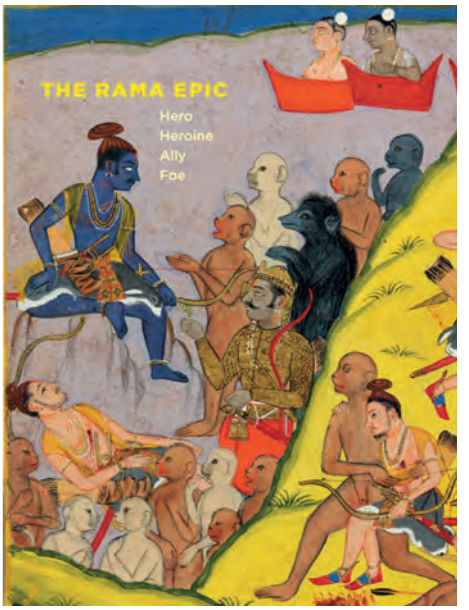
The Rama Epic—Hero, Heroine, Ally, Foe, edited by Forrest McGill. San Francisco: Asian Art Museum, 2016. ISBN: 9780939117765. US$35.



With roots in the Indian subcontinent, the story of Rama has spread far and wide, being adopted, adapted and absorbed by nearly every culture and society throughout Asia. The universal themes of love and devotion, along with a great tale of adventure, war and conquest involving hundreds of characters of all colors, shapes and sizes, has never ceased to capture the imagination of those with whom it came into contact. The exhibition and accompanying volume, *The Rama Epic: Hero, Heroine, Ally, Foe*, organized by the Asian Art Museum, Chong-Moon Lee Center for Asian Art and Culture, San Francisco, California for their fiftieth anniversary, highlights the wide diversity of tellings and renditions, along with the wide variety and forms of images that are associated with the Rama story, here labeled an "epic", a title that appears befitting for this thick tome and ambitious exhibition.

Readers of this Journal may be most familiar with the Thai telling of the Rama story, generally known as 'Ramakien' in Thailand. As with many other cultures and societies, the Rama story has been absorbed and adapted such that it has become a deep reflection of and is reflected on Thai society, customs, and traditions. In keeping with the prominence of the Thai rendition, this exhibition and volume contain a fairly good representation of art works of Thai origin.

In addition to detailed explanations of all 135 objects in the exhibition, this volume contains five readable and informative essays by eminent scholars in the field of Rama studies. The layout of the exhibition material is split into sections covering four of the main characters considered to be archetypes of a 'hero, heroine, ally, and foe', thus the name of the book and exhibition. The organizers considered this a sensible way to arrange the extensive volume of information that would usually be considered "too vast to cover in an exhibition and publication" (xi), and generally works quite well in presenting this complicated and complex epic in which one can find time-honored themes of love and devotion, good versus evil, truth over ignorance, faith and devotion, all presented through intricate plots and sub-plots involving a multitude of characters.

After an introduction and summary of the Rama story, in this case using what many consider the 'original' Rama story, *Valmiki Ramayana*, the first essay is penned by Pika Ghosh, a professor at the University of North Carolina and frequent writer of books and articles on Indian culture and art history. Her contribution, entitled "A Ramayana of One's Own", describes the intimate personal experience of her relationship with the Rama story, along with some keen insights the story has on the daily life of people in

India. Her observations, such as how everyday activities became mixed with events from Rama's adventures, provide an interesting perspective on the impact of the story, which for many is often just a dusty tome on the shelf, a formal religious ceremony or an obscure painting or performance.

The second essay is written by Robert Goldman, the leader of the monumental translation project of the *Valmiki Ramayana* that took more than thirty years to complete and produced seven volumes of translation, explanation and footnotes providing essentially everything one would want to know about this version of the epic, as well as many others. Given his background, Goldman is perfectly qualified to undertake the job of describing the central character of the story – Rama, the "Hero" – in an informative essay, "Hero of a Thousand Texts". Goldman's discussion of Rama makes clear the wide diversity of depictions and interpretations of this character depending on the source of the narrative, wherein Rama can be a divine being of Hindu worship, an ideal Jain layman, a Buddhist Bodhisattva or a Muslim ruler. Goldman explains that this is possible because Rama is "an exemplar of social and political conduct…[this, thus being]…the "most 'exportable' feature of the story" (28).

