

The Dual Representation of Apsaras in Indian Culture: Raja Ravi Varma's Subversion of Traditional Patterns

Senior Capstone Project

by

Gargi Bhalerao

College of Design, Art, Architecture, and Planning

Project Advisor: Dr. Chris Platts

Spring 2026

Introduction

Apsaras are divine maidens in Hindu mythology, embodying ethereal beauty and fertility. They are mainly dancers and servants in the heavenly courts of the gods, but they also serve as significant catalysts in many stories in the Hindu epics. Apsaras are the ultimate reward for fallen soldiers, and their beauty inspires worshippers to begin their journey of spiritual awakening. They have had a significant impact on Hindu visual art and temple architecture throughout India since their earliest depiction at the Bharhut Stupa temple in Khajuraho (present-day Madhya Pradesh) in the 10th century B.C.E.¹ The apsara's beauty and bodies are manipulated and used as sexual bait by their ruler, and their promiscuous nature results in them being eroticized and objectified in Hindu visual culture.² In contrast, Raja Ravi Varma, the “father of Indian art”, created artworks that focused on apsaras and challenged traditional representations by depicting them as independent and emotionally complex, emphasizing their mythological influence. In my research, I focus on a feminist analysis of Hindu literature and scholarship to understand the role of apsaras in Hindu epics and the pattern of sexualization. For my study of apsara representation in visual culture, I compare an early apsara temple sculpture from Khajuraho with Raja Ravi Varma's nontraditional depictions of apsaras to analyze the objectification of their bodies. Previous scholarship has focused extensively on the cultural significance of apsaras, and my analysis demonstrates how apsara representation has shifted with diverse cultural influences.

Several scholars have analyzed the mythological impact of apsaras in the major Hindu epics and the visual symbolism of apsara sculptures in temple statuary. The suffering and

¹ Ślaczka, Anna, “Temples, Inscriptions and Misconceptions.” *The Rijksmuseum Bulletin*, 2012: 224 <https://doi.org/10.52476/trb.9878>.

² Purobi Sen and Dr. Deepa Sarabhai, “Celestial Nymphs as Sexual Objects: A Study of the Indian Epic Ramayana”, *PalArch's Journal of Archaeology of Egypt*, 2020: 1425.

sacrifice of apsaras serve as divine protection or support for the main heroes in these epic stories. Deepa Sarabhai and Purobi Sen focus on the Ramayana specifically, and expand on the brutal nature of the apsara's bodily sacrifice and the psychological consequences of being sexually controlled and objectified. The functions of dehumanization that the apsara faces emphasize their lack of power and autonomy through the cycle of objectification. The significance of apsaras in Hindu spiritual practice is also demonstrated in a research article by Suwanee Goswami, in which she analyzes the psychological characteristics of the apsaras and the multifaceted impact of their sexuality. Her research demonstrates how they function as creative inspiration for artists and that their relationship with ascetics represents the connection of mind and spirit that signifies enlightenment. The significance of apsaras in temple architecture is established in Anna Ślaczka's study of *The Celestial Beauty* and the apsara sculptures in Khajuraho. Ślaczka's research is critical to understanding the distinguishing characteristics of apsara depictions that indicate their origins, and the spiritual significance of apsaras in Indian temples. To understand the purpose of Raja Ravi Varma's deviation from traditional apsara representations, I researched the evolution of his artistic training and intentional combination of European and Indian art culture. Sadhna Chouhan's comparative study on the female nude in Indian art asserts that Ravi Varma's representation of apsaras and women was an intentional shift to normalize sensuality and nudity. His cultural interpretation and depiction of Hindu mythology deviates from Indian art traditions by acknowledging the sexual nature and manipulative nature of the apsara while demonstrating their mythological impact.

This project analyzes the multidimensional impact of apsaras on Hindu mythology, visual art, and temple design to demonstrate cultural shifts in their representation from early to

modern India. By comparing one of the earliest depictions of apsaras, *The Celestial Beauty* (Fig. 1) from 950, with Ravi Varma's paintings of apsaras from the 1890s, my thesis explores the religious tradition in Indian visual culture that represents apsaras as powerless and promiscuous, to analyze the patriarchal belief system that consistently degrades them. I analyze Varma's paintings depicting the stories of *Urvashi and Pururavas* and of *Rambha* to understand his practice of representing apsaras in relation to the European tradition of mythological art. Researching the psychological and social impact of sexual objectification also reveals the cruelty that the apsaras experience in their submissive role. I analyze the exploitation and impact of apsaras in Hindu stories and temple art to demonstrate the evolution of apsara representation and its cultural implications. The sculptures of apsaras in temple statuary ignore their mythological significance, displaying their bodies and beauty to reinforce their passive function and promiscuous nature. Raja Ravi Varma depicts apsaras reverentially, shifting the focus of his paintings to their individual stories and significance. As a Sanskrit scholar, Varma challenged the influence of patriarchal Hindu tradition by legitimizing the sensuality and complexity of apsaras. Traditional temple sculptures objectify apsaras by focusing on their victimization and promiscuity in a forced sexual role to minimize their spiritual significance. Raja Ravi Varma based his art on his cultural and mythological research, rejecting the traditional pattern of objectification to emphasize the apsara's individual story and emotional complexity.

