

THE FIELD - Maharaja: The Splendor of India's Royal Courts

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By Edward Mazur, CTG

A wonderful touring exhibit currently at The Field Museum illuminates the artwork and culture of the eras under India's royals. On Monday, October 22, **two dozen CTPA members** visited the Field Museum to view, appreciate, and experience Indian culture during the bygone eras of the maharajas. **Running through February 3, 2013**, the exhibit presents more than 200 rare artifacts including elaborate jewelry, ornate weaponry, royal costumes, and gorgeous artworks and tells the story of the Maharaja rulers from the early 18th century through 1947, when India became independent from Great Britain. A highlight of the exhibition is the Patiala necklace by Cartier which originally contained 2,930 diamonds including the yellow 234.69 carat DeBeers diamond.

The word "maharaja" or "great king" recalls a turbaned and bejeweled ruler with absolute authority and immense wealth. The maharajas had a very complex role in the cultural and political history of India. From military strength to administrative and diplomatic skills, maharajas were expected to adhere to a strict code of behaviors. In addition to being wise and benevolent, the king was expected to be an excellent warrior and accomplished hunter. Since they also participated in elaborate public spectacles visitors will see dazzling ceremonial regalia including a silver howdah (chair), which the maharaja used atop a giant elephant during grand processions.

Rare paintings in watercolors and gold chronicle royal rule and daily life. The clothing and jewelry illustrate how maharajas used opulence as symbols of authority. One of my favorites is a turban ornament made of gold, rubies, emeralds, diamonds, a pearl, and an enormous sapphire.

The exhibition traces the decline of the Mughal Empire in the early 18th century, to the rise of smaller kingdoms, through the expansion of the English East India Company and British colonization in the late 1850s, ending with India's independence movement and the collapse of British rule in 1947.

People have been living in what is now India for **50,000 years** and it is an amazing rich, fertile, cultured, and complicated place. The exhibit is organized by the Victoria and Albert Museum in London and should serve as a reminder of the very specific and historically situated manifestations of power and royalty in South Asia.

Most of the maharajas **acceded** their kingdoms after British rule ended in 1947, creating modern-day India and Pakistan. In 1971, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi stripped the maharajas of all their privileges and instituted a tax on them. The maharajas went through a period of being viewed as "personae non grata" that has slowly changed. Some former maharajas are involved in wildlife and cultural heritage programs and their palaces or estates are popular hotels and tourist attractions.



On December 15, artists, musicians and storytellers from Kalapriya, a Chicago-based Indian music and dance company, will entertain at several locations in the Field Museum. At 11:30 a.m. and 1:30

p.m. on **December 29**, Kalapriya's principal dance troupe and musicians will perform at the Field's James Simpson Theater.

Remember, Maharajas will only be at the Field until February 3. This is an exhibit not to be missed by CTPA members, associates and tour groups of all ages.