

#AGARWOOD

The World's Most Expensive Perfume Comes from a Wounded Tree

Only a small percentage develops enough resin to become commercially valuable. This rarity is what makes agarwood one of the most prized natural materials



One of the rarest and most expensive perfume ingredients on Earth doesn't come from a flower. It comes from a tree that has been wounded.

The Aquilaria tree produces agarwood only under extraordinary circumstances. When the tree is naturally infected by certain fungi or damaged by storms, insects, or human intervention, it responds by creating a dark, aromatic resin to protect itself. Over the years, this resin gradually saturates the heartwood, transforming ordinary wood into agarwood, better known in the perfume world as oud.

Not every Aquilaria tree produces oud. In fact, only a small percentage develops enough resin to become commercially valuable. This rarity is what makes agarwood one of the world's most prized natural materials.

Harvesters sometimes make small cuts in the trunk or allow natural infections to trigger the tree's defense mechanism. As the tree heals, the resin slowly accumulates, darkening the wood and enriching it with an intensely complex fragrance. The longer the process continues, the richer the resin becomes.

And the richer the resin, the higher the price. The finest grades of agarwood are incredibly scarce and can sell for tens of thousands of dollars per kilogram, while the pure essential oil distilled from premium oud is among the most expensive perfume ingredients ever produced.

Its scent is unlike any other, deep, warm, woody, smoky, and subtly sweet, with layers that evolve over time. For centuries, oud has been treasured across the Middle East and Asia in perfumes, religious ceremonies, and traditional medicine. Today, many of the world's most luxurious fragrance houses use it as the signature note in their exclusive collections.

What makes agarwood truly remarkable is the story behind it. Unlike most precious natural materials, its value is born from adversity. The tree creates its greatest treasure not during perfect health, but in response to injury. Nature turns damage into beauty, defense into fragrance, and a wounded tree into the source of one of the most luxurious perfumes on Earth.



Raja Ravi Varma, Malabar Lady.



Through these works, Sairandhri, Malabar Lady (1892), and Damayanti Vanvas together reveal the artistic depth and versatility of Raja Ravi Varma, one of the most influential figures in the history of Indian art. Through these paintings, Ravi Varma demonstrates his unique ability to merge storytelling, portraiture, and mythology with a refined academic style, while simultaneously shaping a modern Indian visual identity.

Sairandhri, now preserved in the Shri Bhavani Museum, represents Ravi Varma's narrative strength. Painted in 1894, the work reflects his mature phase, where composition, gesture, and expression are carefully orchestrated to convey emotional drama. Though not as widely discussed as his mythological canvases, the painting reveals his sensitivity to human interaction and psychological depth.



Malabar Lady (1892) shifts the focus from narrative drama to cultural identity. This portrait captures a woman from the Malabar region of Kerala with remarkable dignity and grace. Rather than idealizing her as a mythological figure, Ravi Varma presents her as an individual rooted in her social and cultural context. Her attire, jewelry, and posture reflect regional traditions...

