



THIS IS THE ULTIMATE MASTERPIECE ON WHEELS AND EVOKE ITS FLAMBOYANT PAST WITH UNDIMINISHED GLAMOUR

This extraordinary silver carriage, a landau by design, was commissioned by the Maharaja of Bhavnagar in 1915. It dates from a time when the lifestyle of the Indian Maharajas truly epitomised luxury, and they delighted in the display of their wealth.

MAHARAJA STYLE IN IMPERIAL INDIA

The princely classes of India had, by the end of the 19th century, developed expensive tastes. Encouraged by their exposure to European and American consumerism, the Nawabs and Maharajas vied with each other to acquire the best that money could buy, both from the western cultures and from their own. A silver landau such as this distinguished its owner, indicated his wealth and implied his superiority. For state processions and ceremonial occasions, such a carriage allowed the members of the princely family to be publicly admired in their finery, while emphasising their status through its sumptuous and extensive decoration.

The Delhi Darbars were perhaps the most famous public occasions on which the Indian princes used their fleets of carriages. Based on the long established Indian practice of royal processions, they were appropriated by the British Imperial system to mark a state occasion, such as

the installation of a monarch, or a significant visit. Darbars represented defining moments for this complex hierarchical society, and the relative status of the participants was all important. Thus was the stage set for astonishing displays of wealth with gold, silver, silk and peacock feathers in abundance.

The Imperial Darbar of 1911, which celebrated the coronation of George V as Emperor of India, is considered among the most spectacular pageants in human history. It marked the last triumphant spectacle of the Raj, with the Indian princes processing in state through Delhi. Modes of transport, from caparisoned elephants with candelabra on their tusks to European-designed carriages, were of enormous significance in this crucial exhibition of political power.

Inspired perhaps by what he had seen at the 1911 Darbar, the Maharaja turned to the Fort Coach Factory of Bombay for his new carriage rather than one of the many European makers that had long been established in Indian cities.

This splendid landau remained with the Maharaja's family until 1968, appearing on festival days and at family weddings in living memory.

THE FORT COACH FACTORY

The proprietor of the Fort Coach Factory was a remarkable man called Pestonji B. Press. Trained at the J.J. School of Art in Bombay, he established his coachbuilding business in 1878 and won many awards at industrial exhibitions. In 1896, he was appointed as coachbuilder to Lord Sandhurst, Governor of Bombay, and worked for succeeding

landau, was born in 1875 to the first of his father's six wives. He succeeded his father, a great benefactor, in 1896 and true to the tradition of this ruling family, was a distinguished scholar and an enlightened man. The Maharaja took a personal interest in the development and continuance of the arts in his native region. His personal taste is described as refined rather than ostentatious. As his granddaughter Maharani Kumud Kumari of Gondal, recalls, 'He was very fond of anything made in silver'.



top The Bhavnagar silver landau with choppards carrying the royal insignia, 1922
left Colonel H.H. Maharaja Raol Sir Bhavsinhji II



Governors. To have prised this patronage from the many contending European coachbuilders must have ranked as a great accolade. By 1908 the Fort Coach Factory was recognised as the leading manufacturer of carriages in Bombay.

There are many glowing testimonials to Press's work in the pages of *The Times of India* which praise his 'up-to-datedness of design', the modernity of his workshops, and the quality of his output. Protap Roy, an Indian authority on vintage carriages writes, 'His endeavour was to equal with native workmanship and material the elegance and durability of the English imported carriages'. Press represented the cutting edge of carriage design in India, and was known for his innovations - which included pneumatic tyres - as well as for the 'general excellence and finish of his carriages'. Typically, he was swift to embrace the advent of the motor car, and readily turned his skills to this new venture early in the 20th century.

DESIGN AND DECORATION

The carriage represents a masterpiece of technical virtuosity, bringing together silversmithing traditions from all over India through the skills of the migrant workmen of Bombay's artisanal workshops. No expense was spared, and the decoration of the

carriage demonstrates the artistic interest and involvement of the Maharaja as well as the innovative spirit of Press.

Mounted on iron frame and axles imported from England, the whole structural framework is clad with silver: ironwork, springs, panelling, wings, shafts and even bolts. This enhances the sense of lightness conferred by its elegant proportions overall.

But it is the decorative work on the silver which is truly remarkable. Flowers, birds and butterflies ripple across the surfaces, rendered in relief, picked out in enamel and highlighted with gold in a flamboyant tour-de-force of the craftsmen's skill. Enamelling like this is as yet unknown on any other native-built carriage. Though enamelling on precious metal has a long and illustrious history in India, it is likely that Press was also inspired by what he saw when exhibiting at the 1900 Paris Exhibition. There are intimations here of Art Nouveau style, both in the form and in the style of enamelling, that bespeak European influence.

Further adornments are crafted from silver, each of significance to the patron - whether through Hindu mythology, reflecting a personal interest, or perhaps just evidence of the cross-currents of Indo-European fashion. Large greyhounds crouch at the front of the carriage while swans, lions and bulldogs decorate the undercarriage.



The coat of arms on the sides of the carriage, beautifully executed in raised silver, gold and enamel, is that of the Bhavnagar royal house. Two heraldic bulls flank a shield emblazoned with a golden eagle and surmounted by a helmet, above which sails a dhow (signifying the importance of maritime trade to the state). Beneath the arms the motto reads, 'Manushya Yatna Ishwara Kripa' (Man's Endeavour, God's Grace). These words distil the philosophy, inherent in the Geeta, that all of human endeavour is separated from its reward, which is bestowed only through divine grace. This motto reflects the royal family's interest and adherence to Hindu philosophy, which in turn informed their practice of *rajdharna*, or royal duty.

In every aspect – design, execution, woodwork, upholstery and decoration – this carriage declares the passionate interest and involvement not only of the Maharaja, but also of Pestonji Press himself. Unusually for a carriage of Indian origin, it bears the Fort Coach Factory's own badge, suggesting that Press regarded this as his chef-d'œuvre. Its astonishing quality and remarkable beauty endorse that view. It is indeed the ultimate masterpiece on wheels and evokes its flamboyant past with undiminished glamour.

DIMENSIONS

Height 82 in 208 cm; Length 185 in 470 cm;
Width 69 in 175 cm

PROVENANCE

The Maharaja of Bhavnagar 1915
Thence by descent to 1968
European private collection



EXHIBITION

Maharaja: The Splendour of India's Royal Courts
The landau is a star exhibit of the Victoria and Albert Museum's exhibition touring North America from November 2010 to August 2012

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THE MAHARAJA'S CARRIAGE

made for the Maharaja of Bhavnagar; 1915

