**John Xaviers**

**Varma, Raja Ravi (1848-1906)**

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. This interaction with western oil painting can be regarded as the advent of modernism in Indian art. It might sound oxymoronic to consider the adoption of western academic realism as modern but here, the modernism was about 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 with respect to a scientific temperament in art making with awareness of anatomy, geometry (perspective) and colour theory. A lot of scholars have said that Raja Ravi Varma forged a “visual unity” in India, through his calendar art (chromolithographs with imported German technology), circulated throughout India, which visually unified the Hindu pantheon which had been iconographically as diverse as the number of dynasties that had ruled across ancient India.

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