

When Was  
Modernism

*Essays on  
Contemporary  
Cultural Practice  
in India*

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## Representational Dilemmas of a Nineteenth-Century Painter: Raja Ravi Varma

### Irregular Modernism

Ravi Varma (1848-1906)<sup>1</sup> is an early protagonist in the Indian artist's passage to the modern (*Illus. 1*). He is at the same time a turn-of-the-century anachronism. Born in the village of Kilimanoor into a feudal family with a small fiefdom and ties of blood with the royal house of Travancore, Ravi Varma was nurtured in a household imbued with a remarkable culture. From childhood he was committed to scriptural learning, the orthodox aspect of which was complemented by his love of epic and classical literature. Growing up within the paradoxical ideology of the Indian renaissance, at once traditionalist and modern, he brought himself on par with the more enlightened princes of his time as also with the educated elite that was converting a diffuse patriotism into a national purpose. A natural boldness of imagination made him a progressive. He became the most celebrated professional painter of his time, casting himself in the role of an autodidact, of a gentleman artist in the Victorian mould and, paradoxically, of a nationalist charged with the ambition to devise a pan-Indian vision for his people.

For, in retrospect, it is time to realize that Ravi Varma was striving to achieve in Indian painting what the new learning of Europe accomplished in Indian literature and philosophy. Ravi Varma struggled to introduce a great many new elements into Indian painting, elements that were pertinent



1 Photograph of Raja Ravi Varma

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only to the world of seeing, the world of the visual image. He introduced perspective, having studied its laws according to the new science. European drawing, construction and composition and a new medium altogether: oil. He tried to wield the new tools in the Indian context and what he produced was not European painting at all but a new way of seeing. He introduced large bright areas of colour in his portraits and landscapes, adapted oil to the Indian light. It would be a mistake to regard his work as only a cheap or pointless imitation of the European technique. He was all the time struggling to look around himself through his European equipment and in doing so modified it to suit his vision. He was doing very nearly what Rajendralal Mitra or Bankimchandra Chatterjee were trying to do in the field of philosophy. He possibly attempted what Amrita Sher-Gil of a later age tried to do in reverse.<sup>2</sup>

Asok Mitra's candid placing of Ravi Varma within the nationalist project takes forward the opinion of a Bengal modernist, Ramananda Chatterjee. He too saw Ravi Varma as a protagonist in the task of nation-building and recounting the ancient Indian ideal of healthy beauty and enjoyment of life, hoped that Ravi Varma's popularity might be an indication of the returning interest of the nation in mundane existence.<sup>3</sup> However, the difference between Chatterjee and Mitra is that while the former echoes the need of his times by approving of Ravi Varma on the criterion and the ethics of nation-building, the latter, writing after independence, puts both Ananda Coomaraswamy (the most celebrated and often-quoted detractor of Ravi Varma) and Ramananda Chatterjee (his defender) in perspective by a brief and plainspeaking reference to the cultural history of the late nineteenth century. Of particular importance is the reference Mitra makes to Bankimchandra Chatterjee. The point about embodying in a material sense the message of a great civilization is exemplified by Bankim's *Krishnacharitra* where, with a clear hermeneutic purpose, the author realigns the epic features of a divine hero and sets him up as omnipotent male/ego and historical agent for a militant nationalism.<sup>4</sup>

Thus Ravi Varma joins the ranks of other anomalous figures in India's nineteenth-century renaissance who see their task in similar terms: of materializing through western techniques the idea of a golden past and then inducting this into a national project. Along with certain pervasive notions about India's civilizational role, national ideology brings to bear a whole range of bold and tantalizing questions about modernity that are being lived out to this day. For example, the modernizing impulse of the nineteenth century led by a movement such as the Brahma Samaj treats historical self-consciousness as a didactic programme of reform. Here the modern serves as an emblematic category on the basis of which a polemical confrontation takes place between revivalists and progressives. The fact that the modern never properly belongs to us as Indians, or we to it, does lead to anxieties of misappropriation.

But these are often pragmatically resolved. In visual art, for example, eclecticism becomes a preferred option and the sense of aesthetic difference begins to be resolved to our advantage.

In the context of a national culture the story of modern Indian art can be told like an allegory—in the conscientious manner of the pilgrim's progress. It can also be told as a series of experimental moves where ideology and practice are often at odds and force unexpected manoeuvres. Indian artists still go riding on the backs of paradoxes, with the more adventurous among them turning this into an original act of self-definition. Sometimes, with the necessary elan, the ride becomes a critical exercise prodding the modern itself or, rather, the fixed notions of that category to diversify its possibilities outside the western mainstream.

Modern Indian art is in consequence a tendentious affair and though the cause of this is precisely our colonial history, the consequences may lie far afield. We may be inclined to develop an aesthetic of contradiction. This may happen through pictorial choices—for example, by adapting narrative means so discredited by modern art. On the other hand, our modernism could also be redefined via such linguistic disjunctions as occur in the course of the most literal adaptations, thereby opening up, even by default, figural devices that match the very exigencies of colonial, excolonial and cleft identities.

It is precisely in such matters that Ravi Varma is the indisputable father-figure of modern Indian art. Naive and ambitious at the same time, he opens up the debate for his later compatriots in the specific matter of defining individual genius through professional acumen, of testing modes of cultural adaptation with idiosyncratic effect, of attempting pictorial narration with its historic scope.

**Oil and Easel Painting**

Leaving aside stray examples of oil paintings (or engravings based on oil paintings) as these find their way into the Mughal courts, it was in the eighteenth century that European (predominantly British) painting was introduced into India. The modernizing impulse in the visual arts was signalled, among other important changes, by the use of the medium of oils and the easel format by Indian artists, one important aspect of which was the technique and form of attempted realism.<sup>5</sup>

By Ravi Varma's time European art, mostly in the way of portraits but also landscapes and genre pictures, was a common feature of colonial culture. Apart from the British, the Indian elite was also collecting European art in various mediums like oils, watercolours and engravings. There was, for example, a collection of engravings based on European art from the renaissance and also neoclassical paintings from the nineteenth century in the Trivandrum palace. Many of these were indiscriminate collections and included copies of masterpieces by travelling European artists, commissioned portraits and contemporary European works of uneven quality.

Ravi Varma is now under art-historical consideration that requires empirical groundwork, conceptual and stylistic speculation. He is conventionally seen in relation to some of those European painters of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries who found a foothold in colonial India. One may mention in particular the works based on Indian subjects by Tilly Kettle (1735–1786) who was in India (mainly in Madras) between 1769–76; Francesco Renaldi (1755–ca. 1799); James Wales (1749–1795) who was associated in the 1790s with the maratha court at Poona; and Thomas Hickey (1741–1824) who was in India (Madras and Calcutta) in the 1780s and then again in 1798–1824.<sup>6</sup>

Partha Mitter mentions that Ravi Varma looked at examples of Royal Academy paintings in the British *Magazine of Art* of 1898. E.M.J. Venniyoor mentions nineteenth-century French painters like Adolphe-William Bouguereau (1825–1905), Louis and Gustave Boulanger (1808–67 and 1824–88, respectively) in whom Ravi Varma was interested.<sup>7</sup> Ravi Varma's theatric neoclassicism and his use of colour and light that is brighter and more iridescent than, for example, the English palette, make the European reference especially relevant.

The adoption by Indian artists of the medium of oils seems, nevertheless, to have been tardy. Drawings, tempera and watercolour remained the commonest means during the nineteenth century. Ravi Varma grew up in the context of the flourishing tradition of Tanjore painting, contemporary to other hybrids included in the nomenclature of the Company School. Significantly, the new medium of canvas and possibly oils was adopted by the painters of the maratha court at Tanjore. This is important as these painters travelled to Travancore and served the court there.<sup>8</sup>

The fact and fiction of Ravi Varma's struggle to learn oil painting has a legendary ring. Here is not only the struggle of an artist to gain a technique but also the struggle of a native to gain the source of the master's superior knowledge and the struggle of a prodigy to steal the fire for his own people. The actual learning process for Ravi Varma was indirect, even arduous. He was initiated by his uncle Raja Raja Varma. When he came as an adolescent to live in Trivandrum, he was allowed free access to the palace by the then ruler of Travancore, the enlightened Maharaja Ayilyam Tirunal and encouraged to pursue his painting talent. The court painter Ramaswamy Naicker was however too jealous to impart the technique to Ravi Varma. In 1868 a Dutch painter, Theodore Jensen, came to Travancore and at the maharaja's request, condescended to allow the young Ravi Varma watch him paint. Although British art school education was already being imparted from the 1850s in different cities including Madras, Ravi Varma picked up his skills without systematic instruction but with passionate persistence.<sup>9</sup>

What I would like to emphasize is the way Ravi Varma's desire to learn oil painting is recounted by his biographer E.M.J. Venniyoor, who in turn must echo other accounts fitting it into the subsequent success story of the artist. This is

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mythology in the making: to say that a native, once he has been initiated into western techniques, proceeds with the redoubled pace of a prodigy and overcomes all hurdles. What is at stake is not only native talent but national destiny.

