

Raja Ravi Varma Narrative Painting

(Based on most Famous Paintings Shakuntala Patra Lekhan)

Name: Shilpa J. Chavadekar

Affiliation: MIT School Of Fine Arts and Applied Arts, MIT ADT University, Pune, India Email ID:

shilpa.chavadekar@gmail.com

Guide: Prof. Dr. Anjali Bhamare

Asst. Professor, MIT School Of Fine Arts and Applied Arts, MIT ADT University, Pune, India

Abstract: The paper focuses on the narrative of Shakuntala and Dushyanta as portrayed in Raja Ravi Varma's paintings, using symbolic elements. These symbols and visual cues, which reference the characters' emotions, environment, and significant events in their relationship, enrich the viewers' understanding and appreciation of the story, fostering a sense of connection and empathy.

Keywords: Indian mythology, Kalidas Literature, Raja Ravi Varma's painting Techniques, Realism, Composition, Influence by European artwork, and its impact on Indian art.

INTRODUCTION

As an artist, I am endlessly fascinated by the beauty and complexity of Indian mythology. These intricate tales, from ancient gods and goddesses to mythical creatures and heroic feats, have captivated readers and listeners for centuries. They have played a crucial role in shaping our understanding of the world and our place in it. In addition to their literary and artistic value, myths and rituals offer a window into different societies' cultural and spiritual traditions, providing us with a deeper appreciation for the diversity and complexity of human experience. The art of writing texts on mythology was typical throughout the subcontinent and produced rich literature written in Sanskrit. Among

the many outstanding works, one of the most prominent is *Abhijnanashakuntalam*, authored by the great Sanskrit maestro Kalidas. The renowned artist Raja Ravi Varma, the "Father of Modern Indian Art," is credited with popularizing these stories among the common people through his paintings and prints. His work not only attracted a vast number of people towards Hindu culture and tradition but also helped preserve its values, leaving a lasting impact on Indian art and culture that we continue to feel today. This paper aims to delve into the contributions of the great artist Raja Ravi Varma, the painter of the Shakuntala series. In this paper, I will explore how artists perceived the character of Shakuntala, their portrayal of "beauty," and how their works were received, appreciated, and shared as sources of inspiration.

Shakuntala (Abhijnanashakuntala), a Sanskrit drama by *Kalidasa*, has been a remarkable piece of world literature since the 4th century CE (Literary cultures in history,79). It has captured the attention of literary enthusiasts worldwide and is known for its descriptive and vivid portrayal of Indian culture, mythology, and love. Sir William Jones' English translation in 1789 made it accessible to a broader audience, and it has been admired and celebrated by prominent literary figures such as Johann Wolfgang

von Goethe, Friedrich and August Wilhelm Schlegel ever since. Shakuntala is a timeless masterpiece that continues to inspire and captivate readers centuries after its creation. (Culp,3)

Ravi Varma was familiar with the highly elaborate and voluptuous mural paintings in the palaces of *Padmanabhapuram* and *Mattancheri*. He was influenced by the iconic, full-bodied images of the Tanjore paintings he was inducted into and the more kitsch, coy and witty versions on glass. He incorporated the epic grandeur, concrete descriptions, hermaphrodite grossness and cunning of kathakali impersonations into his repertoire of images while loving Parsi theatre.

Ravi Varma was steeped in the high literary sensibility of his region, with epics like *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, as well as *Kalidasa* and neoclassical Sanskrit poetry, being translated, adapted and elaborated in Malayalam. For instance, his relative Kerala Varma's translation of *Abhijnana-sakuntalam* influenced Ravi Varma's 1876 portrayal of the tragic nayika. Ravi Varma's choice of *nayikas* and legendary couples can be seen in literal descriptions of the erotic in contemporary Malayalam poetry. (Kapur,168)

Ravi Varma (1848–1906) advocated for Indian artists' transition to the modern world early. He was also considered a survivor at the turn of the century. Born in Kilimanoor village, he came from a feudal family with a small fiefdom and connections to the royal house of Travancore. Ravi Varma grew up in a household with an exceptional culture. From a young age, he was dedicated to scriptural learning and loved classical literature and epics. Growing up during the Indian Renaissance, which was both traditionalist and modern, Ravi Varma saw himself as equal to enlightened princes and educated elites working towards a national purpose. Due to his natural boldness of imagination, he became a progressive. Ravi Varma became the most renowned professional painter of his time, seeing himself as an autodidact and a gentleman artist in the Victorian model. Paradoxically, he was also a nationalist with a desire to create a pan-Indian vision for his people. (Kapur,151) gods, goddesses, and ancient epic heroes into the realm of reality.

