



Timeless

The art of Raja Ravi Varma

DISCOVER MAP



*She is Goddess Lakshmi, the Hindu goddess of wealth, fortune, beauty and prosperity.

This is an image from the 1930s, advertising a soap. Do you recognise the figure?* Can you think of why this figure was used to promote soap, of all things?

The person who made this painting is one of the most famous artists from India, and his art is around us even today – whether as home decor or as advertisements for various household goods! His name was Raja Ravi Varma.

What product(s) would you choose to advertise using this image? Why?

Hailing from present-day Kerala, Ravi Varma started painting from a young age.

Did you know that originally his name was only Ravi Varma? The title Raja was given to him in honour of his artistic talent, by Lord Curzon, who was the Viceroy and Governor-General of India. And from then he became **Raja Ravi Varma**.

What does this picture tell you about the artist and his personality?



Image: Public domain on Wikimedia Commons



Image: Public domain on Wikimedia Commons

Ravi Varma first received encouragement and training in his artistic practice from his uncle, who brought him to the Travancore court and introduced him and his work to the Maharaja.

Learning from others later, Ravi Varma eventually became known for making detailed portraits and pictures of Indian deities and mythological characters, particularly in the medium of oil paintings.



He was also interested in everybody being able to see his art, not just the rich and noble people who employed him to make them paintings. So he often held public exhibitions of work.

Most importantly, he was responsible for one of the first printing presses in the country, which allowed for multiple copies of his artworks to be reproduced and sold.

If you had to pair a song with this image, which one would it be and why?



Ravi Varma is considered as the first Indian modern artist. He introduced Indian subjects to Western mediums and techniques which gave way to new kind of imagery. This, in turn, had a huge impact on art made in the beginning of the 20th century.

In the next few pages, let us take a peek at some painting techniques Varma introduced to Indian art.

If you were inside this picture, what different sounds would you hear?

#1 Perspective

VOCABULARY ALERT!

Perspective is a way of showing depth and distance in a picture or painting. Observe how Ravi Varma achieves that in this painting.

LOOK CLOSELY

Can you spot the building through the window? The building appears smaller and further away in comparison to woman.

This creates the illusion of three dimensions on a flat surface like a canvas.

