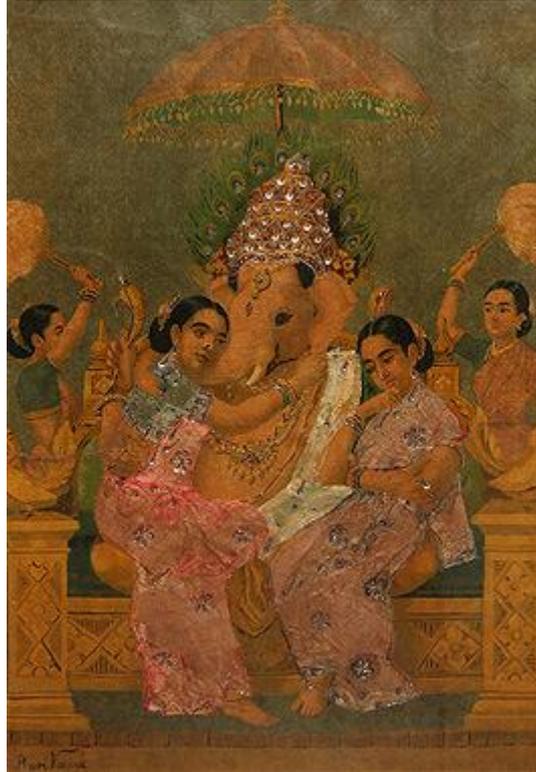


## [Raja Ravi Varma's Oleographs: The Making of a National Identity](#)

Posted on [January 23, 2013](#) by [manjarisihare](#)



Raja Ravi Varma Riddhi Siddhi Ganpati

*Manjari Sihare shares some insights about Raja Ravi Varma's oleographs*

**New York:** This week, [The Story](#) features a curated selection from the [vintage print archive](#) of well known advertising guru, Cyrus Oshidar. Among these is an eclectic selection of oleographs by India's first modern artist, [Raja Ravi Varma](#). Ravi Varma (1848-1906) is credited for many-a-firsts: probably the first Indian artist to master perspective and the use of the oil medium; the first to use human models to illustrate Hindu gods and goddesses; the first Indian artist to become famous, before him painters and craftsmen were largely unidentified; and the first to make his work available not just to the rich elite but also to common people by way of his oleographs.

Even while catering to a specific class of patrons with his oil paintings, the artist harbored an underlying concern to make his works accessible to the so-called common man in the hope that it would help the general populace cultivate artistic values and draw inspiration from the religious figures and Pauranic episodes represented in the works. The master artist's biography in Malayalam by Balakrishnan Nair further elaborates this point. It records an exchange between Ravi Varma and a Brahmin scholar at his studio in Kilimanoor, Kerala. The artist had asked a bystander for his opinion of a certain painting, and the scholar argued on the pretext of how could the artist expected a commoner express an opinion on a work of art? "True" said Ravi Varma, "these people do not have the means to get the pictures painted, but who knows if in the time of their children, these very pictures now painted for Maharajas and nobles will not become their property as well, and find their way into museums. I have heard that there are public galleries in Western countries."

The idea of printing and distributing oleographs was given to Ravi Varma by Sir T. Madhava Rao, former Dewan of Travancore and later Baroda, in a letter in the 1880s which read: “There are many friends who are desirous of possessing your works. It would be hardly possible for you, with only a pair of hands, to meet such a large demand. Send, therefore, a few of your select works to Europe and have them oleographed. You will thereby not only extend your reputation, but will be doing a real service to the country.” At the time, Ravi Varma had promised his friend and patron that he would give his suggestion his earnest deliberation, and although it took the artist nearly a decade, he did so eventually.

The Ravi Varma Lithographic Press was started in 1894 in Bombay, a carefully chosen location, for the expediency of importing machinery from Germany and distributing the prints. Ravi Varma sought the partnership of a local entrepreneur, Govardhandas Khataumakhanji in this venture. Additionally he solicited the services of German technicians for the Press. It is worth noting that original suggestion in the letter of T. Madhava Rao was to send works to Europe to be oleographed, but what Ravi Varma eventually did was to set up a press himself employing Europeans to do the job for him in his homeland.

Oleography was a comparatively new form of printing then, mastered by an Englishman, named George Boxtor in 1835. It came into commercial use by 1860, but was already an exhausted force by the end of the century in Europe. In India, until Ravi Varma’s prints, oleography was used for gaudy ‘calendar art’ and commodity packaging. In the context of fine art, it is essentially a method of reproducing an oil painting on paper in such a manner that the exact colors and brushstrokes textures are duplicated. This litho-printing (stone printing) thus requires as many litho-stones as there are colors and tones in a painting. Oleo is the Latin for oil, which helps to explain the word.



