

Renate Dohmen - Tipu's Tiger

RENATE DOHMEN: I'm Renate Dohmen. I'm a lecturer in art history at The Open University, with a particular interest in global art history, and within that, the British Empire. And the object I want to talk about today really reflects that interest. And I've chosen Tipu's Tiger, which is a late 18th-century musical automaton. It hails from India. In fact, it belonged to Tipu Sultan, who was a king of the kingdom of Mysore in South India in the late 18th century.

It's a nearly life-sized object. And we can see a large tiger crouching on top of a human figure, or mauling it. It's carved of wood. It's actually Indian jack wood. It's painted. And you can see that this human figure is a European figure, because it has this black hat and has a red coat on. And that would be a reference as a British person.

And why am I saying that? Well, at the time, British soldiers would also be referred to as red coats. And this would be because they had red jackets that would be their uniform. So the question then is, why would an Indian ruler create this very unique object where a tiger is mauling a British man?

Well, we have to look at the history to get a handle on this and to get more of a sense of where this might be coming from. Yes, there was quite a British presence in India at the time. The British had arrived in the early 17th century as traders. India was politically very stable. That was one big powerful empire, the Mughal Empire, which really kind of created that very stable situation, and then some smaller kingdoms dotted around. The economy was booming. It was very sophisticated. You can go get wonderful luxury objects. So it was a fantastic place to trade.

About 100 years later, by the early 18th century, however, the situation had changed quite dramatically. The Mughal Empire was beginning to fall apart. And this created a power vacuum. And all the local Indian rulers were obviously trying to either secure their own borders, or to get sort of a slice of the Mughal pie.

And what you were beginning to get was quite an unstable political period with a lot of military conflict. At the same time, you obviously had a British presence. And you also had a French presence, though, who were also there as traders. And we have to remember that at that time in Europe, Britain and France had been really embroiled in regular military conflict since the sort of mid-late 17th century. And actually, Britain considered France an arch-enemy.

And in fact, in the late 18th century, you had nearly three decades of intermittent war between Mysore supported by the French and Britain. They're called the Anglo-Mysorian wars. And they ended in 1799, with the defeat of Tipu's army. And he actually also died in battle. And that was really, you know, the British had won decisively.

And as the British then entered his capital and his palace, they found this object that's very curious and an unusual object. Let's think about what this object might have meant for Tipu. First of all, it was found in his music room, which meant it was used sort of in a recreational space where Tipu would enjoy musical performances, dance performances. He would entertain his

courtiers and dignitaries, and which also brings us onto an aspect of the kind of object which we haven't discussed yet, which is the musical aspect to it.

So, if you take a closer look at the object, you can see there's a handle sticking out. So obviously, you can crank it. And then there's also a flap on the side of the tiger. So if you open that flap, you will find a keyboard. It's an ivory keyboard with sort of buttons to press. So you can play this as an instrument.

And then, if you take the entire top off, what will be revealed is a kind of a mini organ. You can see the two rows of organ pipes. Behind that would be leather bellows. And then you also see that kind of quite chunky metal tube, which sort of bends and is going into the head of the tiger. These are wind pipes.

So basically, as you would crank the handle, the tiger would start to grunt. But there would also be a second sound emanating, and that would be a kind of a wailing sound on the part of the human figure. And that was also a very ingenious solution of how to create this wailing sound, because - and this is where we get onto the automaton part - because the arm of the soldier would move. It's semi-articulated.

So as you would crank the handle and air would come out of a tube - which would be inside the soldier's mouth emitting a sound as the arm would come closer and go further away - the sound would be modulated, creating a wailing sound. And then imagine somebody else is playing the keyboard, and you get quite an interesting, and very sophisticated, and certainly, utterly unique sound.

Also we must consider, for us it might be a little bit quaint but at the time, this was cutting-edge technology. And it was European technology, which is also important to remember. So while the outer shell of that object is carved, it's carved in jackwood, it's sort of carved in the manner of a kind of traditional Indian folk art. You can see really quite thick accretions of paint, and sort of heavy gloss on top, which is what you would have needed in that climate. It's very hot. It's very humid, so wood wouldn't sort of survive very long otherwise.

So the outer shell is thoroughly Indian. But inside, you have a very sophisticated custom-made European kind of technology or mechanism. And the assumption is that this would have been created at Tipu's court, obviously to his specification, by French artisans. And so we have quite a unique object, which also shows the kind of cultural exchanges that were happening on a regular basis in this part of the world. Which leads us to the next question, why would Tipu create an object like this, or commission it, rather?

I think one aspect of this by now has become quite obvious. Obviously, he was in sort of military conflict with the British. So you can quite imagine this would be like a symbolic victory over the British. At the same time, because it is cutting-edge technology, it's also a status symbol, that it presents him as a ruler open to the world and on a par with the European powers.

And this brings us to another aspect of it - why the tiger? Obviously, there were tigers at the time in India. But there's more to it than that. It's quite a traditional notion. Actually, Indian kingship

and notions of heroism were associated with big cats. So it could be a lion or a tiger. And in this case, Tipu obviously opted for the tiger. So this would also be a representation of kind of divine kingship in the Indian tradition.

But Tipu actually went further than a lot of Indian rulers at the time. And he was very image conscious. And he really fashioned himself in the image of the tiger. He was actually called Tipu The Tiger. And he really used the tiger as an emblem. If you look at the object, if you look at the tiger, you can see these sort of rather stylized tiger stripes you find on the body of the tiger. This would be the kind of emblem which you would, for example, have on the uniform of his soldiers. You would find it also on other objects. So he was really creating an image in a way which, maybe, we are much more familiar with than people would be at the time, and certainly for another Indian ruler.

When Tipu's Tiger actually arrives in London, of course, the meaning changes. It is now the ultimate war trophy. It's displayed in the India Museum of The East India Company. It's open to the public. And it's an absolute sensation. The public flocks to see it. First of all, of course, it's a fabulously interesting object. And they were allowed to crank the handle and sort of enjoy all the sounds this strange creature would create. But it also had a huge symbolic value, because the public were well aware of Tipu Sultan, he would have been in the press, there had been so many military campaigns. And him and his father had really been a thorn in the side of British interests in India.

So the fact that he was vanquished was sort of hugely celebrated. And of course, the other aspect was that he was seen as an ally of the French, so an ally of the arch-enemy which with Britain was actually in military conflict with at the time. And so this would also sort of be a symbolic vanquishing of France.

Now, the object is in the Victoria and Albert Museum. It's under glass. So I have to disappoint you. You won't be able to touch it. You won't be able to crank the handle and hear the sounds that come out of it. But you can go and enjoy it, and look at it. And it's actually displayed in the Neeru Gallery in the Victoria and Albert Museum.