The section on Sita is composed by Sally Sutherland Goldman, Robert Goldman's wife, who has written extensively on Sita and women in general in a Rama related context, as well as being an integral part of the *Valmiki Ramayana* translation project. This longest essay in the book – "A Heroine's Journey" – again focuses on the diversity of depiction, describing Sita in the many versions and renditions, showing how she may have a nuanced role other than being just a stereotypical devoted and dutiful wife, the way she is often thought of, and should really be considered more of a 'Heroine', as in the title of this book.

For the essay on the 'Ally' – Hanuman – Philip Lutgendorf was chosen. The author of a seminal work on Hanuman, *Hanuman's Tale*, as well as the translator of the recently issued two-volume English translation of the Hindu rendition of the Rama story by Tulsidas, *Rāmcharitmānas*, Lutgendorf is well suited for the task. His description of Hanuman is one of a multifaceted character, who can be an "Ally, Devotee, and Friend" at the same time, thus giving him universal appeal in almost every telling of the story, the Thai rendition being no exception. Many have said that Hanuman is, perhaps, really the most important and central character in the whole tale, thus leading to his overwhelming popularity in nearly every culture which the Rama story has touched.

The final essay, by Forrest McGill, the chief curator of the Asian Art Museum and general editor of this volume, is on the 'Foe' – "Picturing Ravana". McGill's lively description makes for enjoyable reading. He focuses on the complexity of Ravana's character, but also points to his universal traits that tend to transcend time and place: "titanic powers of intellect, of charisma, of physical strength, of magic, and, above all, of will" (202). In describing several rubbings from Thailand's Wat Phra Chetaphun, McGill points out his complex nature, noting the feeling of a "…degree of empathy for Ravana" (207). This sort of reaction is often noted particularly in connection with the Thai telling of this tale, with Ravana (known as Thotsakan in Thai) being perhaps the most well-rounded character in many of the renditions.

Each essay is followed by a short discussion of "What does [the character] look

like?", which is a clever way to tie the general discussion in the essays to the images presented in the exhibition and reproduced in this volume. Because, as is clearly evident by the large number of works included, there is a very wide variation in the way each of the characters is depicted, following on the very wide variation of characterizations in the many tellings and renditions of the tale. As with the localization of the story in narrative form, there is also localization of the depictions in image form, thus reflecting the wide range of local culture and customs that have adopted and adapted the Rama story to local taste. Therefore, Rama is blue or green, crowned or bareheaded, wearing localized royal or ascetic attire, all depending on the source and locale of the narrative used to create the image.

Befitting Rama's role in the epic, the greatest number of exhibition figures are associated with him, followed by those related to Ravana. Mirroring the diversity of the tellings of the epic, the entries run from paintings of all shapes and sizes, to sculptures, puppets and manuscripts. As one might expect, an overwhelming majority of the objects are of Indian origin – from every region of that subcontinent and nearly every period of history.

Next to those of Indian origin, items representing the Thai tellings of the story are the second most represented; these might be of particular interest to readers of this Journal, and include: stone rubbings from Wat Phra Chetaphon (cat. nos. 67, 68, 69); illustrated manuscripts (cat. nos. 10, 46, 121); *khon* masks (cat. nos. 82, 114); shadow puppets (cat. nos. 9, 113); a wood carving (cat. no. 8); a gold and black lacquerware cabinet (cat. no. 41) and a cloth painting (cat. no. 104). Most of these entries are described by Forrest McGill and the explanations greatly benefit from his deep knowledge of Thai art.

Of these entries of Thai origin, the gold and black lacquerware cabinet is of particular note. A large number of these type of cabinets, of which there are hundreds in museums, temples and private collections in Thailand, contain images from the Thai rendition of the Rama story and are perhaps the largest repository of original artwork and images remaining from the late Ayutthaya to early Rattanakosin period (18th to mid-19th century).