From the very first decade of Ravi Varma's professional career the narrative is packed with success.<sup>10</sup> He wins the governor's gold medal in the 1873 Madras exhibition and is said to have gained a certificate of merit in an international exhibition in Vienna. A second gold medal in the 1874 Madras exhibition is topped by royal appreciation. When the Prince of Wales visits Madras in 1875, the Maharaja of Travancore presents him Ravi Varma's painting. In 1876 Ravi Varma enters *Shakuntala Patralekhan* at the Madras exhibition which not only wins him another gold medal but gives him his breakthrough at the iconographical level as well, recommending him to the educated elite of India—orientalists and nationalists alike. This painting is acquired by the Duke of Buckingham, then governor of Madras. Sir Monier-Williams uses one version of Ravi Varma's many Shakuntalas as the frontispiece to the fifth edition (in 1887) of his 1855 translation of Kalidasa's *Abhijnana-sakuntalam*. In 1878 Ravi Varma paints a life-size portrait of the Duke of Buckingham and the patron declares that the painter has equalled, even surpassed, European portraitists. In 1881, through the initiative of Sir T. Madhava Rao (former dewan of Travancore state, now dewan and regent of Baroda), Ravi Varma is introduced to the ruling Gaekwads of Baroda and invited to the investiture ceremony of Maharaja Sayaji Rao III (reign 1881–1939). From this ruler, who set up the modern institutions of Baroda state, Ravi Varma receives recurring patronage. In 1888 Sayaji Rao invites him to embark on a set of fourteen pictures depicting puranic themes. Following Baroda's lead, the states of Mysore and Travancore commission mythological works in the coming decades and, until his death, Ravi Varma remains master of the mythological genre.

In 1893 he sends ten paintings and wins merit at the International Exhibition of the World Columbian Order at Chicago, one of the grandest expositions of the nineteenth century (and also, as it happens, the occasion of Swami Vivekananda's famous address to the Parliament of World Religions).

Every subsequent decade of Ravi Varma's life is packed with more and more success. Ravi Varma moves among the elite ranging from Lord Curzon to royal patrons in many states (prominent among them Travancore, Baroda, Mysore and Udaipur), to progressives like Gopal Krishna Gokhale. He becomes an odd genius of his times celebrated by colonizers and nationalists alike. In 1904 he is given the imperial Kaiser-i-Hind award (at which time his name is shown as 'Raja' Ravi Varma and gains currency thenceforth). At the same time he is befriended by Congress leaders including Dadabhai Naoroji and regarded as a visionary for a prospective nation. Patrons and clients, both Indian and foreign, princes and literati are eager to acquire his work until finally the middle class can acquire it as well, but in the form of

oleographs. Following up an earlier suggestion by the far-seeing Sir Madhava Rao, Ravi Varma and his younger brother C. Raja Raja Varma decide to set up a lithography press near Bombay in the early 1890s.

### Surrogate Realism

While Ravi Varma has the advantages of aristocratic confidence, charm, talent and ambition that account for his unique success—placing him ahead of all his contemporaries engaged in a similar project—there are objective circumstances at this juncture that he, above all, reckons with and masters. As an artist of his time he recognizes what is at stake for all concerned: the rich density of oil paint, its exceptional plasticity, promises a greater *hold on reality*. The paint-matter of oil and pigment is conducive to simulating substances (flesh, cloth, jewels, gold, masonry, marble) and capturing atmospheric sensations (the glossiness of light, the translucent depth of shadows). Flowing from such material possibilities of oil paint is the lure of appropriating the world, of appeasing the acquisitive impulse, of saturating the consciousness with the profit of possession.

Set in the easel format, representation develops laws about framing and within the frame, about proximity and distance: the laws of perspective. Justified by the science of optics, perspective has the profound implication of assuring continuity between subject and object and therefore, no matter what the motif and style, an existential contiguity of the beholder with the painted image.

Initiated in the late seventeenth century, this is realism inalienably related to bourgeois desire, to bourgeois ideology and ethics. Despite its more obvious seductions, this realism offers a complex and often paradoxical phenomenon that has a run of several hundred years before its culmination with the realist master, Gustave Courbet. Realism proper is distinguished for establishing the material presence of the subject in an equation with the objective world through embedded structures and their transforming logic.

Among the several faces of realism manifest in the nineteenth century it is salon painting shading into a second phase of neoclassicism that offers the canon and, with it, a conservative idealism. An artist like Ravi Varma adapts this conservative representational mode of European painting. Just as prose fiction, especially the novel and its narrative project, comes to be regarded in India as per se realistic (the realist novel is queen of genres), representational painting in oils is construed to mean an enabling technique that stands for an accredited realism (*Illus. 3*). That is to say, while Ravi Varma's adaptations that range all the way from iconic portraits to narrative allegories fit better as nineteenth-century salon paintings, the circular logic persists and they are seen to promote this much-regarded realism.

And even given the misapprehension, the somewhat false aura and some distressing consequences of appropriating 'alien' conventions/ideologies, this surrogate



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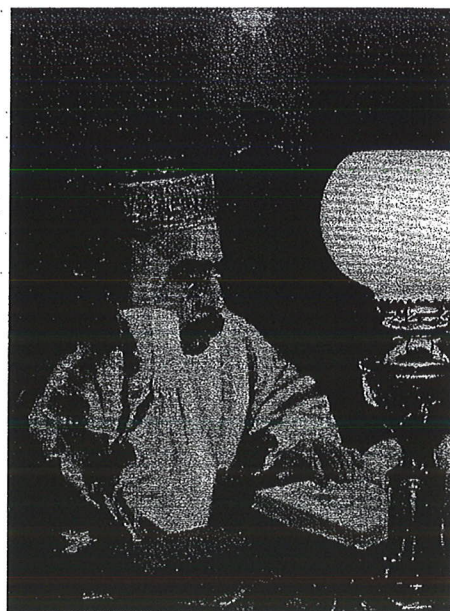
2 Ravi Varma, *Portrait of a Lady*, 1893

realism achieves definite ends. It fulfils the mission of the Indian elite to adapt European means to Indian needs, to become historically viable through the use of the realist genre.

Ravi Varma's first success in the realist mode is, predictably enough, as a professional portrait painter (*Illus. 2*). His aristocratic sitters often have the remoteness of memorial painting as also of painted photographs (his paintings are sometimes done from photographs). They are, in an almost literal sense, mirror images: they transfix the refracted gaze that joins the past and the present in the interface of the framed canvas. There are superb portraits of the Gaekwad family by Ravi Varma.<sup>11</sup> Of special note are the portraits of handsome, richly adorned women of the maratha clan who are at once iconic and bold in their peculiar status as consorts of a progressive royalty, portraits that seem to check the easy seduction that the endemic illusionism of oil portraits encourages.

Another kind of portrait appears when Ravi Varma paints nair women of aristocratic lineage from his own milieu (*Illus. 4, 5*). Socially permitted liaisons with higher-caste men give the matrilineally positioned nair women ambivalent erotic significance. As coded icons they are paradoxically thematized in Ravi Varma's oeuvre: these are his Malabar beauties. In the genre pictures with narratives (such as the 1892 *Here Comes Papa*), he develops conventions that are pictorial equivalents to social custom and local etiquette in an as yet nascent modernity.<sup>12</sup>

A systematic portrayal of the Indian people is an ongoing project everywhere in India and the rules are similar to those hypothesized for the larger question of national identity. The paradigms position the binaries racial/universal, regional/national, individual/typical in place. It is within these terms that an iconography and also, in stylistic terms, a typology for Indian representational arts is developed by Ravi Varma. And though the rules are rudimentary the pictures have some claim to being realistic. The figures are based on live models occasionally from amongst his own aristocratic family and otherwise drawn from professional models—prostitutes, dancers, singers, actresses, as for example Anjanibai Malpekar whom he met in Bombay. When live models are difficult photographs come in handy.



3 Ravi Varma, *Man Reading a Book*, ca. 1898

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4 Ravi Varma, *Amma Tampuran of Mavelkara*, ca. 1883



5 Ravi Varma, *Woman with a Fruit*, 1890s

Further, as Ravi Varma takes on the problem of the 'correct' rendering of persons and objects, he goes beyond the everyday to introduce what one might call genre painting that socializes the mythological. Consider, for example, *The Victory of Indrajit* (1905, *Illus. 6*), *Shri Krishna Liberating His Parents* (1905, *Illus. 7*) and *Shri Krishna as Envoy* (1906, *Illus. 8*). Painted at the end of his life, these paintings achieve a 'thereness' of objects, weighted and modelled and fixed in a measured space in which everything is seen to have a discrete place: architectural elements, period furniture, royal accessories, artisans' tools. And human beings, even if they be divine envoys and legendary kings, go about their business in the given scheme of things mostly with the purpose of making a moral point to the viewer who is carefully positioned vis-a-vis the pictorial event. Whether it is a miracle as in the Krishna painting, or a court scandal as in the Indrajit painting, the spectacle is as it were attended by the laws of social behaviour. Seeing mythology thus pictorialized, the viewer obtains a manner of 'truth' through an objective demonstration of life's protocol.

