

## REVISING THE TIGER.

### The case of the instrument of Tipu Sultan in the Victoria and Albert Museum and the discussion on contested heritage

**A**mong many Indian pieces that can be found in the vast collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum, one of the most renowned and often represented is a huge instrument that does not only surprise with its size (178x71x61cm), but most of all, with its shape. It represents a huge, strong tiger attacking a lying European man. His clothing fashion – white pants, stockings, red coat, and black hat – does not clearly indicate his origins, although it might allude to the famous British “redcoats”. If the visitors were allowed to move the handle, they would hear not only a pipe organ hidden inside, but also sounds akin to the dying moans of the man and angry growls of the animal. The victim’s arm starts to move too, as if he were still struggling in his last moments. The sounds escape through narrow crevices hidden in the tiger’s stripes. The side flap reveals the windpipes with an ivory keyboard, while removing the whole back portion of the animal presents the spectator with a view of the intricate bellows mechanism hidden inside. It was made in the 1790s of Indian jackwood by a European artisan, probably a Frenchman, or by Indian artisans under his guidance, as such objects were often collected by Indian rulers.

The instrument is commonly called “Tipu’s Tiger” and both the instrument, as well as the person it was commissioned for, are subjects of disputes until today. The artwork was made for the 18th century Indian ruler, Tipu

Sultan, and is one of the pieces in the Victoria and Albert Museum currently contested by the decolonizing movements that target museums.<sup>1)</sup>

Tipu Sultan Fath Ali Khan was born in Karnataka, India, around 1750, as the son of Hyder Ali, a distinguished commander-in-chief and later ruler of the Kingdom of Mysore. Young Tipu Sultan (also transcribed by the British as Tippoo Sultan) continued the work and the political line of his father, as he fought for dominance with the Maratha empire and stood firmly against the rising power of the East India Company. The First (1767–69) and Second Anglo-Mysore War (1780–84), led by Hyder Ali, in which Tipu participated as a teenager, had concluded on equal footing, although the British were still constantly acquiring new territories in proximity to the Kingdom of Mysore, while simultaneously ensuring the support of the Marathas and the Nizam of Hyderabad. That has only further confirmed to the Karnatak leader that this was a true threat to the subcontinent, one so great, that he refused the presence of British ‘ambassadors’ at his court and strictly controlled the presence of Europeans in his kingdom<sup>2)</sup>.

Tipu Sultan was a Muslim ruler in a land inhabited mostly by Hindus, as well as Jains and Christians. He preferred Persian as his court’s language, instead of the regional Kannada. Those traits, however, were nothing unusual in the 18th century Subcontinent. 18th century Northern India was ruled by the Mughals, a Muslim Turkic-Mongol dynasty, using Urdu as the court language, while Kashmir, a state inhabited by Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and Sikhs, was ruled by Hindu Dogra Rajputs. Tipu’s religious patronage extended equally to mosques and temples. While the Sultan was the constant enemy of the British, he managed to cooperate with the French, which allowed him access to “gunsmiths, bomb-makers, watchmakers, workers of porcelain from Sèvres, glass-workers, textile-weavers, printers who could work with Eastern languages, an engineer and a physician.”<sup>3)</sup> Tipu was competing with the British in more ways than one. He wanted Mysore to be an economic, industrial and military power, one to be easily matched with the European leading forces. This involved building roads, repairing forts, and strengthening the administration.

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<sup>1)</sup> Procter (2019), <https://objectlessons.space/Alice-Procter-The-Exhibitionist-on-Tipu-s-Tiger-Unedited> <https://objectlessons.space/Alice-Procter-The-Exhibitionist-on-Tipu-s-Tiger-Unedited> (Access: 04.09.2022).

<sup>2)</sup> Brittlebank (2016: 7).

<sup>3)</sup> Brittlebank (2016: 29).

The growing strength of Tipu Sultan, called also “The Tiger of Mysore”, was a constant concern for the British. As Lord Cornwallis, East India governor-general, described him as “a prince of very uncommon ability and of boundless ambition, who had acquired a degree of power in the extent of territory, in wealth, and in forces that threatened the Company’s possessions in the Carnatic and those of all his other neighbors with imminent danger.”<sup>4</sup> The Third Anglo-Mysore War, which began because of a conflict between the Tipu Sultan and the Raja of Travancore, broke out in 1790. The British, who supported the Travancore, allied themselves with Marathas, the Nizam of Hyderabad, and several other Malabar chiefs. In this war Tipu lost not only half of the Mysore territory, but also two of his sons, who have been sent as captives to Madras in order to ensure the fulfilment of the peace treaty, signed in 1792.

