

# ***Treasures of a Desert Kingdom: The Royal Arts of Jodhpur* Descriptive Audio Tour**

## **Stop 0: Curator's Welcome**

Welcome to *Treasures of a Desert Kingdom: The Royal Arts of Jodhpur*. I am Dr. Deepali Dewan, the Dan Mishra Curator of South Asian Art and Culture at the Royal Ontario Museum. Thanks for joining me as we explore the rich and fascinating history of one of India's great former kingdoms: **Marwar**, and its capital city of Jodhpur. They were located in what is now the northwestern state of Rajasthan in India. Jodhpur continues to be a thriving city today.

The alluring jewellery, lavish tents and canopies, vibrant paintings, and opulent decorative arts in this exhibition will allow you to step into another world. They tell stories of kingship, strategic alliances, gender roles, life at court and a cosmopolitan culture sustained by a delicate balance between tradition and modernity. Amassed over the course of nearly four centuries, these treasures reflect the Rathore dynasty that ruled this desert kingdom until India's independence in 1947. Today, the Rathore family is led by Maharaja Gaj Singh II, the 38<sup>th</sup> in this royal lineage. He and his family are the custodians of a rich cultural legacy.

This exhibition is a special experience because most of the treasures are coming from Jodhpur itself, not from western museum collections. Many are being presented outside of Jodhpur for the very first time. *Treasures of a Desert Kingdom* tells the story of a dynamic, cosmopolitan, and influential kingdom that saw art and culture as a critical aspect of rule. It flourished, despite the odds of being in the middle of a desert, because it made strategic alliances, opened its borders, and allowed for a diverse culture. These are lessons still relevant today.

This thematic exhibition features 250 objects on display from the Rathore family's collection. As you move toward the first highlight object on this tour, you will pass imagery of Mehrangarh Fort and the Jodhpur sun.

## Stop 1: Meet the Rathores - Grand Palanquin (*Mahadol*)

The first section of the exhibition introduces you to the Rathores. The Rathores are a clan of Rajputs (meaning, “sons of kings”) – a hereditary Hindu social group of warriors (or *kshatriya*). The family lineage dates to the 8th century. Now in its 38<sup>th</sup> generation, it is one of the longest continuous royal dynasties in the world.

During the 12th century, the Rathores migrated west from northern India to the desert region of Marwar in Rajasthan, where they established the city of Jodhpur. Here, they built their citadel, Mehrangarh Fort, also known as the “Fort of the Sun.” In this section of the exhibition, you will find spectacular drone footage of the Fort, which shows how the red sandstone fortress stands on a cliff over 400 feet above the surrounding city. Today, it functions as a museum, and most of the objects presented here come from the Fort.

Art and culture have played an important role in the Rathore dynasty and to convey ideas of kingship. In the centre of this area is the first stop on our tour: the Grand Palanquin, also known as *Mahadol*. This palanquin was taken as war booty by Jodhpur after a victory in Gujarat, a nearby territory. A symbol of prestige, the palanquin was used to transport members of the royal family in public processions such as for marriage celebrations or festivals. It was carried by 12 attendants.

This palanquin is made of gilded wood and has an elegant curved roof and arched doorways and windows. This design is reminiscent of 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century Mughal and Rajput architecture. Small hooks were used to hang curtains for privacy. Red cloth covers the carrying bars.

As you walk through this section, you will see painted portraits of different Jodhpur kings that express ideas of ideal kingship. They show the king as a strong administrator seated with nobles, as a connoisseur of the arts examining jewelry, as a brave hunter reflecting his skill in battle, and as a pious devotee making offerings to his god.

## Stop 2: Forging Strategic Alliances - Red Tent (*Lal Dera*)

The next section of the exhibition explores strategic alliances. For the Rathores, strategic alliances were key to maintaining their power and independence. One of their strongest allies was the Mughal Empire, which ruled much of northern India from 1526 to 1857. This alliance created opportunities for new objects, ideas and aesthetics to enter Jodhpur, even though the city was in a remote landscape.

Our second stop is *Lal Dera*, which means 'red tent.' This is the oldest surviving Mughal tent, featuring the original back wall (or *kanat*) and canopy (or *chattbandi*) dating to the late 17<sup>th</sup> century. The history of how the Rathores came to own this tent is unclear. One thought is that Maharaja Jaswant Singh I (who ruled from 1638-1678) brought it back to Jodhpur as a war trophy after a victory over the Mughals.

