

Contextualising museum objects through visual narratives

The Story of FHD0102

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Material culture studies and the study of objects in museums have received a renewed interest that focus on the diversity of meanings embodied in objects and the numerous ways in which they can be interpreted. This research project is an attempt at studying one such object, FHD0102 in the collection of the National Maritime Museum (NMM), Greenwich, London. What makes this object relevant to discussions of Bangalore? The museum identifies this as a part of a figurehead that adorned the Royal Navy vessel, HMS Seringapatam. It is made of wood, copper, and iron and carved to indicate a male figure sheltered under an umbrella riding a mythical bird.

Recent research on the object has resulted in the object being identified as a 'large-scale polychrome carving of an attendant bearer holding a *kittasol* (parasol/umbrella) for the figurehead from the 46-gun fifth-rate frigate HMS Seringapatam (1819)'. This information is based on an article in 'The Asiatic Journal and Monthly Miscellany' (January-June 1820; V.9) which describes the frigate Seringapatam with the following detail, 'the carving work on the prow appears chiefly designed in compliment to the natives of Hindoostan, and represents the Mysore Raja, attended by his *kittasol* bearer' (pp.306-7).

However, prior to this new research, this object has been presumed to represent the erstwhile ruler of the

South Indian state of Mysore, Tipu Sultan (1751-99) himself. Known as the Tiger of Mysore for his valour in the battlefield against the British East India Company (henceforth referred to as the Company), Tipu holds a distinguished position in Indian history. This research is an enquiry into why this ascribed identity of Tipu stayed with the object for several decades. My first encounter with the figurehead was in 2017 when it was still presumed to be Tipu. Displayed on a red cuboidal pedestal in the Traders Gallery at the museum, the visitor could walk around the figurehead allowing views from different positions. The object was introduced through labels on all four sides. The first one described the object as:

'This seated figure probably represents Tipu Sultan of Mysore. He is riding a roc - a mythical bird of great strength. As the ruler of an extensive empire in Southern India, Tipu opposed the extension of Company rule in India. HMS Seringapatam, named after Tipu's capital city, was a 46-gun warship launched at the Bombay Dockyard in 1819.' (NMM, object label: FHD0102)

The label, at the onset, provides an introduction to three major associations that the object has, and these are Tipu Sultan, HMS Seringapatam and the relationship between Tipu and the Company.

The three labels introduce the visitor to (i) Tipu - the Tiger of Mysore and (ii) Tipu - the enemy of the Company. The location of the display strategically introduces the viewer to the complexity of the Company's rule in the region and the narrative that flows in the rest of the gallery.

In the introductory chapter of her book 'Museums and Biographies', art academic Katie Hill points out that 'biographies have subjects and museums have objects' (2012:1). In the case of objects like FHD0102, it is crucial to question what biographies the object can tell, not just about its own life but of the person represented and the networks they have been part of. The objective of the research lies not just in unpacking and finding factual information of the object, but also to understand what meanings it encompasses and how these meanings lend towards identities of objects. This paper aims to explore the identity and narratives of the object through two trajectories: (i) exploring a biography of the object through historiographic and symbolic approaches, and (ii) a representational narrative that attempts to establish a broader frame of reference to interpret the object.

Named after Seringapatam (now Srirangapatna), the then fortress-city of Tipu Sultan, HMS Seringapatam was a 46-gun fifth-rate frigate built for the Navy in India, at Bombay Dockyard in 1819. The HMS Seringapatam became a receiving ship in 1847 and in 1852 a coal hulk at the Cape of Good Hope, where it was broken up in 1873 (NMM). The figurehead was preserved and stored at the 5th Yard Firehouse (NMM Archives, LKY/4/22:38) in Devonport Dockyard till 1937, after which it was moved to the museum in the same year along with several other figureheads (Longair and McAleer, 2012:228).

Separated from the HMS Seringapatam and residing in a museum, what narratives does the figurehead, perceived to be Tipu Sultan, have to tell? To do this, one needs to first establish whether it is Tipu or not and the factors that led to this perceived identity. This research attempts to establish this identity through deconstructing the object with regard to symbolism associated with Tipu. With the lack of written records indicating the identity of the person, one of the ways to answer the question if it is indeed Tipu, is to analyse the complex iconography of him and the events of his reign (Forrest, 1970:346). The period saw the production of several artworks including portraits of Tipu that offer an interesting insight towards the comparison of features of the carved figurehead to that of Tipu himself.