Image: Public domain on Wikimedia Commons



#2 Chiaroscuro

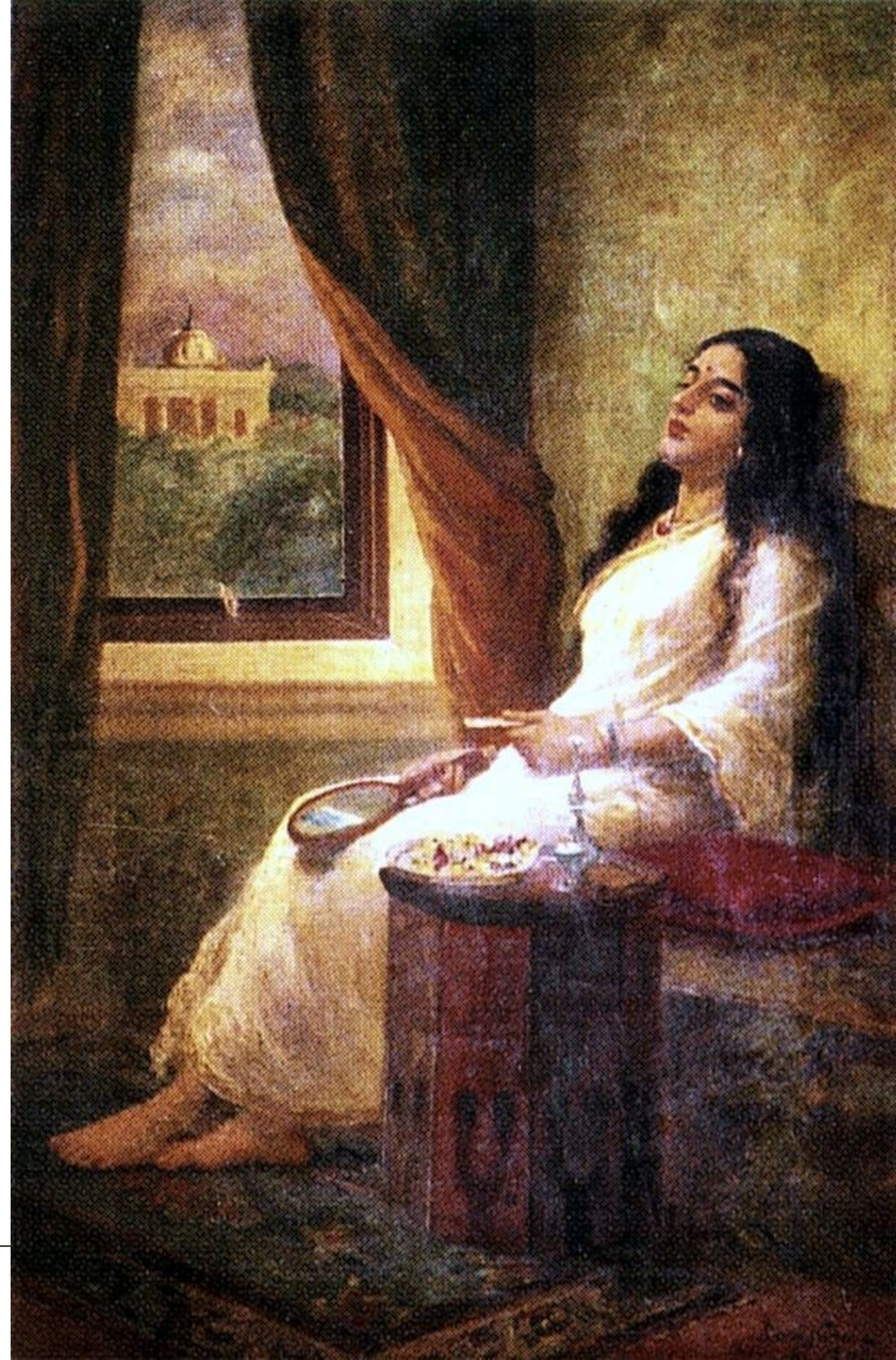
VOCABULARY ALERT!

Chiaroscuro (kia-rus-curo) means 'light-dark' in Italian. In painting it is used to refer to the use and play of strong light and dark tones.

Usually dark shadows and areas are used in the background with strong light on subject. Can you spot where it feels like the light is coming in from, in this painting?

When used along with perspective, this technique enhances the illusion of the subject in the painting being 3D.

Image: Public domain on Wikimedia Commons



#3 Realism

Ravi Varma paid attention to details like facial expressions, clothing, and background scenery.

He layered his paints to create texture and depth. All of these things helped to make his paintings look like real people and places.

Based on her expression, how do you think the woman in the painting is feeling at the moment?

Image: Public domain on Wikimedia Commons





Image: Public domain on Wikimedia Commons

All of these techniques you just learnt about were European techniques which Varma was heavily inspired by including oil painting (which was common in the West from the 11th century). Even though he used Western techniques, the themes he explored were Indian.

Imagine how the curtain, the skirt or the pillars would feel if you could touch them? Would they all feel the same?

COMPARE AND CONTRAST

Here is a quick game for you now! Image A is Rani Lakshmi Bayi of Travancore, painted by Ravi Varma in 1883 and image B is that of Queen Victoria, painted in 1843. Can you compare these two images and list down any similarities and differences?

A



Image: Public domain on Wikimedia Commons

B



Image: Public domain on Wikimedia Commons



Ravi Varma painted several portraits and most of his subjects were royal families and people of higher ranks.. Even when photography was present, important people found it prestigious to have their portraits painted.

LOOK CLOSELY.

- Why do you think the background is left blank?
- Can you recognise any of the faces in the pendants on their neck? What do you think it means?
- How would you describe this person's expression? What about their clothes?



GAME TIME!

Now would you like to take a guess as to who this person is?

- a. A King
- b. An aristocrat or person from a noble family
- c. A Soldier

Why do you think so?

