

Two most unusual Projects from India

By Michael Barrington

These two very unusual objects (An early 19th Century Hindu Wedding Carriage and a Hindu golden God's Horse) were imported to Britain in the early 1980s and since then housed in Bradburn Museum in Lancashire and in Harrogate City Hall.. They were sold at Bonhams in October 2007.

On receipt in late 2007 I began research mainly on the carriage because it seemed to be a vastly more complex object than the horse needing detailed inquiry into its origin, use and construction. So it was not until about 3 months later that I embarked on the horse.

During my research I made inquiries across the EU and in the USA through the Smithsonian Institute in Washington DC who, as has always been my experience living over there and since, were wonderfully helpful. I spoke to the Director of Asian Collections with the principle aim of finding out if and where similar objects are held in America. The answer, after about a month's research on their part was, there are no examples of either in the USA which we both considered very surprising. After some fairly fruitless discussions with the British and V&A Museums, we all concluded that these two objects are probably the only examples of their type in the Western World.



described in the Bonhams auction catalogue.

I should emphasise that the Horse and carriage are not related except for the fact that they are Hindu and possibly of around the same 200 year age. The carriage is drawn by bullocks either side of a central trail and the picture here is an example from a mid 19th Century book "The Golden Calm". It is evident from its decoration and indeed complexity that the carriage belonged to a very high caste family and possibly a Rajasthani Royal Family as it was



But now back to the Horse and opposite is a picture of it taken for the Bonhams auction catalogue. It is a God's Horse made to carry a bronze figure of either Agni the God of Fire and/ or [Lord Azhagar](#) and features annually in the Madurai (Southern India) Chithirai Festival in April and May.

Our first line of research was based on Agni but he appears in a Wikipedia file to ride a ram although with exactly the same neck harness and garlands as are on the horse. I asked a senior Director (Dr Amin Jaffer) of Christies if Agni ever rode a horse, to which he replied 'yes' and send me a picture (opposite) of Agni on a black. That was great news but the horse as received is a 'grey or dun', I immediately voiced my concerns to which Amin replied "either it has been repainted or the sculptor chose grey – not an important issue".



The horse is originally made almost entirely of wood (teak) except for four chain rings on the flat saddle to carry the bronze God sculpture, an iron weapon or perhaps parasol stay on the saddle and the simple bar bit (a snaffle in English terms) in its' mouth, although when it arrived here the bit was a piece of

string. It was evident that the figure had experienced very serious accident, such as falling from a great height because all four legs, the tail and neck in two places had been very badly broken.

Large nails, both round wire and cut iron, had been driven in to repair the breaks. The legs had been largely replaced with a wood which was not teak and the whole sculpture had been 'gessoed' with a thick layer of clay and sawdust with a fabric cover and painted. To investigate the breakages and later to repair/replace them, we removed the belly plate which was nailed, and inside we found the whole horse was full of clay, wood particles, dead insect nests and parts of the skeleton of an animal which turned out to be a monkey of sorts. It appeared that the sculpture had almost certainly been 'done up' to sell. Having emptied the body we removed the clay gesso covering and its fabric, some of which was over an inch thick, particularly on the neck. This revealed the most exquisite original carving of the harness and decorative garlands and jewellery/medallions. Also, and vital to our conservation work, we found many traces of original carving and paintwork, the colours of which been well preserved under the clay. Evidently the wreck of the horse must have lain in damp conditions for many years because the teak on each flank was badly rotted and had to be replaced. More detailed investigation showed that the horse was not a grey but, in western terms, a 'dun' (a yellowish tanlike tint) with darkish legs, black tail, and a black dorsal stripe which is a significant and universal marking of duns worldwide. This was a revelation and our excitement was further boosted by the discovery of an Indian website posted in early March about a two month festival in Madurai (in the Indian deep South) showing in the Chithirai period (April and May) the God Lord Azhagar who rides a Golden Horse. The picture on the site is a replica of the horse we have here! Moreover 'Dun' is the equivalent of 'Gold'. The garlands are identical as is the horse's facial expression!



In a later article I will describe the work involved in repairing the broken body of the horse and its colouring, for which much further research was needed. The pigments are again un-western and much of the paintwork, which is all water-based and 'Earthborn'. I will also publish the work on the carriage which is 16ft long x 9ft in height !

Lastly, I was asked by LAPADA last November to take the horse to Cheltenham Fine Art and Antiques Fair on the BAFRA stand. It got coverage in about 14 publications, and one of them, The Gloucestershire Echo, featured the horse on the front page with a record of an interview in which I had described it as early 19th C. Two senior members of the antiques trade, one of whom I worked with on the furniture vetting team, said they thought I had the date wrong and that the horse was more likely 10th or 11th Century. Wow, I thought and said. A few other visitors thought the horse was a 'Gallopier' from a fairground carousel but a number of visitors to our stand had much experience of travel in India and I learned a great deal from talking to them. Later I asked Amin Jaffer for his view and he said it was at best 18th Century. Extremely beautiful whatever and we are constantly driven to tears when we look at him.



Madurai Chithirai Festival

This is celebrated every year on the full moon day of the Tamil month of Chithirai (April – May). Lord Azhagar stepping into the river Vaigai is a spectacular event. It commemorates the occasion that he rode on a golden horse to Madurai to participate in the celestial wedding of Goddess Meenakshi with Lord Sundareswar. This is celebrated every year with a spectacular procession of the deity on a gold horse chariot adorned with garlands.

To be continued....