The Fourth and final Anglo-Mysore War (1798-1799) brought the defeat of Mysore and the death of Tipu Sultan during the siege of the East India Company of the capital, Srirangapatna (known to the British as Seringapatam). His death turned him for a long time into a legendary fighter for freedom, which concurrently made him a villain that the British loved to hate. This is clearly implied on the Seringapatam medal, ordered by the Court of Directors at East India House, whose reverse bears the inscription: “has subverted the notion of the ‘tiger of Mysore’: here, a powerful, roaring lion forces its snarling, tiger victim to the ground. The banner above bears the Union flag and the proclamation in Arabic, ‘Asadullah al-Ghaleb’ (the conquering lion of God), found on the weapons of Muslim warriors, including Tipu Sultan.”<sup>5</sup> For years Tipu Sultan had been surrounding himself and his court with different representations of the tiger, viewed as the symbol of strength and fighting spirit. It was carved on cannons, guns, swords, his throne, and was alluded to on the garments of his leading regiment and his coins by the stripes decorating them. The tiger, an embodiment of his royal power (used in earlier centuries by two other ruling powers of South India: Cholas and Hoysalas), was a clear symbol with religious implications for both main regional faiths. For the Hindu it represented the animal ridden by powerful goddesses (also by Sufi pirs), and also alluded to tiger skin worn by the god Shiva. For the Muslims it was a clear reference to Caliph Imam Ali, “Victorious Lion of God”. It represented Tipu Sultan, his power, the divine connotations, and

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<sup>4</sup> Brittlebank (2016: 33).

<sup>5</sup> Stronge (2020: 72).

the people he ruled. Therefore, it should come as no surprise that one of the instruments in his music room was the organ depicting a tiger mercilessly defeating a scared European.

The plunder that began after the conquest of Srirangapatna took the entire night, after which the order was restored by Colonel Arthur Wellesley. All of the belongings of the Tipu Sultan became spoils of war, either passing to be the property of the British Crown or becoming prizes for the commanders that distinguished themselves during the conflict. They were all distributed diligently by Prize Agents and “war booty was classed as ‘prize’[...] rather than ‘plunder’, which was illegal according to British law at the time.”<sup>6)</sup> As Richard H. Davis explains: “If plundering involved individual, disorderly, and predatory activity subverting the terms of disciplined military arrangements, prize involved collective, orderly, hierarchical distribution rearticulating the established social order of the military itself.”<sup>7)</sup> Tipu’s magnificent throne, covered in gold, jewels, decorative tiger heads and religious inscriptions, was dismantled and distributed between the troops, with only a few pieces saved to be presented to the Royal Crown. The garments were redistributed so that none of them would end up in the hands of his Indian supporters, while his guns and swords were sent to England to be presented to the king.

The instrument, found in Tipu’s music room, was not an object that would present any monetary value to the soldiers; what it symbolically represented, however, was bound to attract the British attention. It was seized by the Board of Directors of East India Company and brought to England to be exhibited in East India House on Leadenhall Street, the company’s headquarters, which housed a library and a museum (later called The Indian Museum). There the tiger changed its meaning: from the royal strength and power defending its territory from foreign conquerors, which it symbolised for Tipu, it became a portrait of the cruelty and hatred of Tipu Sultan towards the British. The instrument only reinforced the image of the exotic tyrant that English newspapers had created, further justifying the British endeavours on the Subcontinent. Instead of emanating the might of the South Indian sovereign, it became a symbol of the defeat of the famous and feared “Tiger of Mysore”, as well as an indirect defeat of the hated French who supported him. The instrument, which was built to emulate the sounds of a dying white man, was used by the public to play traditional English melodies, such as “God,

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<sup>6)</sup> Stronge (2020: 68).