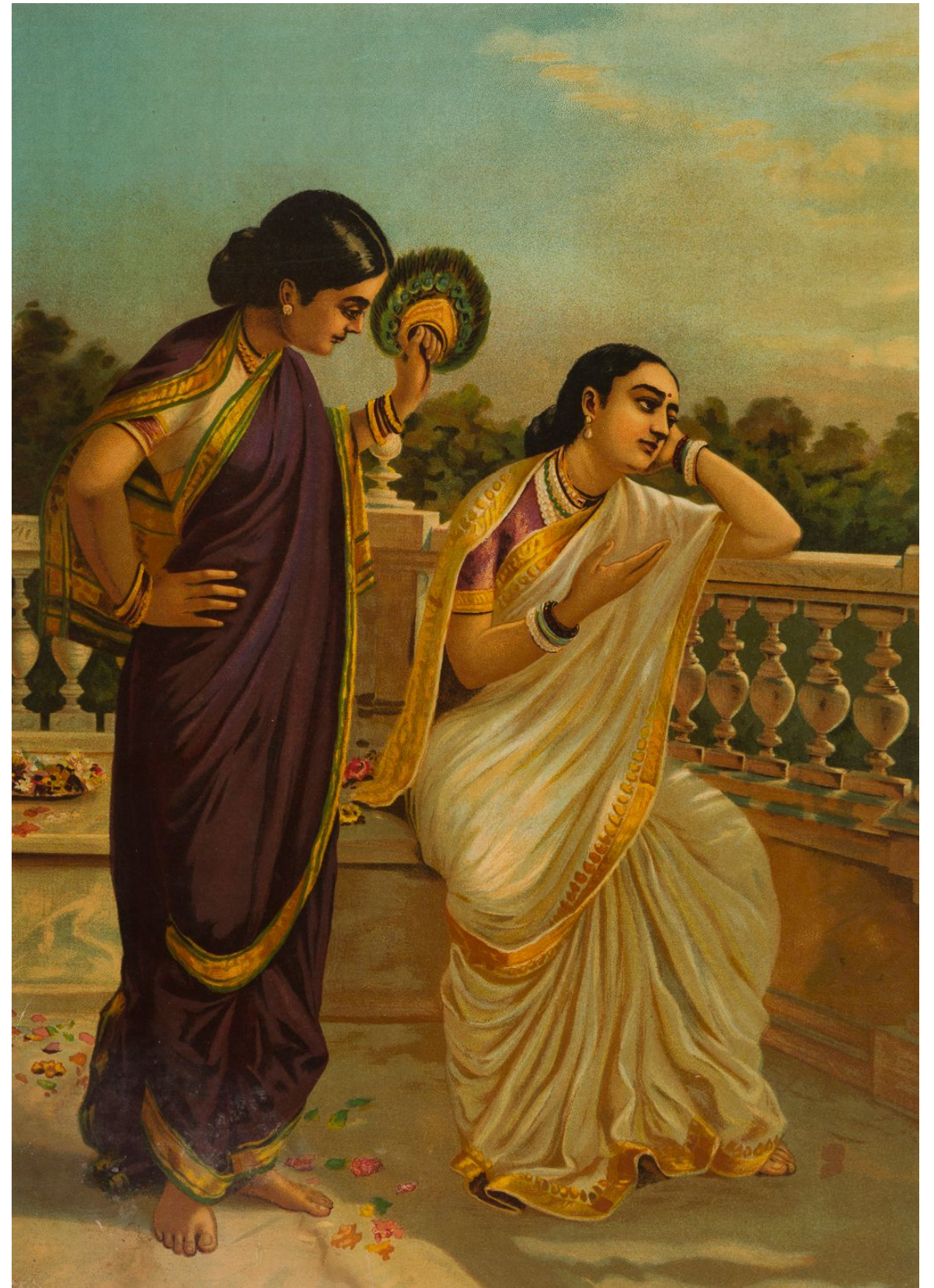
Answer:B

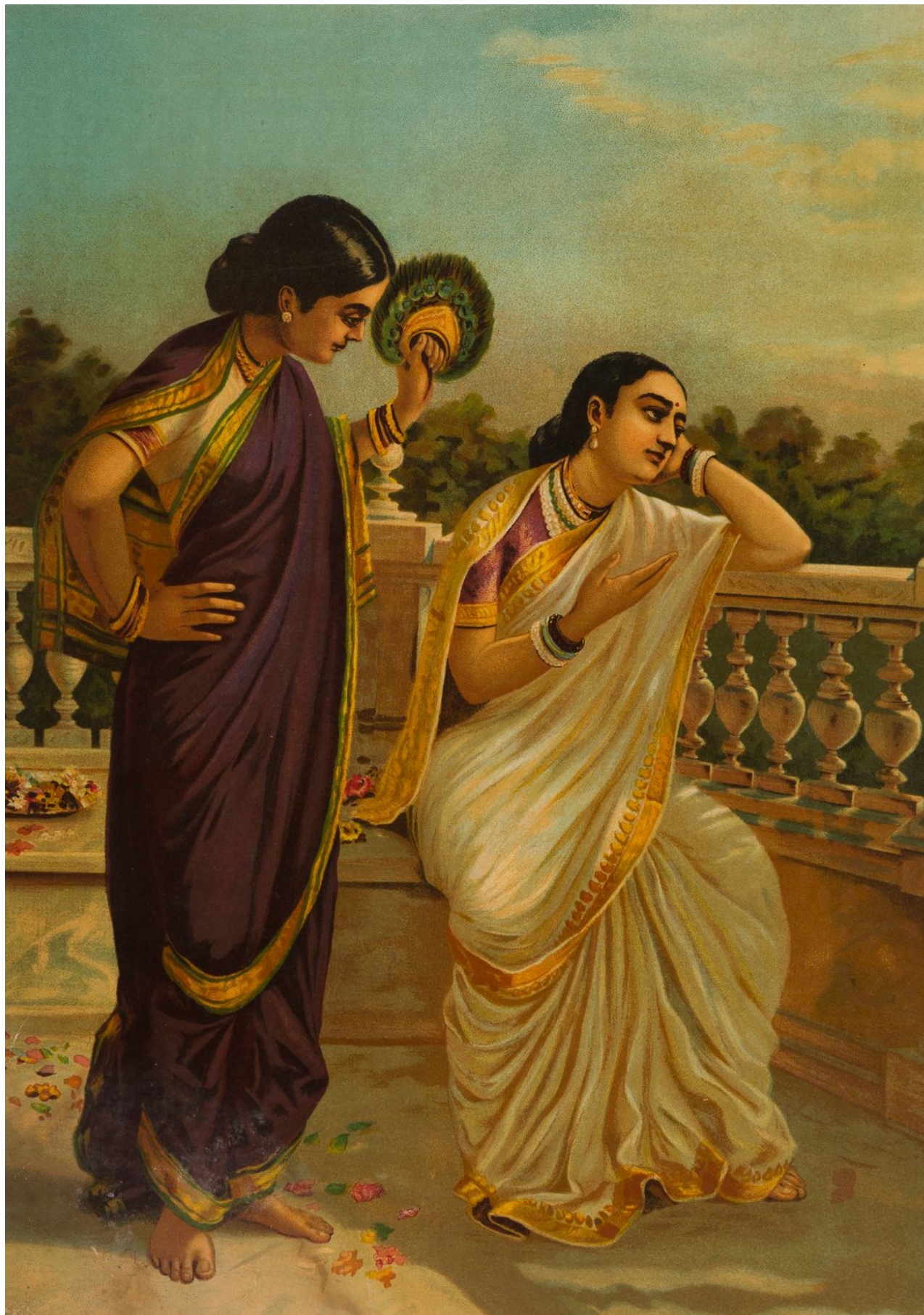
In addition to portraits, Varma painted scenes and stories from various myths. He took inspiration for these compositions from various sources including theatre, dance and photography.

LOOK CLOSELY.

- Can you guess the time of the day? What makes you say that?
- Where do you think they might be located?
- Observe the folds and creases in the saris of these two figures. Do you learn anything from that?

