

A detailed oil painting of a man with dark hair, a prominent mustache, and a serious expression. He is wearing a dark blue or black jacket over a white shirt. The background is a muted, textured grey.

5

THE LEGACY OF

Annasaheb
Rajopadhye



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PRINSEPS

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ANNASAHEB RAJOPADHYE

(1885–1940)

The city of Kolhapur in southern Maharashtra is often called Kalapur, a city of the arts: a tag that originated in the early twentieth century as a result of a social and cultural transformation initiated by Chhatrapati Shahu Maharaj (1874–1922).

A remarkably progressive ruler, Shahu Maharaj challenged the stranglehold of the Brahmin caste over administrative posts and educational opportunities in his state, and introduced the idea of affirmative action to India by reserving jobs for the non-Brahmin castes. Coupled with sweeping social and educational reforms, his policies helped free the depressed classes from their traditional shackles, and unleashed their creative and entrepreneurial skills. With support from the state, various gifted individuals emerged as early adopters of the new modes of cultural production that were evolving in the port cities of British India. In the process, modern visual technologies such as illusionist painting and photography and cinema took root in this remote princely state.

Ganpatrao ‘Annasaheb’ Rajopadhye came of age in the era when a new social and cultural order was emerging in Kolhapur. The Rajopadhyes belonged to a line of royal priests who served the Chhatrapatis of Kolhapur. They were a large and wealthy landed family with an ancient lineage: the family mansion was a 300-year-old sprawling wada with more than 30 rooms, 3 courtyards, a well, and a family temple where shehnais heralded the dawn and the chanting of mantras continued through the day. Shahu Maharaj's battles with religious orthodoxy and his subsequent dismantling of Brahmin hegemony had a significant impact on the family's fortunes, as well as Annasaheb Rajopadhye's life and career. Where earlier generations had emphasised Sanskrit learning and scholasticism, Annasaheb sought his own way in the modern world.

‘It was my father who made the move to contemporary and modern thinking, while keeping alive the tradition of my ancestors’, remembers his daughter, the renowned costume designer Bhanu Athaiya, in her book, *The Art of Costume Design*. A University education in English introduced Rajopadhye to new ideas and interests and he soon demonstrated a strong inclination towards all forms of artistic expression, which became his life's passion’.

‘It was my father who made the move to contemporary and modern thinking, while keeping alive the tradition of my ancestors’, remembers his daughter, the renowned costume designer Bhanu Athaiya, in her book, *The Art of Costume Design*. A university education in English introduced Rajopadhye to new ideas and interests, and he discovered ‘a strong inclination towards all forms of artistic expression, which became his life's passion’. He studied painting techniques from books on European art, which he purchased on his frequent trips to Mumbai; he learned photography and set up his own darkroom. In both mediums, his main interest lay in portraiture: images of family members, as well as of theatre greats such as Bal Gandharva and Ganpatrao Bodas, painted from photographic references.

In Kolhapur, the 1920s were a period of great cultural ferment, in which the artisan class came into its own to create an artistic and technological revolution,

manifested most visibly in the work of the artist and silent-film pioneer Baburao Painter, who famously constructed his own camera, and then an entire film industry from scratch with the barest of resources. Painter’s circle consisted primarily of fellow members of the artisan castes who honed their craft by working with him, and graduated to become full-fledged painters, art directors and film-makers. With success, he also drew connoisseurs and art-lovers from varied backgrounds into his orbit. Rajopadhye was one of them. He began to drop in at Painter’s studio to look at his work and chat about art. He also studied Painter’s craft and is known to have reproduced the artist’s *Nadikathchi Madhursmruti*, most likely with the intention of understanding his techniques and distinctive approach to colour. Meanwhile, Painter, who had a rudimentary education, looked up to the older Rajopadhye for his knowledge and his awareness of developments in the world of

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art. He was a frequent visitor to the Rajopadhye household, where he spent hours poring over books on art and photography, immersed in deep discussions. Just a few decades earlier, this kind of symbiotic friendship between a highborn Brahmin and a member of the carpenter caste would have been well-nigh impossible; its existence in the twenties was a tribute to both Shahu Maharaj's social engineering and Rajopadhye's progressive outlook.

