

Books Reviews

Horse, dress, turban, moustache and sword

No Rajput warrior was worthy of the name without these five things – especially his sword. By **Giles Tillotson**

Rajput Arms & Armour: the Rathores & Their Armoury at Jodhpur Fort

Robert Elgood

Niyogi Books in association with the Mehrangarh Museum Trust, two volumes, 1,024pp, £200, \$280, Rs12,500 (hb)

“Rajput”, as used in the title of this book, refers to Hindu warrior clans of northern India. Historically, a Rajput warrior’s chances of achieving acclaim rested on his use of his sword. Parted reluctantly if at all from the tool of his trade, a Rajput used his sword rather than a book for swearing oaths and making promises. At the start of his two-volume study of the armoury of the Rathores, a Rajput clan of Jodhpur, Robert Elgood comments: “This catalogue is therefore primarily about the most important object owned by a Rathore – his sword.”

If this suggests a very specialised study, do not be misled. Later, Elgood quotes a local saying to the effect that the Rathore warrior is defined by five

things, “horse, dress, turban, moustache and sword”, which makes the sword (and perhaps the horse) almost a body part, while embedding it in a broader material and ethical culture. Indeed, as the author also explains, the history of the arms is also inevitably the history of the men – and some women and children – who used them. Based on over a decade’s research conducted on site in Mehrangarh, the fort of Jodhpur, Rajput Arms & Armour is not only the most extensive and scholarly study of a Rajput armoury ever to be published (and ever likely to be), it is also a wonderfully evocative introduction to the wider world of Rajput history and culture.

A long historical introductory chapter skilfully navigates the mythical origins and highly contested early history of the Rajput clans in general, discussing the emergence of the distinctive Rajput martial ethic within the broader Hindu world. There follows an account of the fluctuating fortunes of the Rathores under Mughal hegemony – sometimes closely allied to, sometimes out of favour with, and occasionally caught up in, the Mughals’ own internal divisions – and through

An 18th-century sword hilt made in Udaipur, from the Jodhpur armoury

the convulsions that attended the waning of their empire and the emergence of the Marathas. By this period, British power was also a factor in the wider geopolitics of the region, but Rajput accommodation with it became an urgent matter only in 1857. Rathore interaction with the British is mostly a story of high empire, focusing on the charismatic figure of Sir Pratap Singh (1845-1922), three times regent and influential in both the Jodhpur Lancers and the Imperial Cadet Corps. The chapter throughout is mostly a military history, and one in which the technology of arms plays an important role in the narrative. Descriptions of particular actions on the battlefield vividly focus on the materiality of weapons.

The chapters that follow, on arms production and trade, and on craftsmen and materials, present the most challenging material of the study. Elgood charts the broad and complex trade routes that connected Marwar

with other parts of India, Sind, Balochistan and Persia. Arms and the raw materials for making them were among the commodities traded along these routes. We are accustomed to thinking of other courtly karkhanas (workshops) – such as painting ateliers – as localised centres of production catering to local consumption, but a Rajput armoury was connected to a far wider network of exchange.

The other point to emerge is that weapons as objects were not stable: it was common practice to exchange a blade or a hilt, in order to repair or upgrade (or downgrade) a piece. Indeed, the author’s research among inventories shows “that it was comparatively rare for a blade and hilt to be made in tandem to create a single, preconceived weapon”. This realisation forces us to question what we are looking at in individual cases. Blade and hilt might be of widely different dates and sources of production, brought together at a time and place relating to the origin

of neither. This has ramifications not only for how we understand the use of arms historically, but also for how we think about the manufacture (from the early 19th century onwards) of arms as collectibles, about the trading of them by dealers in more recent times, and the description of them by curators in museum and exhibition catalogues. Despite its size, this catalogue does not actually include any gauntlets, but the reader will detect the unmistakable sound of one being thrown down.

These matters, laid out at the start, are revisited in the detailed notes on individual pieces that are described and lavishly illustrated throughout the catalogue itself. The majority of the objects selected are of great beauty, with superbly crafted detail. The aesthetic element reflects the ceremonial and ritual uses of arms, which go beyond their function as weapons of war. Indeed, with the introduction of firearms, many of the swords of later periods should properly be thought of as primarily ceremonial. The book’s photography, design and printing do full justice to the exquisite forms and details of these objects, while numerous paintings and archive photographs beautifully amplify Elgood’s historical contextualisation of them.