Apsaras in Indian Mythology

The origins of apsaras and their multifaceted roles in Hindu culture are significant in understanding their mythological impact. The Atharaveda, the fourth Vedic text in Hindu

mythological literature, states that apsaras were created at the beginning of the world, in the churning seafoam of the Indian rivers.³ Their existence is intrinsically linked to water, especially evident in their creative and eternally youthful energy. Apsaras are seen as divine muses of dance and art, embodying the spiritual significance of beauty, pleasure, and fertility.⁴ In Vedic spiritual traditions, the relationship between the apsaras and the sages is meant to trigger psychic sublimation, an inner shift of creative energy which enables comprehension of the universe and the attainment of enlightenment.⁵ Apsaras function as a psychic connection to the universe; the first spiritual contact with divine energy and bliss.⁶ The King God Indra controls apsaras from his heavenly court and sends them to powerful sages to sabotage their religious practice. The divine maidens represent beauty, creativity, and the manifestation of *kama* in Indian visual art. *Kama* is the Hindu concept of sexual desire, but also relates to sensory pleasure and enlightened bliss.⁷ Apsaras are a significant facet of spiritual enlightenment and evolved psychic experience, but they are degraded for the sexual nature of their sacred role.

The Ramayana, the first great Hindu epic, is an extremely valuable source that describes the early impact that apsaras played and their unjust consequences. Deepa Sarbhai analyses the different versions of objectification that apsaras face, and the unknown sacrifices they made in the Ramayana. She cites W.J. Wilkins, who wrote that “they are sometimes called the wives of the gods and the daughters of pleasure.”⁸ Apsaras were unwanted by both the gods and the demons since their creation, so they were considered common physical

³ Lad, Gouri, “Mahabharatha: A Mythology in the Making”, *Bulletin of the Deccan Post-Graduate Research Institute*, 1985, Vol. 44: 85.

⁴ Goswami, Suwanee, “APSARAS: An Archetypal Exploration of Unmotherly Mothers”. *International Journal of Indian Psychology*, (2025), 11(2): 1425. DOI:10.25215/1102.153.

⁵ Goswami, “APSARAS: An Archetypal Exploration of Unmotherly Mothers,” 1426.

⁶ Goswami, “APSARAS: An Archetypal Exploration of Unmotherly Mothers,” 1426.

⁷ Goswami, “APSARAS: An Archetypal Exploration of Unmotherly Mothers,” 1427.

⁸ Sen et al., “Celestial Nymphs as Sexual Objects: A Study of the Indian Epic Ramayana,” 9336.

property and were assumed to be promiscuous and lustful. Their spiritual role forces them into sexual subjugation and exploitation for the benefit of religious practice. Sarbhai draws upon the *Objectification Theory* by Fredrickson and Roberts, which “states the generalization of women as attractive bodies and their subjugation based on their physical selves”.⁹ Apsaras are consistently used for their divine bodies by sages and devotees in the pursuit of enlightenment, but are discriminated against for their exposed sexuality. The functions of objectification that describe the treatment of apsaras are instrumentality, reduction to body, and self-objectification. Sarabhai defines instrumentality as “treating a person as a tool for another purpose”.¹⁰ The act of using apsaras as sexual bait and reward is dehumanizing and forces them into a state of victimization. Indra controls the apsaras to manipulate sages and devotees, but they suffer constant punishment in their service. Reduction to body and appearance refers to treating women solely based on their bodies and physical beauty. The collective exploitation and sexual degradation result in self-objectification, which is “the act of considering oneself as an object of pleasure and using one’s own sexuality to exert power.”¹¹ This cycle of sexual objectification leads to the apsaras being represented as promiscuous and powerless in their stories and depictions, which created a traditional pattern in Indian temple art. Sarabhai’s article references the story of Apsara Punjikatshala, the mother of the monkey-god Hanuman, who is worshipped as a symbol of strength. She was sent to disturb the meditation of the sage Durvasa, and he cursed her to be reborn as a monkey named Anjana.¹² She returns to her original form only after giving birth to Hanuman. Her story demonstrates the body instrumentality that is

⁹ Sen et al., “Celestial Nymphs as Sexual Objects: A Study of the Indian Epic Ramayana,” 9338.

¹⁰ Sen et al., “Celestial Nymphs as Sexual Objects: A Study of the Indian Epic Ramayana,” 9338.

