



Google Arts & Culture

The Life and Art of Raja Ravi Varma

in association with  sixredmarbles

Sita Bhumi Pravesha, Raja Ravi Varma, 1880, The Ganesh Shivaswamy Foundation

How to Make the Most of This Lesson

This lesson serves as a **road map** for your journey through a rich and exciting collection of online content made available by **Google Arts & Culture's partners**. You will explore photographs, slideshows, musical recordings, videos, and more. The images in this lesson are just a sample of what's available to you via the **Google Arts & Culture** website.

You can complete this lesson independently or with fellow students, a teacher, or another adult. The content is accessible to a wide range of ages, but it's especially geared toward students ages 12 to 15.

Your journey in this lesson will take you through three major topics:

Chapter 1: Blending Styles and Influences

Chapter 2: A World of Color and Sound

Chapter 3: Varma's Impact on India

You'll see some helpful signs along the way:



Estimated time for completing the chapter



Audio recording or video



Link to more online content



Learning activity

Tools for Learning

Below are tools for learning that you may need for Digital Discovery lessons:



A device that connects to the internet (a computer or tablet)



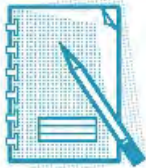
A tool for writing your responses and big ideas (pen, pencil, computer, etc.)



Art supplies (markers, crayons, paint)



Scissors



A notebook



Scrap paper

Explore! Google Arts & Culture pictures are **big**. If you want to explore a picture in greater detail, click on the magnifying glass symbol and zoom in with the zoom slider. By dragging the white box around, you can see even **tiny** details.

Welcome to *The Life and Art of Raja Ravi Varma*

In this lesson, you'll learn about famed Indian painter Raja Ravi Varma (1848–1906), who transformed Indian art by incorporating new styles and by making art available to everyday citizens. After learning about Varma in this lesson, you will use props and a camera to re-create a setting that might appear in a Varma painting.

What Will You Do?

1. Learn about a revered Indian painter born in 1848 who brought dramatic changes to the Indian art world.
2. View some of Varma's portraits and understand how he became famous as a portrait painter.
3. Understand the role Indian traditional stories played in many of Varma's artworks.
4. See how Varma's artwork became part of Indian popular culture.



What's in this lesson?

1. Find out about Raja Ravi Varma's early life.
2. Learn how Varma was trained as an artist.
3. Understand why it was unusual for Varma to become a professional artist.
4. Take a look at Varma's portraiture.
5. View paintings that reflect Indian religious and cultural traditions.

By participating in this lesson, you will be able to:

1. Explain why Varma is so revered today.
2. See how Varma's work became popular throughout India.
3. View the use of art in ways that were revolutionary for Varma's time.

Vocabulary

aristocratic, patron, realist, medium, perspective, draftsman, commission, lithograph, *Puranas*, democratization

Need help with some of these terms? See the glossary at the end of this lesson.



The Kizakke Palat Krishna Menon Family, Raja Ravi Varma, 1870, The Ganesh Shivaswamy Foundation

Chapter 1:

Blending Styles and Influences



What is this chapter about?
Varma's early life and training



How long will this chapter take?
1 hour

This portrait of an Indian subjudge's family launched Varma's professional career as a painter.

Chapter 1: Warming Up

Before you explore, answer the questions below in your notebook.

Consider

1. What do you know about the use of perspective in painting and drawing? If you're unfamiliar with the definition of *perspective*, look it up in the glossary at the end of the lesson.

– How might the use of perspective affect a painting?



Discover

2. What's the difference between realism and stylistic painting? Use the glossary to find definitions of these terms. Then, write a couple of sentences reflecting on how two works of art in these styles might differ.

An Aristocratic Upbringing

In April 1848, Ravi Varma Koil Thampuran was born into an **aristocratic** family in Kilimanoor Palace in rural Kilimanoor, a village in the state formerly known as Travancore, in South India. His elders called him Ravi Varma.

Varma grew up in the world of the palace arts—the royal family served as **patrons** for many artists. Varma's uncle, Bharani Nal Raja Raja Varma (1812–1883), was a talented royal artist. He saw that his nephew was good at drawing and added art to Varma's formal palace education.

India has a long artistic tradition. Historically, Indian painting to this point had been primarily the **stylized** form common to the highly complex Indian miniatures, which date at least as far back as the 800s CE.



Read more about Varma's early life in this [exhibit](#).

Find out more about Indian miniatures [here](#).

