

RCEWA – A Tipu Sultan Throne Finial

Statement of the Expert Adviser to the Secretary of State that the finial meets Waverley criteria one, two and three.

Further Information

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Brief Description of item

Title: Tiger's head finial from the throne of Tipu Sultan of Mysore (1750-1799). **Place and date:** Mysore, 1787-93 (construction of the throne; Kirmani 1864). The plinth possibly made in Madras or Calcutta, c. 1799-1800. **Material:** gold over a lac core, set with rubies, diamonds and emeralds. The head mounted on a black marble pedestal with gilt metal inscription and mounts, with four gilt metal feet and four gilded balls. **Size:** 6.9cm (height of head); 17.5cm (total height with pedestal). **Condition:** good.

Context

Provenance: Tipu Sultan of Mysore (1787-1799); Thomas Wallace, Baron Wallace of Knarsdale (c.1800 or later) – listed in an 1843 inventory of the contents of Featherstone Castle (Northumberland), the family seat, and thence by descent; Bonhams, London, 2 April 2009 (lot 212); private collection. **Literature:** Bonhams, London: 2 April 2009, lot 212; Jaffer, A. (ed.), *Beyond Extravagance* (NY: 2013), pp.189-90, cat.61; Haidar, N.N. (ed.), *Treasures from India* (NY, 2014), pp.46-7.

Waverley criteria

The tiger's head finial has an early provenance of national importance, inextricably tied to the history of British imperialism and Anglo-Indian relations. Once part of the throne of Tipu Sultan, it is integral to our understanding of the ways in which Indian rulers constructed their identity and legitimacy. Tipu was regarded as the British East India Company's greatest threat. After he was finally defeated in 1799, the finial found its way to Featherstone Castle in Northumberland, acquired by Thomas Wallace, where it remained for at least a hundred years. Its future in a public collection is highly desirable, and would enable links with other museum holdings of Tipu material which are frequently sought out by visitors (including at the V&A, British Museum, National Army Museum, National Trust, and Royal Collection).

One of the few fully-documented examples of South Indian goldsmiths' work, it is a fine example of late 18th-century royal craftsmanship. The techniques employed (including the mounting of gems within arcades, the inclusion of closely set rubies and emeralds with *kundan*-set diamonds, and the texturing of the surface using punch) were also used for elaborate jewellery in the region, including pieces found in Hindu temple treasuries. The

tiger motif and, uniquely, the *bubri* or stylised tiger stripe, are especially associated with Tipu. Described as the ‘Tiger of Mysore’, tiger imagery adorned most of his possessions as expressions of his power.

The finial is of outstanding significance for the art historical study of royal propaganda. Although many rulers often associated themselves with particular symbols to project their identity, Tipu did so to a greater extent than was usual. The throne was broken up after his defeat by the British and the whereabouts of only one other throne finial is known (Powis Castle), while three others are in private collections. This finial would contribute to a greater understanding of Tipu’s court, the study of which has been challenging due to the wide dispersal of surviving objects associated with him. Its presence in a public collection would also enable links with South Asian diasporic communities in the UK. Objects associated with Tipu’s reign represent some of the most important artefacts for the study of 18th-century Anglo-Indian history. They allow scholars and curators to tell multiple stories – they not only illustrate the vibrant culture of Tipu’s court, but their provenances allow us to critically examine British imperial history.

DETAILED CASE

The tiger’s head finial was one of eight which once adorned the gold-covered throne of Tipu Sultan (r.1782-99), arranged around the balustrade of the throne platform. The historian of his reign, Mir Husain ‘Ali Kirmani, noted that the throne was commissioned in 1787, a year after Tipu adopted the Mughal royal title *Padshah* (‘Great King’), cementing his legitimacy as ruler of Mysore. It was completed by 1793: “the Sultan (...) collected all the treasures of the state, or rather assumed the pomp and splendour of royalty, and directed the formation of a throne of gold, ornamented with jewels of great value in the shape of a tiger” (Kirmani, 1864). Three images depict the throne with eight finials, a large central tiger support and a canopy: a drawing by Captain Thomas Marriott (dated 16th August 1799), aide-de-camp to the Commander-in-Chief of Madras; a c.1800 watercolour by the Italian artist Anna Tonelli, who accompanied Lady Clive on her tour of South India, and an engraving after Gholam Mohammad, one of Tipu’s sons, first published in 1848. There are also several contemporary descriptions of the throne (including by Lady Clive, Major David Price, Lt-Col. Alexander Beatson and Surgeon-Major Pulteney Mein). Kirmani recorded that “intermixed with the ornamented workmanship (...) were hundreds of Arabic sentences, chiefly from the Koran, superbly stamped, being raised and polished with the most beautiful effect.”