Tents like this were designed to match the splendour of royal residences and were set up in encampments for rulers to live in while on the move. This tent is large and square, around 7 metres or 24 feet on each side. Only one side is closed off by a wall; the remaining three sides feature scalloped archways, making it easy to see into the centre of the tent. The canopy ceiling stands 4 metres or 13 feet high. The tent is made of red silk velvet featuring gold embroidered floral motifs; this combination symbolizes Mughal sovereignty. On the ground in the centre of the tent is a Mughal summer garden carpet from the late 17<sup>th</sup> or 18<sup>th</sup> century, and it features evenly-spaced flower blossoms connected by delicate vines that create an overall pattern.

Imagine the meetings that would have taken place inside this very tent! Take a moment to enjoy an augmented reality experience of the tent using one of the nearby iPads. Figures from a painting in the ROM's collection have been used to animate the space and give a glimpse of how it was used by the Mughal emperors. The emperor sits at the centre, surrounded by a guest and various attendants.

### Stop 3: Objects of Diplomacy - Turban Ornament (*Sarpech*)

Our third stop is a turban ornament known as a *sarpech* – one of the first items in a section that looks at objects of diplomacy. It is one of many types of objects on display that are symbols of strategic alliance. Precious and jewelled objects were brought to court in a bride's trousseau or exchanged in ritual ceremonies as diplomatic gifts (known as *khilat*). For example, Mughal emperors gave gifts to high-ranking nobles like the Rathores, to signify imperial favour. Beyond symbolizing honour and rank, these gifts were also invitations for the recipient to be symbolically incorporated into the body of the empire. Here, the spectacular craftsmanship of luxury items is highlighted through placement and lighting – it is meant to look like a high-end jewellery store. As you stroll through this dramatic display, you will see examples of fine jewellery, precious objects used for leisure activities, and even finely crafted objects for personal care, like foot scrubbers.

This turban ornament features emeralds and diamonds in the shape of a curved feather, a form which was traditionally reserved for the emperor. The emeralds are set without a backing, which then allows light to pass through the stones, giving them greater luminosity. The sun was another symbol of divine kingship, and it was believed that sunlight passing through these stones transferred their powerful quality of immortality to the wearer. This turban ornament is about the size of my hand, 17 centimeters high by 5 centimeters wide, or about 7 inches high by 2 inches wide. If I lay it on my palm, it will extend just past the tip of my middle finger.

As you leave this area, you enter the *zenana* section, referring to the space in the palace where royal women lived. Women from different regions entered the Jodhpur court through marriage, bringing with them new languages, cuisine, arts and ideas. They transformed the culture of Jodhpur.

## **Stop 4: Royal Women, Cross-Cultural Spaces: *Zenana***

### **Stop 4A: Swing (*Jhula*)**

The area in a palace where women lived was called the *zenana*, based on a Persian word meaning “of or pertaining to women.” In contrast to colonial perceptions of the *zenana* as a space of seclusion, it was full of activity, where women engaged in art, music, dance, games, exercise, worship, and festivities. Women in the Rathore court held considerable power and prestige. They were financially independent, organized annual festivals, patronized the arts, and had political influence at court. As such, royal women were a vibrant part of palace life. In this section, you will see paintings and objects pertaining to life in the *zenana*.

As you make your way through this section, I’d like to call your attention to the swing, or *jhula*. Swings were installed in garden settings to celebrate the arrival of spring and the monsoon season, which are associated with romance and fertility. I invite you to take a seat on the swing replica we have set up, and imagine yourself in a Rathore palace, celebrating the coming of spring with the maharajah and the women at court.

### **Stop 4B: Stone Screen (*Jali*)**

Our fourth stop is a *jali*—a screen, made of red sandstone, with openings to regulate sunlight and allow the free flow of air. It is a distinctive architectural feature of the *zenana*. *Jalis* allowed women to look out on the activities in the public spaces of the palace while they themselves remained hidden from the view of strangers. The *zenana* area within the palace was a space of empowerment where women could conduct themselves independent of men.

This *jali* is approximately 80 centimetres wide and 75 centimetres high, or 31 inches by 30 inches. A large flower is carved into each of the upper corners, and just below is a floral motif in profile, with stems that trails down into the bottom corners. Below the flowers is a screen divided into three sections, with a flat bottom and a scalloped arch at the top. Red sandstone is soft and malleable when wet, allowing artists to create intricate designs that solidify when the stone dries.