Raja Ravi Varma painted this portrait of his uncle, his first artistic mentor and tutor.



Bharani Nal Raja Raja Varma, Raja Ravi Varma, The Ganesh Shivaswamy Foundation



Early Years

Raja Raja Varma only painted as a hobby. But he trained his nephew to become a master **draftsman**, teaching him everything he knew. At 13, Ravi Varma was invited to live in the court palace and study the artists at work there.

Varma often wandered the palace, closely studying the art. He especially admired the European **realist** style of painting. He wanted to experiment with realism and to use oil paint as a **medium**. The European technique of **perspective** intrigued Varma, and he wanted to master it.

Varma approached court artist Ramaswamy Naidoo, asking if he'd provide instruction. Naidoo refused, viewing Varma as a potential rival. In secret, one of Naidoo's apprentices taught Varma how to paint in the European realist style, using oils. Varma practiced for nine years, eventually mastering European techniques.



See the palace where Varma was born and raised in [this exhibit](#).

Explore how Varma incorporated new techniques in [this story](#).

Painting as a Profession

No one of aristocratic birth painted as a profession—it was simply a pastime. With the court's backing, however, Varma became a professional artist.

Varma's early work consisted primarily of **commissioned** portraits of royal family members and government leaders.



See more portraits Varma painted [here](#).

View the details of some of Varma's portraits up close, [here](#) and [here](#).



Ayilyam Thirunal Rama Varma, Raja Ravi Varma, 1892, The Ganesh Shivaswamy Foundation



Later Career

As Varma grew as an artist, he often painted scenes from ancient Indian mythology, Hindu religious texts, and epics. His faith and tradition were very important to him. Varma also painted everyday subjects, such as landscapes, animals, and the people of India at work and leisure.

Varma was chosen to send paintings to the 1893 World's Fair in Chicago, to represent India as part of the 'Parliament of Religions' exhibit. Varma sent 10 paintings. A detail from one of those paintings, 'Expectation,' is shown here.



Learn more about Varma's work in the 1893 World's Fair by viewing [this exhibit](#).

See more about the women in Varma's paintings in [this story](#).



Varma Becomes a Printmaker

As Varma became more famous, his work was increasingly in demand across India. He was encouraged by a mentor to reproduce it in an affordable way so that the average citizen could afford it. He opened the Ravi Varma Fine Art Lithographic Press to create **lithographs**—print copies of his paintings. Varma also encouraged the establishment of the first Indian art museums.

For his work, Varma received the Kaiser-i-Hind Medal in 1904, the highest medal of honor given by the government run by the British Empire in India. He was the first artist to receive this recognition. At his death in 1906, Varma had become India's greatest painter. He is still revered for his artwork and has inspired countless artists for more than 100 years.



Read more about Varma's career in [this story](#).



Find out more about the press [here](#).

