

Imagery by Raja Ravi Varma on Raj Silver

Raja Ravi Varma's paintings of Hindu deities and mythological scenes in the style of western European art became immensely popular in India in the nineteenth century thanks to their dissemination in the form of chromolithographs. The impact of these prints on silver made during the Raj for both European and Indian clients is here discussed in the light of surviving pieces and an unpublished group of workshop drawings after his designs.

by VIDYA J. DEHEJIA

A PAIR OF HANDSOME SILVER vases, each decorated with an image of a young woman – one still and poised, the other active and lively – are examples of so-called Raj silverware created by Indian artists and craftsmen around the turn of the twentieth century, primarily for use in British households in India. The figures are taken from works by Raja Ravi Varma (1848–1906), a self-taught gentleman artist associated with the princely state of Travancore in the Kerala region of south India. Each depicts a similarly dressed young woman: on one vase, she leans against a tree, holding a basket of flowers (Fig.1) and on its companion she is enjoying herself with abandon on a swing attached to a tree (Fig.2). The silver reliefs are closely based on oleographic prints (Figs.3 and 4), which are copies of paintings by Ravi Varma. The figure of the woman with a basket on the vase, for example, copies the drape and folds of the sari, worn in the Maharashtrian style, her bordered *choli*, her jewellery, the way her loose hair sweeps over her left arm and the British-style basket of blossoms she holds. The landscape, a shimmering lake and conical mountains, is also reproduced, as are the creeping vines that wrap around the tree trunk against which she leans. The scene on the companion vase is an equally close copy of the oleograph. The drape of the sari of the woman on the swing, its flowing *pallav*, the absence of a *choli*, her long tresses billowing out behind her with a portion crossing her upraised left arm, are all reproduced, and in the background looms the same tableland with its many levels.

Using linear perspective and naturalistic colours, Ravi Varma places his subjects within illusionistic landscapes. His style marks a radical shift from the earlier schools of traditional Indian painting, which had no interest in any form of naturalism. Ravi Varma may have intended the standing woman to represent Ahalya, the beautiful wife of the sage

The author thanks the anonymous reviewer of this article for suggestions relating to silverware, and Ganesh Shivaswamy for his generosity in sharing information on Ravi Varma's lithographs and other popular material.

1 There is some ambiguity about the titles of Ravi Varma's works.

For instance, the artist's undated oil painting of a woman carrying a tray of fruit (Travancore Royal family, Kandiar Palace, Trivandrum) is titled *Maharashtrian lady with fruit* whereas the lithograph of the image has the mythological title *Madri*. Similarly, an image of a seated woman and her companion with a fan in her hand is

1. Vase depicting a woman with a basket. Indian, twentieth century. Silver, height 61 cm. (Private collection).

2. *Ahalya*, by Raja Ravi Varma. c.1898. Chromolithograph, 35.6 by 25.4 cm. (Private collection).

3. Vase with a scene of a woman on a swing. Indian, twentieth century. Silver, height 61 cm. (Private collection).

4. *Temptress (Mohini)*, after Raja Ravi Varma. Undated chromolithograph, 49.8 by 34.8 cm. (Private collection).

Gautama, and the woman on the swing to portray Mohini, the enchanting form assumed by the goddess Shiva. However, the intended audience for the vases is unlikely to have recognised them as figures from Hindu legend.¹ Decorating either a British house or an Indian one set up in a British manner, they would probably have been interpreted simply as attractive genre scenes.

