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# TAASA Review



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**TEA AND COFFEE SALON (SABŌ), SAEKI SHUNKŌ** 1939, (DETAIL) INK, COLOUR, PAPER, LACQUER, 186.0 x 180.5 CM. NATIONAL GALLERY OF VICTORIA, MELBOURNE. PURCHASED WITH FUNDS DONATED BY ALAN AND MAVOURNEEN COWEN, THE MYER FOUNDATION AND THE NGV SUPPORTERS OF ASIAN ART, 2015. PHOTO: NATIONAL GALLERY OF VICTORIA, MELBOURNE SEE PP7-9 IN THIS ISSUE.

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## EDITORIAL

*Josefa Green, Editor*

TAASA's Monday night lectures have been cancelled for the time being due to COVID 19 but we were able to enjoy the first of this series on *Asian classics through art*, namely Chaitanya Sambrani's lecture on *The Ramayana in Art*. Chaitanya's article which opens this issue takes us through the complexities of interpreting this epic and allows us to enjoy some of the ravishing miniature paintings he used to illustrate his talk.

The theme of classics illustrated through art is continued by Russell Kelty's article on a pair of 18th century six panel screens from the Art Gallery of South Australia (AGSA), which depict scenes and characters described in chapter nine of *The Tale of the Heike*. These screens were part of AGSA's exhibition *Samurai*, sadly interrupted by the pandemic. TAASA members will be able to enjoy Russell's talk once we resume the Monday night lecture series in early 2021.

Visual representations of religious texts have often been used for didactic purposes, as demonstrated by Gill Green's article on a ritual banner depicting the Vessantara Jataka, the last of the stories recounting the lives of the Buddha before his final reincarnation. In NE Thailand, these kinds of painted banners are still paraded around villages at the festival *bun phra wet* before being taken to the local wat, providing an important insight into village engagement with Theravada Buddhist belief.

Tantalizingly, quite a few of this issue's articles describe exhibitions that we are no longer able to visit due to the temporary closure of our museums and galleries. One major event that did manage to get a run before these closures is Asia TOPA, an annual celebration of the cultures of the Asia-Pacific region in Melbourne. *Knowledge in your hands, mind and eyes* by Phaptawan Suwannakudt was presented by Arts Centre Melbourne as part of this festival early this year. Curator Kathleen Ashby's article describes how this artist has drawn on the rich traditions of Thailand and her personal experiences to create her multi-sensory, experiential installation.

*Japan Modernism* opened at the NGV in February and can now be viewed via the NGV website. Wayne Crothers surveys the artists represented in this exhibition, a new generation of artists whose *bijin-ga* style of painting celebrated modernity and broke away from the orthodoxy of traditional painting in 1920s and 30s Japan.

The 22nd Biennale of Sydney NIRIN was also forced to close its doors soon after it launched

in March and can now be accessed through the Biennale's website. Julia Booth presents one of its major installations, the Artree Nepal Artist Collective's project *Not less expensive than gold*, the first time artists from Nepal have been represented in Sydney's Biennale. In a work that surely speaks to the times, this installation combines sculpture, video, drawings, documents and herbs to expose the commercialisation and corruption of Nepal's health system.

A major rehang of the Asian galleries at the National Gallery of Australia was launched in November 2019, to be enjoyed again once the NGA reopens. As Carol Cains explains, this has provided an opportunity to explore the NGA's collection through a fresh perspective, grouping historic and contemporary works together into broad themes.

The Art Gallery of NSW's *Japan Supernatural*, which closed in March, featured a major work by Takashi Murakami specifically commissioned as a central piece for this exhibition. Melanie Eastburn's contribution offers us a deeper insight into the complex influences which inspired this painting.

Jackie Menzies reviews the catalogue of last year's Metropolitan Museum exhibition on the *Tale of Genji*, while Annika Aitken presents a recent NGV publication *She Persists*, about women's contribution to art and design history. Finally, both Jackie Menzies and Pratapaditya Pal acknowledge Jim Masselos' distinguished contribution to Indian scholarship on the occasion of a two day conference recently convened at Sydney University in his honour.

