



INVISIBLE LABOUR ON CANVAS: A STUDY OF FISHERWOMEN IN B. PRABHA'S PAINTINGS

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Abstract: *The sector of fisheries and aquaculture provides employment to over 600 million people across the globe. As per the 2024 reports of the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO), women constitute almost half of the total workforce in this sector. In India, the contribution of women exceeds that of more than 66% of the total workforce. Women in this sector often face sexual harassment and discrimination in the workplace that not only affect their professional growth but also leave psychological impacts as well. In this paper the issues faced by fisherwomen of India will be discussed with the help of the artworks of B. Prabha, which act as the reflections of the social realities of Indian fisherwomen. She, being one of the foremost modern women painters of India, consistently depicted fisherwomen as central subjects in her canvases. Through elongated forms, subdued tones, and a focus on everyday toil, she gave visibility and dignity to women otherwise sidelined in both art and society.*

Keywords: *B. Prabha, Fisherwomen, Gender in art, Invisible Labour, Modern Painting.*

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Introduction

During the 1950s, the Indian government undertook the initiative of modernising the fishery sector; before this, it was mostly a caste-based profession. The people involved in this sector were considered to be one of the lowest in

the socio- economical hierarchy of Indian society. This sector experienced rapid mechanisation and industrialisation in production, which attracted corporate interests in fishing and aquaculture. After the entry of big corporations the focus was

more on the international export and the local markets were mostly neglected (Hapke: 2001: 1103-1107).

The precarious working conditions of women in the fishery sector are significant and to be analysed because their invisible labour makes small-scale fishing communities survive. In some cases, underprivileged women are forced to use sex as a bargaining tool and survival strategy; this is generally termed as “fish for sex,” which indicates the extreme vulnerability of women in this sector. By the late 1970s and 1980s, the term “exploitation” was seen as too confrontational against the patriarchal practices and capitalism, especially as development agendas such as the United Nations CEDAW sought to include them in the economy.

Over the years the discussion on the women in the fishery sector has shifted from the framework of political economy to political ecology (Biswas: 2011: 53-60). The early scholarly works on this sector were mainly based on the framework of Marxian class analysis, which discussed that in the fishing economy only the act of fishing was economically valued, and other activities involved were either underpaid or unpaid. This has been analysed in the light of the sexual division of work, which justified such patriarchal practices through biological differences between a man and a woman. The sector had also been seen as divided into public and private spheres. In the private sphere, activities such as cleaning, drying fish, repairing the nets, cooking for the family, and childcare were included, which were generally considered useless in economic terms and remained unpaid, although women are hired by the industries when they need flexible and low-paid workers. This trend is known as ‘feminisation of employment’, where more women enter wage work, but they are either underpaid or work in bad conditions. In the last decade of the twenty first century privatisation of regulation and targeted

aid have again strengthened the hold of capitalist interests under the banner of “good governance.” This has deepened the socio-economic inequalities where the poor produce and the rich consume, and the class struggle has been overshadowed by the environmentalist discourse (Biswas: 2011: 53-60). Although India has experienced significant economic growth, the opportunities in the formal sector remain scarce, which has led to the expansion of informal employment, especially among women (Pritam Ranjan Sahu: 2025).

The issues faced by fisherwomen have been meticulously documented by the social scientists as discussed above in detail, while visual artists have made them immortal by portraying them on their canvases. Among them, B. Prabha stands out for consistently depicting them as central characters on her canvases. Her artworks portrayed them as simple yet strong, suggesting their courage to face hardships in life and to survive against all odds. These women have been depicted with distinctive features such as their downcast eyes, sombre facial expressions, and the majority of them wearing white saris, suggesting their quiet dignity and physical as well as emotional burden (Trust:2011).

Literature Review

The topics related to gender, labour, and their artistic representation have been a matter of discussion for a long time. Early studies on the fisherwomen focused entirely on their developmental and economic aspects. Holly Hapke, in one of his most significant works, discusses the socio-economic conditions of fisherwomen in Kerala and their situation after the arrival of big corporations. In recent years scholars such as Nilanjana Biswas (2011) and Kusakabe (2022) have expanded the framework by incorporating feminist perspectives and by highlighting the dual role of females and their invisibility in the fishery sector. Within the Indian art historical discourse, scholars such as

Geeta Kapur and Partha Mitter have investigated the representation of women in modern Indian painting. Women artists such as Sunyani Devi and Amrita Sher-Gil and other women artists have been widely discussed, but B. Prabha's representation of the working-class women, especially the fisherwomen, remains under-researched. The sociological readings of the Koli community by G.S. Ghurye (1963) provide vital ethnographic information to understand the lived realities that were re-articulated by B. Prabha on canvases.

