

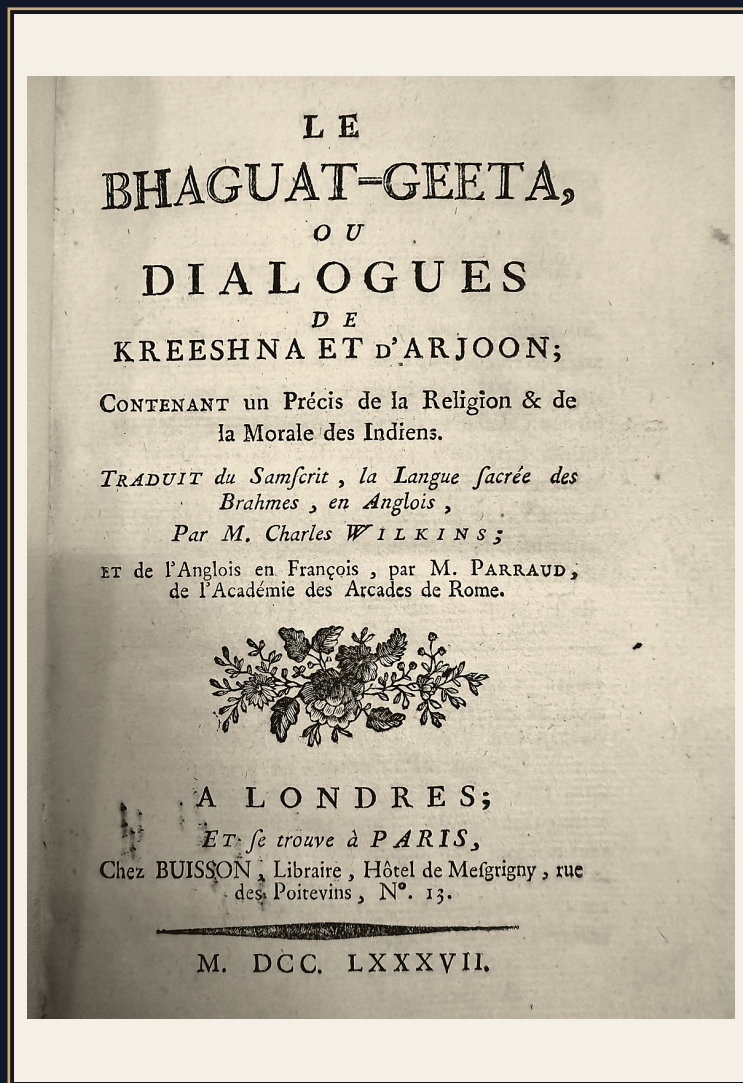
THE EYE OF THE BEHOLDER

A CATALOGUE MONOGRAPH

LE BHAGUAT-GEETA

The Song Enters France

The First French Bhagavad Gita | 1787



CHARLES WILKINS • J.-P. PARRAUD

INDOPHILES • BIBLIOPHILES • ICONOPHILES



THE CUSTODIANS

We believe that certain books are not merely read. They are inherited, protected, interpreted and passed forward. They are witnesses: to the moment when one civilisation first attempted to understand another; to the migration of sacred thought across languages; and to the patient labour by which knowledge survives political power.

To acquire such a volume is therefore not simply to possess an old book. It is to accept custody of an object that has travelled through minds, libraries and centuries. The finest collections are not accumulations. They are arguments about what deserves to endure.

The Eye of the Beholder presents books in that spirit. Scholarship establishes their place in history; connoisseurship recognises the particular qualities of the individual copy; and custodianship ensures that the object remains available to the future.





कर्मण्येवाधिकारस्ते मा फलेषु कदाचन ।
मा कर्मफलहेतुर्भूर्मा ते सङ्गोऽस्त्वकर्मणि ॥

“Your claim is to action alone, never to its fruits.”

Bhagavad Gītā, II.47



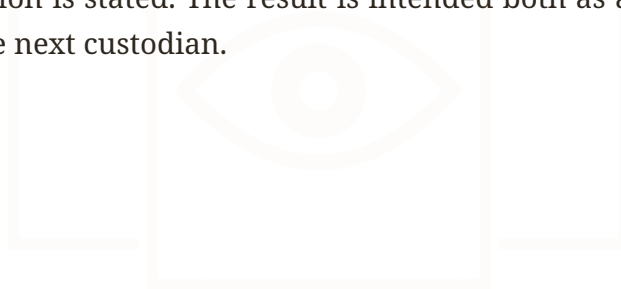


PREFACE

This catalogue note concerns a book that stands near the beginning of the modern global life of Indian philosophy: the first French translation of the Bhagavad Gītā, published in 1787. It appeared only two years after Charles Wilkins's epoch-making English translation from Sanskrit, and it carried the dialogue of Krishna and Arjuna from the intellectual world of Bengal into the largest continental language of Enlightenment Europe.

