

# 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.