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Published: October 2, 2011 00:00 IST | Updated: October 2, 2011 04:30 IST

## Picture perfect Painter-Prince

P.K. Ajith Kumar

**Film:** Makaramanju (Malayalam) , **Director:** Lenin Rajendran

**Cast:** Santosh Sivan, Karthika, Nithya Menon, Lakshmi Sharma, Jagathy Sreekumar.

*Makaramanju* is as pleasing to the eyes as a Ravi Varma painting. Lenin Rajendran is back at his best as a director and scriptwriter, as in films such as *Daivathinte Vikruthikal* , *Mazha* , *Meenamasathile Sooryan*, and *Vachanam* .

*Makaramanju* is about the artist extraordinaire Raja Ravi Varma, the women in his life, and the story behind his famous painting, 'Urvashi-Pururavas'.

As Santosh Sivan did in his superbly crafted Hindi film *Asoka* (2001), Lenin has let his imagination—more than the history books—recreate the life of a great man from the past. Cinematographer Madhu Ambat has given his vision a shape, a beautiful one at that. The film's cinematography is, in fact, among the best in our cinema of late. Interestingly, it is noted cinematographer Santosh Sivan who plays Ravi Varma making his acting debut.

Much of the action in *Makaramanju* take place in the late 19th century Bombay where the painter-prince of Travancore is in exile.

One day, he comes across Sugandha (Karthika), a beautiful dancer, and she becomes the latest of his several muses. Even as she models as Urvashi, she transforms as the celestial dancer and the painter turns into Pururavas, a king. The film now has a parallel plot that narrates the poignant love story of Urvashi and Pururavas.

Lenin brilliantly uses this tale from the mythology as a metaphor to narrate the love story of Ravi Varma and Sugandha. With excellent support of editor Mahesh Narayanan, he blends these two tales with finesse. The film ends when Urvashi leaves Pururavas even as Sugandha is prevented by fundamentalists from letting Ravi Varma finish the painting.

*Makaramanju* once again proves that Lenin has a remarkable eye for casting, and an ear for the music. His choice of Santosh Sivan as Ravi Varma is spot on. Santosh looks as assured in front of the camera as he is behind it.

His fine performance is enhanced by the arresting voice of Biju Menon (who has dubbed for him). Karthika, only in her second film, is perfect as Sugandha. She is beautiful and enchanting.

Nithya Menon, one of our most promising actors, too impresses as the maid who models for the painting, 'The Lady Wearing Jasmine Flowers in Her Hair'. Shamna Kasim has put in a fine performance in a cameo role of a sex worker.

Lenin makes some statements, without being verbose, about issues like artistic freedom and censorship and intolerance of fundamentalists towards artists. There are erotic scenes in *Makaramanju* that one would rarely see in Malayalam cinema; but they do not stick out.

Ramesh Narayan's music is pleasing , once again. Costumes by S.B. Satheesan also merit mention. *Makaramanju* is surely one of the best films of the year in Malayalam.

P.K. Ajith Kumar

Printable version | Oct 12, 2013 12:02:23 PM | <http://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-national/tp-kerala/picture-perfect-painterprince/article2505682.ece>

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