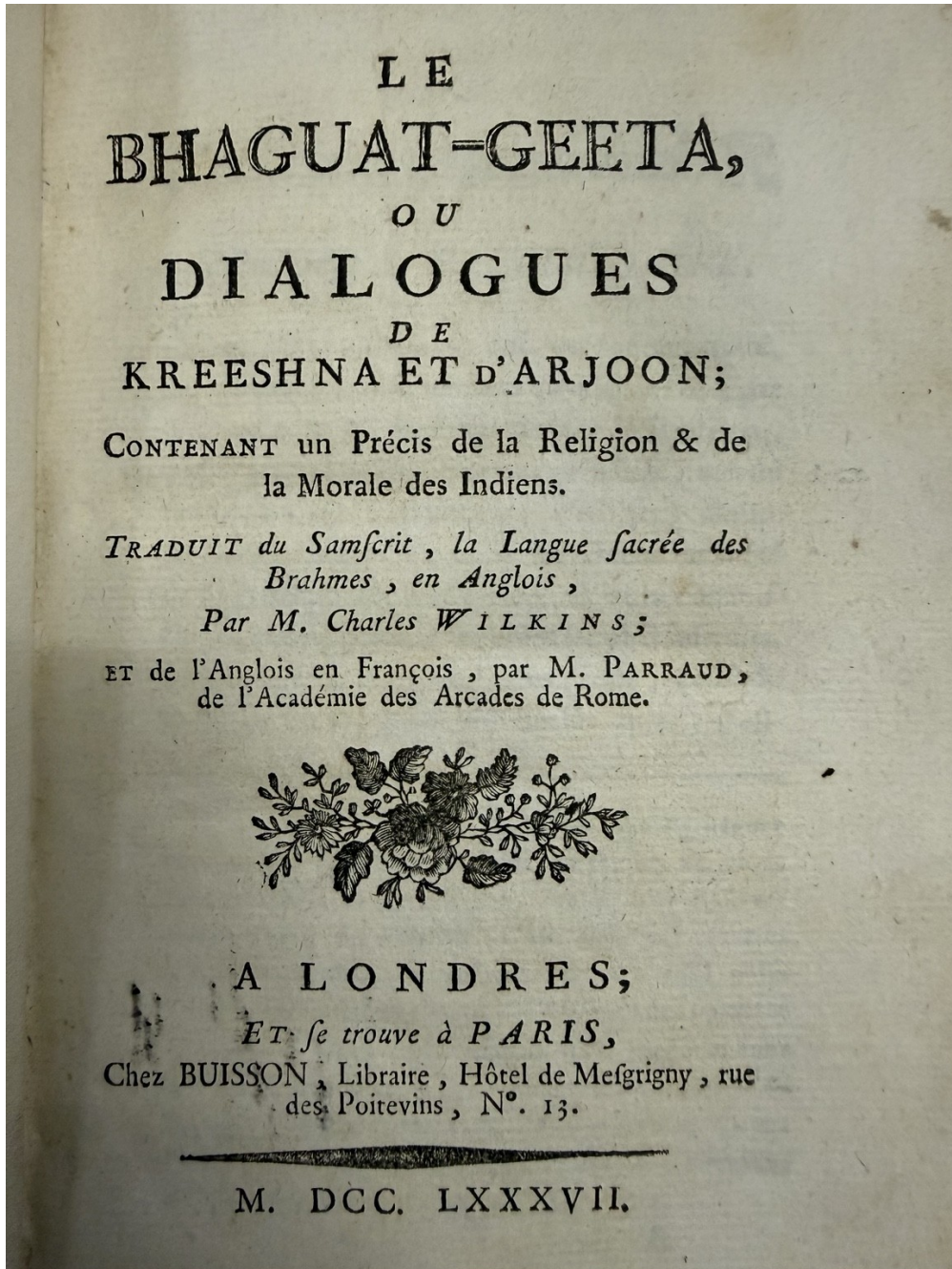
The present copy is especially compelling. It retains an elegant contemporary French binding, remarkably fresh text, and an engraved ownership label of M. de Laus de Boissy. That bookplate does more than supply a name. It places this copy inside the culture for which Parraud's translation was made: the cultivated, office-holding and book-collecting society of late ancien-régime France.

The following account distinguishes the edition from the individual copy; explains its relationship to Wilkins's 1785 English Gītā; considers Parraud's mediation of Indian thought; and records the provenance, binding and condition visible in the supplied photographs. Where a conclusion depends upon photographs rather than physical collation, that limitation is stated. The result is intended both as a scholarly record and as an invitation to the next custodian.



THE SONG ENTERS FRANCE

The First French Bhagavad Gītā • 1787



Title page of the present copy: London, and sold in Paris by Buisson, 1787.

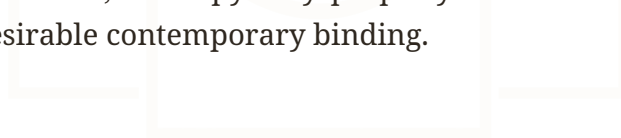
CHARLES WILKINS • J.-P. PARRAUD

THE BOOK AT A GLANCE

WILKINS, Charles; PARRAUD, J.-P. (translator into French). Le Bhagavat-Geeta, ou Dialogues de Kreeshna et d'Arjoon; contenant un Précis de la Religion & de la Morale des Indiens. Traduit du Samscrit, la Langue sacrée des Brahmes, en Anglois, par M. Charles Wilkins; et de l'Anglois en François, par M. Parraud, de l'Académie des Arcades de Rome. A Londres; et se trouve à Paris, chez Buisson, Libraire, Hôtel de Mesgrigny, rue des Poitevins, no. 13. 1787.

First French edition; the earliest complete translation of the Bhagavad Gītā into French, made by J.-P. Parraud from Charles Wilkins's 1785 English translation, which had itself been translated directly from Sanskrit. Octavo. The standard recorded collation is six preliminary pages, clxii pages of introductory and contextual matter, and 180 pages of the Gītā; some copies also preserve publisher's advertisements. Contemporary French mottled calf, spine divided into gilt compartments with small floral tools, gilt rules and a contrasting red morocco title label; marbled endpapers. Engraved ex-libris of M. de Laus de Boissy on the front pastedown.

