

## FINE ART EDUCATION IN INDIA AND RAJA RAVI VERMA'S CONTRIBUTION

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The term "fine art" refers to an art form practised mainly for its aesthetic value and its beauty ("art for art's sake") rather than its functional value. Fine art is rooted in drawing and design-based works such as painting, printmaking, and sculpture. It is often contrasted with "applied art" and "crafts" which are both traditionally seen as utilitarian activities. Other non-design-based activities regarded as fine arts, include photography and architecture, although the latter is best understood as an applied art. Fine art is "a visual art considered to have been created primarily for aesthetic and intellectual purposes and judged for its beauty and meaningfulness, specifically, painting, sculpture, drawing, watercolour, graphics, and architecture." In that sense, there are conceptual differences between the Fine Arts and the Applied Arts.

As originally conceived, and as understood for much of the modern era, the perception of aesthetic qualities required a refined judgment usually referred to as having good taste, which differentiated fine art from popular art and entertainment. However in

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the postmodern era, the value of good taste is disappearing, to the point that having bad taste has become synonymous with being avant-garde. The term "fine art" is now rarely found in art history, but remains common in the art trade and as a title for university departments and degrees, even if rarely used in teaching. The word "fine" does not so much denote the quality of the artwork in question, but the purity of the discipline according to traditional Western European canons. This definition originally excluded the applied or decorative arts, and the products of what were regarded as crafts. In contemporary practice these distinctions and restrictions have become essentially meaningless, as the concept or intention of the artist is given primacy, regardless of the means through which this is expressed.

Indian Art consists of a variety of art forms, including plastic arts (e.g., pottery and sculpture), visual arts (e.g., cave paintings), and textile arts (e.g., woven silk). Geographically, it spans the entire Indian subcontinent, including what is now India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. A strong sense of design is characteristic of Indian art and can be observed in its modern and traditional forms. The origin of Indian art can be traced to pre-historic Hominid settlements in the 3rd millennium BC. On its way to modern times, Indian art has had cultural influences (e.g., Indus Valley and Hellenistic), as well as religious influences such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Islam. In spite of this complex mixture of religious traditions, generally the prevailing artistic style at

any time and place has been shared by the major religious groups. In historic art, sculpture in stone and metal, mainly religious, has survived the Indian climate better than other media, and provides most of the best remains. Many of the most important ancient finds that are not in carved stone come from surrounding, drier regions rather than India itself. Indian funeral and philosophic traditions exclude grave goods, which are a main source of ancient art in other cultures.

During 19<sup>th</sup> century the art as a whole was obviously of a very inferior character made in the “Bazaars” as at the trading stations and showing little or elegance of its origin which were in ancient miniature paintings. Thus India in the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century presented as spectacle of “Art-barrenness”, hard to imagine. In order to revive the lost glory of traditional crafts art schools were started during 19<sup>th</sup> century. But these colleges were ineffective in salvaging the lost spirit, because academic art was taught in these institutions. Less attention was paid to Indian form and techniques. As a result traditional Indian paintings began to decline.

In order to revive the lost glory of Indian paintings many art schools were opened during 19<sup>th</sup> Century. While there are stray examples of short-lived art schools prior to the 1850s, the Madras School of Arts and Craft (now renamed Government College of Fine Arts) was the first institution to experiment with systematic art training. Established in 1850 by Alexander Hunter, the school began imparting

lessons in subjects ranging from botanical drawings and lithography to woodcarving and pottery. Soon, yet another art school opened its doors in Calcutta. Established in 1854 by a group of Bengali elite under the aegis of the Society for the Promotion of Industrial Art, the Calcutta School of Art intended “to develop inventiveness and originality, to supply skilled draftsmen, designers, engravers, to meet increasing demand, to provide employment, to promote taste and refinement in the application of Art, among the upper classes to supply the community with works of art at a moderate price.

In 1854 the first industrial Art society was set up in Calcutta By Rajendra Lal Mitra, Jatindra Mohan Tagor and others. By 1864 this was converted into the “Calcutta Government College of Art” With the British crown taking over the east India Company in 1857 and queen Victoria becoming express of India, the Bombay Government Art College (Later renamed J.J. School of Art) and the Madras Government college of art were also established.

By 1867, 22 Industrial Art Societies and three Government Art school in the Presidency cities was established, But the medium of instruction remained European. The Indian method of painting was dominated by European.

