

invogue



Picture perfect
Clockwise from top left: Anoushka Shankar, Ayesha Thapar, Saloni Puri, Sailaja Tahiliani, Smriti Bhatia, Kalyani Chawla, Punit Juneja and Binita Rawley in their new avatars

PHOTOGRAPHY

from canvases to frame

Photographer Rohit Chawla re-imagines Raja Ravi Varma's portraits with newer subjects. By RITUPARNA SOM

At first glance, Rohit Chawla's photographic recreations of Raja Ravi Varma's paintings look, well, a little unreal. A lady balances a gigantic sitar, her discarded shoe appears larger than her head; drapes in the background look rigid, almost unnatural. On closer examination, the women look familiar—society belles Kalyani Chawla and Punit Juneja, and musician Anoushka Shankar, to name a few. Primped and bejewelled, they are Chawla's muses, posing as 19th-century south Indian beau-

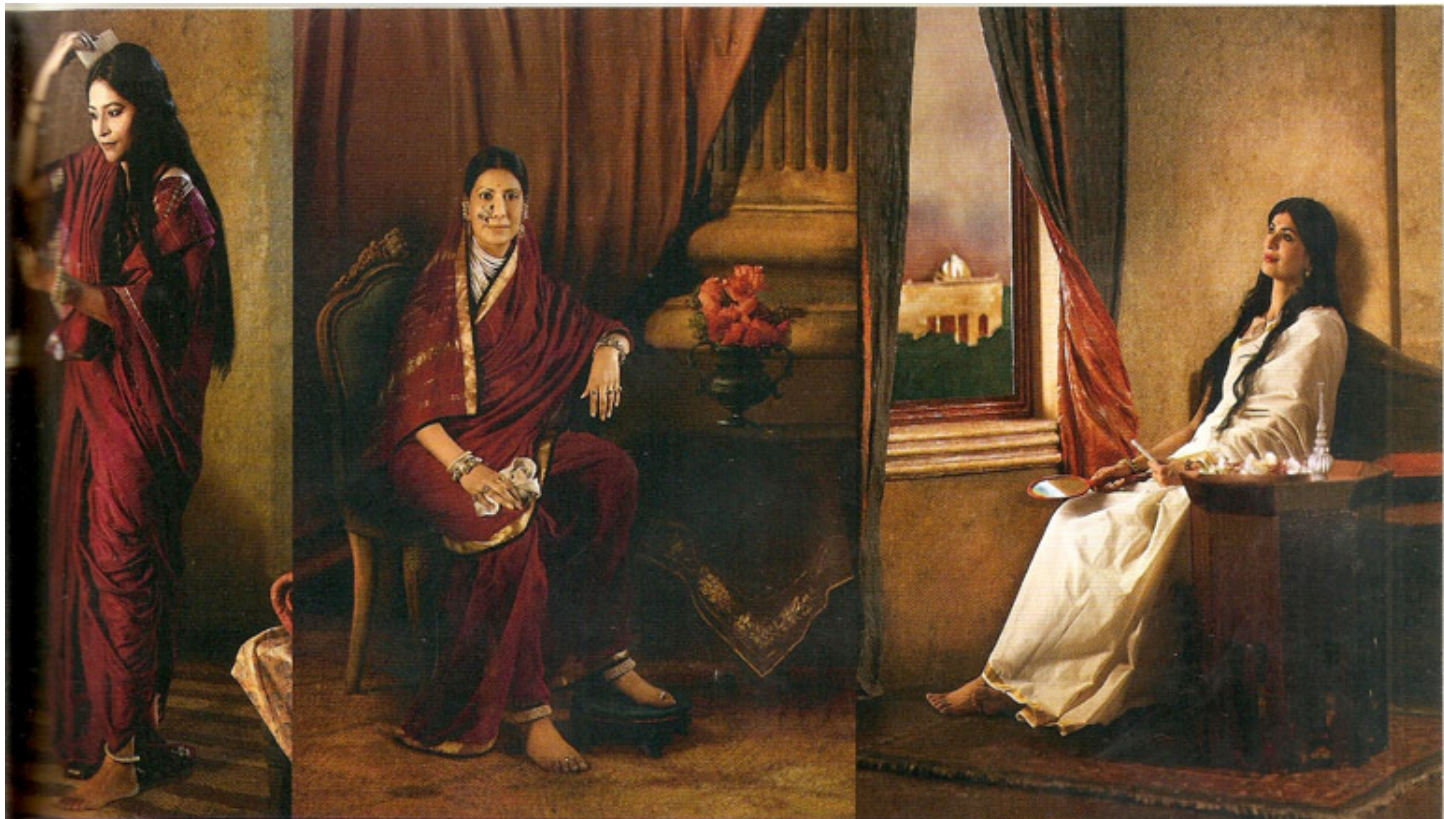
ties, imitating the canvasses of one of India's most renowned artists.

The son of the royal family of Travancore, Kerala, Raja Ravi Varma is perhaps best recognised for his work in the iconography of Hindu mythology—he gave the goddesses Lakshmi and Saraswati a face, and the paintings have since become the template for millions of reproductions that the devout worship in lieu of idols. His study of the Hindu epics and mythological stories became the themes for some of his most famous work.

He was the first artist to fuse tradition-



al Indian painting (Tanjore styles) with Western technique where the colours were brighter and the beautifully sensual paintings were three-dimensional. Most importantly, he chronicled the life and times of ordinary Indian women, painting portraits and immortalising simple, everyday moments of singing, swinging, bathing and sewing.



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According to Chawla, Ravi Varma is the closest that Indians have to an American artist like John Singer Sargent, whose work “documented the styling of a generation... creating a sense of architecture and style.” It was one of the reasons that led Chawla to choose the well-loved artist. “I wanted a classic Indian sensibility—I wanted to click pictures of a certain grandeur and Ravi Varma was an obvious choice. After that, I chose the gorgeous Indian subjects.” The result is an exhibition of 12 portraits of 12 well-known faces in equally celebrated poses as in some of Ravi Varma’s most famous portraits. The collection of photographs has resulted in a calendar, and when the exhibition travels to other countries (London and Japan have been covered so far), more famous women will join the posse, including actress Chitrangada. And later, Anoushka Shankar is scheduled to pose with the gigantic sitar for her album cover.

The ‘unreality’ of the pictures can be blamed on the painter himself. “He cheated on perspective and scale,” laughs Chawla. “The models were always more prominent than anything else.” This was difficult to pull off with photography, so other methods were employed. “We made the sitar prop one-and-a-half times bigger than a normal sitar. The shoes and curtains



are made of Plaster of Paris.” The props were made by 75-year-old Manoranjan Majumdar, who duplicated the sets from Ravi Varma’s paintings. And the finished product is as lush as the original; beautiful women captured for a moment, this time on film instead of canvas. ■

