

Sporting pastimes of the Hara Kings

Murals of Bundi and Kota

Opposite above: *A tiger mauling a hunter, Bara Devtaji ki Haveli, Kota, about 1810*

Below: *Revenge of an elephant, an early mural from Bundi*

An enraged buffalo, Jhala ki Haveli, Kota, about 1780

Francesco Pelsaert, a Dutch merchant who travelled through India during the early 17th century, marvelled at the excellent wall paintings that he came across at Rao Bhoj of Bundi's palace in Agra, near Ram Bagh. These murals, commissioned by Jehangir in about 1620 AD are remarkably similar to the murals on the walls of a deserted portion of the Bundi palace.

Kotah and Bundi were once ruled by the Hara kings. The latter is a charming city set into a wooded hillside now denuded. A wonderful broad paved pathway leads upto the summit of the fort and the palace. Here, in a remote room, unexposed to sunlight, elaborate murals adorn the walls. How were they conceived?

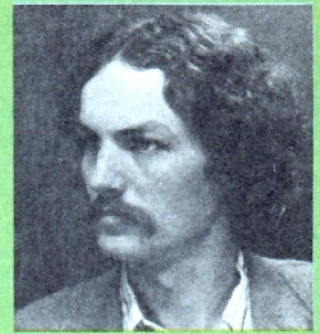


When were they created? Who masterminded their fine execution? These questions come to mind.

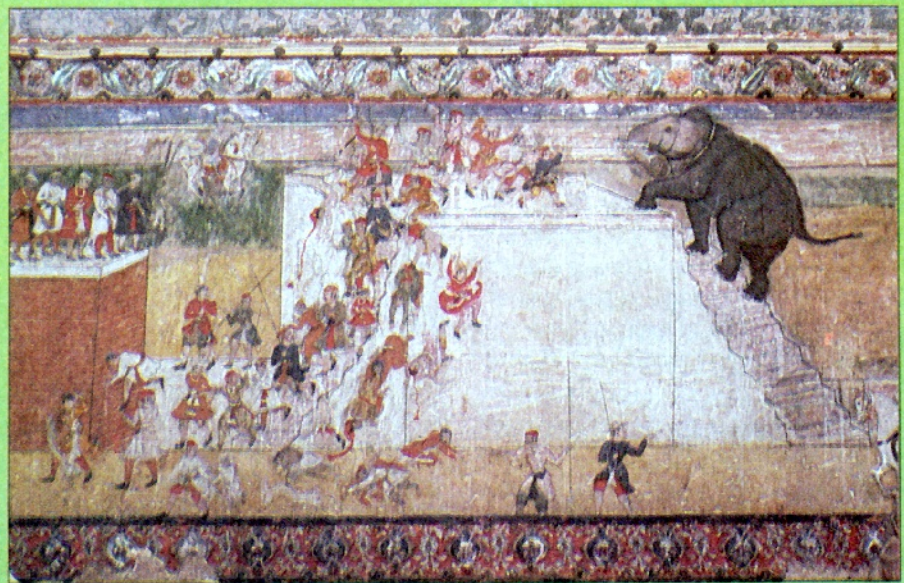
It is assumed that Rao Ratan of Bundi, 1607-31 AD, was a great favourite of the Emperor. He inherited the palace in Agra from his father and possibly saw the Ram Bagh murals being executed. Rao Ratan is infact depicted in many of the murals in that painted portion of the Bundi palace. He is seen observing a procession with the ladies of the harem by his side, leading a procession or playing polo, but most often he is seen watching elephant fights. Rao Ratan was very fond of elephants and pleased Emperor Jahangir by giving him three elephants. One of these became part

of the private elephants of the emperor and was called Ratangaj, the elephant of Ratan. A painting of this elephant still survives in the Indian Museum, Calcutta.

Rao Ratan watched the elephant fights from a simple unembellished elevation about eight meters high. This architectural structure looks like a huge cube, accessible by one or two staircases. Rao Ratan would sit on a small square elevated platform in one corner of the structure. The elephants had to be in a certain mood, in *musth*, before they were sent to fight with a suitable rival. Sometimes the elephant was prodded with long spears to irritate it and encourage the animal to be hostile. The organisation of such elephant fights



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*A hunter attacked by a boar.
Mural in the Jhala ki Haveli,
Kota*



*Below: Detail of a buffalo
hunt in the Chattr Mahal,
Kota*

was actually a privilege of the Emperor but it seems that Rao Ratan, being on such friendly terms with Jahangir, was an exception to the rule and could dare to disregard this Imperial privilege.

We know from contemporary sources that the drivers of fighting elephants were in great danger during the fights and often got either seriously injured or lost their lives. The king would sit at a safe distance with his nobles enjoying the spectacle below.

