

# The Art of Raja Ravi Varma

## Viswamitra and Menaka an episode from the Hindu epic, the Ramayana.

Viswamitra, though born a *Kshatriya* (warrior), sought acceptance by the *Brahmins* (priest caste), through intense penance. Alarmed at this, the gods sent the lovely nymph Menaka to seduce him.

Ten years passed, before Viswamitra realized his mistake. Ashamed at his passion, he gently sent her away and resumed his penance with greater severity and success.

Viswamitra is known as one of the seven great sages in Hindu mythology.

Specially reproduced by Air-India, from the original painting at Maharaja Fatesingh Museum Baroda.

## Victory of Indrajit an episode from the Hindu epic, the Ramayana.

When Ravana attacked Swarga, the heaven of Lord Indra, his son, Megha-nada accompanied him. Megha-nada fought so valiantly that Indra himself was forced to intervene.

Megha-nada, by using a magical charm, made himself invisible and took Indra as prisoner to Lanka.

Lord Brahma, sought the release of Indra by conferring on Megha-nada the title of 'Indrajit', conqueror of Indra; but Megha-nada insisted on the boon of immortality in exchange for his prisoner.

In the painting, Megha-nada presents his spoils from Swarga to Ravana. Amongst them are celestial nymphs.

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## Sri Krishna as an Envoy an episode from the Hindu epic, the Mahabharata.

Sri Krishna, disguised as 'Govinda' goes to the Kaurava court as the Pandava ambassador, to settle peacefully the rival claims to the Indraprastha throne.

Despite the gentle advice of the elderly, blind king, Dhritarashtra, Duryodhana, the haughty Kaurava prince, remains adamant. The prince attempts to seize 'Govinda' as hostage. Sri Krishna anticipates this, and with silent contempt reveals his divinity.

Dhritarashtra regains his sight to see the *visvarupa* form of Krishna. Having seen this vision, the noble king asks for his blindness to be restored, as he does not wish to see anything more.

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## Sri Rama Vanquishing The Ocean an episode from the Hindu epic, the Ramayana.

Rama prays to Varuna, Lord of the Ocean, that the sea be made shallow and calm, to assist him in his conquest of the island of Lanka.

Varuna is unresponsive. Furious, Rama threatens to vanquish the sea with his weapon—the *Agneyastra*. Varuna emerges, accompanied by the Rivers Ganga and Sindhu. He explains that the Laws of Nature were created so that the elements follow their own course.

Accepting his explanation, Rama withdraws the *Agneyastra*, and builds a bridge across the ocean.

This incident reflects the Laws of *Karma*, the basis of Hindu philosophy.

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## Arjuna and Subhadra an episode from the Hindu epic, the Mahabharata.

Arjuna, the Pandava prince, hears of the great beauty of Subhadra, the sister of King Balarama and Lord Krishna. It had been decided by Balarama that Subhadra be offered in marriage to Duryodhana, the Kaurava prince. Undaunted, Arjuna resolves to win her love.

Disguised as a *sanyasi* (hermit), Arjuna goes to the kingdom of Balarama.

The king invites him to the palace, where he is seen by Subhadra. She is immediately attracted by the handsome *sanyasi*.

They meet in secret, to pledge their love.

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## Lady Musicians

The painting portrays women from different regions of India, dressed in communal attire.

A variety of Indian instruments are also depicted. These are, from left to right, the *veena*, the violin, the *sitar* and the *sarangi*.

In the foreground on the right is a *ghazal* singer, who renders Urdu verses into song.

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## RAJA RAVI VARMA

Raja Ravi Varma was born in 1848, in a princely family in Kilimanoor, near Trivandrum, in Kerala. Like his uncle, Raja Raja Varma, he was interested in painting and his contact with the British painter Theodore Jenson appears to have influenced his style.

In 1873, he participated in an Exhibition in Madras and won the first prize. This established his future and the Duke of Buckingham, the then Governor of Madras, commissioned him for several works.

In 1875, when the Prince of Wales visited Trivandrum, the Maharajah presented him with paintings done by the artist.

In 1892, he participated in exhibitions in Vienna and Chicago. Ravi Varma was the first Indian painter to exhibit his work overseas.

Ravi Varma is considered the pioneer in the development of the western style of Indian painting, by his use of canvas and oils and by the introduction of perspective and natural form in contrast with the very highly stylised techniques of traditional Indian painters.

The importance of his work lies in its correlation of Indian mythological art and the Western concept of art. His subjects were taken from Hindu religious texts and mythology. His paintings depicted Hindu gods and goddesses, legendary kings and queens, and were instantly popular with a large section of society.

In view of the tremendous demand for his work, and on the suggestion of the Maharajah of Baroda, he established the first oleographic printing press near Bombay.

Ravi Varma was patronized by the Indian Royalty and was given a substantial number of commissions for paintings by the Maharajahs of Baroda, Mysore and Trivandrum. His best works can be seen at the Laxmi Vilas Palace, Baroda and at the Sri Jayachamarajendra Art Gallery, Mysore City. His paintings are also on display in art galleries in Delhi, Udaipur, Hyderabad and Trivandrum.

Ravi Varma died in 1906, but he left behind a legacy of paintings which form an important landmark in the history of Indian painting.

Colour transparencies by Umakant Shirodkar

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