The influx of British officers and civil servants and their families into India in the years following 1858, when the Crown took direct control of the subcontinent, created a market for decorative silver to serve a British way of life, in the form of tea services and platters, biscuit containers and tea caddies, menu holders and visiting-card cases, beer mugs, christening mugs and salt and pepper shakers. Each region of India developed a distinctive repertoire of decorative motifs to adorn such pieces. The major centre for silver, Kutch in Gujarat, focused on scrolling vegetal motifs, frequently sprinkled with birds and animals; Madras and Bangalore focused on 'Swami silver', as it was known in British India, which featured the gods and temple festivals of the Hindus; silver made in Lucknow often depicted hunting scenes; Kashmir silversmiths favoured the *chinar* leaf, common in the region; while those in Calcutta, which began to produce silverware towards the end of the nineteenth century, focused on village scenes.²

variously titled *Ladies in the moonlight* in its painted version (present whereabouts unknown) and *Damayanti* in the lithograph; this image is featured on an undated silver vase (private collection) that is not discussed here. By contrast, the lithograph of a woman on a swing is given two titles: *Temptress* in English

and *Mohini* in Devanagari script.

2 The pioneering monograph on Indian silver is W.W.T. Wilkinson: *Indian Silver 1858–1949: Silver from the Indian Sub-Continent and Burma Made by Local Craftsmen in Western Forms*, London 1999. See also V. Dehejia: *Delight in Design. Indian Silver for the Raj*, Ahmedabad 2008.



Raja Ravi Varma and Raj silver

Two areas of Raj silver production, both within the expansive Bombay Presidency, are noteworthy in the way that by 1900 they were combining different regional styles. Silversmiths in Kutch frequently introduced the gods into its characteristic vegetal scroll motifs, producing what the workshop of Oomeree Mawji – the leading firm in Gujarat – proudly termed ‘Cutch Swamy work’, which was sold at a price per *tola* of silver higher than that for items decorated only with vegetal scroll designs interspersed with animals or birds (Fig.5).³ Workshops in the nexus of Bombay, Poona and Karachi, the centre through which silver was imported into and transported around India, also adopted a range of styles, including ‘Swami work’. The impact of Ravi Varma’s art on these craftsmen can be traced not only on such items of silver but also in the unique survival of a group of drawings from an Indian silver workshop, made around the turn of the twentieth century for Oomeree Mawji. These drawings include several copies of works by Ravi Varma.

Raj silver aroused the enthusiasm of the British officials in India who wrote about regional handicrafts, including silverwork, in the pages of

the *Journal of Indian Art & Industry*, published between 1884 and 1914.⁴ In a review of the Delhi Durbar exhibition of 1903 that was the brainchild of Viceroy Lord Curzon,⁵ George Watt, author of *The Dictionary of Economic Products of India* (1889–1893), commented on the facility with which silver workers were by then combining styles:

The Gold and Silver Plate of India, until very recently, could be readily referred to four or five well-marked types or styles of ornamentation. Within the past few years, however, the silversmiths of India and even of Burma have taken to producing any or all of the styles, the result being that it has become difficult, if not impossible, to affirm where a piece of plate may have been made.⁶

The visit to India by the Prince of Wales during the winter of 1875–76, when the rulers of the various Indian states presented him with a range of official gifts, mostly examples of contemporary crafts, had been crucial for raising awareness of Raj silver.⁷ The Gaekwad of Baroda and the Maharajah of Indore both presented the Prince with silver tea services made by Peter Orr & Sons of Madras, and the Maharaja of Cochin presented him with an ornate dessert set by the same maker.⁸ These gifts were displayed in the India Museum in South Kensington, and then loaned to international expositions in Paris, Edinburgh and Glasgow, where they were displayed in architecturally striking India pavilions. This was despite the occasional negative reaction. When one of the Swami tea services that had been given to the Prince was exhibited in Paris in 1878, George C.M. Birdwood commented: ‘Nothing could be worse than the tea tray and teapot, and sugar and milk bowls in this Madras tea service.’⁹ Birdwood admired Swami work on jewellery, but disapproved of its use on European forms such as tea services.



5. Design for a teapot in a Cutch Swamy work tea service, by the Oomeree Mawji silver workshop, Kutch. Late 19th or early 20th century. Pencil on paper, approx. 10 by 15 cm. (Private collection).

