

How many artists can enjoy the distinction of having prints of their paintings enshrined and garlanded in millions of households all over the country, without the owners ever being aware that they possess a copy of a famous piece of art? The greatest victim of piracy even during his own lifetime, prints

of Raja Ravi Varma's works continue to adorn prayer alcoves in homes, as much as a 100 years after his death. The worshippers are blissfully unaware that Raja Ravi Varma ever existed.



WORKING IN OIL PAINTS

Varma started painting by using indigenous paints made from leaves, flowers, tree bark and soil. Oil paints reached the shores of India much after the Renaissance; through trial and error, Varma learned to use this pliable, slow-drying paint, utilising the flexibility it afforded to blend, smoothen

and maneuver, to his advantage. It probably proved to be a more user-friendly medium than water colours, which offer little scope for correction or modification because of its quick drying properties and relative translucency.

PORTRAITS

Varma's fame as a portrait artist soared and he was besieged with several portrait commissions from the Indian aristocracy as well as British Governors. The recognition that

ART

Princely Painter

TEXT DEVYANI JAYAKAR

Sita's Bhumi Pravesh, signed Ravi Varma, 1880 Nov. 12 Travancore Koil Tampuram; oil on canvas; 112 x 142 cm.

On Raja Ravi Varma's (1848 - 1906) death centenary, a retrospect of his works reveals his unflagging contribution in transforming the history of painting in India.



he received in several exhibitions abroad, especially after the Vienna Exhibition which he won in 1873, Indian painting received newfound respect in the Western world, as also credibility in the eyes of the Indian elite. His idyllic paintings of beautiful, light skinned, uppercaste, bejewelled Maharashtrian sari clad women, influenced by his sojourn in Bombay, ensured him success.

Varma's works are recognisable by his use of painted props and highly stylised prosceniums to provide the necessary depth, in the foreground of which his protagonists are posed. The concentration on the exquisite folds of the nine yard sari could be likened to a down sized version of the drapery of the Pieta. With oil paints applied thickly, Varma created lustrous impasted jewellery and brocaded textures. Soon, it became a status symbol for homes to display his work.

ICONOGRAPHY

Besides portraits and portrait-based compositions,

“ Varma was Rembrandtesque in his dramatic use of light and shadow, trademark of the chiaroscuro technique. He portrayed not only courtly life, as in his celebrated ‘Begum’s Bath’, but also everyday life, and the sheer size of his canvas multiplied several fold the miniatures of the past.”

Pheroza Godrej, art connoisseur

Varma honed an oeuvre for theatrical compositions based on Indian myths and legends, such as the epic Ramayana and Mahabharata. Characters from Marathi theatre and Sanskrit classics were also



Kamsa Maya, attributed to Raja Ravi Varma; oil on canvas; 165 x 112 cm.

his inspiration. His use of perspective was tempered by the Tanjore school, where the main subject stood out in dramatic contrast to lesser characters. A.Ramachandran's in his analogy to describe Varma's works says, "even though he borrowed his vocabulary from European art, his

language exhibited a distinct South Indian flavour. It is as if an educated South Indian was narrating the Indian stories in English, with a recognisably South Indian accent."

struggling for survival by laboriously adapting Europeans elements, Varma insouciantly defied all taboos. In seeming incompatibility, he used western neo classical techniques to portray Indian themes and subjects that were cultural symbols. The same kind of paradigm shift in aesthetic values must have occurred when Mughal painters rendered the Ramayana or Krishna in Persian miniature format. Varma gave mythology a form that had become entrenched in the nation's collective unconscious.

Between the 1920's and the 1940's a new genre of Varma oleographs, decorated with silver and gold thread, beads, pearls and semi precious stones became the vogue.



Princess Tarabai (1871-97), attributed to Raja Ravi Varma; oil on canvas; 152 x 143 cm.

FAR REACHING INFLUENCE

At a time when Company Schools in India were

Travelling Tamilians, especially Chettiars, took the prints to Burma,

where the local women painstakingly embroidered them. When these prints were brought back to the Madras Presidency, they became a rage and were soon de rigueur to decorate the homes of the rich and the famous.

CRITIQUE

Art historians of the early 20th century disparaged Varma's "art" as mere hybrid kitsch, which made a travesty of Indian aesthetic and spiritual values. For the purists, his use of a foreign technique was trite as well as pretentious. In his defence, it could be said that his position was similar to that of early Indian writers, who modelled their works on those of Walter Scott and Charles Dickens. He provided a

world on a flat canvas, by using perspective and scale for spaces and figures. This was opposed to the largely flat, highly stylised forms of miniature painting, which had disregarded linear perspective.

His detractors, however, wince at the bonhomie with which East meets West in his work. Varma's approach to frontality had severe limitations in terms of space and movement. He exploited popular taste and his



Ganga and Shantanoo, signed Raja Ravi Varma, 1890; oil on canvas; 178 x 127 cm.

“ Critics sidelined what was a definitive art form, merely because Varma assuaged the vanity of the nobility. ”

Pravina Mecklai, Jamaat Art Gallery

link between the traditional Thanjavoor school of Indian art and the more contemporary Western Academic Realism. This ensured a vital bridge between two centuries, signifying different periods in art, and fulfilled the historical necessity of transition.

The colonial influence is also seen in his adoption of the Western technique of creating a three dimensional

mythological scenes were unabashedly theatrical. But in spite of all these drawbacks, his images could hold together both the refinement of a classicist as well as the populist appeal. His paintings were always vibrant with tactile qualities both in terms of colour and texture.

PRIVATE COLLECTIONS TODAY

Niloufer Kapadia, The

“ Varma's contribution has not been clearly understood. His talent lay in adapting and assimilating new ideas and techniques. He pioneered a style of painting that became extremely popular, and impacted several forms of art, particularly cinema, even upto the time of V. Shantaram. ”

Saryu Doshi, ex Director NGMA

Fourth Floor Art Gallery, is passionate about collecting Varma's oleographs. "Fusion is a buzz word in music, cuisine, fashion, dance, interior styles and several other fields today," she says. Varma was a pathbreaker in "fusion" art more

than a century back. With the revival beginning in the 1990's, everyone's dusting their Varma's, and international auction houses like Christie's and Sotheby's are waiting in the wings, eager to bring his works under the hammer. ✂

ART FOR CHARITY

People for Animals, India's largest Animal Welfare NGO, [chaired by Ms.Maneka Gandhi] is organising an Exhibition cum Sale of 400 of Raja Ravi Varma's oleographs on the occasion of his Death Centenary. Many of the oleographs on sale belong to the personal collection of the late Sir C.P.Ramaswami Aiyar. The proceeds of this fund raiser will go to:
 *People for Animals
 *The Saraswathi Kendra Learning Centre for Children.
 The oleographs will be on exhibition as well as sale from 11th-15th August 2006, at Hotel Grand Intercontinental.



Arjun and Subhadra, attributed to Raja Ravi Varma; oil on canvas; 160 x 112 cm.