But the socializing process drags along a good deal of sentimentality with it. When Ravi Varma's epic characters seek to gain the same credibility as those in genre pictures they tend to ingratiate themselves. Credibility comes to work on the lowest common denominator; the merest skills of modelling and perspective or a crude illusionism acquire magical value. The quest for a renewed iconography suffers in consequence. It is instructive to note that the process of bourgeois appropriation of the Greco-Roman past also displays its share of ethical dilemmas.

### 'Realism' of the Academy

The project of an allegorical transfer of the heroic ages into a resurgence on behalf of modernity has one of its fittest models in the European renaissance. What Ravi Varma has access to, in actual pictorial terms, is not renaissance classicism but a reduced version of neoclassicism and its Victorian pastiche. He has access to the perennial subject-matter of European gods and heroes transferred from age to age in the mode of allegory and in the jaded technique of *trompe-l'oeil* as they float and settle in the salons of the nineteenth century and find their way into the colonies.

The Royal Academies (started in France in the 1640s and in England in 1768) undertook the task of inculcating intellectual and moral values through aesthetics, the model for which was found in classical art (from Raphael to Nicolas Poussin), though a debate and battle for supremacy between the mind and the senses (represented by the flamboyant colourist Peter Paul Rubens) persisted. In the nineteenth century clear options were posed by their respective theorists for neo-classical and romantic painting (represented respectively by Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres and Eugene Delacroix).

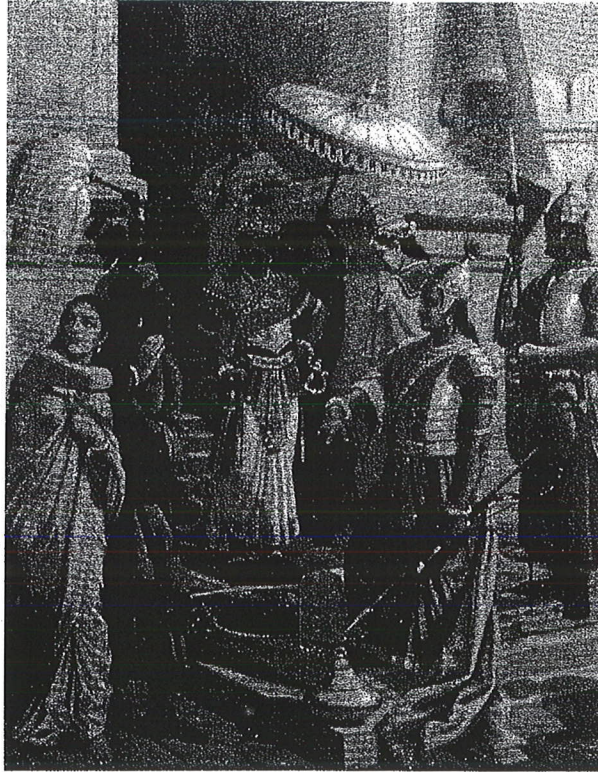
The European Academies had pedagogical and juridical functions for entry into the salons. They laid down a hierarchy in the choice of subject-matter. The more radical values of the renaissance and of neoclassicism and romanticism in the eighteenth century were turned thoroughly conservative by the nineteenth-century salons. These served to uphold social snobbery and the counter-offensive against a changing society by the ruling class. The hierarchy worked through the following classification. (I) History Painting representing Greek-Roman heroic deeds for which the Academy encouraged students to be familiar with classical history and mythology, and to show their skill in painting nudes and draperies alike after plaster-casts of antique statues, and to copy Old Masters. (II) (a) Historical Landscape with a classical motif (b) Portraits (c) Religious Subjects. (III) (a) Still Life (b) Animal Painting (c) Rural Landscape (d) Genre or Domestic Scenes.<sup>13</sup>

Under the patronage of the Academies the sense of well-being and promise of plenitude in the mythic world view were offered as pictorial manifestations of secret, pagan energies. And even as the erotic was made into a spectacle the supporting allegory was adduced in favour of moral purpose and transcendent sentiments. It is worth looking at the work of the two sons of Louis de Boullongne (1609-1674), one of the founders of the French Academy: both Bon de Boullongne (1649-1717) and Louis de Boullongne the Younger (1654-1733) were known for the elegant posing of figures, for their discreetly sensual charm and the subtle manner of infusing a mythological scene with the refinements of fashionable society: Louis the Younger is relevant for Ravi Varma in that he is a successful painter of the '*grande machines*' but also paints gracefully, if naively, the mythic verse of antiquity. His *Diana Resting*<sup>14</sup> (1707) is a good example of classicism offered as sweet euphoria to the ruling classes for iden-

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6 Ravi Varma, *The Victory of Indrajit*, 1905

tification, using an intermediate theatrics of a posed tableau. Other artists played their part in devising the mythological portrait, based on the actresses of the day playing star roles.<sup>15</sup> This suggested easy intercourse between figures of mythology, aristocratic clients and plebeian seductresses, all treated to the European grand style of painting.

In the matter of clever transfiguration and theatric intervention the Dutch-born Lawrence Alma-Tadema (1836–1912), who settled in London and became a favourite painter of Victorian England, may be mentioned. Alma-Tadema specialized in the archaeological reconstruction of the ancient world, providing a thrilling glimpse to his nineteenth-century viewers of a Greco-Roman world but in terms familiar to contemporary Victorian high society. Thus even to sustain a sensual reverie of a golden past the mirror was focused on their own bourgeois lifestyles. Further, in the rapidly changing world of the bourgeoisie, not only myth and legend but also the operatic spectacle served a role, giving nineteenth-century painting elaborate stage sets and a strained loftiness of style and purpose.<sup>16</sup> Ravi Varma paralleled many of these features: the ideology and the melodrama, the flats, drapes, proscenium, cyclorama and all.

### Theatricality

Ravi Varma grew up in a family richly connected with kathakali.<sup>17</sup> From his childhood he is said to have indulged himself watching theatrical performances at home and in the court. What influenced him equally were performances of Parsi and Marathi theatre which he and his painter-brother C. Raja Raja Varma, his constant travelling companion, saw in Bombay and in different venues in the south.<sup>18</sup> Parsi theatre, playing myths and romances, gave Ravi Varma a readymade repertoire of legendary figures. It also helped him devise the postures and gestures of figures within a given format. One may set up a studio tableau for the purpose of formatting pictures. But proscenium theatre is a more useful model in that the director/choreographer has already devised a *mise-en-scene* and placed figures and props in it. Each narrative episode has its compositional solution, good or bad, worked out from start to finish. The part of the painter is to pick out the most succinct moment from the sequence for pictorial rendering.

The matter of course is not so simple, nor are the actual terms of translation so rudimentary as between realist theatre and narrative painting. For one thing, while the dress, the posture, the gesture of the figures allow imitation, the layered gaze, motivating the dynamic of realist theatre, eludes painterly transcription. Ravi Varma senses the problem and reverts to an ingenious solution: precisely because Indian narrative painting and theatre need not conform to the cumulative logic of time, because they work through spatial repetition/displacement of the figural image, Ravi Varma simply circumvents the pitched logic of a realist encounter. While his figures interact with something of a realist protocol, he breaks the spell of interlocked gazes and allows a kind of abstract gaze to surface. Simultaneously he annuls the one aspect of time that narrative arts of the west in particular favour—climax and denouement—and disperses the action.

For all their staginess Ravi Varma's narrative paintings have the figures address not each other nor the viewer but that ideal spectator who prefigures rather than follows events. If we look for antecedents at least one of these is classical Indian theatre (from *kudiyattam* to *kathakali*), where the mode of address between characters as also their gaze is directed along a distant, divergent scale, complementing plural action in the performance. With Ravi Varma there is no such grand design; the means at his command make the narrative procedure eclectic and contrary. The event depicted may suggest a climax but the congregated figures create a distracted effect and the denouement, if there is one, becomes a transcendent affair by default.<sup>19</sup>

On the other hand, the imitation of proscenium theatre itself releases a shorthand solution in lieu of realism proper. The proscenium arch supports a fourth wall which is supposed to separate the viewer from the actors, making them invisible to each other. In actual fact this wall, notated by the arch, frames the stage providing an even more focused visibility. In adapting theatric presentations Ravi Varma

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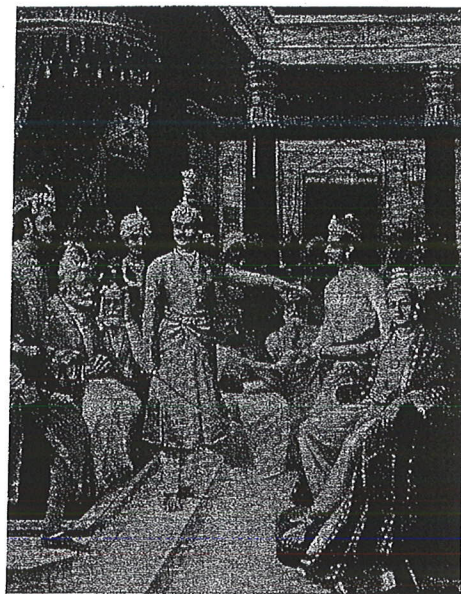
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7 Ravi Varma, *Shri Krishna Liberating His Parents*, 1905



8 Ravi Varma, *Shri Krishna as Envoy*, 1906

inadvertently, but also artfully, substitutes the more conceptually remote analogue of the mirror/window frame (used in renaissance painting) with the more open theatric solution of the threshold (used from baroque to realist painting). This helps him avoid the ideological problems of perspective and the practical problems of its correct rendering. At the same time it gives him the possibility of making the viewer a closer participant in the noble (or pathetic) enactment at hand. A low threshold introduces a pause marking the moment of privileged, or tabooed, access. But it is also a way of aligning the real with the imaginary where the two become contiguous. The ideal character in mythology and epic is realized by Ravi Varma through an act of impersonation at the level of common theatrics, the low threshold being entirely convenient to the identificatory desires of the beholder.