6. *Arjuna and Subhadra, Visvamitra and Menaka, Shakuntala writing a love-letter and Savitri pleading with Yama for Satyavan's life*, by the Oomeree Mawji silver workshop, Kutch, after Raja Ravi Varma. Late 19th or early 20th century. Pencil on paper, approx. 15 by 25 cm. (Private collection).





In discussions of the remarkable amalgam of taste and style in silver that combined western forms with Indian motifs and subject matter, the contributions of Raja Ravi Varma, have been largely ignored. He was one of the first Indian artists to turn away from India's long tradition of working in watercolour on paper to create oil paintings on canvas for a wealthy clientele, who included the rulers of several Indian states.¹⁰ His introduction to the medium had been watching the Dutch-born British artist Theodore Jensen (1816–94) paint commissioned portraits of Travancore rajas in the mid-nineteenth century. From Jensen and other European artists visiting India Ravi Varma learned the use of perspective and chiaroscuro, and he admired the composition of the staged portraits that they painted. He also studied paintings reproduced in such periodicals as *The Art Journal*, *The Magazine of Art*, *The Artist*, *Royal Academy Pictures* (issued as a Supplement to *The Magazine of Art*) and a range

7. *Saraswati*, by Raja Ravi Varma. c.1896. Chromolithograph, 69.2 by 49.8 cm. (Private collection).

8. *Lakshmi*, by Raja Ravi Varma. c.1896. Chromolithograph, 70.8 by 49.8 cm. (Private collection).

of other such material that he purchased in Bombay.¹¹ British residents encouraged him and bought several of his works. For instance, the Duke of Buckingham, who was Governor of Madras from 1875 to 1880, bought Ravi Varma's 1878 oil painting *Shakuntala writing a love-letter* (present location unknown), which was copied in a drawing by the Oomersee Mawji silver workshop in Kutch together with other examples of the artist's work (Fig.6).¹² An image by him of a seated Shakuntala was reproduced on the cover of the 1887 fifth edition of Monier-Williams' English translation of Kalidasa's famous Sanskrit dramatic work on Shakuntala, *Abhijnana Shakuntalam*, scenes from which are reproduced on silverware. Oils by Ravi

3 The modern spellings of Kutch and Swami are used in the present article except when quoting nineteenth- or twentieth-century sources in which the spellings Cutch and Swamy were used.

4 Launched with the title the *Journal of Indian Art* in 1884, this periodical was published in seventeen volumes between 1884 and 1914. Among its authors who focused on silver working are B.H. Baden Powell, on Cutch silver (vol.5); Harry L. Tilley on Burmese silver (vol.10); and J.H. Rivett-Carnac on silver filigree (vol.9.)

5 For this last exhibition, see Y. Sharma: 'A house of wonder: silver at the

Delhi Durbar exhibition of 1903', in Dehejia, *op. cit.* (note 2), pp.48–64.

6 G. Watt and P. Brown: *Indian Art at Delhi, 1903. Being the Official Catalogue of the Delhi Exhibition, 1902–1903*, Calcutta 1903, cited by Sharma, *op. cit.* (note 5), p.48.

7 For a richly illustrated book featuring some of these gifts, see K. Meghani: exh, cat. *Splendours of the Subcontinent. A Prince's Tour of India 1875–76*, London (Queen's Gallery), Edinburgh (Queen's Gallery) and Bradford (Cartwright Hall) 2017.

8 V. Dehejia: 'Whose taste? Colonial design, international exhibitions, and Indi-

an silver', in *idem.*, *op. cit.* (note 2), p.13. See also D. Khera: 'Designs to suit every taste: P. Orr & Sons and Swami silverware', in *ibid.*, *op. cit.* (note 2), pp.20–37.

9 G.C.M. Birdwood: *Paris Universal Exhibition of 1878. Handbook to the British Section, Presentation Edition*, London and Paris 1878, cited in Khera, *op. cit.* (note 3), p.22.