One of the most popular portraits of Tipu Sultan is his representation in Figure 1, from the book 'The history of Hyder Shah, alias Hyder Ali Khan Bahadur, and of his son, Tippoo Suldaun, by M.M.D.L.T, General in the



Figures 1 & 2. Two portraits of Tipu Sultan
(Source: Narayanan, 2018)

Army of the Mogul Empire, Revised and Corrected by His Highness Prince Gholam Mohammed [Son of Tipu Sultan]' (Narayan, 2018). While there exist several similar portraits, a more recent claim is that most of these portraits were imagined representations and the only original representation of him is the one published in Thomas Mante's 'The naval and military history of the wars of England, including, the wars of Scotland and Ireland, etc. Vol.V' (Figure 2). While this conjecture would be hard to prove, it is important to note the dichotomy that exists around his representation.



Figure 3. 'Tipu seated on throne' - Illustration by Anna Tonelli in Clive Museum, Wales (Source: Wikimedia Commons)

umbrella, which is a perceived indication of a person in a subordinate position of power. The figure is devoid of any ornaments, indicating a demeaning representation. The figurehead has been painted several times over the years; assuming that the colours have been retained as on the original, it reflects the British flag and therefore alludes to Britain. This immediately compels one to dismiss the idea that the figurehead represents Tipu, but a careful observation gives us further clues to establish otherwise.

The striped paint on the body is similar to the representation of tiger stripes on Tipu's clothes. The twisted patterned turban called the 'shumledar', along with the waistband, are strikingly similar to what Tipu wore towards the end of his life. The other intriguing aspect of the object is the bird, identified rightly as a 'roc' or a 'garuda'. A conversation with Nidhin Olikara, a collector and an avid researcher on Tipu brings to light the 'legend of the *huma*' ('bird of paradise' in Persian), a mythical bird that symbolises a pinnacle of spiritual realisation that it would bestow on the one over whom it flew.

The *huma* hovered over the umbrella on Tipu's throne, which was part of the loot from his palace that made its way to England in 1799. It was presented to Queen Charlotte at Windsor, and since then has been part of the Royal Crown of England. It was often said that



Figure 4. FHD0102, Figurehead of HMS Seringapatam © National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, London (Source: Author)

In this process of identifying the figurehead's identity through visual references, the starkest resemblance of the figurehead is to a sketch made by Anna Tonelli of Tipu seated on his throne (Figures 3 & 4). Both visuals indicate a person seated on animal figures sheltered by an umbrella in almost similar positions. This representation strengthens the case of imagined constructions of the identity of Tipu, because Tipu is believed to have never sat on his throne (Olikara, 2014).

An analysis of FHD0102 reveals that the person's stance is subservient, indicated by the holding of an



Figures 5 & 6. Royal munificence - hem! by W.N.Jones, June 01,1814 (Source: Nidhin Olikara)

'the Royal Bird of Paradise had flown from Seringapatam onto Windsor' (Olikara, 2014). In addition to this legend, a pamphlet printed in England in the early 1800s lampooning Queen Charlotte indicates a bird labelled 'Tippo's dove' sitting on a shelf behind her (Figures 5 & 6). The bird being indicated as a 'dove' is an indication that the *huma* was indeed misrepresented at the time. This misrepresentation may have translated into the making of a figurehead, where a craftsman carving it may have had only 'received knowledge' of a certain mythical bird to be carved.

Having unpacked the object to a certain extent, I am inclined to conclude that this object at the mast of a ship sailing into the sea and named after Seringapatam, could very well be a statement, and a representation of England's victory over Tipu. While this symbolic deconstruction has much to say about the object and its identity, there is more to be revealed about the larger context in which it was made. Objects like FHD0102 are a testimony to the complex history of the 'Empire'. Longair and McAleer (2012) have written about how such objects illustrate how interpretations change and are changed over time as the process of 'curating Empire' continues to preoccupy and fascinate curators and museum visitors alike. Learning and unlearning the 'Empire' is a burden we are going to be faced with for a long time to come (Longair and McAleer, 2012:226). Having said this, are there ways in which the viewer can interpret such objects in new ways to provide a context that may help in understanding the multiple identities encompassed in them?