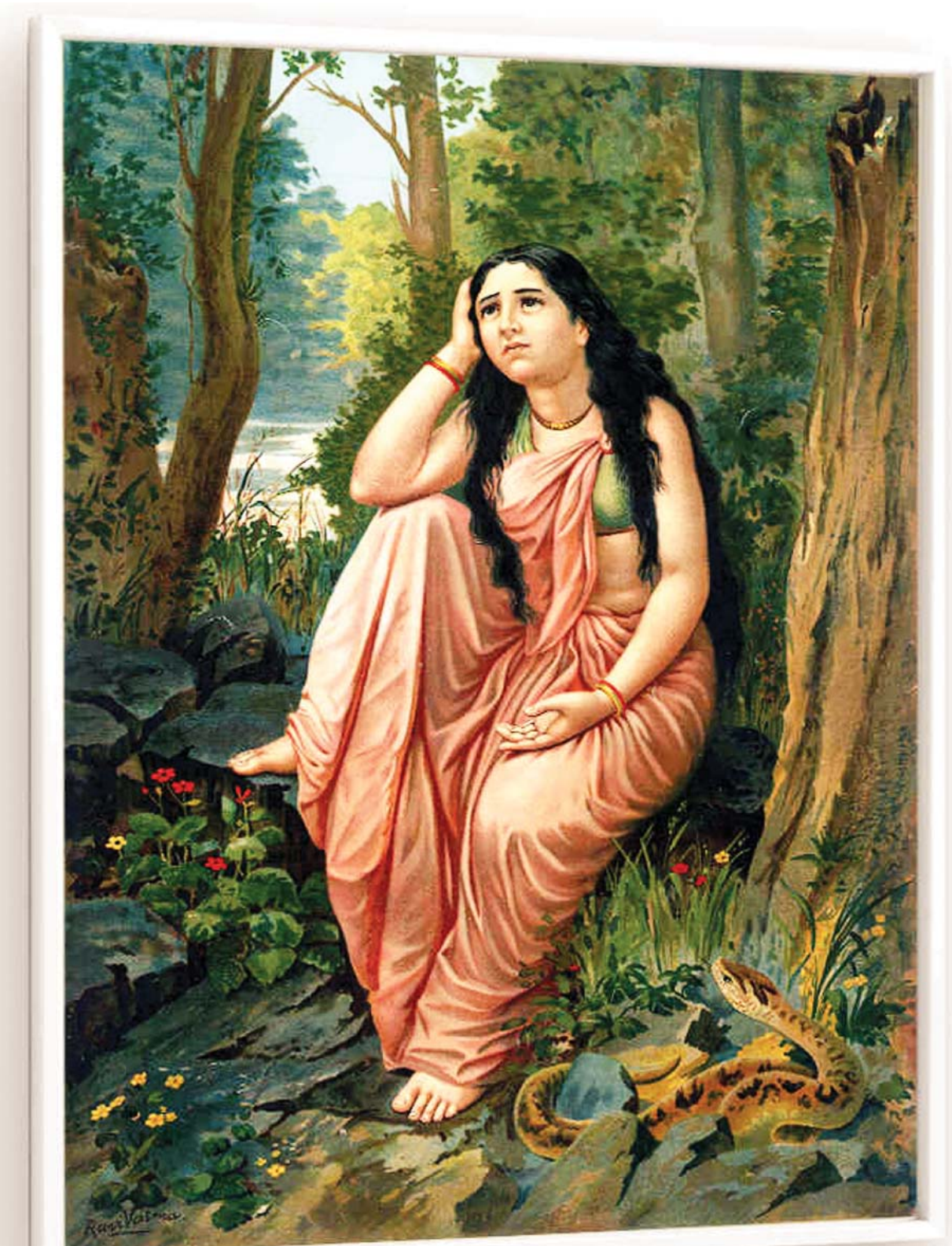
posture reflect regional traditions, while the calm composure of her expression emphasizes inner strength and presence. Through such works, Ravi Varma elevated everyday subjects to the level of fine art, challenging the boundaries between portraiture and cultural documentation in colonial India.

The painting *Damayanti Vanvas* draws from the epic tradition of the Mahabharata, focusing on a poignant moment in the story of Damayanti's exile. Here, Ravi Varma turns to mythology, yet his approach remains deeply human. Damayanti is not depicted as a distant, divine figure but as a woman experiencing loss, endurance, and emotional

