



SPRING AUCTIONS 2022

MODERN INDIAN ART
6 APRIL 2022 | LIVE | MUMBAI

SAFFRONART

RAJA RAVI VARMA: THE ARTIST

ften called the 'Father of Modern Indian Art', Raja Ravi Varma is known for having played a critical role in the development of the genre at a time when the movement for Indian Independence was just gaining momentum. An incredibly talented artist, he managed to develop a distinct visual language that was relatable by large sections in a country that was unique in its many differences.

Ravi Varma was the first Indian artist of aristocratic lineage to depict conventional themes with stunning photorealism with his commissions primarily coming from princely states and prosperous professionals across British India. His legendary talent would have perhaps been limited to an affluent crowd had he not set up a printing press, an action that was born out of a desire to democratise his art. This led to Ravi Varma's artistic endeavours expanding "beyond palace walls and stately homes to the humble domain of the ordinary man. They stirred the imagination of a nascent India seeking its identity. A hundred years have gone by since this journey started and his images of Hindu gods and goddesses as well as countless other manifestations of calendar art have become part of India's visual culture." (Rupika Chawla, *Raja Ravi Varma: Painter of Colonial India*, Ahmedabad: Mapin Publishing Pvt. Ltd., 2019, p. 291)

Born in 1848 to an aristocratic family in Kilimanoor in the southern princely state of Travancore (present-day Kerala), Ravi Varma was trained as a court artist in Trivandrum, where he continued to study and work through the 1860s in the company of other court painters such as Ramaswamy Naicker of the Tanjore School. It was during the same time that academic realism as a style of painting had gained great popularity. This "new way of painting" where "the principles of perspective, foreshortening and highlighting were applied in order to create works that evoked the visual reality of life... changed the course of painting in India." (Chawla, p. 157)

This was also when oil paint became the more soughtafter medium by many artists because they "remain fluid for a considerable period unlike quick drying water-based colours; they are supple and can be used thick or as a glaze. A brush loaded with oil paint can create volume and brushstrokes that tempera cannot." (Chawla, pp. 155-156)

These developments and influences along with the opportunity to observe European portrait artist, Theodore Jensen, at work presumably prompted Ravi Varma to begin the process of developing his own style that took his awareness of "the ancient conventions and the new thinking, or past history and present events" into account. "He underwent a process of conscious selection of themes, genre and medium in the paintings he wished to make – the grand historical paintings of gods and heroes and portraits of the rich and powerful. He allowed Western influences to prevail when and where it suited him, and from which he knew he could derive the maximum advantage." (Chawla, p. 157)



Raja Ravi Varma with the Kaiser-i-Hind medal Image courtesy of Manu S Pillai

CLASSIFYING RAVI VARMA'S PAINTINGS

There is a clear demarcation between the various categories of paintings created by Ravi Varma. A rich body of portrait work exists along with his mythological paintings that are further divided into subcategories – ""Puranic", "Religious" and "Scenes from Hindu Classical Drama"." (Chawla, p. 158)

"The *Puranic* paintings are generally the large ones, with several figures caught in the midst of a dramatic action... They depict a historic moment from an epic or a classical text, which is intended to be noble, momentous and emotional... the choice of scene had to be an unforgettable one within that particular narrative, which would invariably lead to a series of repercussions and consequences... Interspersed within these *Puranic* paintings are the religious ones, the interpretation of which is quite different from the earlier category. In the religious paintings the same gods and noble characters from the *Puranas* can illustrate a certain state of being, or present an iconic or decorative image. They may also depict the consequences of the high drama of a *Puranic* painting..." (Chawla, p. 161)

An examination of the *Puranic* and religious paintings that were based on the same epic or classical text helps the viewer realise Ravi Varma's talent as an artist as well as a storyteller. When observed in a sequence, these paintings help push forward the narrative in a unique and visual manner. This is evident in Ravi Varma's paintings of scenes from the *Mahabharata* – particularly the ones depicting Krishna and Draupadi, of which the present lot is a part. "These two compelling characters are strongly interconnected in the *Puranas* but since their lives are extraordinarily eventful, Ravi Varma makes them strike divergent courses and devotes a different set of paintings to each." (Chawla, pp. 163-164)

Ravi Varma's unique style incorporated the use of oil as a medium as well as European naturalism and academic realism, often combined with distinctly Indian mythological themes.



