

***Many Visions, Many Versions***  
**University of Tennessee, Knoxville**  
**Faculty Guide**

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The exhibition *Many Visions, Many Versions: Art from Indigenous Communities in India* features art created in the Mithila, Warli, Gond, and Chitrakar artistic traditions. The artists are contemporary and use their work to explore traditional themes as well as modern day issues impacting society. The show's curators have broken the artwork held within the exhibition into four broad categories: Myth and Cosmology, Nature Real and Imagined, Village Life, and Contemporary Explorations as a way to compare the different aesthetics thematically.

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**Pre-Tour**

To prepare for a visit to the exhibition, faculty may ask students to explore and define some key terms:

Indigenous	Contemporary
Spirituality	Cultural representation
Ethnicity	Narrative
Adivasi	Caste

Explore the following Indian communities and art making traditions: Mithila, Warli, Gond, Chitrakar, Patua (Pat)  
Resources for exploring these terms, communities, and traditions can be found in the bibliography.

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**During your Visit**

*Many Visions, Many Versions* is divided into the subcategories of nature, cosmology, everyday life, and contemporary issues. Within these basic categories, we have identified key overarching educational themes to guide the learning experience. One or more of these themes could be used to focus a conversation and/or subsequent assignments. Below you will find a brief summary of each theme, related questions to consider, and a prompt for a conversation beyond the exhibition.

**Theme 1: Representations and Depictions of Gender, Sexuality, and Fertility**

Gender identity and roles between genders are depicted both explicitly and in more implicit and subliminal ways throughout *Many Visions, Many Versions*. Human figures show traditional relationships, some of which may seem conservative or traditional, while other ones may not be. Contemporary interpersonal relationships may challenge the traditional ones, especially in terms of women's agency, sense of self, and place within society. Also, fertility is expressed in some work through human relationships and occasionally in representations of plants, animals, and spiritual entities. Natural objects and spiritual beings may also be gendered. Fertility may relate to industry and economy as well as a connection to

nature. Consider these depictions as they relate to a largely agrarian society that is closely linked to the environment around them.

- What visual cues are used to describe gender and relationships between genders? How is it the same or different between the four artistic traditions? What, if anything, appears to be gender neutral?
- When exploring non-human elements, based on identifiers you have observed elsewhere in the artwork, what symbols appear “feminine” and what appear “masculine”?
- All communities have fashion and social cues that are linked to gender. Consider a community you are familiar with. How is gender described through style and dress? How has gender fluidity and nonconformity played into or questioned those norms? What from history or religion defined those roles? When comparing that culture to the art you saw today, what seems universal or familiar? What is unique?

**Beyond the exhibition:** Tejal Shah (<http://tejalshah.in/home/>) is an Indian artist whose work aligns more with the accepted concept of contemporary fine art. As a genderqueer artist, they challenge gender, sexuality, and societal expectations through their video art and collage. Compare and contrast Shah’s work to that of Rani Jha, a Mithila artist, and Swarna Chitrakar, a scroll artist, in *Many Visions Many Versions*. How do their ideas and concepts overlap? Where do they diverge? What are some parallels and distinctions?

## Theme 2: Politics in Art

Within much of the art in *Many Visions, Many Versions*, the personal becomes political. This is not always overt, singular or one-sided. Politics may be large-scale and global, or they may be intimate. They could address the dynamics within a particular community or even within a household. When identifying political elements in art work, keep in mind the nuances that occur in the images as they are represented. Think about what the artist may be trying to say or not say; what is left out may be just as important as what’s included. Also, the issues and perspectives may not match Western ideas or Euro-centric perspectives. Consider class, economics, and power structures through the images as they are represented.

- Several of the works depict labor practices. What might be the artist’s perspective about a particular industry? What makes you say that? What are some overt and subtle cues that caused you to form your analysis? How do you think that particular industry is viewed within the community?
- How are everyday politics of a small community portrayed versus large-scale global issues? What issues resonate with you? What have you not thought about before?
- What surprises you about the political perspective of these artists? What do you want to know more about?
- Consider other indigenous communities that you may be familiar with. What are some contemporary political issues or themes that are going on? Can you think of how those issues or themes are addressed through the arts?

**Beyond the exhibition:** Though it originated in the United States, hip hop has become a global art form for personal expression and speaking truth to power. Consider the work of M.I.A., a London-born, Sri Lankan hip hop artist who references her experiences as a South Asian woman in her work. She challenges cultural norms alongside the impact of globalization, colonization, and prejudice. How does her work reference and

challenge stereotypes of South Asian people? Where do you see her political perspective? Consider the imagery she uses in her dress and videos against that of the artwork you saw in *Many Visions, Many Versions*.

### **Theme 3: Storytelling through a Visual Narrative**

Storytelling is central in much of the artwork presented in this exhibition. A singular piece can be elaborate, with complex layers and multiple scenes to construct narrative. Other works may use a single image tells a story. Still others tell a story through several individual works that go together. As you go through the gallery, consider both the symbolism and metaphor used in their artwork to tell a story. Compare the ways the different artistic traditions and the visual language they each employ. Specifically, in a traditional setting the work of Chitrakars would include performance. The artist would paint the *pat* or scroll and write a song to go with it. Then the artist would perform the song and reveal the scroll as they tell their story. Think about how the scrolls presented in *Many Visions, Many Versions* might change were they accompanied by a song.

