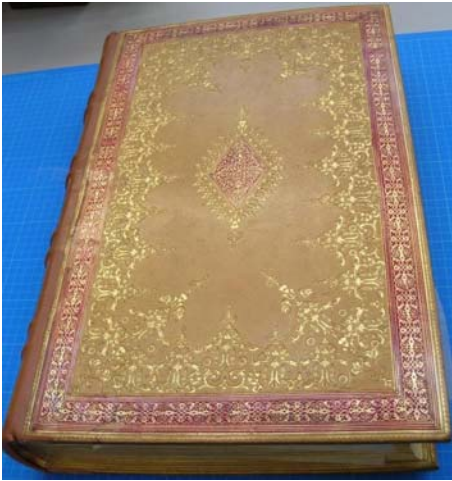


The long-term preservation of our Ramayana manuscripts

By Martina Groenvelt, Book Conservator and Vicki Humphrey, previous Head of Conservation at the British Library



The British Library's Ramayana manuscripts have been kept as a complete collection, bound together in five volumes. The volumes were very attractive with light tan goat skin covering with very expert decorative gold tooling. The edges to the text block were gilt and the double headbands were hand sewn with silk thread in 2 colours. Inside the books had extensive gold tooling and red watered-silk doublures – ornamental inside linings to the book cover in place of the more usual endpapers and pastedowns

Attractive as the bindings were, they were not suitable for the long preservation of the Ramayana and the book format was not original. The text and

Above: One of the Ramayana volumes

painted illustrations were inlaid into sheets of modern Western paper making up the textblock. The volumes did not open easily; they were very large and difficult to handle and some damage had already occurred in the form of tears and creases to some of the leaves. There was also a risk of loss of pigment from the paintings as the pages were turned.

The work in preparation for the exhibition of the Ramayana is part of an ongoing conservation treatment which involves



Above: The text and painted illustrations inlaid into sheets of modern western paper making up the textblock



Above: A conservator working on an illustration from one of the Ramayana volumes

removing the Ramayana from the bindings and mounting the individual sheets of paper in double sided conservation mounts, allowing access to both text and paintings on either side of the paper. As part of this process tears are repaired and flaking pigment consolidated to stabilise the paintings. In time the full Ramayana will be mounted and stored in archival boxes.

The bindings will not be lost – although not original they are considered to be an important part of the history of the BL's Ramayana. The decorative features remain intact and the bindings have been supported with archival foam forms and boxed and kept as an integral part of the Ramayana collection.