What do you imagine these two characters are talking about?





Inspired by other European artists, Ravi Varma often used the spotlight effect in his works.

This use of spotlight also is a simple technique of bringing attention to parts of painting which needed to be focused on.

This scene is from the story of Nala and Damayanti.

Looking at the expression and hand gesture of the lady in white saree, what does that tell you about what's on her mind?

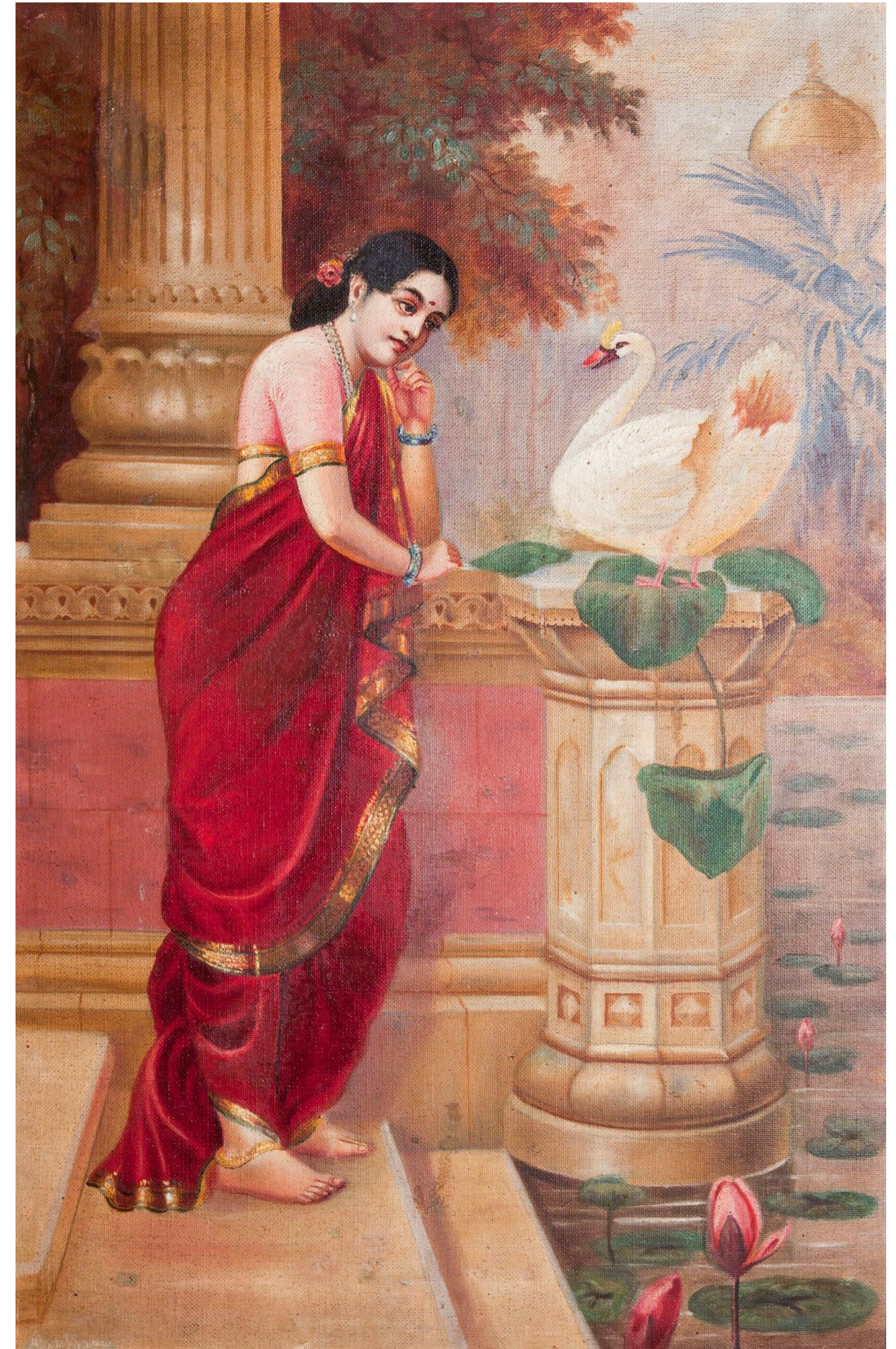
Here is another painting by Varma, of a different moment from the same story. This is a love story between Damayanti and King Nala, who fall in love without ever meeting, but simply by learning about each other through a swan.

