

PLUS PROMO

Royal passion

You could call hunting masculine, but gender biases have never mattered to Princess **Rajyashree Kumari** of Bikaner, as **Vatsala Kaul** finds out

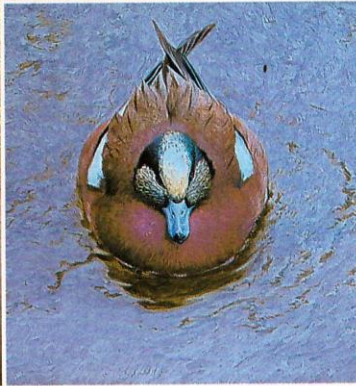
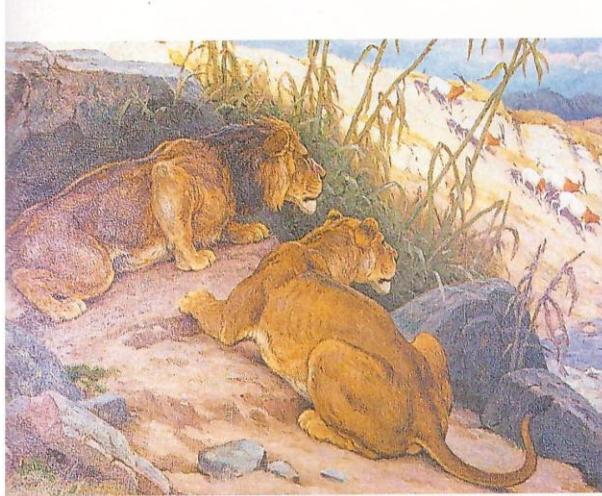
HUNTING AND GAME ANIMALS have been an enduring motif in royal art. Gorgeous tiger skins, trophies of stags with impressive antlers and curving mounted tusks adorn many a palace wall. However, a priceless collection of much-loved wildlife paintings handed down generations... now that's royally unusual. "It's a rather masculine thing," laughs Princess Rajyashree Kumari of Bikaner, looking anything but, dressed in mauve, an amethyst necklace in perfect complement, at her Delhi residence. The tables are dripping with Baccarat crystal, the cushions are Ferragamo, and the glass is Venetian, but magnificent wild animals inhabit the walls of the drawing room and the adjacent dining hall, in the form of 15 oil paintings that echo with dark forest secrets, the excitement of the hunt and the sound of that final shot. A collection spanning four generations, it dates back to the time of her great-grandfather Maharaja Ganga Singhji and grandfather Maharaja Sadul Singhji.

Two small studies of a lion crouching on a rock by George Frederic Lodge quietly draw your eye. Lodge (1860-1954), himself a naturalist, was a painter of birds and animals in oil, tempura and watercolour. Then there are the works of British classicist painter Arthur Wardle (1864-1949), a self-taught artist who held his first exhibition at 16 at the Royal Academy and became famous for his paintings of wildlife, domestic animals and sporting scenes. Also on display are the renditions of French artist Georges Frederic Rotig (1873-1961), British painter Cúthbert Edmund Swan (1870-1931) and German artist Wilhelm Friedrich Kunhert (1865-1926), whom some call the greatest animal painter ever. There are also game birds by Michael Jackson and other feathered beauties by David Ord Kerr, a top bird painter in the UK.

"Most of the paintings are by European artists," the princess tells me. "My great-grandfather and grandfather picked them up on their travels to England. I have been brought up with these paintings, and with a deep respect for animals. They have always appealed to me. My favourite one is in Bikaner—there are about 10 paintings at the palace there—it's a lioness and her baby by Harry Dixon. It catches a beautiful mood. There's a favourite in Delhi too, a Wardle, the one with the



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(Facing page) Princess Rajyashree at her New Delhi residence. Behind her, Dino Parvano's zebras; (clockwise from left) Lions of Arabia, by Rotig; tiger pair by Arthur Wardle; a duck painting in Princess Rajyashree's collection; leopard by Parvano

tiger pair, one of them looking as if it has been woken by something just for a moment." She points out a dark painting with a pair of lions stalking antelope from a high vantage point: a Rotig rendition. "My father told me," she recalls, "that the lions were indigenous to Arabia and that both the lion species and the antelope are now extinct." The Princess has added a leopard on a tree and a pair of zebras against a washed yellow grassland, both by Dino Parvano—a master artist of landscape and wild animals—and a recent one of a duck by David Ord Kerr. "My tastes have recently changed from game birds to more exotic parrots and parakeets," she says.

Daughter of the multi-faceted Maharaja Dr Karni Singh, the princess started to shoot professionally at the age of six, went on to compete internationally in trap and clay pigeon shooting, and was honoured with the Arjuna Award when she was only 16. Often the only woman participant even at international meets, she is unapologetic about her hunting heritage. "People tend to think that the royal families killed mindlessly for sport, but it was accepted at that time. While some royals may have practised excess, most conserved wildlife. I remember that my father was deeply concerned with the upkeep of the forests, preserving the quality and quantity of wildlife, and explained to us about the forest being out of bounds during the breeding season or closed season. I remember how great clouds of the Imperial Sand Grouse used to descend on Gajner where my great-grandfather had an artificial lake built, and how in the summer months salt licks were set up for the deer, who were never shot."

She lovingly brings out her most recent addition, striking birds by David Ord Kerr, one of her favourite artists from London. "The collection is very special for me—representing as it does four generations of my family—and it is a representation of art from Victorian times to our modern times," she says. "There are many styles, and several interpretations of the same animal by different artists." Many of the paintings have been painstakingly reframed, the frames chosen with great care to match the period they belong to. They are kept in airconditioned rooms for part of the day during the summer months to keep them from drying out and becoming brittle. "What I would love to do is display them in one place in Bikaner," the Princess concludes, "along with information on how my family helped to conserve the forests in which some of these majestic animals roamed." ■