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| Varma, Raja Ravi (1848-1906) |
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| Raja Ravi Varma transformed the way Indian gods and goddesses were pictured, and he did so with oil painting — a new import in nineteenth-century India. By the last quarter of the 19th century, when western art had long rejected Salon art and a modernist explosion in painterly surface was imminent, the auto-didact Raja Ravi Varma started to paint in an academic realistic style. His interaction with western oil painting can be regarded as the advent of modernism in Indian art. It may sound paradoxical to consider the adoption of western academic realism as modernist but in this instance, Varma’s modernism was a break from various folk or classical Indian painterly traditions. The role of the aristocratic gentleman artist, which Ravi Varma performed, differed from traditional artisans in that it entailed a scientific temperament in art-making, with awareness of anatomy, geometry (perspective), and colour theory. Many scholars have claimed that Raja Ravi Varma forged a ‘visual unity’ in India through his calendar art — chromolithographs created with imported German technology — which circulated throughout India. His work visually unified the Hindu pantheon, which had until then been as iconographically diverse as the number of dynasties that had ruled across ancient India. |
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