



The Splendours of India's Royal Courts

Palace Museum, Beijing

25 April – 31 July 2013

The Splendours of India's Royal Courts will be the first exhibition to be held in China to explore the magnificence of Indian court culture. Over 110 works from the V&A's superlative collections, including beautiful paintings, sumptuous jewellery and textiles, richly embellished arms and armour as well as thrones of gold and silver, will reveal the splendour of India's emperors and kings during the 18th and 19th centuries.

The exhibition has been curated by the head of the V&A's Asian collections, Anna Jackson and co-organised by the staff of the Palace Museum in Beijing, China and the V&A in the UK. It is part of a wider project of collaboration and exchange between the two institutions which saw the V&A present *Imperial Chinese Robes from the Forbidden City* in 2010/11. This exhibition presented for the first time in Europe the spectacular robes worn by the emperors and empresses of the Qing Dynasty (the last ruling dynasty of China) and told the story of a vanished court life within the confines of the Forbidden City.

Martin Roth, V&A Director, said: “*China and India are two of the world's greatest cultures, so it is an enormous privilege and pleasure for the V&A to be presenting at the Palace Museum the first exhibition to be staged in China on the arts of the Indian court. The V&A holds one of the world's largest and most comprehensive collections of art and design from the Indian sub-continent and I hope that visitors to the Palace Museum will marvel at these extraordinary objects from the V&A's collections which have never before been displayed in China.*”

Shan Jixiang, Director of the Palace Museum, Beijing, said: “*In 2010 the exhibition 'Imperial Chinese Robes from the Forbidden City' from the Palace Museum collections was successfully held at the V&A, London; and now another important exhibition, 'Splendours of India's Royal Courts', drawn from the collections of the V&A will be shown at the Meridian Gate Gallery in the Palace Museum, Beijing. These exhibitions, jointly organised by the two museums, mark the development of our tradition of friendly exchanges.*”

The Splendours of India's Royal Courts will reveal how royal status, court culture and patronage were transformed during a period of great political change in India. Not unlike the emperors of China, India's rulers conducted important court business, engaged in elaborate and symbolic rituals, adopted sumptuous dress and adornments, performed religious and military duties, and presented themselves in spectacular processions. Their palaces were filled with the finest works of art and luxury goods which were commissioned from specialist workshops or acquired through diplomacy and trade. To be a patron of the arts, and the possessor of the rare and wonderful, was considered one of the duties of an Indian ruler.

The exhibition is divided into four sections:

Darbar

The court of an Indian ruler was known as *darbar*, a term adopted from Persian. Attended by courtiers and nobles and governed by rigid protocol, this ritual audience was a public display of the ruler's power and authority. The architecture of traditional Indian palaces, with their many open courtyards and gardens, had few fixed furnishings and instead sumptuously decorated and elaborate textiles were used to augment the courtly space. The focus of this section will be a richly embroidered canopy and *gaddi* (textile throne) and the famous golden throne of Maharaja Ranjit Singh. Also on display will be a large and rare portrait of a Maharana Amar Singh II of Mewar which expresses the ideals of Indian kingship, plus objects of symbolic and artistic value associated with court etiquette and ceremony.

Palace Life

The palace was the locus of statecraft, but also the residence for the extended royal household. While *darbar* was a public spectacle other parts of the palace were more private, a division being drawn between the areas open to men and the quarters reserved for the ruler and women of his court. The female household was extensive as polygamy was common in Muslim, Hindu and Sikh courts, where rulers often married for political ends. This section of the exhibition will explore the pastimes and pleasures of India's rulers – such as listening to music, watching dance performances and playing games – and examine the lives of women at court. A highlight of the section will be a display of court costumes.

Beyond the Palace

The third section of the exhibition will explore the role of the ruler beyond the palace, whether displaying his power and splendour before his subjects or demonstrating his ability to control his realm and protect his people from external threats. The secular and sacred authority of an Indian king was expressed most spectacularly in the grand public processions that celebrated royal events and

religious festivities. The vision of a king in all his splendour riding a richly caparisoned elephant or horse was believed to be auspicious. The display will centre on a lifesize model of a horse dressed for procession and include a silver howdah, lavishly embellished swords and striking paintings of procession, battle and the hunt.

The Influence of the West

The cultural history of India has been characterised by the absorption and transformation of foreign influences and ideas, whether introduced by traders or colonisers. In the 18th and 19th century western goods and technologies were brought to India by European trading companies, most notably the English East India Company which became a major military and political power during the latter part of the period. While contact with the British often led to conflict it also resulted in changes to royal patronage as rulers turned to European-inspired art and design to express their power and status. This final section of the exhibition will examine the impact of western goods and technologies at Indian courts. Echoing the displays at the beginning of the exhibition this section will include two European-style silver throne chairs and a large portrait of a ruler, Nawab Muhammed Ali Khan of Arcot executed in oils on canvas by a British artist working in India.

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Notes to Editors

- *The Splendours of India's Royal Courts* will be held in the Meridian Gate Gallery of the Palace Museum, Beijing 25 April – 31 July 2013
- The exhibition is curated by Anna Jackson, Keeper of the V&A's Asian Collections and jointly organised by the V&A and Palace Museum

About the V&A

The V&A is the world's greatest museum of art and design with collections unrivalled in their scope and diversity. The V&A has a large and vibrant programme of touring exhibitions and regularly works with museums and cultural institutions both in the UK and abroad. In 2012 the V&A presented 24 exhibitions at 31 venues in 13 countries around the world, attracting over 1.7million visitors.

About the Palace Museum

Established in 1925, the Palace Museum is housed in the former imperial palace of two consecutive dynasties - the Ming (1368-1644) and the Qing (1644-1911) and is popularly known as the Forbidden City. Its vast collections comprise nearly a

million art treasures spanning five thousand years of Chinese history and include the imperial collections of paintings, calligraphy, ceramics, and decorative objects. In 1961 the imperial palace was designated by the State Council as one of China's foremost-protected cultural heritage sites, and in 1987 was made a UNESCO World Heritage site.

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