Depicting love in India's royal courts

It originally contained almost 3,000 diamonds and weighed approximately 1,000 carats. Its size and weight make it impractical for any woman to wear.

The Victoria & Albert Museum exhibit "Maharaja: The Splendour of India's Royal Courts" shows how depictions of love between royal couples evolved from the early 18th century to the mid-1930s. Anna Jackson, the show's curator, describes how "never before has a show been devoted entirely to the rich material culture of the maharajas."

In fact, the subject of the maharaja is a neglected one in the art world. Jackson and her team's objectives included breaking stereotypes of the Raj as well as showing how the princes were respected and powerful patrons of art, whether through the commissioning of royal-court paintings or jewel-encrusted weaponry.

The main intent of the exhibit is to serve as a history lesson about how India evolved politically from the early 18th century, when the Mughal Empire was in decline, to 1947, when Gandhi secured India's independence.

However, what struck me as most memorable in the sweeping show containing approximately 250 objects was the ways in which the raja and his rani's relationship were depicted in paintings of the royal court, silent wedding videos and black-and-white photos by avant-garde fashion and portrait photographer Man Ray.

Much of the show is dedicated to the idea of the procession because this was the method with which the king's material wealth was put on display. Maharajas regularly commissioned works of art that showed the raja as central in a procession, whether to meet members of the East India Company or political allies.

These processions were the equivalent, I came to realize, of watching New York's Thanksgiving Day Parade, a Broadway show in Times Square or Cirque de Soleil in Las Vegas.

Processions were not only a way for a king to show off his splendour, but also a form of entertainment for observers eager to feast their eyes on fantastically creative objects of conspicuous consumption, often times designed and produced by European designers such as Cartier, Rolls Royce and Louis Vuitton. This display of wealth was instrumental in reinforcing the raja's power and influence among his subjects.

Having just published a book about Hindu weddings in America, I pondered the significance of the maharaja's procession in relation to the baarat, a popular element in the Hindu wedding ritual when the bridegroom travels to the wedding site, often on a horse, surrounded by friends and family.

What is the significance of

Kavita Ramdya

this bridal custom in relation to the maharajas' processions in celebrating religious holidays and court-related events? Perhaps the widespread tradition of the baarat is in fact meaningful in light of the Hindu philosophy that life is organized into four distinct stages.

Just like the royal king is seen to express his darshan as a superior being by displaying his kingliness via a procession, the bridegroom symbolically moves from the brahmacharya, student, stage to the grihasthya, householder, stage via the baraat.

In the maharaja's processions, royal women are invisible. Whereas the raja is often times depicted in the public sphere of the procession, the rani is only depicted in the private sphere such as the palace's women's quarters, hunting grounds and gardens.

However, the Indian ruler and his wife are rarely depicted as sharing the same space. There is the occasional painting or drawing depicting the raja behaving intimately with a courtesan, but these works are meant to convey his sexual prowess, thus his manliness. His relationship with his wife remains private.

Just as royal women are conspicuously invisible in the courts, so is the evidence of their existence. The vast majority of material objects on display are ones used by the rajas.

Many of these objects have an effeminate flavor to them; their splendorous qualities betray an element of girlish lavishness rather than mannish austerity. For example, a Jaipur sword and scabbard dated from 1902 is encrusted with diamonds and other jewels, making it impractical to slay enemies on the battlefield; instead, this sword was an instrument for displaying wealth rather than martial agility.

The central object in the vast exhibit and, ironically, the one that most powerfully indicates the raja's position as "fashion icon" is the Patiala Necklace. Commissioned in the mid-1920s, the necklace took three years to complete.

It originally contained almost 3,000 diamonds and weighed approximately 1,000 carats. Its size and weight make it impractical for any woman to wear. So it should have come as no surprise when, next to the necklace, the museum visitor can watch a rolling black-and-white video of a tall, bearded, heavy-set maharaja swinging his arms alongside his staff as he swaggers and shows off the Patlia Necklace draped around his neck.

The ethereal collection of interwoven diamonds conjures the illusion of light rays emanating from the raja's burly chest; the necklace, despite its mass, is as effeminate as the raja is brutish.It is not until the early 1920s when "modern" maharajas emerge as multidimensional beings rather than models for manliness.

These maharajas struggled with their dual identity as an English-educated, modern-thinking individual versus the pressure of maintaining a public image as an Indian maharaja restricted by tradition.

One of the most interesting displays in the exhibit is a photograph of Maharaja Sayajirao Gaekwad III of Baroda wearing a traditional gown and turban side-by-side with another photo of the same subject in a three-piece suit and hat standing outside the Royal Courts of Justice.

The repetitive theme of the procession, hyper-masculinity of the raja and sexually-vexed femininity of their purchasing habits display the move toward modernity at a time characterized by a state of flux in gender roles and social mores.

Likewise, just as these maharajas began to challenge customary depictions of rajas, royal women emerge from the background and are instead the subjects of fashion and portrait photography by artists such as Ray. The invention of photography is in itself an insidious yet visually powerful influence in royal paintings.

For instance, a work depicting Ram Singh II of Jaipur worshipping is amazingly realistic; worry lines from royal pressures and court feuds are woven into his face like waves in the sea. Additionally, the notion of "perspective" is appropriated as a technique utilized by palace artists who have been radicalized by court photography.

Ray's playful yet dignified, accessible yet classy black-and-white fashion/portraiture photographs of Maharaja Yeshwant Rao Holkar II and his wife Maharani Sanyogita Devi of Indore are the highlight of the exhibit.

After looking at hundreds of objects that illustrate the divide between the public and the private, adhere to the formality of royal etiquette and honor tradition and customs over individuality and self-expression, these few photographs offer a brief yet oceanic respite.

Holkar's slicked-back hair, 30-inch waist and dainty mustache place him in a historical period and modernist mindset as different from his maharaja predecessors as the Krishna-designed Rolex cricket watch is to the Greek civilization's sun dial. Holkar's wife has a slight wave in her shoulder-length hair, reminiscent of 1930s film actress Marlene Dietrich. In Paris, specifically at Cannes, Ray photographed the royal pair playing games together, posing affectionately and teasing one another.

The photographs justify the couple's and their contemporaries' eagerness to live abroad where they could live both privately and publicly as man and wife without the burdens of custom and tradition weighing on them like the Patlia Necklace on a brutish maharaja.

Kavita Ramdya is author of "Bollywood Weddings: Dating, Engagement and Marriage in Hindu America"
www.bollywood-weddings.com