As his reputation grew over the years, Painter with his sagely appearance became a kind of patriarch of the Kolhapur art scene. By the late thirties, he was the nucleus of a motley group of amateurs and professionals who met regularly to organise demonstrations, exhibitions and sketching trips. Their artistic activity was rooted firmly in naturalism, steering away from both the older style of narrative painting and the contaminating touch of modernism. Instead, there was a newfound interest in drawing and painting from life. 'It was common to see painters propping up their easels on a portable stand and doing landscapes in watercolours', writes Bhanu Athaiya. 'The temple with its grand architecture, the Sandhya Math with the Shalini Palace in the background and the Panchganga river were the favourite scenes. Demonstrations were held by painting enthusiasts on Sundays. Master painters would be invited to give step-by-step demonstrations of their style of rendering portraits'. Though he is not known to have painted watercolours from life, Rajopadhye was nevertheless an enthusiastic observer at these events, and took his daughter along on one occasion. She would later compare the sight of the Sunday painters by the river to a scene from Paris, where 'instead of the Seine, we had the Panchganga'.

Perhaps it was the charged artistic atmosphere of the times that eventually led Rajopadhye to make the transition from amateur to semi-professional. With the advent of sound cinema in the thirties, Kolhapur's lone film studio was joined by several others, and the small Maharashtrian town became an unlikely hub of Hindi, Marathi and South Indian cinema.

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where he has to either break the *ekadashi* vow, or sacrifice his beloved son for the sake of his ideals.

The story of Mohini would have been familiar to Rajopadhye from ritual *vratkatha* retellings and prior film versions; its artistic and dramatic potential was illustrated by Raja Ravi Varma in the painting *Rukmangada* and *Mohini*, which depicts the tense moment where the king steels himself to behead his son. From the available evidence, it appears that Rajopadhye's ambition was to create an artistic film imbued with refined cultural values. Accordingly, he engaged the well-known Marathi poet Yashwant, the Rajkavi of Baroda, to write the script and the songs. Photographic stills from the film reveal that he drew inspiration from Indian academic painting for the poses and costumes of the characters. This is similar to Baburao Painter's approach in films such as *Usha* (1935) and *Pratibha* (1937) where the director can be seen striving to create a 'classical' aesthetic for cinema. Significantly, Rajopadhye cast Painter's heroine and artistic model Usha Mantri in the title role of Mohini, while other important parts were also played by actors associated with the master director.

Like much of India's film legacy from this era, Annasaheb Rajopadhye's most ambitious work has not survived into our times. A few photographs and paintings are all that remain of his artistic endeavors today.

Rajesh Devraj is the co-author of *The Art of Bollywood* (Taschen, 2010), and the editor of *From Darkness into Light: Perspectives on Film Preservation and Restoration* (2015) and *Yesterday's Films for Tomorrow* (2017). He is working on a biography of Baburao Painter.

Mohini was noteworthy in another respect. It was the debut film for Rajopadhye's daughter Bhanu: she played the role of the king's son, twin braids hidden under a heavy wig, and played it well enough to draw a line of praise from the *Times of India*.

Sadly, Annasaheb Rajopadhye did not live to see his daughter on the big screen. He died in September 1940, while his film was still under production, leaving it to be completed by an associate, Madhukar Bavdekar. According to the film researcher Shashikant Kinikar, who interviewed Rajopadhye's widow in Kolhapur some decades ago, it was Baburao Painter who provided the finishing touches. Kinikar also recalls being shown the family's only print of *Mohini* in an advanced state of decay.

Like much of India's film legacy from this era, Annasaheb Rajopadhye's most ambitious work has not survived into our times. A few photographs and paintings are all that remain of his artistic endeavours today. They are a testament to a fertile moment in the history of Kolhapur, which many remember with nostalgia as Bhanu Athaiya did, and conjure a golden age in which the city was a thriving centre of the arts, a Paris by the Panchganga.

