

Laksmi: An Indian Woman of the Twenty-First Century

A woman's identity is wrapped up in many things from religion to marriage statuses to occupation. In art, women are often depicted as being one dimensional, traditional, and sexualized for the male gaze. Pushpamala N. series, *The Native Types: A Series of Photographs Illustrating the Scenery and the Modes of Life of Women of South India*, starts with this prescribed way of depicting the Indian female body, however, the series goes much further to show how Indian women view themselves and construct their identities in the twenty-first century. For this paper, I am using the photograph *Laksmi* as a case study. The aims of this paper are to show a timeline of the Laksmi image and how she has gone from a religious context through a national context, then to a stereotypical context, and lastly to her current context as part of the Indian female identity.

Pushpamala N.'s Series: *The Native Types*

To understand the singular photograph *Laksmi* (figure 1), one must understand the overarching ideas of the series *The Native Types: A Series of Photographs Illustrating the Scenery and the Modes of Life of Women in South India*. The technical aspects of this project are as important as an understanding of the long title. Technically speaking these images are all photographs of Pushpamala N. She is named as the artist because the photographs were her concept. Since Pushpamala is the body in the photographs she acquired the help of Clare Arni to click the shutter and expose the film. Each of the photographs is twenty inches by twenty-four inches and is a type C print on metallic paper. The metallic paper gives the photographs a sparkle that is not capable of being reproduced in a book or online, so the viewer of the reproduction does not get the full affect.

Another important aspect of this body of work is that the photographs are appropriations of images that circulate freely from arrest photographs published in the newspaper to movie stills. The photographs being focused on here, *Laksmi*, is a reproduction of an oleograph from Ravi Varma Press produced in the early twentieth century (figure 2). Varma and his printing press will be revisited later in this paper. Furthermore, each photograph is produced as it is a set for an advertisement or movie. The backdrops and props are created and painted for each

photograph. In addition to this, beginning with the *Laksmi* photograph, professional makeup artists are used.¹

The title of the series give a clue to how the viewer is supposed to read the photographs. *The Native Types* lets the viewer know that he or she is looking at traditional views of women in South India. Moreover, it is my argument that these images can apply to all Indian women whether from the north or the south and regardless of religion. While each photograph represents a stereotypical and one dimensional figure, the series of photographs show that women of India are multidimensional and take on multiple roles in home, family, and society.

Textual Descriptions of Laksmi and their Relationship to the Laksmi Photograph

To any Indian viewer or non-Indian viewer that is familiar with Hindu iconography would instantly recognize Pushpamala's photograph of Laksmi. While visual depictions of Laksmi and other gods and goddesses have shifted over time, this photograph of Laksmi matches up well with textual descriptions of Laksmi, which is why she is easily recognizable. Two descriptions I am looking at are from the Tantric Text volume 16 Part 1 (Saradatilaka Tantra), edited by Arthur Avalon in 1933. The third description is from the Tantrasara Samgraha verses 18 – 20 and the last is from the Amsumadbhedayama Chapter 49.

Chapter 8 verse 4 from the Tantric Text states, "She is seated on a lotus. She has a lustrous crown on her head. She is raimented in silk which shines over her rounded buttocks. In two of her hands she is holding two lotuses and with her other two hands she is making gesture of Abhaya."² In the photograph of Laksmi, she is wearing a crown and wears a silk sari. These aspects of Laksmi are the beginning of an understanding of the photograph. Later in verse 38, Laksmi is described as having a body that is luminous like lightning and having a shining rope of pearls over her large and high breasts.³ The description adds to the way in which Laksmi should be depicted. In the photograph of Laksmi, Pushpamala is wearing pearls around her neck. Furthermore, the metallic photographic paper would give a shimmer to Laksmi and make her body luminous like lightning.

¹ Pushpamala N. *Native Women of South India: Manners and Customs*. 30

² Niranja Ghosh. *Concept and Iconography of the Goddess of Abundance and Fortune in Three Religions of India*. 50.

³ Ibid. 50.