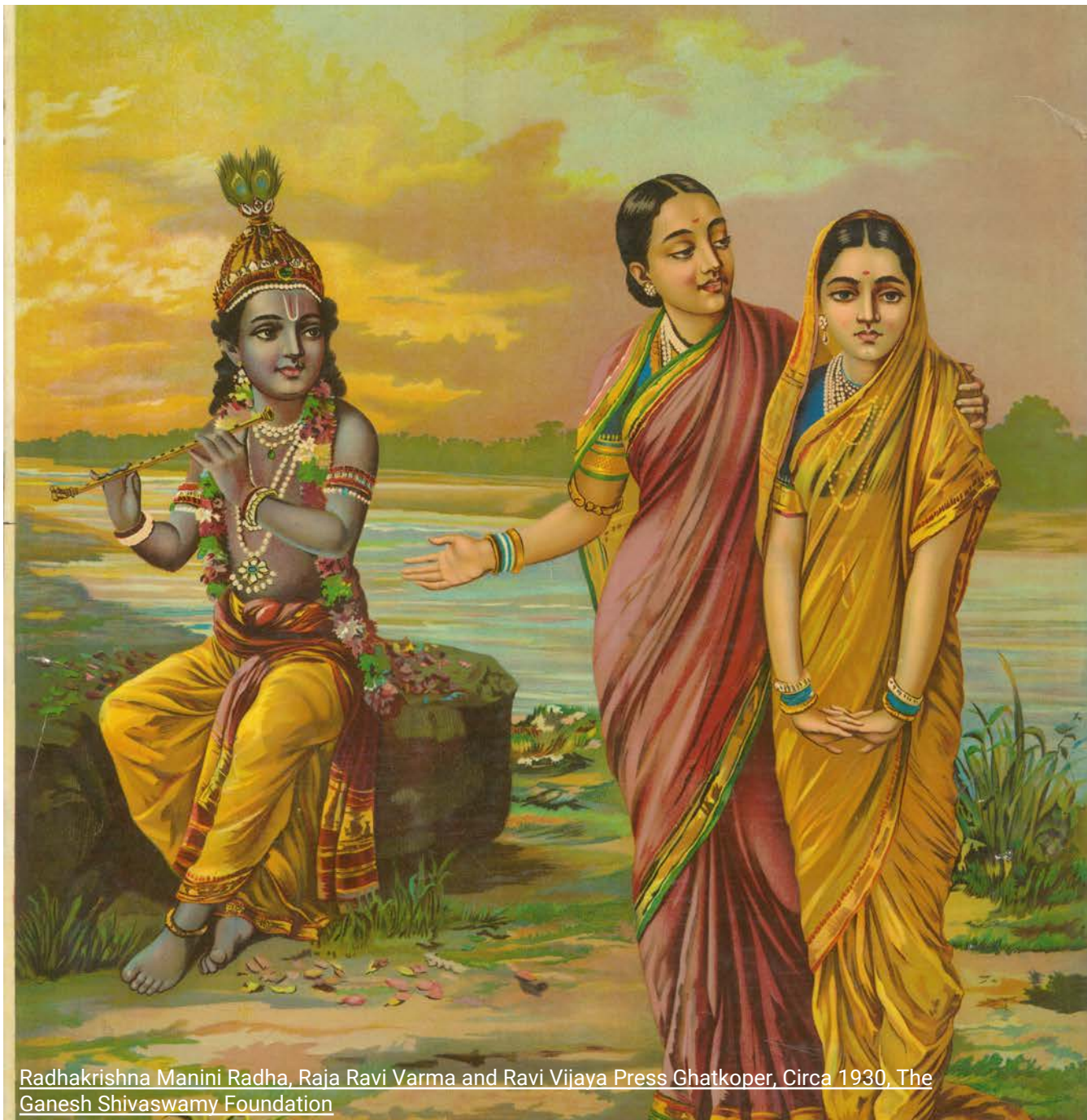
See this painting up close [here](#).

Chapter 1: Wrapping Up

Now that you've **read** the chapter, reflect on what you've learned by answering the question below.



Review the terms *perspective* and *realism*. Then, view the paintings in this chapter once more. Choose one of them, and write a paragraph explaining how that painting reflects these two terms.



Radhakrishna Manini Radha, Raja Ravi Varma and Ravi Vijaya Press Ghatkoper, Circa 1930, The Ganesh Shivaswamy Foundation

Chapter 2:

A World of Color and Sound



What is this chapter about?

The use of color in Varma's paintings and prints



How long will this chapter take?

1 hour

Chapter 2: Warming Up

Before you explore, answer the questions in your notebook.

Consider

1. Mythology is the story of the heroes, gods, and goddesses of a particular people. Why do you think painters like Varma would feature mythological stories in their work?



Discover

2. Varma sent 10 paintings to the Chicago World's Fair in 1893. Why do you think he chose to portray different types of Indian women?

Color and Detail

Varma was well known for his ability to capture mood, emotion, and the action of a story in his paintings. He was also famous for his use of bright colors and exquisite detail. In this painting, Varma shows a character from Hindu mythology, Shakuntala, pretending to remove a thorn from her foot so that she can gaze back at her lover, Dushyanta.



[Read more](#)
about how
Varma used
color and
expression to
convey
emotion.



Shakuntala Removing a Thorn from Her Foot, Raja Ravi Varma, 1898, The Ganesh Shivaswamy Foundation



This colorful painting with its lush fabrics and jewel-like colors is called 'Disappointed.' Notice the expression on the woman's face. What do you think has just happened in this scene?



[Take a tour](#) of this painting to see its details.

See another of Varma's paintings up close. [Click here.](#)

The Music of Varma's Paintings, Brought to Life

Many of Varma's paintings feature the popular musical instruments of India. Stringed instruments called the veena and the sitar are common, but the flute and percussion instruments can also be found.



Read [this story](#) to find out more about the musical instruments of Varma's paintings and to hear their sounds.





