

BIO



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Freelance objects conservator trained at University College London and based in India. Over the past 7 years she has worked with the Science Museum and Cliveden Conservation in London and with various institutions in India including the Jaipur City Palace, where she now works as a consultant. She is also engaged with a digital humanities project 'Mapping Color History' with Harvard Global to undertake noninvasive analysis of illustrated manuscripts in Indian collections.

ABSTRACT

The Elephant in the Room: Mounting a 19th Century Elephant Armour at the MSMSII Museum, Jaipur

The Maharaja Sawai Man Singh II (MSMS II) museum is situated within the Jaipur City Palace, the residence of the Jaipur royal family. The museum aims to convey the story of Jaipur and its royal family through art, architecture and other varied collections.

An elephant armour comprising of 6 pieces (a head piece, a pair of ear guards, a tail cover and large panels for the right and left flanks) was discovered in 2018 in an abandoned palace store. This one-of-a-kind armour included metal plates and chain mail stitched onto cotton quilting, along with decorative lace and frills. The armour was likely assembled in the late nineteenth century for ceremonial use on an adult elephant and was also possibly exhibited in the 'Jeypore exhibition' of 1883.

Following interventive conservation, the elephant armour was to be displayed in the upcoming 'Transport gallery' at the museum. It was decided that a life-sized elephant shaped mount would allow appreciation of the assembled object in a three-dimensional form.

The mount was designed and created by an external metal working studio Techno Centre (India) based in Jaipur. Reverse engineering was applied and 3D softwares were used to achieve the organic shape of an elephant from flat object templates. For each piece of the armour, a shaped stainless steel mount was crafted by welding multiple sheets together onto mild steel grids to retain the curved shape. The ear mounts were designed such that they could be inserted after mounting the sides and the headpiece using a telescopic bush fitment with locking screws.

The object was prepared for mounting by the in-house conservation team. 2" loop velcro strips were machine stitched to cotton tape and positioned in a staggered fashion on the underside of each piece for even weight distribution. These were hand stitched in place using mercerised cotton threads and 4" curved needles. Additional support was provided by stitching through the quilted padding and the metal chain mail in a few key spots. Hook velcro strips were positioned on the stainless steel mounts to match the loop velcro position and were attached to the mount using epoxy adhesive and steel screws. An additional support was provided to each piece using a steel wire rope assembly which was secured to the steel grid mount using a locking screw. This would not only act as back up support in case of local velcro failure, but also allow easy adjustment of the object if a sag were to develop over a prolonged period of vertical display.

Finally, each armour piece was mounted on its respective stainless steel mount and each individually mounted armour piece was attached onto a heavy base pedestal crafted by the metal working studio to recreate a larger than life caparisoned elephant in the transport gallery of the MSMS II museum.