The artist as dramaturge irons out the excesses of pathetic fallacy by the more logical theory of mimesis learnt via nineteenth-century European painting and theatre (*Illus. 9, 10, 11, 12*). Manifold mimicry helps render the world of appearances familiar and spectacular at the same time. The dramatic impulse gives the erotic metonymy in the Nala–Damayanti story a form of apotheosis.<sup>20</sup> Shakuntala, the forest maiden and virtual dryad in form and spirit, becomes a plump dreamer against the *ghat* landscape; in another painting she appears to be an elegant and self-confident actress, perhaps because a Parsi actress of Ravi Varma's acquaintance is said to have posed for the portrayal.<sup>21</sup> An epic figure like Draupadi becomes a pitiable figure in a melodrama. And Sita is shamed by a common abduction.<sup>22</sup> A human-size frame is put



9 Ravi Varma, *Hamsa-Damayanti*, ca. 1899



on the narrative that disturbs the space-time conjunction on the basis of which Indian epic encounters take place; the disturbance amounts to a virtual betrayal of Indian aesthetics in both its perceptual and theoretical particularities.

Mixing techniques and genres and styles with a kind of benevolent universality of intentions, Ravi Varma creates a re-vision of Indian civilization for his contemporaries. It is as if he is destined to fulfil the 'prophecy' delivered in 1871 by the governor of Madras, Lord Napier, who suggested that Indian artists deploy their modern skills and new techniques learnt from European painting to present not only the rich pictorial potential of India's everyday culture but to incorporate ancient Indian mythology. The advantage of a 'national pencil'<sup>23</sup> that renders an 'ideal and allegorical' vision gains them, along with a national memory, a national voice. Given that lineage an artist like Ravi Varma succeeds in obliterating the forms in which the past has come to us. Henceforth the past is mediated not by metaphoric forms. The past is a pastiche of present desires clad in flesh and blood and costume.

#### Uses of the Past

It needs to be discussed how this past sees itself so easily impersonated and what, in turn, are the effects of such impersonation on the development of painting (and other art forms such as theatre and cinema) in the following decades. If in India as elsewhere the notion of the past usually dovetails with the notion of the classical it is because of the desire to retrieve, at the imaginative level, the golden age of Indian civilization. The period from the epics to the puranas and the classical period emblemized by Kalidasa provide the frames to designate the supreme aspects of ancient India. Ideologically the classical past is set against the medieval, regarded as having been corrupted by a medley of foreign influences and by the psychology of subordination showing up in the 'Hindu psyche'. Not only Islamic but curiously also Buddhist culture, though falling squarely within the classical, is largely excluded when a civilizational memory of India is sought to be awakened. By deduction the touchstone for the nineteenth-century Indian renaissance is clearly Hindu civilization.

To the extent Ravi Varma actually reflects this it is by sticking to one sure ideal of all classicisms: the pursuit of ideal beauty. An erotic fullness of archetypal figures now becomes the precondition for their representational poise within a society already alive to history. And though the actual mode of representing this body comes from whatever Ravi Varma has seen of western art, there are immanent references in indigenous art which make for an inadvertent visual archive. For example, Ravi Varma would have known the highly elaborate and voluptuous mural painting in the palaces of Padmanabhapuram and Mattancheri. Inducted into the lineage of Tanjore paintings (*Illus. 13, 14*), he was influenced by their iconic, full-bodied images. As also by the more kitsch, coy and witty versions on glass.<sup>24</sup>

The epic grandeur, the concrete descriptions, the hermaphrodite grossness

and cunning of kathakali impersonations is part of his repertoire of images; at the same time he loved Parsi theatre.<sup>25</sup> He was saturated in the high literary sensibility of his region: the epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, as well as Kalidasa and neoclassical Sanskrit poetry were translated, adapted and elaborated in Malayalam. (For example, his kinsman Kerala Varma's translation of *Abhijnana-sakuntalam* influenced Ravi Varma in his 1876 portrayal of the tragic *nayika*.) Ravi Varma's choice of *nayikas* and of legendary couples can be seen in relation to literal descriptions of the erotic in contemporary Malayalam poetry.<sup>26</sup>

The broad-hipped, full-bosomed figure is the preferred type in the neoclassical Sanskrit poetry that influenced Kerala's tradition and it is the ample feminine



Left: 10 Ravi Varma, *Shakuntala*, 1898.  
Right: 11 Ravi Varma, *Shakuntala Looks Back in Love*, 1898.



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figure that dominates text after text in Manipravalam (a language tissue rich in Sanskrit words selected for their sensuous and musical qualities) produced during the period from the thirteenth to the fifteenth century and paying homage to numerous beautiful courtesans.<sup>27</sup>

By the time we come to the period at hand this image of the past has become subject to the lure of orientalism. A product of romanticism in the imperialist age, orientalism is a way of first alienating and then eroticizing cultures of the east so as to fulfil at once the sense of western primacy and the longing for the unknown other. Ravi Varma's choices, narrowly defined, are also in every danger of becoming elaborate misunderstandings: conservative, kitsch and orientalist by turn.

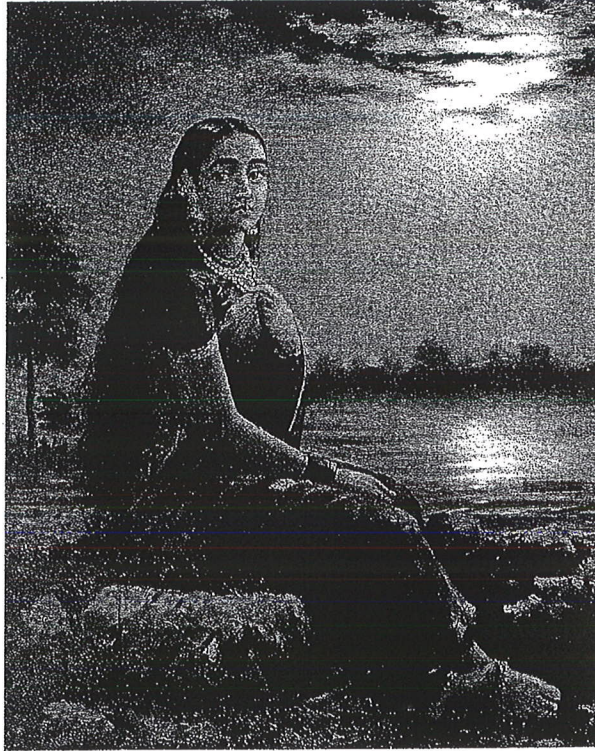


12 Ravi Varma, *Jatayuvadha*, 1906

### Unity in Diversity

The homogenizing project imbued with patriotic zeal encourages native imagery to gain attributes that will recommend the race to the alien gaze. This raises an endemic problem: in recommending the race you accept the terms of others' fantasies. Ravi Varma painted ten pictures during 1892–93, for an exhibition in Chicago. The paintings depicted women from different parts of India, women of different physiognomy, class and dress, the idea being to present a compound of the voluptuous, wistful, self-possessed Indian woman for universal approbation. The project had an anthropological aspect, an aspect of oriental seduction.

