



British Library / Asian Art Museum

"Rama and Lakshmana, Riding Hanuman and Angada, Set Off Toward the South," a page from the Mewar Ramayana (1649-53).

ART REVIEW

'Rama Epic's' intense cultural immersion

Asian Art offers a visually superb journey through the narrative

By Charles Desmarais

Exhibitions at San Francisco's Asian Art Museum can be exercises in endurance. But when the art is as varied and absorbing as that in "The Rama Epic: Hero, Heroine, Ally, Foe," the effort pays off richly. Drawn from multiple cultures encompassing more than half the world, this is a show you should not miss.

The tale of Rama — the Ramayana — is an ancient one. Some argue that it predates the written word by many millennia. It is a core legend of Hinduism but, as we learn from the informa-

tive catalog, it also has a place in Jain, Buddhist, Muslim and other traditions, with versions recorded in at least 22 Asian languages. Indeed, according to Indian lore, there are 10 million Ramayana variants.

With all that, the curators wisely chose to focus on the four main characters and the widely told primary story line. Rama, the rightful heir to the crown of his kingdom, marries the beautiful Sita. When he is unfairly exiled to the wilderness, he stoically accepts his fate, and she bravely follows him. She is abducted

"Rama" continues on E2

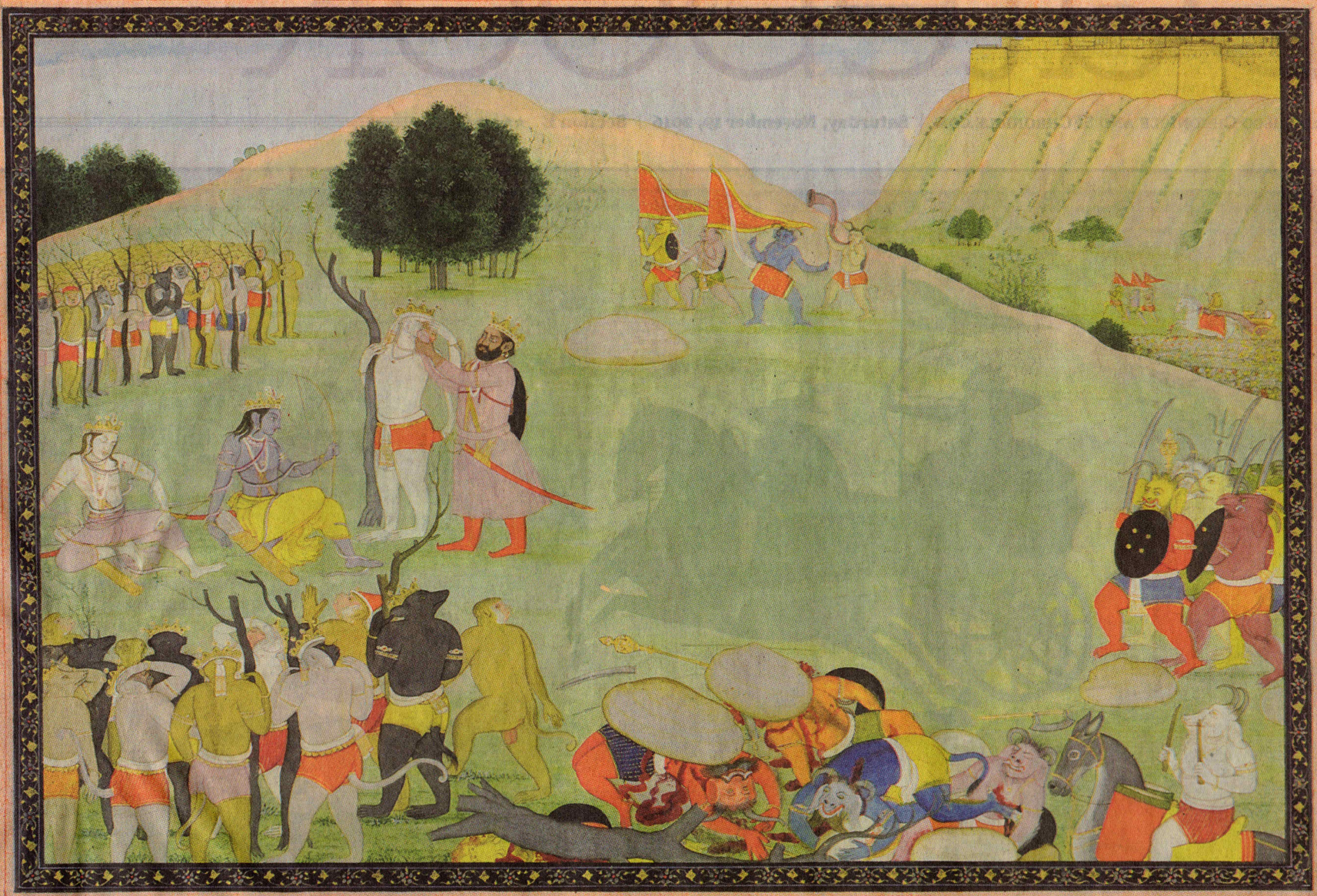
The Rama Epic: Hero, Heroine, Ally, Foe:
10 a.m.-5 p.m. Tuesdays-Sundays.

