

‘Asian Elephants’ in ‘Madhubani’ Paintings: Legends, Mythology and Iconography

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ABSTRACT

“Madhubani” is an ancient folk art of the Mithila region in Bihar, India. Until the year 1960, only the families undertook the art of Madhubani painting, as the skills were transferred exclusively from mothers to daughters. By tradition the Madhubani paintings (chitrakari) were composed and painted solely by women, and their subjects involved folk songs, tales, social and religious belief. Besides such narrative themes, the Madhubani paintings also included emblematic expressions that associated cultural and religious beliefs with Mother Nature. Accordingly several birds, water animals, and certain quadrupeds are depicted with symbolic expression in Madhubani paintings. In this context, the quadruped elephant had been an admired subject, depicted as a fertility symbol, insignia of power for its immense strength, and also as a status symbol for its huge physical structure. The subsequent spread of Hindu Classical (puranic) mythologies introduced several elephant related Hindu deities such as Indra, Indrani, and Ganesha into the Madhubani folk tradition that were absorbed in Madhubani visual compositions. Thus, in the Mithila tradition the Madhubani paintings containing images of elephant are measured auspicious used significantly for certain social and religious events. This paper will shed light on the aspects of local legends and mythology behind the depiction of elephant in Madhubani canvas paintings (patachitrakari), and the iconographic elements absorbed by Madhubani artists. Besides this, the style, use of material and colors, techniques and the aesthetic values applied by Madhubani artists using the ‘Asian elephant’ as a visual subject in their painting will also be discussed with selected visual examples incorporated in this paper.

Keywords: *Asian elephants, Mithila, Purana, Indra, Indrani, Ganesha*

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