Music Hath Charms (Kadambari), Circa 1900s Saffronart, Mumbai, 15 December 2021, lot 13 Sold for Rs 20.4 crores (\$2.73 million)



The Maharaja of Travancore and his younger brother welcoming Richard Temple–Grenville, 3rd Duke of Buckingham and Chandos, Governor–General of Madras (1875–80), on his official visit to Trivandram in 1880, 1881

Saffronart, Mumbai, 26 March 2019, lot 13 Sold for Rs 16.1 crores (\$2.36 million)

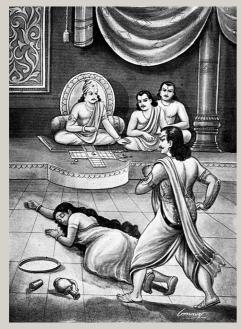


Illustration from *Maharabharata* by Gita Press Wikimedia Commons



Woodcut illustration depicting Draupadi's *vastraharan*, Circa 1870 Wikimedia Commons

MAHABHARATA AND DRAUPADI'S VASTRAHARAN

The *Mahabharata* is a seminal Sanskrit epic that has formed a large part of the collective Hindu consciousness for centuries. It revolves around two branches of a family – the Pandavas and the Kauravas – who, in the Kurukshetra War, battle for the throne of Hastinapura. It is considered to be the longest epic poem ever written and contains lessons on *dharma* that are considered to be critical for all Hindus.

Amongst the many episodes contained in this epic, the one around Draupadi's forceful stripping is considered to be the most crucial. It marks a critical point in the story and acts as a trigger for the events leading up to the Kurukshetra War, as well as the war itself.

The moment depicted in *Draupadi Vastraharan* by Ravi Varma comes after much has already transpired between the Pandavas and the Kauravas and serves to heighten the drama further. When the Kauravas challenge the Pandavas to a game of dice with the primary aim of taking away the kingdom of Indraprastha from the latter, things escalate to a point where Yudhishthir (the oldest Pandava brother) has gambled away everything they own – including his brothers as well as himself. Finally, in a state of desperation, he ends up using the Pandavas' wife Draupadi as a bet – a gamble he then manages to lose.

Thrilled by their victory, the Kaurava king Duryodhana demands for Draupadi to be brought to the court at once. His brother, Dushasana, proceeds to drag Draupadi to the court by her hair. In order to continue her public humiliation, as well as that of the Pandavas, Dushasana is instructed to disrobe Draupadi. Though Draupadi appeals to the elders present in the court to prevent this violation of her modesty and self, her words remain unheard. Caught in her helpless state, Draupadi prays to Krishna for protection, who intervenes by ensuring the yards of the *sari* draped around her person never run out. Dushasana is eventually forced to stop out of sheer exhaustion while Draupadi manages to remain chastely dressed, thereby heralding a timely victory for her.



Raja Ravi Varma, *Draupadi Being Dragged*, sketch, Circa 1891 Image sourced for reference only from Rupika Chawla, *Raja Ravi* Varma: Painter of Colonial India, Ahmedabad: Mapin Publishing Pvt Ltd. 2019, p. 171

