



Art As A Mirror: Exploring Environmental Ethics Through Indian Miniatures And Modern Art

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Abstract: This paper critically reflects on the ethical and philosophical approaches of Indian art practices in response to promoting environmental awareness. By carefully examining the methodological, thematic and philosophical approaches in Mughal miniature paintings, Pattachitra scrolls, and the works of Raja Ravi Varma, this paper intends to explore the connection of these art practices in addressing critical environmental concerns, the overexploitation of natural resources and the visualization of ecological consequences. In this manner, the paper situates the historical and artistic reflections on contemporary environmental discourse by arguing for its relevance and impact on modern environmental issues.

Keywords: ethical considerations, environmental degradation, environmental justice, human-nature relationship, industrialisation, interconnectedness, sustainability, traditional art forms.

Introduction:

Art serves as a critical reflection on the interplay between anthropogenic activities and the environment. The rich artistic traditions of India offer unique insights into this intricate relationship by reflecting on the philosophical and ethical perspectives on nature, sustainability and the effects of human interventions. By critically analysing the engagement of various Indian art traditions with environmental themes, the broader implications of these artistic practices on environmental discourse were explored.

Aurobindo's (1915) holistic approach advocates for a synthesis of spiritual, cultural, and ecological dimensions, suggesting that art and culture play a significant role in shaping societal values towards the environment. According to Ganeri (2007), the ancient Indian philosophers explored human-nature interactions, giving a special place to the moral and philosophical underpinnings which inform these artistic practices. Nevertheless, these philosophical insights help the artists to relatively a great extent and framework for understanding the role of traditional art practices in promoting

environmental awareness. Similarly, Baindur (2015) underscores the influence of religious and cultural traditions on environmental awareness, which is crucial for contextualizing the ethical narratives in art. This paper critically assesses how Indian art practices reflect and challenge these values, especially in light of modern environmental concerns.

Ethical Imperatives in Art

The engagement of Indian art with nature has historically combined both reverence and critique. Traditional art forms such as Mughal and Jain miniature paintings provide rich insights into the philosophical and ethical dimensions of the connection between environmental awareness and art. Jha (1920) highlights that this intricate relationship is encapsulated in ancient scriptures, such as the Manusmriti, highlighting humans' ethical responsibilities towards nature as:

“पृथिव्यां त्रिविधं धर्मं शास्त्रेषु व्यवस्थितं नृप।

समावेत्य सदा यस्मिन् नरो धर्माद्विगच्छति॥” (Manusmriti, 1.101)

This shloka represents a threefold duty prescribed for the earth and underscores humans' ethical responsibilities towards nature as part of their broader moral and cultural identity. Indian artistic traditions have long depicted the natural world, its elements, and the symbiotic relationship between humans and their environment. This reflection was also beautifully noted by Sarovar (2024), traditional art forms of any culture deeply reflect society's attitudes, values, and perspectives. The traditional art forms of India signify a strong connection with the environment and natural surroundings and emphasise the importance of sustainable practices, promoting the philosophical underpinning of considering ecology as a way of life. This connection can be observed through their thematic use of nature, storytelling traditions, symbolic motifs, iconographical representation, and use of natural materials.