<sup>7)</sup> Davies (1999: 154).

save the king” and “Rule Britannia”.<sup>8)</sup> The object of pride became an object of mockery. Instead of symbolising power, it became a symbol of defeat. It became a tool for British propaganda, as the museum guides would tell the public that the instrument was used to wake up Tipu Sultan every day, and this way incite his hatred towards the British even more.<sup>9)</sup>

The “Tipu’s Tiger” was further transferred to South Kensington Museum, which later would be renamed the Victoria and Albert Museum, where it remains until today. However, the instrument is only one piece from the number of objects plundered from Mysore that until today remain in Britain or the United States. In 2021 the British government’s official website published an article about one of the bejewelled tiger heads from the Tipu’s throne, one of the five finials known and “at risk of leaving UK”.<sup>10)</sup> The irony of the search for a British buyer for this object in order to protect it as a part of British heritage should be duly noted. The Arts Minister Lord Parkinson of Whitley Bay says in the above-mentioned article: “This fascinating finial illustrates the story of Tipu Sultan’s reign and leads us to examine our imperial history. I hope a UK-based buyer comes forward so that we can all continue to learn more about this important period in our shared history with India. The precious artifact was brought to the country by Thomas Wallace, Baron Wallace of Knarsdale, the Commissioner for the Affairs of India, who in 1801 was appointed a Privy Councilor and served as President of the Board of Control between 1807 and 1816, in which position he oversaw the East India Company.”<sup>11)</sup> Even the three remaining images of the throne are all in the UK. The Clive Museum in Powis Castle has, among others, one of Tipu’s swords, his tent and one of the throne’s finials<sup>12)</sup>, British Museum has one sword, that is exhibited in the South-Asian Gallery along with Tipu’s ring and perfume bottle. Several pieces have already landed in auctions. Famously, one of Tipu’s swords was bought in 2004 by Vijay Mallya, an Indian liquor tycoon. Mallya,

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<sup>8)</sup> Stronge (2020: 73).

<sup>9)</sup> Stronge (2020: 75).

<sup>10)</sup> Parkinson (2021), <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/18th-century-tipu-sultan-throne-finial-worth-15-million-at-risk-of-leaving-uk> (Access: 07.09.2022). <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/18th-century-tipu-sultan-throne-finial-worth-15-million-at-risk-of-leaving-uk>.

<sup>11)</sup> <https://www.bonhams.com/auctions/16776/lot/212/> <https://www.bonhams.com/auctions/16776/lot/212/> (Access: 07.09.2022).

<sup>12)</sup> Archer, Rowell, Skelton (1987).

who at that time was the president of the political Janata Party, flaunted the sword during the elections as the symbol of stolen Indian heritage that has rightfully returned home.<sup>13)</sup>

And should Tipu's belongings not be perceived in that way? Should they not be considered loot, instead of prizes? For the past few years the museum world has been buzzing with the controversy about the Benin Bronzes, artworks that were taken by British soldiers after a punitive military expedition on the Kingdom of Benin in 1897. As the British Museum describes it: "Along with other monuments and palaces, the Benin Royal Palace was burned and partly destroyed. Its shrines and associated compounds were looted by British forces, and thousands of objects of ceremonial and ritual value were taken to the UK as official 'spoils of war' or distributed among members of the expedition according to their rank."<sup>14)</sup> This sounds very similar to the narration about the division of Tipu's property. And although the justification for Benin Bronzes to be returned to Nigeria was for a long time discussed and questioned, more and more artworks are restituted both from private collectors, as well as from national cultural institutions, with Smithsonian and Berlin's Ethnological Museum being the latest additions to that list.<sup>15)</sup>

Then what is the difference between Tipu's possessions and the Benin Bronzes? Are they not a topic of international discussions because the Indian government is not pushing hard enough for restitutions? Even if it does, in the current Indian political climate, directed mostly towards very Hindu-centric rhetoric, Tipu is not the national representative the politics might hope for.

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<sup>13)</sup> Sreenivas (2004), <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/bengaluru/tipus-sword-back-after-200-yrs/articleshow/604911.cms> <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/bengaluru/tipus-sword-back-after-200-yrs/articleshow/604911.cms> <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/bengaluru/tipus-sword-back-after-200-yrs/articleshow/604911.cms> (Access: 22.0.2022). <https://www.bonhams.com/auctions/16776/lot/212/> <https://www.bonhams.com/auctions/16776/lot/212/>.

<sup>14)</sup> <https://www.britishmuseum.org/about-us/british-museum-story/contested-objects-collection/benin-bronzes> <https://www.britishmuseum.org/about-us/british-museum-story/contested-objects-collection/benin-bronzes> (Access: 27.08.2022).

