

Art in Focus: Krishna's Mature Life



Krishna driving Arjuna's chariot, approx. 1750–1825. India; Kashmir state. Colors on paper. Gift of Margaret Polak, 1996.6

The defining moment of Krishna's mature life occurs in his role as charioteer and advisor to Arjuna, one of the Pandava brothers, in the Bhagavad Gita, a portion of the epic Mahabharata.

In this great war between two branches of the Bharata family, the Pandavas and the Kauravas, Krishna allies himself with the Pandavas agreeing to counsel the hero Arjuna on the battlefield on the condition that he, Krishna, does not physically engage in fighting. On the eve of the battle, Arjuna doubts his ability to harm his own kinsmen and questions whether victory is worth untold deaths. Krishna imparts to Arjuna the importance of fulfilling one's societal duty (*dharma*), acting without concern for the benefits of one's actions, and giving oneself entirely to Krishna (the Supreme Spirit). Krishna then reveals his true cosmic self to Arjuna as proof of his divinity.

The underlying power of the scene in this painting is that it takes place immediately prior to the moment of Arjuna's ethical dilemma. Here the Pandavas are shown having assembled their forces riding atop an army of elephants and horses. Arjuna sits confidently in his chariot, his bow hanging over his left shoulder and his right hand grasping two arrows. Krishna blows his conchshell horn in anticipation of the impending confrontation. The majestic regalia of this image is in dramatic contrast to what is about to take place: Arjuna setting down his weapons in anguish over the task that looms ahead.

Characteristic of miniature paintings from Kashmir is a profusion of colors especially pink, lilac, and crimson; the bodies of horses overlapping with raised forelegs; and lotus-petal motifs incorporated throughout the composition.

Standing on their great chariot yoked with white stallions, Krishna and Arjuna sounded their divine conches.... The noise tore the hearts of the Kauravas, and tumult echoed through heaven and earth.... Arjuna told his charioteer: "Krishna, halt my chariot between the armies! Far enough for me to see these men who lust for war." Arjuna saw them standing there: fathers, grandfathers, teachers, uncles, brothers, sons, grandsons, and friends.... Dejected, filled with strange pity, he said this: "Krishna, I see my kinsmen gathered here. My limbs sink, my mouth is parched, my body trembles, the hair bristles on my flesh.... I lament the great sin we commit when our greed for kingship and pleasures drives us to kill our kinsmen.... Saying this, Arjuna slumped into the chariot and laid down his bow and arrows, his mind tormented by grief.

From the *Bhagavad Gita*, 400–300 BCE
Adapted from a translation by Miller, 1998