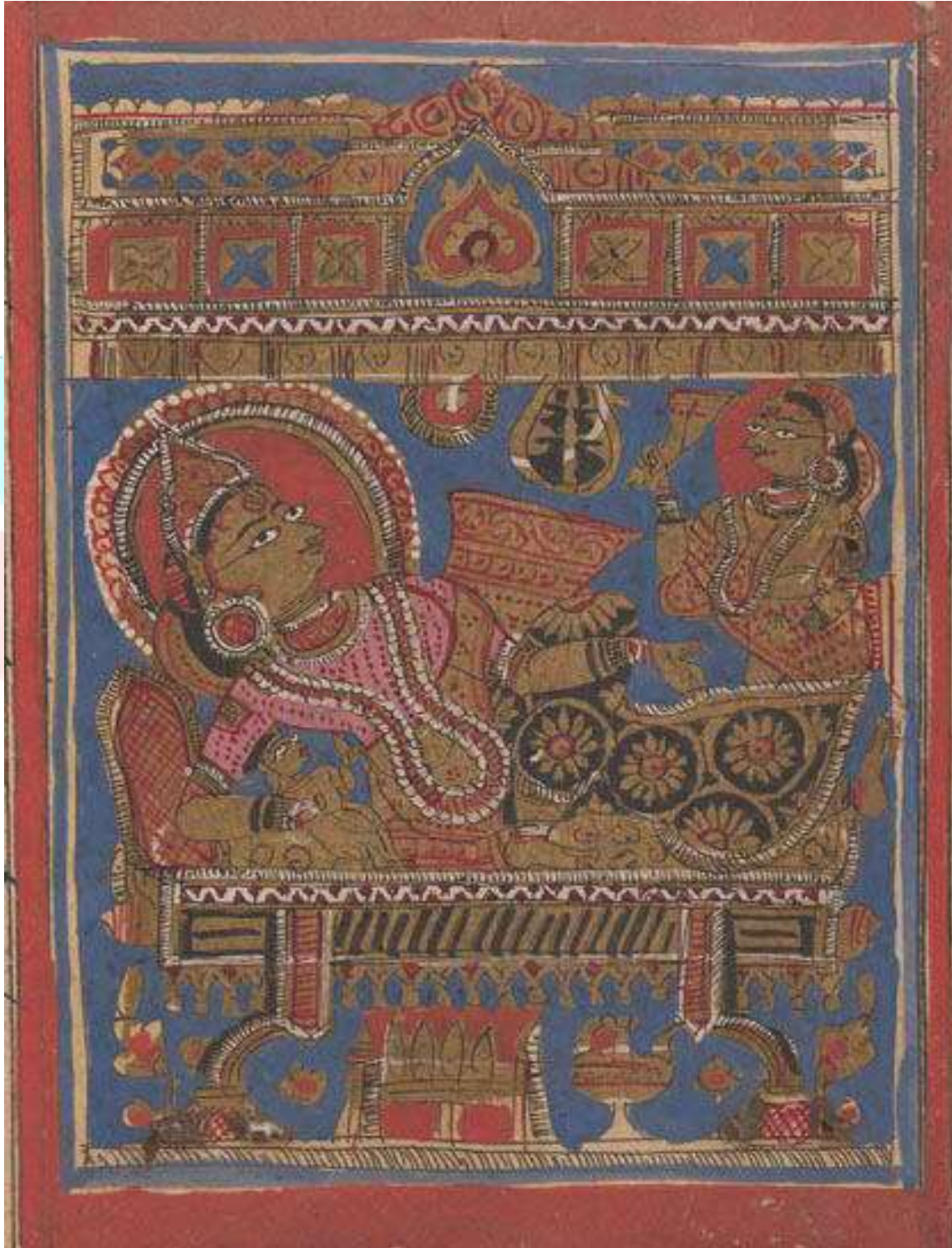
This section examines artistic responses across different periods and genres to illuminate how artists have navigated the complex terrain of environmental degradation, offering insights into their creative processes, cultural contexts, and ethical perspectives. Artists document environmental changes through their works and inspire societal reflection and action towards a sustainable future. In this endeavour, it is essential to emphasise the early miniature painting tradition, such as the Buddhist and Jain miniature paintings, which intricately wove themes of reverence for nature and ecological balance. Through different philosophical accounts, Ravikanth (2021) emphasised the Indian philosophical view on the distinction between the human-nature relationship. The Jain perspective emphasises reverence and respect for all life forms, promoting a holistic approach to the environment and a spiritual relationship between nature and humans

This approach is visible in the Jain Miniature painting tradition, known for its intricate motifs and vibrant colours to represent religious stories from Jain scriptures. These paintings can be reimagined to promote environmental awareness by integrating Jain values of non-violence (ahimsa), non-possessiveness (aparigraha), and respect for all forms with contemporary environmental themes. This integration is visible in the Kalpa Sūtra Manuscript paintings.