<sup>15)</sup> <https://www.si.edu/newsdesk/releases/smithsonian-board-regents-votes-return-29-benin-bronzes-nigeria> <https://www.si.edu/newsdesk/releases/smithsonian-board-regents-votes-return-29-benin-bronzes-nigeria> (Access: 02.09.2022); Harris (2022), <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2022/07/04/the-benin-bronzes-are-returning-home-germany-and-nigeria-sign-historic-restitution-agreement> <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2022/07/04/the-benin-bronzes-are-returning-home-germany-and-nigeria-sign-historic-restitution-agreement> (Access: 02.09.2022).

Although for years he has been celebrated as a hero and freedom fighter, a legend perpetuated both by Indian literature (“The Sword of Tipu Sultan” by Bhagwan S. Gidwani), and television that broadcasted in the 90s the drama based on the above-mentioned book, lately the figure of the sovereign has been very polarising. For some he was a Muslim tyrant who killed Christians and forcefully converted people to Islam. However, both Brittlebank<sup>16)</sup>, as well as Narasingha Sil in his article “Tipu Sultan in History: Revisionism Revised” prove that his actions were based more on common sense and political drive than on religious fanaticism, as the Christian communities of the region were usually the ones who collaborated with the British forces. William Dalrymple for years has been describing the efforts of British propaganda and British people in order to villainise him.<sup>17)</sup> Brittlebank and Sil reiterate that he was very interested in Western technological inventions, the protector of Hindu temples on his lands, and that the reason for his defeat was not his short sight or his pride, but the result of a confluence of events. As Dalrymple says: “The reality is that the pre-modern rulers of India tend to be more layered and complex figures than the one-dimensional gallery of angels or devils we sometimes reduce them to.”<sup>18)</sup>

The same might be applied to the situation of Indian colonial artworks remaining in the British domain. We might blame the Indian government for the lack of action on that front, but even with some success stories comes some bitter disappointment. As the 2019 movie “Blood Buddhas” shows, the objects restituted in previous years not only have not been restored to any appropriate places, such as museums or temples, but even lack the protection (both in the context of conservation and the protection from illegal trade that would sell them on the black market) that is due for this kind of precious works. The aforementioned case of the sword of Tipu Sultan bought by Vijay Mallya adds insult to injury, as in 2016 the businessman gave it to an unknown person or entity, practically vanishing this priceless

<sup>16)</sup> Brittlebank (2016: 60–62).

<sup>17)</sup> Dalrymple (2005), <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2005/may/24/foreign-policy.india> <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2005/may/24/foreignpolicy.india> (Access: 25.08.2022); Dalrymple (2015), <https://openthemagazine.com/voices/tipu-sultan-noble-or-savage/> <https://openthemagazine.com/voices/tipu-sultan-noble-or-savage/> (Access: 25.08.2022).

<sup>18)</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2005/may/24/foreignpolicy.india> Dalrymple (2015), <https://openthemagazine.com/voices/tipu-sultan-noble-or-savage/> <https://openthemagazine.com/voices/tipu-sultan-noble-or-savage/> (Access: 25.08.2022).

historical object, as it brought him bad luck.<sup>19)</sup> This only further fuels the arguments of the past colonial powers conveying that they are the only ones who can properly care for pieces brought from their colonies (provide proper atmospheric conditions, safeguard and protect them from theft) which gives them the right to possess them. They present themselves as keepers for the greater good of all. The precarious climate conditions or lack of a specific place designated to exhibit the objects are also some of the most often used arguments. In this case, however, Srirangapatna counts on Tipu Sultan's palace, turned into a museum and a tourist attraction. The "Tipu's Tiger" most probably would not be displayed in a climate-controlled glass cabinet, but it would be precisely in the place where it was originally taken from, shown in its original and intended context.

