

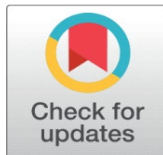
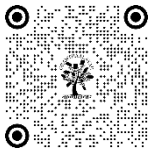


# REVIVING MANJUSHA: INTEGRATING BIHAR'S SEQUENTIAL FOLK ART INTO CONTEMPORARY ART EDUCATION AND PRACTICE

Dr. Aditi Jha <sup>1</sup>  

<sup>1</sup> Associate Professor, Rachana Sansad College of Applied Arts and Craft, India



## Corresponding Author

Dr. Aditi Jha,  
[aditij@rachanasansad.edu.in](mailto:aditij@rachanasansad.edu.in)

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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines the revival of Manjusha Art, a traditional narrative folk art from the Anga region of Bihar, through its integration into contemporary art education. Known as one of India's only sequential storytelling art forms, Manjusha combines ritual, mythology, and visual symbolism rooted in the legend of Bihula and Bishahari. Despite its historical and cultural richness, the art form has faced significant decline due to limited institutional support, aesthetic bias, and the marginalization of Angika culture. Unlike Madhubani, which gained international recognition, Manjusha remained confined to ritual spaces and economically vulnerable artisan communities. The paper argues that formal art institutions—particularly colleges and universities—have a critical role to play in reviving Manjusha through curriculum development, community collaborations, field internships, and research initiatives. It also explores recent innovations that have expanded the reach of Manjusha into fashion, digital media, and e-commerce platforms, signaling its adaptability and contemporary relevance. By embedding Manjusha into pedagogical, scholarly, and market frameworks, educational institutions can help preserve this endangered tradition while fostering creative reinterpretation. Ultimately, the revival of Manjusha art is presented not just as a cultural necessity but as a unique opportunity to engage with heritage in meaningful, inclusive, and future-facing ways.

**Keywords:** Manjusha Art Revival, Sequential Folk Narratives, Indigenous Art, Angika Cultural Heritage, Contemporary Folk Integration

## 1. INTRODUCTION

As educators in the arts, we often find ourselves navigating a curriculum shaped largely by Eurocentric frameworks, modernist paradigms, and global trends. While these are undeniably important, they often leave little room for indigenous expressions that are deeply rooted in local culture and storytelling. One such tradition—rich, symbolic, and yet nearly forgotten—is Manjusha art, a folk art form that emerged from the Anga region of Bihar, particularly Bhagalpur. Known as one of India's earliest forms of sequential narrative art, Manjusha is not just a visual style—it is a living story passed down through generations (Sagar, 2021).

Historically, Manjusha was practiced by communities like the Kumbhakar and Malakar castes and was integral to rituals like Bishahari Puja, which honors snake goddesses through temple-shaped bamboo boxes and vibrant depictions of the legend of Bihula and Bishahari. The artwork is characterized by its use of natural colors, bold lines, and recurring

motifs like serpents, floral borders, and mythological figures—all woven together to tell a story visually across panels (Manjusha Kala, n.d.).

The decline of Manjusha art reflects a broader pattern: traditional art forms—especially those without commercial or state backing—are often excluded from academic discourse and contemporary practice. In doing so, we risk losing not only the art itself but the cultural memory, identity, and values it carries (Echoes of Time, 2022). Folk art traditions like Manjusha are invaluable not only for their aesthetic merit but for their ability to teach us about local belief systems, gender dynamics, environmental relationships, and modes of visual communication that are distinctly Indian.

This paper argues that reviving Manjusha art through formal art education is both timely and essential. By incorporating it into studio practices, visual storytelling, research modules, and community projects, we can preserve this endangered tradition while inspiring innovation in contemporary art-making. Manjusha offers students a unique opportunity to engage with heritage, rethink their visual narratives, and contribute meaningfully to cultural sustainability.

## 2. HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL CONTEXT OF MANJUSHA ART

Manjusha art, a vibrant and narrative-driven folk tradition, finds its roots in the Anga region, historically known as Champa, in present-day Bhagalpur, Bihar. Referenced in the Mahabharata, Atharva Veda, and Buddhist texts as one of the sixteen Mahajanapadas, Anga was a center of trade, spirituality, and cultural synthesis (Manjusha Art, 2021). The legend of Sati Bihula and Devi Bishahari—a tale of feminine devotion and cosmic justice—is central to the art and to the annual Bishahari Puja observed in Shravan (July–August).

The Sanskrit word Manjusha means "box," and refers to the ritual containers adorned with painted narratives. These temple-shaped boxes are believed to symbolize the chest in which Bihula carried her husband's lifeless body to the heavens (Folkartopedia, 2023). Figures are stylized with distinct iconographic features—elongated limbs forming X-shapes, expressive eyes, and vivid borders such as Lehriya (waves), Belpatra (Shiva's sacred leaf), and Sarp Ladi (serpent chains) that contribute to both structure and symbolism. It has been depicted clearly in Figure1.