¹¹ Sen et al., “Celestial Nymphs as Sexual Objects: A Study of the Indian Epic Ramayana,” 9338.

¹² Sen et al., “Celestial Nymphs as Sexual Objects: A Study of the Indian Epic Ramayana,” 9340.

forced upon the apsara, and the spiritual impact of their sacrifice in religious stories. The god Hanuman was a major character in the Ramayana, and his support was a significant factor in the hero's victory against evil. The suffering and bodily sacrifice of the apsara Punjtkashala and countless others remain unseen. There are multiple instances of apsaras in the Ramayana who provide protection or create obstacles for the heroes, but their religious influence is a consequence of the suffering they endure.

Apsaras also play a major role in the Mahabharata, the second great epic in Hindu mythology. The maidens played a significant role in caring for fallen soldiers on battlefields, somewhat similar to the Valkyrie of Norse mythology. A passage from the Mahabharata, specifically in the Nalopākhyāna, describes the apsaras' preparation and role on the battlefield. The Nalopākhyāna describes how

When the heroic warriors are slain in battle, these heavenly maidens are said to become dead to them... these *apsaras*-es feel thrilled when they hear war drums, which herald the approaching warfare. They are now busy making their *toilette* for the first rendezvous with heroes... Often they descend to the battlefield, singing songs and playing on musical instruments, and ascend to heaven, taking the slain soldiers one after another in heavenly carts.¹³

The presence and affection of apsaras also spurred living soldiers to fight harder in battle, promising them a blissful afterlife after a glorious death. The apsaras are eager to take the soldiers to heaven, which leaves the wives of the fallen soldiers in grief and emotional distress. The wives feel jealous of the apsaras even before the husbands join the battlefield, and often lament in the Mahabharata about being left behind in the physical world. Another passage also references the duty of a faithful wife, who is ready to sacrifice herself to join

¹³ Hara, Minoru, "Apsaras and Hero", *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, Springer, Vol. 29, April 2001: 139-141.

her husband in the afterlife and not allow the apsaras to claim him. The story of Tarā mentions how she “despises herself for being simply annoyed by jealousy of the *apsaras*-es in heaven, and wants to be united with her husband in heaven...she requests Rāma to kill her with the same shaft in which he had killed her husband.”¹⁴ These passages also demonstrate the points of contention and comparison between apsaras and wives. The wives are supposed to uphold the expectation of marital devotion and sacrifice their lives for their husbands to compete against the apsara’s divine sexuality. The apsaras and wives serve the soldiers differently to emphasize the importance of a glorious death in battle and the functions of moral purity. The apsaras are presented as a heavenly reward for a heroic battle, and a guide to spiritual enlightenment. They are still described as opportunistic temptresses, and the grieving wives are faced with constant jealousy and the expectation of self-sacrifice. Apsaras inspire soldiers in battle and lead them to heaven, but the nature of their role only draws attention to their relationships with the soldiers and to the betrayal of their wives.

APSARAS: An Archetypal Exploration of Unmotherly Mothers

In her article, *Apsaras: An Archetypal Exploration of Unmotherly Mothers*, Suwanee Goswami explores the mythological depiction of apsaras and their deviation from traditional Indian gender roles. She presents the psychological theory that women who function as muses in society are creative wombs for ideas, philosophy, and art. However, cultural traditions force a moral dichotomy between sexually independent women who reject social expectations and the modest and austere women who adhere to those systems. Goswami explores the idea of the *heitara* archetype from ancient Greece, defined as a refined

¹⁴ Hara, Minoru, “Apsaras and Hero,” 146.

courtesan who was accomplished in the arts and possessed a cultivated intelligence.¹⁵ Their education and independence granted them conditional social freedom, and their lives were very different from those of the married women around them. Goswami references Carl Jung in her article and notes that to become these muses, women must “oscillate between the poles of goddess and whore”.¹⁶

Goswami contrasts this ancient concept of the *heitara* with the function of apsaras in Indian mythology, beginning with their creation. They were formed in the churning ocean of life and embody the spirit of water and change.¹⁷ Similar to water’s many forms, apsaras are also shapeshifters that can manipulate psychic energy to transform. Apsaras are divine inspirations and manifestations of creative expression that help artists connect to the universe. They are portrayed as immortal celestial maidens, sexually evolved and emotionally unattached in their partnerships. Goswami noted how apsaras were “accepted by neither the *devas* nor the *asuras* as their wives, they belonged to none but shared by all.”¹⁸ She never has a consistent partner but appears to individuals as divine visions, inspiring their craft or spiritual journey. The aspsara’s sacred purpose of sensory pleasure and divine inspiration causes her to suffer against moral prejudice and sexual objectification because she doesn’t conform to traditional gender roles.

