The Influence of Raja Ravi Varma’s Mythological Subjects in Popular Art

Rachel Cooksey
SIT Study Abroad

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcollections.sit.edu/isp_collection

Part of the Asian Art and Architecture Commons, Asian Studies Commons, Fine Arts Commons, and the Graphic Design Commons

Recommended Citation
https://digitalcollections.sit.edu/isp_collection/2511

This Unpublished Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the SIT Study Abroad at SIT Digital Collections. It has been accepted for inclusion in Independent Study Project (ISP) Collection by an authorized administrator of SIT Digital Collections. For more information, please contact digitalcollections@sit.edu.
The Influence of Raja Ravi Varma’s Mythological Subjects in Popular Art

Rachel Cooksey
India: National Identity & the Arts
December 9th, 2016
# Table of Contents

Abstract ........................................................................................................................................... 3

Acknowledgements .......................................................................................................................... 4

Dedication ........................................................................................................................................ 5

The Power of Images .......................................................................................................................... 6

Ravi Varma and His Influences ........................................................................................................ 9

Ravi Varma’s Style ............................................................................................................................. 13

The Shift from Paintings to Prints ..................................................................................................... 17

Other Artists ....................................................................................................................................... 22

Other Visual Mediums ....................................................................................................................... 24

Myth and Legacy ................................................................................................................................. 28

Conclusion ......................................................................................................................................... 30

Appendix ............................................................................................................................................ 32

Glossary .............................................................................................................................................. 40

Bibliography ....................................................................................................................................... 41

Further Reading ................................................................................................................................. 43
Abstract

This paper will examine the aesthetic qualities that Raja Ravi Varma helped to introduce to mythological paintings and then to popular devotional prints with the Ravi Varma Press, as well as the influence of the aesthetic to other areas of visual culture in India. Prior to the 1993 retrospective exhibition in New Delhi on Raja Ravi Varma, little was known about his impact on the calendar prints of today. By tracing the rise of academic realism in late 19th and early 20th century India and Ravi Varma’s role within it, I gained a clearer understanding of the degree to which one man can impact an entire nation’s visual culture. There are conflicting opinions on exactly how much he is responsible for the innovations that led to the modernist movement in India, but my study concluded that popular prints are too imperative to visual culture in India to exclude from aesthetic and historical analysis.

Much of my work was done through gathering print sources, but I travelled to Ravi Varma’s home state of Kerala to visit his original oil paintings at the Sri Chatra Art Gallery. I also stayed in Madurai to observe the culture surrounding popular prints in urban settings, such as roadside chai and snack stalls. This study supports a growing academic interest in examining popular art’s place in the ever-developing definition art history.
Acknowledgments

I would like to express my gratitude towards Dr. Mary Storm and the entire SIT staff in New Delhi, for introducing me to life in Delhi and for the help and encouragement over the course of this program, as well as this project. I want to give special thanks to Arjun Chauhan, for his friendship and for help with all my travel arrangements, and Prahlad Kumar for patiently teaching us Hindi. Additionally, I would like to thank Professor Shukla Sawant for her time and guidance during this project, and suggestions for further reading and art exhibits. Finally, thank you to my cohort for the unyielding support, positivity, and humor throughout the semester.
Dedicated to Scotch
Introduction: The Power of an Image

India is home to Hinduism, a religion that places a substantial emphasis on the active worship of icons. According to the Purāṇas, a set of Hindu religious texts that date back to the 4th century C.E., divine power within an object or image can be awakened through worship, the goal being unity with the divinity it represents. India is also the biggest producer of printed images in modernity.1 The fact that these are two prominent Indian values is no coincidence. With roots originally in oral traditions that have endured centuries, the wide circulation and consumption of printed images in India is deeply intertwined with the power that Hindus bestow in representations of their deities.2

Images are in some sense, the most powerful way of communication,3 and this is largely because they are accessible to both illiterate and educated people; this accessibility is the “democratic value intrinsically embedded in images.”4 Because of the availability of images, they have the potential to become powerful tools for religious, social and political ideology to be understood by people from all castes and backgrounds. In his comprehensive examination of printed images of deities Photos of the Gods, art historian and anthropologist Christopher Pinney credits images with the “construction of public spaces and areas of consciousness that are intimately linked to nationalism.”5 Especially potent during the Indian nationalist movement from roughly 1917 until Independence from the British in 1947, printed images created a “common cultural, religious, and aesthetic background for the Indian people who were living in a

1 Enrico Castelli and Giovanni Aprile, Divine Lithography (Montone, Italy: Il Tamburo Parlante, 2005), 14
2 Castelli and Aprile, Divine, 11
3 Professor Shukla Sawant, interview on November 15th, 2016, at Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi
4 Castelli and Aprile, Divine, 14
5 Christopher Pinney, Photos of the Gods (India: Oxford University Press, 2004), 12
fragmented political universe deprived of any sense of unity.” Images are always more than just images. They have social and political biographies, stories that can be studied through a historical approach, a dynamic essence within them that ebbs and flows over time.

This is especially true with images in the form of flashy, inexpensive prints that regularly depict mythological scenes from Hindu tradition. The prints that have become synonymous with Indian culture come in all shapes and sizes: some are large and ornate wall calendars given at Diwali and other special occasions; some are smaller framed prints, postcards, magnets, and stickers. Kajri Jain, author of Gods in the Bazaar, attributes their immense popularity to the “intense colors, lavish ornament, compassionate smiles, and clear gaze.” In her book, Jain discusses the difference between bazaar art and calendar art, and how both terms have come to represent the generic set of expectations of not only the illustrated calendars, but also wall posters, framing pictures, key chains, and other knick knacks. This also can include the visual idioms sometimes deployed in advertising, comic books, packaging, theater, film, and television.