The supplied photographs show a handsome, substantially unrestored eighteenth-century binding with a sound and attractive spine; light rubbing and normal surface wear to the calf are visible, but the volume retains strong period character. Internally, the paper appears exceptionally clean and bright, with no material foxing apparent in the illustrated openings. The title page shows only a few tiny, isolated age marks. Subject to physical collation, the copy may properly be described as an exceptionally fresh example in a desirable contemporary binding.





I. A SCRIPTURE AT THE MOMENT OF DECISION

The Bhagavad Gītā is a poem about action uttered at the instant when action becomes almost impossible. Arjuna, warrior and prince, surveys the armies assembled at Kurukshetra and recognises among his opponents teachers, kinsmen and friends. The conventions of heroic warfare collapse before the moral fact of killing those whom one loves and honours. He lowers his bow. Krishna, his charioteer, must answer a question that is at once political, ethical and metaphysical: how should a person act when every available action appears stained?

That dramatic economy helps explain the Gītā's extraordinary portability. Its setting is particular, but its crisis is universal. Krishna's response does not offer a single doctrine. It moves through the immortality of the self, the discipline of action without attachment to results, the paths of knowledge and devotion, the ordering of nature by the three guṇas, and the vision of the divine form. Duty is neither blind obedience nor private preference; it is action undertaken with disciplined understanding, freed as far as possible from vanity and possessiveness.

The poem forms part of the Bhīṣma Parvan of the Mahābhārata and is conventionally arranged in eighteen chapters and approximately seven hundred verses. Its position within the epic is essential. This is not philosophy withdrawn from history. It is philosophy spoken before battle, in the presence of consequence. The Gītā asks how transcendence can illuminate worldly obligation without dissolving it.

For centuries the work generated an immense Indian commentarial tradition. Śaṅkara read it within Advaita Vedānta; Rāmānuja emphasised devotion within qualified non-dualism; Madhva argued from a dualist position; later thinkers repeatedly made it answer new historical needs. The printed translations of the late eighteenth century did not create the Gītā's importance. They changed the geography of its readership.



II. 1785: WILKINS AND THE FIRST EUROPEAN GĪTĀ

Charles Wilkins arrived in Bengal as a servant of the East India Company and became one of the earliest British scholars to acquire a serious command of Sanskrit. His achievement belongs to the formative period of European Sanskrit studies, before the discipline possessed established grammars, dictionaries, university chairs or stable typographic conventions. Translation demanded direct work with learned Indian interlocutors and manuscripts, as well as the creation of a vocabulary in which unfamiliar philosophical distinctions might be made intelligible.

In 1785 the East India Company published *The Bhagvat-Geeta, or Dialogues of Kreeshna and Arjoon, in Eighteen Lectures*. It was the first English translation of the Gītā and, more broadly, the first direct translation of a major Sanskrit work into English. The importance of that event is difficult to overstate. Europe had long received reports about India, but Wilkins offered sustained access to an Indian philosophical scripture through the authority of the Sanskrit text.

Warren Hastings, Governor-General of Bengal, supported the publication and contributed a celebrated prefatory letter. His prediction that the philosophical works of India would survive British dominion has become one of the best-known statements attached to early Orientalist scholarship. The formulation was imperial, yet it contained an acknowledgement that literary and spiritual authority could outlast political conquest.

Wilkins's translation inevitably bears the marks of its time. Names appear as "Kreeshna" and "Arjoon"; chapters become "lectures"; concepts are filtered through English theological and philosophical language. Yet its seriousness distinguished it from the sensational and anecdotal accounts through which India was often represented. The Gītā appeared not as a curiosity but as a coherent work of moral reasoning and metaphysical ambition.

III. 1787: FROM CALCUTTA AND LONDON TO PARIS

Parraud's French translation followed Wilkins after only two years. That speed is itself evidence of contemporary interest. The route of transmission is candidly declared on the title page: Sanskrit into English by Charles Wilkins; English into French by M. Parraud. Bibliographically, therefore, this is not a direct Sanskrit-to-French translation. Historically, it is no less significant. It is the first complete French Gītā and one of the earliest continental embodiments of the new Sanskrit learning.

The imprint—"A Londres; et se trouve à Paris, chez Buisson"—situates the book within a familiar eighteenth-century publishing convention. "London" could lend cosmopolitan or philosophical prestige, while the named Paris bookseller identified the real point of distribution. The supplied title page clearly names Buisson at the Hôtel de Mesgrigny, rue des Poitevins. Some modern records repeat variant or erroneous seller information; for this copy the primary evidence of the title page must prevail.

The book appeared on the eve of the French Revolution, when arguments about religion, authority, nature and moral obligation possessed unusual urgency. Parraud's subtitle, presenting the text as a summary of the "religion and morality of the Indians," is revealing. It made the Gītā legible to readers trained to look for systems of natural religion and universal ethics. The phrase compresses a work of great complexity, but it also accords India philosophical dignity: a civilisation with reasoned conceptions of divinity, soul, conduct and liberation.

French gave the Gītā a continental reach that English alone could not provide. Through translation, the text entered a European republic of letters and became available to the intellectual currents that would develop into comparative religion, Romantic Orientalism and academic Indology. The 1787 volume is consequently both a translation and an event in the history of reception.