Despite considerable academic attention on gendered labour and women artists in India, there is a gap in how the visual representations play a vital role in understanding the socio-economic condition of women. The paintings of B. Prabha act as a bridge between the visual and sociological invisibility of fisherwomen. Figures 4.2 and 4.3 represent the publication trends in gender-focused and gender-related studies from 2011 to 2021 on fisheries and aquaculture respectively. Both graphs reveal an increase in the gender-focused publications after 2015, reaching its zenith in 2017, after which a subsequent decline can be observed whereas gender-related studies display a more consistent publications across the decade. This indicates at the moderate but continuous scholarly attention. Both of the graphs call for more gender-focused and interdisciplinary academic engagement.

Theoretical Framework

This paper adopts Marxist feminist and visual sociological framework to interpret the art works of B. Prabha, representing class and gender. The Marxist feminist approach helps us to analyse the major issues faced by women engaged in the fishery sector such as the unpaid or underpaid labour and patriarchal hierarchy resulting in the devalue and invisibility of their labour whereas the visual sociology provides a technique to

understand the paintings by B. Prabha as the record of ethnography and social experiences of the fishing community of Maharashtra. Through this interdisciplinary approach Prabha's art is not only perceived in aesthetic terms but also as a sociological commentary that represents the hardships and invisible labour of fisherwomen.

Methodology

This paper adopts an interdisciplinary methodology, combining the visual analysis of the artworks of B. Prabha as well as the existing sociological texts related to class and gender. It attempts to analyse the paintings of B. Prabha as ethnographic records of fisherwomen and women in general and the difficulties faced by them in their daily lives.

The Koli Community of Maharashtra

Kolis are arguably the largest of the non-Brahminic and non-dominant ethnic groups dwelling in the Bombay state (Maharashtra). According to the data of 1891 their population was twenty-one lakhs. The term Koli encompasses various communities engaged in diverse occupations and cultural advancements. This diversity is reflected in the distinctive names which each community uses for itself and its neighbours. In the Gujarati region, two divisions of Koli ethnic groups are identified namely the Talabda Koli and Chunvalia Koli, both of them belonged to agricultural sector but former was more settled and superior agriculturists on the other hand in Maharashtra the term Koli is used to refer to a fisherman (Ghurye:1963). The Koli community has a documented existence in Mumbai (erstwhile Bombay) since the twelfth century. For generations they lived on the shores of the Arabian Sea which provided them subsistence. Traditionally the Kolis lived in the "Koliwada" at the entrance of which there used to be a fish or the *machhi* market (Tiwari: 2022).

Women are considered as the protectors of ancestral knowledge especially when it comes to the intangible inheritance such as preparing traditional dishes, handicrafts and other art forms. According to Nagwa Abdel Zaher (2021), women not only preserve and disseminate them to younger generations but also adapt them with the contemporary needs while retaining the originality. Koli women are no exception, they have passed their culture to several generations especially their traditional dresses, food practices and ornamentation and in this elderly women of the family play a very significant role (Somani, 2024). This cultural aspect will be discussed subsequently through the analysis of the artworks of B. Prabha.

Fisherwomen in the Artworks of B. Prabha

Art can be interpreted with different approaches such as with the lens of connoisseurship which focuses on questions like the authorship, place of origin, and the year when the artwork was produced. Another approach is the historical style which focuses on the stylistic features to their historical context. Social, political, and economic conditions of the period also profoundly influence art and its forms. The other perspective through which artwork can be viewed is with the psychological approach which considers perception, emotion, and psychological theories associated with art (Bergossi and Caires: 2015). This analysis aims to examine the paintings of B. Prabha from all of these interpretive frameworks in order to arrive at a holistic understanding of her artworks.