The themes in popular prints have fluctuated between religious and secular to reflect significant political or cultural shifts in India over the decades. For example, under the British Raj, artists carefully created allegories using mythological stories from the Hindu epics to represent Britain’s dominance over India. In the 1950’s, with a spike in influence from Hollywood, cinematic imagery was celebrated, and prints resembled pin-up girls and American movie posters. Mother and child imagery is another common constant through the years, as well

---

6 Castelli and Aprile, Divine, 11, 12
7 Kajri Jain, Gods in the Bazaar (London: Duke University, 2007), 4
8 Jain, Gods, 15
9 Patricia Uberoi, “Feminine Identity and National Ethos in Indian Calendar Art” Economic and Political Weekly 25, no. 17 (1990) 43
as the occasional landscape. Late twentieth century distributors of calendar art informally categorized their products as patriotic, scenic, filmic, or dharmic. Despite the variations on popular prints, religious themes have remained consistently dominant since the birth of mass-produced prints, in two types: devotional and mythological.

The centrality of images in Hinduism has always captured the imagination of westerners, but none so much as the devotional image. The signifier of a devotional image is that the divinity’s eyes book back at the viewer. The reciprocal gaze from the deity allowed the viewer to engage in darsan, an essential part of worship in Hinduism where being seen or blessed by the deity is as important as having votive access to it. These images involve the god or goddesses in the middle of the image, demonstrating their associated attributes, typically in front of a detailed background including their vehicles. While not used for darsan, mythological scenes featuring icons and scenes from the Hindu epics, particularly the Ramayana and the Mahābhārata, were also highly common. Mythological prints focused on sentiment, immaterial quality, showing the emotional or moral climax of the story, the teachable moment. It is through mythological scenes, accompanied by oral storytelling that uneducated Hindus were able to familiarize themselves with the traditional stories.

With how ubiquitous these prints are across the country, it is a shame that they have not been thought of as relevant enough to be studied academically: “Despite its initial warm reception by “native” and colonial “master” alike, for the better part of the twentieth century this

---

10 Castelli and Aprile, Divine, 81
11 Uberoi, Feminine Identity, 43
12 Castelli and Aprile, Divine, 13, 24
13 Jain, Gods, 90
14 Uberoi, Feminine Identity, 43
15 Castelli and Aprile, Divine, 26
genre [of printed images] was either reviled or ignored by scholars and critics.”\(^{16}\) This specific category of religious print, so integral to India herself, has only recently been appreciated for its fascinating aesthetic biography. Although he did not produce his work explicitly for calendars, many scholars consider painter Raja Ravi Varma responsible for the “ubiquitous, gaudy, glossy painted pictures” commonly found on calendar art, as his printing press revolutionized the style in which these gods and goddesses were portrayed.\(^{17}\)

Ravi Varma and His Influences

Raja Ravi Varma was born in April 29, 1848, at Kilimanoor Palace in Kerala, South India. His family was related by marriage to the royal family of Travancore and he grew up around aristocratic supporters of arts and culture. His father was a Sanskrit scholar and because of his orthodox Hindu education, he grew up fluent in the Purāṇas, the Mahābhārata, the Ramayana, and other religious texts.\(^{18}\) Hindu mythology and oral tradition were the very foundation of Keralan culture and were highly valued in the Court in Travancore.\(^{19}\) His education in classical language and scripture “prepared him eminently to receive the lessons stocked in Kerala’s heritage of classical painting,” such as the traditional mural paintings on temple and palace walls.\(^{20}\)

\(^{16}\) Jain, Gods, 15
\(^{20}\) Nair, “European Influences” 75
Ravi Varma first encountered European painting by watching practicing painters at the family’s court. His uncle, Raja Raja Varma, recognized his potential and encouraged him to pursue his own interest in the arts. In 1862, his uncle arranged for fourteen-year-old Ravi Varma to stay in a house at the palace of the king Ayilyam Thirunal in Thiruvananthapuram, to nurture his potential talent. Ayilyam Thirrunal exposed him to examples of French and Italian painting, and sometimes artists from Europe would stay at the court for commissions, such as Dutch artist Theodore Jensen who allowed young Ravi Varma to watch him work.

At this time in Kerala, painting was viewed more often a craft for working class people than an art, and for members of aristocratic families like Ravi Varma, painting was a leisure activity. However, artistic professions were gaining traction as the Western art schools established themselves around India and traditional Indian artists had the opportunities to observe European technique. Not unlike his contemporaries, Ravi Varma admired and accepted western values, and was fascinated with European painting in particular.

With encouragement from the king, as well the Minister of Travancore Sir Madhava Rao as a mentor, he established himself as a society portraitist. With the help of his courtly connections, he spent his twenties painting portraits for various wealthy clients around South India. Near the end of the century, his portraits ran as high as 1,500 rupees, an “enormous

---

23 Chaitanya, "His Moment” 28
amount for that period.” As someone of this status had never achieved artistic professionalism of this level before, Ravi Varma is accredited with creating “the image of ‘fashionable painter.’”

However, he never lost interest in displaying the religious imagery he was familiar with. In 1881, he completed his first series of mythological paintings, and the genre proved a strong suit for him, presumably because of his cultured upbringing. He drew copiously on Sanskrit classics, and when using them, “he carefully selected the stories that plucked the beholder’s heartstrings.” These were equally if not more successful with Indian nobility than his portraiture had been. As his paintings became more famous, some patrons even asked him to duplicate his best-known mythological paintings for their private collections. As P. Sivakumar explains, “His sensibility has been seen as naturally and fully responsive to the taste of the contemporary native rulers and the rich westernized gentry. As one catering to [the patron’s] taste he is often seen as a product of patronage. That in a sense he was, but before he was consciously responding to it and allowing himself to be molded by it, he was motivated in that direction by some very home-bred values.”

Painter A. Ramachandran said of his background, “The strong foundation that he received from his traditional upbringing and his early training in the Tanjore (Tamil Nadu) tradition, gave him an unmistakable stamp of “Indianness”, which was more and more discernable with the passage of time.” The marriage of this “Indianness” with the Western technique became his signature brought him fame across the country.