Ravi Varma had a remarkable career marked by several achievements. He was awarded the governor's gold medal at the Madras exhibition and a certificate of merit at an international exhibition in Vienna. His exceptional talent was recognised by the royalty of his time and his paintings were highly acclaimed by the educated elite of

India, including Orientalists and nationalists. His maternal uncle, Raja Raja Varma, introduced his talent to the world, and Ayilyam Thirumal Rama Varma later became his patron. Ravi Varma received training in watercolour painting from *Rama Swami Naidu* and oil painting from the Dutch portraitist Theodor Jenson. He believed that the combination of three powers—spirituality, Aesthetic Creativity, and Intelligence—resulted in his highly intuitive style of realism, which brought Ravi Varma believed in nothing less than actualisation; he aimed for a perfect mix of various artistic styles to achieve this. He looked to Edward Burne-Jones for the purity of line, Joshua Reynolds for charm, Lawrence Alma-Tadema for exquisite detail, Lord Frederic Leighton for beauty, and Rubens for the richness of hues. (Peramana, pg9)

Raja Ravi Varma was a gifted artist who achieved remarkable success during his lifetime, a rare feat for most artists who usually receive posthumous recognition. When his paintings became highly sought after, Dewan Sir *Thanjavur Madhava Rao* suggested that Ravi Varma send some of his work to Europe to be oleographed. This led to the

establishment of the Ravi Varma Fine Art Lithographic Press with the help of Fritz Schleicher, a German industrialist. The first chromolithograph, 'Birth of Shakuntala', was launched in July 1894, which brought a new dimension to Ravi Varma's art. His printed copies of Gods and Goddesses became widely available, allowing people of all castes and creeds to worship their gods in their homes - a freedom previously unknown to the lower castes. The Lakshmi and Saraswati chromolithographs overcame religious restrictions and found their way into every Hindu home, democratising access to uniform religious imagery across all classes and castes. (Peramana, pg17)

Ravi Varma's breakthrough came with his painting "Shakuntala Patralekhan" at the

Madras exhibition, which won him another gold medal and established him as a master of the mythological genre. His portrait of the Duke of Buckingham was highly praised, and his patron declared that he had surpassed even European portraitists.

In 1881, Ravi Varma received an invitation from *Maharaja Sayaji Rao III* to the investiture ceremony of Baroda state. This proved a turning point in Ravi Varma's career, as he received recurring patronage from the Maharaja and created fourteen pictures depicting puranic themes. Other states, including Mysore and Travancore, followed Baroda's lead and commissioned Ravi Varma to create mythological works in the coming decades. Ravi Varma's legacy as a master painter of the mythological genre endures today. His contributions to Indian art have been immeasurable, inspiring generations of artists. (Kapur, pg155)

A Story of Shakuntala and Dushyanta Written by Kalidasa, *Abhijñānaśakuntala* (Part of Mahabharata)

Kalidas is a renowned Sanskrit author from the 4th to 5th century CE. However, his exact birth and death dates are unknown. He is widely considered

the Father of Indian Literature and the greatest playwright of ancient India. His plays mainly revolve around themes from the Vedas, The Purana, the Ramayana, and the Mahabharata.

"Kalidas was a renowned Classical Sanskrit writer, widely regarded as the greatest poet and dramatist

in the Sanskrit language. His place in Sanskrit literature is akin to that of Shakespeare in English. His plays and poetry are primarily based on Hindu mythology and philosophy" (Mehta 1).