IV. THE TRANSLATOR: J.-P. PARRAUD

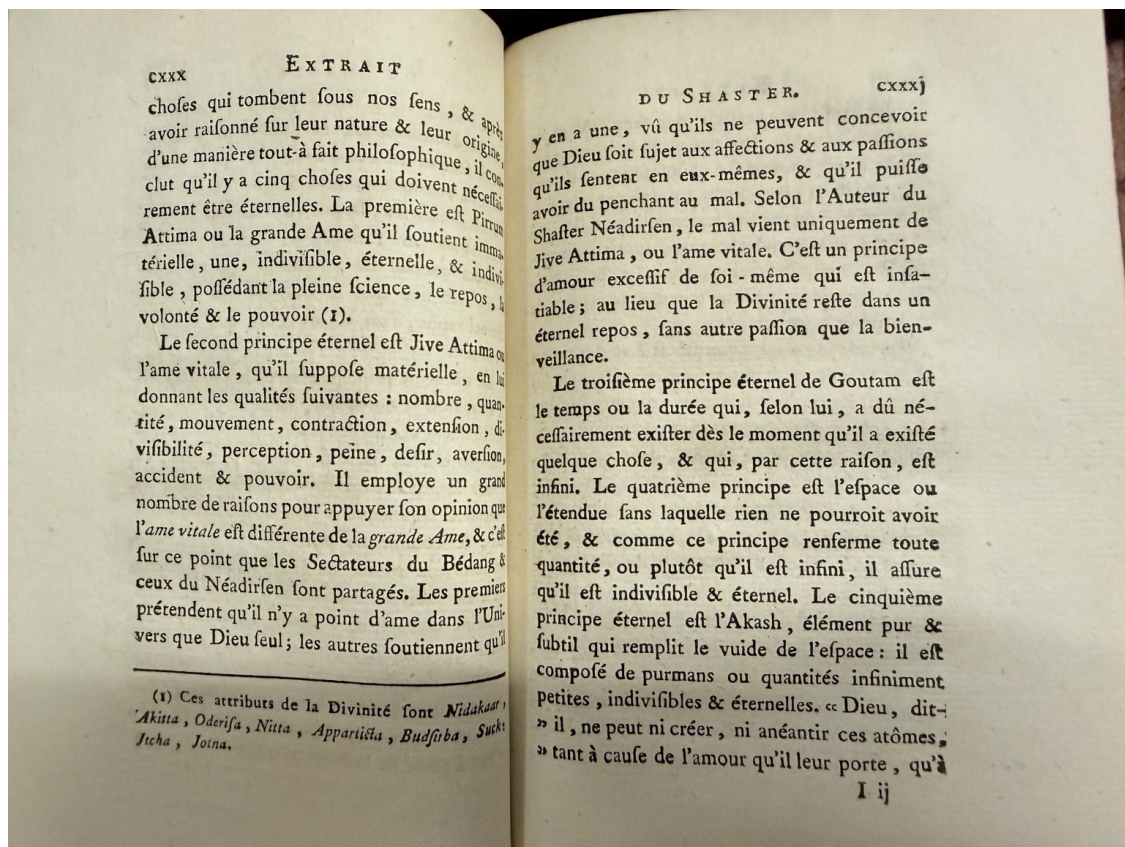
The title page identifies Parraud as a member of the Academy of Arcadia in Rome, a distinction intended to establish literary standing before the French reader. Bibliographical sources commonly identify him as Joseph-Pascal Parraud (1752–1832), often styled the Abbé Parraud. His role in this book was that of mediator: he did not claim access to the Sanskrit original, but sought to preserve and clarify the substance conveyed by Wilkins.

Translation at one remove invites easy dismissal, yet such versions often determine the early life of a work beyond its first linguistic frontier. Parraud had to decide how Wilkins’s vocabulary of “Supreme Being,” “soul,” “devotion,” “works” and “knowledge” should inhabit French philosophical prose. Each decision placed Indian concepts in conversation with the lexicon of Catholic theology, Enlightenment moral philosophy and classical metaphysics.

The extensive preliminary matter matters as much as the translated dialogue. It supplied readers with an intellectual map of Indian doctrines and terms. The photographed opening at pages cxxx–cxxxı discusses eternal principles including Attima, Jive Attima, time, space and Akash. Its spelling now appears archaic, but the page records an extraordinary early effort to convey categories of Indian thought in French type.

Parraud’s achievement should therefore be judged historically. He made the first English Gītā travel. The result is a document of interpretation: Sanskrit thought refracted through Wilkins’s English and then recast for French readers just before Europe’s political and intellectual order was transformed.

V. THE MATERIAL BOOK



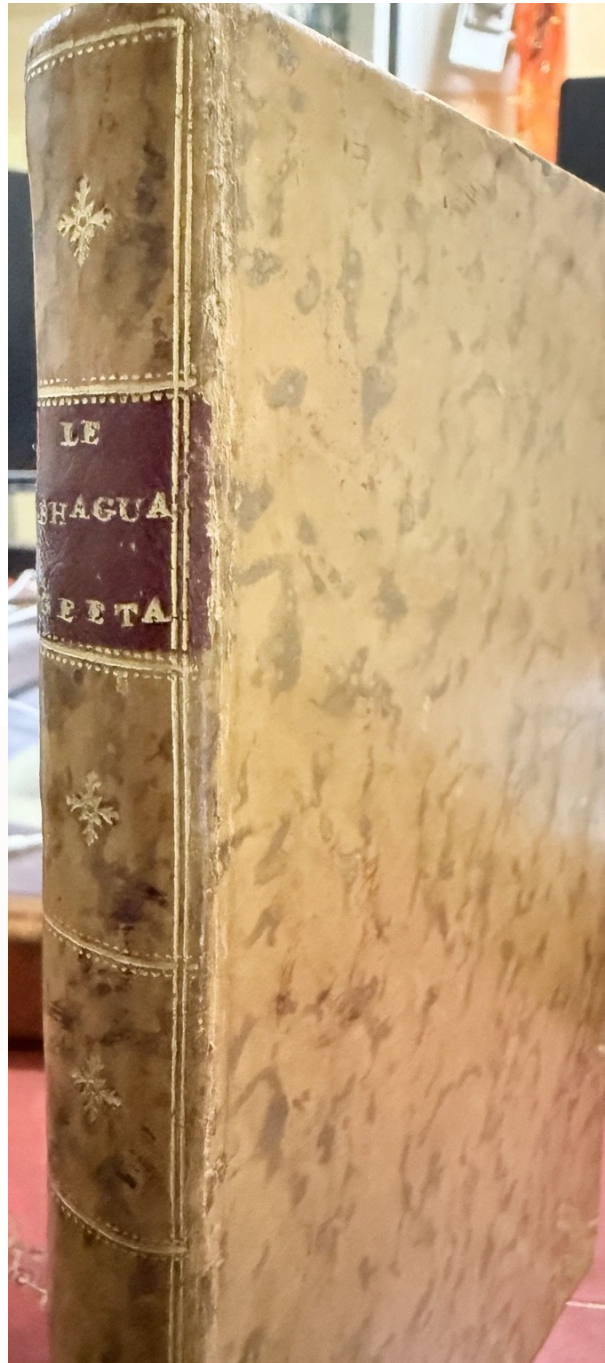
A notably clean opening in the extensive preliminary matter, pages cxxx–cxxxj.