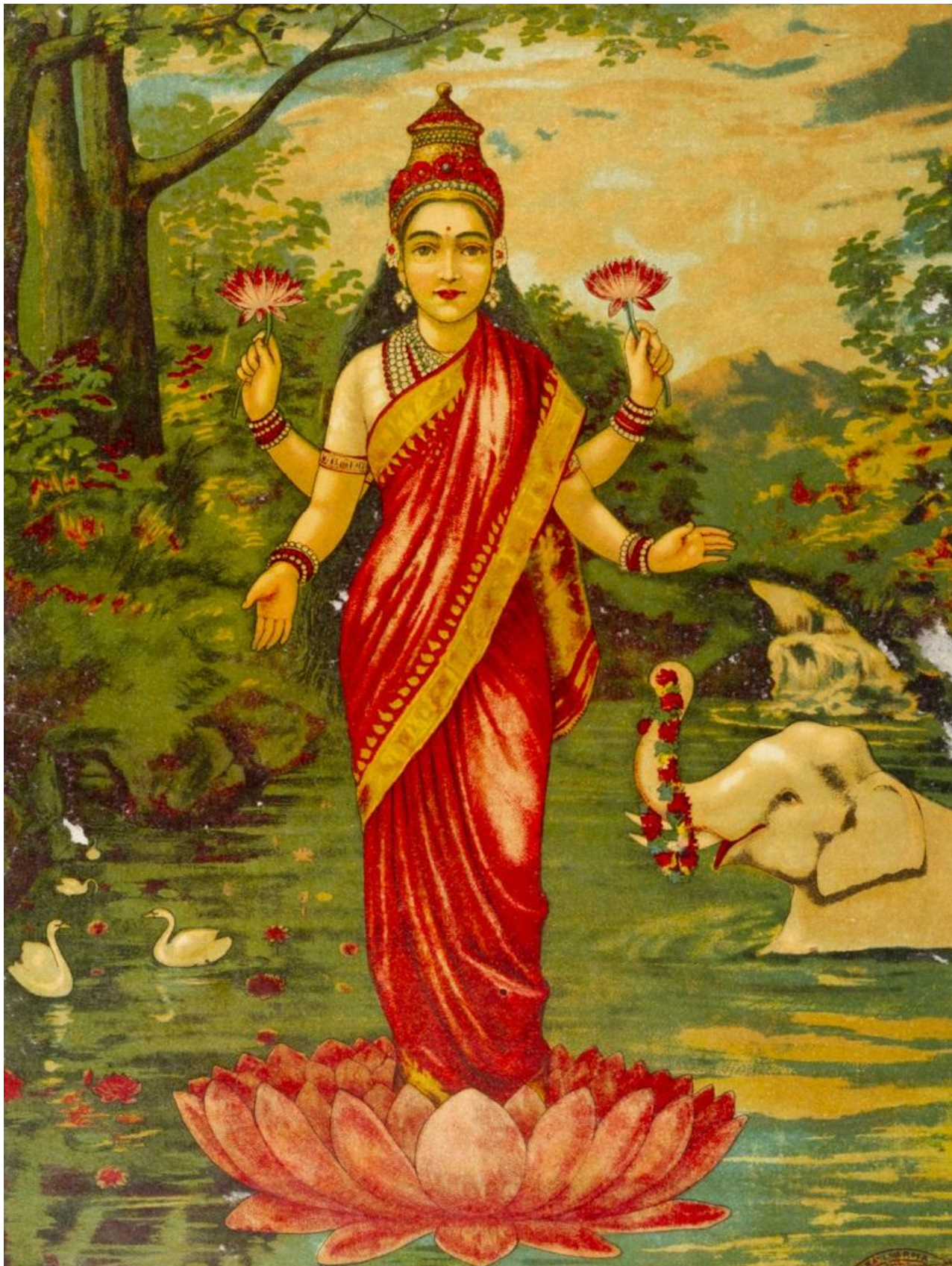
THINK.