Although the art schools in Madras, Calcutta, and Bombay began as private endeavors, they were gradually taken over by the British

government as part of an initiative to gain an increased control over education in the colony. The Madras School became a government institution in 1854, closely followed by the Calcutta School in 1858, and the Bombay School in 1864. Aimed solely at craft education, the Mayo School of Art, the youngest among the colonial art schools, was established in Lahore with government support in 1875. With government patronage, there was a concerted effort to redesign art school pedagogy in India, modeling art education in the colony on South Kensington's design pedagogy.<sup>9</sup> For instance, after the Bombay School was taken over by the government, the curriculum was restructured and South Kensington trained teachers such as Hugh Stannaus, Michael John Higgins, John Lockwood Kipling and John Griffiths were appointed. Similarly, with the appointment of the South Kensington trained Henry Locke as the Principal of the Calcutta School, the school's curriculum was reoriented with the introduction of South Kensington's multi-stage pedagogic model.

The introduction of art teaching on the basis of the British pattern had far-reaching implications on Indian Paintings because most of the artists have been receiving their training in this institution. The British did not have a clear policy of art education. On one hand they wanted to develop Indian taste and on the other was to train craftsmen so that the excellent tradition of Indian crafts might survive and their deterioration could be stopped. But the actual training given was based

on realistic rendering of objects and copying of western pattern. “It was the taste of European art which they wanted to inculcate by training Indians in western representational and Techniques’.

According to Ratan Parimoo Lord Napier (Governor of Madras) in 1871 recommended “Indian artist could paint Indian Mythology and life with the Power of European art.”

One dominating intention of British Art institutions Could be summarized by the following statement from the ‘Report of the Director of Public Instructions, 1876-1877 “The object of the institution was to give native youth of India an idea of men and things in Europe both present and past, not that they might learn to produce feeble imitation of European art, but rather they might study European methods of imitation and apply them to the representation of natural scenery , architectural monuments ethical varieties and national costumes in their own country”

The fine art education catered to European tastes, in terms of themes and mediums - perspective, light and shade, portraiture, landscape. The report further mentioned:

“The fine art education soon supported a package of oils on canvas and clay modeling with an emphasis or portraiture landscapes , and still life. This was coupled with a shift towards studding illusionistic – realism rather than conceptual forms, especially within human

figuration. The use of chiaroscuro instead of flat colour patterns of tonality rather than line, and perspective instead of decorative compositions, were a few of the other changes.”

The academic perspective was not the manner with which the Indian vision had been fashioned. In Indian thought, the perspective of the mind's eye was far more relevant than representation.

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Towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, one notable Indian artist, Ravi Verma, tried to reestablish Indian art through western methods, techniques, principles and traits. He was successful in his venture because he took Indian art back to feudal themes. (With the coming of European Painters the myth and religion was no more important subject

matter of paintings. Nature, Festival, common men's life was introduced as a subject of Indian painting with western technique).

Raja Ravi Verma was among the first artists in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century to introduce a radical change by focusing on themes of Indian mythology and literature. He did this by resurrecting classical Indian sources from the Mahabharat and from Kalidasa's Play, and by combining this with European techniques of realism in colour, composition & perspective.

### **RAJA RAVI VARMA (1848-1906)**

An artist who is credited with bringing about a momentous turn in Indian art Raja Ravi Varma influenced, future generations of artist. He was first Indian artist to master perspective and the use of the oil medium. He was the first artist to cast the Indian gods and mythological characters in natural earthy surroundings using a European realism; the first Indian artist to become famous, before him painters and craftsmen were largely unidentified and he was first to make his work available not just to the rich elite but also to common people by way of his oleographs.

Even Rabindranath Tagore expressed his admiration. Tagore noted:

“I spent the entire morning looking at Ravi Verma pictures. I must confess I find them really attractive. After all, these pictures prove to use



how dear our own stories our own image and expressions are to us. In same paintings, the figures are not quite in proportion. Never mind! The total effect in compelling.”

Tagore further said:

“The secret of their appeal is in reminding us how precious our own culture is to us, in restoring to us our inheritance. Our mind here acts as an ally of the artist. We can almost participate what he is about to say..... It is all too easy to find fault with him. But we must remember that it is a lot easier to imagine a subject than to paint it. A mental image, after all, has the freedom to be imprecise. But if that mental image has to be turned into something as concrete as a picture, with concern for even the minute aspects of representation, then that task ceases to be facile.”

