

# The Enduring Myth of Ravi Varma

[Two books that fall prey to the mythology of the 'artist'](#)

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Raja Ravi Varma: Portrait of the artist as an old man.



**IT IS FAIR TO SAY** that the afterlife of Ravi Varma's images has been as eventful as his own. Fêted widely as the 'first modern Indian painter' during his lifetime, the years after his death saw a dramatic change in the reception of his work by the art historical community. In the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Bengal School (centred around the Tagores) had established itself as an avant-garde movement that proclaimed an 'authentic' modern Indian art and the realism of Ravi Varma's works was seen as derivative, inspired by Western academic sources. Stalwarts like EB Havell, Principal of the Government School of Art, Calcutta, and Ananda Coomaraswamy dismissed his works as extravagant and theatrical and this characterisation continued over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In 1993, the painter A Ramachandran and the art conservator Rupika Chawla curated a major exhibition of Ravi Varma at the National Museum in New Delhi, and it announced a renewed interest in the artist at a moment when the art world was just beginning to embrace popular culture.

And so the myth of Ravi Varma persisted, not in the least because of his pioneering efforts in setting up a modern press to mass-produce his paintings—chromolithographs of gods and goddesses that persist in the ubiquitous calendar art of today. The spurt of interest in Indian visual culture since the 1990s, as evidenced in writings on vernacular photography, cinematic

culture and bazaar prints, has led to our considering Ravi Varma the ‘father of modern Indian visual culture’—one whose mythological prototypes have provided templates for visualising the culture of kitsch in which we find ourselves immersed.

Rather than this guise as the father of kitsch, these two recent books on Ravi Varma adopt a different approach, examining the aesthetic value of Ravi Varma’s oil paintings and his career as a ‘gentleman artist.’ Rupika Chawla’s is a well-researched biography that comes the closest to a catalogue *raisonné* of the artist, featuring 436 paintings in rich colour. Chawla has meticulously gathered archival material on Ravi Varma—letters, newspaper clippings, conversations with experts—and consulted Marathi and Malayalam sources to produce a veritable tome on the artist. Locating him within the complex social hierarchies in Kerala, Chawla documents how Ravi Varma was able to cast off his provincial identity for a pan-Indian cosmopolitanism, travelling the breadth of the country in quest of a personal and professional vision. Chawla’s book is particularly rich in details about the palace intrigues involving Ravi Varma’s royal patrons (the courts of Baroda, Mysore, Travancore), revealing the complex place that an independent painter in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century occupied vis-à-vis his benefactors. Unlike the royal ateliers of the 18<sup>th</sup> century where painters were beholden to their rulers, Ravi Varma was able to carve out an individual professional career that spanned the nation, including both the British and Indian elite in his roster of clients.

While the bulk of Ravi Varma’s work consisted of portraits, his fame rested on his Pauranik paintings, which dramatised scenes from the Ramayana and Mahabharata in the European-inspired naturalism that was in vogue at the time. In a public visual arena dominated by Victorian commercial and academic imagery, the very presence of Pauranik subject matter was a powerful reminder of the glories and legends of a shared Indian heritage. Its role in visualising a national past when the very contours of such a nation were indistinct, cannot be undermined. Here Chawla’s analysis wears thin, as she chooses to recount the stories depicted in the Pauranik paintings and the circumstances of their commissioning without relating them to the larger political project of nationalism within which they were implicated. In comparison, Christopher Pinney’s *Photos of the Gods: The Printed Image and Political Struggle in India* is a compelling account of Ravi Varma’s images being drawn into the vortex of nationalist theatre, particularly by Bal Gangadhar Tilak and Kakasaheb Khadilkar. Chawla, however, steers resolutely away from the uncomfortable political questions Ravi Varma’s art raises, drawing an idealised portrait of the artist as a creative visionary. The criticisms against Ravi Varma are recounted and summarily dismissed and Chawla’s biography becomes an exercise in connoisseurship, eschewing politics for aesthetics.