The research so far brought to light several works of art, media representations and artefacts from the era, indicating the possibility of interpreting FHD0102 by situating it in a broader frame of representational narrative. To explore this interpretation, I rely on Appadurai's (1990) idea of 'mediascapes', which 'provide large and complex repertoires of images, narratives and "ethnoscapes" to viewers throughout the world...' (299). While Appadurai (1990) situates this idea in the globalised world of the 21st century, the role of media creating imagined identities is perhaps not something new.

Tipu and the Company relied heavily on propaganda as a means of depicting their mutual hatred during the four wars they fought against each other between 1792 and 1799. Alongside these wars, they also engaged in what I would like to term as the 'war of representation'. This use of propaganda resulted in the creation of several artistic and media representations alongside the production of objects and artefacts that in turn led to the creation of imagined identities of Tipu in Britain and the British in India. This representational narrative is a way of interpreting FHD0102 to establish a broader frame of reference and understand the context in which the

figurehead was made. The list of these representations and the scholarship on it over the years is endless, and for this research I have chosen a selected few that provide insights into the relationship between Tipu and the British.

The fight for power in South India goes back to the time of Haider Ali, Tipu's father. The battle of Pollilur was painted on the walls of Dariya Daulat Palace in Seringapatam (Figures 7 & 8). There are two important aspects to note in the painting. One, the representation of Tipu himself; a side profile indicates him seated on a horse with one of his men holding up a *chhatra* (umbrella) for him and bears an uncanny resemblance to the person in the object, complete with an attire with tiger stripes. The second is the grotesque representations of the British army that appear all across the painting. As Osborne (2002) highlights, 'images of the sub-continent and her peoples were consumed in Britain as readily as the textiles, dyes and spices of the East' and 'seared into the nation's collective memory' (220). Osborne also describes how Tipu Sultan came to be 'well-known in the 1780's and 1790's through his



Figures 7 & 8. Scenes from the painting of the Battle of Pollilur (Source: Battle-of-pollilur-painting.com., 2018)

appearances in cartoons and paintings accessible in London’ (2002:220). One such satirical cartoon was ‘The coming of the Monsoons’ ridiculing Cornwallis after battlefield reversals in India (Figure 9). On one hand, it indicates a fleeing Lord Cornwallis who lost the first Anglo-Mysore War, while also depicting Tipu as a ‘tyrant’ on the other.

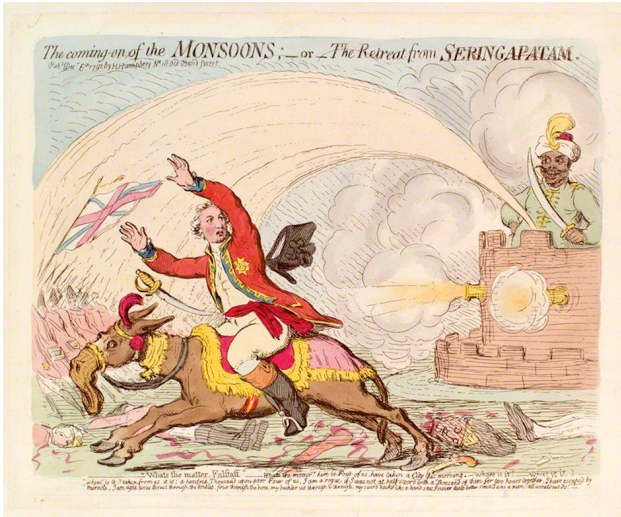


Figure 9. ‘The coming of the Monsoons’ or ‘The Retreat from Seringapatnam’ (Source:BM Satires 7929)



Figure 10. The Seringapatnam medal (Source: Steward, 1915)

Most artworks commissioned after the defeat of Tipu indicate his supporters in a demoralised stance while the British army is depicted in a triumphant stance. The most popular object in the ‘loot’ from the palace of Seringapatam was Tipu’s tiger, a mechanical wooden toy which now rests in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London after two centuries of shifting locations and identities.

