

Tipu Tiger

Interview with Rachel Peat, Assistant Curator of Non-European Works of Art

To the right of Queen Victoria, you can see some of the magnificent objects associated with Tipu, Sultan of the south Indian state of Mysore.

Tipu came to the throne in 1782 and he quickly built a modern and sophisticated court. His foremost emblem was a tiger, this was an ancient symbol of Kingship in India and Tipu really took it to new lengths. The tiger appeared on the uniforms of his soldiers, on the bindings of books in his library and four tigers even guarded his private apartments in the palace. Tipu is rumoured to have said 'better to live a single day as a tiger, than a thousand years as a sheep'.

This life-sized tiger's head formed the centrepiece of an octagonal throne built for Tipu. The entirety was covered in two millimetre gold sheet and some parts were decorated with rubies and diamonds. On the tiger the gold has been decorated with stripes, that look like fur. The tiger's mouth is open, which gives the impression that he is roaring, the tongue inside can move up and down. There are rock crystal teeth and fangs, which produce an even more fearsome appearance.

Tipu was engaged in hostilities with the British for much of his reign, and when it was discovered that he was in secret communication with Britain's enemy Napoleon, the British went to war with him. In 1799 Tipu was defeated and much of his throne was broken up and the pieces dispersed. This tiger's head was brought back to Britain intact and it was presented to William IV in 1831.