Deepanjana Pal’s book *The Painter: A Life of Ravi Varma* is more forthright in acknowledging the criticisms against Varma—“His paintings are seen as too mannered, too Hindu, too literal, too melodramatic”—but she brushes these away as insignificant in the face of his “sensual and voluptuous heroines [who] remain eye-catching even in today’s age of Photoshopped perfection.” (p 112). Her dramatised biography pays keen attention to Varma’s female subjects, both on canvas and in his life. Taking a painting of a Malayali girl bathing as her point of departure, Pal engages with her coquettish gaze and those of his other heroines as indicative of the changes taking place in late 19<sup>th</sup> century gender relations. Lengthy sections follow speculating about his wife (Bhagirathi), her place within the matriarchal Nair society and how she might have dealt with Varma’s extended absences on his trips across India.

Pal's writing is engaging and vibrant and she is skilled at bringing the paintings to life, but the book relies much too heavily upon unverifiable accounts that encourage speculation and provide dramatic grist to her mill. To be sure, she deliberately sets apart her own creative liberties from matters of fact in conveniently italicised portions in which she deals with the rumours and legends that have gathered around the figure of Ravi Varma. However, the non-italicised portions are equally prone to exploiting rumour for conjecture. Consider the case of Bhagirathi, about whom nothing is known:

“Had Bhagirathi been known for her modernism, her move to Thiruvananthapuram may have been seen as an attempt to act upon her own desires. Perhaps that is actually what it was. Perhaps she was meant to give her elder sister, whose husband was still under house arrest in Harippad, companionship. Perhaps Ravi asked his young bride to come with him to sample the life he so enjoyed.” (p 98)

Or:

“There must have been some pressure upon Bhagirathi to enter into a new sambandham. She wasn't too old, her family was respected, and there could be no doubts about her childbearing ability. Perhaps the decision to remain Ravi Varma's wife demanded the same strength and resilience of Bhagirathi that we attribute today to those who leave husbands.” (p 119)

While the genre of the dramatised biography necessitates taking certain liberties with documented fact, what is disconcerting in this case is that despite Ravi Varma's widespread popularity, the literature on him has remained resolutely opaque on his personal life, his drives and his desires. We have no personal letters, only official ones, and little evidence of his ties to family, friends or loved ones other than the documented circumstances of his life. In this scenario, it is all too inviting to fill in the gaps of his personal motivations and his intimate thoughts with speculations that derive from our modern understanding of the artist as a romantic figure. To complicate matters, the myths and legends of Ravi Varma's life are deeply implicated in this construction of the artist as genius. We have the obligatory stories of him painting on the walls as a child, the divine intimations of his birth, his having mastered the techniques of oil painting on his own, and his liaisons with the models and prostitutes he painted.

**I HAVE BEEN QUIBBLING** over the fact and fiction of Ravi Varma's life, because despite Chawla's careful attention to detail and Pal's italicised disclaimers, both these books fall prey to the mythology of the 'Artist,' presenting him as a revered figure who single-handedly launched the project of modern Indian art. The truth, as we know, is much more complex—a host of painters were churned out by the government-instituted art schools in Bombay and Calcutta, but were never really as successful as Ravi Varma and remained involved in commercial ventures that paid small change. Ravi Varma was by no means an exceptional painter, but his aristocratic background and proximity to royal patrons granted him a profile quite unlike those of artists from more modest backgrounds. The heroic narrative that has canonised him in the popular imagination as the 'painter prince' seized upon precisely these elements, establishing him as a worthy native who could equal the colonial master. In Ravi Varma's case, his identity is so enmeshed with the celebratory accounts of his genius that he has become a prototypical figure. To uncritically endorse his mythology is to overlook how Ravi Varma's aristocratic pedigree and romantic imagination cast him perfectly in the role of the 'first modern Indian artist' that would henceforth become a nationalist rallying point.