Through Jan. 15. \$15-\$25, free for ages 12 and younger. Asian Art Museum, 200 Larkin St., S.F. (415) 581-3500. www.asianart.org

At right: "Hanuman Conversing" (1000-1100), a bronze sculpture from the Chola period in India.



Metropolitan Museum of Art



Asian Art Museum

"The Invisible Indrajit Wounds Rama and Lakshmana With His Snake Arrows..." is part of "The Rama Epic," running through Jan. 15 at the Asian Art Museum.

Resplendent trip through Rama lore

"Rama" from page E1

by the 10-headed demon Ravana; to win her back, Rama enlists the powerful monkey god Hanuman. A great war ensues, eventually ending with Ravana's defeat and Rama's coronation, followed by a long and peaceful rule.

One of the difficulties of building an art exhibition around any story is that, to find works that fit the narrative, one is tempted to cut corners on the quality of the art. That is anything but a problem here, with so much to draw from. With 135 superb works, many from the great collections of the world, the show is a visual feast. From 1,000-year-old Indian Chola-period bronzes, to Indonesian shadow puppets as lively in color and form as in action, to a pointy-spined demon mask presented to the U.S. as a centennial gift by the king of Siam (now Thailand), each work seems more extraordinary than the one before it.

At the same time, it can be a bit bewildering to track an already complex story when its heroes and villains appear as different ethnicities and colors (from white to blue to brown or green) and — entertainingly but confoundingly — with a differing num-

ber of heads.

If many institutions seem indifferent to the importance of context in understanding any work of art, the Asian Art Museum can tax our stamina with its exhibition texts, explanatory videos, educational placards and the like. It is no exaggeration to say one could easily spend several hours in this exhibition reading and watching every didactic offering — while missing the art. It's nice to have information at

hand when you want it, but I advise a strategy: Set a ratio of art to explication — say, devoting at least triple the wall-label reading time to enjoying the work itself.

Indian miniature paintings are richly represented in "The Rama Epic." Jewel-like in scale, intricacy and brilliant color, many are also startlingly inventive as pictures. "Hanuman Returns With Medicinal Plants" (1775-1780) comically depicts the supernatural monkey ally carrying off an entire mountaintop when he can't find the specific herbs he has been sent to gather. An ingenious if subtle shift of color allows us to see the shadow of the enemy in "The Invisible Indrajit Wounds Rama and Lakshmana With His Snake Arrows..." (circa 1800-1810).

The 17th century "Rama and Lakshmana, Riding Hanuman and Angada, Set Off Toward the South" is an all-over pattern of galloping monkeys, all brown against a red field, with the blue-skinned Rama (he is an incarnation of the blue god Vishnu) and his pale brother riding through the center. The work is one of



Victoria and Albert Museum

"Rama's Concerns for Sita" (circa 1720), a page from Bhanudatta's Rasamanjari.



British Museum

The ivory "Ravana" (c. 1800-75), depicts the 10-headed demon that abducted Rama's wife.

several in the exhibition from the British Library's famous "Mewar Ramayana," a nearly complete manuscript that once contained 450 paintings. It took the efforts of whole teams of artists more than five years to accomplish. (To see a terrific online reproduction of the entire manuscript, go to www.bl.uk/ramayana.)

A much larger work of great interest, from the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, again tells the story

of "Hanuman Bearing the Mountaintop With Medicinal Herbs" (c. 1800). A painting from the state of Rajasthan, India, it shows the monkey's encircling tail as a vast human procession, both a part of him and under his protection.

Though the exhibition includes two works made as early as A.D. 400, the earliest surviving manuscripts, according to the British Library, are from the 11th century. That coincides with the strikingly sen-

sual Chola bronze "Hanuman Conversing" (1000-1100), also on loan from the Met. It's no surprise that the monkey god is enormously popular throughout the Hindu world — he is loyal and powerful, and he can fly. And who doesn't love a fuzzy animal?