From the Tantrasara Samgraha verses 18 – 20, Laksmi is described as golden in color and adorned with ornaments and garland of lotuses.⁴ While Pushpamala is not painted golden in the photograph she is wearing an orange sari to point to this important color reference. Furthermore, Pushpamala does not wear a lotus garland but the elephant in the background seems to be bringing her one.

In another description of Laksmi from the Amsumadbhedayama Chapter 49, she is described as, “that of a maiden who has just attained age and is a very handsome appearance with pretty eye-brows, eyes like petals of a lotus, a full neck and a well-developed waist.”⁵ This description points to Laksmi being a young woman who has just come of age. However, in more modern depictions of Laksmi including Varma’s oleograph and Pushpamala’s photograph, Laksmi is aged a few years so that she is a mature woman, because it is this mature woman that is a representation of India and the one that takes care of the family.

These textual descriptions of Laksmi give insight into the understanding of how the visual depiction of Laksmi should be created but does not provide the reasons why she is a part of Indian female identity. For an understanding of the role Laksmi plays in female identity depictions of Laksmi throughout her history must be examined.

Visual Representations of Laksmi throughout History

Religious Iconography

The first visual depiction of Laksmi is at Bharhut (figure 3).⁶ In this depiction she is standing on a lotus and flanked by two elephants. These two elephants flanking Laksmi are holding something over her head, “which are said to represent rain-bearing clouds and, by association, fertility and abundance.”⁷ This image of Laksmi lines up with textual evidence mentioned earlier. She is recognized by the fact that she is standing on a lotus. The importance of this image in terms of Laksmi and her place in religion is that she spans across Indian religions.

⁴ Gosh. *Concepts and Iconography of the Goddess of Abundance and Fortune in Three Religions of India*. 51.

⁵ Ibid. 51.

⁶ Heather Elgood. “Exploring the Roots of Village Hinduism in South Asia.” *World Archaeology*. Vol. 36, No. 3 (Sept. 2004): 334.

⁷ Ibid. 334.

Gupta Coins and National Importance

It is not surprising that during the Gupta period the kings stamped various depictions of Lakshmi on their coins. As the goddess of wealth, prosperity, and abundance she would be an appropriate image on money. During the Gupta period the emperor wished to consolidate the empire, gain more wealth through production and trade, and a care for the general welfare of their subjects.⁸ The use of Lakshmi on coinage led and the emperor's strong affiliation with Lakshmi led to all classes of society viewing Lakshmi as a symbol of prosperity.⁹

The Gupta emperors were not only asking their subjects to view Lakshmi as the goddess of wealth and prosperity but to view her as a national symbol as well. This took the icon of Lakshmi into the realm of politics as well as the religious. Furthermore, it is the use of Lakshmi for political gain that makes her relatable to all members of society. It also brings the goddess closer to the human realm. Today on India's paper currency, one finds the image of Mahatma Gandhi. His is on modern currency because he symbolizes independent modern India. He is a part of history and a part of the spirit of India. In the same way modern politicians wanted the people of India to identify with Gandhi, the Gupta emperors wanted their people to identify with Lakshmi, because they wanted a wealthy and prosperous nation. In addition, Krishna Kumar argues that the connection of Lakshmi and coinage created during the Gupta period is still observed "during the Deepawali festival, goddess Sri or Lakshmi is worshipped by an offering of gold or silver coins."¹⁰ In short, Lakshmi and Gandhi are both subjects of national pride.

The coin example I have is from the Kumaragupta I's reign circa 414-455 CE (figure 4). On this coin Lakshmi is shown seated on a lotus with a lotus in her right hand and a fillet in her left hand. "Her sitting posture is excellent with its typically Indian and may be called *Yogasana*."¹¹ This image is recognizable in relation to the textual information mentioned previously because Lakshmi is seated on a lotus, holds a lotus in one hand and has well developed breasts.

⁸ Ghosh. *Concepts and Iconography*. 62.

⁹ *Ibid.* 62-63.

¹⁰ Krishna Kumar. "The Silver Plates of the Gungeria Hoard: Their Monetary Significance." *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*. Vol. 35, No. 1 (1992): 89.

¹¹ Ghosh. *Concepts and Iconography*. 65.