B. Prabha was born in 1933 in Bela, Maharashtra. She studied at Nagpur School of Art and then completed her diploma in Painting and Mural Painting from the J.J School of Art, Mumbai (1954- 55). She was deeply inspired by Indian as well as European masters namely, Van Gogh, Gauguin, Modigliani and Picasso and Sher-Gil. B. Prabha had herself stated:

“I have yet to see a happy woman” and the central theme of her paintings are women of different social strata and their sufferings. Through her artworks she tried to give a voice to these voiceless females and to their struggles. Most of her paintings portray fisherwomen and their everyday challenges (Trust: 2011). As pointed out by Booth and Booth (2002), the photo voice method challenges the traditional ‘politics of representation’ by documenting lives of the common powerless people (Shibaji Bose:2018). Although this observation exclusively addresses the photo voice methodology but the artworks of B. Prabha reflect similar intentions by painting the marginalised fisherwomen as passive subjects which have been discussed in this paper.

The earliest artworks of B. Prabha portray two women carrying out the post fishery tasks in public as well as private spheres. They have been painted with strong and very expressive brush strokes using rich colours such as orange, yellow and green contrasting to their gloomy life. The painting from 1950’s shows women carrying fishes from the sea (Fig.4.4). Both women are draped in their traditional attire *lugaṭ or lugaḍ* which is 12 meters in length and sometimes because of the unavailability of such a long piece of fabric they use two different saris of 6 meters each. An important characteristic of the *lugaṭ* is that it is draped tightly which helps in maintaining the health of lower abdomen and flat stomach. It ends right below the knee. An upper garment or the blouse (*coli*) generally has a round neck and sleeves of which ends above the elbow. *Lugaṭ* as well as *Coli* have been designed to favour women while working in the wet conditions (Somani: 2024). The depiction of *Lugaṭ* which is a functional clothing indicates a profound relationship between labour and lifestyle and how they influence each other. In both of the paintings marital status of women has also been indicated with the help of the simple *Gāṭhlā (Maṅgalsūtra)* worn by them and turmeric smeared foreheads which shows the participation of married women in the fishery sector represents the active yet

invisible participation of married women in the post-harvest activities. Another painting of 1956 depicts a moment of respite - two women sitting on a traditional woven bed - representing a moment of pause amidst the labour and in the background a lit lantern is hanging, suggesting the evening time when they would have returned from selling the fishes and are perhaps discussing about their day conveying a mutual support and solidarity (Fig.4.5).

From 1960's the aesthetic language of B. Prabha undertook a shift and she started using a very restrained colour palette, dominated by hues of blue, brown and ochre and depicted fisherwomen in a more simplified and elongated form, showing the influence of Amrita Sher-Gil. She placed the figures against a very minimalist background devoid of time and space unlike her earlier artworks which had narrative qualities. These transformations evoked the melancholy of the life of fisherwomen.

The untitled paintings of B. Prabha from 1960 and 1962 (Figs.4.6 and 4.7) surpass the ethnographic portrayal and act as a social commentary on the condition of fisherwomen. Both paintings depict fisherwoman in their traditional attire, sitting on a low stool with a basket of freshly caught fishes which has been used as a metaphor for her daily toil. Both of them have been depicted against a monochromatic background, dominated by greys, browns and whites which intensifies the melancholy. The latter has been shown with downcast eyes, signifying her quiet endurance and the burden of survival. These paintings of B. Prabha suggest that the Koli women had nothing but the basket of fish which was her only source of subsistence. These paintings justify her statement that her objective was to paint the trauma and tragedy of women (Artnet:n.d.)

Painting executed in the year 1966, Fig.4.8 depicts two women, both of whom are semi-nude

except for the white drapes around the waist. The bodies are elongated and simplified, emphasising fragility over sensuality, a hallmark of the B. Prabha's paintings. Both of them are facing each other and there is a sense of helplessness on their faces while interacting with each other. One woman is holding an empty basket symbolising the absence and unfulfilled labour and the other is standing beside the heap of fish, clasping her wrist with another hand communicating lack of confidence and nervousness. Prabha again by using restrained colour palette and minimal background intensifies the socio- economical and psychological conditions of the women.

The untitled painting of 1986, (Fig.4.9) shows three women seated closely together,

Suggesting closeness, feminine solidarity, support among the community members and their shared experiences. The women are draped in white saris and their faces are painted in deep brown tones and similar colour palette has been used in the background as well as in the rendition of women creating a desolate ambience, merging the women with their environment. A cluster of thatched huts have been represented to give the painting a rural coastal setting. They are surrounded by four large baskets with plenty of fishes but yet the women have a sorrowful expression, suggesting that their happiness required much more than fulfilment of materialistic needs.