The myths of the apsara and the old sage are also a recurring motif in Indian mythology. The King of Gods, Indra, routinely sends apsaras to sabotage the ascetic practices of powerful sages and hermits. Goswami references the myth of the apsara Menaka and the sage Vishvamisra, a prominent example of an apsara’s power of sexual

¹⁵ Goswami, “APSARAS: An Archetypal Exploration of Unmotherly Mothers,” 1424.

¹⁶ Goswami, “APSARAS: An Archetypal Exploration of Unmotherly Mothers,” 1424.

¹⁷ Goswami, “APSARAS: An Archetypal Exploration of Unmotherly Mothers,” 1424.

¹⁸ Goswami, “APSARAS: An Archetypal Exploration of Unmotherly Mothers,” 1425.

manipulation. Menaka successfully distracted Vishvamisra from his asceticism, resulting in the birth of a daughter named Shakuntala. Menaka later abandons her child to return to heaven on Indra's command, and another sage adopts Shakuntala. Indra had also sent the apsara Rambha to distract the sage Vishvamisra again, but this time, he had gained enough psychic powers to curse her to turn to stone for ten thousand years.¹⁹ Goswami cites Devdutt Pattanaik, an Indian mythologist, to explain Indra's motive for sabotaging the Hindu sages. She writes that the apsaras represent worldly abundance and fertility, and contrastingly, the hermits symbolize the search for enlightenment and evolved truth. Indra, the god of thunder and rain, is meant to facilitate the fertilization and growth of the earth and life. The ascetic practices of sages go against the rules of nature and are therefore consistently sabotaged by Indira, and the apsaras face sexual violence and spiritual curses under his control.

Goswami also analyzes how the relationship between the apsara and the sage symbolizes the divine evolution of physical beauty and pleasure into enlightened bliss. She describes the necessity of apsaras in spiritual practice, stating that "the *yogi*-sage needs the apsara-the manifestation of the feminine within- to facilitate the arousal of psychic energy."²⁰ The apsara serves as a test for devoted ascetics as their first contact with the divine spirit in the universe, helping them attain enlightenment. Apsaras demonstrate the significance of *kama* in Hindu spirituality, the pursuit of pleasure, desire, and aesthetic evolution. Goswami concludes that though the apsaras are vilified for their emotional detachment and their promiscuous nature, their connection to evolved pleasure makes them spiritual guides for religious enlightenment. Though apsaras function as divine muses for

¹⁹ Goswami, "APSARAS: An Archetypal Exploration of Unmotherly Mothers," 1427.

²⁰ Goswami, "APSARAS: An Archetypal Exploration of Unmotherly Mothers," 1426.

Hindu sages and worshippers, their sexual liberty comes with the consequences of body objectification and degradation.

Visual Analysis of Fig. 1- The Celestial Beauty from Khajuraho

The Celestial Beauty, shown in Figure One, was sourced in Khajuraho in the 1930s by Charles Fabri for the Asian Art Society in the Netherlands. It is currently on display at the Rijksmuseum, where Anna Ślaczka studied the apsara statue to determine her original location in the Laxmana temple complex in Khajuraho. *The Celestial Beauty* was criticized by the chairman and members of the Asia Society for her exposed body, but Ślaczka uses her research to comment on the differences in moral prejudices between European and Indian culture and the spiritual significance of the apsara sculptures in Indian temples.

The Celestial Beauty is a light-pink sandstone sculpture dating to 950 C.E. that depicts an apsara, her attendant, and two monkeys beneath a tree. The apsara holds a flywhisk over her head as a monkey playfully tugs away her skirt or loincloth. The veil draped around her shoulders begins to slip down her arms as she stares down at it. Her bare body is put on display as the monkey pulls her skirt away to expose her genitals; her breasts are almost fully exposed, but she is laden with jewelry to emphasize the curves of her body. Her hair is braided away from her face and interwoven with flowers, with soft curls falling across her forehead as she looks down at the playful monkey. She wears heavy earrings and multiple detailed necklaces draped across her neck, collarbones, and down to her chest, with a single strand of jewels dripping between her breasts. She wears intricate armbands and bangles as well, and heavy anklets. The female attendant to her left is one-third her size, depicted in heavy jewelry, yet fully bare.

The apsara sculpture, *The Celestial Beauty*, demonstrates the apsara's passive role and the objectification of their bodies in Indian temple statuary. The apsara is depicted as a helpless victim, unable to defend herself against a small monkey. Her body is effectively put on display, and she becomes an object of sensual pleasure and beauty for the viewer.