The physical design is sober and persuasive. The title page uses changing sizes and italic forms to establish the chain of translation, while a floral ornament separates title and imprint. Such typography places the work within the conventions of learned French publishing rather than travel entertainment.

The text is printed on laid paper in an octavo format suited to private reading and the library shelf. The photographed leaves retain generous tone and strong impressions. The old-form long s and the transliterations—Attima, Bédang, Akash, Kreeshna—make the volume a record not only of philosophy but of the developing European attempt to hear and print Sanskrit.

The present copy's contemporary binding is particularly appropriate: mottled calf, a spine ruled and tooled in gold, and a red morocco lettering-piece. It is neither ostentatious nor utilitarian. It belongs to the cultivated library of the 1780s. The marbled endpapers extend that visual world into the interior, where the former owner's engraved label survives.

VI. THE BINDING AND SPINE



Contemporary mottled calf; gilt-ruled spine with floral tools and red morocco label.

The spine is one of the copy's principal attractions. Its gilt compartments remain clearly articulated and the red label retains the title in gold. The small floral tools echo the ornament on the title page without attempting pictorial decoration. This is the visual language of an eighteenth-century gentleman's library.

The supplied image also records honest age: rubbing at the joints and extremities, some surface variation to the calf, and modest wear to the label. These are not defects that erase quality; they are the expected traces of a binding approaching two and a half