Raja Ravi Verma ‘the artistic genius.’ Who embodies the virtues expected of an academic artist, Modern Review described him as the greatest artist of modern Indian, a nation builders, who showed the moral courage of a gifted ‘high – born’ in taking up the’ degrading profession of painting.

Even Lord Curzon, was impressed by the paintings of Ravi varma. He considered Ravi Varma’s work as a “happy blend of western technique and Indian subject and free from oriental stiffness.” He

recognized Varma as “One who for the first time in the art history of Indian, Commenced a new style of painting.”

Even the prince of wales on his Visit to India in 1875-76 expressed ‘great pleasure in (Varma’s) works, (and) was presented with two of them by the Maharaja of Travancore.

Raja Ravi Verma was considered as a legend in his own time. He is considered one of the world’s most romantic and revolutionary painters of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. He was responsible in giving a new dimension to Indian painting he carved a niche for himself in painting, thus bringing laurels to his work not only in India but also worldwide.

Born on April 29, 1848, in Kilimanoor, a small village in the southern state of Kerala, Ravi Verma belonged to a family of scholars. From his early childhood he was interested in drawing. As a small boy, he filled the walls of his home with pictures of animals, acts and scenes from his daily life, which was noted by his uncle Raja Raja Varma who himself was a painter of Tanjore style. “He drew on walls and sketched incessantly when he should have been memorizing his Sanskrit conjugations. The prodigy was then duly ‘discovered’ by his uncle Raja Raja Varma, an Artist himself. The Child often watched him at work. Once in his uncle’s absence, he even dared to complete the figure of a bird in his uncle’s painting . The older man was so impressed with the work that he predicted his future greatness.”

His uncle Raja Raja was instrumental in bringing him to Thiruvananthapuram where Ayilyam Thirunal accorded him royal patronage. At the age of 14 Ravi Varma started living in Thiruvananthapuram as the protégé of the Ruler. Under the generous patronage of Ayilyam Thirunal, Ravi Verma was exposed to a whole lot of new influences, western and Indian.

Intently Ravi Varma used indigenous paints made from leaver, flowers, tree bark and soil which his uncle Raja Raja Varma prepared for him. But the technique of oil on canvas drew his attention, (the medium was very new and the technique equally elusive in those days.) Only one person in Travancore knew the technique of oil painting and he was Ramaswamy Necker a palace artist. He refused to teach him because he recognized a “potential rival” in Ravi Varma.

Even Theodore Jensen, a portrait painter of Dutch origin who came to the capital with a letter of recommendation from the viceroy and was given commission by the ruler for his portraits, refused to teach Ravi Verma and merely allowed him to see him at work.

Both the painters considered Ravi Verma as a threat. Perhaps one can easily detect a clear trace of Jealousy. Never the less, One of “Naidu’s pupil helped Varma secretly. Ravi Varma was quick to learn on his own and adopt any new technique.

Whatever may be one's appraisal of Ravi Varma's aesthetic contribution, one cannot deny him the credit for the first substantial achievement in the modern context in India, in the new medium of oil painting, and that too without the benefit of systematic training in an academic institution or under a competent instructor.

Ravi Varma was a 'Self-thought' artist. He had none to guide and instruct him in the technique and mysteries of oil painting ..... yet nothing daunted (him).....he worked till he overcame all difficulties.

B. Havell says, "Though not trained in a school of art, all his (Ravi Varma's) methods have been based on the academic rostrums of Anglo-Indian schools, fine Arts societies and art critics" and G. Venkatachalam, discussing the state of Art during the latter half of 19<sup>th</sup> century, says "Painting, as such, there was none worth the name except the mongrelised type imposed by the Government Schools of Art, of which Raja Ravi Varma was the best example.'. Ravi Varma had nothing to do with art schools at any point of time. The Madras Art School was founded in 1853 and the Calcutta School in 1854, and for many years both of them had taught only industrial crafts. When painting, as high art as it was introduced as an additional discipline, during the late 1870's Raja Ravi Varma was already an accomplished painter. And his paintings emerged as the first important signifiers of 'modernity' and 'nationality', the notion of modernity, by then, was fully appropriated

with the agenda of Indian nationalism. Dr Anand Kentish Coomaraswamy's criticism was not based on his originals but on his oleographs. He had not seen the originals "I have not even seen the painter's work, and known it only from coarse prints." According to Nanak Ganguly, the clue to the interpretive process in his work starts from the fact that the portrait, a privileged form of European and therefore colonial Indian art, is mapped over an indigenous albeit popular iconicity. Ravi Varma's references for this came from Tanjore paintings with their more elaborate Mysore antecedents, but these are superseded by what he learns of western manner in the easel format in Trivandrum.