ON RAJA RAVI VARMA'S DRAUPADI VASTRAHARAN

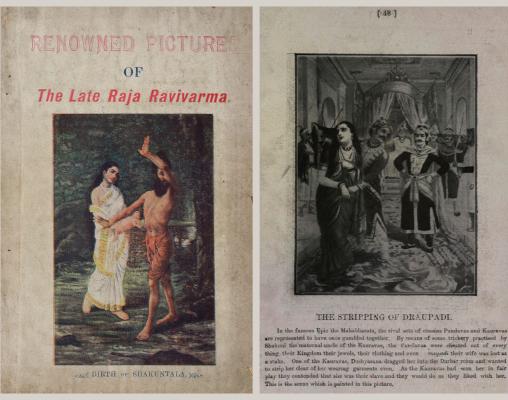
By GANESH V SHIVASWAMY

Raja Ravi Varma's first painting on the theme of Draupadi is from the year 1884 and depicts the enchantress Simhika trying to entice her to go with her into a forest. The episode of the stripping of Draupadi, an episode narrated in the Sabha Parva of the Mahabharata was first commissioned to be painted by Sayajirao Gaekwad – III, the Maharaja of Baroda during his trip to Ootacamund where he met the artist. Ravi Varma was paid Rs 500 for the painting of Draupadi Vastraharan¹ which was delivered to the Lukshmi Vilas Palace, Baroda on 9 March 1891.

The painting for the Baroda *durbar* is in a horizontal format and elaborately composed. Rama Varma (Ravi Varma's son) painted a copy, and both the paintings continue to remain in the ownership and custody of the Royal Gaekwad Collection, Vadodara. The Baroda painting was photographed, and the photograph was used as a reference image for a postcard printed by The Phototype Company, Bombay.



Draupadi Vastra Haran, The Phototype Company, Bombay Postcard Collection: Hemamalini and Ganesh Shivaswamy, Bengaluru



The present lot published in S N Joshi, Half-Tone Reprints of the Renowned Pictures of the late Raja Ravivarma, Poona: Chitra-shala Steam Press, 1911, p. 48 (illustrated)

Ravi Varma painted a second version of the scene which was intended as an exemplar for the printing of chromolithographs at the Ravi Varma Press. This painting was also photographed and featured in an early catalogue authored by S N Joshi. The book was printed at the Chitra-shala Steam Press, Poona in 1911 and was titled *Half-Tone Reprints of the Renowned Pictures of the late Raja Ravivarma*. The book contains 87 illustrations, many of which have hitherto not been traced.

The Ravi Varma painting that is a part of Saffronart's upcoming Spring Live Auction (lot 13) is illustrated in Joshi's book under the title *The Stripping of Draupadi*. To quote Joshi, the scene "painted in this picture," was the episode whereby "Dushyasana dragged her into the Durbar room and wanted to strip her."²

This painting was used as the reference exemplar for chromolithographs printed at the Ravi Varma Press bearing the title *Draupadi Vastraharan*. The earliest chromolithograph is from the Ravi Varma F A L Press, Karli, Bombay which may be dated to circa 1898. Later versions were printed after the Press shifted to Lonavala.³

Baroda State Archives- Huzur Order Registration Number 216 dated 9 March 1891

² S N Joshi, Half-Tone Reprints of the Renowned Pictures of the late Raja Ravivarma, Poona: Chitra-shala Steam Press, 1911, p. 48

³ Rupika Chawla, *Raja Ravi Varma: Painter of Colonial India*, Ahmedabad: Mapin Publishing Pvt. Ltd., 2010, p. 171

PROPERTY FROM AN IMPORTANT PRIVATE COLLECTOR, NEW DELHI

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RAJA RAVI VARMA (1848-1906)