'Bombay Singer (Bombay Songstress)' was one of the 10 paintings sent to Chicago for the 1893 World's Fair. Varma's intention was to show different social classes of women in India. He wanted to convey the great cultural variety of the Indian population. In addition to this painting of a singer and her instrument, he included a depiction of a Muslim woman visiting a bath and a poor Gypsy on a street with her children.



View [this exhibit](#) to see this painting and find out how it relates to a famous singer.



Immerse yourself in the sound and color of Varma's paintings [here](#) and [here](#).



This is a detail from a print of the painting 'Shanmukha Subramanyaswami,' which features the Hindu god Subramanya, shown here riding his peacock. The god is referred to here as *Shanmuka*, which means "six faces."



Explore more of the color found in Varma's art by clicking [here](#).

Chapter 2: Wrapping Up

Now that you've read the chapter, reflect on what you've learned by answering the question below.



Many of the paintings you've seen in this lesson have been of women. Varma was well known for his portrayal of beautiful women. One interesting fact is that, unless the painting was a portrait, the women of his paintings are mostly identical, with different surroundings and wardrobes. Why might Varma have painted the same face on his female subjects?



Shakuntala And Her Companion, Raja Ravi Varma, 1880, Raja Ravi Varma Heritage Foundation

Chapter 3:

Varma's Impact on India



What is this chapter about?
Varma's artistic legacy



How long will this chapter take?
1 hour

Chapter 3: Warming Up

Before you explore, answer the questions in your notebook.

Consider

1. Varma is famous for the expressive way in which he painted the eyes of his subjects. Why do you think the eyes became some of the most important features in his portraits and other paintings of people?



Discover

2. How does a lithograph differ from an actual painting? Why would a lithograph be more affordable?

Bringing Emotion to Art

As you have read, one of Varma's primary influences on the Indian art world was bringing emotional expression into painting. Traditional Indian painting styles, while intricate, were flat and expressionless. The subjects were treated more as sacred icons than as humans with emotions and depth.

Take a look at the painting shown here, 'Tara Bai – Tanjore style painting.' It was done by Varma before he began painting in a realist style and using dramatic perspective, light, and color to create depth. On the next page, you will see a similar subject, painted after Varma transitioned to new techniques. What details do you notice about the painting shown here?



See a print of a Tanjore-style painting by another artist [here](#). The print was made by the Ravi Varma Press.



[Tara Bai - Tanjore style painting, Raja Ravi Varma, 1860, Raja Ravi Varma Heritage Foundation](#)



This painting, 'Maharani Chimnabai II,' was painted by Varma 29 years after the painting on the previous page. The rich colors, shading, and use of light and dark to create depth show how much Varma's work changed during that time. How is this painting different from that on the previous page?