Temples, Inscriptions, and Misconceptions- Anna Ślaczka

Anna Ślaczka begins her article by introducing an apsara statue at the Rijksmuseum, and the mystery behind its origin and acquisition. The Asian Art Society of the Netherlands had been trying to expand its collection in the 1930s, and chose Charles Louis Fábri as its acquisition agent.²¹ He was trained in philosophy, Indology, and Asian Art at the University of Pécs. He was also a temporary resident in Bengal when the Asian Art Society decided to expand, and he was highly valued for his research. Fabri had chosen an apsara statue that was shipped from Calcutta to the Netherlands. The sculpture emphasizes the apsara's passivity and physical beauty by placing her in a helpless position, being teased by a small monkey, and by the heavy detailing of her jewelry and clothing, which accentuates her body. Ślaczka conducts a visual analysis of *The Celestial Beauty* to emphasize its intricate details and dynamic representation. She also delves into the cultural symbolism in the sculpture to demonstrate the intentionality behind an apsara depiction. Ślaczka notes that when the apsara sculpture reached the Society, it elicited mixed reactions. The chairman of the Asia Society was unhappy with the statue, remarking on the 'unattractive color and the fall of the folds.'²² Ślaczka points out that the critique was hard to believe because no observations or records of the apsara were found to support that claim. She concluded that the prim reaction

²¹ Ślaczka, "Temples, Inscriptions and Misconceptions," 213.

²² Ślaczka, "Temples, Inscriptions and Misconceptions," 216.

of the members was caused by the regressive mindset of European modesty, which might have been unable to accept the sensuality of the apsara's form or her exposed body.

Ślaczka also draws attention to the lack of research into the origins of the apsara sculpture and its representational patterns in the 1930s, particularly concerning the Rijksmuseum's acquisitions. The apsara sculpture in the Rijksmuseum was originally from the Laxmana temple complex in the city of Khajuraho, but Ślaczka worked to find the specific position of the *Celestial Beauty* in her original location. Ślaczka writes that "as a rule it is extremely difficult to attribute an individual sculpture from a museum collection to a specific monument, particularly when there is scant information on the purchase."²³ She writes that a match between an ancient artifact and a cultural location is possible if the patterns in body anatomy, jewelry detailing, and clothing drapery and design are consistent. Her research demonstrates the visual impact of apsara sculptures in the Khajuraho temple complex.

Slackza's research was critical in demonstrating the visual significance of apsara sculptures and their cultural value in Indian temples and European museums. She emphasizes the importance of ethical cultural acquisition and the differences in apsara representation, as well as her approach for identifying apsara sculptures with minimal information about their origin. Slazcka demonstrates the significance of apsara sculptures in temple design and art, as well as the cultural patterns of objectification in India and Europe. Her research proves the visual impact of apsara sculptures in Indian temples, and the cultural value of their artistic representation.

Raja Ravi Varma's Artistic Evolution

²³ Ślaczka, "Temples, Inscriptions and Misconceptions," 217.

Ravi Varma Koil Tamuran, soon known as Raja Ravi Varma, was born in an aristocratic family on April 29th, 1848. His talent was discovered by his uncle, Raja Raja Varma, who was also an artist and encouraged his experimentation. Their family was linked to the rulers of Travancore in South India, so Varma was able to study the techniques of the court painters in the Tanjore art style from an early age. Varma was familiar with the Tanjore painting tradition from his uncle's lessons, and he was also resourceful in studying the oil paintings that hung in his family's court. He also observed the artistic processes of Theodore Jensen, a traveling artist who visited the royal courts in 1868.²⁴ Varma's art was a "blend of Western technique and Indian subject" in the words of George Curzon, the Viceroy of India.²⁵ His art style demonstrated his command of Western illusionism, but he hadn't received any formal or traditional artistic training. Varma was skilled at portraiture and crafting human likenesses, and he was paid more for his commissions than the standard rate for Indian painters in the 1890s because of his elite network of patrons.²⁶ His skill also earned him an extensive, valuable network of patrons over time as his recognition grew. He worked with his younger brother, who was also a talented landscape artist, to commission multiple valuable works.²⁷ Varma's talent and innovative art style reached international audiences, and Varma was chosen to represent Indian art at the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893, where he won two awards.

Ravi Varma often centers women as artistic subjects in his works, and his choices deviated from traditional visual patterns in Indian art. His art style is a commentary on the reconfiguration of femininity during the British occupation of India, and demonstrates the

²⁴ Mittar, Parth, *Art and Nationalism in Colonial India*, Cambridge University Press, 1994: 184.

²⁵ Mittar, *Art and Nationalism in Colonial India*, 180.

²⁶ Mittar, *Art and Nationalism in Colonial India*, 190.