In 1888, Ravi Varma ventured on his first all-India tour with his brother to search for truly Indian motifs and they continued to journey together throughout his career, following

---

27 Ramachandran, “Raja Ravi Varma” 16, 18
28 Mitter, “The Artist as Professional”, 36
29 Mitter, “The Artist as Professional”, 41
30 Ramachandran, “Raja Ravi Varma” 18
31 Sivakumar, “The Home and the World” 60
32 Ramachandran, “Raja Ravi Varma” 16
commissions. His career “marked the point at which the changing world of court painting in the South merged with new patterns of patronage, professionalism, and commercial success in colonial India.” As he got a feel for aesthetic elements that appealed to Indians across the country, his Keralan identity “flowed into a pan-Indian one.”

Ravi Varma’s pictorial language gave him the power to represent past history imagined as present melodrama. His work reflected his familiarity with the performing arts, as the Parsi theater movement was at its peak during his time. For example, in his rendering of Nala-Damayanti, the couple is in front of a painted forest curtain, which was a recognizable feature of Parsi theater. Suresh Awasthi believes that Ravi Varma was influenced by Parsi theater to the same degree that Parsi theater was influenced by Victorian theatre, and this is “only natural, as all our arts had come under influence,” adopting new norms and techniques yet reflecting each other. Awasthi also likens owning a Ravi Varma painting and attending the theater equal status symbols of the period, which positions visual arts as both signifier and signified of the social structure of Ravi Varma’s world.

From portraiture to religious work he was appreciated and supported by British and Indian benefactors alike, but by the end of the 19th century, he was determined to gain his independence. According to some, Ravi Varma was “convinced of the need to provide an alternate to the ‘atrocious’ and ‘debased’ varieties of cheap religious pictures that flooded the

---

33 Guha-Thakurta, “Raja Ravi Varma” 52, 45
34 Mitter “The Artist as a Professional” 41
35 Mitter, “The Artist as a Professional” 41
37 Awasthi, “Theatrical Connections” 114
38 Mitter, “The Artist as a Professional” 41
market, and thus improve popular taste.” Whether or not his motives were this explicit, he certainly went on to transform the religious picture market once he began releasing paintings as prints available to the masses.

Ravi Varma’s Style

British colonization brought many changes to the art world in mid-1800’s India; notable new tools included oil paint, canvas, and tin paint tubes. Before then, Indian painters had used primarily tempera. It was the application of these tools that made it possible for artists like Ravi Varma to reach a level of naturalism that could rival the great painters of the West. With a clear interest in European artists, it is likely his style was influenced by artists such as Vermeer, Raphael, Rembrandt, David, Ingres, and Manet. Oil paint allowed for subtleties in flesh tones and shadow that quick-drying tempera did not. By mastering these nuances in light, color, and perspective that oil paint granted, Ravi Varma and his style entered the realm of academic realism taught in European art schools and common across the British Empire in the nineteenth century, despite not attending one of these art schools himself. Supriya Nair believes that his adoption of European materials and method were his way of acknowledging the superiority of foreign power in India.

As for subject matter, the Hindu mythology Ravi Varma grew up with remained a consistent source of inspiration throughout his career. Unlike artists before him, he “shrewdly and confidently fused European and Indian elements since he had a clear grasp of the underlying

41 Ramachandran, “Raja Ravi Varma” 16
42 Nair, “European Influences”, 72
principles of naturalism.” His portrait-based compositions showed a “synthesis of early Tanjore tradition and ‘delicate realism’ of the Dutch masters like Vermeer.” He used photography when live models were not available, which contributed to why his figures bear a distinct stamp of life study and photo-realism. He employed these western techniques in color, composition and perspective for all of his subjects, whether physical or mythological. Indian Art History scholar Partha Mitter believes his stylistic choices were a successful pair with Indian subject matter: “A certain sentimentality went hand in hand with a new image of voluptuous women, a blend of Kerala and Guercino.” Paula Sengupta writes in *The Printed Picture* of the portraits, “they had a naturalistic finesse, and there appeared to be a three-dimensional quality, a sense of volume, and perspective in the composition.” She compares his style to the animated academic realism instructed at The Calcutta Art Studio at the time, which encouraged female figures in mythological scenes with “plump anatomies, oversized heads and large drooling eyes, gaudy costumes and patterned jewelry, heightened chiaroscuro effects, dark misty landscape settings, and palatial backgrounds.”

Perched somewhere between naturalism and idealism, Ravi Varma’s style does have undeniable correlation with the colonial art school characteristics. Indeed, the paintings housed in the Sri Chatra Art Gallery in Trivandrum have a weighty and dimensional quality to the figures, warmth to their complexions, and lively facial expressions. In composition, strong parallels can be drawn between his works such as “Gypsies,” 1893, and the structure of William-

---

43 Mitter, “The Artist as Professional” 42
44 Ramachadran, “Raja Ravi Varma” 16
46 Mitter, “The Artist as Professional” 41
47 Sengupta, *The Printed Picture*, 73
Adolphe Bouguereau’s “Indignat Family,” from 1865. Ravi Varma is said to have admired the French artist extraordinarily after seeing his work at the Travancore Court.⁴⁸

As with the oeuvres of many 19th and 20th century painters, treatment of the female figure can tell us plenty about Ravi Varma’s approach to painting. His female subjects were inspired by both the aristocratic ladies who posed for him in the studio, and the Victorian and French women of neo-classical paintings. The women featured in his paintings are distinct figures of class and status, apparent in their dress, homes, demeanor, lives of leisure.⁴⁹ The idealized figures are appealing regionally and nationally: “His heroines became ideal national prototypes, consciously representing a pan-Indian type…”⁵⁰ A good example of this is the regal Hamsa Damyanthi, which was painted for the Trivandrum Palace in 1899 and is on display at the Sri Chatra Art Gallery in Trivandrum. (Fig. 1) In works like this, “it is unique in that even while he fulfilled [the public’s] demand using European method and means, he was also offering, especially through his mythological scenes, authentic slices of Hindu dharma.”⁵¹ This painting describes a scene from the Vana Parva book of the Mahābhārata, in which Damayanti is told about the virtues and accomplishments of Nala by a swan, as she is choosing a husband from her many suitors. Ravi Varma painted several stages of Damayanti’s story, but this depiction of Damayanti is thought of by contemporary critiques to be “the most beautiful and idealized” of his women.⁵² Much of Damayanti’s beauty in this painting comes from the radiance of her gold and red south Indian sari wrapped around her body, and the physicality of her weight on the stone steps. His strength was bringing the deities and mythological characters into the earthly realm, painting them in settings and clothing from the world he knew. Gods and goddesses, he