## **Stop 5: Listen, Learn, Play - *The Goddess Fights the Buffalo Demon*, a Painting from the *Durga Charit***

The next section of the exhibition invites you to Look, Listen and Play. Here you can sit and look closely at a painting, hear the story behind it, and understand the different visual elements of the composition. You can also play an enlarged and simplified version of an ancient Indian board game.

Stop 5 is a painting entitled, *The Goddess Fights the Buffalo Demon*, from the *Durga Charit*, a sacred text recounting the stories of the Hindu goddess Durga. In Hindu philosophy, Durga represents the feminine energy known as *Shakti* and is more powerful than any one of the male gods alone. She also presides over martial activities, which had meaning for Jodhpur rulers who, as Rajput warriors, were devoted to her worship. The painting is large, about 130 cm wide by 50 cm high, or 50 by 19 inches. In the Rathore court, people narrating the story of the *Durga Charit* would have held up monumental paintings like this as visual aids.

As the story goes, the buffalo demon Mahishasur captured heaven and could only be defeated by a woman. The *Durga Charit* tells of how the gods combined their powers to create the great goddess who fights the buffalo demon as he changes forms, eventually defeating him. In this painting, Durga wears a red and gold breastplate and an ankle-length red skirt with a sheer green overlay. Her stomach is bare, and a gold crown sits atop her head. She rides a lion, which is the animal vehicle associated with her.

This painting features two moments in Durga's battle, which takes place amongst rolling green and brown hills dotted with trees. Highlighting the epic nature of the battle, both Durga and Mahishasur are much larger than the hills, and the trees are barely as large as the legs of Durga's lion.

The first moment, on the left side of the painting, features Durga battling Mahishasur in lion form. Her sword slices into his neck just as he leaps up to attack. Blood drips from the bottom of the blade.

In the second part, on the right of the painting, Durga battles Mahishasur in the form of a man with buffalo horns, buffalo ears and a tail. Mahishasur has already been wounded in battle, with arrows piercing his skin. Durga's lion is on its hind legs, poised to attack. A

detail featuring this part of the scene can be found in a raised line drawing nearby. Typical of Indian painting, the emotion of the scene is not expressed on Durga's face, which remains serene, but through her dramatic body gesture.

On your way to Stop 6, please take a moment by the larger-than-life *chaupar* game we've set up in the corner. You may have seen the original game on display in the *zenana* section. It was a popular pastime in the Jodhpur court and is the predecessor of modern day board games like Parcheesi. We've adapted the rules to quicken the pace of the game. Try it out for yourself!

## **Stop 6: Durbar – the Rathore Armoury**

In our sixth stop, we take you into the Royal court – or *darbar*. The *darbar* is where the ruler, nobles, and esteemed guests assemble. It is also the area within the palace where meetings and public receptions are held. "*Darbar*" is also the term used for formal political ceremonies, which are displays of power, loyalty, and alliance. Usually, at the centre, the maharaja would sit on a throne beneath an umbrella or canopy. The other people would be positioned in hierarchical order, with those of highest rank closest to the king.

Here we invite you to explore the animal symbolism in weaponry from the Rathore armoury. The Rathores accumulated a vast collection of weapons through patronage, diplomacy, and conquest. They used weapons not only in battle and hunting, but also as court attire and ceremonial gifts. Even today, weapons are cleaned, perfumed and worshipped at the Mehrangah Fort as part of the Dussehra Festival every autumn.

In this section, you will find an array of weapons, from swords to firearms used in more recent times. These weapons show innovations in technology and design, and many are intricately decorated with animal motifs of symbolic significance. On a nearby table, you will find raised line graphics of some of the animals depicted on the weapons in the Rathore armoury. Try to find these animals in the weapons on display!

On the table is a raised line graphic of a mythical animal known as *makara*. It is a sea monster often represented with a crocodile's body, pig's eyes and ears, and an elephant's trunk. A guardian of thresholds, the *makara* is associated with the intersection of the Holy Rivers Ganges and Yamuna, and symbolic of sacredness,

protection, water, and abundance. In this graphic, the *makara* chases a rabbit, a symbol of swiftness and prey.

The design for this graphic is taken from the hilt of a sabre on display nearby. The *makara's* rounded body forms the handle. Its neck is covered in scales and its head curves down to catch a rabbit with its long snout and sharp teeth. The rabbit is depicted fleeing from the creature with its ears flying back, and its front paws gripping the base of the handle.