After Tipu’s defeat by the British at his capital of Seringapatam in 1799, the extent of the looting and plunder of the palace was unprecedented. The throne was “barbarously knocked to pieces with a sledge hammer” according to eye-witness Pulteney Mein (Moienuddin, 2000). This was to the regret of the governor of Seringapatam, Arthur Wellesley, who wished to reassemble it and present it to King George III. In a letter sent to the Court of the Directors of the East India Company (January 1800) he wrote: “it would have given me great pleasure to send the whole throne entire to England, but the indiscreet zeal of the Prize Agents of the army had broken that proud moment of the Sultan’s arrogance into fragments before I had been apprised even of the existence of such a trophy” (Buddle,

1999). The large amount of gold covering the throne, along with the decorative features, were allocated by the Prize Agents amongst the soldiers according to rank and, as a result, very little of it has survived. Four other tiger-head finials are known, one in Powis Castle, the others in private collections (see further information below), along with only three confirmed additional elements of the throne: a *huma* bird that once crowned the canopy (gold set with rubies, diamonds, emeralds and pearls) and a large tiger-head (gold over a wooden core) which remain on display as part of the Royal Collection, and a wooden tiger paw (from one of the legs supporting the throne, Bonhams lot 166, 2016), now in a private collection. Another paw from the throne is also said to have been adapted as a snuff-box (whereabouts unknown). A jewelled tiger head, later mounted as the pommel of a sword, shares a very close affinity with the finials (despite its smaller size and relative simplicity) and was almost certainly produced by the same craftsmen. It must have formed part of Tipu's royal regalia, possibly from a rod of office (Bonhams lot 157, 2015).

Objects associated with Tipu remain a source of enduring fascination, closely connected to our larger history and identity as a country with long-standing ties to South Asia. By the time Tipu became ruler of Mysore the British had established themselves as a rival power in India through the East India Company. Tipu, and his father before him, resisted three attacks by the Company. He was regarded as their greatest threat and was feared and respected during his lifetime. When objects from his treasury arrived in Britain after his defeat they were displayed as a form of trophy and to exoticise India, evoking a vivid picture of Tipu's life at court which went on to inspire poetry, fiction, theatrical productions and films, up to the present day. This has included Girish Karnad's 1997 drama 'The Dreams of Tipu Sultan', commissioned by the BBC to mark the 50th anniversary of Indian Independence, and based on the diary Tipu kept of his dreams which is now housed in the library of the Royal Asiatic Society. Tipu's death was evoked by many British writers and artists – famously in a c.1837-38 painting by David Wilkie, now in the National Gallery, Edinburgh, which depicts the discovery of his body and went on to inspire many popular prints that circulated throughout 19th-century Britain.

The greatest of the arts produced by Tipu's court were metalwork and jewellery. The finial tells an important story about the vital role that visual culture played in self-representation and the consolidation of power. Tipu employed the tiger as his personal emblem. Although the rulers of the Chola and Hoysala dynasties of South India had also adopted the tiger symbol during the medieval period, his use of it was uniquely imaginative (including stylised tiger stripes or *bubri*) and pervaded his court, from arms and armour, textiles and architectural ornamentation to the uniforms of his courtiers and soldiers. 'Tipu's Tiger', a famous semi-automaton and mechanical organ from his palace which depicts a tiger mauling a European soldier, is on permanent display at the V&A and is probably the most frequently sought out object of Indian origin by visitors.

The tiger's head finial in question is similar to the only other two finials that have been publicly seen and examined in recent years (Powis Castle and Bonhams, lot 370, 2010) – in all three cases gold tooling is employed on the surface and there are rubies on the sides

and back of the head shaped like tiger stripes (*bubri*). This finial is unique in having a black stone pedestal, which is supported by four gilded tiger paws with acanthus-leaf collars, resting on another flat plinth with four gilded ball feet. It has been suggested that the pedestal may have been made in Madras or Calcutta by an Indian craftsman shortly after the throne was broken up and before it was shipped to England (Stronge in Haidar, 2014). This intriguing addition demands further study. Other minor differences between the finials include variations in the ruby settings on the nose and the design of the tiger's moustache, indicating that each was made by a different craftsman, possibly Hindu jewellers; Tipu supported Hindu temples via donations and gifts, including silverware, crowns and jewellery. One other finial from the set was acquired by Pulteney Mein and appeared on the London art market in 1974; however, it has since disappeared (*Oriental Art*, 1974), while a fifth mentioned by Forrest (1970) has since been identified and is in a private collection. Aside from the jewelled *huma* bird, large tiger-head (both Royal Collection), tiger paws (private collections) and jewelled tiger-head possibly from a rod of office (private collection), this short list is all that we now know from this remarkable example of royal regalia. Any opportunity to take further the study of this famous example of Indian gem-set insignia is thus of exceptional importance.

The tiger's head finial led a significant after-life in Britain and is therefore of national importance. It found its way to Featherstone Castle in Northumberland, acquired by Thomas Wallace (1763-1844), where it remained for at least a hundred years. From 1800 Wallace was one of the Commissioners for the Affairs of India and oversaw the East India Company in his capacity as President of the Board of Control from 1807 to 1816. It is uncertain how he acquired the finial; he may have been gifted the piece by the Company when he was made Commissioner. It is possible that Arthur Wellesley presented it to him from amongst the items that he sent to London from Tipu's palace; he had presented Lady Clive with another of the surviving tiger's head finials, now at Powis Castle. Despite having a well-documented provenance, it was hitherto unknown to Tipu scholars and historians until it came up for auction at Bonhams in 2009 (lot 212). Its export from the UK was stopped (Case 1, 2010-11, May 2010, RCEWA) and funds were raised to acquire the finial by Sir William Burrell's Trustees for the Burrell Collection. The owner confirmed that they were prepared to accept a matching offer from that institution. A decision on the export licence application was deferred for a further three months. At the end of the second deferral period, a firm offer to purchase the finial was made by Sir William Burrell's Trustees for the Burrell Collection. The owner refused this offer and the Secretary of State therefore decided to refuse an export licence.

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