⁴⁸ Nair, “European Influences” 74
⁴⁹ Guha-Thakurta, “Raja Ravi Varma” 48, 50
⁵⁰ Sengupta, The Printed Picture, 82
⁵¹ Nair, “European Influences” 73
⁵² Guha-Thakurta, “Raja Ravi Varma” 53
“visualized as princes, set them into the marvelous palaces the painter as accustomed to,” and therefore grounded them in reality. He paid attention to the aesthetic elements of Indians in different regions, including physiognomy, costume and jewelry that he thought to be most appropriate for grounding subjects in reality. Though inspiration likely came originally from European neoclassical women, he always made the women in his paintings India’s own. By incorporating these details into his mythological personifications, he appealed to a wider audience than ever and succeeded in giving them a pan-Indian dimension.

Ravi Varma chose to capture the special moments where listeners of the Mahābhārata or Ramayana would be invested in the emotional climax of the story. Jatayu Vadham, which he completed in 1895, is a scene from the Ramayana in which shows the chaotic moment that Ravana, King of the Demons, cuts off the wing of demi-god vulture Jatayu as he tries to interfere with the kidnapping of Sita. (Fig. 2) His scenes often preserved a frozen moment on his canvas like this, teeming with dynamic energy. This, too, set him apart from the traditional Indian painters of his time; “Narrative art was nothing new to India. But illusionist painting as a vehicle for story telling by presenting a ‘frozen moment was a Western invention.” These are the stylistic elements that Ravi Varma mastered on canvas before delving into the system of mass-production.

53 Castelli and Aprile, Divine, 14, 27
54 Guha-Thakurta, “Raja Ravi Varma” 51
55 Sivakumar, “The Home and the World” 68
56 Mitter, “The Artist as Professional” 40
The Shift from Paintings to Prints

Germans were at the forefront of printing technology, producing the first substantial printed book in the 15th century, and printing was first introduced to India when Portuguese missionaries brought presses to Goa in the 16th century. Lithography was invented in 1796 by German author and actor Alois Senefelder, as a cheap method of publishing theatrical works.\(^{57}\) Images were drawn on limestone with oil, wax, or another water repellent substance. Then the stones were moistened, oil-based paints would be used on the image, and a neat transfer of the image could be printed onto a sheet of paper. For several hundred years, printing presses in India were used for only for government use\(^{58}\) and the occasional commercial purpose, such as reproducing music paper.\(^{59}\) The melding of Eastern tradition with Western style began to take shape in Punjab paintings and prints, and they are believed to be the precursor to the mass-produced art. Punjab art was printed with lithographic stones before being hand colored, and interpret all kinds of themes such as cityscapes, military activity, gods and goddesses of the Hindu pantheon, Sikh gurus and nobility. Paula Sengupta argues in *The Printed Picture: Four Centuries of Printmaking* that the timing of the British occupation and the lithograph technology in Punjab in the 1850s had much to do with the dwindling of traditional Indian style in the north: “With the British occupation of Punjab, old social, moral, psychological values were altogether revolutionized. The British were now the controllers of taste.”\(^{60}\) However, this was also true in Calcutta, more so than Poona, which both established major lithographic presses in 1878.\(^{61}\)

European influence took a strong hold over not only painting in India, and also the prints that

---


\(^{58}\) Sengupta, *The Printed Picture*, 18

\(^{59}\) Castelli and Aprile, *Divine*, 40

\(^{60}\) Sengupta, *The Printed Picture*, 64

\(^{61}\) Pinney, *Photos*, 46
followed. The medium quickly became common across India, although quality prints were still associated with Germany, and so “Printed in Germany” was added to many Indian images.

The Ravi Varma Press

Technically, reproductions of Ravi Varma’s paintings had been circulated before he had printed them himself, in the form of photographs after a Bombay exhibition in 1891. Because of this, in 1884, Madhava Rao wrote Ravi Varma and encouraged him to take advantage of the commercial market and have his paintings sent to Germany to be oleographed. In 1892, he opened a printing press of his own in Ghatkopar, Mumbai. His was only one of many presses that were established at the turn of the century, a notable competitor being the Chitrashala Press in Pune, formerly Poona.

Like all quality presses, the Ravi Varma Press used the best German inks and took careful pride in its production. The transfer process was incredibly labor-intensive: colors were added lightest to darkest, deep colors required multiple layers, and each single stone could print only one color which means one multi-colored print could use up to 16 different stones. Teams of specialized workers in the presses included chief designers and many drawers who copied the original paintings. The resulting prints were “the highest quality only if the team was able to work in harmony.” Ravi Varma had help from his brother, twelve years his younger C. Raja Raja Varma, as well as assistants including two German technicians. While the popular opinion

---

62 Pinney, Photos, 62
63 Chaitanya, “His Moment” 29
64 Castelli and Aprile, Divine, 37
65 Guha-Thakurta, The Making, 106
66 Pinney, Photos, 48
67 Castelli and Aprile, Divine, 42
68 Mitter, “The Artist as Professional” 39
is that the first lithograph out of the Ravi Varma Press was ‘The Birth of Sakuntala’ in 1895, Christopher Pinney refuses to ignore the image’s “13” serial number. He proposes that “Standing Lakshmi,” numbered 001, is a more likely first published image from the press in 1894.\(^{69}\) (Fig. 3) Regardless of which lithograph was the first, his prints became wildly renowned. With their oleographs, Ravi Varma resolved to “elevate public taste by injecting the idealism they felt lacking in the Bazaar works,”\(^{70}\) perhaps in reference to the output from Chitrashala Press.