10 For an authoritative work on Ravi Varma, see C. Rupika: *Raja Ravi Varma. Painter of Colonial India*, Ahmedabad 2010. A forthcoming work on Ravi Varma by Ganesh Shivaswamy will focus on the oleographs and other related material, such as soap and

matchbox covers, and postcards, all intended for popular consumption.

11 E. Neumayer and C. Schelberger, eds: *Raja Ravi Varma. Portrait of an Artist. The Diary of C. Raja Raja Varma*, New Delhi 2005, pp.324–32, 'Inventory of the library in Kilimanur'.

12 The painting was sharply criticised in Calcutta in the early twentieth century, when Sister Nivedita bemoaned the fact that 'every home contains an image of a fat young woman lying at full length on the floor writing a letter', quoted in P. Mitter, *Art and Nationalism in Colonial India*, Cambridge 1994, p.258



Varma were sent to the 1893 Chicago exposition, where they won awards, including one for 'Oil Paintings Illustrative of the life of Native Peoples'. At the urging of his British supporters, he attempted history paintings in a European style, although with a focus on Indian mythological subjects from the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* epics.

Ravi Varma's aristocratic Indian clientele included the Maharaja of Mysore, the Rana of Mewar and in particular the Gaekwad of Baroda, who

9. *Saraswati seated on a peacock and Lakshmi standing in a lotus pond*, by the Oomarsee Mawji & Sons silver workshop, Kutch. Late 19th or early 20th century. Pencil on paper, approx. 10 by 15 cm. (Private collection).

10. The rear of the vase illustrated in Fig.3.

Opposite, clockwise from top left
11. Tea service, designed and made by P. Orr & Sons. 1907. Silver, heights 12 cm (teapot), 7.8 cm (sugar bowl) and 9.5 cm (cream jug). (Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto).

12. Detail of the teapot in Fig.11, showing Lakshmi.

13. Detail of the sugar bowl in Fig.11, showing Saraswati seated on a rock.

14. Detail of the cream jug in Fig.11, showing Saraswati seated on a rock.

15. Detail of the sugar bowl in Fig.11, showing Lakshmi.

16. Detail of the teapot in Fig.11, showing Saraswati seated on a peacock.



commissioned a set of fourteen oil paintings featuring Hindu gods and goddesses together with subjects from Puranic myths (Maharaja Fateh Singh Museum, Baroda). Many of these works are on a scale that evokes history paintings, several measuring six feet in height. If Ravi Varma had produced only oil paintings on large canvases, his legacy may have been less distinctive. Although commissions from aristocratic patrons brought him prestige, the paintings hung in isolated splendour in the palaces of India's princely rulers, whereas Ravi Varma wanted his works to be accessible to and appreciated by a much wider segment of India's population. To achieve this, he shrewdly shifted his practice to chromolithography, which enabled his compositions to be widely disseminated and boosted



Raja Ravi Varma and Raj silver

17. *Kamandalu*. Indian, twentieth century. Silver, height 29 cm. (Victoria & Albert Museum, London).

Opposite

18. Detail of Fig.17 showing Vishvamisra and Menaka.

19. Detail of Fig.17 showing Vishvamisra and Shakuntala.

20. Detail of Fig.17, showing Arjuna and Subhadra.

21. Detail of Fig.17, showing Kamsa-Maya.

22. *Kamsa-Maya*, by Raja Ravi Varma. 1896. Oil on canvas, 168.1 by 116.8 cm. (Royal Gaekwad Collection, Lakshmi Vilas Palace).



his popularity. In 1893 he set up a chromolithographic press, importing machinery from Germany and persuading Fritz Schleicher, a printer from Berlin, to manage the Ravi Varma Fine Arts Lithographic Press in Bombay. Ravi Varma was thus able to translate his large canvases into small and inexpensive lithographs.