He is one of the most celebrated writers of the Gupta age and has rightly been called the "Shakespeare of India." It is well-known that writers have always found their muse in nature and attempted to capture its essence in their works. In this regard, *Abhijñānaśakuntala* is an exemplary piece of literature that brilliantly captures the beauty of nature. The text can be seen as an ode to nature in all its glory. (Culp, 47)

Kalidasa's literary works narrate a tale of love, separation, and eventual reunion, all viewed through the lens of nature. His writing can be regarded as a paradigm for global literature to

shift from a human-centric system to a nature-centric one. Moreover, Kalidasa can be deemed a romantic poet who deeply appreciates the natural landscape's beauty and biological diversity. (Francis Alapatt, 633)

The story of Shakuntala is a fascinating tale of love, courage, and resilience. It tells the story of how a newborn baby girl, abandoned by her heavenly mother, was taken in and raised by the kind sage Kanwa. Over the years, she grew up to become a beautiful and responsible maiden who cared for the animals around her.

One day, the king of Hastinapur, Dushyanta, visited the hermitage of Sage Kanwa and was received by Shakuntala in the absence of the sage. Dushyanta was struck by her beauty and grace and asked her to marry him. Shakuntala, however, asked him to wait for her father's return, as he would be the one to bless their marriage. Dushyanta suggested a *Gandharva Vivaha*, which Shakuntala agreed upon on the condition that their son would be declared Dushyanta's heir-apparent. The couple got married, and Dushyanta left her with a promise to send his troops to escort her to the capital as his wife and queen.

Shakuntala's story highlights the importance of respect, love and resilience. After Dushyant rejected Shakuntala, she treated him respectfully and overcame her anger to stand firm and assert her rights. Her story inspires us to be strong and resilient in adversity and always stand up for our beliefs. Shakuntala is always referred to as a delicate jasmine flower spreading its fragrance around and is mainly seen tending the plants and

feeding the animals in the forest. (Francis Alapatt, 633, 634)

Ravi Verma's painting, which was exhibited in Madras in 1876, was a remarkable masterpiece that transformed how mythology was perceived. The painting's popularity was instrumental in paving the way for numerous similar mythological paintings throughout Verma's career.

The painting portrays Shakuntala thoughtfully writing a letter to Dushyanta on a leaf while sitting with her friend in a picturesque yet simple background. Verma's expert selection of colours, careful background management, and portrayal of characters set a new standard for future artists. Verma's study of women's lives and his ability to portray them in romantic and refined gestures without any unnecessary additions found in Kalidas' text is

praiseworthy.

This painting is an excellent example of how art can break new ground and inspire future artists to create unique masterpieces. It is a testament to Verma's skill and vision. (Adhikari 1, Saha 2, 50)

The Relation Between Anusuya and Priyamvada

Anasuya and Priyamvada are Shakuntala's closest friends, and they have a strong sisterly bond with her. Priyamvada is a vibrant and enthusiastic person, while Anasuya is more solemn. They quickly realise that Shakuntala is hopelessly in love and are fully aware of her lovesick state of mind. In the tale, they confidently compare Shakuntala's condition to that of people who are struck by love, as often seen in stories. They propose that Shakuntala write a love letter to the King and hide it in flowers, which can be delivered directly into his hands under the pretext of flowers. This will undoubtedly help her to nurture and strengthen her relationship with the King. (Mehta, 93)

Kalidasa's depiction of the connection between nature and woman

Kalidasa, the celebrated Sanskrit poet, demonstrates his accurate knowledge and deep empathy towards nature. He symbolically portrays nature as the central focus of most of his poetic works, and his heroine is depicted as an innocent creature, akin to a deer, who falls in love with an accomplished man. Although some critics have interpreted Kalidasa's portrayal of Shakuntala as nature being submissive to men's desires, one can also interpret it as a harmonious relationship

between humans and nature. Kalidasa's use of the mango blossom as a symbol is particularly noteworthy, as it represents both nature and the completeness of womanhood in motherhood and the continuity of human existence. Overall,

Kalidasa's work is a testament to nature's beauty and significance. We all can see this

Shakuntala Composing a Love Letter to King Dushyanta

The paintings showcased Indian themes and reflected the growing familiarity of the middle class with Indian art. It is worth noting that the wealthy and educated were already well-versed in India's rich history and were familiar with the allegorical paintings from European Academy artists shared in the country through prints and

magazines. Ravi Varma's works were exceptional because they portrayed realism, romantic values, and dramatisation of characters, making them the best representation of Indian art. Ravi Varma's paintings idealised the feminine figure and later explored human figures and mythological themes. Ravi Varma also championed the sari as a formal dress for women in India, which is widely accepted in Indian culture.

depiction in Raja Ravi Varma's painting.