After the plague wreaked havoc on Bombay in 1898, the Ravi Varma Press moved to nearby Malavi in 1899. Unfortunately, mostly due to financial obstacles, in 1901 Ravi Varma sold his press to German entrepreneur and technician Fritz Schleicher, along with the rights to 89 of his original designs, although several hundred more bear Ravi Varma’s name, suggesting his signature was used long after he was involved with the press.\(^{71}\) After all, he had built enough of a reputation by this time that prints signed with his name carried prestige. The mythological compositions he had become legendary for were less and less attempted, and were not successful by other artists that followed except later by his son, Rama Varma.\(^{72}\)

As demand for prints grew higher over the decades, quality suffered. Colors were reduced to the yellow, magenta, cyan and black tetrad common today in electronic printers. Later editions from the press are frequently oversaturated and the layers are misaligned. Etching into metal plates replaced limestone, because it is more cost efficient. The press has used this method to print their packing labels since the 1920s, but not for the actual art. This method resulted in a lack of depth and shadows, a general flatness that became all too common from the 1920s

---

\(^{69}\) Pinney, *Photos*, 64  
\(^{70}\) Mitter, “The Artist as Professional” 42  
\(^{71}\) Castelli and Aprile, *Divine*, 34  
\(^{72}\) Ramachandran, “Raja Ravi Varma” 22
The later editions of prints were often “so distorted that, to a great extent, they were responsible for damaging the reputation of the artist in the eyes of art critics.”

How Art Was Affected by Commodification

The original aim of the Ravi Varma Press was to give the ancient gods and goddesses a “modern, colored, and vital appearance,” to reaffirm the Indian peoples’ faith. The cheap calendar prints we may be familiar with today are a far cry from the early prints Ravi Varma released. Just as with his paintings, he was not aspiring for anything less than fine art. Some of his most intricate lithographs required as many as thirty stones for different layers of colors, and the ink was not inexpensive. It was only once the press became broke and was sold to the German technician that the prints decreased in quality significantly. It is compelling to observe how correlations with his name changed as his medium shifted from painting to printing.

Generally, reproduced images are seen as ‘goods’ rather than unique specimens or works of art, the way paintings or marble sculptures are treated. This distinction begs the question whether the mass-produced prints can be treated as art or not. Paula Sengupta does not consider Ravi Varma’s prints artwork, the way Ba-tala woodblock prints or early Punjab lithographs are; she calls his printing press “merely a means of reproduction.” In Gods in the Bazaar, Kajri Jain explains the major critiques of the calendar art that has stemmed from the lithograph industry:

“On aesthetic grounds, [this genre of printed image] has been condemned its derivativeness, repetition, vulgar sentimentality, garishness, and crass simplicity of appeal; on nationalist

---

73 Castelli and Aprile, Divine, 45
74 Ramachandran, “Raja Ravi Varma” 21
75 Castelli and Aprile, Divine, 26
76 Sawant, interview on November 15th, 2016
77 Castelli and Aprile, Divine, 10
78 Sengupta, The Printed Picture, 73
grounds, for being a western-influenced, hybrid, inauthentic, in-Indian idiom as opposed to the rich classical and folk “traditions”; and on ideological grounds, for being part of a commercial culture industry that feeds off the credulity and in particular for reinscribing patriarchal, feudal, caste-based, and Hindu nationalist structures of representation.”79 Asok Mitra argues that despite the fact that “these types were instantly vulgarized through cheap oleographic imitations that became the staple décor of wayside shops,” there cannot be any doubt about his mastery in the European methods and technical finish of his works.80

The acclaim Ravi Varma had enjoyed in the 19th century was based primarily on the readability of his images.81 However, it is apparent that in some cases, the further the products of the press strayed from the artist’s own hand, appeal was lost: “The later editions [of prints] were often so distorted that, to a great extent, they were responsible for damaging the reputation of the artist in the eyes of art critics.”82 An unfortunate example of this is the harsh criticism by influential art historian and philosopher Ananda Coomaraswamy, who said Ravi Varma’s work was lacking both imagination and Indian feeling in the treatment of sacred and epic Indian subjects. This comment was rather harsh as he admitted that he had never actually seen Ravi Varma’s paintings, and was basing his judgment off of the much more widely available “coarse” prints he had seen.83 Nevertheless, critiques like this have shaped his reputation over the last century.

Other Artists

79 Jain, Gods, 16
80 Mitra, “Raja Ravi Varma” 25
81 Ramachandran, “Raja Ravi Varma” 14
82 Ramachandran, “Raja Ravi Varma” 21
83 Chaitanya, "His Moment,” 30
One of the talented artists who once worked at the Ravi Varma Press in addition to his own career in portrait painting and illustration was M.V. Dhurandhar. Dhurandhar trained at J. J. School of Art in Bombay where he became proficient at European style naturalism and won numerous awards for his paintings. He too mastered the balance of representing timeless divinities within a “historicizing, naturalist still frame” before becoming headmaster of the school and fostered a “reindigenized Indian naturalism” in response to Western ideals.\textsuperscript{84} He designed images for advertisements and calendars for businesses in the 1920s and 30s. His advertisements, which were often for household products, frequently featured mythological tableaux in domestic backdrops such as a 1932 calendar created for Woodward’s gripe water depicting baby Krishna in a home setting with mother Yashoda. (Fig. 4) Through common adverts like this, Western academic realism became correlated with sentimentality in the minds of Indians, and images became dually sacred and commercial objects. The domestic products were likely aimed at the women, but anyone who saw the image associated with the divinity would associate auspiciousness with not only the calendar but also the product advertised.\textsuperscript{85} Secular images of mother and child relationships existed in advertising too, which Castelli and Aprile call “an evergreen Western theme, that has obviously found an Indian audience.”\textsuperscript{86}

Much of Dhurandhar’s work came from magazines, textbooks, and literary works which needed accompanying illustrations. These ranged from secular historical subjects to episodes from the Puranas, and were aimed at an increasingly literate middle class. He favored scenes of marital relations, interactions between Indians and Europeans, and domestic moral issues. The contexts of his illustrations gave them an informality that differed from the Ravi Varma brand, and he tried to stick with narrative rather than liturgical designs, except when an advertisement

\textsuperscript{84} Jain, \textit{Gods}, 145  
\textsuperscript{85} Jain, \textit{Gods}, 121, 124, 149  
\textsuperscript{86} Castelli and Aprile, \textit{Divine}, 81
demanded an iconic image. The circulation of magazines and bulletins featuring illustrations like Dhurandhar’s explored the nuances of regional Indian identities and religious images in commercial spaces.