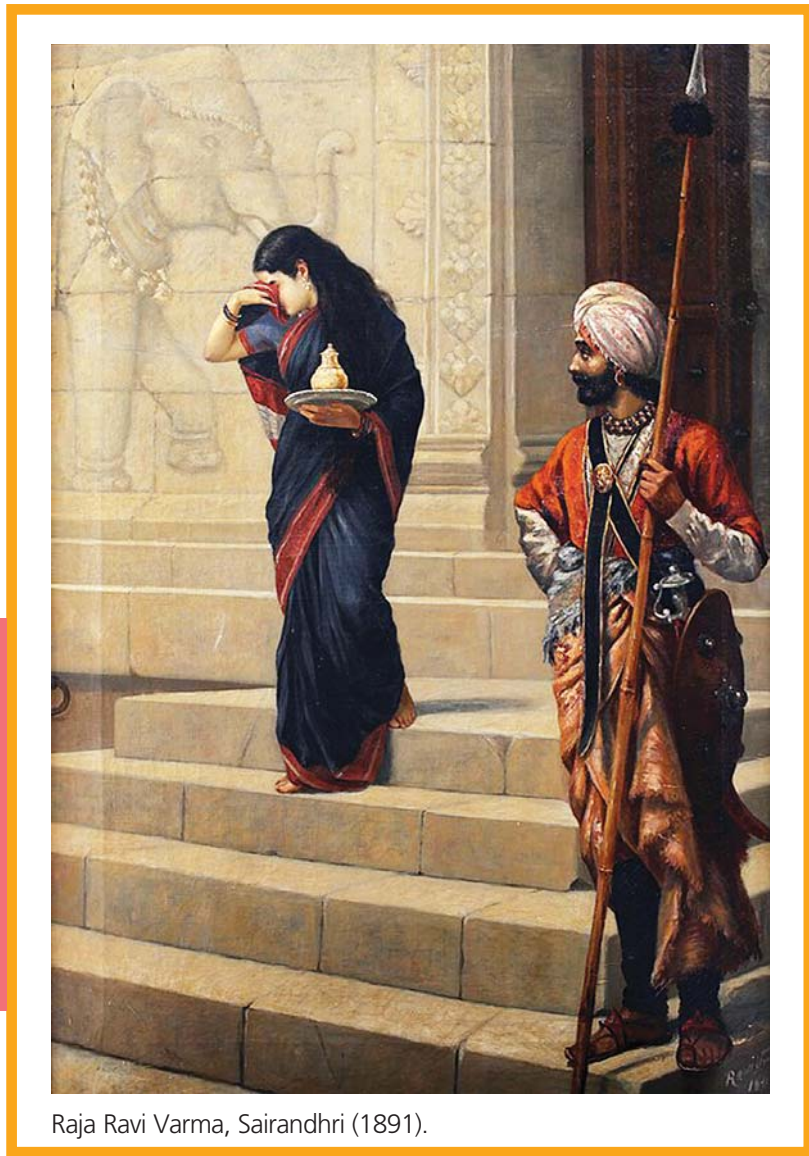
Narrative, Identity, and Technique

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#RAJA RAVI VARMA



Raja Ravi Varma, Damayanti Vanvasa (Oleograph).



Raja Ravi Varma, Sairandhri (1891).



His artistic philosophy can be understood through his body of work and historical accounts. He sought to bridge Indian themes with European techniques, particularly oil painting, which he mastered with exceptional skill. His use of pigments reflects this synthesis: rich oil colours, subtle gradations of light and shadow, and carefully modeled forms create a sense of realism...

struggle. The surrounding natural environment often mirrors her inner state, reinforcing the connection between human emotion and landscape. This ability to humanize mythological characters was central to Ravi Varma's appeal, making epic narratives accessible and emotionally resonant for a wide audience.

Damayanti is the daughter of Bhima, the king of Vidarbha. The legend of Damayanti is found in the Mahabharata, *Vana-Parva*, Chapters 52 to 79. At the same time, Nala was a prince born to Virasena, the king of Nishadha. The swans which came to the palace of Damayanti extolled praises for Nala and also told Nala of Damayanti's extraordinary beauty.

The messages of love being were being carried to and fro by the swans; Nala and Damayanti fell in love with each other. After the marriage of Nala and Damayanti, several events lead to their being exiled from the kingdom by Nala's elder brother. They were compelled to lead their lives in a forest. Nala, therefore, abandoned Damayanti in the forest when she, in a helpless state, was consumed by the snake. In this painting, Raja Ravi Varma depicts the scene of impending danger with the snake in the foreground.

