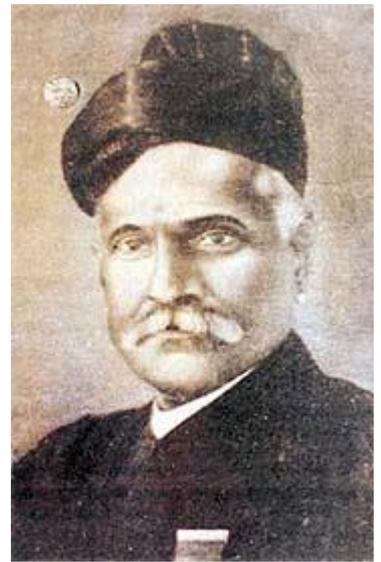


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Article

## A great painter, no doubt, but controversial too

**More than a hundred and fifty years after Ravi Varma's birth on April 29, 1848, his paintings have lost, to a great extent, their attraction for the modern connoisseur, although affluent collectors show a great interest in acquiring his originals. That he was a great artist, no critic disputes. But most regret the way in which he, by his paintings, led the public taste in India. The era in which he lived was the age of artistic experimentation and renaissance all over the world. But in India, Ravi Varma, aided by wealth and talent, a rare combination in an artist, was resuscitating a type of portrait painting which Europe had begun to discard, writes K.R.N. Swamy.**



**T**HE era of modern painting in India can be said to have started from the last decades of the 19th century. For official purposes, 1857, the year of the First War of Independence, is taken as the beginning of the modern era, and for 25 years of this era (1880-1905) Raja Ravi Varma reigned supreme. Nearly a century after his death in 1906, his representations of Hindu gods and goddesses still adorn homes in India.

Ravi Varma was born on April 29, 1848, in the village of Killimannur, in Kerala. He belonged to a family of local chieftains known as the Koil Thampurans. The bridegrooms for the princesses of the royal family of Travancore were always taken from the Koil Thampuran family. He was the eldest of a family of four children and showed a keen interest in painting even in his childhood. Although this desire to paint was frowned upon by his elders, Ravi Varma's uncle, Raja Raja Varma, who himself was an artist of high calibre, nurtured this artistic streak in his nephew and once, during his visit to the court of the Maharajah of Travancore, persuaded the king to let Varma stay in his palace, so that he would profit from his association with famous artists in the court.

In 1863, British painter Theodore Jensen was invited by the Maharajah of Travancore to paint some portraits for him. Ravi Varma often went to see the Englishman painting and the flattering realism of the oil painting and the glitter of the new medium made a great impression on him. After much rebuffing from Theodore Jensen and help from the Maharaja, Ravi Varma finally succeeded in learning the rudiments of oil painting. Modern critics of Indian art have deeply regretted this meeting of East and West in Ravi Varma's paintings and according to one critic, the effect of Jensen's technique on Ravi Varma retarded the progress of modern Indian painting by 50 years.

In 1866, Ravi Varma, as a Koil Thampuran (Lord of the Palace) married the Maharajah's youngest sister and became an influential member of the court. Soon, he found that the demand for his paintings far outstripped his capacity to paint. By the 1890s, acting on the advice of his friend, Sir Madhav Rao, the then Dewan of Baroda, he established an oleographic printing press in Bombay, so that even the poor could buy copies of his paintings. After 1894, Ravi Varma was busy with the affairs of the state as the

guardian of the young Maharaja of Travancore and further, the death of Raja Raja Varma in 1905, proved a great shock to him. He never recovered from this loss and on October 5, 1906, passed away in the town of Attingal in Kerala.

The palaces of many Indian princes contain a number of his original works. Of all his works, the mythological composition of Shakuntala, writing a love letter to Dushyanta and the non-mythological painting 'Poverty' are adjudged to be the best. As per Ravi Varma's son, Shri Rama Varma Raja, Ravi Varma used to charge Rs 1500 to 2000 for a life-size painting. For the Maharaja of Baroda, towards the turn of the 19th century he painted 14 classical paintings for Rs 50,000. The Baroda collection is today conservatively estimated to be worth Rs 30 million. In 1997, one painting by Ravi Varma was sold for Rs 32 lakh and this year one art auctioneer put the reserve price of Rs 48 lakh on a Ravi Varma painting.

But now, more than a 150 years after Ravi Varma's birth, his paintings have lost, to a great extent, their attraction for the modern connoisseur, although affluent collectors show a great interest in acquiring his originals. That he was a great artist, no critic disputes. But most regret the way in which he, by his paintings, led the public taste in India. The era in which he lived was the age of artistic experimentation and renaissance all over the world. In the East, in Japan, the austere Hokussai prints, in the simplicity of their selective line and colour, revealed the formal beauty of an authentic art, while in Europe, the Impressionists were struggling with the optical effect of light on colour and shifting physical appearances. But in India, their contemporary, Ravi Varma, aided by wealth and talent, a rare combination in an artist, was resuscitating a type of portrait painting which Europe had begun to discard.

As a popular artist, he was a great success and probably more oleograph copies of his paintings have been sold than those of any other artist, dead or alive. But this was due to the devotional content, of the paintings, combined with their beauty, rather than for their artistic value alone. As an example, critics point out that very few oleograph copies of non-mythological paintings have been sold, and his best work of art, titled 'Poverty', is not as well known as some of the mythological paintings.

For nearly 25 years, he held sway as the leading luminary of Indian art, riding on the crest of public acclaim not unmixed with nationalistic fervour. But in that ecstasy, painting in India could not keep up with the progress that painters worldwide were making. It is for this reason, that at times, Ravi Varma, a legendary figure in his days, is termed a 'historic failure' with reference to modern Indian painting. Controversy will continue to rage on the manner in which he influenced Indian art. But of his unequalled success as a great artist, there can be no doubt. **(MF)**