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When India Reinvented Prints

Andrew Raftery

Divine Color:

Hindu Prints from Modern Bengal
an exhibition at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, January 31–May 31, 2026.
Catalog of the exhibition by Laura Weinstein, with Mark Baron.
MFA Publications, 143 pp., \$45.00

Household Gods:

Hindu Devotional Prints, 1860–1930
a rotating exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City, January 24, 2026–June 27, 2027

From the vantage point of his long service as the keeper of prints at the British Museum, Antony Griffiths posited this “law of print survival”:

The chance of a print surviving today is in direct proportion to the original price, and in inverse proportion to the length of its print run. The highest quality and most expensive prints printed in small numbers to maintain quality will survive in quantity. The most ordinary and cheapest prints published in huge editions are unlikely to survive at all.

In 2013 the catalogers of Rembrandt’s 314 etchings consulted 18,000 known impressions. Griffiths speculates that only a quarter of the prints made from his plates are extant. Given that many prints do not exist in even a single impression, we can scarcely imagine the scale of loss.

Even though Griffith’s comments were made about European prints from before 1820, his observations are entirely applicable to the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when a surge of new printmaking techniques combined with mechanization to cause an explosion in print culture around the world. Certain major innovations came with unfortunate consequences, such as the introduction of acidic wood pulp papers, which reduced the number of prints that remain from the period. Saving what is left from possible extinction is often urgent.

One recent and one ongoing exhibition of Indian devotional prints present the results of such a rescue mission. “Divine Color: Hindu Prints from Modern Bengal,” at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, featured extremely rare religious prints, the remnants of many millions of images used for worship throughout India, material still being shown in “Household Gods: Hindu Devotional Prints, 1860–1930” at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. These holdings are the precursors to the vast quantity of printed devotional images that remain an important part of Indian visual culture to this day.

The Boston exhibition, curated by Laura Weinstein, focused on Calcutta (modern Kolkata), an early and continuously robust center of production for Indian printmakers and publishers, starting in the mid-nineteenth century, with the first wood engravings inscribed with the names of Indian artists, and ending around 1920, when photomechanical offset lithography started to take over. John Guy



‘Vishnu Narayana on the divine serpent Shesha (Shri Sheshanarayana)’; chromolithograph, 1886

has curated the Met exhibition, which will mount three more rotations over the coming year,¹ all including prints from diverse publishing centers, with some examples ranging into the 1940s.

Many of the prints in these exhibitions were collected over more than two decades by Mark Baron and Elise Boisanté, well known since the late 1980s as dealers in contemporary art and publishers of significant editions by artists including Donald Baechler, Michael Byron, and Not Vital. In 2000 Baron and Boisanté made the first of fourteen trips to India and were entranced by the vibrant popular print culture they encountered. Attuned to the nuances of prints, they noticed that some they came across were distinctive for their visual qualities—evincing a blend of older stylistic characteristics with the rich materiality of printing techniques long superseded by modern mechanization.

On subsequent visits they sought out more of these prints, finding sources throughout India and eventually in Europe and the United States. Much of what they saw was in parlous condition—works exposed to a century of

damaging light and framed with nonarchival materials. The paper was often in direct contact with glass and subject to condensation caused by high humidity, encouraging depredations by silverfish and other insects. It’s a wonder any of the prints survived.

As Baron and Boisanté learned more about the Indian artists, publishers, and consumers of these sacred images, they were eager to share their excitement with print lovers in the United States and showed their discoveries at print fairs and on their website, Om from India. The first large-scale presentation was “Seeing God in Prints” at the International Print Center New York in 2009 and the Davis Museum at Wellesley College in 2010. An illustrated monograph appeared in 2012. Museum acquisitions followed, often supplemented by gifts from Baron and Boisanté. The Met and the Museum of Fine Arts gathered significant holdings, resulting in the current exhibitions.

Both shows introduce nineteenth-century Indian print culture through the medium of relief prints from woodblocks and more durable substitutes, including electrotypes metal plates made to replicate the woodblocks. Cut by artists in the Battala area of Calcutta, they are difficult to date, but the earliest are probably from the 1840s. Many of them depict popular gods and

were meant for pilgrims visiting the famous Temple of Kali in Kalighat. The scale of production in relation to survival of these relief prints is astounding. Carved on dense, end-sawn boxwood² (rather than with the plank grain, which takes less detail and wears more quickly), the woodblocks could yield tens of thousands of good impressions. Metal casts from the blocks were even more resilient to the rigors of the press, though we can see how much these metal matrices were used in some examples where the plates have cracked and been repaired with screws that show up on the printed image. Yet from the many millions of prints that were produced, it is estimated that only about two hundred survive.