A small Pamphlet, "Ravi Varma, The Hindu artist of India", issued in connection with the Chicago exhibition of 1893, stated "Ravi Varma started painting for amusement , not expecting this to be his life's work. He had no one to instruct him or draw inspiration from when he started".

Raja Ravi Varma had a ability to produce a deceptive invitation of real objects. As Ravi Varma's descendant Indira Verma writes, "when a European woman painter tried to deceive him with a trompe – L' oeil umbrella, the artist invited the lady ..... to dinner, when she arrived, he led her inside. She found many other guests seated on either side of a long table in a large hall. The artist asked her to take her place, but when

she tried to do so, she found that the door, the large room, the table and the guests, all formed part of one large canvas.”

Raja Ravi Varma's Paintings drew inspiration from his uncle Raja Raja, and Tarjor Painters at the court. Secondly even though Ramaswami Naidu refused to train Ravi Varma, he used to watch him working. The court painter's Canvases were on View in the palace. He was a well- respected traditional oil painter. Naturalism had crept into other parts of traditional Kerala, as for instance in the murals of the Padmanabhanswami temple in Trivandrum. This mixed world of Varma's youth provided the ground work of his art.

Another source of Ravi Varma's inspiration was a member of that band of adventuring brush- wielders who descended upon India carrying letters of recommendation from eminent Englishmen, such as Theodore Jenson who was working for the Travancore Maharaja in 1868 Raja Raja Varma probably picked up the technique of academic oil – from him.

The next source of borrowing form Ravi Varma was Sanskrit poetry, particularly dramatic poetry, Kathakali literature of kerala. Ravi Varma's Mother, Uma Amba Bai, was a poetess of sorts in Manipravalam and trained her daughter Mangala Bai as a musician. Mangala Bai, Ravi Varma and C. Raja Varma, all three brothers and sister, illustrated many a well- known Sanskrit text particularly Kalidas.

Raja Ravi Varma was also inspired by Marathi theatre to infuse a dramatic quality into his paintings.

The female figure was much favored by him and heroines of Puranic and classical Indian themes and neo - classical Manipravala Malayalam Literatures, High – class ladies, including from his own community, women from other stratas of society, all come to life with the absolute sureness of touch of his strokes and sweeps. They arrived in a vast Variety of moods and costumes like women engrossed in beautification, playing musical instruments and at temples and trysts or in light banter.

Raja Ravi Varma was one of the greatest portrait painters of his time. He painted the portraits of many British governors and was invited by the rulers of Mysore, Baroda and Udaipur to paint – portraits and mythological scenes. In the course of their career they received commission from the leading princely states, and English and Indian dignitaries. The Duke of Buckingham is said to have remarked that he had once given eighteen sittings to a European painter, who was unable to do half as well as Ravi Varma with so few sittings.

Ravi Varma's talent never went unrecognized. In 1873 he won the first Prize at the Madras Painting Exhibition, Patronized by the then "Governor Lord Hobart." His Painting 'Nair Lady at the Toilet', Won the first prize, the Governor's Gold Medal and later in 1873, for the

same work he secured the most distinguished award at the International exhibition in Vienna. In 1876, his Large figurative composition ‘Shakuntala’s Love Letter’ was exhibited in Madras and was purchased by Lord Buckingham. His painting ‘A Tamil Lady Playing the Sarabat,’ also won the Governor’s Gold Medal in 1894 in Madras Exhibition.

The Maharaja of Travancore, who was so generous in honoring him for the State, gifted this painting (The Nair Lady at the Toilet), along with two other’s – one of a Malayalee lady on a couch under a transparent curtain, another of a fine tusker and its mate in water, to the Prince of Wales (Later king Edward VII), during his royal visit to Madras in 1875. The Prince was all admiration for this display of talent. The year 1876 saw the now-world famous ‘Shakuntala’s Love Letter’ to Dushyantha ‘as Ravi Varma’s’ entry. It was a well-known episode from Kalidasa’s immortal Sanskrit play and set in motion a new vision to Indian art itself, as for the first time ever, the theme came from a totally literary source. This portrait was a masterpiece in every sense of the term, its treatment of the face, figure expression and posture was brilliant, and it was possible, that many would have fallen in love with her, like her royal sire of yore. Lord Buckingham the then governor, announced his desire to purchase the painting, and Sir Monier Williams who translated “Shankuntalam” requested Ravi Varma’s Permission to use it as the frontispiece in the subsequent edition of the book.