²⁷ Mittar, *Art and Nationalism in Colonial India*, 190.

shifting gender roles and cultural changes from Western influence.²⁸ His depiction of apsaras and other significant women in Sanskrit mythology combines traditional and Western ideals while rejecting the patriarchal tradition of passive objectification. He was influenced by his father, a respected Sanskrit scholar, to understand the spiritual complexity of his mythological pieces. Ravi Varma makes the artistic decisions to place his female subjects in the center of his pieces, and emphasizes their emotional complexity and cultural impact.²⁹ Laxmi Nair describes how Varma places the politics of the gaze back in the hands of women by situating them as thinking, feeling, and desiring subjects.³⁰ Varma subverts the colonial influence of modesty by normalizing sensuality, and the symbolism in his mythological paintings reflects the spiritual significance of the apsara.

Raja Ravi Varma also introduced a new representation of the female nude in his art. Several of his paintings and prints depict an unclothed or partially clothed woman, but he is very intentional and nuanced in his artistic choices. His representations were heavily influenced by European academic realism and the Romantic movement, but he always centered on the representation of Indian women and Indian iconography. Sadhna Chouhan observes how “Varma’s artistic style has influence of the West, but the themes are indigenous to the traditional folklore, revisiting his influence in the context of contemporary Indian art reveals complex continuities and discrepancies in the representations of the nude.”³¹ The female nude was prevalent in European art, but it was also common in Indian

²⁸ Laxmi Nair and Dr. M. Angakayarkan Vinayakaservi, “Shifting Gender Norms and Sexuality Questions Towards Transforming Womanhood in Raja Ravi Varma Paintings,” *ShodhKosh: Journal of Visual and Performing Arts*, June 2025, 6(2): 115.

²⁹ Nair et al., “Shifting Gender Norms and Sexuality Questions Towards Transforming Womanhood in Raja Ravi Varma Paintings”, 115.

³⁰ Nair et al., “Shifting Gender Norms and Sexuality Questions Towards Transforming Womanhood in Raja Ravi Varma Paintings”, 117.

³¹ Kamble Nishita and Dr.Sadhna Chouhan, 2025. “The Nude in the Artworks of Raja Ravi Varma, Amrita Shergill, Jamini Roy: A Comparative Study”, *Shodhshreejan: Journal of Creative Research Insights*, January-June 2025, 2(1): 17.

art and culture, especially in ancient India and before British colonization. Varma normalized the beauty and sensuality of the apsara while emphasizing their mythological significance. Traditional depictions of apsaras in Indian temples are a stark contrast to Varma's figures of independence and complexity. Chouhan writes that "Raja Ravi Varma attempted to normalize the representation of both clothed and naked figures, including divine beings and ordinary people, while also legitimizing sensuality in Indian art during the colonial period."³² Varma roots his art in the scholarly culture that shaped his upbringing, making his artworks emotionally intense and spiritually resonant. By combining Western art traditions with Indian inspiration, he shifts the representation of apsaras and emphasizes their spiritual and mythological significance. Raja Ravi Varma rejects the colonial influence on modesty by normalizing nudity, rooting his paintings in cultural accuracy to reflect the spiritual significance of the apsaras.

The Story of Urvashi and Pururavas and Ravi Varma's Interpretation

In Raja Ravi Varma's painting *Urvashi and Pururavas* (Fig. 2), he depicts the apsara Urvashi leaving King Pururavas after his final betrayal. Unlike the traditional depictions of apsaras, Varma chose to depict Urvashi as pure and angelic. He paints her returning to Vedic heaven, draped in a soft pink sari with golden borders. She is also shown with pearly-pale skin, long curly hair, and a gentle smile. The sari billows around her as she ascends to the sky, wrapping gently around her waist and legs to emphasize her graceful figure and her ephemeral nature. Urvashi is shown dripping in gold jewelry, with delicate earrings, bangles, and anklets that emphasize her radiant beauty and movements. As she rises, King

³² Kamble et al., "The Nude in the Artworks of Raja Ravi Varma, Amrita Shergill, Jamini Roy: A Comparative Study," 17.

Pururavas grabs onto the end of her sari with a devastated expression. His other hand clutches at his chest, and his desperation to physically and emotionally hold onto her is evident. The king is shown shirtless, with a beaded string which resembles a *mala*, the Hindu equivalent of a rosary. He wears a simple, heavy golden bangle and two rings, which reveal his emotional vulnerability. Though he is a king, he is not shown in his traditional royal attire or opulent jewels. His bare skin and lack of jewelry make him look like a Hindu sage or worshipper, showing how the nature of apsaras can affect all men, regardless of their status. Urvashi looks back towards him, extending her arm with her palm out to reject his efforts. Her expression seems soft and sad, but her body language demonstrates that she is resolute in her decision to leave him behind. Even though Varma captured a single moment in Urvashi's story, the emotional intensity and divine mythological elements center her agency.