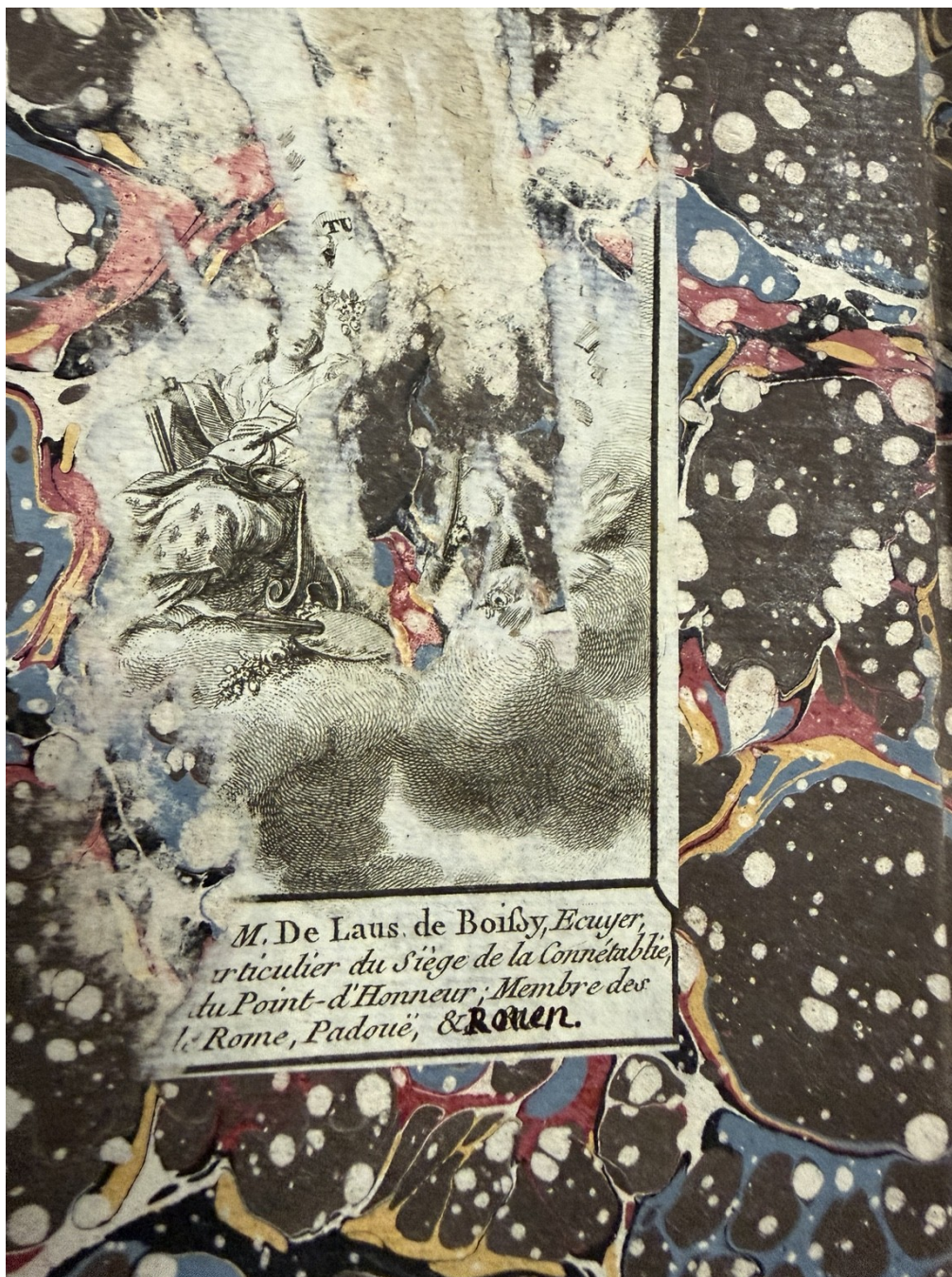


centuries. Crucially, the spine presents coherently and with good architectural strength. The overall impression is handsome, authentic and highly displayable.

The boards show the attractive mottling characteristic of the period. Their survival with the original spine, endpapers and bookplate allows the volume to be read as a complete historical object. A later luxury rebinding might appear brighter, but it would sever precisely the material relationship that makes this copy persuasive.



VII. PROVENANCE: THE EX-LIBRIS OF M. DE LAUS DE BOISSY



The engraved ex-libris of M. de Laus de Boissy on the marbled front pastedown.

The damaged but substantially legible engraved label identifies “M. De Laus de Boissy, Ecuyer, ... du Siège de la Connétablie ... Point-d’Honneur; Membre de ... Rome, Padoue, & Rouen.” Contemporary and later catalogues identify him more fully as an écuyer and lieutenant-particulier of the judicial seat of the Connétablie de France, associated with the jurisdiction of the Point d’Honneur. Other surviving books bearing the same engraved ex-libris establish him as a recognisable eighteenth-century owner rather than an unidentified family name.

The label is important at three levels. First, it supplies a near-contemporary French provenance. De Laus de Boissy belonged to exactly the literate official culture for which a French *Gītā* was published. This was not a scripture returned later to an antiquarian binding; it entered a cultivated French library close to the date of publication.

Second, the bookplate gives the copy individuality. Early translations are usually catalogued through edition alone. Here the physical object preserves evidence of reception: someone in ancien-régime France chose to acquire and mark the first French rendering of an Indian sacred dialogue. The copy therefore embodies the movement from publication to readership.

Third, the worn state of the engraving should be described accurately and appreciated intelligently. Portions of the portrait and lettering are abraded, but the identifying text and design remain sufficient to connect the label with documented examples. Its wear does not negate provenance; it is part of the copy's material history. The marbled pastedown around it remains vivid, producing an especially evocative eighteenth-century opening.

A nineteenth-century sale catalogue of the celebrated Rouen collector Charles Lormier specifically praised the “bel ... ex-libris gravé” of M. de Laus de Boissy on another volume. Auction catalogues also record multiple books from his library. Such references support both the identification and the bibliophilic significance of the label.

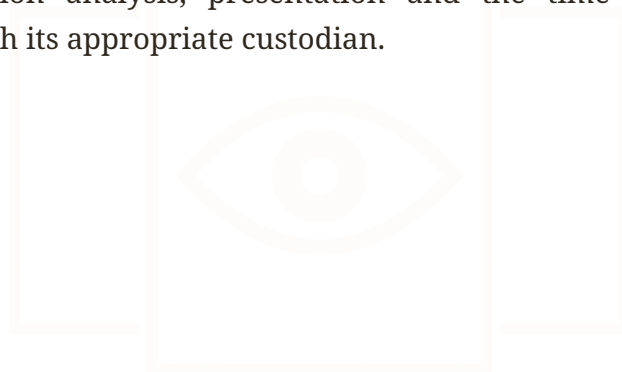


VIII. A COPY WITH A TRACEABLE MODERN HISTORY

The unique conjunction of binding, red label, marbled endpapers and the de Laus de Boissy ex-libris appears to identify this as the copy offered by Saffronart in The Divine Eye, 20–21 August 2025, lot 59. That catalogue recorded the volume as [4], clxii, 180 pages, 20 × 13 cm, in contemporary mottled calf with gilt spine, red morocco label, marbled endpapers, bookplate and red edges.

The auction description mistakenly or inconsistently named Benoît Morin in its imprint line, while the photographed title page of the present copy unmistakably reads Buisson. This is precisely why primary bibliographical evidence must be separated from secondary catalogue transcription. The title page confirms the standard Buisson issue of 1787; the auction record remains valuable for modern provenance and market history.

Saffronart estimated the copy at INR 150,000–250,000 (USD 1,745–2,910) and recorded a winning price of INR 192,000 / USD 2,233 inclusive of buyer's premium. The result is a useful public benchmark, but auction and curated retail markets are not equivalent. The former measures one competitive moment; the latter includes research, photography, condition analysis, presentation and the time required to place a specialised object with its appropriate custodian.



IX. CONDITION: THE PRESENT COPY

The present copy may be described as exceptionally fresh internally and very good overall, in an attractive contemporary binding. The supplied photographs show clean, bright leaves with strong printing and no meaningful foxing visible. The photographed text opening is remarkably free from spotting, staining or handling soil. The title page has only a few minute, isolated age marks and remains crisp and well margined.