In one mural the artist depicts a rare incident where one elephant takes revenge for all the unfair treatment he had to suffer during the fight, at the hands of the royal attendants: the elephant ascends one of the staircases leading to the flat top of the elevation on which all the nobles are seated. This he does with such speed that the spectators leave the platform in panic. Some of them run down the staircase in time and others are shown jumping off, breaking their skulls on the ground. A few courageous attendants are depicted trying to prevent the elephant from mounting the platform. Those who reached the ground safely look perplexed, trying to rearrange their turbans. The painter does not show whether the elephant really attacked the spectators or whether the spectators jumped down from the structure in sheer terror. The painting is unique and certainly based on a real event. The dramatic





A furious buffalo. A wall painting in the Chhattar Mahal, Kota

flight of the noble spectators has been shown very realistically by the artist who possibly received his training in an Imperial workshop.

The walls of the eastern part of the Chhattar Mahal within the fort or *garh* of Kota were decorated with murals in about 1701 A.D. These seem to be the oldest datable wall paintings in the Kota fort. The artists have shown all the different amusements of the Raos or kings of Kota like hawking, pig sticking, cheetah hunting, hunting rhinoceri, tigers, lions, bears, buffaloes, shooting nilgai and suchlike. The southern wall of Chhattar Mahal is decorated with a large sized mural showing a battle. In a *quamargah*, or ring hunt, Akbar once employed fifty thousand beaters to drive the animals within the hunting enclosure or ring. The Chhattar Mahal murals show one such ring hunt in minute detail.

The large half circle of beaters who, with the help of much noise created by drums, trumpets and raised voices, are shown pushing the encircled animals into the direction of the hunting enclosure. The beaters are shown unaware of a group of large boars. Three boars are shown running in the opposite direction towards the beaters who in panic try to escape from the enraged animals, some of them losing their turbans in flight. Only one beater is seen with his raised sword squarely facing the situation.



A wild boar charges a ring of beaters. A mural in the Chhattar Mahal, Kota, early eighteenth century

Overleaf: The decorated walls and cupolas of a room in Bundi dating to about 1620

Rhinoceros could defend themselves when attacked by hunters. Hunted exclusively from the backs of elephants by the Hara kings, in one particular hunting scene on the northern wall of the Chhattar Mahal, a rhino is depicted attacking an elephant.

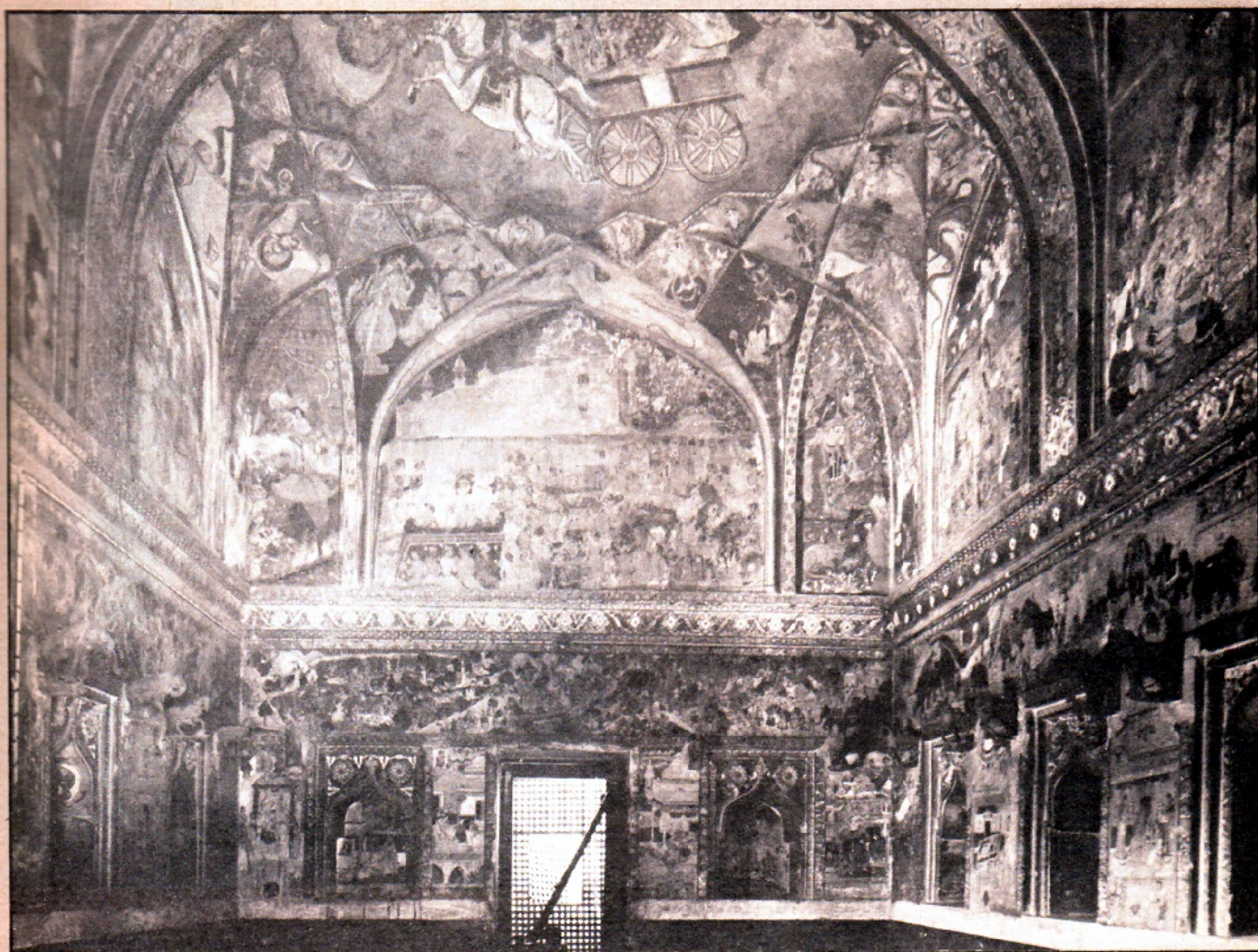
The rhino is shown injured by several arrows but running its horn against the elephant with great force. The hunter is seen falling headlong from the back of his elephant, losing his turban. This was the artist's indication of a highly dangerous situation. The mahout or elephant driver is shown bowing and attempting to distract the attention of the defenseless hunter.