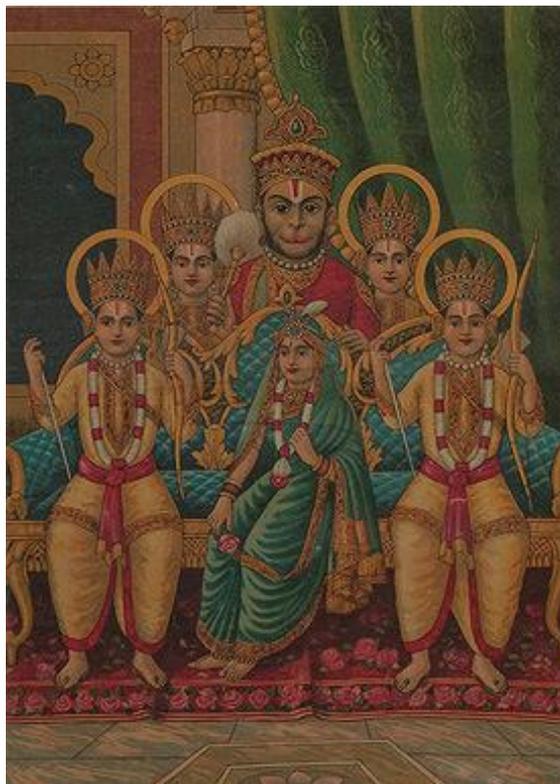
Raja Ravi Varma Lakshmi and Saraswati

It is commonplace that Raja Ravi Varma is vastly celebrated. In the year following his death (1907), the inaugural issue of *Modern Review*, a monthly magazine which emerged as an important forum for Indian Nationalist intelligentsia celebrated Varma as “the greatest artist of modern India, a nation builder who showed the moral courage of a gifted ‘high-born’ in taking up the ‘degrading profession of painting’ and displaying a remarkable ability to improve upon a received idea; to grasp a situation clearly and to act upon it swiftly.” Varma projected these characteristics many-a-times throughout his illustrious career.

The period of production of Ravi Varma’s oleographs coincided with the rise of Calcutta as a rapidly expanding urban center, both politically and culturally. The print medium became the ideal channel for the wide circulation of images and ideas to the general populace. Correspondingly in Western India, Bombay and Poona emerged as the two major centres for mass print production. Some important presses of the time included the Poona Chitrashala Press, Bombay City Press and Bombay New Press. The mass prints mainly represented Indian’s past ethos inspired by the two main epics, *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. This mass production made information available to one and all, helped forge a national identity in modern India, creating a unified visual culture – a culture that was the need of the hour in a country where the dialect changed every 5 kilometers.



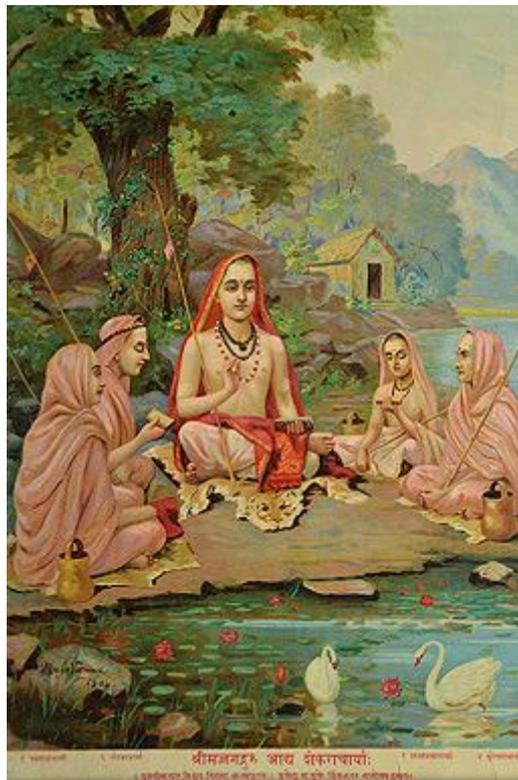
MV Dhurandhar Vishnu



Ravi Varma Press Shri Ram Janki

No popular print maker or printing press at the time could match up to Ravi Varma in reputation. Varma is known to have worked with two German technicians, chief among whom was a gentleman named Schleizer, to whom the artist eventually sold his press. He was also assisted by a group of Indian artists such as [M.V. Dhurandhar](#), M.A. Joshi and his brother, Raja Raja Varma.

Oshidhar's collection on [The Story](#) includes [a print by Dhurandhar](#), who was a famous artist in his own right, known for his stint as the first Indian director of the Sir J. J. School of Art in Bombay.



Raja Ravi Varma Shrimad Guru Adi Shankaracharya

The first picture printed at Varma's press is said to be *The Birth of Shakuntala*. This was followed by an array of images of gods from the Hindu pantheon, including Lakshmi, Saraswati, Ganpati, and Vishnu and his avatars such as Rama and Krishna. Other images included those of revered gurus and saints such as Adi Shankaracharya and Vaishanava Guru. We also see extensive series of oleographs representing women figures from Hindu mythology such as Damayanti, Menaka, Shakuntala, and Rambha. View Oshidar's selection on [The Story](#).

The phenomenal popularity of Ravi Varma's oleographs has been spoken and written about extensively. According to his Malayalam biography, "His success in this enterprise has far exceeded his anticipations. There are few cultured well-to-do houses in Hindustan, from Cape Comorin to the Himalayas, in which his pictures are not found, and his name is known all over the land, from the highest to the lowest."