Across these three works, a consistent thread emerges: Ravi Varma's commitment to storytelling. Whether portraying a dramatic scene, a regional identity, or an epic moment, he imbues each subject with narrative depth and emotional clarity. His art does not merely depict; it communicates, inviting viewers to engage with the story behind the image.

Although Raja Ravi Varma did not leave behind a conventional autobiography, his artistic philosophy can be understood through his body of work and historical accounts. He sought to bridge Indian themes with European techniques, particularly oil painting, which he mastered with exceptional skill. His use of pigments reflects this synthesis: rich oil colours, subtle gradations of light and shadow, and carefully modeled forms create a sense of realism, while vibrant textiles and ornamentation retain a distinctly Indian aesthetic. Pigment Crimson lake had been dulled as it was a fast colour.

Girikumar, Art conservator, says: "Another version explained. Everyone used the best possible material available at that time. Crimson lake, as an element enhancing the effects in the painting, had been used in traditional oil painting practice. By the time the autobiography was written, it was unlikely that it faded away. It is not possible for colour to fade away unless subjected to extreme conditions. What might have occurred is that varnish used might have darkened and made the painting dull. Sometimes, the varnish turns yellow or brown and obscures the details of the painting. Still, you can see the remnants in the details."

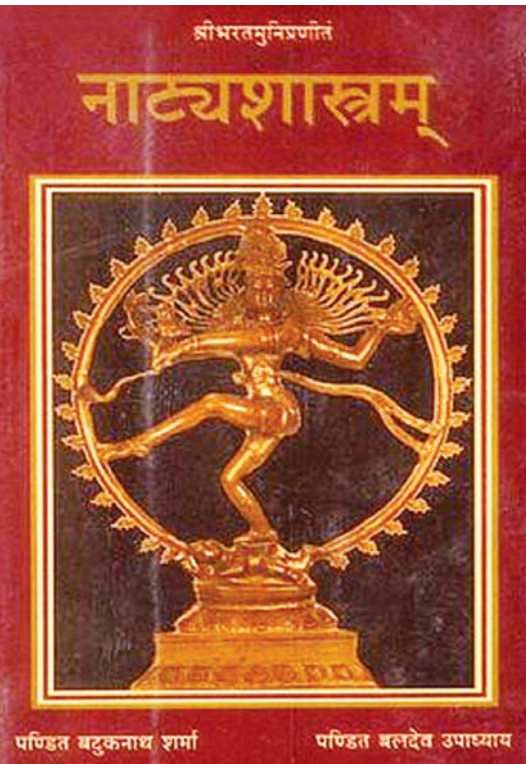
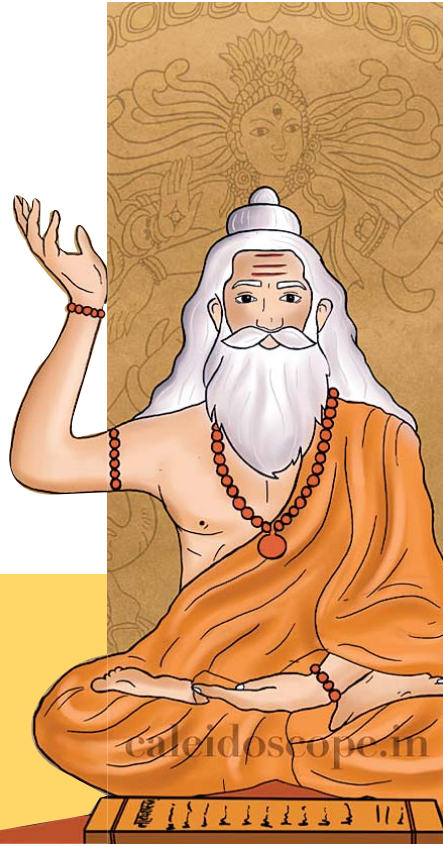
It is important to relook at the painting and the pigment analysis.

