SUGRIVA TAKES RAMA TO THE MOUNTAIN CAVE WHERE SITA’S JEWELS ARE KEPT

PAGE FROM A DISPERSSED SERIES OF THE RAMAYANA (KISHKINDHAKANDA)

We see two scenes from the ancient epic poem Ramayana (The Journey of Rama) in this small, jewel-like painting. On the left, a monkey general greets the exiled Prince Rama and his devoted brother. On the right, the brothers sit with the monkey-king Sugriva, also in exile, while another monkey holds a shawl belonging to Sita, Rama’s kidnapped wife. When she was carried off by the wicked demon Ravana, Sita cleverly dropped several jewels and her shawl as clues to her whereabouts. The monkeys picked up the clues and hid them in a cave for safekeeping.

This painting was created around 1820 in the Himalayan foothills of northern India. Families of painters produced hundreds of images illustrating texts such as the Ramayana for the pleasure and education of rulers that controlled the many small kingdoms of the region.

The Ramayana blends thrilling adventures, philosophical concepts, and religious truths related to Hinduism. The hero, Rama, is the model of an ideal king and is also one of the human forms of the Hindu god Vishnu; Sita is the model of an ideal woman. In ancient times, storytellers memorized all of the epic’s different parts, but today its 24,000 verses are organized into seven books. Translated into many languages, the Ramayana spread across India to Nepal and Sri Lanka, and to Thailand and Indonesia, countries that are now mostly Buddhist and Muslim. Today the stories of the Ramayana are still read, told aloud, and performed at festivals and as shadow puppet plays, and portrayed on television and in movies.