



Parashurama Kills Kartavirya Arjuna

Probably from a set of dasavatara

Uttar Pradesh, Lucknow, Third quarter of the 18th century

Ink, opaque watercolour and gold on paper

29cm high, 19cm wide

Stock no.: A4336

One of the dasavataras, the ten principal incarnations of Vishnu, Parashurama is rarely seen in paintings compared with the more popular depictions of Krishna and his brother Balarama, Rama or even some of the earlier incarnations like Matsya (fish), Kurma (tortoise), Varaha (boar), and Narasimha (man-lion). Perhaps only Vamana (dwarf) and Kalki (horse) are less-often depicted. There are a number of stories told about Parashurama, named because of an axe (parashu), which he obtained from the god Shiva after severe penances. The scene here involves the powerful multi-armed Haihaya King Kartavirya Arjuna who, with his vast army, had visited Parashurama's Brahman father and was given a wonderful feast. Asking how Jamadagni, Parashu's father, had been able to offer such a feast, Jamadagni told him that he possessed a wish-fulfilling cow named Kamadhenu. There are many slightly differing versions of this tale, but effectively Kartavirya steals the cow. In some accounts he kills Parashu's father before the scene depicted here. In other stories, Kartavirya Arjunas' sons kill

Jamadagni after their father dies. Parashu then battles Kartavirya and kills him. Parashu also kills many other Kshatriyas, members of the warrior caste. Some versions involve the abduction of Nandini, Kamadhenu's calf, which accounts for the pair of mother and daughter cows observed in the background of this painting.

The closest examples in terms of painting style are found in two albums of Indian mythological subjects commissioned by the Swiss engineer and architect Colonel Antoine-Louis Henri Polier (1741-95) while working for the East India Company in the 1770s-80s. These two albums from the Polier collection were acquired by the collector William Beckford who later sold a portion of his library due to financial strains. On May 6th, 1817, the two volumes of paintings 'representing the system of Indian Mythology' were sold from the private collection of Colonel A.L.H. de Polier which were the highest paid single lot sold in the auction – hammer price of £267.15 (Gemmett, 1972, p. 52). After about 77 years and several changed owners, the Polier albums were sold to The British Museum in 1894 by Mr G. Baumgartner (Losty, 1982, p. 150). Currently, the Polier albums are housed in The British Library, London, Accession Numbers Or.4769 and Or.4770, which hold 32 folios. According to Archer, Colonel Polier had one of the finest collections of Persian, Sanskrit manuscripts and Indian miniatures (Archer, 1979, p. 142-143).

The Polier albums in The British Library were likely painted by Mihr Chand, one of Polier's commissioned artists and a leading studio painter from around 1773-86 (Roy, 2014, p. 5-7). As the Varaha (boar) miniature in The British Library's collection is dressed to match the figure of Parashurama and with nearly identical painting style (light washes of colour in the background and thin shadows painted behind the figures), there is a strong probability that our Parashurama Kills Kartavirya Arjuna miniature was painted by Mihr Chand or one of his associates. Furthermore, there is a convincing prospect that this Parashurama miniature might have also been a part of one of Polier's original group of commissioned albums which were sold off and then separated from the album at a later stage.

Literature:

Archer, India and British Portraiture 1770-1825, Sotheby Park Bernet, London, 1979.

Gemmett (ed). Sale Catalogues of Eminent Persons, Volume 3, Sotheby Park Bernet, London, 1972.

Losty, The Art of the Book in India, The British Library, London, 1982.

Roy, "William Beckford's Albums on Hindu Mythology." The British Library, 08 December 2014. Web 03 October 2015.