Another noteworthy calendar artist who worked later in the 20th century was Kondiah Raju (1898-1976), a religious painter from Madras. He attended the Governmental School of Arts and Crafts in Madras, where he studied European painting. He travelled around with a drama company that performed religious and mythological dramas, decorating their backgrounds, before finally deciding to dedicate his life to teaching art. As he had always regarded painting as rooted in religious tradition, he taught students “how to visualize the Gods before even touching the brush.” He believed that the making of religious images requires meditation and contemplation of the subject and the impulse to show deities derived from the spirit of adoration. In The Dance of Shiva, Coomaraswamy wrote of Raju, “if there was any beauty in his work, this did not arise from aesthetic intention, but from a state of mind which found unconscious expression.” He became known for stressing personal relationships with the gods to his disciples, as well as for the vivid colors he used to bring the deities to life. (Fig. 5) Raju also introduced airbrushing to calendar art in the 1960s, which became a favorable technique. His work became the standard on which modern religious calendar art is based. Both Ravi Varma and Raju used their extensive knowledge of the ancient texts to inspire their renderings of the deities. They were both conscious of regionality, and they both helped to mold the new medium “suitable for modernity” at different stages.

---

87 Jain, Gods, 145-149
88 Castelli and Aprire, Divine, 50
90 Castelli and Aprire, Divine, 56
Relationship with the Other Visual Mediums

While his reputation has become warped and inflated along the way, it stands true that Ravi Varma was one of the artists whose lithographic prints and illustrations “set the model” for future designs in advertising, films, and theater.91 As his career demonstrated, the modernism movement in India drove a wedge between the vernacular culture industries and cosmopolitan realm of ‘fine art,’ “sometimes forcing artists to choose between naturalism sponsored by commercial interests and the modernism sponsored by the state and an English-educated nationalist elite.”92 On one side of this “wedge” were artists like M. F. Husain, who began as a cinema billboard artist in Bombay before joining the Progressive Artists’ Group and eventually became a well-known artist. On the other side were lesser-known artists who remained in professional commercial fields, such as book and magazine illustration, signboard painting, technical drafting, and photograph retouching, in addition to cinema and theater work. Many modern artists that followed were involved in some way or another in the business of film. As the film industry developed in the centers of Bombay, Calcutta, and Madras, it provided jobs for aspiring artists from all over the country to work on makeup, painting sets, and art direction, and publicity banners. This “film line” in the 1940s and 1950s allowed artists to break into the art community before moving on to work for the more stable calendar trade.93 One of the most celebrated calendar artists in history was S. M. Pandit. He co-founded the Young Artist Commercial Arts Studio in 1938 where he designed publicity posters for MGM. He also worked for the first Indian-owned advertising agency, Ratan Batra’s, and designed covers for FilmIndia, an English monthly film publication about Indian cinema. (Fig. 6, 7) Pandit continued to work

---

91 Ramachandran, “Raja Ravi Varma” 22
92 Jain, Gods, 151
93 Jain, Gods, 152
for *Filmindia* in a characteristic style similar to Hollywood posters of the 1930s and 1940s; through Independence and beyond, he carried this “glamorous appeal, dramatic expressiveness, and bold, graphic compositions” across to mythological prints that proved to be his most remembered and influential legacy.\(^94\)

Cinema

Pandit is just one case of the mutual influence between popular prints and other art outlets, such as the blossoming cinema industry of the time. The relationship between mythological paintings and the theater may have been the origin to reflexivity between film industry and popular prints decades later, described as a “spillage between genres” by Pinney.\(^95\) New art forms embodied intersections between a range of political affiliations and class interests, including support of Swadeshi nationalism, which existed until Independence but prospered between 1905 and 1917. The politicization of visual art forms coupled with “their ambivalent status as both art and commerce meant that they were initially fostered through a mixture of artistic patronage and entrepreneurial investments, which was especially true with capital in cinema. “Princely support of the cinema can be seen as an extension of this artistic patronage”, and in this way Kajri Jain believes early filmmakers “benefitted from fine art’s culture capital among the native elite.”\(^96\)

Nearly all early cinema in India was inspired by popular prints.\(^97\) The opulent beauties in early cinema and decades of calendars descended from Ravi Varma’s heroines.\(^98\) Before it was

---

\(^94\) Jain, *Gods*, 153
\(^95\) Pinney, *Photos*, 34
\(^96\) Jain, *Gods*, 150
\(^97\) Sawant, interview on November 15th, 2016
\(^98\) Mitter, “The Artist as a Professional” 35
regarded as an artistic endeavor, film was used only as a recording device. That is, until Dadasaheb Phalke, who is now hailed as the ‘father of Indian cinema, became big in the art scene, just as Ravi Varma seemed to be fading into the background. Phalke went to Sir J. J. Art School in Bombay, and began as a small town photographer. He met Carl Hertz and other magicians employed by the Lumière Brothers, which piqued his interest in the cinema. He also worked at Archaeological Society of India as a draftsman, specializing in lithographs, and then for the Ravi Varma Press as a lithographic transfer artist. When his own printing ventures did not pan out, he decided to try the film industry, which was still in its preliminary stages.