Now that you know a little bit of the story, can you guess which part is depicted in this painting?

Is the setting indoors or outdoors?
What makes you say that?

Check out the **Stories with Art extra** for a fun activity inspired by Ravi Varma's mythological paintings!



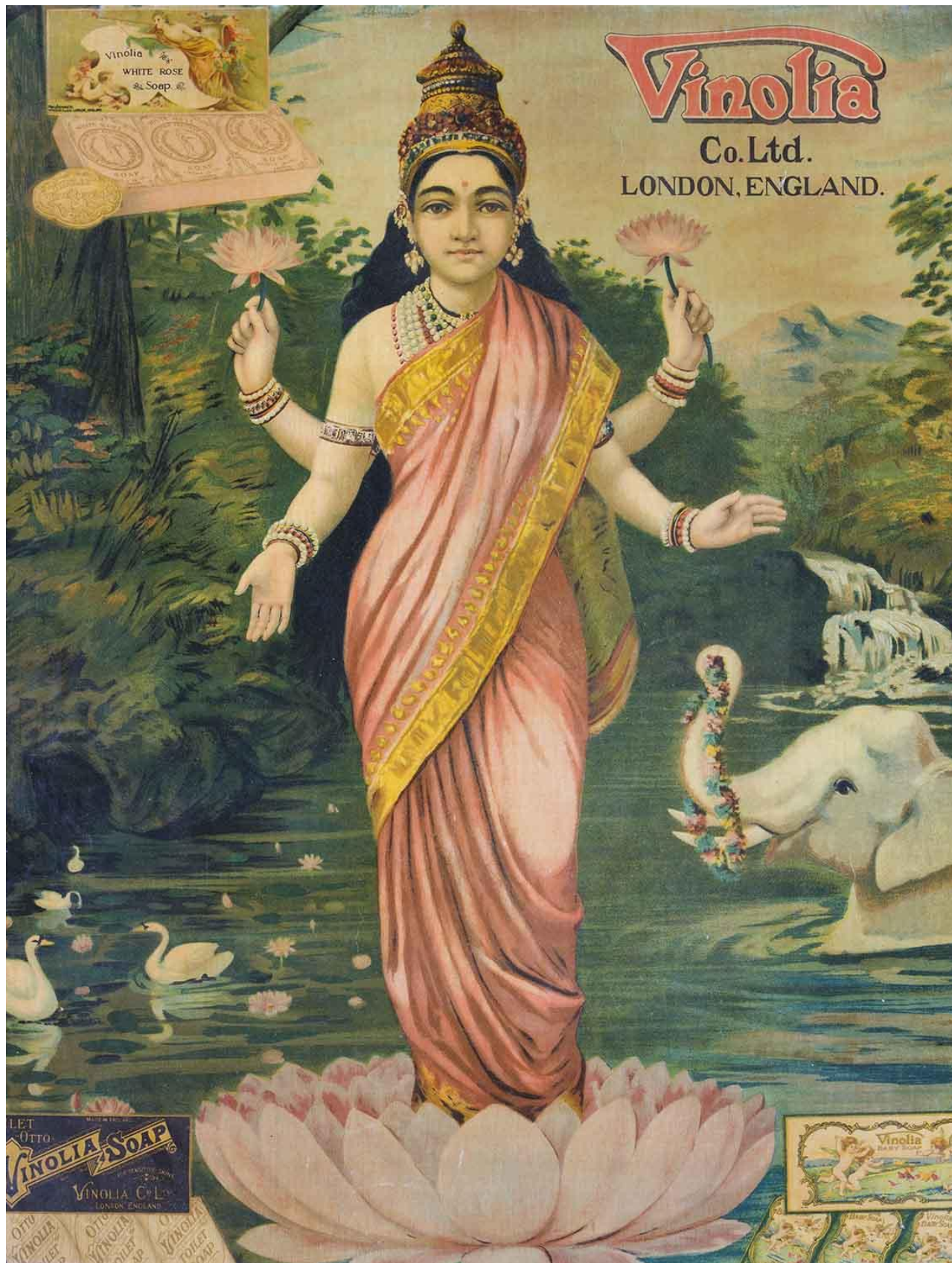


Soon Varma's paintings became popular and their demand rose. So he set up his own lithographic* printing press in Maharashtra in 1894 where he made copies of his art. This made his art affordable to the common people as well.