But he also speaks in human language and, as evidenced by this handsome figure, is admired both spiritually and physically. Among his depictions in the exhibition, he can have the physique of a bodybuilder; several images, including a gloriously kitschy TV sketch, show him tearing open his chest to reveal Rama and Sita, held in his heart.

The curators made an intriguing attempt to include a few European and American works that relate the story. The effort starts with a terrific Odilon Redon "Sita" from around 1893 in pastel and some lovely photographs of dancers Ted Shawn, Ruth St. Denis and others in performances around 1920 telling Sita's story. But it's just too much to go down that road, on top of all the rest the show sets out to do, and the idea is not enthusiastically carried through.

The show is hung in prescribed sequence, with the final galleries devoted to the great foe Ravana and his defeat. It is an oddly melancholy experience to track the hordes of human and monkey armies as they overcome Ravana's demon legion. Few art exhibitions have an actual denouement, but, in this case, we would feel a great vacuum without it. And the image of the fearsome Ravana, his 20 once-mighty arms and hands now lifelessly splayed around him, does not disappoint.

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PUZZLE ANSWERS

Crossword Puzzle

T	I	S	S	U	E	S	A	M	P	L	E			
A	R	O	U	N	D	T	H	E	H	O	R	N		
J	A	C	K	I	E	R	O	B	I	N	S	O	N	
	S	K	I	N	U	K	E	S	A	M	A	J		
		Y	E	S	M		H	E	T	E	R	O		
C	R	E	A	K	S	I	N	C	Z	A	R	S		
H	U	N	K	E	R		D	O	J	O	N	A	B	
A	N	T	I		K	A	R	M	A	I	S	T	O	
P	A	R		G	O	B	I		R	O	M	N	E	Y
A	L	A	D	Y		A	S	H		I	P	O	D	S
T	O	N	I	N	G		A	L	L	A				
I	N	C	A		Y	A	L	T	A	S	T	L		
G	E	T		I	N	F	O	R	M	A	T	I	O	N
	D	O	N	T		T	R	E	A	D	O	N	M	E
	M	I	S		A	D	D	R	E	S	S	E	D	

Sudoku Puzzle

2	6	3	9	1	5	7	4	8
5	9	8	3	7	4	1	2	6
1	7	4	2	6	8	5	3	9
9	2	5	4	8	7	6	1	3
4	3	6	1	9	2	8	5	7
7	8	1	5	3	6	4	9	2
6	1	2	7	4	9	3	8	5
8	4	9	6	5	3	2	7	1
3	5	7	8	2	1	9	6	4

New York Times Crossword

C	H	I	P	P	E	R		C	O	N	G	A	S		A	L	D			
M	A	I	N	L	A	N	D	O	N	R	A	M	P		P	E	R			
P	A	N	T	S	A	N	D	A	S	W	E	A	T	E	R		O	T		
A	N	N		T	I	E		H	M	O		E	X	I	T	L	A	N		
S	U	I	T		A	N	D	B	R	I	E	F	S		T	O	O	T		
S	A	B	O	T	S		R	E	I	N		A	M	A	Z	E		C	O	
G	L	A	D	E		A	I	D	S		K	L	I	N	E		B	E	E	
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P	O	T		B	R	I	G		S	A	N	D	M		I	C	E	M	A	
T	U	R	T	L	E	N	E	C	K	B	O	A	A	N	D	C	R	O	C	S
S	T	I	R	I	N		T	A	I	L	S		S	U	L		I	T	A	
				B	I	G		D	O	N	N	E		D	E	P	P			
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L	A	T	E		E	V	E	R		H	O	L	E		B	L	I	N	I	
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W	E	B	A	P	P		S	O	C	K	S	A	N	D	A	B	E	L	T	
O	N	A	B	R	E	A	K		A	I	R		O	R	S		V	E	E	
M	A	N	Y		S	L	A	C	K	S	A	N	D	L	O	A	F	E	R	S
A	D	D		T	U	N	N	E	L		S	E	A	M	L	E	S	S		
N	E	S		S	I	E	N	N	A		C	O	N	S	E	N	T			

Challenger

6	9	9	9	33
9	6	9	9	33
9	9	9	6	33
9	9	6	9	33
33	33	33	33	30

Chess

1. Qxf6 Rxf6
2. Rd8ch,
etc. [Marin-Gonzalez-Vidal '16]