

## Mithila Exhibitions and Events

The RU Art Museum (RUAM) is hosting an international symposium on Mithila art from northern India on Thursday, October 13. The morning session will be at the Floyd Center for the Arts and the afternoon session will be in the Davis Performance Hall in Covington. It will feature presentations by scholars from various countries. The symposium is part of an ambitious all-semester series of exhibitions and events. The joint exhibitions will be the world's first to focus on the Dalit myths and artistry of Mithila, a region in northeast India and southeast Nepal famous for its ancient and contemporary traditional arts and culture. The exhibitions/events are listed below in chronological order. All events are free and open to the general public.

***Mithila Medley: Contemporary Arts from an Ancient Culture in North India***—an exhibition of paintings by artists belonging to Mithila's various castes and communities—on display at the [Floyd Center for the Arts](#), **August 13 - December 1**.

***Inspired by Mithila: Shadowboxes by RU Design Students***—an exhibition of Mithila-inspired works by first-year students in the Design Department—on display in [McConnell Library's Andrew W. Ross Student Gallery](#), **August 22 - November 18**.

***Naresh Paswan***—the first solo exhibition celebrating one of Mithila's leading emerging young artists—on display at [Blacksburg's Miller-Off-Main Street Gallery](#), **September 6 - October 29**.

***Martine Le Coz: A French Homage to the Ancient Myths & Contemporary Artists of Mithila, India***—the first public exhibition of illustrations by a leading contemporary French author and Legion of Honor inductee—on display in [Radford University Art Museum's Tyler Gallery](#), **September 14 - November 18**.

***Raja Salhesh's Garden: Contemporary Dalit Art & Ancient Myths of Mithila, India***—will be on display at the [Radford University Art Museum's Covington Gallery](#), **October 13 - December 3**.

***Mithila Musings***—an international symposium on Mithila's contemporary arts, presented in two panels on **Thursday, October 13** (9:30-11:30am at the [Floyd Center for the Arts](#); & 2:30-4:30pm at [Radford University's Davis Auditorium in the Covington Center](#)).

***Sama in the Forest***—a short documentary film, featuring some of the exhibited artists—directed by Carlos Gomez, produced by Prof. Coralynn Davis of Bucknell University—to be premiered at [Radford University's Davis Performance Hall in the Covington Center](#) on **Saturday, October 15**, 2:00-3:15pm.

***The Girl Who Touched the Stars*** and ***The Priest and the Prostitute***—Two 45-minute plays, the 1<sup>st</sup> is a contemporary drama, and the 2<sup>nd</sup> is a comedy based on a centuries old folktale with traditional Indian music and dance elements. Presented by The Indian Cultural Society Theatre of East Brunswick, NJ. **Saturday, October 29** at 7:30 pm in [RU's Davis Performance Hall](#).

## 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 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 Sahlesh'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 male 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.

Less encumbered by the visual conventions and subject matter followed by most of their upper caste neighbors, Mithila's Dalit artists' paintings are at last being recognized as creating some of their region's most innovative and vigorous imagery.

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, Martine 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, entitled *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 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 Ethnic Arts Foundation; most of these paintings have never before been publicly exhibited. We have much to celebrate here at Radford University!