Laksmi as a Symbol of the Female in Modern India

Ravi Varma's images of Laksmi came at a time of change of India. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century's India was still under British rule, however, a movement was starting to take hold and the people of India were exploring ways of creating a national identity and gaining independence from Great Britain. At this same time mass image technology in the form of lithography and oleography were becoming more available. Ravi Varma who was a well-established painter and had sent several of his paintings to Europe to be mass printed as lithographs decided to buy his own press, with this he brought mass produced image technology to India. Furthermore, during this period Varma produced the Laksmi image that Pushpamala appropriated.

Ravi Varma's Laksmi print is a part of a group of images known as calendar art or bazaar art. These prints are still being created and circulated today and are bought by the masses for use in home shrines and for decoration. These calendar art prints range from religious icons to images of mother India. One common theme studied by several scholars is the use of the female body. Throughout India's history images of the gods have been humanized, but in many cases, they are stylized. At this time, Varma and others humanized the gods and goddesses so that they seemed like people who one would see walking down the street. This is the case with the Laksmi image, while you might not see her standing on a lotus in the middle of a river her body and face looks as though she could get lost in the crowd.

In Ravi Varma's print one sees the goddess Laksmi standing on a lotus rising out of a river. She wears a crown, pearls around her neck and wrists, and a pinkish red sari with gold trim. Two of her four hands are held out in gesture while in her other two hands she holds lotus blossoms. To her left side is her vehicle, the elephant which is bring her a garland of lotus blooms. To her right side is the river bank covered in abundant foliage. This image contains many of the attributes mentioned in the textual references above; however, it is the images place in time and history that makes it important.

Tapita Gura Thakurta and Patricia Uberio have both written articles on the importance of calendar art to this period though the feminist perspective. It is the feminist perspective that sheds light on the use of the female body as a stereotype and as a national symbol of India. As I stated above, during the Gupta period the emperors placed Laksmi on the

coins as a national symbol of the empire as a way of bringing their subjects together and binding them under the ideas of a wealthy and prosperous nation. The female body is used for the same purpose during the period of British rule, however, instead of focusing on the goddess the emphasis is on the female body.

Gura Thakurta argues in her article, “Women as ‘Calendar Art’ Icons: Emergence of Pictorial Stereotypes in Colonial India,” that Ravi Varma’s images went from genre studies of the Indian woman to the subjects of Hindu mythology.¹² It is in this transition that the stereotypes such as the Laksmi image are born. Varma and others identified with the ‘classical’ cannon and

“they located ‘culture’ and ‘tradition’ in certain iconic images of Indian womanhood; most significantly, these paintings shaped the images of women and mythic heroines as ideal national prototypes. Individualized and regionally placeable, they were still meant to represent the pan-Indian type.”¹³

Patricia Uberio continues this discussion in her essay, “Feminine Identity and National Ethos in Indian Calendar Art,” by stating, “thus a national identity was constituted through the construction of the ideal Hindu woman, and her characteristics derived from a higharchy of textual authorities: the Vedas, shastras, epics, puranas, and so on.”¹⁴ The idea that national identity can be found in the Indian woman is not surprising since even today the woman is seen as the moral and religious caretaker of the household. This fusion of national identity together with the Indian female identity is what makes this period unique. In addition, the use of a goddess as the Indian female as seen with the Laksmi image is what gives her a different place in history.

The argument that both Guha Takurta and Uberoi have made about the national identity hanging on the Indian female and the fusion of the Indian female and Hindu mythology to create these stereotypes shows the political intent to create a pan-India through the lens of Hinduism. The Laksmi print works best for this purpose because she

¹² Tapita Gura Thakurta. “Women as ‘Calendar Art’ Icons: Emergence of Pictorial Stereotypes in Colonial India.” *Economics and Political Weekly*, Vol. 26, No. 43 (Oct. 26, 1991): WS-93.

¹³ Ibid. WS-94.

¹⁴ Patricia Uberio. “Feminine Identity and National Ethos in Indian Calendar Art.” *Economics and Political Weekly*. Vol. 25, No. 17 (Apr. 28, 1990): WS-43.

is truly pan-Indian in that she is discussed in not just Hinduism but Buddhism and Jainism as well. During this period the Laksmi print and similar prints stood for a national identity of India, one that was trying to gain its freedom.