Giles Tillotson, an expert on the art history of India, has lectured widely in Britain and India, and is the author or editor of numerous books on architecture, history and landscape, including *Taj Mahal* (2008) and *The Artificial Empire: the Indian Landscapes of William Hodges* (2000). He has lived in India since 2004, working as a freelance author and as consultant director of the City Palace Museum in Jaipur. He is a Fellow (and former director) of the Royal Asiatic Society, London



A Regency printing prodigy and his naughty nephew

A biography of Rudolph Ackermann, the Anglo-German founder of an art and fashion publishing house. By **James Yorke**

Rudolph Ackermann & the Regency World

John Ford

Warnham Books, 402pp, £45 (pb)

From around 1800 until his death in 1834, Rudolph Ackermann was one of London’s leading publishers. Whereas John Ford’s earlier book, *Ackermann: the Business of Art* (1983), covers the story of the family firm up to the 1980s,

Rudolph Ackermann & the Regency World

concentrates on its founder and draws on unpublished German sources. These provide fascinating detail on Ackermann, a naturalised Englishman born in Saxony, who was most famous for the Repository of Arts, Literature and Commerce, better known as Ackermann’s Repository.

Published in 40 volumes between 1809 and 1828, the Repository was largely inspired by the Saxon fashion journal *des Luxus und der Moden*. It was mostly aimed at women and covered everything to do with fashions, upholstery and the latest furniture. In addition, Ackermann published large numbers of topographical engravings, the most famous being perhaps *The Microcosm of London* and the various misadventures of Dr Syntax, illustrated by Thomas Rowlandson, as well as satirical prints of his own *bête noire*, Napoleon.

A shrewd businessman with an eye for profit and talent, Ackermann produced lucrative series of engravings, employing watercolourists such as Auguste Pugin, Thomas Uwins and Frederick Shepherd, aquatint specialists such as John Bluck and Thomas Sutherland, and John Raphael Smith for mezzotints. In fact, any random Regency print or engraving that comes to mind was probably originally issued from Ackermann’s glamorous, newfangled gas-lit premises at 101 the Strand.

Ackermann kept abreast of the latest printing techniques, doing more than anyone to spread the popularity in Britain of lithography, or printing on stone, especially Bavarian limestone. He seems to

have been a benevolent but somewhat autocratic patriarch: when his first wife died in 1811, his oldest daughter, Angelica, took over the role of housekeeper and business manager at the age of 15. In 1825, he set up his eldest son, Rudolph, in highly fashionable premises at 191 Regent Street, where he successfully dealt in sporting and military prints; his younger son George was sent off in 1817 to Mexico City to supervise his mining investments, which, despite early optimism, proved a costly mistake. Ackermann was also constantly bailing out his nephew, Friedrich, much to his irritation – “he cost me 200 florins, which is a cruel robbery to my family of seven children”.

His German origins made him the crucial link with charities for the relief of his native Saxony, which had fought on the wrong side in the Napoleonic wars. As a successful entrepreneur, he was an important contact for German princes and archdukes, anxious to emulate England’s industrial advances at home. Over 30 years, he maintained correspondence with Karl Boettiger, editor of the *Journal des Luxus*, revealing his thoughts about his family, especially his troublesome nephew Friedrich, and his political machinations to secure charity for Saxony.

This highly enjoyable and lavishly illustrated book covers one of the most stimulating periods of English history. Although the text hardly ever refers to illustrations by plate or figure number, skilful juxtapositions by the book designer obviate that need. More precise references to archival sources could have been included, but these are minor cavils. At the back of the book is a comprehensive list of all of Ackermann’s publications between 1791 and 1832. A vitally important contributor to Regency fashions and designs has found the book he deserves.

James Yorke was a curator at the Victoria and Albert Museum for 32 years before retiring in June 2010. He has lectured and published various articles on furniture and historic houses, especially Lancaster House

GIOVANNI BELLINI
The Art of Contemplation

By Johannes Grave

Hardback | £95.00 | 288 Pages
242 colour illustrations | 29.6 x 37.5 cm

This new examination of Giovanni Bellini’s oeuvre provides a lavishly illustrated overview of his career from the early devotional paintings to the later, secular works. This original study offers an in-depth analysis of every Bellini work as well as some of those of his contemporaries. An important contribution to the scholarship of Italian Renaissance art, this authoritative book reaffirms Bellini’s status as one of the most influential painters of all time.

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