

CELEBRATING FEMININITY WITH FINENESS

As Bangalore commemorated the 176th birth anniversary of iconic artist Raja Ravi Varma with an exhibition spotlighting his granddaughter - the Queen of Travancore, we strive to explore the artist's unique interpretation of femininity

Bindu Gopal Rao

The week kicked off with a burst of modern realism, captivating art enthusiasts across Bangalore. The reason? A hitherto unseen portrait by the revered artist Raja Ravi Varma graced the walls of the Raja Ravi Varma Heritage Foundation in Shanthala Nagar.

The exquisite portrait captured the innocence of a three-year-old Maharani Sethu Lakshmi Bayi, Ravi Varma's eldest granddaughter, and it was unveiled for public viewing till April 30.

In commemoration of the 176th birth anniversary of Raja Ravi Varma, an artist whose legacy continues to resonate deeply in the annals of art history, an enchanting exhibition unfolded in Bangalore.

The exhibition paid homage to the life and legacy of Maharani Sethu Bayi, the last ruling queen of Travancore, and an emblematic figure of twentieth-century India. Aptly titled "Daughter of Providence", the exhibition curated a visual narrative of Maharani's life, depicted through a captivating collection of photographs arranged in thematic chapters.

And at the heart of this captivating showcase stood a masterful oil portrait, lovingly crafted by her grandfather Ravi Varma, a poignant gift bestowed upon the queen of Travancore.

Fuelled by meticulous research and enriched by insights from historian and acclaimed author Manu S. Pillai, whose award-winning book *The Ivory Throne: Chronicles of the House of Travancore* delved into the rich tapestry of the region's history, the exhibition offered a poignant journey through Maharani's life.

From her tender infancy to the tranquil twilight of her days, spent in serene contemplation on Richmond Road, Bangalore, every chapter of her remarkable story unfolded with grace and resonance.

The connection between Bangalore and the Maharani of Travancore resonates deeply. As Maharani Sethu Bayi wielded her sceptre with wisdom and grace, ushering in an era of progressive reforms and enlightened governance in Travancore, Bangalore emerged as her chosen sanctuary in later years.

It is a fitting tribute to commemorate her legacy alongside that of her illustrious grandfather, Raja Ravi Varma, in the city where she found solace and sanctuary.

"We curated this experience to ignite conversations, inspire reflections, and celebrate the enduring influence of a woman ahead of her time. It's about experiencing the beauty of art intertwined with

the power of storytelling and discovering a world where femininity and strength intertwine seamlessly," says **Gitanjali Maini**, CEO of the Raja Ravi Varma Heritage Foundation.



Ode to femininity

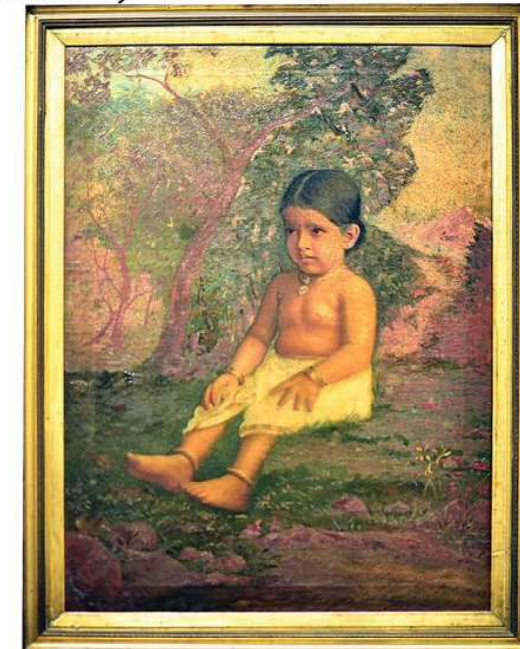
Ravi Varma's artistic prowess transcended mere skill - it was an alchemy that brought his paintings to life, particularly those depicting women. From mythological icons like Sita and Draupadi to the everyday women adorned in traditional attire, Ravi Varma captured the essence of femininity with unmatched finesse. What distinguished his artistry was his remarkable ability to infuse his subjects with grace, dignity, and an inner strength that leapt from the canvas, captivating viewers with their captivating presence.

Archana Shenoy, Director of Curatorial Practices at the Raja



Ravi Varma Heritage Foundation, expounds, "Ravi Varma's portrayals of female deities immortalised these divine beings in breathtaking detail, elevating them to realms of eternal reverence."

Reflecting on the oil painting of the three-year-old Maharani of Travancore, Shenoy elaborates on the artist's profound vision. "While another painter may have depicted a smiling child at play, Ravi Varma chose to unveil his granddaughter's regal stature, all while preserving her innate innocence," she muses. "The painting



Daughter of Providence - Young Maharani (Sethu Lakshmi Bayi) painting by Raja Ravi Varma

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transcends mere representation; it is a testament to the child's resilience, solitude, and inherent virtue—a poignant portrayal of the woman she would later become," she adds.



Reclining Nair lady - Private collection



Daughter of Providence - Raja Ravi Varma & Sethu Lakshmi Bayi, aged ten, prior to her marriage

capturing feminine grace but also highlight the depth of emotions and narratives woven around each character.

"Raja Ravi Varma's female characters often defied cultural norms and societal expectations by embodying qualities of independence, intellect, and agency. Whether portraying mythological heroines questioning societal norms or women in contemporary settings asserting their identity, his art challenged traditional perceptions and advocated for women's empowerment," says Maini.

His paintings of female characters highlighted literacy, different aspects, and the standing of women in society, and them in an extremely flattering light.

Classic meets contemporary

The master painter's women seamlessly blend the essence of classic beauty with contemporary sensibilities. While they embody traditional elegance in their attire and demeanour, their expressions and actions often reflect modern ideas of empowerment, breaking away from stereotypes and showcasing a timeless relevance.

For instance, one can pick the "Reclining Nair Lady", in which a woman, while reclining on a settee, is reading a book. "She appears beautiful and affluent. He paints her reading a book, showing that Indian women were educated and literate even way back in 1893. Behind her in the background of the painting is a dark-skinned maid. She is seen fanning the lady who is the main character in the painting. Through the figure of the lady's maid, Ravi Varma highlights a classic portrayal of slavery that existed during the time. So nearly all of his paintings carried strong socially relevant messages," adds Shenoy.



Daughter of Providence - A studio photograph of the Maharani through the second half of the 1920s

Celebrating innate beauty

Some of Raja Ravi Varma's prominent works that prominently feature women include "Damayanti Talking to a Swan", "Lady in the Moonlight", and "Saraswati with Veena". These paintings not only showcase his mastery in