**Figure 1**



**Figure 1** Manjusha Painting Depicting Symbolism

Women from the Malakar and Kumbhakar communities played a key role in preserving the tradition, using domestic materials like turmeric and bamboo slivers for brushes. Their participation was a form of devotional and cultural authorship (Historified, 2025).

The revival of Manjusha gained momentum in the 1930s with British official W.G. Archer's interest in the art, and later through the tireless efforts of practitioners like Smt. Chakravarty Devi, Nirmala Devi, and Manoj Pandit (Folkartopedia, 2023; TOI, 2025).

**Figure 2**



**Figure 2** Artisan Painting the Manjusha Artform

### 3. DECLINE AND CHALLENGES OF MANJUSHA ART

Despite its narrative depth and historical significance, Manjusha Art remains in the shadows compared to other Indian folk art forms such as Madhubani. While Madhubani achieved global commercial success, Manjusha was constrained by its ritualistic scope and symbolic intensity—factors that limited its visual appeal to contemporary audiences (Sahapedia, 2021).

Aesthetic biases and institutional neglect have played significant roles in this disparity. The fluorescent color palette and imagery of snakes and funerary scenes often alienated urban buyers, as noted by artist Soma Roy (Sahapedia, 2021). Institutional support remained limited, with sporadic efforts like the 1984 JansampoornaVibagh campaign doing little to effect systemic change (Folkartopedia, 2023).

Artisans, many from marginalized communities, face economic barriers and lack access to sustainable markets. As Roy points out, younger generations are drawn to Madhubani due to better financial prospects and visibility (Sahapedia, 2021). Moreover, cultural marginalization of the Angika-speaking region has led to limited state recognition compared to Maithili culture, further eroding Manjusha's status (Historified, 2025).

### 4. EDUCATIONAL INTEGRATION: THE ROLE OF ART COLLEGES

To ensure Manjusha's survival, formal art education must become a critical platform for revival. Art colleges should integrate Manjusha into their curricula through elective courses, folklore illustration workshops, and research modules that focus on traditional storytelling forms. These modules can help students contextualize indigenous knowledge systems within contemporary artistic practice (Indian Folk Art Corridor, 2023).

Collaborations with artists such as Soma Roy and Manoj Pandit can bridge the gap between institutional and community knowledge. These partnerships provide artisans with recognition and students with firsthand learning experiences (ResearchGate, 2020).

Art colleges can also support field internships in Bhagalpur, enabling students to document oral histories, assist with exhibitions, and co-create with artisan groups. This transforms local heritage into a dynamic part of contemporary pedagogy (Manjusha Art, n.d.).

Research and archiving initiatives, such as design genealogy documentation and motif decoding, will be critical as the Bihar government moves toward obtaining a GI tag and legal patent for Manjusha Art (TOI, 2025).

## 5. CONTEMPORARY INNOVATIONS AND MARKET REVIVAL

Manjusha has gradually moved from a ritual practice to a modern design language. Artists like Manoj Pandit initiated this shift by painting Manjusha on silk, expanding its reach into fashion and lifestyle products. Today, Manjusha appears on tussar sarees, cushion covers, jute bags, bamboo crafts, and jewelry, creating a diversified product ecosystem (Indian Folk Art Corridor, 2023).

Organizations such as the Manjusha Art Research Foundation have empowered over 1,000 women artisans by linking them to e-commerce platforms like Etsy, Flipkart, and Discovered.us, helping integrate the form into national and global marketplaces (Manjusha Art, n.d.).

Digitally, Manjusha holds potential for NFT artworks, animated shorts, and visual storytelling apps based on the Bihula-Bishahari epic. Its narrative format lends itself to comics, gaming, and immersive multimedia (TOI, 2025).

A major symbolic moment was the gifting of a Manjusha painting to the Prime Minister, signifying state recognition and cultural pride. Craft training courses and certification programs further encourage new generations to reinterpret the art in contemporary forms while maintaining its cultural essence (TOI, 2025; Sahapedia, 2021).

**Figure 3**



**Figure 3** Pen Stand Artifact with Manjusha Painting

**Figure 4**



**Figure 4** Lamp Artifact with Manjusha Painting

**Figure 5**



**Figure 5** Elephant Showpiece with Manjusha Painting

## 6. CONCLUSION

Manjusha Art is more than an artistic form—it is a cultural inheritance that carries the myths, emotions, and histories of an entire region. Its preservation requires more than nostalgia; it demands sustained institutional engagement. Art colleges and universities hold both the responsibility and the tools to protect, propagate, and innovate this tradition.

By embedding Manjusha in art education, research, and collaboration, we can transform the way folk art is perceived—not as static relics of the past but as evolving mediums of cultural expression. Manjusha is a vessel of pride, identity, and creative potential. It deserves not just to be remembered, but reimagined for the present and preserved for the future.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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