The binding is contemporary mottled calf with gilt rules and floral tools to the spine and a red morocco title label. The spine is sound in appearance, retains strong decorative definition and presents very well. There is age-consistent rubbing at the joints, edges and extremities, with surface wear to the boards and some abrasion to the lettering-piece. These qualifications should be stated, because “pristine” is best reserved for an object without visible external wear. They do not materially diminish the desirability of a copy whose original binding, spine, endpapers and provenance label survive together.

The engraved bookplate is rubbed and partly abraded, particularly through the portrait area, but remains identifiable and historically valuable. The marbled pastedowns are vivid. No claim about absolute completeness should be made without leaf-by-leaf collation, although the modern auction record gives the standard substantial pagination. Before publication, the volume should be checked for the six preliminary pages, clxii pages, 180 pages of translation, and any terminal advertisement leaves that may occur in some copies.

Recommended concise condition statement: “First French edition. Contemporary mottled calf, gilt spine in compartments, red morocco label, marbled endpapers, red edges. A handsome, unrestored copy with light rubbing and age wear to binding; spine sound and attractive. Engraved ex-libris of M. de Laus de Boissy, rubbed but identifiable. Internally exceptionally fresh and clean, with no material foxing observed; only a few minute marks to title. Very good overall.”

X. RARITY AND COLLECTOR SIGNIFICANCE

The 1787 Parraud is scarcer in commerce than its historical importance would suggest. Institutional holdings exist and digital surrogates have improved scholarly access, but attractive copies in contemporary bindings do not appear regularly. Copies that combine fresh paper, an original French binding and a named eighteenth-century provenance are considerably more difficult.

Its collector appeal operates across several fields: the history of the Bhagavad Gītā; first translations of Sanskrit literature; East India Company scholarship; the European Enlightenment; comparative religion; French intellectual history; and provenance collecting. It also belongs naturally beside the foundational works through which India entered modern European print: Halhed's Code of Gentoo Laws (1776), Wilkins's Bhagvat-Geeta (1785), Jones's Sacontalā (1790/1792 in its principal early forms), and the early volumes of Asiatick Researches.

The 1785 Wilkins remains the foundational prize because it is the first direct translation from Sanskrit into a European language. The 1787 Parraud should not be represented as equal in bibliographical primacy. Its distinction is different and substantial: it is the first French Gītā and the work that moved Wilkins's achievement into continental Europe. Collectors building a history of civilisational transmission require both moments—the original bridge and its first major extension.

The de Laus de Boissy bookplate elevates this copy above an anonymous example. Provenance does not automatically confer celebrity value, and no extravagant biographical claim is necessary. Its importance lies in coherence: an early French reader, belonging to the administrative and literary culture of the ancien régime, owned the first French translation of one of India's central scriptures.

XI. THE GĪTĀ AND THE EUROPEAN IMAGINATION

The translation history inaugurated by Wilkins and extended by Parraud helped alter European conceptions of India. Earlier accounts often oscillated between admiration for antiquity and dismissal of contemporary religious practice. A sustained philosophical text made caricature more difficult. Readers encountered arguments about the self, the divine, action and liberation expressed with a systematic intensity that demanded comparison with Plato, Stoicism and Christian mysticism.

Those comparisons could illuminate, but they could also distort. Terms such as God, soul, duty and devotion never perfectly map onto Brahman, ātman, dharma and bhakti. The early spellings in Parraud's pages remind us that European vocabularies were still being made. This is part of the book's fascination. It preserves the first phase of conceptual negotiation before Sanskrit studies became professionalised.

The Gītā's later European and American readers—Romantics, Transcendentalists, philologists and religious reformers—encountered increasingly direct and sophisticated versions. Yet the 1787 French edition belongs to the decisive opening movement. It made the text available at the moment when Europe was reconsidering revelation, reason and the diversity of human civilisation.

The book is therefore not merely “an early translation.” It is evidence of a shift in the hierarchy of knowledge. Indian thought began to appear in European print as something to be studied, argued with and assimilated into accounts of universal philosophy.

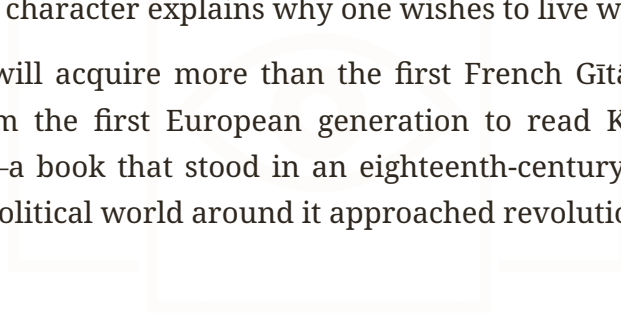
XII. WHY THIS COPY BELONGS IN A SERIOUS COLLECTION

A foundational book gains power when edition, condition and provenance reinforce one another. Here the edition marks the *Gītā*'s first complete entrance into French. The condition preserves the pleasure of eighteenth-century printing: clean paper, strong type and an intact visual field. The binding retains the period architecture of the book. The ownership label supplies a named, near-contemporary French reader.

For a collector of India, the volume is a key node in the printed history of Sanskrit. For a collector of the Enlightenment, it records the enlargement of Europe's philosophical archive. For a collector of sacred texts, it captures the moment when one of Hinduism's most influential works began its modern multilingual career. For a provenance collector, it offers an unusually coherent relationship between text, date, place and owner.

It is also a book with presence. The restrained gilt spine and mellow calf belong comfortably in a traditional library; the title page is typographically handsome; the marbled endpaper and ex-libris reward close inspection. Scholarship explains why it matters, but material character explains why one wishes to live with it.