This early colour printing process, described variously as chromolithography and oleography, involved skilled artist-technicians transferring Ravi Varma's compositions onto a lithographic stone.¹³ The paintings were copied closely, resulting in prints that reproduced most of their elements. The lithograph version of a work depicting the goddess Saraswati illustrates this well. It is based on one of a pair of oil paintings (Maharaja Fatehsingh Museum, Baroda) of Saraswati and Lakshmi, that shows the four-armed goddess Saraswati clad in a Maharashtrian-style sari and seated on a rock by the water's edge; she holds a *veena* (a stringed lute-like instrument), while her peacock mount stands beside her (Fig.7). The lithograph of Lakshmi (Fig.8) was based not on the oil painted by Ravi Varma as a pair to that of Saraswati, which has a sky-filled background, but on an oil he had painted a few years before (Kiran Nadar Museum, New Delhi), which shows the four-armed goddess against a wooded background with distant hills. Lakshmi wears a pink sari draped in a manner that was not then representative of any known regional tradition, but became fashionable as a result of the print's popularity and is now the standard manner of wearing a sari.

Ravi Varma's lithographs became so popular that a number of other presses soon began to produce prints that imitated his works. This has continued up to the present day in the form of what is now known as 'calendar art'. Copies of Ravi Varma's winsome gods and goddesses are displayed not only in shops and homes throughout India, but also in taxis and auto rickshaws.

His use of perspective and naturalistic landscapes has resulted in images very different from the depiction of these deities in India's ancient traditions of sculpture and wall paintings. As the scholars who published the diaries of his younger brother, Raja Raja Varma (also an artist, who took on the role of his brother's manager), so aptly phrased it: 'If Ravi Varma carried the title "Painter of the Celestials", then Schleicher should go by the epithet "Printer of the Gods"'.¹⁴

The audience for Ravi Varma's lithographs included craftsmen in silver workshops, who recreated in silver his unmistakable renderings of Hindu deities and his idiosyncratic versions of ancient myths. Their impact is apparent not only in surviving pieces of silver but in the group of drawings from the Oomersee Mawji workshop in Kutch.¹⁵ Draughtsmen in workshops made pencil outline copies of the prints or motifs in them. This design was transferred in outline form to the silver vessel by a craftsman known as a *chitrakar* (artist). The piece was then given to a *chitera*, or chiseller, who chased the design into relief. A good example of the way Ravi Varma's images were used is the pair of silver vases with which this article began. As has been explained, the figurative cartouches that occupy

13 E. Neumayer and C. Schelberger, eds: *Popular Indian Art. Raja Ravi Varma and the Printed Gods of India*, New Delhi and New York, 2003, p.14. The size of these lithographs was largely determined by the size of the imported stone, the two standard sizes of which were roughly 49.5 by 36.8 cm. and 34.3 by 25.4 cm. Large lithographs used thirteen colours, so producing a single print necessitated thirteen successive runs of the press (one for each colour) using a different stone for each run.

14 *Ibid.*, p.4.

15 The changes of name of the workshop as one generation succeeded

another can be traced in the handwritten or stamped inscriptions on the reverse of the drawings. They include 'Oomersee Mawji, Silversmith, Bhuj, Cutch'; 'Oomersee Mawji, Sonar [goldsmith] Bhuj, Cutch'; and 'Oomersee M & Sons, Gold & Silversmiths, Bhuj, Cutch'. Some drawings are inscribed 'Oomersee M & Sons, Art Silversmiths, Baroda', indicating that the workshop established a second outlet in the Gujarat town of Baroda. The Baroda outlet later took the name of one of Oomersee Mawji's sons, 'Harilal P Oomersee, Gold & Silversmiths, Chokhandy, Baroda'.



most of the space on the front of each vase closely replicate the oleographs on which they are based. These in turn reproduce in detail the original oil paintings. Interestingly, even though the vases are the same height, the silversmiths did not attempt to reproduce both women in the same size; instead, they closely followed the scale of the prints, in which the woman leaning against the tree is substantially larger than the woman on the swing (the landscape occupies a larger part of Ravi Varma's picture). Stylistic elements, such as the *buttis* (little floral knotted motifs) decorating the rear (Fig.10) and the scrolling motifs surrounding the vignettes suggest that these vases were produced either in Kutch or – more likely – Bombay, where silver workers routinely combined styles from different regions.