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#BHARATA MUNI

Origins of Music Theory

The Natyasastra represents one of the earliest systematic attempts to define how sound becomes structured music



Around 200 BCE, in ancient India, a remarkable intellectual achievement took shape in the form of the *Natyashastra*, attributed to Bharata Muni. This monumental work is often remembered for its insights into drama and performance, but it also contains one of the earliest and most sophisticated formulations of music theory in the world.

The Foundation: Bharata Muni and the Natya Shastra

The *Natyashastra* represents one of the earliest systematic attempts to define how sound becomes structured music. It outlines:

Svara and Sruti

The text describes the seven fundamental notes (svaras) and the 22 microtonal divisions (srutis) that form the subtle pitch framework of Indian classical music. Unlike rigid scales, this system acknowledges fine gradations of pitch, allowing for expressive flexibility and nuance.

Rasa Theory

Perhaps, one of its most influential contributions is *rasa* theory, the idea that art, including

music, is designed to evoke specific emotional states. These "rasas" form the aesthetic backbone of Indian performance traditions even today, linking technical sound directly to human feeling.

Instrumentation Classification

The *Natyashastra* also categorizes instruments into four broad groups:

- string instruments
- covered instruments (drums)
- hollow instruments (flutes and wind)
- solid instruments (cymbals and percussion)

This classification is strikingly systematic and resembles modern organological approaches.

Acoustics and Physical Principles

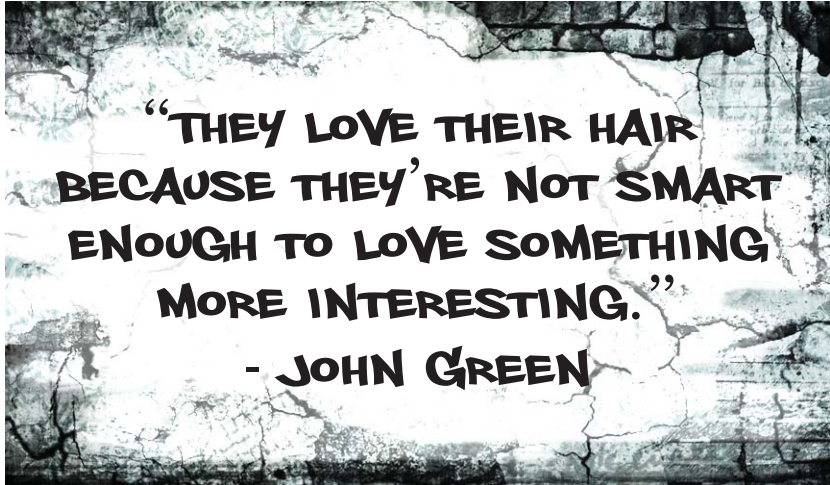
It recognizes that pitch changes with string length, effectively documenting early acoustic principles: shorter strings produce higher pitch, longer strings produce lower pitch. This reflects an empirical understanding of sound physics embedded within a musical framework. What makes this achievement particularly striking is its level of formalization. The ideas were not just practiced, they were documented,

categorized, and transmitted as knowledge. This distinguishes Bharata's work as a true theory of music, rather than a collection of empirical observations.

Centuries later, in medieval Europe, figures like Guido of Arezzo developed systems for musical notation and pedagogy that became foundational to Western music. Guido is often credited with major innovations in music theory, including the development of staff notation. However, the broader global history of music theory is far more interconnected than such narratives suggest.

The story of Bharata Muni and Guido of Arezzo highlights a recurring pattern in intellectual history: knowledge emerging in one part of the world is often rediscovered, reframed, or credited elsewhere. While there is no simple or direct line of transmission in every case, the depth and sophistication of early Indian music theory challenge the idea that systematic musical thought began in medieval Europe. Recognizing Bharata Muni's contributions does not diminish later developments; it enriches our understanding of them. It reveals that the foundations of music theory were laid across multiple civilizations, with ancient India playing a pioneering role.

THE WALL



BABY BLUES



ZITS