The back end of this issue would normally be filled with information about previous and future TAASA events, and exhibitions in Australia and overseas. Instead, we offer a range of information which we hope you will find useful and entertaining: a selected list of online Asian art exhibitions and lectures; notes from Publications Committee members sharing their activities in lockdown, and personal recommendations for listening or reading from Jackie Menzies and Asia Bookroom's Sally Burdon respectively.

The *TAASA Review* would like to wish our members all the best in these trying times, with the hope that in Australia at least, we will be able to resume something akin to normal life soon. TAASA's AGM was held online on 1 June (after finalisation of this issue), and the results of the elections for the TAASA Committee of Management will be reported next issue.

## THE RĀMĀYANA IN INDIAN PAINTING: PRINCELY ADVENTURES AND OTHER STORIES

Chaitanya Sambrani

**T**he *Rāmāyana* is considered the first epic in Indian tradition and has come to be central to religious belief, moral precepts and political convictions in much of the subcontinent. Its origins are debated, with varying contentions placing its composition (or compilation) across a millennial span ranging between the 5th centuries BCE and CE.

In mainstream belief, it is known as the *ādi kāvya* (first epic), and its composer Vālmīki is described as *ādi kavi* (first poet). While mainstream accounts place Vālmīki as the sole and original author who lived around the middle of the first millennium BCE, there are also opinions that Vālmīki was a much later figure who compiled older narratives into the singular text he is known for.

Vālmīki's *Rāmāyana* is one of dozens, if not hundreds, of versions or tellings of the story that stretch across the subcontinent and further into mainland and insular Southeast Asia. Though it has been mobilised in modern Indian politics to legitimise a homogenous and majoritarian view, there is in fact great diversity among narrative traditions of the *Rāmāyana* across South and Southeast Asia. These traditions do not always agree with each other, whether in the roles and virtues of the principal characters, or in details of location (Ramanujan 2004).

As the story has been told and retold in different languages across the north and south of India and as it has travelled further afield, it has accumulated layers of meaning, a polyphony of tellings that are in dialogic relationship with each other and at times with other religious and narrative traditions within animist, Buddhist and Islamic cultures. In the Lao version of the *Ramayana*, *Phrā Lak Phrā Lam*, also known as *Rama Jataka*, for example, Vālmīki's narrative plays a secondary role to Lao Buddhist rites and rituals (trans. by Sahai 1996).

Numerous depictions of the *Ramayana* have been produced since the 5th century as sculptures and reliefs, and as miniatures, murals, scrolls, prints, posters, animation and video across South and Southeast Asia. However, this article will consider only a few bodies of miniature paintings that span roughly three centuries since the late-16th, focusing on key features of the narrative as well as the visual devices mobilised by artists to illuminate it.

VĀLMĪKI SEES THE HUNTER KILLING A PAIR OF KRAUNCH BIRDS, FROM THE SHANGRI RĀMĀYANA, PAHARI, MID-18TH CENTURY. 22 X 31.5 CM. NATIONAL MUSEUM, NEW DELHI



Of particular interest are miniatures commissioned by the Mughal emperor Akbar in 1588 as well as those produced at the court of Rana Jagat Singh of Mewar during 1649-53, and several bodies of Pahari painting, including the *Shangri Rāmāyana* made in the Himalayan foothills of Punjab and Himachal Pradesh during the early 1700s. Though they were working under different conditions of patronage and with differing visual languages, the artists have left behind bodies of work that

are striking in their range of innovations and interpretations of the text. This discussion remains attentive to questions of gender, ethnicity and political geography rather than being content with a straightforward account of artistic genius in the service of a linear narrative centred around the triumph of a masculine north-Indian god-king.

