Madhubani is a remote regional market town in the rural state of Bihar near the Indian–Nepalese border. It lies in the ancient kingdom of Mithila, the birthplace of Sītā (the heroine of the epic Rāmāyana), as well as of the Buddha, and the founder of the Jain faith. The conduct of daily life in Madhubani still provides a living link with this millennia-old cultural heritage. It is a matriarchal society and women are the custodians of tradition. Through paintings and drawings they draw down the blessing of the gods on the family at each of the many Hindu religious festivals and prescribed rituals that traditionally mark each person’s ordered progress through life—especially at the time of marriage.

Styles vary from outlying village to village, but each work is generally painted from the centre outwards. The main icons of gods and characters from well-known religious stories are surrounded by an abundance of natural motifs—buds, flowers, leaves, animals and birds—as well as ornamental swirls, stripes and dots. The limited traditional palette of yellow carnation pollen and turmeric powder, red clay, lamp black and cow dung mixed with goat’s milk, cow’s urine or vegetable juice, has been expanded with the more recent availability of powdered fabric dyes from plants and minerals. Paint may be applied with a small wad of lint or rat’s hair tied to a twig, or simply a frayed bamboo splint.

Traditionally the designs were painted as large murals on the mud walls and floors of key areas of the house, verandah or courtyard, or sometimes to decorate wrapping paper for ceremonial gifts. It was during the devastating drought and famine of 1966–68 that the women of Madhubani were encouraged to produce their designs on handmade paper for sale.

This collection of paintings was purchased in local Madhubani markets in 1982 by John Dunham, then lecturer in the Department of Indian Studies at the University of Melbourne, as a teaching aid to introduce students to Indian religious iconography.