Relief printing had been practiced in India for centuries as a part of textile production, and carved metal plates were used by earlier Indian artists to make prints on paper. Lithography had no such reference point in tradition. Invented in Bavaria in the 1790s, it quickly spread around the world. Each decade of the nineteenth century saw remarkable technical advances. Successful experiments in multicolored lithography were published in England and France in the late 1830s, and within fifteen years “chromolithography” was used for every possible job, including labels, posters, illustrations, maps—any color image that needed to be broadly distributed. Lithographic presses appeared in India in the 1820s, and the first Indian-run publishing shops were founded in the 1870s.

The original English word for lithography was “polyautography,” which points up the ability of the process to reproduce the exact character of an individual artist’s drawing.³ In the early Calcutta prints in the Boston exhibition, two images inscribed with the name of Becharam Das Datta look like the boldly brushed traditional watercolors that were painted in Kalighat in mass quantities. Close examination reveals a delicate printed guide for subsequent hand coloring, which used transparent

²Like the miniature wood engravings by Thomas Bewick, familiar to longtime readers of the *Review*.

³I often teach lithography at the Rhode Island School of Design, where it’s required for printmaking majors. Demonstrating the process can take five hours as we go over at least one hundred steps. It begins with graining a limestone slab to erase previous images and create a smooth surface. Because the stone is highly sensitive to grease, artists draw using special greasy crayons and inks. A solution of gum arabic and nitric acid is applied to the image and buffed to a smooth finish, bonding it to the stone while making nonimage areas water-attracting and ink-repelling. The stone is washed with solvent, removing the drawing material but not the gum, which is further treated to make it more receptive to oil-based ink. The stone is then repeatedly sponged with water and rolled with ink, which builds up (and adheres only to) the image. The paper is placed on the stone and run through the press—the final print is the original drawing in reverse.

and opaque colors. Even comparing the two examples we see a difference between the earlier work with minimal contours and his later use of lithography to add decorative elements and shading, which shows through the paint layers. A traditional style has been subtly altered by new technology.

Datta worked within the conventions of Kalighat religious painting aimed at a broad audience, ranging from pilgrims to elite consumers. New Indian-owned presses soon started to expand the range of their imagery and representational strategies. The most prominent early publisher, Calcutta Art Studio, was started in 1878 by Annada Prasad Bagchi, a well-known teacher of oil painting, and four of his students. At the district's Government School of Art, following a British agenda, they had learned "civilizing" Western drawing methods of shading and perspective—and presumably how to make lithographic prints. Their first publications were printed in black from one stone and hand colored with transparent watercolor. Among these was *Hindu Sacred Pictures*, a series of prints meant to appeal to buyers who would know stories of the divinities from a combination of religious practices, existing graphics, and versions performed onstage. *Ahayla Uddhar* (Ahayla's Deliverance, 1878–1885) shows the heroine lying on the ground after having been turned to stone by her husband. Rama is entering from the right; the touch of his foot brings her back to life. The dynamic subject, set in an illusionistic woodland scene illuminated by moonlight, is rendered in crayon with a touch that employs the granular texture of the limestone to convey an emotionally charged ambience, reminiscent of high romanticism.

When Calcutta Art Studio turned to chromolithography in the 1880s, it continued to emphasize fully developed modeling, cast shadows, and atmospheric effects in combination with rich colors to make prints that were instantly recognizable for their moody intensity. Instead of the literary narratives of *Hindu Sacred Pictures*, the compositions strictly adhere to traditional religious iconography. The climax of the Boston exhibition arrived in the fourth room with a display of five prints of the Tantric goddesses, *Dasa Mahavidyas* (Ten Mahavidyas, circa 1895). On each sheet, two of them occupy discrete fields. We should be prepared for the sensational imagery of Kali, having already encountered her many times in the galleries, her two blessing hands seen in balance with corresponding hands of retribution—in this case, one holding a bloody bludgeon and the other a severed head. The powerful shading of her blue skin is framed by a mass of black hair set against a stormy sky that opens up to form a yellow halo, both rendered with multiple layers of graduated tone and color that use every resource of the medium: drawn crayon textures, dotted tones, saturated flat shapes of color, scraping, and pen work. It adds up to an unforgettably palpable image. The forceful spiritual and physical presence of the *mahavidyas* is evoked entirely through the techniques and idioms of multi-stone lithography.

The distinctive aesthetic of Calcutta Art Studios becomes clear when we consider it in comparison with the work of another press in the city, Chore Bagan Art Studio, started by Akhoy Kumar Shaha sometime before 1896 and ac-

tive under the ownership of his sons until at least 1912. Chore Bagan's prints are brightly colored, with crisply defined, highly stylized forms. Shading is achieved through layers of colored dots drawn on polished stones with pens and greasy ink.

