

# Conservation

## Saving the crumbling palaces of Nagaur

*A neglected fort in north-west India is being restored to its former glory with help from the Getty and other foundations*

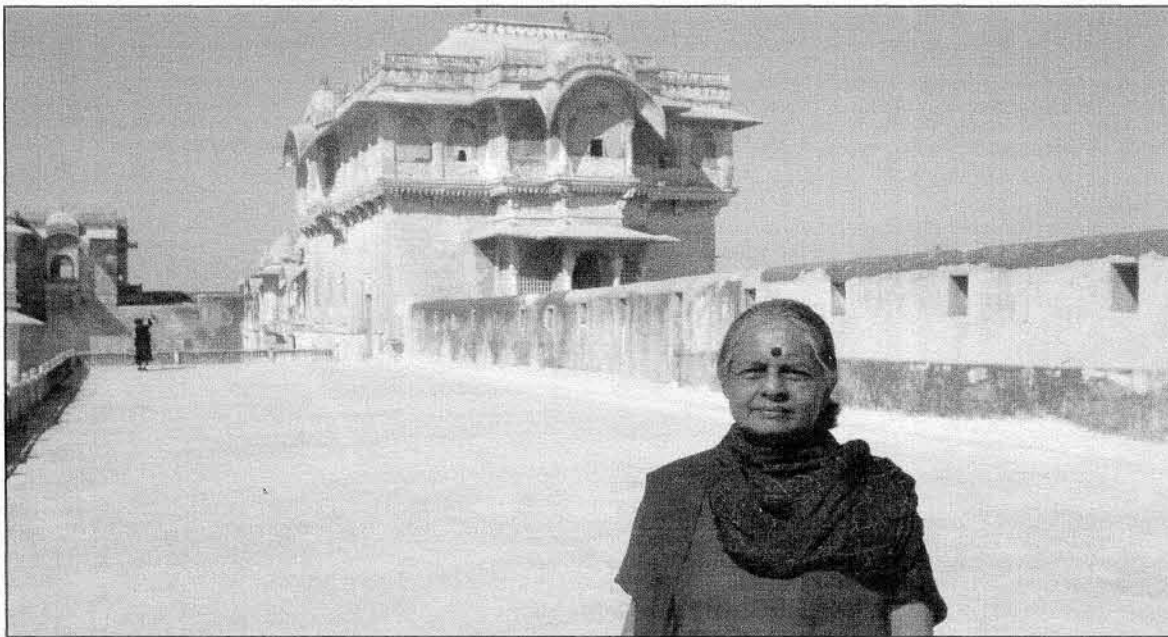
NAGOUR, INDIA. It is rare for the Getty to give more than one grant to the same restoration project. But a fort in Nagaur, Rajasthan, has recently received its fourth award from the California institution. The latest grant is allowing research and conservation to be carried out on a fragile group of wall paintings in the desert fortress.

Ahichhatragarh, or "Fort of the Hooded Cobra", is one of the oldest intact architectural sites in India. Sited on the edge of the great Thar desert, some 100 miles from Jodhpur and close to the Pakistani border, the fort's days of glory were in the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries. Nagaur was an important trading post, and a succession of Muslim and Hindu rulers built sandstone palaces in the fort, adorning them with delicate wall paintings and classic Rajput and Mughal gardens.

Elaborate engineering ensured that water was not wasted, and in case of attack a year's supply of water could be stored.

But by the late 1980s the site was "sad, forlorn and desolate", in the words of H.H. the Maharajah of Jodhpur. Gaj Singh II, who inherited Ahichhatragarh in 1952.

It had been occupied by India's Border Security Forces (BSF) after the 1947 partition of India and Pakistan. The BSF sub-divided rooms, left inscriptions on the walls and plastered over the graceful paintings. Debris accumulated in the spacious courtyards; walls crumbled while the massive two-tiered wall that completely



Clockwise from top: the Hani Radi Mahal, architect Minakshi Jain in the palace complex and wall paintings inside the Palace of Mirrors

enclosed the 35-acre site was severely dilapidated.

### Financial aid

The fort has gradually been restored to its former glory with the support of four grants from the Getty, two from the British-based Helen Hamlyn Trust, and contributions from the Maharajah's charity and the Mehrangarh Museum Trust (MMT), among others. Because of the scale of Nagaur, with its four main palaces and 50 other buildings, the Getty has treated it as more than one structure, thus entitling it to multiple awards. It has given a total of \$750,000,

with \$200,000 being used to conserve the wall paintings. The Hamlyn Trust has granted \$428,200, part of which funded the initial study of the paintings.