The next custodian will acquire more than the first French *Gītā*. They will acquire a surviving object from the first European generation to read Krishna's counsel in a modern vernacular—a book that stood in an eighteenth-century French library while the intellectual and political world around it approached revolution.



XIII. MARKET POSITION AND RECOMMENDED PRICE

Three public reference points are especially useful. A specialist dealer currently advertises a first French edition in contemporary binding at USD 2,850. An Ewbank's copy offered in June 2024 carried a modest estimate of GBP 150–250, illustrating how general-auction estimates can understate specialist material. Most importantly, the apparently identical de Laus de Boissy copy sold at Saffronart in August 2025 for USD 2,233 inclusive of premium against an estimate of USD 1,745–2,910.

The present copy merits a premium over an ordinary trade example because it combines exceptionally fresh internal condition, a handsome contemporary binding and a documented eighteenth-century French provenance. At the same time, the recent public auction record is discoverable and should discipline the asking price. A price far above the established market without additional scholarship or provenance would be difficult to sustain.

Recommended international listing price: USD 4,250.

This level positions the book as a curated cultural asset rather than an undifferentiated antiquarian volume, while remaining credible relative to the USD 2,850 dealer comparable and the USD 2,233 auction result. It leaves room for a considered private negotiation without weakening the object's stature. A sensible confidential acceptance range would be approximately USD 3,600–3,900, depending on payment terms, shipping, and whether physical collation confirms complete preliminary and terminal matter.

If the copy is physically collated as complete, professionally photographed, and accompanied by this provenance research, USD 4,250 is competitive. For a rapid sale, USD 3,500–3,750 would be more liquid. A price above USD 4,750 should be attempted only if further evidence substantially enriches the de Laus de Boissy provenance or if the book is offered as part of a paired Wilkins–Parraud narrative.

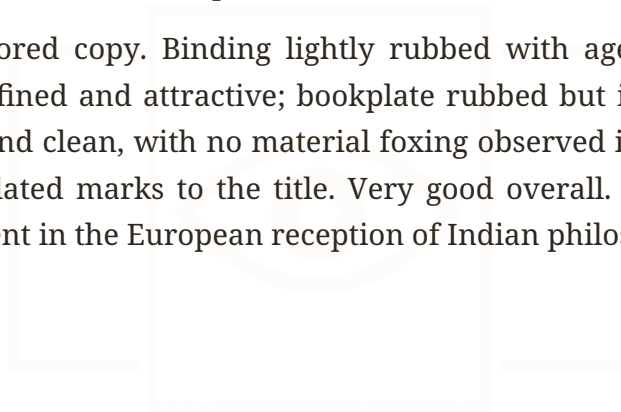
XIV. CATALOGUE DESCRIPTION

WILKINS, Charles; PARRAUD, J.-P. Le Bhagavat-Geeta, ou Dialogues de Kreeshna et d'Arjoon; contenant un Précis de la Religion & de la Morale des Indiens. Traduit du Samscrit ... en Anglois, par M. Charles Wilkins; et de l'Anglois en François, par M. Parraud. London, and sold in Paris by Buisson, 1787.

First French edition of the Bhagavad Gītā, the earliest complete appearance of India's sacred philosophical dialogue in French, translated by the Abbé J.-P. Parraud from Charles Wilkins's landmark 1785 English version from Sanskrit. Published on the eve of the French Revolution, the volume carried Krishna's teaching on duty, action, knowledge and devotion into the language of the continental Enlightenment.

Contemporary mottled calf, gilt spine in compartments with floral tools, contrasting red morocco lettering-piece, marbled endpapers and red edges. With the engraved ex-libris of M. de Laus de Boissy, écuyer and magistrate connected with the Connétablie de France: an evocative near-contemporary provenance from the cultivated official society for which Parraud's translation was produced.

A handsome, unrestored copy. Binding lightly rubbed with age-consistent wear, the spine sound, well defined and attractive; bookplate rubbed but identifiable. Internally exceptionally fresh and clean, with no material foxing observed in the supplied images and only minute isolated marks to the title. Very good overall. A desirable copy of a foundational document in the European reception of Indian philosophy.



SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY AND MARKET REFERENCES

Primary edition: *Le Bhagvat-Geeta, ou Dialogues de Kreeshna et d'Arjoon*. London and Paris: Buisson, 1787. Digitised institutional examples record 180 pages following extensive preliminary matter.

Charles Wilkins, *The Bhagvat-Geeta, or Dialogues of Kreeshna and Arjoon, in Eighteen Lectures*. London: C. Nourse, 1785.

Saffronart, *The Divine Eye*, 20–21 August 2025, lot 59. Catalogue description, condition, collation and result: USD 2,233 inclusive of buyer's premium.

Timeless Tales Rare Books, "Le Bhagvat-Geeta, ou Dialogues de Kreeshna et d'Arjoon," first French edition, offered at USD 2,850 (accessed July 2026).

Google Books, bibliographic record for the Buisson 1787 edition, recording 180 pages and an original copy from the Bibliothèque municipale de Lyon.

University of Pennsylvania, Online Books Page, bibliographical entry identifying Parraud's French translation of Wilkins, Paris: Buisson, 1787.

Catalogue de la bibliothèque de feu M. Charles Lormier de Rouen, later nineteenth-century sale catalogue, noting another volume with the engraved ex-libris of M. de Laus de Boissy.

All conclusions regarding this individual copy are based on the supplied photographs and the closely matching 2025 auction record. Final publication should follow physical collation and measurement.



**A BOOK IS MOST ALIVE
WHEN IT PASSES FROM OWNER TO CUSTODIAN.**

THE EYE OF THE BEHOLDER