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Raja Ravi Varma must be rolling over somewhere in the great ever-after. The mildly erotic six-minute clip from Ketan Mehta's forthcoming film Rang Rasiya/Colours Of Passion on the legendary 19th century painter, shown at a talkfest during Osian's Cinefan Festival being held in the capital, had some in the audience drooling.

There on the screen were hulk Randeep Hooda/Raja Ravi Varma and his sensuous muse Nandana Sen/Sugandha dabbing paint on each other □ a prelude to making love to a rather dramatic, loud background music score. Perhaps the academics and critics assembled on a sultry afternoon earlier this week hadn't quite expected the screen avatar of the painter to be, as one of them put it: "oozing sex from every pore".

I am sure Hooda, despite his rippling muscles and macho look, must be a good actor: Ketan Mehta is known for his ability to spot latent talent and unleash it. However, it is hard to imagine an actor whose career has recently taken off in action films like D and Risk in the role of the aristocratic painter from Travancore. Whatever, apparently the actor also started painting in order to get under the skin of his character.

Come to think, what's with all with the action hero stuff? Two other film makers who were said to be making biopics on Raja Ravi Varma zeroed in on action heroes for the leading role. It was Ajay Devgun for Malayalam cineaste Shaji N Karun. The focus of his film was the period the itinerant painter spent in Mumbai; his muse was to be played by either Madhuri Dixit or Vidya Balan. Film director Lenin Rajendran, also from Kerala, had settled on popular action hero Suresh Gopi as his Raja Ravi Varma.

Perhaps, these directors wanted to show the protagonist not only as a painter of beautiful women but as a lover of his muses. A good body would help, despite the fact that Raja Ravi Varma was slight of build.

Curiously, there have lately been a slew of documentaries and plays based on his life and works. Suddenly, he's become retro-cool. Vijay Mankara's documentary film, *Before The Brush Dropped* □ an analytical appreciation of his paintings □ was recently chosen for a Kerala State award. Apparently, Mankara wanted to rescue the painter from the label of "kitsch" painter □ and worse □ slapped on him in the past by art historians. Ananda Coomaraswamy classified his work as "second rate".

In his successful film, *Anathabadram*, cinematographer-director Santosh Shivan has shot a long romantic song based on a few of Raja Ravi Varma's signature paintings like *Damayanti* and *The Swan* or *The Milkmaid*.

Perhaps, the much ado about Raja Ravi Varma has to do with the soaring prices for his paintings. Unlike our beleaguered stock exchange, the prices for his works are headed upwards. On the day of the seminar itself, Osian's chairman Neville Tuli unveiled the painting he recently bought at a Bonham's auction for about Rs6 crore □ a record for the painter.

Alas, nobody really talks about the amazing man behind the legend, and the excitement of the times he lived in. We will have to wait until Rupika Chawla's forthcoming book *Raja Ravi Varma. A Painter Of Colonial Times* comes out. Until then here's what she has to say about the man. "He had a sense of enterprise, even foreign enterprise. He jumped from idea to idea □ He was an explorer of sorts and fond of adventure. He went on streamers, trains everywhere. He wanted to see the world. He wanted to see things, he wanted money and fame. He was a very modern man!"

The man was obviously way ahead of his times. He wanted his work to reach the masses. He bought a printing press: his oleographs allowed people to take gods and goddesses home. Raja Ravi Varma also thought of museums to house his works. Our very own MF Husain must surely have taken inspiration from that.

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