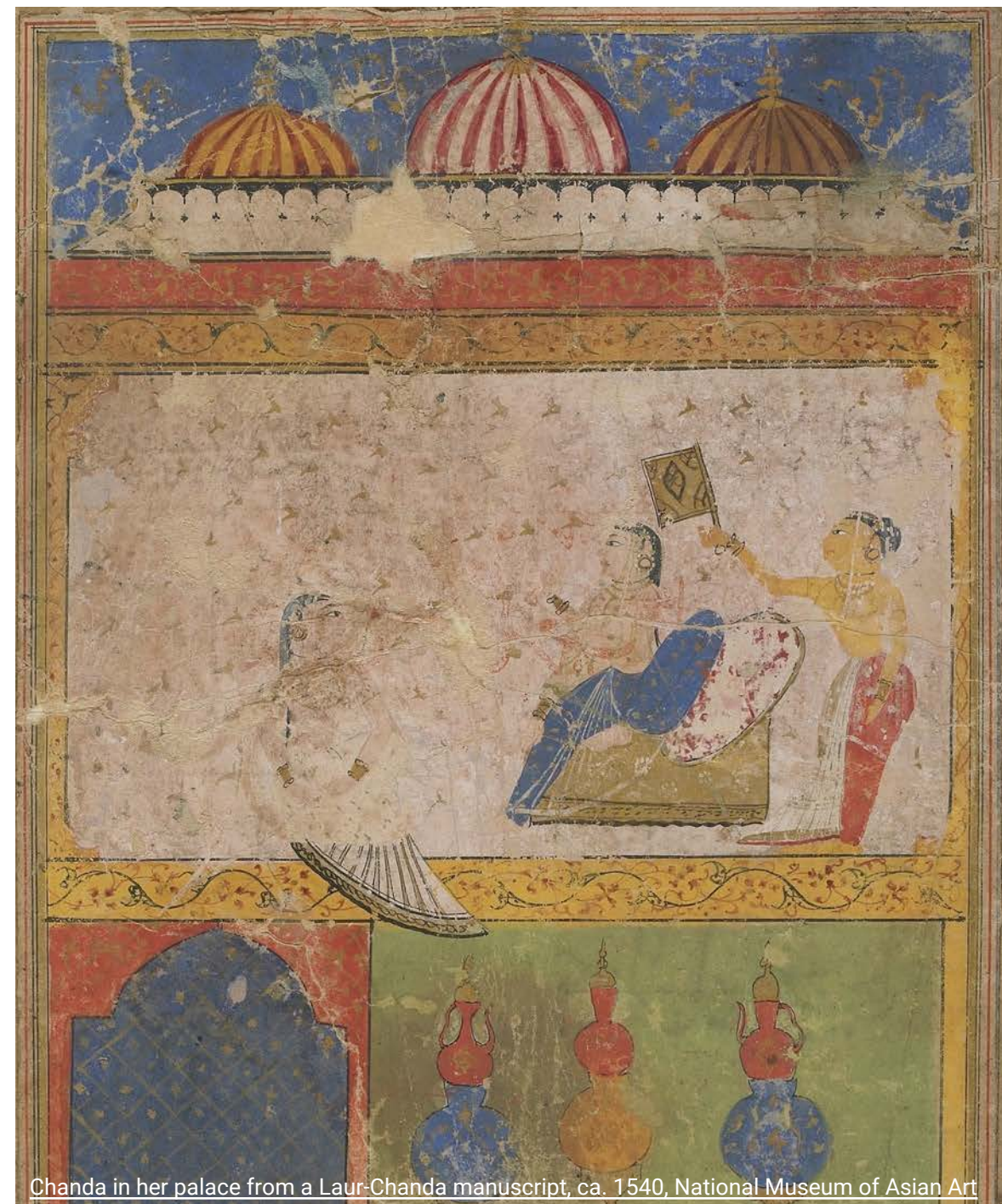
Learn more about how Varma became the first "modern" Indian artist in [this story](#).

Telling Traditional Stories in New Ways

Varma's paintings also leave another important legacy. They tell the stories of the *Puranas* and classic texts using more dramatic scenes. Contrasted with earlier paintings of the same subject matter, Varma's paintings bring new dimension to the stories. Take, for example, the painting shown here, 'Chanda in Her Palace from a Laur-Chanda Manuscript.' It shows the flat, two-dimensional style characteristic of earlier artistic traditions. This particular painting is from northern India and dates to around 1540.



