

## **Detailed Study of Raja Ravi Varma's Paintings**

**Pankaj Verma,**

*Student (MFA),*

*Teerthanker Mahaveer University*

**Vaibhav Jha,**

*Assistant Professor,*

*Teerthanker Mahaveer University.*

### **Abstract**

Raja Ravi Varma was a true gem among Indian artists, the one who first introduced vibrant oil colours to the country. His contributions to Indian art are so immense that words can hardly do them justice. He revolutionised the way we use oil paints today by weaving together India's rich cultural heritage with European artistic techniques, creating a unique style that left an indelible mark on Indian art history.

Born into the royal family of Travancore, Raja Ravi Varma was drawn to drawing and painting from a young age. His family saw his passion and nurtured it, giving him the freedom to explore his talent in fresh, innovative ways. Though he never travelled to Europe, he absorbed European techniques right here in India. A pivotal moment came when Theodore Jensen, a British painter, visited the Travancore court and shared his oil paintings and European materials with Varma. This encounter sparked something extraordinary.

Raja Ravi Varma became renowned for his distinctive approach, using European methods to bring Indian stories to life. He was particularly inspired by the European technique of chiaroscuro, mastered by artists who used light and shadow to create depth and drama. Varma adopted this technique to make his paintings feel vivid and lifelike, with light dancing across faces and fabrics, adding a sense of richness and dimension. Thanks to the influence of European artists, his work carried a bold, global flair while staying deeply rooted in Indian narratives.

**Keywords:** Raja Ravi Varma, Influence, Europe, Indian and European Artists, Indian culture, Main features

## I. INTRODUCTION

### **The Magic of Realism in Raja Ravi Varma's Art**

Raja Ravi Varma was a game-changer in Indian art, blending the lifelike realism of European painting techniques with the soul of Indian stories. He was the first to bring this approach to India, painting mythological figures as if they were real people you could meet. His work grabbed everyone's attention because it felt so vivid and relatable. Let's dive into how he pulled this off!

**Picture 1.1**

### **Painting Titled "Radha in the Moonlight" by Raja Ravi Varma**



### **Faces That Speak**

The heart of Raja Ravi Varma's realism lies in the emotions he captured. His paintings don't just show faces—they show *feelings*. Take his famous work, *Lady in the Moonlight*. The woman's face is so soft and serene, like she's lost in a daydream. The delicate shine on her lips and the gentle curve of her mouth makes her feel like a living, breathing person, not just a figure on canvas. Another gem, *Hamsa Damayanti*, shows the princess Damayanti with a poetic, tender expression as she chats with a swan. She's so lifelike, it's hard to believe she's just paint on a canvas. Raja Ravi Varma had a knack for making his characters feel real, with every glance and gesture telling a story.

### **Clothes That Feel Touchable**

Raja Ravi Varma was obsessed with getting textures just right, especially when it came to clothes. His paintings make you want to reach out and feel the fabric. In *The Milkmaid*, the woman's sari looks so real, with every fold and shimmer of silk catching the light perfectly. You can almost sense the softness of cotton or the weight of the fabric as it drapes over her body. Unlike older Indian art, where clothes were often flat and simple, his work brought out the richness of everyday

textures. The play of light and shadow on the fabric made his scenes feel grounded, like snapshots from real life.

### **A New Spin on Indian Art**

Raja Ravi Varma's paintings gave Indian art a fresh, realistic vibe that was revolutionary for its time. That said, when you compare his work to today's hyper-realistic art, you might notice a slight dreaminess or softness in his figures—like a faint mist over the canvas. Researchers point out that his paintings capture about 70-80% of the realism we'd expect by modern standards. The edges of figures or backgrounds sometimes lack the razor-sharp clarity we see today. But this isn't a flaw—it's a reflection of the tools and techniques available back then. His contribution was massive, breathing life into Indian art and setting the stage for future artists.