The paintings and embedded mirror decorations in the elegant, one-storey Sheesh Mahal, the "Palace of Mirrors", which probably dates from the early 18th century, are the most endangered due to water damage and salt deposits. Work has now started, in a joint partnership with the wall painting department of the Courtauld Institute in London and MMT (which manages the fort). Research will be carried out on the subjects depicted in the paintings to determine when and by whom the works were commissioned.

In 2004 the site won the Unesco-Asia Pacific Award of Excellence for Cultural Heritage Conservation, for its combination of modern scientific techniques with traditional building practices. As part of the project, architectural and conservation students, stonemasons, and artisans received on-site training in traditional building procedures. The aim of the Nagaur project is to enable other Indian conservators to be trained more fully in wall painting research.

### Water seepage

Courtauld Institute conservator Charlotte Martin de Fonjaudran explains that the team is current-

ly trying to establish the mechanisms of deterioration of paintings in the Sheesh Mahal. There has been water infiltration, part of the vault has collapsed and paint is flaking off. The main problem, she says, is salt efflorescence, a build up of salt deposits, and the team is monitoring changes in humidity in the building. The aim is to complete the investigation and conservation of these paintings, and others, by 2010.

As for the buildings, conservation of the structures has been overseen since 1993 by architect Minakshi Jain. "We are preparing this architectural monument for future generations," she says, noting that work on one of the unique aspects of the fort is almost complete. This is the elaborate system that recycled water.

Aqueducts run along the tops of the walls to bring water into the palaces, where it flowed in sculpted floor channels through

reception rooms as well as into the hamman (steam bath). Now all the waterworks have been repaired, including the courtyard fountains.

And thanks to the Hamlyn Trust, visitors can even stay in the fort. The Ranvas, the queens' rooms in the zenana (harem), have been converted into accommodation for paying guests, helping towards the sustainability of the whole project.

**Georgina Adam**

### Florence's proposed new tram divides opinion

LONDON. The plan by the town council of Florence to extend its new €715m (\$1bn) tramline through the city's historic centre has faced protests by the heritage and conservation lobby groups Europa Nostra, Italia Nostra and the Fondo Per l'Ambiente Italiano. The proposal is an attempt to cut congestion and pollution caused by the 1m cars and buses that enter the city centre daily and to cope with the millions of tourists who visit Florence every year. The groups say the scheme will damage the city's buildings and works of art. A petition has also been signed by 13,000 residents. The tramline extension would travel through the Piazza del Duomo close to the Baptistery and the Cathedral, then alongside the Palazzo Medici-Riccardi to the Accademia which houses Michelangelo's *David*, viewed by 1.3m visitors a year. Paolo Cocchi, the Florentine cultural director, has written to Italian culture minister Francesco Rutelli, asking to move the statue to a concert hall being developed at the Stazione Leopolda to the west of the city, in an attempt to draw tourists away from the centre. Mr Cocchi says Florence now has "an unsustainable level of tourists". Giorgio Bonsanti, professor of art history and restoration at the University of Florence, has said that the trams would "save our monuments, not damage them". **D.L.**

## Spiral Jetty threatened by oil company

NEW YORK. The State of Utah has received over 900 letters, emails and calls from members of the public protesting against exploratory drilling set to take place less than five miles away from Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty*.

Completed in the Great Salt Lake in 1970, *Spiral Jetty* is one of the earliest and most recognisable examples of "land art". Dia Art Foundation, which acquired *Spiral Jetty* in 1999 from the artist's estate, oversees preservation of the earthwork, including its surrounding area.

"The expansive natural setting is integral to Smithson's work of art, providing an essential frame for experiencing the *Spiral Jetty*," said Jeffrey Weiss, Dia director, in a statement to the press. "Any incursion on the

open landscape, including the proposed drilling, would significantly compromise this important work of art."

The National Trust for Historic Preservation, along with Smithson's widow, Nancy Holt, have joined the campaign against the drilling, raising con-

cerns over increased traffic, disruption of the natural environment and the possibility of toxic spills. As we went to press, the state authorities in Utah were set to reach a decision on whether to allow drilling within the month.

**Lauren Conrad**