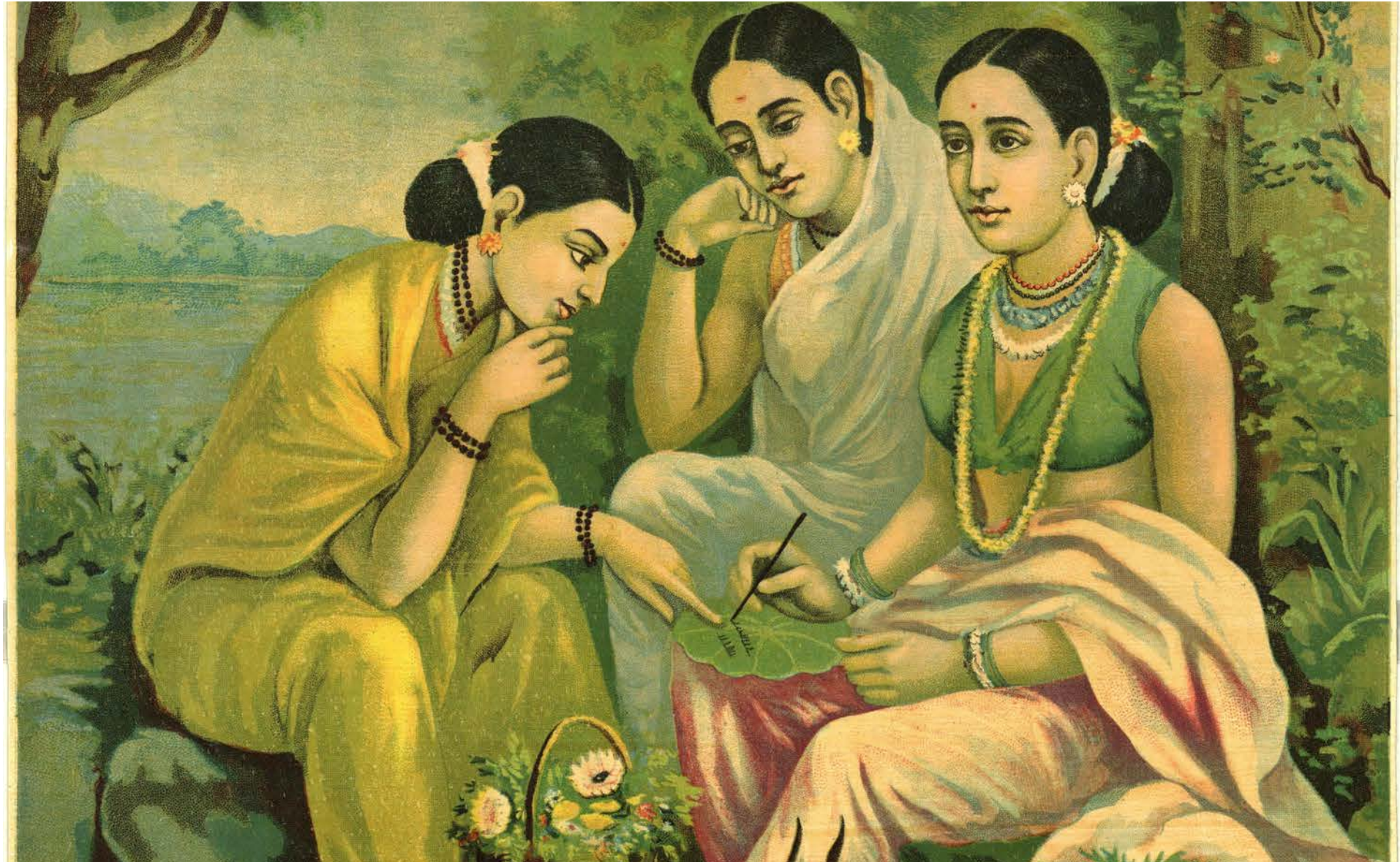
See more on how Varma brought new life to old stories [here](#).



Chanda in her palace from a Laur-Chanda manuscript, ca. 1540, National Museum of Asian Art

Art for Everyone

Finally, the Raja Ravi Varma Press brought Varma's work to everyone, in many different formats. His paintings were reproduced as affordable prints. His images could be found on textiles, matchbox covers, labels, calendars, and more. This "**democratization**" of the art world cemented Varma's place in Indian popular culture forever.



Read more about how calendars and advertisements used Varma's work in [this exhibit](#).

Chapter 3: Wrapping Up

Now that you've read the chapter, reflect on what you've learned by answering the question below.



You learned that the press Varma founded allowed art to be reproduced in many different ways. Reflect back on the types of products on which Varma's images have been used. How do these objects show that Varma had become part of Indian popular culture?

Digital Learning in Action

So, what did you learn? Read the questions and complete the learning activities below to extend your learning based on what you just experienced.



Reflect Answer these questions:

- How do you think Varma's aristocratic background helped him become an artist?
- Why do you think members of royal families valued having their portraits painted?



Summarize: View [5 Things to Know About Raja Ravi Varma](#). Based on this story, which two events in Varma's life do you think were most significant to his becoming a famous artist? Explain your answer.



Create: What props might you use to create a scene from a Varma painting? [This story](#) shows photographs inspired by Varma's paintings. Gather some props and a camera (tablet or phone). Then, view some of the paintings in [this exhibit](#) for ideas. Take a selfie (or have someone take your picture) with your props. If your camera has photo editing and filtering tools, experiment with some of them to make your photo look more like a Varma painting or print.

Glossary

- **aristocratic:** relating to members of a small and privileged ruling class
- **commission:** a formal request to produce something, such as an artwork
- **democratization:** the state of being available to broad masses of people
- **draftsman:** a person who excels in drawing
- **lithograph:** a print made by using metal or stone and ink to reproduce a design or image
- **medium:** material used for artistic expression
- **patron:** a wealthy supporter
- **perspective:** the technique of creating the spatial relation of objects on a flat surface as they would appear to the eye
- ***Puranas:*** Hindu sacred texts that contain popular myths and legends
- **realist:** a person such as an artist who portrays subjects that are true to nature and/or real life