As he watched the Life of Christ, (either the 1902 or 1906 version), he envisioned Indian Gods; “while the Life of Christ was rolling fast before my eyes I was mentally visualizing the gods Shri Krishna, Shri Ramachandra, their Gokul and Ayodhya…could we, the sons of India, ever be able to see Indian images on the screen?” He was concerned with establishing a self-sufficient film industry in India, with a characterization of Indian images in a ‘Ravi Varma sense.’ In 1913 Phalke released Raja Harishchandra, India’s first feature length silent film. The story of Raja Harishchandra from the Mahābhārata was a popular subject among printmakers, presented by both the Calcutta Art Studio and the Ravi Varma Press, and thus began the correlation between the two artists’ mediums. And although their preferred means were different, Ravi Varma was “in many ways the direct cultural predecessor to Phalke, greatly

---

100 Pinney, Photos, 72
102 Pinney, Photos, 72
influencing his themes, his images, his views on culture.”\textsuperscript{103} The style Phalke had absorbed through working at the Ravi Varma press was evident in his films; in fact, Ravi Varma may have inspired cinema on the same scale that Victorian art inspired D. W. Griffith.\textsuperscript{104}

The two men were linked in the desire to produce genuinely “Indian” images. This involved bringing religious and myth imagery into a pan-Indian sphere, as part of a “growing nationalist discourse on ‘Indianness’ and civilization, which required creating a visual vocabulary including costume, gesture, mise-en-scène.”\textsuperscript{105} The Indianness label in Phalke came to perform a role similar to the drama of Ravi Varma’s epics: uniting viewers in their nationhood and traditions with the power of images. In 1917, Phalke released the biggest success of his career, \textit{Lanka Dahan} in Bombay. During the premier, “when Ram appeared, the audience prostrated itself before the screen.”\textsuperscript{106} The special effects exhibiting Hanuman flying through the clouds over the burning city of Lanka were “awe-inspiring” to the crowds, according to Bollywood film director J. B. H. Wadia. He remembers that villagers had come to the opening in huge numbers to receive darshan from their beloved God, Lord Rama, and that devotees camped out to see the film multiple times in a row, amazed by images on the screen.

Film has a crucial quantifiable value because it has a larger distribution reach than any other art form, which gives it momentous power. Phalke was confident in embracing the dominant political movement of his time with his art: “My films are Swadeshi, in the sense that the capital, ownership, employees and stories are Swadeshi.”\textsuperscript{107} He continued to explore his medium with documentaries, features, comedies and educational films and ended up produced ninety-five films and twenty-six short films in only a nineteen-year career. His success in film

\textsuperscript{103} Rajadhya\textsuperscript{105}a\textsuperscript{109}ka \textit{"Impact"} 105, 109
\textsuperscript{104} Mitter, \textit{“The Artist as a Professional”} 35
\textsuperscript{105} Jain, \textit{“Figures”} 74
\textsuperscript{106} Pinney, \textit{Photos}, 72
\textsuperscript{107} Rajadhya\textsuperscript{105}a\textsuperscript{109}ka \textit{"Impact"} 108
came to an end with the introduction of sound technology, which was the unfortunate fate of filmmakers universally at this time. His last film, Setubandhan, was released in 1932 and later dubbed.\(^\text{108}\) His experiments in cinema not only kick started the larger-than-life film industry that thrives in India today, but supported the larger political notions of unity and identity in India and drew his own inspiration from the Ravi Varma approach.

Myth and Legacy

Dissecting Ravi Varma’s impact requires a broad scope of exploration. In addition to Ananda Coomaraswamy, another vocal critic of his was Irish author and social worker Sister Nivedita, who in 1907 wrote for *The Modern Review*, “[a]n Indian painting, if it is to be really Indian … must appeal to the Indian heart in an Indian way”\(^\text{109}\) She believed the West’s material artistic sensibility and his subjects, especially women, to be distracting from the true spiritual and disciplined gist of the mythological teachings. He may be unconditionally eulogized in his home state of Kerala,\(^\text{110}\) but beyond that is sometimes accused of producing mongrelized works, imposed by the government school or art.\(^\text{111}\) He was certainly not the first or only artist to tackle Indian subject matter with European means, but his independence certainly strengthened his acclaim: “the legend of the self-taught genius was at the heart of his reputation” since he did not participate in the colonial art schools, but did receive much informal education.\(^\text{112}\)

---

\(^{108}\) Rajadhyaksha "Impact" 109


\(^{110}\) Ramachandran, “Raja Ravi Varma,” 14


\(^{112}\) Mitter, “The Artist as a Professional,” 36
Over a hundred years after Ravi Varma opened his lithographic press and began to sell his images as commodities, there continues to be new commentary of exactly what he has contributed to India’s visual landscape. In 2000, when Castelli & Aprile spent time at the old site recovering fragments of prints, collected lithography stones (some of which had been preserving drawings for decades), photographs and other business documents, they discovered that “the conservation of cultural heritage is not a slogan but a critical political issue” and decided that Ravi Varma is an important piece of that Indian heritage.\textsuperscript{113} They credit him with a great deal for a single artist:

“The effort made by Ravi Varma to render ‘the past’ in a way that would make it tangible to the contemporary experience…was not only the invention of a genre, but something that changed the country, and prepared India for modernity…He brought to India the marvel of their own country, that side of reality they were never allowed to see … [Indians] have entered modernity because people living all over the subcontinent could look at identical lithographs and recognize themselves as Indians.” (Castelli and Aprile, \textit{Divine Lithography} 14, 15)

The authors even partially attribute the longevity of the sari to his stylistic choices after traveling with his brother: “The merit of successful choices such as that of the sari out of the multitude of local female dresses, that became, through his paintings, (and the widespread distribution of their oleographic reproductions) the national dress had been ascribed to these journeys.”\textsuperscript{114} Others, like Christopher Pinney, are more skeptical that all of this can in fact be attributed to a single artist. There is evidence that the Ravi Varma Press employed many talented painters at various stages. The rights to only 89 cartoons were handed over with the press deed in 1901, and reproductions seemed to get sloppier over time making it even tougher to identify a genuine piece. Pinney argues that most images bearing the Ravi Varma Press label are not in fact his work.

