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# Raja Ravi Varma's 'Yashoda and Krishna' — Rs 167.2 Crore Record Auction

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# Raja Ravi Varma's 'Yashoda and Krishna' — Rs 167.2 Crore Record Auction

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## WHY IN NEWS

Raja Ravi Varma's oil painting "Yashoda and Krishna" sold for Rs 167.2 crore at Saffronart's Spring Live Auction in Mumbai (April 1–2, 2026) — shattering the previous record of ~Rs 118 crore set by MF Husain. The painting was acquired by Cyrus Poonawalla, founder of Serum Institute of India.

## RAJA RAVI VARMA: FATHER OF MODERN INDIAN ART

### Biography

PARAMETER	DETAILS
Born	April 29, 1848, Kilimanoor, Travancore (present-day Kerala)
Died	October 2, 1906
Title	“Father of Modern Indian Art”
Technique	European oil painting + Indian mythological themes
Training	Self-taught; later trained under Dutch painter Theodor Jensen
Patronage	Maharajas of Travancore, Baroda; Mysore royal family

### Artistic Significance

Raja Ravi Varma was the first Indian artist to successfully fuse **European academic realism** with **Indian mythological and classical themes**. At a time when Indian art was dominated by either Mughal miniature traditions or European colonial portraiture, Varma created a distinctly new visual language.

His genius lay in depicting Hindu gods and goddesses as real human figures — relatable, emotional, and aesthetically accessible — rather than the stylised iconography of traditional temple art.

## THE LITHOGRAPHIC PRESS REVOLUTION

Perhaps Varma’s most transformative contribution was not his paintings, but what he did with them.

In **1894**, he established a **lithographic press** at Malavli, near Lonavala (Maharashtra) — later moved to Ghatkopar, Mumbai. Using colour lithography, he mass-produced **oleograph prints** (colour prints on canvas-textured paper) of his most famous paintings depicting Hindu deities.

## Impact of the Lithographic Press

BEFORE VARMA'S PRESS	AFTER VARMA'S PRESS
Religious imagery only in temples or expensive manuscripts	Affordable prints available in every home
Highly localised iconographic traditions	Standardised pan-Indian visual representations of deities
Art accessible only to royalty/wealthy patrons	Art democratised — available for a few annas

These prints **standardised the popular iconography** of Hindu deities — Lakshmi, Saraswati, Krishna, Ram — across India. The images you see on calendars, posters, and puja rooms today largely descend from Varma's visual vocabulary.

## FAMOUS WORKS

PAINTING	THEME
Yashoda and Krishna	Maternal love — Krishna with foster mother Yashoda
Shakuntala	From Kalidasa's Abhijnana Shakuntalam
Saraswati	Goddess of knowledge
Lakshmi	Goddess of wealth
Hamsa Damayanti	From the Mahabharata
Indulekha	Malayalam literary character
Galaxy of Musicians	Group portrait of women with instruments

## AUCTION RECORD: WHY RS 167.2 CRORE MATTERS

- **Previous record:** MF Husain's "Untitled (Gram Yatra)" — ~Rs 118 crore
- **Estimate:** Rs 80–120 crore; sold for Rs 167.2 crore — well above estimate
- **Buyer:** Cyrus Poonawalla (Serum Institute of India) — keeping a national treasure in India
- **Painted:** 1890s, during the height of Varma's career at the Baroda court

## National Treasure Status

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Works by Raja Ravi Varma are classified as **National Treasures** under the Antiquities and Art Treasures Act, 1972. This means:

- They **cannot be exported permanently** from India
- They can only be sold within India or loaned abroad temporarily
- Any export requires special government permission

### UPSC RELEVANCE

**Prelims:** Ravi Varma's birthplace (Kilimanoor, Kerala), lithographic press (1894), "Father of Modern Indian Art," National Treasure classification, Antiquities Act 1972.

**Mains (GS1 — Art & Culture):**

- How did Raja Ravi Varma democratise religious imagery and standardise Hindu iconography in colonial India?
- The tension between art as cultural heritage and art as private property — should there be a right of first refusal for Indian museums in such auctions?
- Colonial-era art and its role in shaping national identity

## ★ FACTS CORNER

### RAJA RAVI VARMA:

Born: 1848, Kilimanoor, Travancore (Kerala); Died: 1906

First Indian to use European oil technique on Indian mythological subjects

Trained in European realism; influenced by Dutch artist Theodor Jensen

### LITHOGRAPHIC PRESS (1894):

Location: Malavli, near Lonavala; later Ghatkopar, Mumbai

Produced affordable oleograph prints of Hindu deities

Standardised popular religious iconography across India

### “YASHODA AND KRISHNA”:

Painted 1890s; oil on canvas

Sold Rs 167.2 crore (April 2026) — highest ever for Indian art at auction

Previous record: MF Husain ~Rs 118 crore

### ANTIQUITIES AND ART TREASURES ACT, 1972:

Regulates export and trade of antiquities

National Treasures cannot be permanently exported

Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) maintains register of antiquities

### CYRUS POONAWALLA: CHAIRMAN, SERUM INSTITUTE OF INDIA (WORLD’S LARGEST VACCINE MANUFACTURER BY DOSES)

**SAFFRONART: PREMIER INDIAN ART AUCTION HOUSE; FOUNDED 2000; HQ: MUMBAI**

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