This painting of women wearing sarees is a testament to the beauty and grace of Indian culture. Through his art, he conveyed the dignity and nobility of women, who are depicted as singular characters worthy of respect and admiration. Varma's paintings of women in sarees are not only aesthetically pleasing but also serve as a symbol of India's rich cultural heritage. These paintings have inspired generations of Indians to embrace and celebrate their cultural identity with pride. (Peramana, pg.30)

The artwork depicts Shakuntala lost in thought about Dushyant, with her two friends from the ashram by her side. It is a beautiful portrayal with light and shade, effectively highlighting Shakuntala's focus on Dushyant. The presence of the deer adds a nice touch to the painting. The artist has used a style that blends European and Mughal Rajput schools of painting to create a dramatic atmosphere that enhances the painting's overall

beauty. The painting captures the emotion of separation, known as "viraha rasa", making it a unique and touching piece of art. The use of natural colours in the painting complements the subject matter. The influence of European style is evident in the saree folds, which are painted in a style similar to that of the Roman and Greek styles.

The woman's blouse in the painting also has a Greek style, which indicates Ravi Varma's influence from European academic realist painters like Thomas Lawrence and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. The painting also shows the impact of miniature painting. The Western influence is also apparent in depicting the deer, which does not seem Indian. The flowers in the painting are European roses, and the baskets present in the painting were not typical of India at that time.

Despite this, the painting remains aesthetically pleasing. The painting depicts an ashram in the distance, a nearby river, and a triangular hut in the background. The hut's style differs from traditional Indian architecture, showing the Western influence prevalent in India then. The landscape is painted in the Dutch and Flemish styles, highlighting the Western influence in Indian art during that period. His portrayal of female figures characterised Ravi Varma's painting style. He drew inspiration from aristocratic women who posed for him in the studio and the Victorian and French women depicted in neo-classical paintings. The women in his paintings were defined by their class and status, evident in their clothing, homes, demeanour, and leisurely lifestyles. His idealised female figures became prototypes for the ideal national woman,

