

[Cities](#) » [Chennai](#)

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## How to tell a real Raja Ravi Varma



The Hindu The oil painting on canvas by Raja Ravi Varma. Photo: Special Arrangement

One look at this striking painting of Jatayu Vadha by Raja Ravi Varma and you want to take it home. But only a small percentage of antique paintings available in the market may be authentic. If you are an art lover and are too impressed to buy a painting, make sure you have it verified by a trained eye.

A Chennai-based conservation firm that was approached by Bid and Hammer Auctioneers Private Limited, Bangalore to check the genuineness of Jatayu Vadha or Ravana carrying Sita, talks about how the valuation is derived. The certificate of authentication is important for an auction house to sell the work as well as to fetch it its worth. “As another conservation firm had dismissed the work to be not original on the grounds that the signature was forged and varnish is insoluble, my work started with verifying the authenticity of the two,” says V. Jeyaraj, Director, Hepzibah Institute of Heritage Conservation, and former curator of the Government Museum, Egmore, who carried out the valuation.

Raja Ravi Varma is said to have signed his paintings in three types of signature — R.V., Ravi Varma and Ravi Varma with the 'V' underlined. Through microscopic examination the strokes, style and signature were examined. "In this case the signature was of the third type and the colour dark brown," Mr. Jeyaraj explains about the application of analytical chemistry in the entire valuation process.

The analysis of pigment was done through both by instrumental and micro analysis, where green, red, yellow, black and white colours were verified.

The type of ground is another crucial stage to be determined. Equally important is to if the canvas is cotton or linen. A majority of canvas of Raja Ravi Varma was manufactured by Vincent Newton and in this case there was no seal but the age is confirmed by the browning of the canvas due to age. "Linen or cotton as base gets affected with the environmental changes. Here zinc oxide was added to linseed oil to give the primer on the canvas," says the former curator, adding that it took him 10 days to arrive at a conclusion.

Another interesting observation was to learn the type of stretcher frame used by Ravi Varma. The original stretcher frame was not present when it was given to the auction house but the marks were visible to arrive at a conclusion that the oil painting was mounted with an external frame and new varnish had been applied keeping the outer frame. The stretcher frame was of mortise and tenon (type of a stretcher which can be stretched or compressed in size). The date of the painting is yet another authentication. The provenance also gives a clue to the authenticity.

If you thought the verification process is all over; you are wrong. Most auction houses have a team of experts comprising art historian, conservator, painter and scientist to study the process again.

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