The earliest surviving paintings of the *Rāmāyana* date from the late 16th century,



BHARATA AND SHATRUGHNA PAY HOMAGE TO SAGE BHARADWAJA AT HIS HERMITAGE, GUMAN, RAJASTHAN, MID-18TH CENTURY. 31.5 X 42.8 CM. NATIONAL MUSEUM, NEW DELHI

when the Mughal emperor Akbar (r. 1556-1605) commissioned artists of the imperial atelier to produce a Persian manuscript with illustrations in 1588. While there are sculptural high-relief representations of episodes from the story that date to the Gupta period (Deogarh, 5th century), and detailed narrative panels at the Loro Jonggrang temple complex in Prambanan (central Java, 9th century), the first paintings we know of come from the atelier of this unlettered Muslim emperor, executed under the direction of the master artist Sahib Din, also a Muslim (Sheikh 2013).

Akbar's mother Hamida Banu Begum is believed to have developed a special interest in the story of the exiled princes in identification with her own experience as wife of Humayun who spent much of his career in exile. The fusion of Persian and Indian painting traditions characteristic of Akbar's atelier is discernible in this illustrated manuscript, as is the development of a naturalism influenced by European images that were brought to the court by Jesuit evangelists from 1580 onwards.

The Rāmāyana story encompasses the entire gamut of human emotion and behaviour. Protagonists act under the influence of love, of longing and of lust. Heroism and faithfulness are amply on display as are betrayal and subterfuge. Sometimes heroic beings commit deceitful acts and villainous beings are capable of honourable behaviour. Human, sub-human, animal and demonic characters all play important roles, as do personified elemental forces.

Despite his status as Viśnu incarnate exemplifying characteristic virtues of perfection in morality, valour and justice, Rāma displays great vulnerability in Vālmīki's poetry, especially in his disconsolate sorrow after Sītā is abducted by Rāvana, the demon king of Lankā, and again, when his brother Lakshmana is rendered unconscious in battle by the arrows of Rāvana's son Indrajit. He is also given to other failings that belie his impeccable goodness: he slays the unsuspecting Bāli from behind cover; he beheads the śūdra (low caste) ascetic Śambūka for daring to aspire to Brahmanical merit; he subjects Sītā to humiliation through a public test of chastity after her rescue from Lankā.

The Rāmāyana begins and ends in separation. As with other epic narratives in South Asia and elsewhere in the world, framed or nested stories occur within the overall narrative structure. One such appears at the very beginning, where the brahmin-turned-robber-turned-sage Vālmīki, witnesses a hunter killing the male from a pair of mating



kraunch birds (*Grus virgo*; demoiselle crane; *koonj* in Hindi, Punjabi and Urdu). The birds are known for their long migrations, crossing the Himalayas to their wintering grounds in India. Moved by the pathos of the female bird's grief, Vālmīki's sorrow (*śoka*) is believed to have been expressed in his invention of *śloka* (verse metre of two lines, each with 16 syllables) condemning the hunter for this.

The artist(s) of the Shangri Rāmāyana (produced in Kulu, mid-18th century and so called because it was once owned by Raja Raghbir Singh of Shangri), envision the episode with characteristic economy of means and condensed emotional expression. On a field of saturated, unmodulated cadmium yellow bordered at the top by a narrow strip of light blue sky flecked with white colours, and at the bottom by a narrower strip of

blue-grey water, the artist has executed the dramatic incident using a small number of significant actions and gestures.

There is much stylistic difference between different bodies of Rāmāyana paintings, but certain characteristic attitudes and tendencies recur in the work of the mostly anonymous artists responsible for them. Over and again, the paintings remind us that Indian artists have not only been concerned with mysticism and other-worldly matters, as is the usual stereotype. The evidence of the work shows that artists took delight in devising ways of representing peculiarities and minutiae of everyday reality, that there were sophisticated variations on naturalism that overreach the single-vanishing-point perspectival regime of post-Renaissance European art. We see innovations in formal, compositional and



material manipulations, accompanied by an abiding interest in observing life in all its details, alongside continuing and sustained investment in pushing limits of representation.