Historical Context of Kalpa Sūtra Manuscript Paintings:

The Kalpa Sūtra is one of the most important Jain scriptures, consisting of the biographies and records of the Jain Tirthankaras, including Lord Mahavira, and several other religious regulations. This manuscript has been beautifully illustrated with intricate miniature paintings, which originated primarily in Western India, especially in Rajasthan and Gujarat, around the 14th – 16th centuries. The materials used to create these miniature paintings include natural pigments, gold, and ink on paper or palm leaves. This integration is visible in several Jain miniature paintings, as discussed below:

1) Birth of Mahavira: Folio from a Kalpa Sūtra Manuscript



15th Century

Ink, opaque watercolour and gold on paper | 11.1 x 27 cm

Image Source: Met open Access with Accession Number: 55.121.38.10

This painting is divided into three main sections. In the central section, Queen Trisala is shown reclining on an ornately decorated bed, cradling the newborn Mahavira. Beside her, a handmaid is visible, holding a fan. The top section of the painting features an architectural canopy with a smokeless fire at its centre. This fire, representing the sun, is a symbol of purity and one of the auspicious signs of Mahavira's birth. This birth scene is a prominent subject, consistently depicted in all illustrated editions of Kalpa Sūtra manuscripts. The queen's sari, adorned with a lotus-blossom pattern, is typical of Gujarati textiles from that era, showcasing the fine silks and intricate embroidery of the period.

Environmental Awareness Interpretation:

The Kalpa Sūtra Manuscript paintings, with their intricate depictions of natural motifs and religious narratives, offer profound insights into ancient ecological awareness. For instance, the birth scene of Mahavira symbolizes purity and renewal, themes that resonate with contemporary environmental efforts like reforestation. The use of natural motifs, such as the lotus, underscores the significance of biodiversity, emphasizing the necessity of preserving diverse ecosystems.

- A) Thematic Parallel:** The celebration depicted can be seen as symbolizing the emergence of environmental awareness. Mahavira's birth folio signifies hope and renewal, similar to how environmental efforts like reforestation and conservation represent the restoration and recovery of the Earth and its resources.
- B) Symbolism of Purity and Sustainability:** The smokeless fire in the painting stands for purity, which can be interpreted as symbolizing clean, renewable energy sources like solar power. This emphasises the importance of eco-friendly practices to reduce pollution and supports the need for sustainable development.
- C) Incorporation of Natural Motifs:** The detailed lotus design on Queen Trisala's sari represents the beauty and significance of preserving biodiversity. The lotus, symbolizing purity and resilience, highlights the necessity of protecting diverse ecosystems to sustain nature's balance. Additionally, the use of fine silks and intricate embroidery in the Queen's attire showcases the traditional craftsmanship and sustainable practices of that era. Encouraging the use of sustainable and eco-friendly materials in contemporary fashion can help minimize the environmental impact of textile production.
- D) Overall Message of New Beginnings:** The birth of Mahavira, depicted with auspicious symbols, represents hope, purity, and fresh starts. This illustration can motivate a renewed dedication to environmental conservation. Just as Mahavira's birth symbolized spiritual renewal, it can also remind us of the potential for a new age of environmental awareness and action.

By connecting the birth of Mahavira to contemporary environmental themes, the emphasis is placed on the relevance of ancient spiritual teachings in addressing current environmental challenges. It encourages viewers to embrace purity, sustainability, and respect for nature as integral parts of their efforts to protect the environment.

Historical Evolution and Continuity of Indian Miniature Painting Tradition: Mughal Miniature Paintings

The examination of the different techniques and styles used in Indian miniature painting through its evolving face and the integration of environmental themes can help us to study Mughal miniature painting from this perspective. The Mughal Empire, which flourished from the 16th to the 19th centuries, mingled Persian and Indian artistic traditions so as to develop a unique style of miniature painting. The mode of expression of this style was related to the awe of nature and the exoticism and global character of the empire it represented.

Distinct Perspectives in Mughal Miniature Paintings

Mughal miniature paintings reveal how the Mughal court engaged with its environment, evident in their color choices, styles, and intricate details. These masterpieces, characterized by elaborate patterns, vibrant colors, and artistic mastery, enable an in-depth exploration of the relationship between the Mughals and nature in the world of arts. This tradition, heavily influenced by the political and socio-political dynamics of its time, is closely associated with the rise and fall of the Mughal Empire.

Mixture of Styles: Mughal miniatures blend Persian techniques with Indian themes, resulting in a distinctive approach marked by meticulous detail and vibrant colors, setting Mughal art apart from other Indian miniature traditions.

Refinement and Detail: The use of delicate brushwork and intricate details reflects the Mughal court's commitment to the highest standards of aesthetics. These meticulously detailed nature paintings showcase technical skill and express a deep appreciation for the natural world.