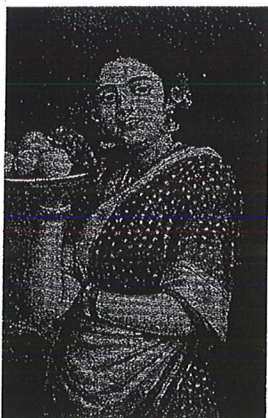
Vennyoor offers a description of the subject-matter of these paintings.<sup>28</sup> There were paintings of upper-caste Kerala women (*Here Comes Papa*, *Malabar Beauty*); of a Muslim woman from a courtly *zenana* and a north Indian girl awaiting her beloved (*Begum at Bath*, *Expectation*); of a Parsi bride (*Decking the Bride*); and of a maratha girl with her deity (*Sisterly Remembrance*). There was an unusual painting of

13 Ravi Varma, *Lady in Moonlight*, ca. 189014 Ravi Varma, *Madri*, oleograph

gypsies of south India called *Gypsy Family* (*Illus. 15*, also variously called *Mendicant Singer and Her Children*, *Beggars*, *Poverty*). There were portrayals of domestic south Indian brahmin women (*At the Well*, *Disappointing News*) and there was, in contrast, *The Bombay Singer*, the conventional nautch girl often portrayed in contemporary Company School paintings of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

The paintings were sent with a commentary which spelt out this self-taught artist's motivation to paint the major social types of his country: to show to the American public the charm and sophistication of the apparel of Indian women. Not only were all ten paintings accepted but they also won him two medals, each accompanied by a diploma and a citation. One of the diplomas said: 'The series of ten paintings in oil colours by Ravi Varma, court painter to several presidencies in India, is of much ethnological value.'<sup>29</sup> The diplomas go on to mention how well the faces of high-caste ladies; the costumes of ceremonial life and current fashions are painted, not to speak of the paintings' truth to nature in form and colour.

The terms of cultural diversity are pegged to the ideal of a nation that will, for all its good intentions, subsume differences and camouflage hierarchies. It is

Ravi Varma, *Madri*, oleograph

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interesting that when Ravi Varma gets his first major commission in 1888 to do a set of fourteen paintings based on puranic stories and later, in 1894, when embarking on the project to produce lithographic prints of his iconographical images, he goes on an extensive tour of India.<sup>30</sup> He looks for the physiognomy that will satisfy his representational needs. He also looks for the common costume that will unify appearances into an Indian type. It is interesting too that he travels mainly (though not exclusively) in the north for the purpose. Is it that he unconsciously assumes an aryan basis for Indian civilization—even his favourite model, as the story goes, is a Parsi actress of 'Indo-Persian' stock. In any case there is the evidence of his paintings wherein ethnic appearances are more or less subsumed in the name of an Indian synthesis and in the hegemonic interests of national unity.

But although the self-image of eastern cultures in the nineteenth century reflects sentimental morality with a full measure of hypocrisy tuned to orientalist expectations, Ravi Varma is a purposeful man. With his knowledge and sophistication he is able to draw on resources within his own culture and so to round off his representational project. Compare him with the other contemporary options. For all its inventiveness in terms of mixed techniques and hybrid elements, the Company School (an eclectic mix of folk *patas*, provincial miniatures and English/amateur water-colours) does not develop a viable iconography or figural type. Full of pictorial oddities after the desires and memories of the sahibs, it is construed on the native side as a trick of technical circumventions. The Indian artists' graphic disalignment of anatomy and perspective in the process of imitating naturalistic skill produces wonderful pictures.<sup>31</sup> But there is not what one may call a successful mediation of social curiosities into historical form, a reflective statement on behalf of selfconscious Indians.

I have already mentioned that Ravi Varma is part of the project of nineteenth-century India to appropriate and devise an identity, and to thus transcend western privilege in the representational project. Added to that is a grander design of the artist: to aspire to a universally attractive human ideal through an Indian manifestation. What

15 Ravi Varma, *Gypsy Family*, 1893

distinguishes Ravi Varma's project of Indian depictions is his curious ardour for a kind of iconographic augmentation of the contemporary whereby the quest for identifying indigenous models turns into a nationalist pedagogy: a cultural synthesis for establishing 'unity in diversity', but more—to approximate a living subject (*Illus. 16*).

#### (Re-)Production of Images

For all its high-mindedness there is an aspect of farce in the project of impersonation as undertaken by Ravi Varma. There is, as I have already said, pastiche involved in his undertaking to translate western classical modes to eastern ends. Secondly, the assumption that one can establish an innocent equation between commonplace types and imaginary personages of a divine nature (though it cannot be dismissed as mere folly when you consider that it produces great painting in seventeenth-century Europe) produces mostly charades for the upper classes here and elsewhere. In Ravi Varma's India there is, in the balance of the farce, something progressive as I have also suggested: a surrogate realism. Ravi Varma's assumption that real men and women, even plebeian actors playing the roles of gods and goddesses, may bring to classical aspirations in the Indian renaissance the full force of attraction of a live/actor's body, helps to desanctify tradition.

There is a pragmatic aspect to this intention as well. In the latter half of the nineteenth century the Indian aristocracy is itself turning part-bourgeois through material changes in social production. Through the influence of western taste it is 'losing' its aesthetic. To this is added the negotiating culture of an ever-increasing urban middle class. While its members are indifferent devotees of the Hindu pantheon, they require a new iconography that reinforces their self-image.<sup>32</sup> This new cultural clientele is a motivating factor in the Ravi Varma project. An aristocrat himself, he is, by a democratic extension of his artistic ambitions, beginning to appreciate the needs of the middle class; indeed he is willing to devise a well-endowed iconography that serves a new class culture.

The elements of pastiche and charade and the acknowledgment of class transpositions within the civilizational effort produce a stress on form. This is what I call a farce and the farce has its uses. The past is now merely a sign, the rich tradition is an anthropological residue of a lost culture. There is a disjuncture between motif and meaning, between models and effect. This is a cultural counterpart of the larger social disjuncture we call the alienating attribute of modernization.

A comparative study of 'western-style' painters from the mid-nineteenth century onward will help to set the parameters of a popular realism and its attendant charade. Consider the Bengali painters Bamapada Banerjee (who comes close to Ravi Varma's intentions) and others like A.P. Bagchi, S.K. Hesh, J.P. Gangooli and Hemendranath Mazumdar. Consider the somewhat younger Bombay painters Pestonji Bomanji, M.V. Dhurandhar, A.X. Trinidad and M.F. Pithawalla. Ranging

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16 Ravi Varma, *Lady with Mirror*, 1894

from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century, these artists contextualize the peculiar painterly qualities of Ravi Varma. Even when they make genre images from a local culture, they construe the bodies according to classroom conventions of portraiture, figure-studies (from plaster-casts and live models), and make a standard application of oils, perspective and composition. Ravi Varma is self-taught and boldly eclectic; he can be kitsch but never dull. He is a little like the Company School painters, haphazard and informal in inventing technique, body-style and figural convention but for an avowedly historicist project of cultural representation.

The Bengal School painters (leaving aside brilliant moments in the oeuvre of Abanindranath Tagore) attempt to fashion an ideal but interpret a medievalist aesthetic by so diffusing the body that often only the aura surrounds the ideal gesture which is located, like all ornamental art, at the point of stasis. I would like to add further that there is perhaps no other way in which the golden past survives in the modern age except as pastiche—and farce. The Bengal School and even Nandalal Bose in Santiniketan could scarcely do anything to lessen the absurdity of so much mythic



17 Ravi Varma, *Portrait of Govardhanlalji, Nathadwara*, oleograph



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invocation. Only Benodebehari Mukherjee achieved in his fresco of medieval saints<sup>33</sup> a synchronic structure in which the tradition of artisan-saints and everyday life could be aligned to make up a temporal mode, a continuous narrative that is in effect a people's history.

To return to Ravi Varma, the mythological rendered through mechanical reproduction reinforces the national-popular agenda. In the specific case at hand, Ravi Varma's piecemeal efforts to produce new forms and techniques is also precisely the point where classical subject-matter, translating itself in order to satisfy bourgeois desire, further translates into images for mass consumption that are facilitated by the reproduction technology of the glossy oleograph.<sup>34</sup> With its printing inks and high varnish, the reproduction technique makes the image *all surface*. It is interesting that towards the end of his painting career Ravi Varma had brightened his oil colours and made them consonant with Indian light. By the very effect of this luminescence the pictures, for all their attempted perspectives, floated to the surface. The technique of the oleograph captures, and then reinforces, this up-floated image (*Illus. 17*).

Ravi Varma's paintings yield penny icons and bazaar calendars and they expand into the great shadow-play of popular cinema. This secular transaction on religion is one kind of modernization achieved through a transfer of technology. It is also an ideological transfer: the image with an aura is delivered to the urban masses who may still revere the past but who do not often dream it—except in the very process of reification. Nor is this entire business of what I euphemistically call modernization, a matter of scorn. Even as kitsch Ravi Varma's transferred representations in the mass-produced prints, as in the cinema (more specially the cinema of Dadasaheb Phalke and Prabhat Film Company), make us reckon with the stylistics of the image. See how theatric flamboyance and the painter's art translate into the lovely pose of the courtesan in Damle/Fattelal's Prabhat Studio film *Sant Tukaram*, not to speak of the great Bal Gandharva who referred to Ravi Varma's figures and became a 'female' idol of his times. These popular images set up a spirited mediation, a relay between theatre, painting and cinema, with painting making a double coordinate, thus reiterating the significance of its iconicity. By formal condensation the image reveals an inner dynamic; even more than any live pose or stance or movement, it reveals the quick and everlasting body-gesture of the would-be subject.