Several paintings of the Rāmāyana give evidence of the artist taking delightful liberties while serving the programmatic needs of a particular narrative episode. Tasked with representing episodes from the Adhyātma Rāmāyana (an allegorical version of the story dating from the 13th to 15th centuries), where Rāma's brothers Bharata and Shatrughna go in search of the exiles, the mid-18th century Rajasthani artist Guman proceeds to render in great detail the royal procession camped in the forest, complete with caparisoned horses, tented enclosures for the royal family and their attendants, soldiers on guard (including those dozing), and the royal elephant being fed and watered.

Innovations are also manifest in the representation of demons. Being absent in everyday reality, the figure of the demon seems to become a site for the exercise of extraordinary artistic innovation. Details of the limbs, bellies, breasts, skin, eyes, hair, nails, fangs, tails and horns can be conjured up without there being the need to follow established iconographies or to be bound by optical perception (Sheikh 2013). As the brother princes Rāma and Lakshmana travel through forests, first as apprentices to the sage Viśwamitra, and then again as exiles accompanied by Sītā, they encounter and vanquish demonic presences of various kinds. There are masculine and feminine demons, as well as demonic creatures who are redeemed and restored to their prior human or divine forms through being killed by Rāma.

But not all demons are represented as grotesque monsters. Rāvana, demon king of Lankā and 'villain' of the Rāmāyana is a regal figure with ten heads and twenty arms.

Confronted by the great bird Jatāyū while abducting Sītā, he is represented in folios from the Shangri Rāmāyana as a great warrior resplendent in gorgeous attire and jewellery.

The Rāmāyana narrative seems to indicate a north-to-south traversal of the subcontinent, from the Kosala kingdom in the north (present Uttar Pradesh) to Lankā in the south. The narrative has been politicised and historicised in South Asia in terms of a journey of pacification and conquest (Henry & Padma 2019: 726-731). Rāvana is thus a great southern king who is defeated by a northern prince. Their quarrel is over possession of the beautiful Sītā, daughter of the earth. The association of woman with land further strengthens the historicization of the story as one of conquest.

There are also discernible undertones of caste hierarchy accentuated by a species-based discourse: the story originates in an urbanised, prosperous and agrarian north populated by cultured humans, proceeds through the demon-infested forests of central and southern India with 'indigenous' populations of humanoid monkeys and bears, and further south to the kingdom of demons. South Indian and dalit interpretations of the epic often focus on the caste-based injustice underlying Rāma's execution of Śambūka (Richman, 2004 and Goldman, 2018), as well as the demonisation of the southern ruler Rāvana.

The character of Sītā is of special interest in the story: she is *bhūmijā*, born of the earth and adopted by King Janaka of Videha (parts of present day Bihar and Nepal) who finds her as a baby during a ritual tilling of the earth to ensure fertility. Her name derives from the Sanskrit word for furrow, *sītā*.

Sītā figures in the Rāmāyana as the ultimate embodiment of beauty and feminine virtue, as Rāma's faithful wife, and earthly manifestation of Viśnu's consort Lakśmī. In paintings of the

Rāmāyana, she most frequently appears as the young bride who marries the youthful hero and accompanies him into a life of forest exile, only to be abducted by Rāvana and held in captivity until her husband kills the demon and secures her release. She is called upon to prove her chastity after long captivity and undertakes a trial by fire from which she emerges unscathed. Yet again, she is sent into exile—this time by Rāma who wishes to avoid any hint of scandal. At the very end of the story, in her one protest against patriarchy, she calls upon her mother, Prithvi, goddess of the earth. The earth opens up to swallow Sītā, and Rāma continues to rule over a golden age of peace and justice accompanied by his twin sons Lava and Kuśa. As it began, the story ends in separation.

*Thanks to Melanie Eastburn for assistance with images.*

Chaitanya Sambrani is an art historian and curator especially interested in modern and contemporary Asian art. He teaches at the Australian National University, Canberra.

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