Ravi Varma's gods and goddesses similarly adorn a richly decorated silver tea service intended for use in a British household (Fig.11).¹⁶ Consisting of a teapot, sugar bowl and cream jug it was made soon after 1900 by Peter Orr & Sons of Madras, whose stamp is on the bottom of all three pieces.¹⁷ The teapot – the handle and spout of which take the form of an elephant head and trunk – and the generously sized double-handled sugar bowl each feature six scenes, and the narrower milk jug has four. A standing Lakshmi appears on both the teapot and the sugar bowl, and the seated Saraswati appears on all three pieces. The two silver images of Lakshmi are closely derived from a lithograph, which was also copied for one of the Oomsee Mawji drawings (Fig.8).

Lakshmi appears prominently at the centre of one side of the teapot (Fig.12), facing the person pouring from it (assuming that they are right-



Raja Ravi Varma and Raj silver

23. Tea caddy. Indian, twentieth century. Silver, height 15 cm. (Private collection).

handed); closer to the handle is a variant of Saraswati seated upon her peacock (Fig.16), and next to the spout Krishna plays his flute while sitting on a rock beside the waters. On the other side of the teapot, are two scenes depicting young Rama and Lakshmana with the sage Vishvamitra, and a vignette of the trio of Rama, Lakshmana and Sita. Separating the vignettes are trees with intertwining foliage that combines to form the upper border of the teapot just below its neck. Centrally placed on one side of the sugar bowl is the goddess Saraswati, seated upon a rock and holding her *veena*, with her peacock beside her (Fig.13); flanking scenes portray Krishna playing his flute while seated on a rock by the river, and a loincloth-clad mendicant holding a garment and a water jug. The centre of the other side of the sugar bowl is decorated with the classic image Lakshmi image (Fig.15), flanked by a scenes of the monkey-general Hanuman at one end and a royal child led by an elder at the other. The four scenes on the milk jug are Saraswati (Fig.14), Krishna sitting on a rock and playing the flute, Ravana abducting Sita, and a sage with a youth before him. Although all these motifs feature in Ravi Varma's oleographs, the choice of sacred imagery on a tea service intended for use in a British household is noteworthy.

A third category of Ravi Varma's imagery routinely transferred onto silver, appearing first in oil paintings and then lithographs, consists of vignettes from legends. These tend to focus on the two main characters of a given myth, for example, the sage Vishvamitra and the *apsara* (a heavenly nymph) Menaka; Arjuna and Subhadra; Nala and Damayanti; and Savitri and Satyavan. These legendary heroic couples captured the attention of the silver workshops. A set of four such scenes appear on a silver water vessel, or *kamandalu* (Fig.17). Often carried by sages and renunciants; and generally used in a sacred context, it would have been used in an Indian household in a *puja* room, probably to store holy Ganges water for use in a variety of Hindu rites and rituals. A *kamandalu* would have had no role in a British household and so this example must have been made for an Indian client. Each of the vignettes is contained within a circular frame, which is linked to its neighbour by a large rosette. The base of the vessel is inscribed 'HEERAPPA BUCHANNA GOLDSMITH POONA'. Buchanna was singled out for special mention in the catalogue of the 1903 Delhi Durbar exhibition.¹⁸ Poona was part of British India's Bombay Presidency, which extended all the way to Karachi and, together with Kutch, was one of two early areas in which a variety of styles of silver were integrated in a cosmopolitan way. The scenes depicted appear also in the Oomarsee Mawji workshop drawing reproduced above (Fig.6), which is evidence of the type of sketch that the Poona *chitrakar* would have referred to in his workshop when making the *kamandalu*.