Most of the explanations of the exhibition entries are quite detailed, perhaps a little more than is essential, and sometimes tend to be somewhat repetitious in retelling the story. This can become a trifle monotonous if reading the entire book cover to cover, but is useful when just picking out certain images to explore. While there is some unevenness in the catalogue descriptions (sometimes "at the risk of overinterpretation"), generally they show a significant depth of understanding of the subject matter. One matter of note is that when describing an image, typically the *Valmiki Ramayana* is the default telling that is used to relate the story, whereas the image is clearly from another rendition, thus making the explanation of the image sometimes seem slightly forced. This is likely because of the accessibility of the Valmiki version made possible through the encyclopedic translation of Goldman, et.al., as compared to the relative obscurity and lack of English translation of many of the other tellings. Matching text to image is always problematic in art history, and more so when there are "three-hundred" or more tellings to choose from.

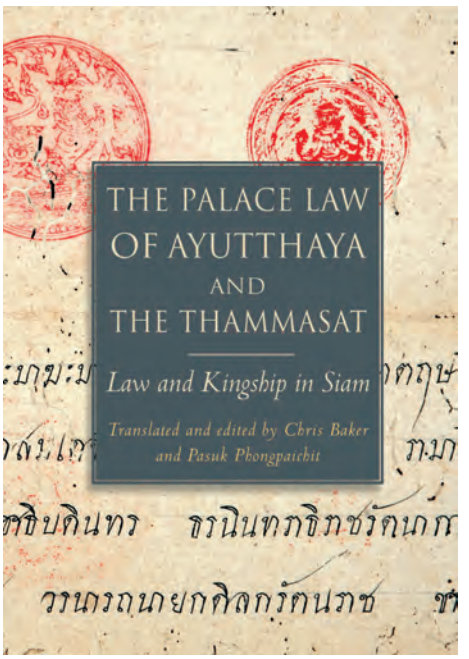
The entries are ordered essentially to tell the entire story as it relates to each of the

four main characters that have been picked out for special review. Thus, the section on Rama covers from the incarnation of Vishnu as Rama, through his marriage to Sita, exile to the forest, the abduction of his wife, the fight to recover Sita and eventual return and enthronement. For Sita, the entries cover from the exile to the forest, her abduction by Ravana, imprisonment and then eventual recovery by Rama. The entries related to Hanuman tend to focus on his many exploits and heroic adventures in serving Rama, while the pieces assigned to Ravana are a bit more varied, covering his many shapes and forms, in addition to his role in the abduction of Sita and subsequent fight with Rama.

Overall, this heavy (literally) volume is a worthy addition to any library and is an informative work for those interested in adding to their knowledge of the Rama 'epic'. The large number of images and interesting and enjoyable essays make for a delightful reading experience.

Frederick B. Goss

The Palace Law of Ayutthaya and The Thammasat: Law and Kingship in Siam, translated and edited by Chris Baker and Pasuk Phongpaichit. Ithaca, NY: Cornell Southeast Asia Program Publications, 2016. ISBN: 9780877277699 (paperback). US$23.95/950 Baht.



Law codes are often seen as a key source of information offering insight into the society over which they govern. In this view, law reflects long-standing traditions and therefore offers scholars a mirror on the social norms and moral code of a society. Adherents of this 'natural law' view tend to "deny human agency a principal role for ordering social life and instead seek guidance and instruction in the morality of a universal, ahistorical 'natural' law" (Silbey 1989:1). Sociologists who study the relationship between law and society, however, tend to view legal codes more instrumentally. The law makes "available tools, resources, symbols, and languages useful in the construction of social order" (p. 1). In *The Palace Law of Ayutthaya and The Thammasat: Law and Kingship in Siam*, Chris Baker and Pasuk Phongpaichit provide not only the first English language translation of two of the most important legal documents for Thai historiography, they present an argument that highlights the tension between the 'naturalists' and instrumentalists, both in the scholarship on Thai law and in the ways in which law has been made and practiced in Siam over the course of the past five centuries.

As a document reflecting the customs and beliefs of a society, the translation of the