

Asian Art Museum At-a-Glance:

Stories of Rama's Youth



Stories of Rama's youth, approx. 1875–1900. India; West Bengal state. Opaque watercolors on paper mounted on cloth. Gift of Anne H. Spink, F2006.70

The Life of Rama (The Ramayana)

The series of events depicted here comes from a northeastern Indian version of the Ramayana, a great Hindu epic. The epic tells the story of the hero prince Rama, the son of King Dasharatha and the seventh incarnation of the Hindu deity Vishnu. Rama was born on earth as a prince in order to protect the world from the demon-king Ravana. Filled with tales of family intrigue, rivalries, and battles, this text remains an important vehicle for transmitting Hindu religious and philosophical thought as well as models of moral behavior.

Stories of Rama's youth are uncommon in popular narratives of the Ramayana. As is typical of scrolls from Bengal, in northeastern India, the scenes unfold in a linear fashion.

Scenes

- In the top scene (right) a sage performs a sacrifice on behalf of King Dasharatha, who wants a male heir. As a result the sage receives a bowl of sweet rice that induces fertility.
- In the second scene the sage arrives at King Dasharatha's court to give him the rice. Dasharatha in turn distributes the rice among his three wives (shown standing in the palace pavilion), who will all bear him sons.
- The third scene takes place years later, when another sage visits King Dasharatha. Troubled by demons the sage asks the king for permission to enlist the aid of Rama to destroy the demons who have been attacking the sages' offerings.
- The fourth scene shows Rama and Lakshmana, his favorite brother, leaving with the sage while Dasharatha and his three wives bid them farewell.
- The fifth scene shows Rama successfully slaying Tadaki, the most troublesome of the demons.

- The sixth scene combines two stories: On the viewer's left a woman who has been turned into a stone is restored to her human form by Rama. On the right Rama is shown in an encounter with a boatman who insists on washing Rama's feet before he steps onto the boat, for fear that Rama's touch might turn his boat into a woman as occurred with the stone.
- The seventh, and final, scene does not relate to Rama's youth. Instead, it foreshadows the childhood of Krishna, Vishnu's next reincarnation. Young Krishna is accompanied by his brother and sister. They are shown not as characters engaged in the actions of a story, but in the rigid, formal guise of deities presenting themselves for worship.

How was this painted scroll used?

It would have been carried from village to village by a storyteller-priest who would narrate the stories in public performances. The scroll was unrolled scene by scene as the storyteller's narrative unfolded. Such paintings not only served as visual aids but simultaneously affirmed the existence of the mythic world they represented. Moreover, the recitation of religious stories and the audience's participation through listening and viewing were means by which worshipers could demonstrate their piety and accrue religious merit.

The condition of the painting

This scroll is worn and cracked from years of use. It is in the process of being repaired and conserved by the museum's expert paper conservators. Using humidity to relax the creases and then reinforcing the breaks in the paper backing will ensure the long-term stability of the scroll.

Lesson: Epic Story Scrolls (Grades 5–8)

Objective

In groups, students will discuss how artists communicate events and characters by observing and describing scenes in the scroll containing stories of Rama's youth. Students will compare the context of this scroll's use with those of scrolls illustrating other epics. Then they will create a biographical scroll from the perspective of a character in the Ramayana (The Life of Rama).

Standards

English–Language Arts: 5.3.1, 5.3.6, 6.3.5, 8.3.1 (Literary Response and Analysis)

History–Social Sciences: 6.4.4, 6.5.7, 7.2.5

Visual and Performing Arts: 5.1.1.3, 5.2.2.7, 5.3.3.1, 6.1.1.3, 6.3.3.3, 6.5.5, 7.3.3.1, 8.3.3.2

Materials

Asian Art Museum storytelling video *The Abduction of Sita*

Asian Art Museum images: Rama's youth, deer headdress

Excerpt of Royal Thai Ballet video

Summary of the Ramayana

Vocabulary

epic

merit

Procedure

1. Ask students to observe and describe the scenes from the scroll depicting stories from Rama's youth. Compare students' ideas with the events actually shown (see other side).
2. Discuss what choices the artist made to communicate each event that how public storytelling may have informed these choices.
3. Explain that the Hindu story of the Ramayana (The Life of Rama) is one of the primary Hindu stories and one of the best-known Asian epics. The Ramayana traveled from South Asia throughout the continent through art, texts, and oral traditions. Storyteller-priests in South Asia narrated scenes from the scroll. This public storytelling gave those who could not read public access to the story and the opportunity to earn merit (favorable consideration in the next life).
4. Show the Asian Art Museum storytelling video *The Abduction of Sita*.
5. Have students observe and describe the deer headdress seen in the video. Explain that this was worn in dance-drama in Thailand for an elite audience. Compare and contrast the visual aides (scroll and headdress) and methods of telling (narrating and dance drama) of the Ramayana. Explain that the Asian Art Museum is conserving the scroll and have students debate whether or not museums should only display and conserve art for the elite.
6. Ask students to choose a character from the Ramayana and to create a scroll illustrating key events in the story from their individual perspectives. Students will need to do research to find out what happened, or they may read the Story story Summarydummary. The scroll should contain only images, not text. Ask students to pay attention to gesture, symbols, and settings that may help convey the intended event.
7. Ask students to write a narration of the scroll from the perspective of the character they chose. Ask them to include what the character might feel and think. Jigsaw: Divide students into groups of characters and have each present their dialogue to the small group.

Extension: Have students create an autobiographical story scroll and reflect on what they choose to include and what symbols they use to refer to time and place.