The derivation of the images on the *kamandalu* from lithographs after Ravi Varma of the story of the sage Vishvamitra is evident in, for example, the rendering of Vishvamitra with the *apsara* Menaka, who seduced him and bore a daughter, Shakuntala (Fig.18). Another vignette depicts an older Vishvamitra standing beneath a tree in his forest hermitage, holding both hands above his head to confer blessings on Shakuntala as she prepares to leave her forest environs for the court of King Dushyanta to present herself as his wife (Fig.19). This is one of



the scenes that appears in the Oomarsee Mawji drawing. A close copy of a Ravi Varma chromolithograph, it reveals that only a single element – a deer that leaps up joyfully against Shakuntala – has been omitted in the silver itself from what has become a crowded composition.

The third *kamandalu* vignette portrays Arjuna, the hero of the *Mahabharata* epic, who reaches out with his left hand to coax his bashful new wife, Subhadra, towards him (Fig.20). The closeness to the Ravi Varma original is evident in multiple details including the circular platform built of stone blocks, the deer skin spread on top and a second skin hoisted on a pole above it. In the Oomarsee Mawji drawing the scene is labelled 'Arjuna Subhadra' in the Gujarati script of the region. The final roundel on this *kamandalu* depicts the story of the evil king Kamsa of Mathura as he attempts to kill his sister Devaki's baby daughter to avoid the fulfilment of a prophecy that a child born to Devaki would destroy him.¹⁹ Comparison with Ravi Varma's oil painting of the subject reveals the close attention paid to copying the original composition in every stage of its reproduction, concluding with the *kamandalu* (Figs.21 and 22). Kamsa's plan to dash the infant to the ground is foiled as she miraculously assumes the form of the goddess Yogamaya and vanishes into an aureole of light. Stunned by the turn of events, Kamsa supports

16 I am grateful to the curator Deepali Dewan at the Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto, for her willingness to share information and for having brought this tea service to my attention when I was working on an exhibition of Raj silver in New York and its accompanying book,

Delight in Design: Indian Silver for the Raj, Ahmedabad 2011.

17 All three pieces are marked 'ORR', 'SILVER' and '7'; the meaning of the number is unclear.

18 Watt and Brown, *op. cit.* (note 6).

19 The better-known part of the story

refers to god Krishna, who as an infant escaped death by being transferred to the cowherd village of Gokula, where he grew up safely, emerging finally to kill his uncle Kamsa.

20 Easy access to the imagery was also possible through postcards and

matchbox covers that were produced of this scene. See G. Shivaswamy: 'Raja Ravi Varma – Commemorating 125 years of the Ravi Varma Press' (National Gallery of Modern Art, Bangalore, 2019), available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R3oWnjfcEE4>, accessed 7th



24. *Birth of Shakuntala (Shakuntala Janm)*, after Raja Ravi Varma. c.1894. Chromolithograph, 49.8 by 34.8 cm. (Private collection).

of Rupees', while a note beneath a drawing of an ebony cigarette box with pierced-work silver mounts reads: 'Made for Captain J.M. Fleming, United Service Club, 1899 Sept.'

Other notes on the drawings refer to an Indian clientele. A note on a drawing of an Indian-style water vessel with an elephant trunk spout reads: 'Approved by Shri Kamaladevi Saheb Gaekwar, 28-10-1926'. The cache of drawings is accompanied by a number of letters from a variety of sources. One example is from the secretary of the Raja of Saugor requesting two silver snuff boxes to be sent to Gold Mohur Lodge, Saugor. Another, from Svadeshi (a shop that called itself 'the Bombay Ladies Store'), regrets the delay in the arrival of a peepul-leaf sweetmeat dish and lotus-footed bowls with plates to match, indicating that such items of silver were kept in stock for purchase through select outlets.