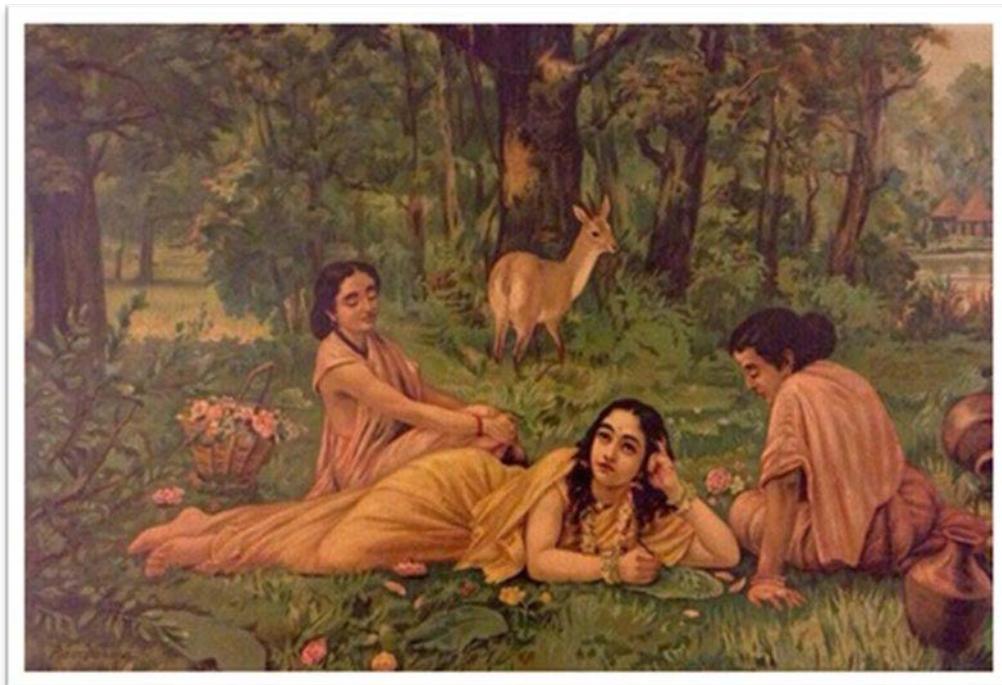


Figure 1, *Shakuntala Patralekhan*

representing a pan-Indian type. Ravi Varma's fascination with Shakuntala resulted in many memorable creations, including the painting with Priyamvada and Shakuntala.

Shakuntala Patralekhan with Priyamvada

Let us look at this beautiful painting that depicts Shakuntala and her friend Priyamvada writing a letter to Dushyanta by the river in the evening. The picture's use of light and shade is simply stunning, and the female figures are depicted beautifully in Greek style yet in Indian dress. The letter is wonderfully portrayed as a symbol of communication. Shakuntala looks radiant with fair skin and long curly hair, and both women are adorned with garlands. Priyamvada holds a lotus

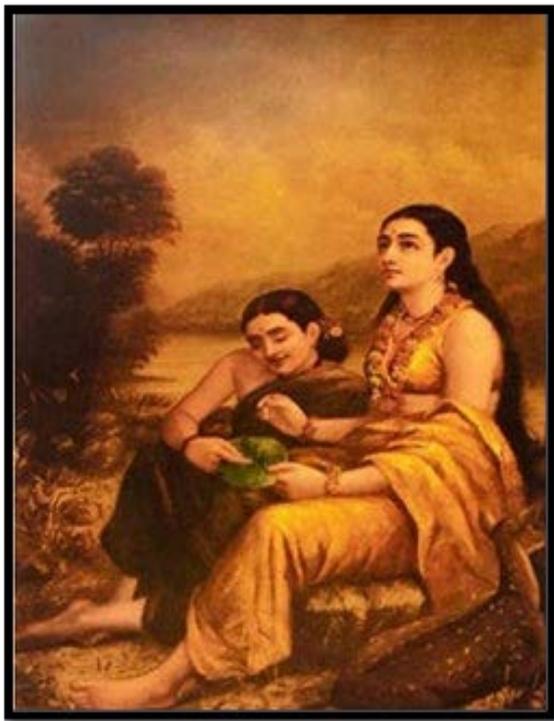


Figure 2, Shakuntala Patralekhan with Priyamvada

leaf in one hand; in this painting, Shakuntala is depicted with

a smile, appearing deep in thought as if eagerly anticipating meeting Dushyanta. Both the characters are dressed in clothing that reflects their importance. Shakuntala wears bright and extravagant clothes in a sleeveless style reminiscent of Greco-Roman culture, while Priyamvada's dress is painted in dark, dull colours. Ravi Varma's skilful use of perspective creates depth and the impression of going away, which is truly remarkable. Overall, this painting is a true masterpiece with much attention to detail, and it is a pleasure to appreciate its beauty



Figure 3, Influencer Realist Painter: Sir Joshua Reynolds {This is Sir Joshua Reynolds painting his influence on Raja Ravi Varma}

Shakuntala With her friends Priyamvada and Anusaya:

This painting depicts Shakuntala with her two bestfriends, Anasuya and Priyamvada, who are of the same age and share the same mannerisms. Shakuntala's life revolves around her companions, who play the most significant role. Priyamvada is portrayed as lively and youthful, while Anasuya appears serious. "The morning scene's scenic environment enhances the painting's charm."

The artist skillfully painted the three women in different styles. Shakuntala stands tall and fair, wearing a garland of jasmine flowers and a light saffron-coloured saree. Her friends, Anusaya and Priyamvada, are in cream and pink sarees, respectively, reflecting Indian Greco-Roman style.