The goal isn't to say Raja Ravi Varma's work wasn't realistic—it absolutely was for his era. Instead, it's about recognising that realism has evolved, and his paintings were a bold step toward that evolution, even if they don't match today's pixel-perfect standards.

### **The Power of Oil Paints**

Raja Ravi Varma was a pioneer in using oil paints in India, a medium that let him create vibrant, lasting works of art. By mixing colours with oils like linseed or sunflower, he could achieve bright, blendable hues that took time to dry, giving him room to perfect every detail. Why oil paints? For one, they helped him nail that realistic look he was after. Unlike traditional Indian art, which used flat, symbolic colours to depict gods and kings, oil paints let him capture wrinkles, expressions, and textures with incredible depth.

Another reason was durability. Oil paints are tough—they don't fade like watercolours or natural dyes, ensuring his paintings would stand the test of time for future generations. Plus, Raja Ravi Varma was inspired by the modern world around him. Under British rule, India was buzzing with new ideas like photography and printing. Oil painting felt like a cutting-edge skill, a way to blend European techniques with Indian stories, giving Indian art a bold new identity without copying Western themes.

### **Bringing Scenes to Life with Perspective**

One of Raja Ravi Varma's secret weapons was his use of perspective, which gave his paintings depth and a sense of reality. Instead of flat, two-dimensional scenes, he made objects and people look like they existed in a real space, with distance and dimension. This was a big deal for bringing his mythological scenes to life. Whether he was painting gods and goddesses from the *Ramayana* or the *Mahabharata*, his use of perspective made them feel like they were standing right in front of you, not just figures on a page. It's this sense of depth that helped turn his paintings into windows to a living, breathing world.

## **Positioning of People**

Raja Ravi Varma had a knack for placing figures in his paintings in a way that felt alive and immersive. He used a clever trick: objects closer to the viewer looked bigger, while those farther away appeared smaller, creating a sense of depth. Take his painting *The Lady with the Lamp*, for example. The woman in the foreground is painted with incredible detail, her features sharp and vivid, while the background softens into gentle, faded shapes. This technique pulls you in, making you feel like you're standing right beside her.

Before Varma, Indian art—like miniature paintings or temple art—was more about beauty and symbolism than realism. Artists focused on intricate patterns and vibrant colours but didn't worry about making things look three-dimensional. People and objects were often the same size, whether they were meant to be near or far, resulting in flat, decorative images. Varma changed that by borrowing the concept of perspective from European artists. This gave his paintings a lifelike quality, with clear distinctions between what was close and what was distant.

His use of perspective wasn't just about size—it was also about colour and clarity. Distant objects were painted in softer, muted tones, while those up close popped with detail. The result? Paintings that felt real, almost like you could step into them.

## **Blending Indian and Western Styles**

Raja Ravi Varma is celebrated for mixing Indian themes with Western portraiture techniques, creating a style that was uniquely his own. Western portraiture focused on capturing real, detailed faces—think expressive eyes, subtle smiles, and lifelike textures. Varma mastered this approach and wove it into Indian stories, painting kings, queens, gods, goddesses, and everyday people with a European flair while keeping the heart of Indian culture.

## **Lifelike Faces and Emotions**

Traditional Indian art often showed simplified faces with little emotion. Varma's work was different. In *The Lady with the Lamp*, the woman's calm expression and soft gaze are illuminated by the glowing lamp she holds, highlighting her delicate skin and gentle eyes. It's a level of detail that feels personal, almost like she's sharing a quiet moment with you. This focus on emotion came straight from European portraiture, which Varma adapted beautifully.

He even brought this human touch to divine figures. His famous painting of Goddess Lakshmi shows her with a serene smile, glowing skin, and a spark in her eyes, making her feel like a real person rather than just a symbol. Before Varma, gods in Indian art were often stiff and iconic. He gave them warmth and personality, changing how people saw divinity in art.