European and American chromolithographers used neutral toning layers and shading in brown and black to subdue the extreme brilliance of new synthetic colors. Artificial alizarin crimson was introduced in Britain in 1868, and by the 1880s the azo colors invented in Germany—cheap, vibrant, and colorfast—offered a full spectrum for textile dyes and printing inks. The Indian lithographers at Chore Bagan embraced these saturated transparent jewel tones, layering red dots over flat magenta and modifying the shadows with complementary greens to create nuanced darks, avoiding the need to use black for shading. Each color family followed a similar scheme, with interlocking chromatic layers adding up to hallucinatory effects. The boldest prints feature so-called rainbow rolls, from rows of colored ink laid side by side on a slab and blended with a roller before being applied to the stone.

Sri Sri Kalika (1895–1900) from Chore Bagan is set against a sky made up of fused primary colors applied as a rainbow roll (see illustration on page 42). In front of this otherworldly atmosphere, Shiva, his skin shaded with blue flecks that transition into pink dotted highlights, reclines on a lotus. A stem emerges from his navel and blooms into a lotus seat for another image of Shiva, this one with naturalistic skin tones. Kali, depicted at half-scale with her deep blue skin and red tongue, sits on his lap. Five small gods float on lotuses in the watery foreground. As with Calcutta Art Studio's *Mahavidyas*, the complete technical and artistic resources of lithography are utilized in the service of sacred Hindu imagery.

In its first rotation, "Household Gods" at the Met included the Calcutta presses featured in Boston alongside prints from western India. Chitrashala Steam Press was founded in Pune, Maharashtra, in 1878, the same year as Calcutta Art Press. The founder, Vishnu Krishna Chiplunkar, was a publisher of literary and political journals at the forefront of Indian nationalism, with close ties to the self-rule activist Bal Gangadhar Tilak; his range of prints encompasses portraits of Indian heroes and politically charged subjects, notably a chromolithograph of Tilak.

Chitrashala's extraordinarily beautiful devotional prints were the pinnacle of Chiplunkar's art publishing enterprise, which existed in tandem with his political and literary portfolio. *Vishnu Narayana on the divine serpent Shesha* (*Shri Sheshanarayana*) (1886) is a work of incredible refinement, worthy of comparison to classic Indian painting and able to hold its own with contemporaneous prints from around the world. It shows Vishnu seated on the coils of a five-headed snake floating in the sea, surrounded by five companions. He has just awakened, and a lotus emerges from his navel, flowering to give birth to the four-headed Brahman. The rhythmic composition, graceful shapes of color, and exquisite ornamental details establish a gentle, dreamlike tone. Vishnu's light-blue skin is modeled with layers

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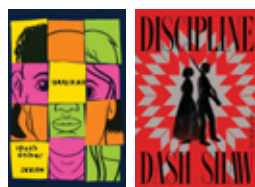
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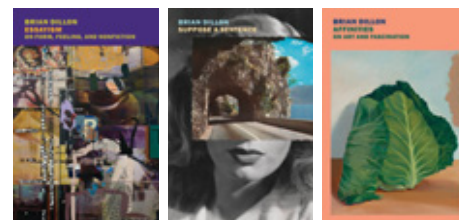
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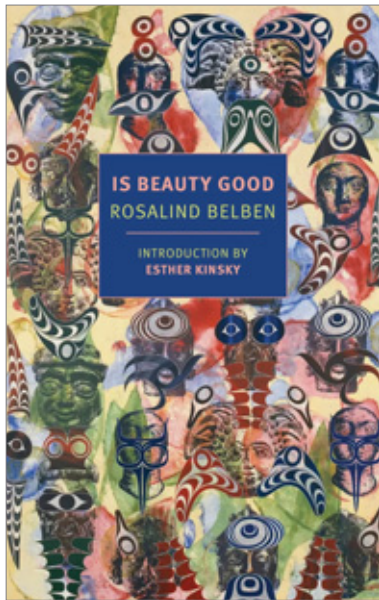
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Elegiac and ironic, the novel speaks most hauntingly of the loss of the natural world, which is of course related to the loss of all those senses and faculties of appreciation that make us feel alive. The sheer sensuous force of Rosalind Belben's prose is on full display in this work of uncommon inventiveness and philosophical potency, which recalls the fictions of Virginia Woolf and Thomas Bernhard.

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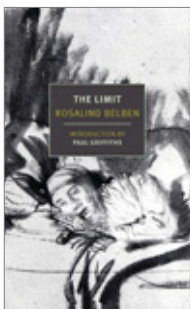
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of delicately colored dots, similar to the tiny brushstrokes used by painters of miniatures. There is endless invention in the way marks and textures are used to assemble the forms. Every stone is exploited in multiple ways, alternately providing contours, shading, and flat shapes in ever-shifting combinations. The finishing touch is a thick layer of varnish, giving the transparent colors an enameled effect.