Although the painting shows Anusaya and Priyamvada as shadowy figures engaged in conversation, their presence adds depth to the overall scene. Shakuntala's allure and beauty are depicted like that of a nymph, making her stand out among the three.

Interestingly, Shakuntala's figure seems disproportionate, possibly indicating her importance over her friends. Nonetheless, the painting is a beautiful representation of friendship

and anticipation, and the artist has done a great job capturing the moment's essence. These paintings also reflect the centrality of the "male gaze" in defining the feminine image.

Though absent from the pictorial

frame, the male lover forms a pivotal point of reference. His gaze is transfixed in the painting, and he mentions two characters - Shakuntala and Damayanti. Objects of nature, such as buck, wild elephants, chakravaka birds, cuckoos, bees, kusa grass, dharba grass, jasmine creeper, mimosa plants, mango trees, and *Ashoka* trees, are used in the play as symbols of human emotions. (Francis Alapatt, pg.633,636)

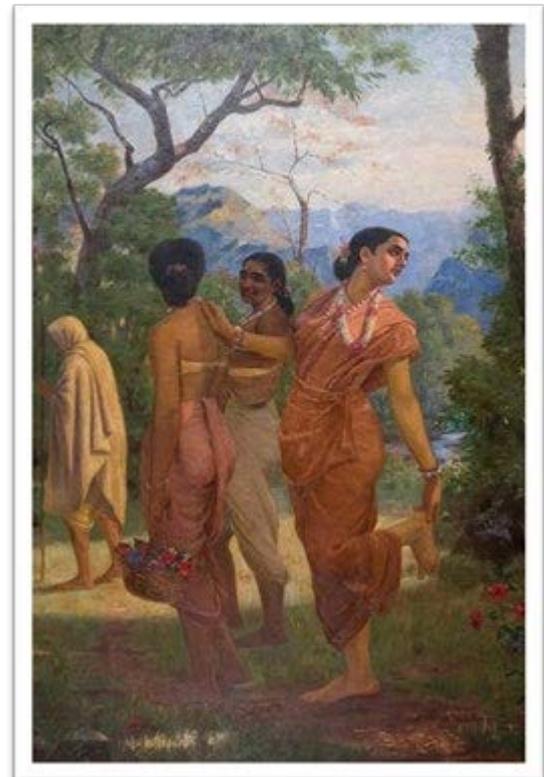


Figure 4, *Shakuntala with her friends Priyamvada and Anusaya*

The artist connects these objects with human beings to show the unity of nature and humans. The artist takes the observer on a journey through the

Appreciation of Raja Ravi Varma's Painting

Ravi Varma was an artist with a unique way of representing history as present melodrama through his pictorial language. His familiarity with the performing arts, especially the Parsi theatre movement, is reflected in his work. For instance, in his painting of Nala-Damayanti, the couple stands in front of a painted forest curtain, a recognisable feature of Parsi theatre. As an artist, he changed India's vision of gods and goddesses from supernatural imagery to human style, with an attention to minute details, from fabrics, hairstyles and jewellery to artefacts and furniture. His style used texture and shade lights. shadows to help evoke the mood. (Sunder)

Ravi Varma was an artist who had a great fondness for painting women in traditional attire. His paintings depict women reclining on a bed or lost in thought. His speciality was realism, and he was meticulous in recreating the costumes and jewellery of that era. The pearls, diamonds, and temple jewellery in his paintings were all depicted

Elements of the forest, where they can feel the sounds of birds, animals, and streams and find abundant life and remedies for everything

with great accuracy. Throughout his career, Ravi Varma drew inspiration from Hindu mythology, which he grew up with. Unlike previous artists, he confidently blended European and Indian elements to create his style of naturalism. British and Indian people widely admired him for his portraits and religious works. His portrait-based compositions synthesised the early Tanjore tradition and the delicate realism of Dutch masters like Vermeer. When live models were unavailable, he used photography, contributing to his figures' distinct stamp of life study and photorealism. He used Western colour, composition, and perspective techniques for all his subjects, whether physical or mythological. "He always strived for actualisation, aiming for nothing less than perfection. He believed that the ultimate blend of artistic elements would include the pure lines of Edward Burne Jones, the charm of Joshua Reynolds, the intricate details of Lawrence Alma-Tadema, the beauty of Lord Frederic Leighton, and the richness of Rubens' hues (Sreekumar 17)

Criticisms of Raja Ravi Varma's Painting

Ravi Verma, a renowned painter, has faced criticism for some issues in his artworks. One of the main criticisms is that his paintings' models never look fully Indian and are always depicted with light skin tones. Critics argue that Indian characters should have dark brown or soft brown skin, especially those from Kerala.