### Epilogue

#### Ravi Varma's *Galaxy*: An Unframed Allegory

Ravi Varma's *A Galaxy of Musicians* has contrary virtues (*Illus. 18*). The ensemble of accomplished women is awkward and tender and quite superbly ornamental in the way the artist composes light and contour and colour from face and shoulders to turned hip and thigh to feet, and in the way the delicate arms and hands are arranged in relationship to the musical instruments. Resembling figures in majesty,

this picture also testifies to the dilemmas in Ravi Varma's admirable project: that of working with orientalist preconceptions toward a national identity. Compounding this is the dilemma of turning male ardour into a woman's subjectivity.

In the otherwise grand historical project of united India in whose name the superb galaxy is arranged for all the world like a conference of goddesses, the artist gives himself over to the prevailing orientalism: the group of eleven oriental women representing different regions of India (including muslim nair tamil parsi anglo-indian women) make up a perfect anthropological vignette. The vignette resembles conventions ranging from the grouping of divinities to courtiers and courtesans; also conventions for grouping ethnic types that continue right up to Company School compositions. But it lays out this mannered group with its uneasy glances as a testimony for a nascent modernity.

Iconographically, *Galaxy* compounds Ravi Varma's splendid portraits with his genre and national-allegorical pictures. Formally, *Galaxy* overlaps the iconic image with the tableau. The iconic image is formatted to converge spiritual energies through inviting the devotee's gaze upon a condensed motif, thus establishing hypostasis. The tableau, a theatre fragment of a larger whole, also invites the viewer's gaze, but by framing it. The image-tableau acquires an imminent (not manifest) narrative. It is, as Barthes says:

a pure cut-out segment with clearly defined edges, irreversible and incorruptible; everything that surrounds it is banished into nothingness, remains unnamed, while everything that it admits within its field is promoted into essence, into light, into view . . . [it] is intellectual, it has something to say (something moral, social) but it also knows how this must be done,<sup>35</sup>

The tableau format in western painting has contained (literally drawn the edges of) an extended allegory which does indeed have something moral, social to say. From the great seventeenth-century tableaux (of Poussin) to those of the eighteenth century (notably those of Jacques Louis David), these tableaux become the models for simulated classicism in the more academic and salon art of the nineteenth century. As I have already mentioned, salon art serves in turn as the remote and much-mediated model in the colonies.

If Ravi Varma's image offers first the tableau with an underpinning of the iconic format, it offers in the second look an active style of *staging* whereby the frozen vignette comes to have an allegorical import. In the subsequent take we have to accommodate the fact that the seemingly classical devolves into the category of a popular realism—which is other than the realism of great European art although that too is being distantly emulated—and settles into the making of a genre. That in turn paves the way for reproducible pictures through printing technology. In other words, we have to deal with mixed or even muddled pictorial conventions and techniques.

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This leads one to believe that Ravi Varma does not in fact know, intellectually or pictorially, the import of the classical tableau picture; and that *Galaxy* is an example of the somewhat naive effort, revealing in the process the vulnerabilities of the incomplete subject.

Thus Ravi Varma's pictures, derived from varieties of high and low art can, in their sensuous presence, give the satisfaction that the figures in their iconographic personae are tokens of the doubly desired world—ideal and yet accessible, real. This is indeed the basis on which mass culture works out its illusions or, rather, its inversions: 'Popular taste applies the schemes of the ethos, which pertain in the ordinary circumstances of life, to legitimate works of art, and so performs a systematic reduction of things of art to the things of life.'<sup>36</sup>

In this medley of contradictory conventions is to be found pictorial gratification in the guise of reality: demonstrable evidence that the world is governed by the bourgeois tenet of a materiality; that the empirical, knowable world-as-image is also at the same time an object easily subsumed within the world of exchange values. Things of art become things of life and then both may become commodified. Ravi Varma's oeuvre covers this social terrain; our retrospect however can help to mark



18 Ravi Varma, *A Galaxy of Musicians*, ca. 1889

reverse readings whereby we can see how reified images regain their aesthetic.

The clue to the interpretative process starts from the fact that the portrait, a privileged form of European and later colonial Indian art, is mapped over an indigenous albeit popular iconicity. To reiterate briefly the steps: Ravi Varma's references come from Tanjore paintings with their more elaborate Mysore antecedents. These are superseded by what he learns of the western manner in the easel format as an adolescent in Trivandrum, first via the apprenticeship of the court painter Ramaswamy Naicker and then by watching a Dutch painter, Theodore Jensen, who is with the Maharaja of Travancore in 1868. Thereon Ravi Varma continues with his assiduous self-training and talent. Further individuation in the manner of staging a person is provided by an introduction to western (Parsi or Company) proscenium theatre. The concept of the *mise-en-scene* and the mimetic aspiration in the newer art forms come from that source. The portrait-into-theatre presentation foregrounds certain aspects of realism, exemplified still further in the newer regimes of the visual by the photograph. All these aspects together—easel painting, proscenium theatre, photography, and ultimately the cinema—determine the meaning of the tableau in Indian art with and after Ravi Varma (*Illus. 19*).

The tableau delivers what Barthes calls the essence (presumably the iconic essence) of the image into the arena of the narrative. This is particularly relevant for Indian pictorial traditions as these transit into the modern. This process of delivering the iconic makes the image appear contiguous with the 'truth' of life and therefore 'realistic', but the realism is in fact subsidiary to the act of deliverance and not a virtue in itself. This is the premise not only of pictorial art as exemplified by Ravi Varma but also, as I have already mentioned, of contemporary Parsi theatre and the first major examples of Indian cinematography worked out by Dadasaheb Phalke precisely along this icon-tableau-narration axis.



19 Ravi Varma, *A Group of Indian Women*, oleograph

Writing on melodrama, Peter Brooks relates the tableau to the melodramatic *mise-en-scène*.<sup>37</sup> The melodrama in turn is predicated on the replacement of the sacred; it enshrines the beloved in the space evacuated by the sacred orders to the profane. We know that the invented genre of the Indian 'mythological' massively mediates western romantic and melodramatic forms of narration and, coming full circle, alludes to the iconic. That is to say, if the melodrama involves the transference from the iconic/sacred to the simultaneously familial and public registers of the image, the mythological takes that over but reinscribes the detached beloved back into a quasi-sacred space. It maintains, in lieu of the lost realms of the gods, this close register between the iconic, the familial and the public. This is where an image like Ravi Varma's *Galaxy* is situated.

This closely packed, richly bedecked band of female musicians, not unlike equivalent bands of angels or celestial nymphs, is something of a paradigmatic image. It suppresses time as history in favour of memory reposed in the woman who can invite and sustain the paramount gaze. Indeed, Ravi Varma's paintings are especially important in that he makes up a female body that is a reflection of the contemporary state of the male gaze. Hovering between the sacred and profane, the aristocratic and the middle class, the foreign and the indigenous (and, in the case of this particular picture, between several ingeniously designated regional types of body, dress and demeanour), the narrative of *Galaxy* is an allegorical compound of vested interests as these are going to develop on several fronts and in the various arts throughout the early nationalist period. Not least of this is the oriental fix between the self and the other (the self *as* the other), where the binaries (as these are posed above) find cathexis in a single image of desire: *the oriental woman*. It is she who becomes, through contemporary national consciousness, an indigenously (and ideally) positioned subject.

What I am spelling out, then, is the chronology of the development (or underdevelopment) of the subjectivity of the woman in one trajectory of Indian painting. She is encouraged to shed her iconicity only to be inscribed through another form of idealization, through a kind of frozen ontology, into the tableau format. For if we recall the Barthian definition of the tableau, this subjectivity will in the very nature of the format be essentialized.

The question that needs to be asked is how the orientalist view is calibrated when it is held by European artists (like Delacroix, Ingres, or on a lesser plane, Jean-Léon Gérôme); on home-ground in India by visiting British/European artists (such as Tilly Kettle, James Wales, Francesco Renaldi, Johann Zoffany, Thomas Hickey), and how it is refracted by the work of a native male artist from India—like Ravi Varma. I claim a crucial difference for Ravi Varma on the basis that the need for *self*-representation in and through the female subject comes to be intimately inscribed within such a motif as *Galaxy*. And further, that this gives the picture an ontological premise that is deeply moving even if it is not from an art-historical point of view

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The *Galaxy* is something in the nature of a prognosis for a national cultural synthesis—the perennial idea of unity in diversity—worked through female/feminine representation; if here is a supposed act of self-representation of a culture via the sensuous body of the woman, it is also in fact an acting out of the bad faith of the male artist/interlocutor. Inevitably read in terms of the woman's spiritual superiority, this picture actually puts on display the male gaze in the light of which this galaxy comes into view. Its intended purpose is to coalesce vulnerable female subjects into the stereotype of civilizational ensemble and to thus make a new norm for cultural deification. But this is subverted by the very consequences of the exposed gaze and unstable format. Teased by the controlling regime of the gaze, the subjectivity in formation turns round to become nearly rebellious.