Duality of Working Women

Women in various cultures have always been portrayed as a goddess of wealth, power and peace but their professional world was primarily confined as care givers and executives of the household services which requires to be altered. In formal as well as informal sectors while performing the dual role working mothers compromise with their health which often lead to depression, stress and other psychological disorders. They also go through the maternal guilt

of not fulfilling their motherly roles. Borg (2007) argues that there is gender discrimination towards the 'long iceberg of guilt' and women feel that it is only their responsibility to keep their children happy and to stand with them whenever her children face a problem (Negi: 2020).

The working mothers of the Koli community not only take care of their family but also actively participate in the post fishery activities as discussed earlier. This leads to an additional burden on their shoulders. Women are also treated as the reserved armies who fulfil the activities which is either simply refused by men to be performed or because of the low salary offered. They are also considered as a commodity in both public and private spheres of the household economy. This condition of Koli women in the male dominated household gives us the hint to the theory of Engels which remarks it as relationship between a bourgeoisie and a proletariat within the family (Crook: 1988).

Several paintings of B. Prabha portray the universal theme of mother and child relationship. In one of the paintings of this series (Fig.4.10), we can see the mother sitting dressed in a white garment with folds. The expression and the body language of the mother exhibit profound emotional attachment suggesting that her world revolves around her child. She is holding the child tightly, close to her chest and her curved body creates a womb like form symbolising safety and unconditional love. The depiction of the mother also indicates the dual burden borne by working class women of being professionally vulnerable and simultaneously required to be strong as mothers. The absence of background and a special focus on the human forms suggest the influence of Jamini Roy's mother and child series.

This series also shows a semi-nude woman holding an unclad child in her arms (Fig.4.11). Both of them appear to be emaciated and their bones are clearly visible highlighting their fragility and deprivation. They have been depicted against

a narrow, vertical and confined space symbolising their isolation and vulnerability. The gaze of the woman is upwards signifying helplessness, hope or most probably appeal to the divine. The grey background intensifies the emotions such as the extreme sadness and helplessness. Through this painting, Prabha conveys the deprivation, social vulnerability and both physical and emotional sufferings which a working woman of the Koli community experiences with her child.

B. Prabha, in her paintings has also depicted women creating *Sikku* or the *Chikku Kolam* (4.12). The painting reflects a clear influence of Amrita Sher-Gil's *Bride's Toilet*. In her article '*Sikku Kolam or the Interlaced Kolam*' Chantal Jumel states that *Kolam* artists described to her that the dots of the *Kolam* symbolise the difficulties of the life and the unbroken lines represent a divine force that navigate through these obstacles and eventually unites with the source of creation (Jumel: 2013). In my opinion B. Prabha conveys a similar thought through her artwork, representing how women often face struggles in their daily lives and overcome them through their endurance.

Conclusion

The Indian fisherwomen play a vital role in the socio-economic framework, yet their labour often remains invisible. This paper was an attempt to uncover the profound meanings of the artworks by B. Prabha especially the fisherwomen series with the help of Marxist feminist and sociological lens. Prabha has shown the everyday struggle, resilience and dignity of fisherwomen by using subdued colour palettes, elongated figures and quiet expressions which elevates her artworks from being mere representations to the preserved lived realities of women who actively contribute in sustaining their households, communities and cultural traditions. By depicting the fisherwomen as central subjects, Prabha challenges their invisibility and calls for recognition of their labour.