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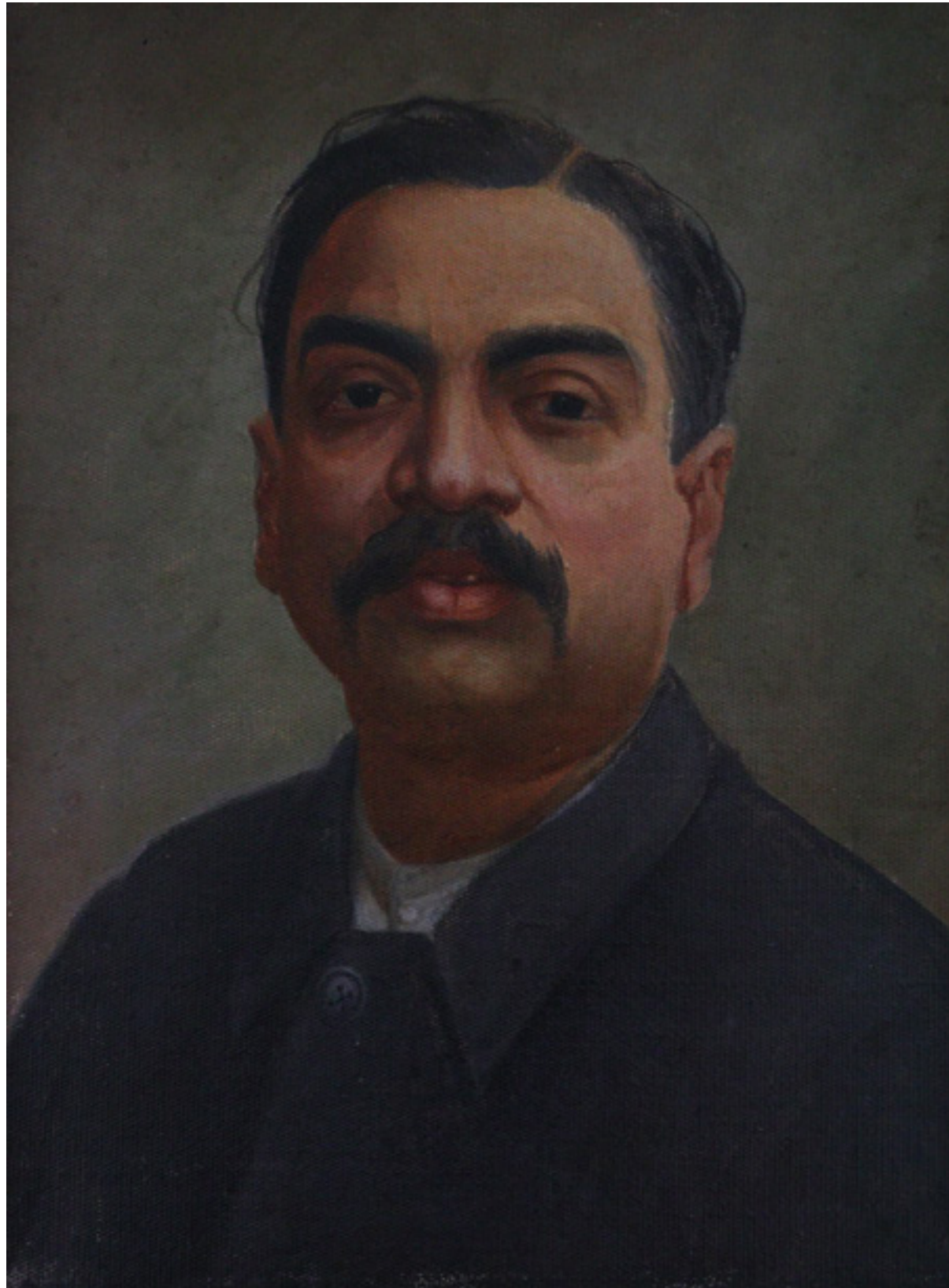
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Lot 1

