

June 21, 2013

## Objects of desire



The Hindu

Main building of Mayo College, Ajmer. Photo: Deepa Alexander



The Hindu

Clock at Umaid Bhawan Palace museum. Photo: Deepa Alexander



The Hindu

Representation of the tea room at Umaid Bhawan Palace museum. Photo: Deepa Alexander



The Hindu

Umaid Bhawan Palace. Photo: Deepa Alexander



The Hindu

Danmal Mathur museum. Photo: Deepa Alexander

## Rajasthan's museums take Deepa Alexander back in time to a heroic era

The Battle of Haldighati — a chronicle of Mughal strength and Rajput valour. According to legend, when the haze of battle cleared, so many bodies littered the landscape that the blood-soaked soil turned turmeric yellow. Nearly five centuries later, I see Haldighati's soil lovingly preserved in a glass jar in the museum of Mayo College, Ajmer.

Rajasthan's museums range from the august to the intimate, their corridors stalked by ghosts, their rooms filled with a myriad objects. They tell stories of strife, intrigue and courage, and I set out one afternoon to read the pages.

In the blue city of Jodhpur, crowning Chittar Hill, rises Umaid Bhawan Palace, its regal dome outlined in the sharp light of noon. Its Art Deco interiors house the ruling family, a luxury hotel, and a museum.

Built by Umaid Singh, the first Indian maharaja to get a pilot's licence, it was designed by British architect Henry Lanchester and begun in 1929. It took nearly 3,000 men and 15 years to complete it. The museum captures the spirit of the labour — a silver trowel used in the ground-breaking ceremony greets visitors. As we walk through the gardens designed by W.R. Mustoe, men on horseback call out salutations, pigeons coo, and vintage cars glint inside glass-walled garages.

The pride of the Ranbanka Rathores who ruled the city echoes in the atrium. On the ceiling are murals of Mehrangarh and Umaid Bhawan by Polish artist Stefan Norblin. Beneath stands a scale model of the palace.

I walk past a gleaming Aphrodite to a room filled with photographs of the royal family. A boyish Maharaja Gaj Singh smiles from one; his father Hanwant Singh (who died in an air crash) stands tall in another, while his mother, the beautiful Krishna Kumari, looks away into the distance. In an adjoining room are painted perfume bottles and glass cabinets filled with Sevres porcelain. I gawk at the tearoom complete with fireplace, sola topees tossed on a wingback chair, and polo trophies crowding the mantelpiece. The queen's dressing tables and her mirrors made of Belgian glass reflect frolicking cherubs.

I travel faster than H.G. Wells through the hall with time machines, crowded with carriage, mantelpiece, table and wall clocks, all engraved like opulent, Baroque ornaments. A long corridor leads to the exit, past models of Tiger Moths and Lockheed Electras that once packed the tarmac of the Jodhpur Flying Club (now an IAF fighter base).

I linger to take a look at a grainy black-and-white photograph. It's a picture of Hon. Air Vice-Marshal of the RIAF, Umaid Singh, the "maharaja who offered mankind a spectacle".

A rosy-fingered dawn finds me travelling east to the pilgrim town of Ajmer. I visit the shrine of Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti, but it is Mayo College, created for the sons of Indian royalty, that I

am seeking. Founded in 1875 by Richard Bourke, Earl of Mayo and Viceroy of India, the school with its imposing grounds stands framed against the hills. I circumvent the main building in search of Jhalawar House that houses the Danmal Mathur Museum.

Mayo is believed to have one of the world's best school museums. Caretaker Ashok Kumar Saini ushers me into a room that is a memorial to one of the school's most beloved principals, JTM Gibson. An oil painting of the academic and mountaineer with his trademark pipe hangs above the world clock that is wound every Tuesday. A photograph of the first batch of students, framed medals and badges, and the school's coat of arms designed by Lockwood Kipling (father of Rudyard) hang in the room. Walking up the creaking wooden stairs, I find little schoolboys from the Museum Society earnestly dusting away at portraits and busts. One wing holds some of Nature's most captivating offerings, roaring tigers, a brace of butterflies, rare nests and bottled specimens.

Recent history is represented by currency from every country across the globe. Polo mallets inch their wooden heads past Ionic columns. Puppets hang suspended in time. Bhil bows and arrows crowd window ledges. Figurines of the coronation procession of George V march by, while a bagh nakh (tiger claw), reminiscent of Shivaji and Afzal Khan, glints in the half-light.

There is also much heroism here. Arms taken during the police action at Hyderabad, a worn Portuguese flag captured during the surrender of Diu, and a dented tank shell used by Lt. Arun Khetarpal PVC, in the Battle of Basantar, tell their bloody tales.

Many hours later, I step out of the museum, blinded by the brilliant sunshine of the 21st century.