Our reference, then, is to the pressure of contradictions under which the meaning of the image is to be elicited. And for that the cue is to be found in the scattered glances—or is it the startled subjectivity?—of the feminine stereotypes. There is no 'meeting of the eyes'—a dictum of Indian aesthetics—either between the viewer and subject or between the subjectivities on display in the tableau. If the synthesizing format of the tableau or its schematic typology is belied in the embarrassed look of the individual subjects, we must elaborate the meaning of the image by asking *what* is the evasion about? In the very question the subjectivity of the women surfaces, if somewhat subliminally. There is as if a refusal on the part of the women to configure themselves into an iconic composure. And there is, even as their underdeveloped subjectivity fails to sustain an alternative point of view, a flouting of the rules of orientalism invisibly structured by the tableau.

Two women in white and gold flank the composition in the *Galaxy*: the vain dreamer from Kerala and the dancing girl from a nawab's court in a narcissistic, self-gesturing pose. Their glances cross in the top half of the picture and form a sort of triangle inside which, diagonally and a little off-centre, sits a moon-faced Maharashtrian woman in her rich red, black and gold sari. She is a compact presence; her folded leg provides a little depth to the composition and as she looks away she also provides distance to the group (*Illus. 20, 22*). The group drifts away in reverie until all the glances are brought back by a small, dark girl with streaming hair, standing almost hidden on the extreme right of the second row (*Illus. 21*).

What we have here is not only an ensemble portrait of Indian (pedigreed, manicured and bejewelled) women in their eternal act of gentle seduction. It is an annotated group portrait with the added motif of a vocation: many of the women hold musical instruments designating the public face of a wife/mistress capable of cultural responsibilities. The women not only have a vocation, they form a sort of clumsy collectivity (or club). The assumed contract encounters a hitch in the presence of the young woman at the back, which is oddly pertinent. Her one hand is held up to

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Clockwise: 20, 21, 22 Ravi Varma, *Galaxy* (details), ca. 1889

the chin and the other hand, at the end of a bent arm, is clenched against the waist: the artist gives her torso a neat triangular form, her head a high delicate perch. Her informal pose, that of a girl dreaming at a window (or gazing at herself in the mirror), makes the figure the protagonist in the group, the painter's protegee. She looks at the viewer, gathering the glances all askance. She *looks* at the beholder attentively and arrests the scuttling effect on the subjectivity on display. She stops the pictorial disarray and the forced clubbing of the women, which no amount of locked limbs and group orchestration seems able to hold down. Ravi Varma recognizes that the

(male) gaze is problematic once actual identities are at stake.

With so much awkward slippage of glance and gesture in the ranged group, the young woman who does look out and back at the viewer transfers any residue of the burden of deification on to the narrative within the tableau. And what is the narrative? The covertly allegorized representational schema in *Galaxy* promotes the selfconscious notion of a composite culture that is just emerging. This is deflected by the painter's protegee into a dialogue on forms of otherness within the colonial sensibility. The deflection is a clever move. Even as the artist presents (in continuation of his larger project of a pan-Indian representation of types) a national-ethnographic

aspect, he shows himself to be working on a determined motive of self-regard. He introduces a sense of triumphant otherness in the self as such. He thereby inscribes in the otherwise gratuitous group a small, firm sign of (female) subjectivity.

With all the injudicious crossing of codes between the iconic and the narrative there is a rebellion in the ranks, and the sign of *Galaxy* develops in favour of a healthy contrariness. These stereotyped women refuse to serve the iconic function; there appears between the lines an inadvertent, or second-level allegory about representation itself. James Clifford argues that the more realistic portraits are convincing and rich the more they serve as extended metaphors, patterns of association that point to coherent theoretical/aesthetic/moral meaning. He argues that in the readings on culture that this form of textualization allows, it is the rhetorical trope of 'allegory [that] draws special attention to the narrative character of cultural representation, to the stories built into the representational process itself'.<sup>38</sup>

The female ensemble of *Galaxy*, including the dark, eagerly staring girl at the back, offers stories drawing on the nothingness around them. The odd feature is that the allegory is at the beginning rather than at the end of the narrative, for it is an allegory about cultural self-representation itself.

Finally, then, 'Raja' Ravi Varma, the native male artist in the orientalist schema, puts forth a performative parody of the female subject on display. Cued by the narcissistic posing of a half-hidden subjectivity in the rear, the ensemble inadvertently offers the feminine as masquerade. With deliberate allegorical interest the artist inflects the theatricality of the presentation and undermines the realism of the picture: by abandoning the (proscenium) frame and letting go. Losing grip on the bodies, he offers more than a parody, he offers an ironical view of the process of representation where the controlling male gaze is shown to be put out within the picture itself.

The tableau of *Galaxy* has to do with the business of types, and with the 'unity in diversity' motif of national culture. It has covertly to do with the relay of the female body through glance, gaze and gesture into the realm of voyeurism—the inner chamber of desire with its fourth wall removed. Thus we have here at once the relay of male desire and female personae. Taking all aspects into account, the picture has to do with the transition of an indigenous society into the problematic of identity wherein what is insecure is mapped on to the female body: the body posed for unabashed viewing outside the margins of history but inside a national pictorial schema. *Galaxy* thus merits iconic status and art-historical deconstruction that will prove Ravi Varma to be a crucial figure in establishing visual modernity at the exact turn of the century.

Not until Amrita Sher-Gil arrives on the Indian art scene in the 1930s is Ravi Varma's representational dilemma sought to be tackled. I would like to hypothesize that Sher-Gil, on her south India tour, saw *Galaxy* hanging in Mysore—or if she did not, that this picture is the fiction on which her own paintings develop after the south Indian trilogy.<sup>39</sup> Her desire finds ways to gain subjectivity in the woman's



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painted image that is a woman's by right. If *Galaxy* allegorizes the beauty of the legendary land of India through the lush, lithe, glittering presence of eleven women, then Sher-Gil enlarges the allegorical reach by attempting to make the woman's subjective presence the model for the developing subject-in-history. This is the history which is being 'discovered' by compatriots and in which Sher-Gil makes a brief aesthetic intervention, introducing, with all the force of her young intelligence, a morphology that takes Indian art firmly towards the modern.

#### Notes and References

- <sup>1</sup> Much of the biographical material on Ravi Varma in this essay has been sourced from E.M.J. Venniyoor, *Raja Ravi Varma*, Government of Kerala, Thiruvananthapuram, 1981. Other biographical and interpretive texts referred to include Krishna Chaitanya, *Ravi Varma*, Lalit Kala Akademi, Delhi, 1960, rev. edn 1984; and Tapati Guha-Thakurta, 'Westernization and Tradition in South Indian Painting in the Nineteenth Century: The Case of Raja Ravi Varma', in *Studies in History*, Vol. 2, No. 2, 1986. Since this essay was first published (in 1989) a number of art-historical studies on Ravi Varma have appeared, to which I am indebted in this revised version. These include Tapati Guha-Thakurta, *The Making of a New 'Indian' Art: Artists, Aesthetics and Nationalism in Bengal 1850–1920*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1992; and Partha Mitter, *Art and Nationalism in Colonial India 1850–1922: Oriental orientations*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1994. Also *Raja Ravi Varma: New Perspectives* (exhibition catalogue, edited by R.C. Sharma, National Museum, Delhi, 1993) which includes several contributions and a multifaceted view of Ravi Varma. A critique of the artist yet to be contended with by other art historians, is provided by R. Nandakumar in 'Raja Ravi Varma in the Realm of the Public', *Journal of Arts & Ideas*, Nos. 27–28, March 1995; and 'The Missing Male: The Female Figures of Ravi Varma and the Concepts of Family, Marriage and Fatherhood in Nineteenth-Century Kerala', *South Indian Studies*, No. 1, January–June 1996.
- <sup>2</sup> Asok Mitra, 'The Forces behind the Modern Movement', in *Lalit Kala Contemporary*, No. 1, Delhi, 1961, p. 16. Mitra says further: 'To European eyes, however, Ravi Varma must have appeared stale and unprofitable, because he was too obviously an "imitation", even as it is possible to imagine that *Durgesnandini* if translated into English would have left an English reader, who had read Scott, cold. . . . It is possible that a European reader would find Iswar Gupta strange, exciting, beautiful, being different, and *Durgesnandini* dull and imitative. It is fortunate, however, that there was no campaign at the time on the part of Bengali-knowing Englishmen advising our intelligentsia to shun *Durgesnandini* and cling to Bharatchandra or Iswar Gupta: English continued to be the window open to the world; to shut it was regarded as a crime against India.'
- <sup>3</sup> See Ramananda Chatterjee, 'Ravi Varma', in *The Modern Review*, Vol. 1, No. 1–6, January–June 1907, pp. 88–90.
- <sup>4</sup> See Sudipta Kaviraj, 'The Myth of Praxis: The Construction of the Figure of Krishna in *Krishnacharitra*', in *The Unhappy Consciousness: Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay and the Formation of Nationalist Discourse in India*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1995.
- <sup>5</sup> See Mildred Archer, *India and British Portraiture 1770–1825*, Southeby Parke Bernet, London, 1979.
- <sup>6</sup> See *ibid.*