Another source of criticism has been that Ravi Varma sometimes seems to have depicted Greek or Roman women as Hindu deities dressed in Indian clothes. This is because of the style of clothing and painting method used in his paintings, which shows European influence. The way the models sit or

stand in his work also seems borrowed from European models. Some of these controversial elements are found in his work. Art historian Ratan Parimoo, in his research paper, argues that Ravi Varma was responsible for the "vulgarity" of popular art. (Parimoo)

Some people believed that Ravi Varma wanted to provide an alternative to the cheap and low-quality religious pictures available in the market and improve people's taste. He started releasing prints of his paintings, which became popular among the masses and transformed the religious picture market. Although it is uncertain whether this was his explicit motive, he significantly impacted the art world. (Adhikari, Saha, 52)

Observations

In these paintings, the rhythmic composition method is used. We see the central character, Shakuntala, staring at the sky, deep in thought. Our eyes wander towards her friends, who are looking at her, which redirects us to the central character.

Further, we see the deer looking at the group, redirecting our attention to the centre again. One rule of recognising a good painting is that the viewer's eye should wander into it. As shown in the image above, Ravi Varma seems to have achieved that if we first look at the composition.

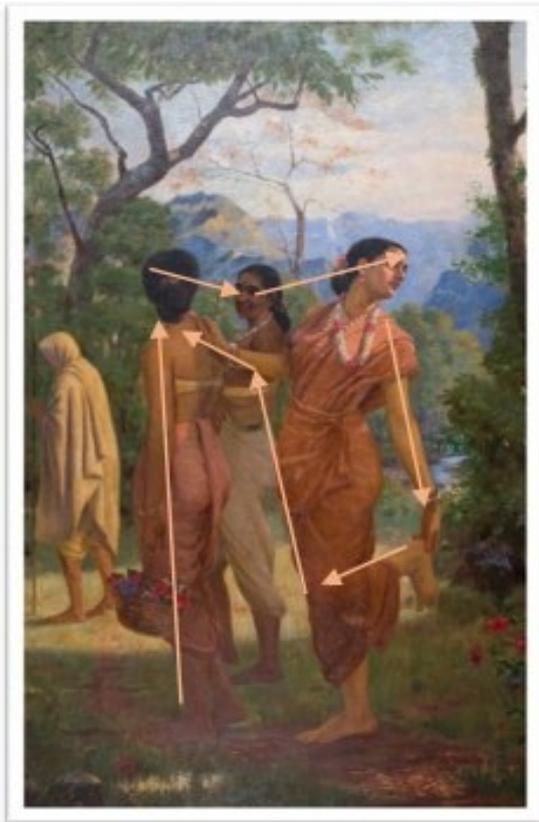


Figure 5, Shakuntala with her friends Priyamvada and Anusaya

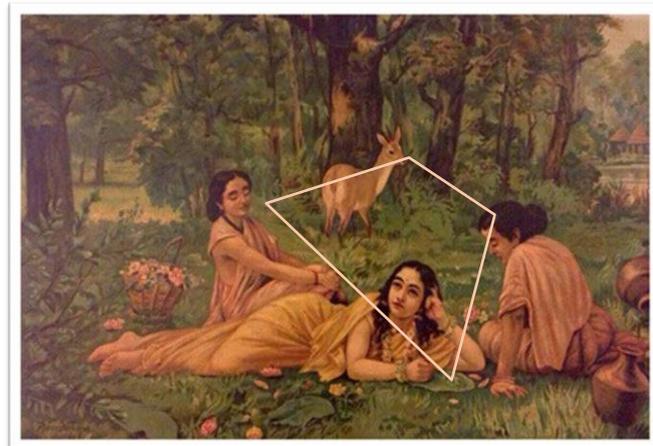


Figure 6, Shakuntala with her friends Priyamvada and Anusaya

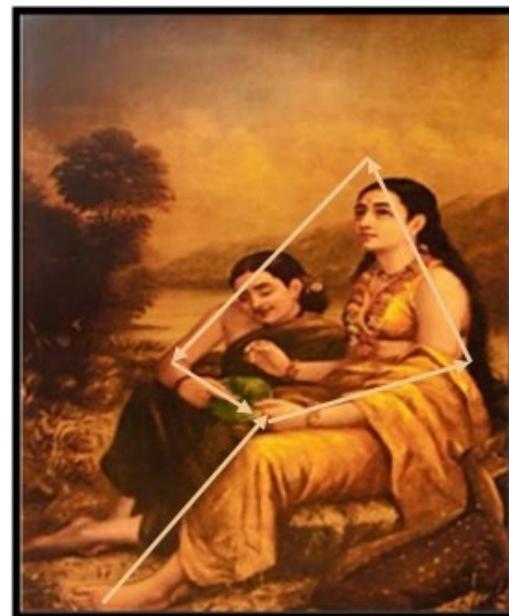


Figure 7, Shakuntala with her friend Priyamvada

Conclusion

Ravi Varma is a tremendously talented artist who has achieved unparalleled success in his field through hard work and dedication. He possesses aristocratic confidence, charm and ambition, which set him apart from his contemporaries. He remains devoted to his craft, utilising oil paint to create highly realistic depictions of various substances and atmospheric sensations. As an artist of his era, he recognised the importance of using oil paint, which has exceptional plasticity. His hard work, deep appreciation for his craft, and mastery of his medium have made him one of the most successful artists of his time (Geeta Kapur, pg-155). Ravi Varma was a visionary artist who used Western painting styles but emphasised Indian subjects. He was the first painter to depict Indian gods and goddesses.