Continuing towards the final stop on our tour, you will pass through a section that explores the painting atelier of Maharaja Man Singh, who ruled from 1803-1843. Admire how the paintings produced during his reign have an enhanced shininess and graphic quality, reflecting new religious ideas he introduced at court. You can also see some of the pigments in their raw state that court artists used to make the paintings—from plant, mineral, and in some cases insect-based substances. Proceed towards the final section of the exhibition that explores the time of British sovereignty in India, an era called the “Raj”, to the present day, or “*aaj*.”

From the late 15<sup>th</sup> century, Europeans travelled to India in increasing numbers, and in 1857, the British Crown became rulers of much of north India. During the Raj, Jodhpur became a Princely State within the British system of Indirect Rule, where a British agent was stationed at court. And yet, Jodhpur kept its sovereignty and continued pre-colonial practices of kingship. In this new strategic alliance, Jodhpur opened itself up to influences from British culture, and in return, shared aspects of its own culture with the West. In this section, called “Raj to Aaj”, you will explore innovation and continuity through large oil on canvas portraits of maharajas based on photographs, jewellery in the art deco style especially commissioned by Jodhpur from European luxury brands, and new forms of fashion that combined eastern and western styles—such as the formal jacket or sherwani, and the riding pant called “jodhpurs.”

## Stop 7: Wedding Procession: The Journey of a Royal Bride

Our final stop on this tour spans an entire wall of the exhibition space. It features objects from a ceremonial wedding procession. Wedding processions have long been part of royal rituals to mark rites of passage and to allow people to participate in the celebration.

In Jodhpur, royal wedding processions combined spectacle and splendour with kingly prestige and authority. In this procession, the bride is carried in a covered palanquin and brought to her new home by the Rathore groom, who would be seated on the elephant under the parasol. A large entourage comprising of nobles, attendants, and musicians would accompany the couple.

Wedding processions were the ultimate symbol of strategic alliance and transcultural interaction. In journeying to Jodhpur, the bride crossed the distance between kingdoms and brought elements of her home's religion, culture, language and traditions with her.

Take a moment to examine the sheer scale and grandeur of this procession. Please also feel free to touch the raised line graphics on display nearby. These include all the highlighted elements in the procession and have labels in raised text and Braille.

Elements include silk flags, brass standards, pipes and drums, sunshades and parasols. The horses are draped with red velvet, and decorated with elaborate jewellery and gilded silver accessories.

The main attraction is the elephant, who was guided by a keeper (or *mahout*) and carried the Rathore groom. The elephant is draped with red silk velvet embellished with embroidered flowers and a light-blue border with fringes. On top of the elephant is a silver riding chair, or *howdah*, made of wood covered in gold leaf. It can seat two people—the groom sits in the larger front seat and an attendant with a yak-tail flywhisk would sit behind. The driver, or *mahout*, would sit directly on the elephant just behind his ears. The seats are covered in orange silk brocade, with a silk-velvet parasol attached to the groom's seat. The *howdah* is carved with an intricate floral pattern and the figure of a lion flanks the groom's seat. You may remember from earlier in the tour how significant the lion is as the animal associated with the goddess Durga, and a symbol of kingship and strength. We hope that this vibrant display against a backdrop inspired by

the blue city of Jodhpur and animated with celebratory music helps transport you to the setting of a royal procession.

## Conclusion

Before you leave the exhibition, I would like to introduce you to the current royal family of Jodhpur. There is a large formal portrait of his Highness Maharajah Gaj Singh II and his family hanging as a banner, and a smaller informal portrait on an iPad nearby.

Maharaja Gaj Singh II (whose reign began in 1952) is known affectionately in Jodhpur as “Bapji” or “father”. With the support of the Queen, Maharani Hemlata Rajye, they participate in community festivals and events, encourage women’s education and have a program of “Traditional Rainwater Harvesting” for rural villages. Their son, Prince Shivraj Singh, trained the Jodhpur Polo Team and manages the palace hotels. Their daughter, Princess Shivranjani Rajye, is involved in running the museums at Mehrangarh Fort and Nagaur Fort, and also established a Women’s Polo Cup. Today, the royal family are the custodians of Jodhpur’s cultural heritage, continuing the long legacy of their ancestors. It is through their efforts to share this heritage with others around the world that you have been able to experience the royal treasures in Toronto for this limited period of time.

I hope you have enjoyed your visit to *Treasures of a Desert Kingdom: The Royal Arts of Jodhpur, India*. I hope you have found something familiar and something surprising about the history of art and culture in India. Again, I am Dr. Deepali Dewan, the Dan Mishra Curator of South Asian Art and Culture at the ROM. Thank you for going on this journey with me, and I look forward to welcoming you back soon!