The company name, Chitrashala Steam Press, suggests that it was using state-of-the-art, steam-driven presses and that much of the work of dampening the stones, inking them, and setting the paper in register was mechanized. This industrial approach was certainly in place at Ravi Varma Press, founded in 1894 by the artist so named and his brother in Mumbai. They imported equipment, materials, and expertise from Germany, including Fritz Schleicher, who became the technical manager (and owner in 1903).

It is impossible to overstate Varma's importance in Indian visual culture. His pictorial style transformed the so-called god picture and became the standard for representations of deities in theater and film. Varma was born into an aristocratic family in the state of Kerala and was sent to the court of Maharaja Ayilyam Thirunal at Travancore, where he had some training in traditional southern Indian water-based painting techniques and exposure to traveling European artists and the rudiments of oil painting. He must have seen European works in exhibitions and collections in India and certainly studied imported chromolithographs. He mastered painting in oil, developing a style that would not be out of place alongside William-Adolphe Bouguereau in France or George Frederic Watts in England. By applying conventions of academic art—drawing that was "correct" according to standards set by the École des Beaux Arts, the Royal Academy in London, and the National Academy of Design, that carefully blended transitions from light to dark, especially on flesh, and that achieved an overall muted, even brownish tonality—to Hindu iconography, he made the gods and goddesses more relatable. Their perfectly modeled faces gaze directly at us with serene, friendly expressions. The smooth finish of oil painting in a style sanctioned by the Salon in Paris or the Royal Academy in London also made them more authoritative to viewers who knew older Indian styles but were increasingly aware of modes of representation practiced in European capitals. Varma applied these tools to Hindu imagery to create something new that must have astonished visitors to the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893 as much as it charmed Indian audiences.

Varma was also well aware of chromolithographs different from those already being produced in India. Most Calcutta prints required eight to twelve runs through the press, with proper registration crucial at every phase. The imported prints, sometimes called "oleographs," used twenty to thirty stones to mimic the effects of oil painting. The early Varma prints are made with many layers of gently muted colors. Great care is taken to imitate brushstrokes in the depiction of leaves and drapery, while skin is rendered with seamless transitions of tone and color. *Saraswati, Goddess of Learning*

(1894–1900), is a typical example from this period. A beautiful young woman sits on a rock by a lake with a peacock who listens to her play a long-necked lute, or vina. Two more arms hold her attributes of prayer beads and a book. The gestures are graceful and the composition is perfectly balanced. It is extremely artificial but couched in terms that make it hard to imagine it being done in any other way.

I have seen comparable Varma prints in different sizes and finishes. *Lakshmi* (1894) was even available with an embossed canvas texture to make it more like a painting. This gets to the essential difference between his prints and earlier Indian chromolithographs. Like the printer Louis Prang in Boston

What about the artists who made these prints? In conversation in the gallery at the Met, John Guy described the tumultuous cultural upheaval faced by Indian artists in the nineteenth century. The court patronage that had sustained the most refined practices of miniature painting was gone. Photography had supplanted handmade portraiture. Government-run art schools under the Raj changed the basic training received by artists, and new technologies transformed the very means of making art. He described it as an AI moment. Even though I am still thinking about what that might mean, I know it must have taken tremendous imagination and resilience for artists to find a way to move forward amid constant change.



'Sri Sri Kalika'; chromolithograph, circa 1895–1900

replicating an oil landscape by Albert Bierstadt or a watercolor by Winslow Homer, the technicians at Ravi Varma Press strove to make lithography look like another medium. At Chore Bagan or Chitrashala, there must have been drawn or painted models, but the primary effort was to make a color lithograph look like itself. That is why they hold their own as prints. Oleographs imitating oil paintings are often astonishing feats of printing virtuosity, but as works of art, they give off the air of knowing they are substitutes.

Of course, this distinction would not have been relevant to the original viewers of these prints. The curators of both exhibitions point out that they were objects of intense veneration—prayed to, incensed, anointed, and touched as they facilitated direct contact with the gods. They also emphasize the political impact of the images. Mass distributed and sold for next to nothing, Hindu religious prints galvanized Indian national identity and were a significant force in the anticolonial project.

The printmakers in these exhibitions created something distinctly new while remaining completely Indian.

In the preface to *The Print Before Photography* (2016), Griffiths writes:

This book suffers from being written at a time when print history is at a very early stage. It is not remotely as advanced as the much larger neighbouring fields of art and book history, and has so far concentrated on a small part of total production.

"Divine Color" and "Household Gods" demonstrate the benefits of moving beyond canonical categories of collecting and scholarship, both in the field of prints and in the study of South Asian art. These fragile pieces of printed paper survive to give us not just visual delight, but insight into the cultures that produced them and the artistry of their makers. Most of all, they tell us how much there is to learn if we know how to look. ●