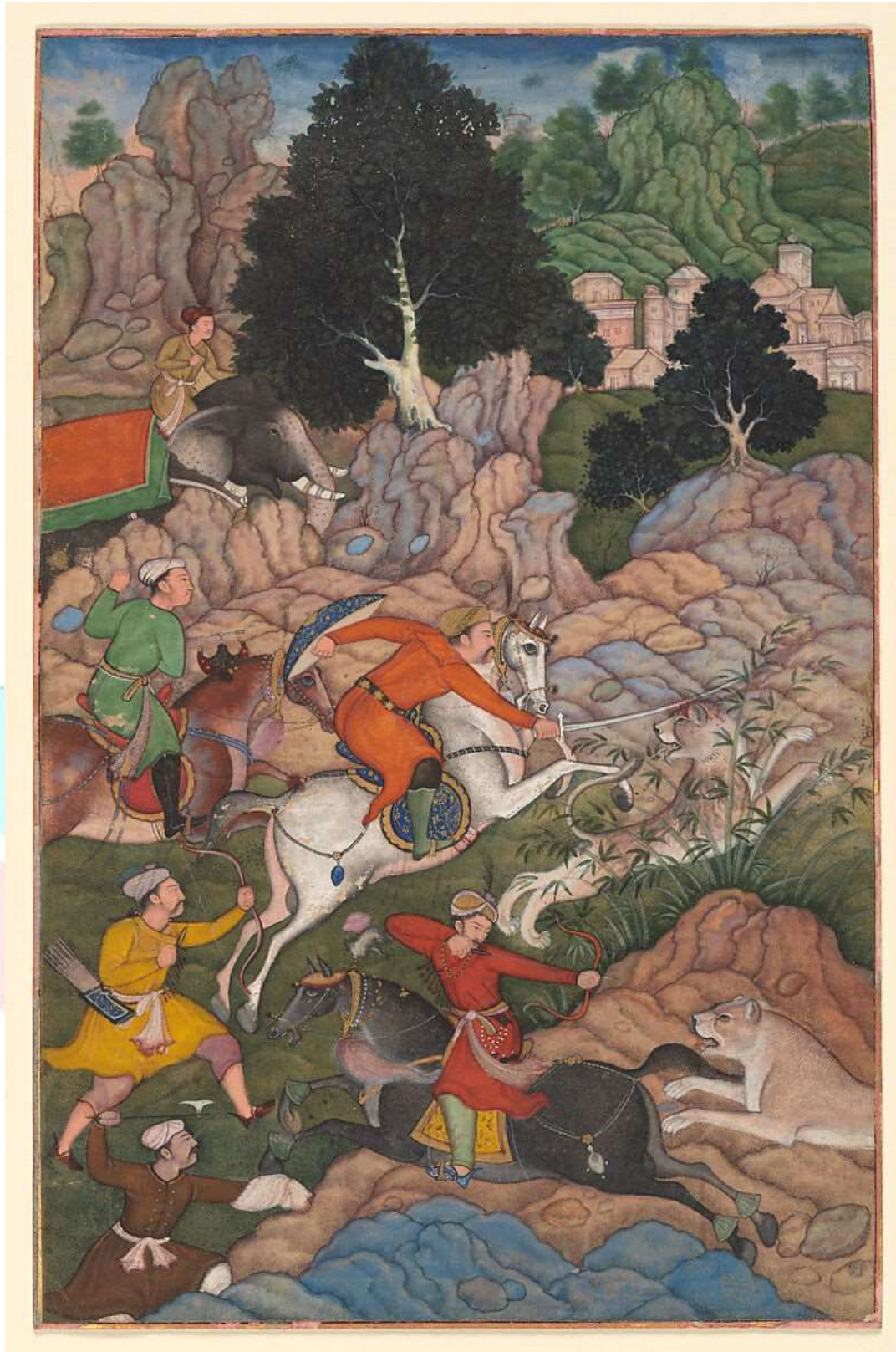
Comparative Analysis: Jain vs. Mughal Miniatures

The works of both Jain and Mughal painters demonstrate a profound connection to nature, emphasizing creation, respect, and the adornment of the natural world. Jain miniatures often integrate ecological themes into spiritual narratives, while Mughal miniatures represent a shift towards portraying royal grandeur and opulence. This transition reflects the Mughal focus on showcasing imperial power and sophistication.

