

Canvas call from a genius

Get a glimpse of rare, vintage oleographs by iconic artist Raja Ravi Varma that are on currently on display at the Clark House

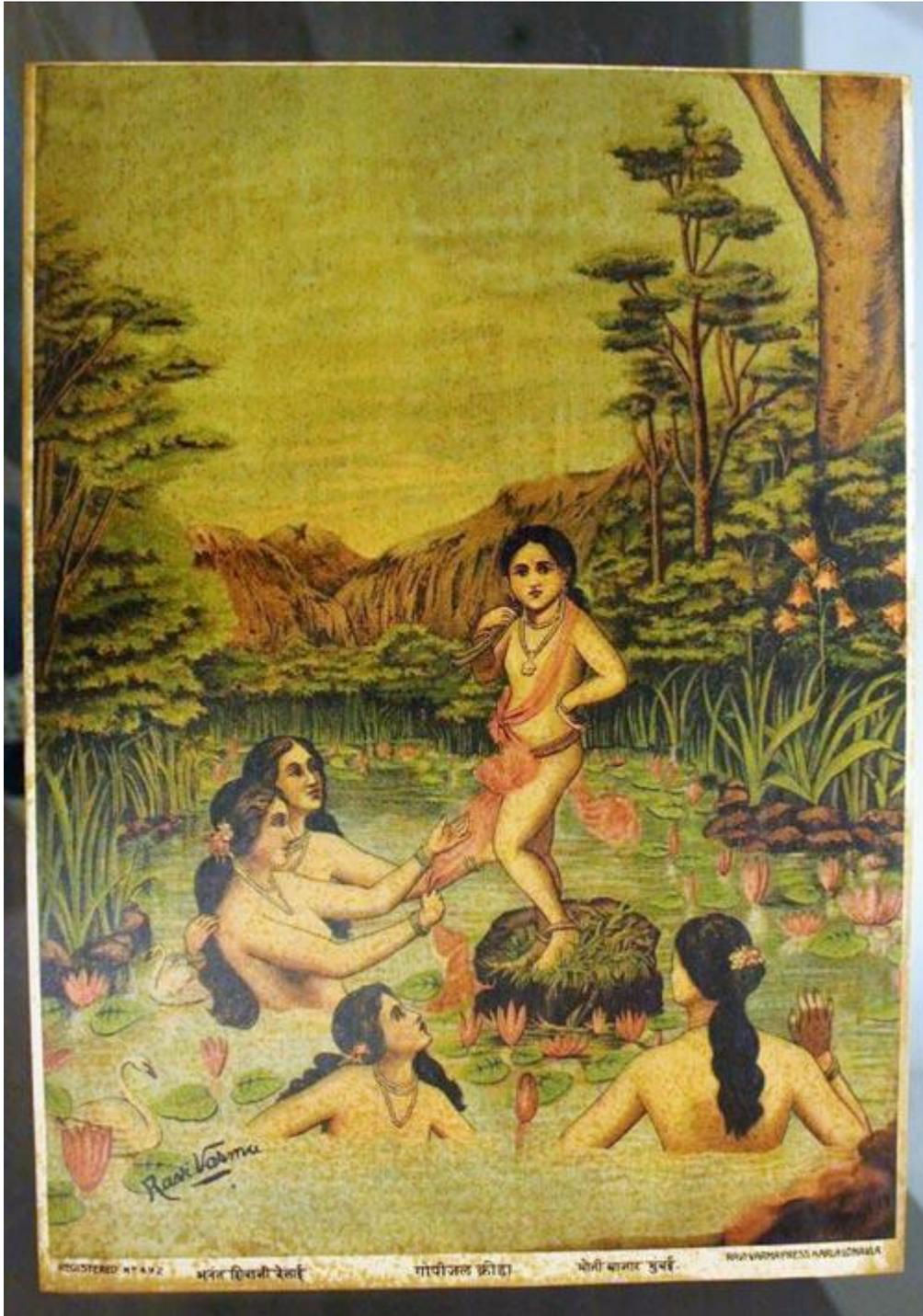
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Mumbai Ruchika Kher

If you wish to appreciate art in its best, finest form, head to an exhibition of 98 oleographs by Raja Ravi Varma, who has been credited of being the first modern artist of India. Published in the 1920s, these oleographs were never framed and remained an entire set that depict numerous stories based on the epics of Ramayana and Mahabharata.

Oil collective

“Oleographs are lithographs created through a multi-layered process using many colours called chromolithography and they need a temperate cool climate for precise registration of the prints. The litho stones used to print the Ravi Varma prints are a particular type of limestone from the Rhenish Valley, Germany,” says Suresh Sharma of Clark House.



Ravi Varma set up a press with the help of German technicians to whom he later sold the press due to bankruptcy; he also sold them the rights to print his images. Around that time, a hat merchant, Anant Shivaji Desai, purchased the rights from the Mysore and Baroda Royal families to print lithographs from their vast collections of Ravi Varma oils, and through his efforts, Ravi Varma's images in the form of poster and calendar prints became popular across India.

Divine theory

“Ravi Varma gave a definite human face to the Gods and Goddesses of the Hindu pantheon. This act put an end to the nuances of diversity in religious practice, as visual perceptions of the deities varied according to geography and the differences of culture throughout India. The rise of the Hindu Right was strengthened by this annihilation of visual diversity, by creating an unwritten set canon of rules of how Hindu deities are to be depicted, that was once breached by MF Hussain,” says Sharma. This will be the first time that an entire set of Ravi Varma oleographs are being displayed together.



Raja Ravi Varma

“Throughout his career, he sought many muses and one of them was Anjanibai Malphekar, a singer from the courtesan tradition of Goa, and a known exponent of Indian classical music who debuted in Bombay in 1899, the year in which Raja Ravi Varma set up his printing press. Her face became an iconic image often becoming a reference to the faces Ravi Varma gave to his Goddesses,” informs Sharma.