## **The Magic of Oil Paints**

Before Varma, Indian artists used watercolours or natural pigments, which were lovely but lacked the vibrancy and depth of oil paints. These older colours could look flat or faded, unable to capture the richness Varma wanted. When he switched to oils, his paintings came alive. The way he used light and shadow gave his figures a three-dimensional look, making them leap off the canvas. People were drawn to these vivid, realistic portraits, which felt like a huge leap from the simpler art of the past.

## **Detailed Backgrounds**

European artists paid attention to every part of a painting, including the background, filling it with details that told a story. In contrast, traditional Indian artists kept backgrounds minimal, focusing only on the main figures. Varma embraced the European approach, painting lush, detailed backgrounds that added context and depth. In his painting *Hansa Damayanti*, for instance, Princess Damayanti sits in a vibrant garden, with a swan nearby and intricate scenery behind her. These details create a sense of place, making the painting feel like a window into a real moment.

## **Drapery and Texture**

### **Picture 1.2**

**Portrait of Maharani Bharani Thirunal Lakshmi Bayi, Painted by Raja Ravi Varma**



Raja Ravi Varma had an incredible knack for capturing the beauty of fabric and texture, making his paintings feel alive. Drapery is all about how cloth flows, folds, and drapes—whether it looks soft and light or heavy and rich. Texture, on the other hand, is about how surfaces *feel* to the eye, like smooth skin, rough stone, or silky hair. Varma was a genius at blending both, turning flat canvases into vibrant, touchable scenes.

### **Drapery: The Flow of Fabric**

The first thing that grabs you in Varma's paintings is how beautifully he painted clothing. In India, traditional outfits like sarees, dhotis, and turbans are full of intricate folds and layers. Take the saree, for example—it's a garment that cascades in countless ways, with folds that shift depending on how it's worn. Varma nailed these details, painting every crease and drape so realistically that you can almost feel the fabric. Men's dhotis, with their layered textures, came to life under his brush, looking as if they could sway in the breeze.

### **Texture: A Feast for the Eyes**

Varma didn't stop at cloth—he brought every surface to life with texture. From the softness of skin to the shimmer of jewelry, or even the ruggedness of a tree or stone wall in the background, his paintings burst with detail. In *Hamsa Damayanti*, for instance, Princess Damayanti's skin glows with a smooth, almost velvety softness, while her hair shines with fine, delicate strands. The swan in the same painting has wings so fluffy and light, you can imagine running your fingers through them. Varma used different brushstrokes to achieve this magic—gentle and blended for skin, detailed and precise for hair or feathers—making every element feel real.

Jewellery, a cornerstone of Indian culture, was another of Varma's passions. In *Lakshmi*, he painted Goddess Lakshmi adorned with a gold necklace, bangles, and a crown. The gold gleams, catching the light in a way that makes it look heavy yet smooth. You can almost sense the weight of the metal and the craftsmanship behind it. These tiny details pull you into the story of the painting.

Varma's background was just as captivating. In *Draupadi*, the walls and floor behind the figure have a rough, stone-like texture, contrasting beautifully with Draupadi's soft, flowing clothes. This interplay of hard and soft makes the painting pop, drawing you deeper into the scene.

Oil paints were Varma's secret weapon, letting him blend colours smoothly and layer them for depth. His use of light and shadow added a lifelike quality, making textures and drapery feel almost tangible. Paintings like *Galaxy of Musicians*, *Malabar Lady*, *Ram and Sita*, and *Lady in the Moonlight* showcase his mastery of clothing, jewellery, and backgrounds, each detail painted with care and precision.

### **Everyday Life: Painting the Heart of India**

Raja Ravi Varma didn't just paint gods and royalty—he brought everyday life to the canvas, inspired by European art but rooted in Indian culture. His paintings of ordinary people doing ordinary things offer a window into the lifestyle and spirit of his time.