Draupadi Vastraharan

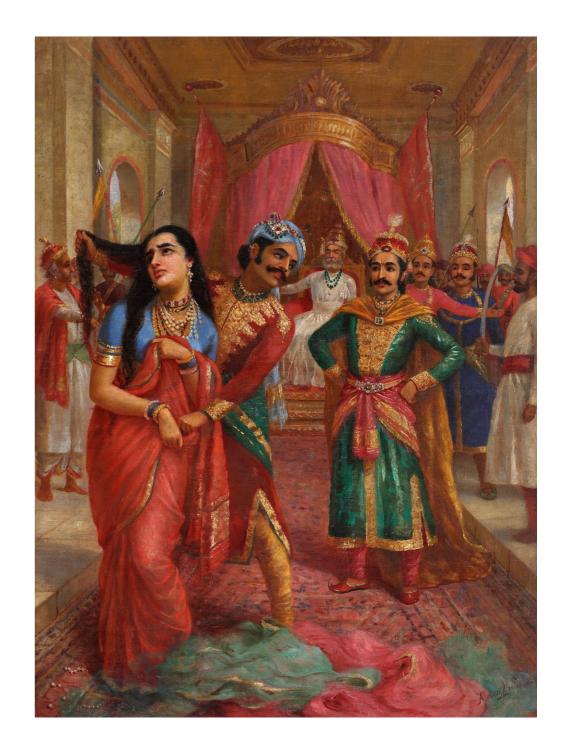
Signed 'Ravi Varma' (lower right) Circa 1888-1890 Oil on canvas 28 x 20 in (71 x 51 cm)

Rs 15,00,00,000 - 20,00,00,000 \$2,027,030 - 2,702,705

NON-EXPORTABLE NATIONAL ART TREASURE REGISTERED ANTIQUITY

PROVENANCE

Commissioned directly from the artist by the Baroda Commission Acquired by a shareholder of The Ravi Varma Fine Arts Lithographic Press Thence by descent



THE RAVI VARMA PRESS

The establishment of The Ravi Varma Fine Arts Lithographic Press led to the widespread proliferation of the artist's unique and compelling imagery. "No other phenomenon was quite so responsible for moving Ravi Varma's images forward as the printing of oleographs that transferred the likeness of his paintings onto an altogether different medium. The oleographs accelerated the dissemination of his images and propelled them forward. They were also responsible for the conversion of his imagery to other visual mediums, each adapting his representations to suit its specific stylistic and technical demands." (Chawla, p. 253)

Born out of a desire to democratise his art, the establishment of this press "carried Ravi Varma's endeavours beyond palace walls and stately homes to the humble domain of the ordinary man. They stirred the imagination of a nascent India seeking its identity. A hundred years have gone by since this journey started and his images of Hindu gods and goddesses as well as countless other manifestations of calendar art have become part of India's visual culture." (Chawla, p. 291)





The original owner of the painting and his daughter, the current owner by descent, are both shown in these photographs taken in the compound of the Ravi Varma Fine Art Lithographic Press.

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RAJA RAVI VARMA PRESS

Droupadi Vastraharan

Oleograph on paper pasted on paper 19.25 x 14.25 in (48.9 x 36.2 cm)

Rs 1,00,000 - 2,00,000 \$1,355 - 2,705

This work was printed at the Ravi Varma Press, Malavli, G.I.P

PROVENANCE

Private Collection, Kolkata Acquired from the above

PUBLISHED

Rupika Chawla, *Raja Ravi Varma: Painter of Colonial India*, Ahmedabad: Mapin Publishing Pvt. Ltd., 2019, p. 171 (illustrated, another from the edition)

Dr. D Jegat Ishwari, *Raja Ravi Varma: Oleographs Catalogue*, Chennai: Shri Parasuraman, 2009, p. 44 (illustrated, another from the edition)

What Ravi Varma manages to do, through his painting and his oleograph of the same work, is bring this moment of heightened drama into the public consciousness. It is perhaps due to this that he continues to remain, even a century following his death, one of the most important figures in Indian art with "his images of mythological figures... imprinted in most Indian minds for being the most authoritative versions that were able to find audiences and markets, whether in the north of India or the south, east India or the west." (Kishore Singh ed., "Raja Ravi Varma," *Masterpieces of Indian Modern Art*, New Delhi: DAG, 2016, p. 438)



Droupadi Vastraharan, Oleograph by Raja Ravi Varma Press