- <sup>7</sup> Partha Mitter, 'Raja Ravi Varma: The Artist as a Professional', in *Raja Ravi Varma: New Perspectives*, p. 38, n. 4; Venniyoor, *Raja Ravi Varma*, p. 8.
- <sup>8</sup> See Jaya Appasamy, *Tanjore Paintings of the Maratha Period*, Abhinav Publications, Delhi, 1980.
- <sup>9</sup> See Venniyoor, *Raja Ravi Varma*, pp. 3–8. It should be mentioned that there were many painters in Ravi Varma's family: his uncle Raja Raja Varma had learnt the Tanjore style of painting from Alagiri Naidu, court artist in Travancore; his younger brother C. Raja Raja Varma (a very accomplished painter who however subordinated himself to Ravi Varma's career); and their sister Mangalbai Tampuratty. Ravi Varma's son Rama Varma also became a painter.
- <sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 14–16, 19–21, 24, 30. The story of Ravi Varma's success has been laid out by Venniyoor and repeatedly recounted: a synoptic paraphrase is presented here for emblematic use in the larger Ravi Varma narrative.
- <sup>11</sup> Besides Sayaji Rao III, there are resplendent portraits of his consorts (Maharani Chimnabai I and II), of Prince Fatesingh Rao, Princess Putlaraje and Princess Tarabai, housed in the Maharaja Fateh Singh Museum Trust at Laxmi Vilas Palace, Baroda.
- <sup>12</sup> See Nandakumar, 'The Missing Male'; also see Venniyoor, *Raja Ravi Varma*, p. 24.
- <sup>13</sup> See Anthea Callen, *Technique of the Impressionists*, Orbist, London, 1982, pp. 8–10.
- <sup>14</sup> See J. Thuillier and A. Chatalet, *French Painting from Le Nain to Fragonard*, Skira, Geneva, 1964, p. 124.
- <sup>15</sup> See examples of paintings by Jean Baptiste Santerre, 1658–1717 and Jean Raoux, 1677–1734. *Ibid.*, pp. 138–40.
- <sup>16</sup> See Robert Rosenblum and H.W. Janson, *Art of the Nineteenth Century: Painting and Sculpture*, Thames and Hudson, London, 1984, pp. 430–31.
- <sup>17</sup> The House of Kilimanoor cultivated performing arts like kathakali and thullal. Ravi Varma's mother Uma Ambabai Tampuratty wrote a thullal—*Parvati Swayamvaram* (Venniyoor, *Raja Ravi Varma*, p. 2), and Ravi Varma was a great kathakali enthusiast.
- <sup>18</sup> C. Raja Raja Varma's diary (1895–1904), quoted in Venniyoor, *ibid.*, pp. 43, 49, 56, and in Krishna Chaitanya, *Ravi Varma*, p. 9.
- <sup>19</sup> *Shri Krishna as Envoy* (1906) shows Krishna in his role as an envoy of the Pandavas to the Kaurava court, treating Duryodhana's evil design to take him hostage with cold contempt by revealing his divinity to the courtiers.
- <sup>20</sup> See *Nala Damayanti*, ca. 1888, in the Maharaja Fateh Singh Museum Trust, Laxmi Vilas Palace, Baroda; *Hansa-Damayanti*, 1899, in the Shri Chitra Art Gallery, Trivandrum; *Swan Messenger*, ca. 1905, in the Shri Jayachamarajendra Art Gallery, Mysore.
- <sup>21</sup> See *Shakuntala Patralekhan*, 1876 (only available in an oleograph version); *Shakuntala*, ca. 1888, in the Maharaja Fateh Singh Museum Trust, Laxmi Vilas Palace, Baroda; *Shakuntala*, 1898, in Government Museum, Madras; and *Shakuntala Looks Back in Love*, 1898, in Shri Chitra Art Gallery, Trivandrum.
- <sup>22</sup> Draupadi is depicted in her moments of humiliation in several paintings. Sita's abduction, shown in *Ravana Slaying Jatayu*, in Shri Chitra Art Gallery, Trivandrum, and *Jatayuvadha*, 1906, in the Shri Jayachamarajendra Art Gallery, Mysore, is among the more mimetically pictorialized images in Ravi Varma. Using narrative gesture, he confirms the subtext of theatricality in the popular aspects of the realist genre.
- <sup>23</sup> *The Fine Arts in India*, Madras, 1871, quoted by Tapati Guha-Thakurta, 'Raja Ravi Varma and the Project of a National Art', in *Raja Ravi Varma: New Perspectives*, n. 11.

- <sup>24</sup> Both Krishna Chaitanya (*Ravi Varma*, p. 8) and Venniyoor (*Raja Ravi Varma*, p. 56) confirm the belief that Ravi Varma would have seen the Padmanabhapuram and Mattancheri paintings of the sixteenth–eighteenth centuries. Transactions between the courts of Tanjore and Travancore in matters of culture and especially painting are well known. The more iconic paintings from the seventeenth–nineteenth centuries (see Jaya Appasamy, *Thanjavur Paintings of the Maratha Period*), the popular paintings on glass during the eighteenth–nineteenth centuries which spread across the present Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh and Kerala (see Jaya Appasamy, *Indian Paintings on Glass*, Indian Council for Cultural Relations, Delhi, 1980), and the hybrid but sprightly drawings of the Company School from the Tanjore region (see Mildred and W.G. Archer, *Indian Painting for the British 1770–1880*, Oxford University Press, London, 1955) would have been familiar to, indeed part of, the immediate milieu of Ravi Varma.
- <sup>25</sup> 'The performing arts (Thullal and Kathakali) favoured literalism and the concrete image. In the interpretation of a metaphoric image like elephant-gaited (*dantigamini*) already a little ungainly and recherche, the elaborate and repeated gestural mimesis of Kathakali is not content to suggest the slow, swinging gait but brings before you the prodigious animal with trunk swaying, fan-like ears waving.' Krishna Chaitanya, *Ravi Varma*, p. 8.
- <sup>26</sup> 'If the Sanskrit acculturation of Kerala was extensive, it is very essential to remember that it was not the lyricism of Vedic poetry or of Valmiki's epic that moulded literary sensibility and creation so much as the neoclassicism of later epochs, the Kavyas written according to the prescriptions of Dandin who went all out for literalism, concreté imagery, exhaustive delineation instead of allusion and suggestion, the systematic description from head to foot (*kesadipada*) instead of the sensuous silhouette of the feminine figure. In Sanskrit neoclassicism, the form and style of the panegyrics of kings (*narasamsa*) had annexed the description of the gods even in hymns and for the obvious reason that the Puranic stories about the exploits of gods were modelled on the valorous deeds of kings. Likewise, the literary manner of the descriptions of woman in her various moods (*nayika* lore) had been uninhibitedly extended to the hymns about goddesses. There was a landslide of this tradition in Kerala.' See Krishna Chaitanya, *ibid.*, p. 7. For a further location of Ravi Varma in Malayalam literature, see also R. Sivakumar in *Raja Ravi Varma: New Perspectives*.
- <sup>27</sup> Krishna Chaitanya, *Ravi Varma*, p. 9.
- <sup>28</sup> In *Raja Ravi Varma*, p. 31.
- <sup>29</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 32.
- <sup>30</sup> He makes a virtual pilgrimage, or is it more the gentleman's grand tour, of the subcontinent. See Venniyoor, *ibid.*, p. 27 and p. 34.
- <sup>31</sup> For an overall idea see Mildred and W.G. Archer, *Indian Painting for the British 1770–1880*; and Mildred Archer, *Company Drawings in the India Office Library*, Her Majesty's Stationery Office, London, 1972.
- <sup>32</sup> See Ashish Rajadhyaksha, 'The Phalke Era: Conflict of Traditional Form and Modern Technology', in *Journal of Arts & Ideas*, Nos. 14–15, July–December 1987. Rajadhyaksha's conceptual framework for inscribing Ravi Varma's iconic images into technological forms is illuminating.
- <sup>33</sup> Executed in 1946–47, this 100-foot fresco is situated in Hindi Bhavana, Visva-Bharati, Santiniketan.
- <sup>34</sup> The project of the printing press begun in the early 1890s, situated in Bombay/Lonavla, suffered many vicissitudes. Difficulties of business forced the Varma brothers to sell the press

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to one of the German technicians in 1901, giving him the right to reproduce 89 pictures by Ravi Varma. See Venniyoor, *Raja Ravi Varma*, pp. 30, 33-41.

<sup>35</sup> 'Diderot, Brecht, Eisenstein', in *Image, Music, Text*, Fontana Paperbacks, London, 1982, p. 70.

<sup>36</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1984, p. 5.

<sup>37</sup> *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama and the Mode of Excess*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1985, p. 48.

<sup>38</sup> James Clifford, 'On Ethnographic Allegory', in *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, edited by James Clifford and George E. Marcus, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1986, p. 98.

<sup>39</sup> I am referring to Sher-Gil's *South Indian Villagers Going to Market*, *Brahmacharis* and *Bride's Toilet*, all done in 1937.