### **Women in Daily Life**

Varma's paintings often spotlight women, capturing their grace in simple, everyday moments. Whether it's friends chatting, children playing, or someone preparing for the day, his scenes feel warm and familiar. In *Lady with the Lamp*, a

woman stands near a glowing lamp, draped in a saree and jewelry that reflect Indian traditions. The quiet, peaceful moment feels like something you've seen in real life. Varma went beyond surface beauty, painting women's emotions—working, dreaming, or lost in thought. This made his art relatable; people could see their sisters, mothers, or neighbours in his figures. At a time when women's stories were rarely highlighted, Varma celebrated their strength and poise in daily life.

### **Family and Relationships**

Family is the heartbeat of Indian culture, and Varma captured it beautifully. In *There Comes Father*, a little girl runs toward her father, her face lit up with joy. It's a simple moment, but it radiates love and warmth, reminding us of the bonds between parents and children. Varma had a gift for freezing these universal feelings—happiness, care, and togetherness—in time.

Even in mythical paintings like *Hamsa Damayanti*, Varma made relationships feel real. The way the couple gazes at each other speaks of love and connection, inviting viewers to reflect on their own families and loved ones.

### **Work and Play**

Varma's art embraced all facets of life—farmers working, musicians playing, or people resting under a tree. In *Milkmaid*, a woman carries a pot of milk with pride and strength, embodying the dignity of everyday labour. Varma's focus on ordinary people, not just the elite, showed his deep respect for everyone's story.

He also loved painting children at play. In one painting, a young village girl stands with a shy smile, her innocence and joy shining through. Varma's art wasn't all serious—it had a playful, light-hearted side that celebrated life's simple pleasures.

### **Iconic Everyday Paintings**

Some of Varma's standout works that capture daily life include:

- *Shakuntala*
- *The Coquette*
- *Damayanti Talking to a Swan*
- *The Gypsy Girl*

### **Chiaroscuro: Bringing Light and Shadow to Life**

“Chiaro” means light, and “scuro” means dark. Together, they form a painting technique that uses light and shadow to create depth and drama. Back in the day, traditional Indian art often felt flat and lifeless. That all changed when Raja Ravi Varma stepped onto the scene. He mastered chiaroscuro, breathing life into his canvases and revolutionising Indian art. His work became a game-changer, with this technique as one of his secret weapons.

Some stunning examples of his chiaroscuro magic include:

- *Galaxy of Musicians*
- *Hesitation*
- *Jatayu Vadham*

Raja Ravi Varma's approach was groundbreaking. He blended the heart of Indian culture with European flair, creating a fresh, vibrant style. His paintings didn't just hang on walls—they told stories of everyday life, capturing the essence of his era. By weaving in European techniques, he made his work strikingly realistic, giving Indian art a bold new chapter that still inspires today.

### **Research Methodology**

The researcher has written this paper by collecting the information from secondary sources that include YouTube, web articles, websites, etc.

### **Objective of the Study**

The main objective of this research paper is to examine the Main features of Raja Ravi Varma's painting.

## **II.CONCLUSION**

This study of Raja Ravi Varma's paintings offers a rich and diverse understanding of the influence of Europe on Raja Ravi Varma's paintings. The Researcher believes that a huge amount of influence of Europe can be seen in Raja Ravi Varma's painting. Through this study, the researcher learned about Raja Ravi Verma's paintings, his European technique, and how he used them to give his paintings a look that appealed to all people. Raja Ravi Verma's work is a clear fusion of European techniques and Indian themes. European Realism gave him the tool to capture lifelike portraits using perspective, lighting, and oil paintings, but he infused these with Indian mythological elements to create powerful cultural representations. His paintings helped modernize Indian art, blending tradition and making it accessible to wider audiences.

The researcher was helped in understanding the European techniques used by Raja Ravi Verma such as realism, western portraiture, oil color, oil color technique, background and its detail, smoothness of color, figure and their emotions, the perspective of the figures, position of the people etc from this study and his paintings. How Raja Ravi Verma's paintings were shaped by European techniques is an exciting journey for the researcher, and he discovers a valuable range of qualities in it, such as Critical thinking, self-confidence, time management, writing and communication skills, independence, and subject matter expertise.

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