Public access description

This Company painting is by Jiwan Das of Delhi and is a portrait of Begam Samru, a remarkable Kashmiri woman who started out as a dancing-girl. She originally married the adventurer Walter Reinhardt, who sailed to India in 1745, jumped ship and enlisted with the French. He was later recruited by the Mughal Governor in Bengal. He led an army which defeated the Honourable East India Company’s army and was ultimately given the fiefdom of Sardhana. Following his death, Begam Samru inherited his army of six well-trained and disciplined infantry battalions, and she even led her troops into battle in person. She became extremely rich, and in her old age she converted to Christianity and built a fine church at Sardhana. This portrait dates from about 1830, when she was nearly 80.

‘Company paintings’ were produced by Indian artists for Europeans living and working in the Indian subcontinent, especially British employees of the East India Company. They represent a fusion of traditional Indian artistic styles with conventions and technical features borrowed from western art. Some Company paintings were specially commissioned, while others were virtually mass-produced and could be purchased in bazaars.

Descriptive line

Painting, Begam Samru; wearing a Kashmir shawl; holding a huqqa-snake; draped curtain behind her, Delhi, ca.1830

Physical description

Begam Samru is pictured wearing a Kashmir shawl and holding a huqqa-snake, with a draped curtain behind her.

Dimensions

Height: 10.5 cm, Width: 8.5 cm

Museum number

03554(IS)

URL

http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O16833/portrait-of-begam-samru-painting-jiwan-ram/