In 1893 at World's Columbian Exhibition in Chicago, Ravi Varma represented Indian. He sent his series of painting of Indian women, and for which he received two awards.

Ravi Varma's Paintings won virtually all the accolades that were possible for an Indian painter of his times. Starting out with portraiture and genre painting, he achieved national fame through his explicit project of figuring 'Indianans' through reinterpretations of the epic narratives of the Ramayana and Mahabharat, and the mythological stories of the Purans.

In the year 1894, Ravi Varma started his Lithographic press in Bombay. He was the first artist to make his work available not just to the rich elite but also to common people by way of his oleographs.

Even while catering to a specific class of patrons with his oil paintings, Ravi Varma wanted to make his works accessible to common man. The artist's Biography in Malayalam by Balakrishnan Nair elaborates this point. It records an exchange between Ravi Varma and a Brahmin Scholar at his studio in Kilimanoor, Kerala, The artist had asked a bystander for his opinion of a certain painting and the scholar argued on the pretext of how could the artist expected a commoner express an opinion on a work of art? "True" said Ravi Varma, "these people do not have the means to get the pictures painted, but who known if in the time of their children, these very pictures

now painted for Maharajas and nobles will find their way into museums. I have heard that there are public galleries in western countries”

The idea of printing and distribution oleographs was given to Ravi Varma by T. Madhava Rao Former Dewan of Travancore and later Baroda wrote to him in 1884 “There are many friends who are desirous of possessing your works. It would be hardly possible for you, with only a pair of hands, to meet such a large demand. Sent, therefore, a few of your select to Europe and have them oleographed. You will thereby not only extend your reputation, but will be doing a real service to the Country. According to Krishna Chaitanya “The artist started his own venture, The Ravi Varma Lithographic press, in Bombay in 1894, with a small staff of German technicians.”

In order to influence vast majority Raja Ravi Varma’s choice for representation was religious themes, God picturised in various situations, female figures, puranic heroines. Straying from his usual choices are the three paintings of great patriotic characters, Rana Pratap, Shivaji Maharaj and Bal Gangadhar Tilak. The Last was done at time when political upheavals were boiling and spilling all over nation. According to E.M.J. Venniyoor “Thus ..... Ravi Varma Achieved such fame as was never achieved by any artist in the annals of Indian Art- to this day. In world art too, except for a Picasso of a later date, no artist seems to have Commanded such reputation among his people during his lifetime.

By the end of 19<sup>th</sup> Century Raja Ravi Varma had attained his goal as a national hero. In 1904 The Imperial Government announced the Kaiser-i- Hind medal to be awarded to Ravi Vorma. According to Raja Raja Varma, Raj Ravi Varma brother “The Honour bestowed on my brother come without our seeking. We never spoke to anyone about it, nor have we worked for it..... This is the first time an artist is honored in Indian history. The honours so far were given to officials and rich men who donated liberally to charitable causes. This honor will never fail to progress of art in India..... When I consider that, as the first Indian artist of worldwide reputation, the Government have recognized his love and devoting for art, I have reason for great happiness being his inseparable companion, Colleagues and Helper .....

Ravi Vorma died on 2<sup>nd</sup> October, 1906. The news of his death was in the evening edition of the times of India which wrote “with Ravi Varma ended the optimistic phase of Colonial art in India”

Ravi Varma’s Contribution has been for – reaching. He awakened a national feeling or consciousness through his chosen medium, projected India into rarified realms of high class art, and for the first time elevated the Indian artist to a position of dignity. He made the outside world more acutely aware of the infinite variety and incredible charm that this ancient land has to offer, an Indianism which survived extended alien influences, The most profound service he rendered, was to invest the Hindu pantheon of gods and goddesses with face, figure

and forms and to enable them to find places in the hearts and homes of the poor and rich.

The picture-prints of Saraswati, Lakshmi, Krishna, Carnation of Shree Ram, which adorn the prayer rooms, shops and commercial establishments all over India, own their origion to Ravi Varma and mass produced colour prints to his press. With the specific aim to making them affordable for the commoner's purse.



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