



Raja Ravi Varma

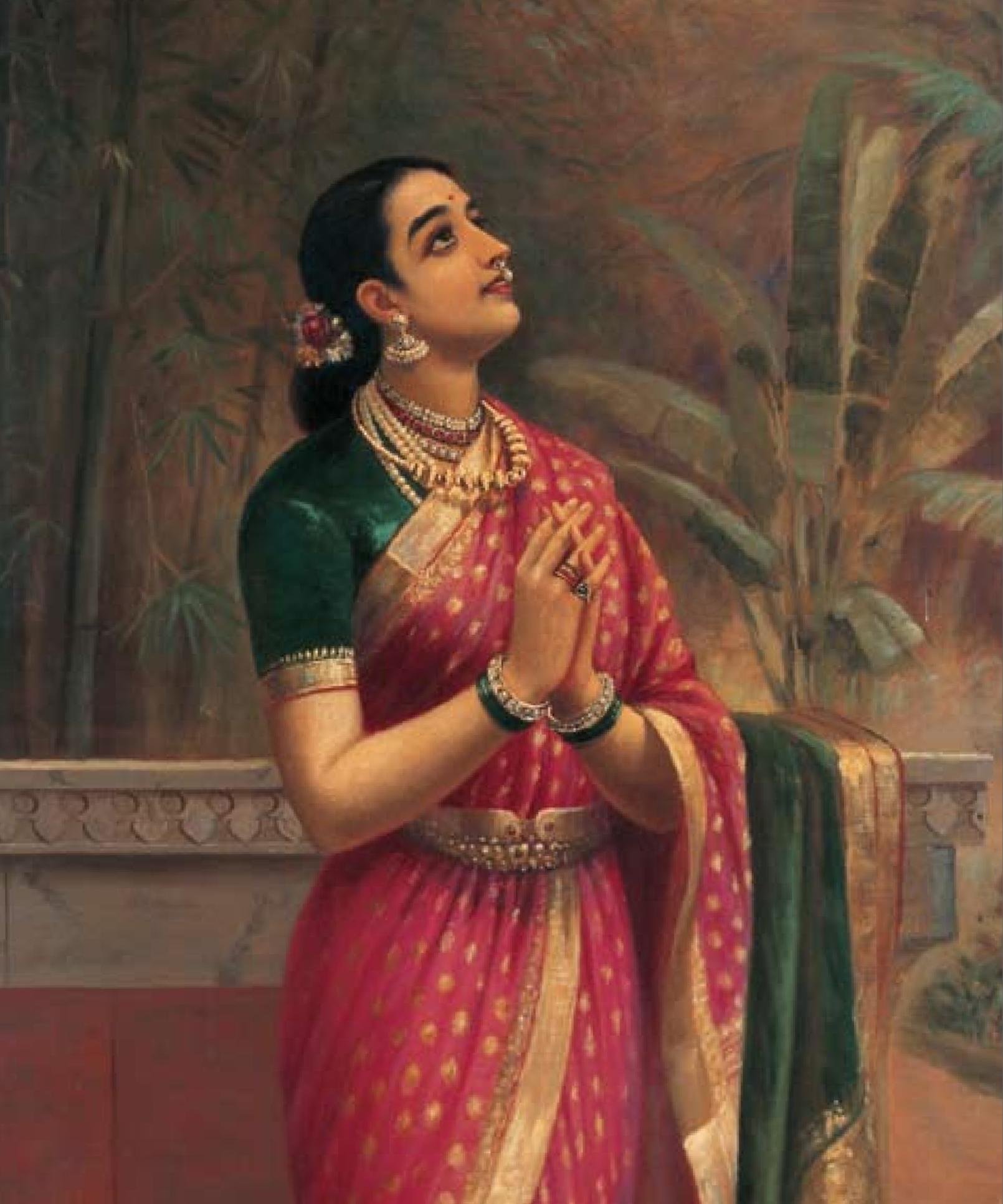
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Author's Note

Over the years I have often pondered over the enigma of Ravi Varma, the man who painted portraits and mythological paintings, who spawned the beginning of popular visual culture and unbeknown to many Indians past and present, influenced their visual perception down the century. Who was this man who had breathed life into these mythology-based paintings, moved with his times and ahead of them as well, taken a farewell bow in the prime of his life and reluctantly left the sphere of living beings with so much yet to accomplish? He had proved to be both provocative and elusive, yet had beckoned, wanting to be known and discovered. I had to seek him out, pursue his trail and unravel something of this man whose quicksilver thoughts and rich emotional reserves guided his actions and his creativity for fifty-eight years.

I have not been able to track down every source or run every bit of information to the ground; neither do I believe it possible to do so. After a hundred years there is so much that has vanished with time's merciless sweep and the indifference of unwilling custodians of tangible evidence. Yet, there was much that was retrieved—a fact this book bears testimony to.

I followed Ravi Varma's fading footsteps, discovered his environment and family, heard anecdotes, unearthed his friends and their present families, exhumed period letters, newspapers and photographs, and correlated him with the India of his times. Slowly I found him as he emerged from the mists of nothingness, conjured up

The Swan Messenger (detail), oil on canvas, 26 x 73.6", 1906.
Collection: Srikanta Datta Narasimharaja Wadiyar, Chairman, Sri Jayachamarajendra Art Gallery Trust, Jaganmohan Palace, Mysore

through the information I had gathered and through my reflections that willed him into manifestation. I will never fully know him but I found much to admire in this bright-eyed charismatic man of easy laughter, so capable of balancing the traditional with the avant-garde, gifted with well-honed senses and sensibility, energetic, enterprising and entrepreneurial, a man indeed, of the twenty-first century.

Sources in Mysore and Bangalore

It was a rainy September in 2003, and as usual, Mysore was overflowing with people who had converged for the Dasara celebrations. They were crowded into the palace gardens, lit up by the lights that chased the contours of this vast structure, impervious to the rain that fell well into the night. Central to the festivities was Srikanta Datta Narasimharaja Wadiyar, the erstwhile Maharaja of Mysore, resplendent in his regalia. With everybody preoccupied with the celebrations this was perhaps the wrong time to be in Mysore but Sunny, who photographed a large part of the paintings for the book, was emigrating to Australia. It was vital that he photograph the fabulous Mysore collection before he left, leaving the remainder to his assistant Pratap to finish.

In the midst of his multiple preoccupations essential for this time of the year, the former maharaja, Mr. Wadiyar, most graciously opened up his private rooms for us to photograph his personal collection. Among them was the impressive portrait of Maharaja Chamarajendra Wadiyar, that forms the cover of this book. Large parts of the palace lay in darkness as the electricity had been diverted to illuminate the extensive exterior. With the rain and the darkness, the walk through



Fig. 1.13 **Nair Lady Arranging Jasmine in Her Hair**, oil on canvas, 18 x 24", 1903. Collection: Travancore Royal Family, Kaudiar Palace, Thiruvananthapuram

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Fig. 1.14 Ramaswamy Naidu, *Lady Coiling Jasmine in Her Hair*, oil on canvas, 27 x 35", undated. Collection: Sri Chitra Art Gallery, Thiruvananthapuram

Fig. 1.15 **Varasiyar at the Bathing Ghat**, oil on canvas, 31.6 x 56", c. 1890s. Collection: Travancore Royal Family, Kaudiar Palace, Thiruvananthapuram

An anecdote often recounted within Ravi Varma's family was of a Varasiyar lady who drifted to the wrong bathing tank by mistake. This incident inspired Ravi Varma's depiction of the embarrassed young woman in this painting. The Warriors maintained major temples.