Ethical and Environmental Themes

Mughal miniatures often depict idealized gardens and natural settings, symbolizing an ethical commitment to environmental stewardship. The emphasis on harmonious landscapes and gardens reflects a philosophical approach to balancing human and natural elements. By meticulously depicting nature, these artists highlight the importance of rational use and protection of the Earth, suggesting that care for the environment is both a practical and aesthetic concern.

2) Emperor Akbar Hunting in the Forest



Akbar Hunting Scene, Folio from Akbarnama

16th century | Opaque watercolour, ink, and gold on paper | 19.1 x 12.4 cm

Image Source: Met Museum | Accession number: 11.39.2

This painting artwork represents Emperor Akbar on a hunting expedition in a dense forest. The scene includes Akbar mounted on a horse, dressed in elaborate royal hunting attire, and surrounded by courtiers and attendants. The painting not only displays imperial strength and courage but also shows a profound commentary on human interaction with the natural world. The dynamic

movement is set against an intricately painted Persian-style rocky landscape with a dense forest with richly depicted with various tree species, undergrowth, and wildlife such as deer and birds.

During Akbar's reign, hunting was not merely a sport but also a means of demonstrating power and testing the skills of the emperor and his courtiers. The depiction of hunting scenes often carried symbolic meanings, representing control over nature and the majesty of the emperor.

The painting offers rich insights into both historical and contemporary perspectives on environmental awareness. The dynamic scene of Emperor Akbar lunging at a lioness and his courtier taking the shot at another lion is a striking depiction of imperial power and the thrill of the hunt.

This visual representation highlights the historical practice of hunting as a symbol of power and control over nature. This also puts emphasis on the depiction of contrasts with today's understanding of the negative impacts and detrimental effects of hunting on wildlife and the environment prompting the need for critical reflections on the role of art in reflecting societal values. Additionally, the painting stands as a testament to the power of art in raising awareness and provoking thought. Art critics might explore how this work, while celebrating a historical event, also serves as a vehicle for reflecting on contemporary environmental issues. The vivid portrayal of the hunt and the lush landscape can inspire discussions about the legacy of human actions on nature and the ongoing efforts to promote sustainability and environmental stewardship.

Integration of Environmental Awareness: The meticulously rendered Persian-style landscape, with its dense trees and majestic mountains, is not merely a backdrop but a character in itself. It evokes the richness and complexity of the natural world, emphasizing the interdependence of species within an ecosystem. Art critics could delve into how the painter's attention to environmental detail serves as a reminder of the biodiversity that once thrived and the delicate balance of ecosystems. This focus on nature's splendour and intricacy invites viewers to appreciate the importance of preserving such environments, both in the past and present.

Changing Perceptions of Nature: Historically, hunting scenes depicted in art were seen as symbols of control over nature, reflecting human superiority and dominance. Such portrayals were not just expressions of personal honor but also demonstrations of cultural and societal norms of the time. An art critic might explore how these depictions highlight the prevailing attitudes during Akbar's era, contrasting them with contemporary views that emphasize a more harmonious relationship with nature. Today's ecological movements underscore the importance of sustainability and the need to value nature rather than dominate it, marking a significant shift from past perspectives.

Cultural Heritage and Environmental Responsibility: The painting, as a piece of cultural heritage, holds substantial value, showcasing artistic excellence and historical narratives. Art critics can draw parallels between the preservation of cultural artifacts and the conservation of natural heritage. Just as we strive to protect and honor cultural masterpieces, there is an increasing awareness of the need to safeguard our natural world for future generations. This connection between preserving cultural relics and environmental conservation highlights the intertwined nature of human and natural history.

In summary, South Asian art traditions offer valuable insights into environmental issues both past and present. By examining the ethical and philosophical dimensions of artworks such as Mughal miniatures and Jain manuscripts, we gain a deeper understanding of humanity's relationship with nature. These artistic reflections not only remind us of historical environmental attitudes but also inspire efforts towards biodiversity preservation and ecological balance.

Raja Ravi Varma's works exemplify this evolution by addressing the cultural and environmental challenges posed by industrial and urban development during the colonial period. His art engages with the philosophical tensions between tradition and modernity, exploring the impact of rapid social changes on society and the environment.