The story of Urvashi and Pururavas demonstrates the tragic romances that apsaras face when Indra and the heavenly court control them. Urvashi was born from the sage Narayana, specifically when he slashed it open in response to the apsaras sent by Indra.³³ He presents her to Indra, and she becomes a prominent dancer in his court, especially admired for her beauty. Pururavas has a divine lineage as well; he is descended from Brahma, the creator of the universe. Pururavas rescues Urvashi from being kidnapped by a demon, and she falls in love with him as a mortal.³⁴ He falls for her, but they separate as she is called back to heaven by Indra. Urvashi pines for Pururavas in heaven, and is cursed to rejoin him and bear his children, but her teacher declares that if her son ever lays eyes on his father, she will be forced to return to heaven.³⁵ Urvashi is happy with this, as she has no desire to care for her

³³ Gartrell, Kate, "Urvashi and Pururavas", EBSCO Information Services, 2021.

³⁴ Gartrell, Kate, "Urvashi and Pururavas".

³⁵ Gartrell, Kate, "Urvashi and Pururavas".

child, only to find Pururavas. When they reunite, she sets two conditions to live at his palace: he must protect her pet goats, and she can never see him naked.³⁶ The *gandharvas*, celestial musicians of the heavenly courts, conspire to bring Urvashi back to heaven. They steal her goats at night, and Indra sends a lightning bolt when Pururavas runs after them to illuminate his body as Urvashi's awoke.³⁷ Urvashi then returned to heaven after both of her conditions were broken, and left a devastated Pururavas behind. Raja Ravi Varma chose to depict the moment when Urvashi left him and returned to heaven, where she chose her boundaries and defended what was valuable to her. She was unlucky to be manipulated by Indra and his *gandharvas*, and for her love to be beyond her control, but Ravi Varma depicts her in a moment when she rejects actions that didn't meet her standards. He depicted her as sympathetic, with a gentle, melancholic smile that shows her sadness at having to leave him behind. Urvashi was shown fully clothed and almost angelic, a balance of detachment and love showing on her face as she breaks the heart of Pururavas and returns to heaven.

The Story of Apsara Rambha and Raja Ravi Varma's Depiction

Raja Ravi Varma's *Rambha* (Fig. 3) print was made in 1896 as a chromolithograph from his press. He depicted the apsara Rambha in a full-body portrait, focusing on her identity without linking her to a man or a mythological tale. He depicts her in an olive-green sari with a golden sash and floral embroidery draped around her waist; she is almost completely covered, except for her bare arms and feet. She wears a translucent light-green-and-gold-bordered veil over her head, representing her modesty and innocence. Her right hand lifts the veil, and she appears to be gazing into the distance with a faint smile.

³⁶ Gartrell, Kate, "Urvashi and Pururavas".

³⁷ Gartrell, Kate, "Urvashi and Pururavas".

Her hand seems to adjust the veil to see more clearly, and her wide-eyed gaze conveys a sense of youth and curiosity. Varma depicts her as stunningly beautiful, with deep golden skin and long, curly black hair, which is partially hidden behind the veil. Rambha is shown wearing heavy jewelry, with delicate emerald earrings, multiple strings of pearls and jewels around her neck, and a white garland of flowers threaded with pink blossoms. She wears green, gold, and red bangles on her wrists as well, and a small gold pinky ring on her right hand. The heavy jewelry makes her seem more mature, which, in contrast, draws attention to her unnatural beauty. Clouds surround her, and she seems to be standing on them as well, which situates her in heaven. By depicting Rambha as fully clothed and veiled, Varma demonstrates that apsaras can be almost indistinguishable from normal Indian women if represented respectfully. The only obvious markers that identify her as an apsara are the title of Varma's print, her background, and the combination of her perfect beauty and delicate jewelry. Varma emphasized her beauty in a way that made her divinity clear, but he showed Rambha foremost as a young, innocent girl.

The story of the aspara Rambha is a heartbreaking example of their exploitation and sexual degradation. Rambha was the Queen of apsaras; her beauty and dancing skills were unmatched in the court of Indra.³⁸ She was the wife of Nalakuvara, the nephew of the ten-headed demon king Ravana, who ruled the kingdom of Lanka. Rambha caught Ravana's attention, and he insults her and assaults her when he learns she is an apsara.³⁹ When her husband learns of her suffering, he confronts Ravana immediately in his court. Ravana tries to blame Rambha and declares that she seduced him as expected of apsaras, but Nalakuvara believes his wife and curses his heads to explode if he ever forcibly lays a hand on any

³⁸ Sen et al., "Celestial Nymphs as Sexual Objects: A Study of the Indian Epic Ramayana," 9339.