Buffaloes were hunted from horseback, dangerous for both horse and rider. The animal was killed either by arrows or by spears and since the range of the spear was rather limited, the hunter had to come quite close to the buffalo exposing himself to the long horns of

the animal. The artist, in one painting, has shown a large buffalo piercing one horn through the flank of a horse which collapses with a contorted body. The rider is depicted unhurt but running off to save himself from the hooves of the wounded animal.

In another scene the less lucky has been pierced through his chest with one enormous horn. The hunter is shown hanging lifeless between the horns of the animal which tries to escape with raised tail. The rider has his sword drawn and gallops after the buffalo in wild pursuit.

The Jhala ki Haveli was decorated with murals during the early part of the reign of Maharao Umed Singh of Kota (1770-1819). Situated within the walls of the Kota fort, it was reportedly the domicile of Jhala Zalim Singh, chief minister under Maharao Umed Singh. James Tod, the famous nineteenth century historian on Rajasthan, referred to Umed Singh as "the best horseman and marksman in the country".



The murals in the Jhala ki Haveli show buffalo hunting as a common sport during the rule of Maharao Umed Singh, and as a dangerous sport. In one mural the buffalo is seen attacking a mounted horse piercing its horn through the left hind leg of the horse thereby lifting the victim. The horse is shown having lost its rider, bereft of his turban. A man is seen running to his rescue, dragging him away to prevent him from being buried under the falling horse.

Pig sticking was popular in Kota during the latter half of the eighteenth century. The pig usually had no chance against a mounted hunter. It could merely try to run faster than the horse or hide itself in a thicket. Occasionally it managed to attack a hunter on foot even when larded with arrows. The attacked hunter in this painting loses his

sword but manages to stab the boar with his dagger or *katar* with another man shown coming to his rescue.

Hunting scenes are a common feature on the walls of an upper storey in the Bara Devtaji ki Haveli, situated in the ancient part of Kota town. Most of the murals were painted during the last years of Maharao Umed Singh and remain well preserved.

In one mural a tiger is depicted having overthrown a mounted horse, about to maul its rider who was not able to draw his sword in time. Two other riders are shown with long spears moving towards the tiger and a man on foot trying to disturb the tiger with a pike usually used for prodding elephants. This composition has been copied from a lost late seventeenth century original.

The sporting of guns in both Bundi

and Kota was fatal for the large game in that area. Lions, tigers, rhinos and wild buffaloes became practically extinct. When these animals were hunted with weapons which needed physical force, they still had some small chance of escape, to defend themselves against attacking hunters.

The clever courage of hunted animals is extensively chronicled and one piece of writing refers to a tiger that secretly managed to climb onto one of the hunting towers near Jaipur, in which the hunters were waiting for him with their loaded guns. This happened at the beginning of this century when the Bavarian crown prince was invited for a *shikar* by the Maharaja of Jaipur. The murals on the walls of both Bundi and Kota are a vivid and genuine testimony to the methods that were employed to hunt, before the introduction of sporting guns.