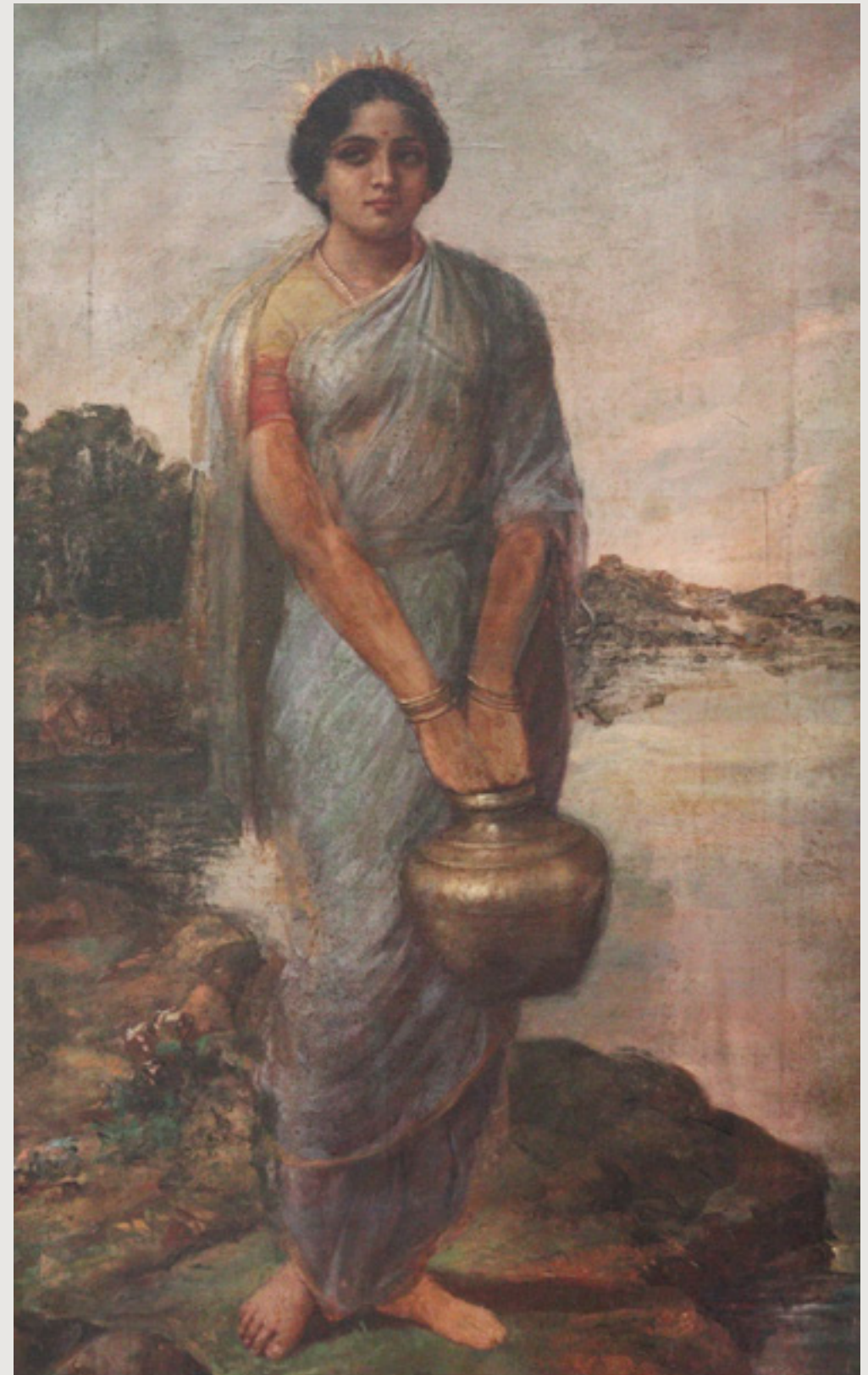
GANPATRAO BODAS, Circa 1930



Estimate : INR 50,000 - 75,000

Lot 2

UNTITLED (Woman with diadem), Circa 1930



Estimate : INR 1,00,000 - 1,50,000

Lot 3

SHANTIBAI (Annasaheb's wife), Circa 1930



Estimate : INR 50,000 - 1,00,000

Lot 4 (Attrib.)

UNTITLED, Circa 1940



Estimate : INR 10,000 - 20,000

Lot 5 (Unknown)

VARIOUS, Circa 1930-1950

Estimate : INR 20,000 - 30,000

















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