

# Two most unusual projects from India – Part 2

By Michael Barrington

In the last Journal I wrote an introductory piece about A Hindu Carriage and a God's Horse explaining a little of the considerable research needed to establish their origins, functions, and construction. This article continues with an outline of the work performed on the horse up to its completion. To remind readers this is a picture of the horse when it arrived from its present owner having been bought at auction at Bonhams in London. Both objects, and apart from being Hindu but otherwise unrelated, had been bought in India and imported to Britain in the early 1980s by a well known London dealer in Asian objects, although neither were typical of the stock he normally carried. They

were offered to him for sale and overnight he said he fell in love with horse and carriage and brought them back to Britain. They were offered to the V&A who certainly wanted them but declined to pay. Subsequently both were housed on display in Blackburn Museum, Lancashire and much later in Harrogate City Hall before being sent to Bonhams as a part of the dealer's retirement plans.



It was very evident when the horse arrived here that it had suffered a pretty catastrophic accident breaking all four legs, the neck in two places and the tail. The neck and legs were all unstable and the whole horse had been covered with a fabric with oil painted surface decoration. It was also clear that the horse had been restored to see having perhaps lain derelict and unprotected for decades. The owner agreed that in order to at least stabilise the breakages we needed to remove the layers of fabric attached to the horse's body to see what lay underneath.

We discovered that the painted fabric had been laid over layers of 'gesso' made of a mixture of clay, grass wood chippings and saw dust. In places, particularly on the neck this 'gesso' layer was over an inch thick. Underneath we found, the terrible breaks in the neck repaired with now very rusty cut iron nails, but also the original carving of the necklaces and bridle with clear evidence of original colouring, much of which was of its near original brilliance. The same went for the saddlery over the horse's hind quarters behind the saddle – the 'crupper' through which the tail is threaded. All this decoration fitted our research of pictures on an Indian website and in books.



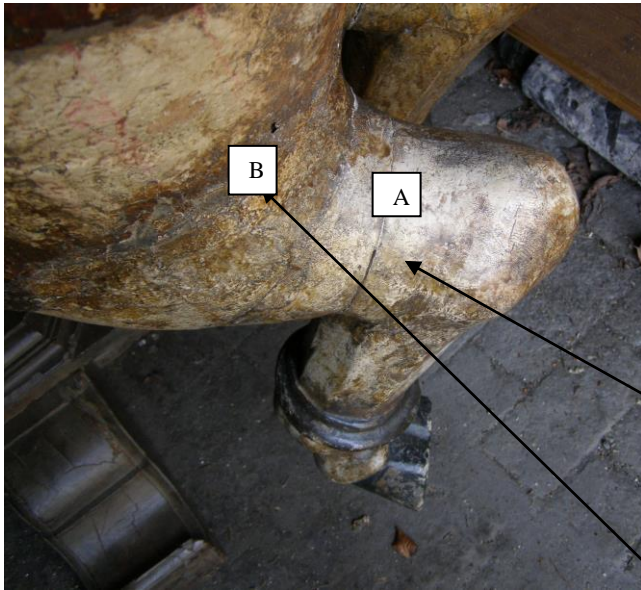
Above is a picture of the damaged neck and on the wide upper garland, under further fabric layers the original decoration in red.

On the right is the 'pommel' (front end) of the flat teak saddle which can be used by a rider to hang on when 'times are rough' ! The pommel is a sort of serpent with ears and snarling. The head was damaged and part of the jaw and the ears had to be repaired. This picture was taken after repairs were made and western rabbitskin gesso had been applied. In front of the serpent are two holes onto which the carved teak reins are pinned.





On the right is a picture of the tail which had been replaced in a different wood, well carved and finished and jointed to what appeared to be the remains of the original 'dock' with a large dowel-type joint. The loose end of cover fabric can be seen where the tail goes through the crupper.



The hind legs which had both been broken at "A" above the hock joints close to the horse's belly contained a large amount of non-teak wood the same as the re-made tail. They were both secured to the body with large and long cut nails driven into the old teak which fortunately had not split.

Further up at "B" were more enormous breaks on both hind legs.

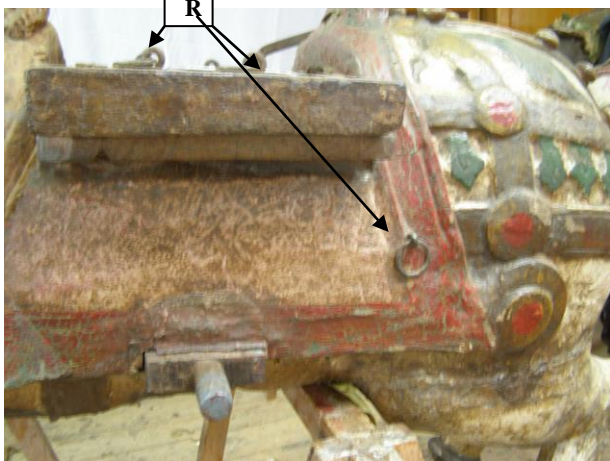
All the unstable and split wood in these areas had to be cut away using a large router which you can see at work at the end of this article.

