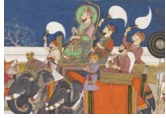


Victoria and Albert Museum, London

by **Priyal Sanghavi**



Opulence and the magnificence of Indian royalty has been the subject of fascination for many a film and book. Anyone who has shrugged off the Victoria and Albert Museum's exhibition 'Maharaja: the Splendour of India's Royal Courts' - as an Orientalist fancy, including many Indians themselves, ought to take a look.

The entrance is not impressive. Divided into sections, the first one is aptly titled 'Royal Spectacle', since it looks more like a nightclub with black and red walls. The background sounds of elephants trumpeting and cymbal music fails to create the dark war-like feel and ends up being a noisy intrusion.

The choice for the first exhibit is a smart one - an impressive metre-long parchment depicting the royal procession of the King of Mysore. The Maharaja in front, atop an elephant followed by chariots of Hindu deities and nobles, with the British representative right behind him. It conveyed the underlying meaning of the exhibition - exploring the hollow show put up by the royals and the creeping English interference in Indian culture.

The exhibition has some outstanding artwork many by the North Indian artists and also depicts gems from South Indian painting. The picture used for the posters- Ram Singh II of Kota is average compared to many such as the Swarup Singh of Mewar at Holi in the Durbaar section.

Indian kings usually conjure images of those from the state of Rajasthan or the Mughal emperors, leaving behind kings from other parts on the popularity scale. It is commendable that the exhibit did attempt to encapsulate the Sikhs and the South India Kings. In fact some of the most memorable pieces come from that section- the Scottish-made throne, King Tipu Sultan's headgear and Maharaja Shivaji's metal claw used to slay a prominent Mughal leader.

If you have no time, make your way through to the last section, 'Princely India', exploring the modern Maharaja. Louis Vuitton, Cartier - top retailers of the time catered to the fancy of the princes who adapted to the western ways of life. Black and white video montages display Maharajas entertaining foreign guests. Fashion enthusiasts will be delighted - innovative Indo-western fusion outfits and accessories of leading ladies of the times are on display.

An issue, however, is the amount of exhibits displayed. Perhaps in the mission to showcase it all, what is displayed is too much, overawing the audience. Many of the initial paintings and jewellery are not required. Editing is much needed.

As an Indian, the Maharaja still remains a powerful historical symbol for us. Indian royalty does not need a dismissive reaction, rather a keen unbiased interest in its study and implications on modern culture, which this exhibition provides.

Maharaja continues until 17 January 2010. Details [here](#)