Another justification frequently quoted as the reason and an insurmountable obstacle in the repatriation process is the National Heritage Act from 1983, which refers specifically to the Victoria and Albert Museum, the Science Museum, Armouries, Royal Botanic Gardens, Armed Forces museums, The Royal Naval College and the Historic Boudings and Monuments Commission for England. The legislation significantly limits the museum's ability to repatriate its collections, not to say that it practically makes them impossible; a law that even Tristram Hunt, the director of the Victoria and Albert Museum, called unsatisfactory.<sup>20)</sup> The objects cannot be repatriated unless they are replicas or are damaged beyond repair. However, as seen in the case of France and its restitution of Dahomey pieces, laws can be changed. They depend on political will more than anything else. For now, the only way to circumnavigate the legislative restrictions without changing them are the long-term loans of contested pieces offered by past colonial powers to countries from where these artworks were originally taken. The Victoria and Albert Museum has already taken such a step in the case of the marble Eros head separated from a Turkish sarcophagus. A similar offer was extended to India in regard to Tipu's instrument, although the wording used by the institution is far from decolonial. The Museum is open to "lend" and "share

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<sup>19)</sup> Canton (2018), <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/vijay-mallya-gave-away-tipu-sword-cant-trust-him-on-other-assets-say-indian-banks/articleshow/63804740.cms> <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/vijay-mallya-gave-away-tipu-sword-cant-trust-him-on-other-assets-say-indian-banks/articleshow/63804740.cms> (Access: 22.0.2022).

<sup>20)</sup> Villa (2022), <https://www.artnews.com/art-news/news/tristram-hunt-uk-law-repatriation-1234633259/>, <https://www.bonhams.com/auctions/16776/lot/212/> (Access: 01.09.2022).



the pieces brought to Britain by the East India Company.”<sup>21)</sup> Pieces that in many cases were looted. Such solutions seem to be more of a band-aid put on an old wound: they seem to make it disappear, while all they actually do is temporarily cover the real issue, and in most cases they are seen as purely offensive, as accepting such offer would mean accepting that the artefact in fact belongs to the British. The idea of lending pieces that were taken as tokens of won war is as conflicting as the Victoria and Albert Museum’s approach to the idea of decolonisation. “There remains something essentially valuable about the ability of museums to position objects beyond particular cultural or ethnic identities, curate them within a broader intellectual or aesthetic lineage, and situate them within a wider, richer framework of relationships while allowing free and open access, physically and digitally”, wrote Hunt in his 2019 piece for “The Guardian” titled “Should museums return their colonial artefacts?”<sup>22)</sup> If it is so, why not pass the legal right to the objects to their historical owners and then lend back the pieces from them? Is it because the legal ownership actually matters, and museums are not as neutral as they would like to seem? Or is it about power that past colonial countries are still not willing to share? The idea behind the extraction of priceless artworks to show them in Western museums was not just to show the world to their visitors, but to show the world ruled and conquered by the British. The Western encyclopaedic museums are encyclopaedic because they still benefit from past colonial advantages. It is still the question of national pride and the manifestation of international influence, both for the past colonial powers that try to show it by retaining pieces, and for the countries that try to prove themselves by repatriating them.

“Heritage that you’ve taken away from here, by right of conquest and nothing else, you need to return them. That’s one concrete thing you can do. [...] In any case, they didn’t steal them because they could look after them better. They stole them first and found the justification later”, says Shashi Tharoor, Indian writer and former diplomat, in the 2019 movie “Blood Buddhas”<sup>23)</sup>.

<sup>21)</sup> Sanderson (2021), <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/victoria-albert-museum-could-share-its-east-indian-company-treasures-with-india-p5tzkktm7>, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/victoria-albert-museum-could-share-its-east-indian-company-treasures-with-india-p5tzkktm7> (Access: 01.09.2022).

<sup>22)</sup> Hunt (2019), <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2019/jun/29/should-museums-return-their-colonial-artefacts>, <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2019/jun/29/should-museums-return-their-colonial-artefacts>(Access: 01.09.2022).

<sup>23)</sup> Rajputt (2019), <http://www.bloodbuddhas.com/> (Access on 24.08.2022).

Meanwhile, Tipu's Tiger is still presented behind glass in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, among dozens of other contested pieces. However, what is slowly changing is the awareness of the museum's visitors, which might bring to light the postcolonial context of the instrument: Tipu's resistance to British rule, as well as British prejudice and imperial aggression. The artwork that once served as the object of English propaganda, may now speak again for the one who once owned it, and serve as contesting point for the presence of the colonial Indian pieces in the Victoria and Albert Museum.

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1. & 2. Tippoo's Tiger Mechanical Organ ca. 1790 (made) Length: 178cm, Height: 71cm, Width: 61cm Victoria and Albert Museum.