³⁹ Sen et al., "Celestial Nymphs as Sexual Objects: A Study of the Indian Epic Ramayana," 9339.

woman again.⁴⁰ This curse is the same one that protects Sita, the main heroine of the *Ramayana*, from Ravana's touch and the violence that the apsara experienced. Rambha's husband defended her against Ravana's accusations, but she still suffered through assault and moral prejudice for being an apsara. Without the sexual degradation of Rambha, Sita would not have been safe from Ravana, and the *Ramayana* may have had a much darker ending. In his print, Ravi Varma intentionally depicts Rambha as an innocent maiden, pure and bright-eyed. Her heavily draped clothing and jewelry indicate her elevated status, but his interpretation of her form emphasizes that she was a young woman who was happily married and cherished in heaven.

Conclusion

Raja Ravi Varma's representation of apsaras is a cultural shift from the traditional Indian visual culture that focused on their bodies and promiscuity. Ravi Varma emphasizes the spiritual significance of apsaras in Hindu mythology and uses cultural symbolism to demonstrate their individual impact. Apsaras in Indian temple art are objectified and depicted as passive objects, which misrepresents their significance in Hindu mythology and spiritual enlightenment. The evolution of apsara representation is caused by cultural shifts and mythological research that centers women as independent subjects. Ravi Varma combines European and Indian art traditions to normalize the Indian culture of nudity and sensuality. He rejects the visual tradition of objectifying apsaras to emphasize their spiritual significance in Hindu stories.

⁴⁰ Sen et al., "Celestial Nymphs as Sexual Objects: A Study of the Indian Epic *Ramayana*," 9339.

Figures



Figure 1. "Celestial Beauty", Sculpture, c. 950, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

<https://www.rijksmuseum.nl/en/collection/object/Heavenly-beauty--e6a8ab210d54b521ef5286199e77954d>

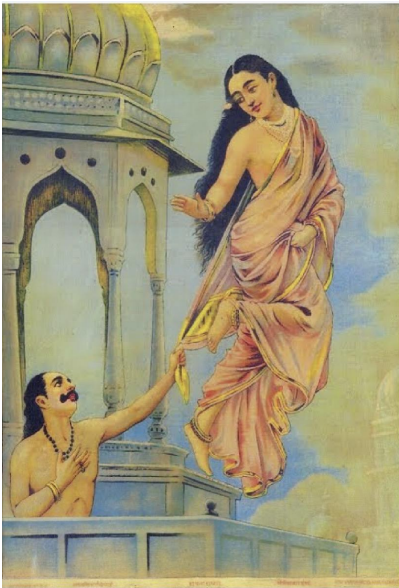


Figure 2. Ravi Varma, Raja, "Urvashi and Pururavas," 1890, Painting, Karla, Lonavla, Google Arts and Culture

<https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/urvashi-ravi-varma-press/-AE-4kWlzsLJQ?hl=en>



Figure 3. Ravi Varma, Raja, “Rambha,” 1896, Chromolithograph, Ravi Varma Press, Bombay, Google Arts and Culture, <https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/rambha-raja-ravi-varma/ZwF-FbKjzEdm3A?hl=e>

Works Cited

- Cooksey, Rachel, "The Influence of Raja Ravi Varma's Mythological Subjects in Popular Art" *Independent Study Project Collection* (2016): https://digitalcollections.sit.edu/isp_collection/2511
- Gartrell, Kate, "Urvashi and Pururavas", EBSCO Information Services, 2021.
- Goswami, Suwanee, "APSARAS: An Archetypal Exploration of Unmotherly Mothers". *International Journal of Indian Psychology*, (2025), 11(2): 1423-1428. DOI:10.25215/1102.153
- Hara, Minoru, "Apsaras and Hero", *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, Springer, Vol. 29, April 2001: 135-153.
- Kamble Nishita and Dr.Sadhna Chouhan, 2025. "The Nude in the Artworks of Raja Ravi Varma, Amrita Shergill, Jamini Roy: A Comparative Study", *Shodhshreejan: Journal of Creative Research Insights*, January-June 2025, 2(1): 16-22.
- Mitter, Partha, *Art and Nationalism in Colonial India*, Cambridge University Press, 1994.
- Lad, Gouri, "Mahabharatha: A Mythology in the Making", *Bulletin of the Deccan Post-Graduate Research Institute*, 1985, Vol. 44: 83-93.
- Laxmi Nair and Dr. M. Angakayarkan Vinayakaselvi, "Shifting Gender Norms and Sexuality Questions Towards Transforming Womanhood in Raja Ravi Varma Paintings," *ShodhKosh: Journal of Visual and Performing Arts*, June 2025, 6(2): 111-118.
- Purobi Sen and Dr. Deepa Sarabhai, "Celestial Nymphs as Sexual Objects: A Study of the Indian Epic Ramayana", *PalArch's Journal of Archaeology of Egypt*, 2020: 1423-1428.
- Ślącza, Anna, "Temples, Inscriptions and Misconceptions." *The Rijksmuseum Bulletin*, 2012. <https://doi.org/10.52476/trb.9878>.