- Consider an issue or idea that was told through a sequential art in this exhibition that resonated with you. What about the way the visual story was told made the narrative impactful?
- How do the different kinds of art (scrolls, paintings, single and multiple pieces) tell stories differently? Are there some stories that are easier to follow than others? What is the relationship between the story and the format in which it is represented?
- Consider how text comes into play with storytelling. Are there pieces that do not need any text to tell a story? Are there others that are less clear and need the text in order to effectively convey their story? How might text verses visual story telling speak clearly to one audience but alienate another?
- Is there any artwork that feels extremely unfamiliar to you? Are there others that feel familiar? How so and what is the difference? Consider your own biases and preconceived notions about India and whether those alter your interpretations.
- One artwork may tell more than one story through its imagery. Where do you see potential examples of that? What different interpretations of the same artwork might there be?

**Beyond the exhibition:** Sequential art, especially when presented as graphic novels or comic books, is an art form that connects two-dimensional art and storytelling by layering images that are designed to be read by the eye. What would you put into a comic book or graphic novel? How would you arrange the story on the page to challenge your audience or relay your message? When would text, song, or performance enhance your story? Where would including text inhibit the narrative? Consider your audience when you think about your choices.

### **Theme 4: Manifestations of Violence, Terrorism, and Death**

As artists often do, those in *Many Visions, Many Versions* consider themes of death and loss on personal, spiritual, and large-scale levels. Death can be manifested as both inter and intrapersonal loss. As scribes within their communities, Mithila and Chitrakar artists document and respond to tragedy and death on local, national, or international scale. Adivasi communities in India, which include the Gond and Warli artists, have struggled for equity and against intimidation for generations. Among all of these artistic traditions, terrorism and a critique of societal trauma may be

portrayed in artwork. However, some recent violent events that have impacted indigenous people in India are not represented in this artwork.

- Do you notice specific artwork that is more overtly violent than others? Can you identify any artwork that is subliminally violent? What are the artists trying to convey through these explicit and implicit depictions of violence?
- What visual elements are used to present the concept of death? What about violence? What are differences and similarities?
- Several of the artists reference specific natural disasters or human-caused tragedy. Find one that resonates with you. Spend a moment to consider what the artwork tells you through its imagery and composition. How does the artwork relay information about what happened? What emotions do you see? What is surprising about the artist's portrayal? What seems left out? Consider how grief appears to be processed.

**Beyond the exhibition:** Memorials, both personal and community-based, are an art form that can rely heavily on visual language. They can also cause significant controversy. What symbols are used in your community to remember the dead? How does it remember world events? In what ways does art play into this process of remembrance? Consider a memorial that has become contentious. Think about who created it and what the intent might be versus the result. What about the memorial is successful and how could it have been improved? Who gets to decide what we remember and how we commemorate loss?

### **Theme 5: Connection to Nature**

Many of the works in this exhibit depict profound relationships to nature. Some references are cosmological or religious. Others are from everyday life, and still others are fantastical depicting imaginary creatures and worlds. Many animals and plants appear to convey specific meanings and relationships. Those connections may be positive, something that an artist feels closely linked to. They could serve as spiritual avatars or places of respite. Conversely, the relationship to nature could be negative or harmful, overpowering communities or punishing its inhabitants. The earth is also shown as a resource, used for the sustaining human life and as key partner for a community's economic wellbeing

- What types of natural images do you see repeated through the artwork? How is that image portrayed differently from artist to artist, tradition to tradition? What might its significance be?
- Consider how you connect with nature on a daily basis. How is that relationship either similar or different, or maybe it is both, from the relationships you've observed in the exhibit? Why do you think that is?
- How do the artists show natural disasters? Consider the symbols and emotions in the work. Do we view nature as an inherently violent force? How do we overcome the aftermath of natural disasters? Is there a causal relationship between natural disasters and people's treatment of the land? Their relationship to it?
- What about when nature is helpful, in terms of agricultural practices?

**Beyond the exhibition:** Global warming is having intense effects on communities worldwide. Humans are affected as are the animals and ecosystems that surround us. Think about how global warming has changed either your personal environment or another environment recently. In what ways have you seen these effects manifest in popular culture and art outside of this exhibit?

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## Big Picture

- Many of these art forms were originally created by artists for their immediate community. Gond, Warli, and Mithila paintings were primarily done on walls for a household or group. Chitrakars travelled from village to village performing original songs while they unrolled their painted scrolls, showing scenes in their songs one by one. However, each community of artists, including the ones in this exhibition, started to create works that could be placed into galleries and shops. This transition largely took place so the artwork could be bought, sold, and collected. How might this have influenced the artists and art market? How might it have impacted the imagery being presented? Consider both positive and negative influence. The canon of art history that is most regularly taught in schools in the United States does not include artists from these communities. What might the impact of that exclusion be? Who makes those decisions? What, if any, other artists should be represented in the canon? Also, within indigenous artwork there is a great deal of debate around the idea of “authenticity” versus artistic agency and cultural practice. How might that impact the way in which this work is created, perceived, and considered?
- Contemporary politics in India have become grossly polarized and even violent. Research the recent elections and stories about human rights issues. How have those activities impacted Adivasi communities like the Gond and Warli? How is it impacting the regions of the Chitrakar and Mithila artists? How do the politics in India seem to be situated within global trends? Look specifically at traumatic events that have happened in India within the timeframe of the art presented here. What stories seem to be left out by these artists? Why might they be excluded? Consider the community’s experience, the perceived audience for the artwork, artistic choice, and curatorial choice in your inquiry. Challenge yourself to think beyond your initial impulse and interpretation.
- Words, like symbols in visual art, can be repurposed, repeated, and become cues for a coded interpretations or meaning. Choose a recent violent or polarizing event and think about how your community described it. If the issue was contentious, how was it presented by other communities? What words were chosen to talk about it? What images and photos were used? What do they mean on the surface? What might the deeper intention or reference be? Choose a certain word or phrase and research its origins of use. How has it changed over time? How else might the same event or sentiment be described? How does changing words change meaning?

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