The annotations on these drawings reveal the diversity of the clientele of the silver workshops of nineteenth- and twentieth-century India that employed Raja Ravi Varma's imagery. The subject matter and intended context of the finished works also yields valuable information about how these objects were perceived. After his death in 1906, Ravi Varma's reputation declined significantly. This coincided in part with Abanindranath Tagore's much-reproduced watercolour painting *Mother India* (1905; Rabindra Bharati Society, Kolkata), a chaste saffron-clad rendition of a four-armed goddess-like figure holding grain, clothing, a manuscript and a rosary. This image was hailed, particularly in nationalist circles as the preferred mode of representation of Indian womanhood, and was contrasted with Ravi Varma's 'vulgar' imagery, partly influenced by European art.²² This conflict, however, was played out in nationalist, elite circles that had little to do with craftsmen in silver workshops. Indeed, it appears to have made little impression on their clientele, whether British or the Indian, who purchased or commissioned silverware with Ravi Varma imagery, nor indeed with his popular following.

From the perspective of a British user, motifs of this sort could easily be interpreted as exotic genre scenes, in tune with European taste and it is possible that, although steeped deeply in the Hindu religious and mythological traditions, the figures on, for example, the tea service illustrated above would not have been recognised by such viewers. These themes were favoured by the artists of the silver workshops and so in the 'catalogue' of choices presented to buyers, there may have been few other options for anyone commissioning or buying pieces from these craftsmen. Although such objects were clearly admired for their fine craftsmanship and attractive and distinctively Indian scenes, it is unlikely that many Western European viewers would have known what they actually represented, much less their ultimate origin in oil paintings made for princely clients.²³ By contrast, an object such as the *kamandalu* would have had no meaningful use outside of a Hindu context and so its owner would probably have been familiar with the mythological content of the images that adorned it. In either case, the drawings reflect the success of the Ravi Varma Lithographic Press in making readily available a range of reproductions of Raja Ravi Varma's oil paintings that could be transferred onto silver in pleasing configurations to create decorative items that were valued by both Europeans and Indians.

himself against the turreted and balconied palace walls, while Kamsa's sister Devaki and her husband Vasudeva devoutly watch the miracle.

An intermediate scene in the story of Vishvamitra as represented by Ravi Varma which also appears in the Oomsee Mawji drawing but not on the *kamandalu* appears on the narrow end of a silver tea caddy, which depicts Menaka presenting her infant daughter to Vishvamitra, who turns away as if to deny the possibility that she is his offspring (Figs. 23 and 24). The somewhat clumsy rendering of this scene indicates that even lesser silver workshops had easy access to Ravi Varma lithographs.²⁰

The use made here of drawings from the Oomsee Mawji workshop in Kutch to compare with silver made elsewhere is a result of the fact that comparable drawings from other centres of silver manufacture have not emerged thus far. As well as being used by craftsmen, the drawings were also shown to prospective clients, as is demonstrated by the scribbled requests from British clients that are found on some. One such comment, alongside a drawing of a lady's hand mirror, reads: 'I think this is beautiful. Please make one for me. C.A.'²¹ A drawing of three mugs includes a note written beneath the third example: 'This is the one I want'. A drawing of a large and ornate double-handled stemmed cup is inscribed by the workshop, 'Can be made large or small for any sum

September 2022.

21 V. Dehejia: 'A cache uncovered: workshop drawings of Oomsee Mawji & Sons, Kutch', in *idem*, *op. cit.* (note 2), pp.38-47.

22 In 1971, India issued a stamp featuring a portrait of Ravi Varma

together with one of his renowned oil paintings, *Damayanti and the swan*. However, a full contextual reassessment of the artist would not come to fruition until almost a century after his death, with the first major exhibition of his work, held at the National Museum, New

Delhi, in 1993, *Raja Ravi Varma. New Perspectives. An Exhibition of Paintings, Drawings, Watercolours, Oleographs from Sri Chitra Art Gallery, Tiruvananthapuram, Kerala*.

23 This issue merits revisiting once a more complete listing is made. For

example, while one may assume that a large decorative bowl (private collection), was made for a British household, it is decorated with detailed mythological scenes, including a copy of Ravi Varma's painting of Rama breaking the bow that earns him the hand of Sita.