The Seringapatnam medal was one of the most important objects indicating the continued use of visual imagery by the British to represent Tipu in a disdainful light (Figure 10). One face of the medal indicates the British lion taking down Tipu’s tiger, while the second face indicates the storming of



Figure 11. Imagined identities (Source: Columbia.edu.,2018)



Figure 12. Visual constructs (Source: Forrest, 1970)

Seringapatam with the use of Tipu’s motto ‘Assad Allah El Ghaleb’ (‘Conquering Lion of God’ in Arabic). The production of broadside ballads such as ‘The Storming of Seringapatam’ at the Royal Coburg Theatre in 1823, in the form of entertainment, fuelled the creation of Tipu’s imagined identities (Figure 11). These visual depictions of Tipu as a barbarous tyrant continued to emerge until long after his death as indicated by this engraving from 1861 (Figure 12).

These examples prove the popularity of Tipu and the Siege of Seringapatam in the media, entertainment, and exhibitions in Britain. The figurehead FHD0102 for years that was believed to be Tipu, is now believed to be his attendant. Perhaps continuing research may lead to more detailed or different answers in the future. An object like this is testimony to the multiple identities encompassed in museum objects and the complexities of interpreting such objects. When interpreted and perceived in the broader context of how media representations create imagined identities, the figurehead perhaps encompasses the memory of a turbulent relationship between an individual (Tipu)



Figure 13. Tracing origins and identities through representational narratives (Source: Author)

and a nation (Britain)! It seems almost impossible to exhibit this complex relationship through a single object targeted for a visitor unaware of these historical narratives.

The diverse identities and imaginaries around Tipu is one of the reasons for my interest in the object. Having grown up in Mysore, a city that is about nineteen kilometres (eleven miles) from Srirangapatna, I learnt in history lessons about Tipu's greatness as a ruler, with his significant contributions to art and architecture, and his valour against Britain, the 'enemy'. In more recent years, a postcolonial revisionist approach tries to question if Tipu was indeed a hero or a villain.

In his own home country, there is a complex dichotomy around Tipu's identity more than two centuries after his death. This is perhaps an indication of the power of visuals and media in the construction of identities (Figure 13). A clear understanding of these identities may remain a question for a long time to come. With the loot from Seringapatam dispersed across the world, it becomes imperative to ask how these are represented, interpreted, and made sense in present times. In such contexts, a reflexive narrative and display practice may perhaps yield various answers. Could we then think of a display of hybridity in interpretation itself as an exhibitionary solution that may allow for exhibiting these narratives more effectively?

Notes:

1. This research is based on a project undertaken with the National Maritime Museum, London titled 'The Whole Story 2018.' This was part of a module on the author's Masters in Arts postgraduate studies in Museums, Heritage, and Material Culture Studies at SOAS, University of London.
2. For this research, the author conducted interviews with Aliyeh Rizvi (writer and historian, Bangalore), Nidhin Olikara (writer and collector, Shimoga), and Meera Iyer, INTACH, Bangalore Chapter.

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An eighteenth century Persian inscription at Tipu Sultan's Summer Palace, Bengaluru contains a date for the structure along with an interesting comparison to 'the beauty of China', that was perhaps an aesthetic aspiration for that time.

'Ta bina e mahal ba shaukat shud
Sar ba anje falak za bohjat shud
Vah che farrokh raahal bina e rafi
Bar tar az asman za rafat shud
Hast aina khaua e ba safa
Har kasash did mahave hirat shud
Go e safvat rabud az kafe charkh
Charkh zan sar niguu za khijlat shud
Vasfe in khasr ra shunid magar
Zan Faridun ba khabe ghalat shud
Justamash az hisabe Zar tarikh
Goft Hatif ke baite ishrat shud
Chun ahud in khasre taza nakhsh tamam
Surate Chin khajil za ghirat shud
Justam az khizre akhl tarikhash
Goft laraib rashke jannat shud'

Epigraphia Carnatica,
Vol.IX, Bn 7, (1905: 6-7)

'As soon as the foundations of this Palace was laid,
its head was raised to Heaven with joy.
Oh, what a lofty mansion, a home of happiness,
Its summit being above the skies.
It is a house of glass in purity, all who see it
are struck with wonder.
In magnificence, it rivals the sky, which
hangs down its head with shame.
The description alone of this place
when heard by Faridun caused him to go to his
long sleep.
I sought by computation according to Zar
for the date and an unseen angel said
—"a house of happiness", 1196 (1781 CE).
When the painting of this new Palace was finished,
It cast the beauty of China into oblivion.
I sought the date from Khizir the Wise,
Who said—"Doubtless, it is envied by Heaven'
1206 (1791 CE)

(English translation)
Annaswamy, (2003: 210-11)