Gopal Saha's three pictures are an excerpt from a larger series depicting the story of the poor shoemaker: in brief, the shoemaker leaves his shop, smokes some *bhang* (marijuana) and enjoys watching the animals of the forest. An extraordinary painting by Mahasundari Devi, considered to be one of the masterworks of Mithila art, depicts the events, ceremonies, and symbols surrounding a Mithila wedding. The large and intricate design which dominates the composition is called a *kobbar*, and is loaded with sexual symbolism while also representing the theme of agricultural abundance.

Karpoori Devi's image of the ghost, Loth, and Chaturanand Jha's remarkably Western-style drawing of Ram and Lakshman in the forest may appear idiosyncratic and outside the traditions of Mithila painting; today, however, Mithila painting must be seen as, above all, the product of individual artists whose work combines selected aspects of traditional art with inspirations from other sources as well as innovations of their own.

Lawrence Rinder
Curator

Checklist (All works lent by the Ethnic Arts Foundation unless otherwise noted. All works 22 x 30 in. unless otherwise noted.)

1. Baua Devi, Untitled (three snake maidens), about 1983
2. Baua Devi, Untitled (snake maiden), about 1983
3. Baua Devi, Untitled (snake maiden), about 1983
4. Baua Devi, Untitled (snake maiden), about 1983
5. Baua Devi, Untitled, about 1983
6. B750, Baua Devi, Untitled (five Shiva lingams), about 1983
7. Baua Devi, Untitled, about 1983
8. Baua Devi, Untitled, about 1983
9. Baua Devi, Untitled (from The Prince and the Witches story), about 1984
10. Baua Devi, Untitled, about 1983
11. Baua Devi, Untitled, about 1983
12. Baua Devi, Untitled, about 1983
13. Baua Devi, Untitled, about 1983
14. Baua Devi, Untitled, about 1983
15. Baua Devi, The Festival of Chait, about 1983, 60 x 124 in.
16. Baua Devi, The Life of Krishna, about 1983, 60 x 118 1/2 in.
17. Baua Devi, Kali, 1984
18. Gopal Saha, The Story of the Poor Shoemaker, about 1983
19. Gopal Saha, The Story of the Poor Shoemaker, about 1983
20. Gopal Saha, The Story of the Poor Shoemaker, about 1983
21. Artist unknown, Untitled, about 1996, anonymous loan
22. Batohi Jha, Ram, date unknown, anonymous loan
23. Leela Kumari, Kali, about 1983
24. B213, Krishnanand Jha, Chinnamasta, about 1983
25. B207, Krishnanand Jha, Mahakali, about 1983
26. Chaturanand Jha, Ram and Lakshman in the Forest, about 1983
27. Karpoori Devi, Loth, about 1983
28. Mahasundari Devi, Untitled (Mithila wedding), date unknown, 42 x 131 in., Collection Berkeley Art Museum

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Mithila Museum, Tokamachi, Japan (<http://www.bekkoame.or.jp/~mithila/Emithilap.html>)

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