Illustrations

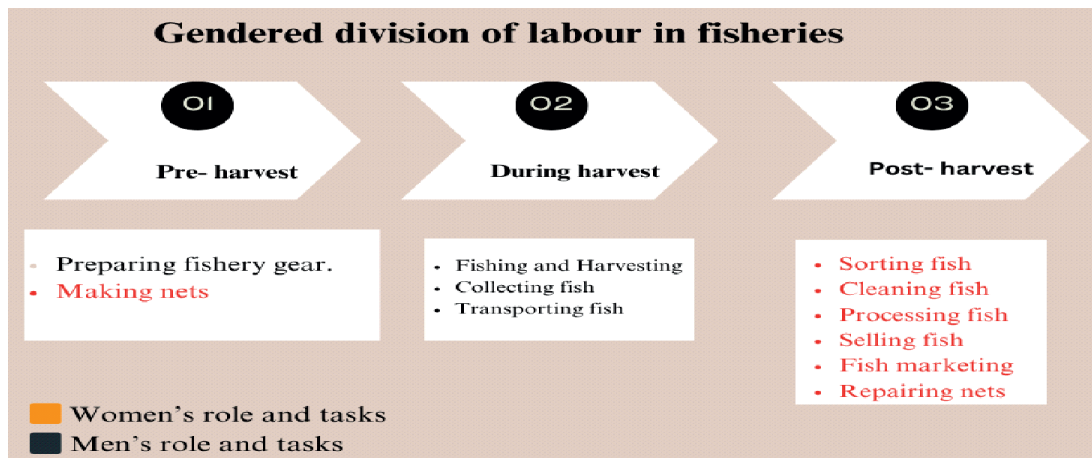


Fig. 4.1: Gendered division of labour in fisheries

Source: Author's own elaboration based on Andrea Raluca Torre, 2019

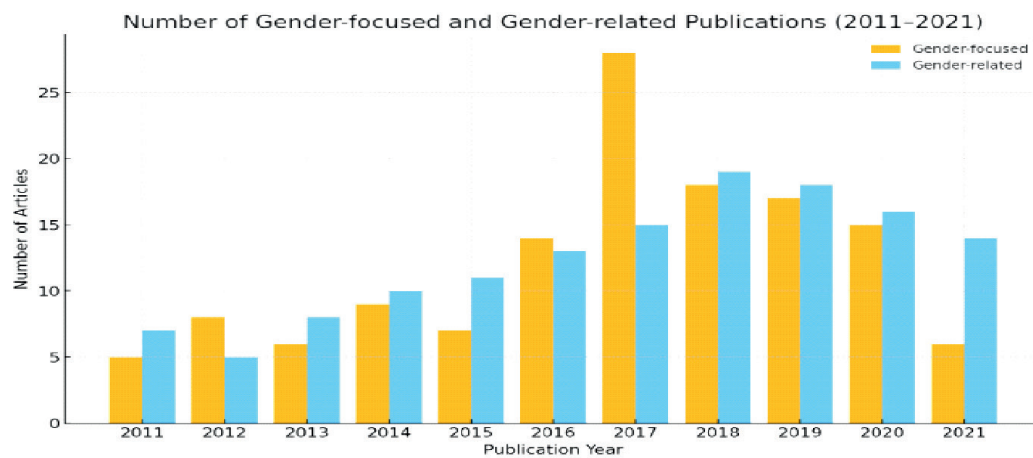


Fig. 4.2: Year wise analysis of research publications on gender and fisheries by year of publication. (Kusakabe:2922)

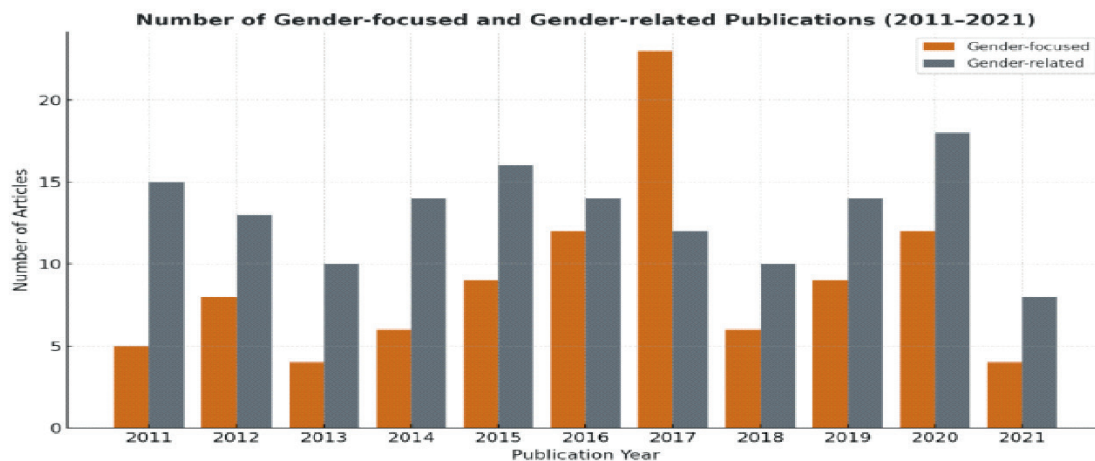


Fig. 4.3: Year wise analysis of research publications on gender and aquaculture by year of publication. (Kusakabe:2922)



Fig 4.4: Untitled, c. 1950s, Gouache and ink on mount board, 15.25 x 19.5 in (39 x 49.5 cm).
Image courtesy of Mutual Art. Retrieved September 23, 2025.