\textsuperscript{113} Castelli and Aprile, \textit{Divine}, 39
\textsuperscript{114} Castelli and Aprile, \textit{Divine}, 27
After the 1993 exhibition of Varma’s work that New Perspectives is commemorative of, a controversy ignited over his true place in history when several contemporary artists contended the claim that he was the first modern artist in India. It is true that high modernists embraced him for his experiments in form, medium and exhibition. The modernist movement placed such an emphasis on secularism, yet his overtly religious subjects have found their way into the popular canon.\textsuperscript{115} Pinney points out that history remembers Varma as not an individual with a personality, but more of an alluring, romanticized fragment of an artist story on which we can pin a larger narrative about how Western naturalism and realism impacted Indian art.\textsuperscript{116}

Conclusion

Calendar art and popular prints in Ravi Varma’s style are still omnipresent as objects of worship across India, and especially so in South India. Kajri Jain argues that the term ‘calendar art’ is important- the fact that they are calendars affects how the art circulates in the bazaar, which has inscribed the economy – where the sacred, commercial, ethical, aesthetic, and libidinal forms of value are closely meshed.\textsuperscript{117} Calendars that were originally gifts may now hang in temple shrines, in people's kitchens, offices, prayer rooms, or auto rickshaws. Sometimes small versions are stowed in wallets. This idea of darshan is central to the worship of the prints; that the god 'seated' in the image should be watching over people, blessing them. This is exhibited in countless snack and chai stalls in metropolitan areas. (Fig. 8) Vihaan Subramani, a chai vendor in Madurai, said of his ornate Ganesha image: “He watches over the stall. Without his image I don’t

\textsuperscript{115} Professor Shukla Sawant, interview on December 8\textsuperscript{th}, 2016, at Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi
\textsuperscript{116} Pinney, Photos, 60-64
\textsuperscript{117} Jain, Gods, 16
have fortunate business.”\textsuperscript{118} This matter-of-fact attitude backs the notion that these images are an essential part of daily life, and even when people aren't looking at their images, there is a feeling it is doing work, protecting the homes and businesses where they are housed.\textsuperscript{119}

“Of course, if Indian bazaar images are not seen as art historical, but as anthropological objects, this is largely due to their status as mass culture.”\textsuperscript{120} In some ways, there is a world of difference between Ravi Varma’s regal oil paintings and the “lurid, pungent, frequently tatty” calendar prints that decorate the walls of present-day India. On the other hand, scholars are finally recognizing that the worth of these prints far exceeds their material value.\textsuperscript{121} Popular prints are undoubtedly a crucial piece of India’s visual culture and the collective national identity. Raja Ravi Varma had a monumental effect on the particular aesthetic that only these prints have, and his legacy elicits a fruitful debate.

\textsuperscript{118} Conversation with Vihaan Subramani on November 27\textsuperscript{th}, Madurai, Tamil Nadu

\textsuperscript{119} Arthur Pais "Some Walls Can Speak." (An Interview with Kajri Jain) \textit{India Abroad} (New York, New York, 2007) 3

\textsuperscript{120} Jain, \textit{Gods}, 17

\textsuperscript{121} Whitney Davis, UC Berkley, on \textit{Gods in the Bazaar}
Figure 1
*Hamsa Damyanthi*, oil painting
Raja Ravi Varma, 1899
Figure 2
*Jatayu Vadham*, oil painting
Raja Ravi Varma, 1895
Figure 3
*Standing Lakshmi*, chromolithograph
Ravi Varma Press, 1894
Figure 4
Woodward’s Gripe Water advertisement
Mahadev Vishwanath Dhurandhar, 1932
Figure 5
*Shri Lakshmi*, printed poster
Kondiah Raju, 1970
Figure 6
FilmIndia cover by S. M. Pandit, 1946
Figure 7
FilmIndia cover by S. M. Pandit, 1951
Figure 8
Nanak Chand’s chai stand in Old Delhi, 2014

Photo from “Chai Wallahs of India” by Zach Marks and Resham Gellatly
Glossary

Academic Realism: Realism is considered by many to be the first modern movement in art, with an emphasis on real life subject matter and themes in content. Academic realism was introduced under the European academies of art.

Calendar Art: colorful and inexpensive calendar prints of religious deities, secular images of women, children or landscapes, product advertisements, etc. on decorative calendars that are saved and hung in the home or place of commerce.

Darshan or Darśana: a Sanskrit term for “visions of the divine,” devotional gaze or reciprocal holy viewing of a Hindu deity

Kerala: A region on the western southern tip of India where Ravi Varma was born and the location of the Sri Chatra Art Gallery, which houses many of his original oil portraits

Lithograph: also called a chromolithograph, “lith” meaning “stone” in Greek, a print produced by preparing a separate stone by hand for each color to be used and printing one color in register over another.

Modernist Painting: An art movement in the early 20th century introduced to Kolkata in the Bengal School of Art, a resistance to overtly religious or traditional

Naturalism: a true-to-life style of representation or depiction of nature and people as they truly appear, with the least possible distortion or interpretation.

Oleograph: the reproduction of oil paintings through the lithographic medium onto paper, canvas, or cloth
Bibliography

Primary Sources

Professor Shukla Sawant
Jawaharlal Nehru University, School of Arts and Aesthetics
New Mehrauli Road, Munirka, New Delhi, Delhi 110067

Visit to the National Gallery of Modern Art on November 16th, 2016
Jaipur House, Sher Shah Road, Near Delhi High Court, India Gate, New Delhi, Delhi 110003

Visit to the Sri Chatra Art Gallery on November 21st, 2016
Museum Bains compound Rd, LMS Compound, PMG, Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala 695033

Vihaan Subramani, chai vendor in downtown Madurai, Tamil Nadu

Secondary Sources


Further Reading

*Divine Lithography* by Enrico Castelli & Giovanni Aprile (2005)


*Muslim Devotional Art in India* by Yousuf Saeed (2012)