The most popular prints were images of Hindu gods and goddesses, especially of Lakshmi and Saraswati. Here is a print made in a Ravi varma printing press depicting Lakshmi.

These were one of the earliest illustrations of deities shown in three dimensional human likeness.

*Lithography is a process of printing from a flat surface like stone or metal plate, (usually zinc or aluminum).



This imagery was reproduced on calendars and inspired advertisements as well.

Here you can see the same image of Lakshmi you saw at the start. Can you spot the similarities with the print on the previous page?

THINK.

Why do you think companies used this kind of imagery to advertise their products?

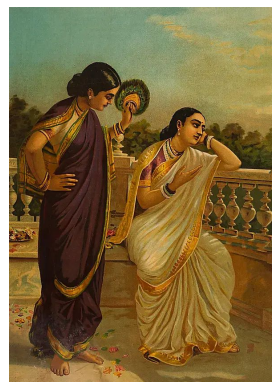
Check out the **DIY Guide extra** to make your own Ravi Varma inspired packaging box!



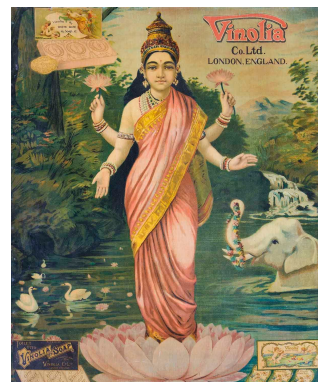
This photograph from 2001 is by artist Pushpamala N., from a larger series that explores popular forms of depictions of women. What similarities and differences do you spot between this work and the prints in the previous pages?

Ravi Varma lived and worked in the 19th century. However, his art influenced artists and forms across time from calendars, theatre, film and contemporary artists like you see here.

His prints were collected and worshipped across homes in India – shaping the way we perceive the images of Hindu gods and goddesses.



Damayanti, late 19th century
H. 35.56 cm, W. 25.40 cm
H. 21 cm, W. 46 cm
POP.01220



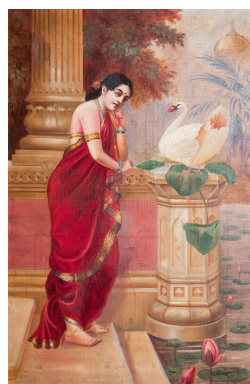
Promotional Calendar for Vinolia co. Ltd.,
England, 1930s
Oleograph
H. 59 cm, W. 47 cm
POP.00815



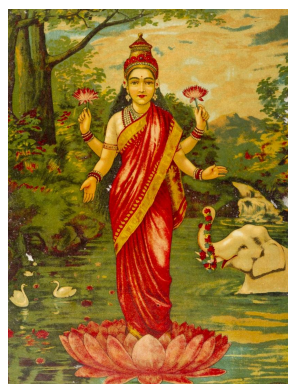
Venugopal Number 2, 1920s
Ravi Varma, Oleograph
H. 35.56 cm, W. 25.40 cm
POP.10800-9



Portrait of Sir T. Madhav Rao, Undated
Raja Ravi Varma, Oil on canvas
H. 75.5 cm, W. 55.3 cm
MAC.03058



Hans Damayant, 1890s
Raja Ravi Varma, Oil on canvas
H. 65 cm, W. 42 cm
MAC.03056



Lakshmi, 1900
Ravi Varma, Oleograph
H. 35.56 cm, W. 25.40 cm
POP.10800-13



Lakshmi, 2001
Pushpamala N, Type-C print
H. 55.7 cm, W. 37.3 cm
PHY.07048




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