



Chano Devi's "The Ghosts of Raja Salhesh" (left) and a detail of Jamuna Devi's "Tiger Hunting" (right). Both paintings are now in the Museum's permanent collection.

Mithila's Dalit Art

South Asia's Mithila Region—located mostly in India's northern state of Bihar and parts of nearby southern Nepal—has for centuries been renowned for its conservative Hindu cultural traditions, ranging from religious poetry to the visual arts. Since at least the 14th century, women in Mithila have painted elaborate murals on the walls of their homes. In response to a devastating drought that afflicted Mithila in 1966, an official in the Indian government's cultural ministry sent an agent to the region's rural villages to encourage the women to recreate their ritual mural imagery as paintings on paper—for sale to outside markets as a means of generating much-needed income. The portable paintings proved an astonishing success, being sold and exhibited throughout India and abroad. Although the first of the women to paint on paper belonged to Mithila's upper caste communities, within a decade their low caste neighbors were following suit—by employing styles and themes that were distinctive to their communities' own unique traditions. The majority of these low caste women artists belonged to India's Dalit community (formerly known as "untouchables"), who total over 200 million people—about 16% of the nation's population—and have the lowest status in the traditional Hindu social hierarchy.

For centuries, Dalits have been marginalized and ostracized; while their political status and rights have incrementally improved over recent decades, they still face widespread discrimination and oppression—and their culture, religious traditions and customs have been less studied and appreciated than those of higher caste Hindus. Thus, Radford University Art Museum is proud to host this first international group exhibition of art by Dalit painters, entitled *Raja Salhesh's Garden*. The exhibition features a diversity of paintings by 17 of Mithila's leading Dalit artists (including Jamuna Devi, Chano Devi, Urmila Devi—and such males artists as Uttam Prasad Paswan, Naresh Paswan and Ranjit Paswan), which range from colorful depictions of the Dalit hero-deity Raja Salhesh to intricate imagery based on tattoo designs. A series of 19 drawings depicts Covid's impact during India's prolonged 2021 nationwide lockdown.



When introducing a new form of art to foreign audiences, it can be helpful to have artists closer to one's own culture provide aesthetic and conceptual "bridges" of appreciation (as happened a century ago when Cubists in France first opened European and American eyes to the wonders of African Art). Thus, RU Art Museum's Tyler Gallery will present the first public exhibition of the original Mithila-inspired illustrations by the French author/artist Martine Le Coz. Inducted into France's Legion of Honour in 2019, Marine Le Coz is cherished in France as the author of numerous novels and other non-fiction publications. Since 2013, she has published four books inspired by Mithila art and culture—the most recent of which, *King of the Mountain*, is her retelling of Raja Salhesh mythology. Her original paintings for that book's forthcoming French edition will be exhibited, alongside her illustrations for a Mithila-inspired abecedary (an A, B, C book) and her portraits of some of the Dalit artists on display in the Covington Gallery's *Raja Salhesh's Garden* exhibition. Last year 21 Mithila paintings were donated to RU Art Museum by the Berkeley-based Ethic Arts Foundation; most of these paintings have never before been publicly exhibited. We have much to celebrate here at Radford University!