Pushpamala N.'s Laksmi Photograph

With the previous examples of the Laksmi image one can see that she has been used in a religious context throughout time. Furthermore, at different stages she has been used for political purposes and gain. However, with the photograph of Laksmi by Pushpamala the reading is different. When looking at Pushpamala's Laksmi photograph one must consider its place in history.

Pushpamala's Laksmi photograph was made in 2001, in an independent India. Her photograph has different trappings from the Varma print or the Gupta coin. Her photograph which can be seen by the masses via the internet is probably only seen by an elite few Indian viewers. As this photograph was made for the fine art market and I am sure in India like America only certain people go to art galleries. This socially constructed exclusivity probably excludes those of lower classes, meaning the audience of this photograph is the middle, upper middle and elite classes. So, if this photograph is not seen by the masses like the Varma print its message must be different. To understand this photograph and its message it is important to look at it through the lens of Pushpamala's present and past photographic works.

Today, at least in the Western context being identified as 'traditional' can be derogatory in that 'traditional' is the opposite of modern. While Pushpamala has appropriated an image that is 'traditional' she is asking the viewer to understand it in a modern context. When looking at the project *The Native Types*, five of the photographs come from the 1990's or 2000's, one photograph is from the sixteenth century and four come from British colonial times. This array of time periods shows that the Indian female is not static; however, her stereotype does become static as an Orientalized female. By using stereotypes, Pushpamala is asking the viewer to see the Indian female in a new way. She is empowering the traditional.

In the essay, "The Elimination of Authenticity" by Ashish Rajadhyaksha, Rajadhyaksha critiques the photograph *Lady in the Moonlight*. The theme of her essay is

comparing the Varma image with the Pushpamala photograph. And he too discusses the issues of national identity. In his conclusion, he states, “‘What does this painting make of you?’ This, in the end, is the precise question Pushpamala/Arni ask of the ‘Lady in the Moonlight.’”¹⁵ This question also applies to *Laksmi*, what does the oleograph make of Laksmi and what does the photograph make of Laksmi? On the one hand, both are just visual representations of a goddess; on the other hand, the oleograph carries with it the weight of national identity and a push towards humanizing the goddess. On still another hand, the indexical nature of photography brings Laksmi to the human realm. As Puspamala performs Laksmi, Laksmi becomes a human. With this final transformation of Laksmi as a human Indian woman can truly see Laksmi as part of their persona.

As stated earlier, Pushpamala’s audience is probably not the whole of India and at the same time reaches out of India. With audience in mind one can see how the Laksmi image no longer stands as a national symbol of India. Here Laksmi is a person, a woman of India. She is someone every woman in India can identify with as the world gets smaller; globalization has already come to India and will probably become stronger. Pushpamala is telling her Indian viewers which are probably westernized in many ways that there is power in the traditional and as an empowered woman they are capable of wealth and prosperity.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Pushpamala has brought Laksmi from goddess to human through photographic means. Laksmi is now more than just a goddess, but a flesh and blood human that the women of India can identify with like a close friend instead of worship. Though different representations in history it is obvious that the importance and emphasis on Laksmi has changed. She began as a mere goddess depicted in religious scenes such as the roundel at Bharhut, then she transformed into a national symbol in the Gupta period by being placed on coins. During the British rule, Laksmi and other goddesses became vehicles for depicting the female body, which was also used as a national icon of India. The versatility and pan-Indianness of Laksmi has been proven with her transformation

¹⁵ Ashish Rajadhyaksha. “The Elimination of Authenticity.” *Native Women of South India: Manners and Customs*. 89.

into the human realm as friend or sister. The question is, how will her persona change in the future?

Figures



Figure 1. Pushpamala N. and Clare Arni, *Lakshmi*, 2001



Figure 2. Ravi Varma, *Lakshmi*, early twentieth century



Figure 3. Lakshmi depicted on railing at Bharhut, mid-second century bce



Figure 4. Lakshmi depicted on gold coin, Gupta period, reign of Kumaragupta, circa 414-455 CE