This emergence of the mythic figure of the Artist in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century is all the more remarkable when pitted against the lowly status of the painter that had prevailed until the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. In early India, painting was one of the 64 arts specified by Vatsyayana in his *Kamasutra*, which included, amongst others, carpentry, architecture, lovemaking and the arts of combing hair. As several commentators have pointed out, the artist did not enjoy a high reputation in the social hierarchy, although a proximity to royal patrons granted him a somewhat higher standing. According to art historian Stella Kramrisch, there was, in fact, no strict differentiation between the artist and the craftsman. Although artists could belong to all four castes, they were generally associated with the Shudras, the lowest.

Nationalist writing through the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century struggled to change this perception of the artist and establish the credentials of an Indian tradition of the ‘fine arts.’ While one strand of art historical writing—Coomaraswamy and Lockwood Kipling—sought to elevate the figure of the craftsman and his work to the status of a fine art, there was a simultaneous bid to lay claim to the fine arts which were seen as embodied in what art historian Partha Mitter has called the “gentleman artist.” A member of the newly-emerging Westernised elite who found professional and bureaucratic careers centred around cities, the gentleman artist distinguished himself from the subaltern craftsman not only in his use of the progressive medium of oils on canvas but also his educational background and his class identity. The changing patterns of patronage and the institutional infrastructure of exhibitions and art journals that had emerged in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century participated in this production of a class of artists from genteel, educated backgrounds who aspired to the cultural and romantic vision of artistic genius popular in the Western world.

In an acknowledgement of the changing status of the painter in the contemporary imagination, an essay on Ravi Varma’s career in *The Modern Review* in 1907 described him as a nation-builder who showed the moral courage of a gifted ‘high-born’ in taking up the “degrading profession of painting.” In accounts like these, Ravi Varma heroically takes on the poor artisan’s burden, as it were, raising artistic practice from its craft-like origins to the status of a fine art. Ravi Varma’s career as an independent painter with commissions that spanned the breadth of the country granted him a profile quite unlike those of traditional artisans dependant upon the declining patronage of the princely courts or British officers of the East India Company.

It is the legacy of this towering figure that has remained in the popular imagination and appears to have inspired current interest in Ravi Varma. And Chawla and Pal are not the only ones who have produced biographies of the artist. Ketan Mehta’s yet to be released biopic on Ravi Varma, *Rang Rasiya*, is a similar valourisation of the artist as an iconoclastic figure committed to artistic freedom. Mehta’s fictionalised narrative has Ravi Varma face charges of obscenity on account of his drawings of semi-nude women, in a thinly veiled allegory of the contemporary charges against MF Husain. Apparently, the freedoms of art only revolve around the licence to depict female bodies! Feminists have raised objections to the trope of artistic genius since the 1980s, arguing that this selective genius seldom descended upon women and was often implicated in fantasies of power over women’s bodies. Yet, the romanticised figure of the artist with his bevy of beautiful models has held sway.

Through all this, Ravi Varma has emerged as a charged site upon whose figure alternative histories of elite and popular art have been written. At a contemporary moment when the elite and popular are increasingly intertwined—with MF Husain’s interest in Bollywood and Bhupen Khakhar’s ‘pop’—Ravi Varma presents an enigma. Considered within the

contemporary culture of the celebrity artist and the ever-growing market for modern Indian art, the idea of the heroic artist who spoke for the nation has immediate appeal, not only for the committed art aficionado but also for the general public.

The interest in Ravi Varma also coincides with a revival in the fortunes of other populist artists thrown by the wayside as the narrative of avant-garde modernism gained ground through the 20<sup>th</sup> century. William-Adolphe Bouguereau (whose name Pal consistently misspells throughout the book), a much-respected academic artist of the 19<sup>th</sup> century admired by Ravi Varma, has seen his stock rise in recent years, as have the works of the American traditionalist, Norman Rockwell (currently showing at the Smithsonian American Art Museum). In the faultlines created by the waning influence of high modernism, there is a closer appreciation of the appeal of these artists and a more forgiving approach to their simplistic idealism. Rather than the culture of dissent and negation that inspired the avant-garde, there is a nostalgic invocation of the populist artists' wholesome fare at play in the current revival of Ravi Varma.

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- See more at: <http://caravanmagazine.in/books/enduring-myth-ravi-varma#sthash.TRcDyVXY.dpuf>