“He took Indian Mythology and history and gave them flesh and blood, clothes, jewellery and architecture.” Kishor Sing (Sunder)

Ravi Varma significantly contributed to Indian painting, introducing many innovative elements exclusive to visual imagery. He recognised that the new knowledge of Europe had revolutionised Indian literature and philosophy, and he

endeavoured to achieve a similar feat in Indian painting. One of his most significant contributions was the use of perspective, which he studied according to the new science. He introduced European drawing, construction, and composition techniques to Indian painting, bringing a new oil painting medium to the country.

Ravi Varma's goal was not to create European-style paintings but to create a new way of seeing that was unique to India. He used his European equipment to modify his vision to suit his surroundings, resulting in an innovative painting approach. He introduced large, bright areas of colour in his portraits and landscapes, and he adapted oil to the Indian light. He was always striving to use the latest tools to see his surroundings from a different point of view, similar to the way Rajendra Lal Mitra or Bankimchandra Chatterjee tried to do in philosophy. He may have tried to do what Amrita Sher-Gil attempted in reverse, i.e., introducing an Indian aesthetic to European painting. (Kapur.pg152)

Kalidasa's literature reflects his deep love for nature, as evident in Raja Ravi Varma's paintings. He skillfully crafted a naturalist environment, portraying the intricate relationship between nature

and humans through symbolic elements such as the mango blossom, symbolising fruitful love and womanhood. Shakuntala's innocence is portrayed powerfully, akin to that of a deer. Ultimately, Raja Ravi Varma was an innovative artist who brought a revolution in Indian art by departing from conventional painting practices. Despite facing discrimination in the royalist circle in Kerala, he boldly stood for popular themes and portrayed everyday people. He used his

extraordinary skills to depict mythological themes with great mastery. His exceptional works earned him recognition and accolades in Vienna and Chicago, cementing his position as a pioneer of modernism in Indian art history. Along with Amrita Sher-Gil, Raja Ravi Varma has earned his place in Indian art history as one of the most significant artists of his era.

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