Raja Ravi Varma's Paintings: Tensions Between Tradition and Modernity

Raja Ravi Varma's artworks reflect the profound cultural and environmental transformations of his era. His paintings often juxtapose the serene rural idylls with the relentless advance of industrialization and urbanization. This contrast highlights two key aspects: the cultural shifts brought about by modernization and the threats posed by industrial and colonial forces. Varma critically addresses these issues, examining the broader implications of a modernized society on traditional structures.

Varma's art expresses his concern about the environmental impact of rapid economic growth. His paintings raise important philosophical questions, such as: "Is progress inevitable?" "Can sustainability be the only solution?" and "Is the preservation of cultural heritage reversible?" Through his work, Varma emphasizes the need for continuity in traditional ways of life and their deep connection with nature. He invites viewers to consider the cost of modernization and the challenge of finding a balance between growth and ecological stewardship.

Lakshmi Standing on a Lotus

Raja Ravi Varma's depiction of Lakshmi standing on a lotus is more than just a painting; it is an iconic symbol that has captivated audiences over time. This artwork is one of Varma's most recognizable pieces, partly because it was reproduced extensively, becoming a staple of Indian art history. The painting's popularity was reinforced by its wide dissemination through prints, making it accessible to many and cementing its place as one of Varma's most divine creations. The extensive print runs continued until the 1920s, allowing countless people to own a copy of this famous image.



Lakshmi standing on Lotus
1894 | Lithograph | 71.4 × 50.8 cm
Raja Ravi Varma

Image Source: Met Museum | Accession No: 2013.10

Artistic and Technical Significance

The original painting of Lakshmi, now housed in the Maharaja Fateh Singh Museum in Vadodara, showcases Raja Ravi Varma's mastery of oil painting—a technique that was gaining popularity in the late 19th century. The print's painterly texture, achieved through stippling and the careful application of brushstrokes, reflects its origins as an oil painting. According to Mark Barron, who dated this print to 1894, its oversized format, textured paper, minimal varnish, and the meticulous use of colors—each applied with a separate stone—underscore the painting's historical and technical significance. The choice of a pastel palette, though delicate, reveals Varma's forward-thinking vision, even if its impact was fleeting.

Environmental Reflection in the Depiction

Beyond its artistic beauty, the image of Lakshmi on a lotus carries profound symbolism. This depiction resonates with themes of purity, prosperity, and spiritual renewal. The lotus, central to the painting, is not just a symbol of divine beauty but also a subtle nod to environmental resilience and the balance of ecosystems. By placing Lakshmi on this sacred flower, Varma hints at the deep connection between divinity and nature, urging us to respect and protect our natural surroundings.

Connection to Industrialisation and Urbanisation

Created during a period of intense industrialization and urban expansion in the late 19th century, Varma's painting serves as a quiet critique of these changes. The serene image of Lakshmi, surrounded by the purity of the lotus, contrasts sharply with the industrial landscapes encroaching on traditional ways of life and natural environments. This tension is evident in the detailed portrayal of the lotus, which would have faced threats from pollution and environmental degradation. By immortalizing Lakshmi in this way, Varma prompts viewers to consider the impact of modernization and the importance of maintaining a balance between progress and ecological preservation.

Comparative Reflection

When comparing three notable works—the Jain miniature "Birth of Mahavira," the Mughal miniature "Emperor Akbar Hunting in the Forest," and Raja Ravi Varma's "Lakshmi Standing on a Lotus"—distinct themes and artistic techniques emerge, each reflecting different cultural and environmental narratives. The "Birth of Mahavira" from the Jain tradition highlights a reverence for nature with intricate motifs and vibrant colors, emphasizing the interconnectedness of life and the importance of ecological balance. In contrast, the Mughal miniature portrays Emperor Akbar hunting, showcasing the grandeur of the Mughal court and its complex relationship with nature, where power and appreciation intertwine. Meanwhile, Varma's "Lakshmi Standing on a Lotus" connects traditional iconography with a critique of industrialization, using serene imagery to symbolize nature's purity and resilience amid societal changes. Together, these artworks illustrate a continuum of environmental engagement in Indian art, from spiritual reverence and imperial control to modern critiques of industrial impact, each offering unique insights into our relationship with nature.

Conclusion

South Asian art from the 15th to 18th centuries provides valuable perspectives on environmental issues and philosophical considerations. By exploring various art forms and their thematic concerns, we gain insights into historical attitudes toward nature and sustainability, offering timeless lessons on stewardship, justice, and ecological interconnectedness.

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