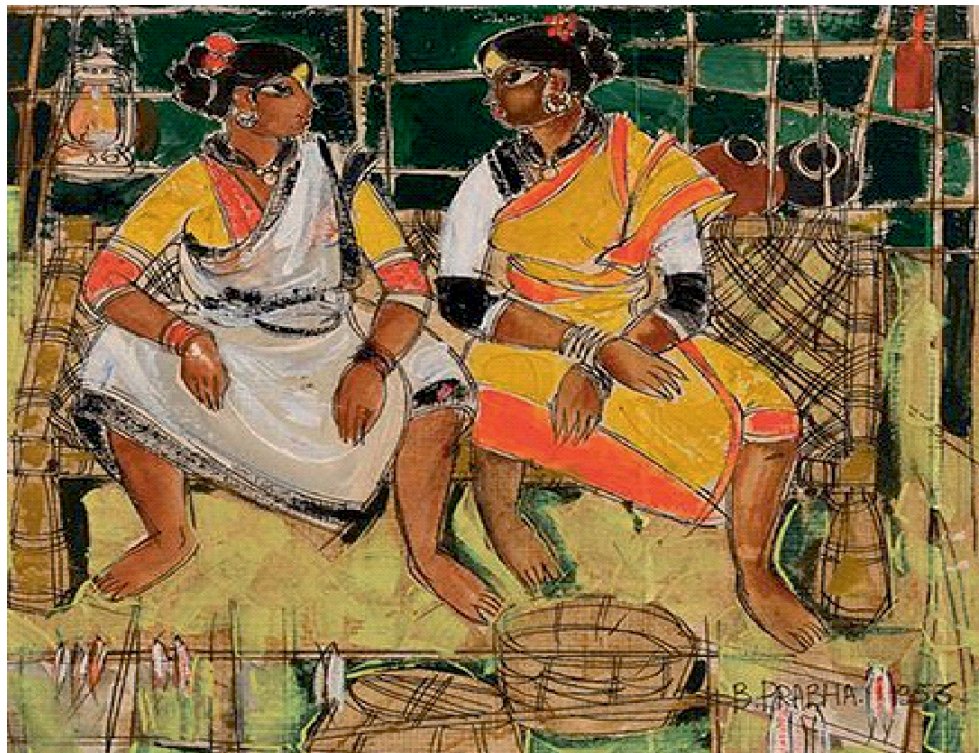


Fig. 4.5: Untitled, c. 1956, Mix media on paper, 8.25x 9.25 in.
Image courtesy of Mutual Art, Retrieved September 23, 2025.



Fig. 4.6: Untitled, c. 1960, Oil on Canvas, 27.5x 23.5 in.
Image courtesy of Mutual Art, Retrieved September 23, 2025.



Fig.4.7: Untitled, (Fish Market), c. 1962, Oil on canvas, 27 3/4 x 35 3/4 in.
Image courtesy of Mutual Art, Retrieved September 23, 2025.



**Fig.4.8: Untitled (Two Fisherwomen), c. 1966,
Image courtesy of Mutual Art, Retrieved September 23, 2025.**



**Fig.4.9: Untitled, c.1986, Oil on canvas, 34x 71.75 in.
Image courtesy of MutualArt, Retrieved September 23, 2025.**



Fig.4.10: Mother and Child, Oil on canvas, 85.73 x 64.14cm.
Image courtesy of MutualArt, Retrieved September, 23, 2025.



Fig. 4.11: Untitled, c. 1963, Oil on canvas, 55 x 28 in.
Image courtesy of MutualArt, Retrieved September, 23, 2025.



Fig. 4.12: Untitled, Oil on canvas, 15.5 x 19.5 in.
Image courtesy of MutualArt, Retrieved September, 23, 2025.

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