Before the rebuilding of the hind legs started we removed, with some difficulty, a belly plate running between the fore and hind legs. This was done with the horse lying on its back and just as well because the interior of the body was crammed full of dried mud, several large long dead insect nests and parts of the skeleton of what turned out to be a monkey! All this was removed which revealed considerable rot and insect damage. The carved saddle girth is at "G"



Across inside and flank to flank of the belly is a flat board with a large 2 1/2" hole in its centre and on each end cylindrical pintles cut and of about 3" in length more about these below..

In use in processions the horses tend to be



mounted in pairs each carrying a bronze replica of the original carved stone deities held in the temples which may not be removed, at least whilst the particular God is "in favour"! The God figures are chained onto the flat saddles onto rings marked "R" in the left-hand picture. The horses rest on the pintles "P" in triangular racks secured to large shelves some 20 ft off the ground fixed to the fronts of wooden replicas of temples pulled through the streets by people



(or perhaps today by vehicles. An Indian informant told me that the human “pullers” could number 500 ! The lower parts of the saddle blankets had to be replaced on both sides because of insect damage in teak 2” thick so that we could sculpt them to flow down the horse’s flanks and simulate fabric which readers will see at the end of this article. The nearside blanket pictured above had been repaired earlier and had no flow at all. We copied the other side.

Much of the work on the body was done in a specially built wooden frame on trestles screwed to the workshop floor. On the frame was secured a large slotted router support track of 12mm plywood. The horse’s body was adjusted and secured with wedges and cramps at appropriate angles and positions for routing. The horse is the size of a Shetland pony of about 11 hands (44” from the top of the shoulders (the wither) in front of the serpent’s head down to the ground).

Throughout, in gluing the replacement pieces of teak we used West System Marine two part epoxy adhesive. This was chosen because of the high natural oil content of teak – especially the new timber. As its name implies West System (an American registered product is used in boat building and repair. It consists of a standard resin, a slow or fast hardener and optional filler. The resin and hardener are mixed at a standard ratio of 5 parts resin to 1 of hardener which is applied firstly to wet the surfaces to be glued and can then be thickened with the filler to bridge joints and fill holes and indents and to which earth pigments can be added for colouring - otherwise it cures to a white colour. I thoroughly recommend the West System which although expensive is highly effective. I would stress accurate initial mixing of resin and hardener in the correct 5:1 ratio . An incorrect ratio can make the system almost boil and cure in minutes ! The cure time is about 24 hours for ‘Slow’ hardener and 5-6 for the ‘Fast’. We bought it from Axminster Power Tools which made it slightly cheaper for a BAFRA Member ! To the right is the router (Tina) at work on the horse’s offside flank.



Lastly we come to the decoration which is all paintwork, except for the saddle and column stand which are oiled. The finished paintwork had to be matt and I decided to use a water-based system, partly because of the risk of conflict of oil base on a highly oily wood and, as importantly, because it seems, from research, that is the type of paint used originally. I sought advice from artist paint suppliers Cornelison in London who helped us considerably in the choice of colours, the most unusual being a yellow based on bull’s urine and not, surprise surprise, easily available. For the paint base I chose Earthborne organic clay paint finished with a wallglaze for protection and the facility to age and adjust surface reflection. The colours used are predominantly prime. As mentioned in the last Journal, we found a picture of one of these horses on a Southern India website (Madurai) advertising the ceremony of the annual full moon day of the Tamil month of Chithira Festival in April and May. The pictures on the right could so easily be the same animal and confirm its golden (dun) colour !



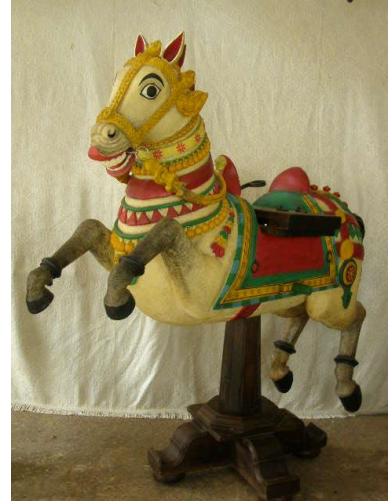
In the pictures below readers will see the finished horse mounted on a wooden stand. The 2 ½” hole in the cross board through the body locates onto a turned top pin of the stand column which below the cross board is octagonal. Although the stand does not look original, undoubtedly something very like it must have been used to display and store the horses when not on their temple rocking stands. We put the stand onto large plate castors at the owner’s request.



Finally, my guess is that this horse fell while being manoeuvred onto its shelf position on a replica wooden temple and was then abandoned. I was told that these figures are beautifully looked after and are restored before each event and to some extent their decoration is at the whim of their builder/restorer.

Below are pictures of the finished horse :

Once all the repairs had been completed



This fierce looking creature with a terrible squint and baring its teeth and tusks hangs on the bottom garland of gold (the Indian yellow mentioned above which we copied from an example sent by Cornelison);

