

**What was the role of British Military costume in creating a visual empire?**

The cultural meaning attached to empire, existed in the minds of the imperial community as the result of exposure to and participation in, the development of the idea of empire.<sup>1</sup> Yet, though such meaning formed the imperial community, it existed and originated in the imaginations of individuals. Particularly important in this creation of cultural empire is the visual empire in which the sights and aesthetics of imperial culture powerfully shape the individual's imagination.<sup>2</sup> Visual empire is formed of cultural symbols which convey and collect meaning and thus come to create the map of meaning through which the individual comprehends and imagines both the cultural and political empire. To the individual, personal relation is essential in the construction of real meaning. This most powerfully occurs through interactions with other individuals, whether personally, through the ordinary local participators in empire, or more distantly through the heroes in the pages of papers and travel writing.<sup>3</sup> This is no less important with the visual empire, where the personal relation with the individual artist, portrait sitter, or heroic subject, or subjects, of the imperial narrative scene, brings the ideas of empire very concretely to the imagination of the individual citizen. In such visual interactions, costume is a central element. Costume is both individual and collective. It marks the individual out personally and identifies them as part of a cultural community. In an imperial context particularly, it can convey far more than simple cultural identification, and can have many different meanings attached. To understand the role of costume in creating a visual empire, I will look at the works of four different artists, James Sant, William Simpson and Henry Armitage, which reveal the role costume played in relating empire. These works will demonstrate the role of costume in narrating the individual and collective experience of coloniser and colonised, and will particularly reveal how the process of transculturation came to forge the visual empire.

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<sup>1</sup> Holger Hooock, *Empires of the Imagination: Politics, War, and the Arts in the British World, 1750-1850* (Profile Books, 2010). 3, 12.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>3</sup> Antoinette Burton, 'The Visible Empire and the Empire at Home, c.1832-1905', *Empire Online*, 2004, 1, 4-5.

James Sant's '*Captain Colin Mackenzie*,' [Figure.1], is one of the most iconic displays of costume in British Imperial Art. It has often been misunderstood as a blunt piece of Orientalist arrogance, masking an Imperial disgrace.<sup>4</sup> Really it is far more nuanced, using a unique costume to encapsulate both imperial ideals and the complex process of transculturation.<sup>5</sup> James Sant was a student at the RA when he painted Captain Colin Mackenzie, and the heroic veteran of the recent Anglo-Afghan war with his exotic wardrobe provided Sant with the noteworthy subject he needed to appear on the walls of the 1844 RA exhibition.<sup>6</sup> Recently, with the painting forming a key part of the Tate Britain's 'Lure of the East' (2008) and 'Artists and empire,' (2015) exhibitions, art historians have seen this 'gallant' image as little more than an arrogant attempt to mask imperial anxieties over the military disaster.<sup>7</sup> However, Corbeau-Parsons described it as being in the tradition of diplomatic rather than military portraiture, the purpose of the costume is to stress the subject's understanding of the different culture over that of his countrymen.<sup>8</sup> Mayer explores a similar interpretation in greater detail, refuting El-Enany's interpretation that Mackenzie's costume represents no 'genuine interest in the natives', but arrogant colonial military pride and a display of imperial mastery.<sup>9</sup> Such art historical explanations are based heavily on Said's *Orientalism*, which she believes has been too uncritically applied by art historians.<sup>10</sup> Too 'monolithic' in its approach, applied uncritically it can exclude nuance from art historical interpretations.<sup>11</sup> Instead the costume relates the subject's experiences of empire, rather than celebrating some grander concept of imperial glory. It narrates, commemorates, decorates and promotes the individual's cross-cultural experiences.<sup>12</sup> The story of Mackenzie's costume reveals his own. During the disastrous 1842 retreat from Kabul, he became a hostage of Akbar Khan, escaping the massacre of the army's 16,000 men and women.<sup>13</sup> A hostage from January to September, Mackenzie received the

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<sup>4</sup> Caroline Corbeau-Parsons, *Artists and Empire: Facing Britain's Imperial Past*, exhibition catalogue, London, Tate Britain (London, Tate Publishing, 2015), 136, and Tara Mayer, 'Cultural Cross-Dressing: Posing and Performance in Orientalist Portraits', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 22:2, 2012, 294.

<sup>5</sup> Mayer, 'Cross-Dressing', 294.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> Corbeau-Parsons, *Artists*, 136, and *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> Corbeau-Parsons, *Artists*, 136.

<sup>9</sup> Mayer, 'Cross-Dressing', 294.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 282, 294.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 294-296.

<sup>13</sup> Colin Mackenzie, *Storms and Sunshine of a Soldier's life*, (Edinburgh, 1884), 261, 263, and *Ibid.*, 294.

costume depicted from Khan, the coat (*khet*) of which is in Dumfries museum.<sup>14</sup> He recalled with great pride receiving the dress, and clearly wears it proudly in the portrait.<sup>15</sup> It is a symbol of experience. For Mackenzie there was a special desire for such a symbol, as he was denied the Kabul medal as a result of his connection to the disastrous campaign.<sup>16</sup> This snub did not reflect his bravery and sufferings during the campaign.<sup>17</sup> While a captive he gained the Afghans' respect for making four trips back to the British army with messages, each time returning, defying the all expectations, finally succumbing to exhaustion and typhus which almost killed him.<sup>18</sup> Abler describes how, in the Imperial military, combat experience is highly valued, and elements of local dress are often adopted by troops on the frontiers to mark them as veterans of colonial action; this is Mackenzie and Sant's aim.<sup>19</sup> But Mackenzie's costume is a more literal symbol than this, as, while journeying to and from captivity, he wore Afghan dress given to him by his captors to protect him from the hostility of the local population.<sup>20</sup> Lieutenant Vincent Eyre painted him wearing such costume while in captivity **[Figure.2]**, similar in every aspect to that in Sant's painting, save in finery.<sup>21</sup> 'The Afghan dress became him well,' recorded fellow officer Broadfoot of this plainer garb, and it is just as true for the finer.<sup>22</sup> 'The exotic souvenir is a sign of survival - not its own survival, but the survival of the possessor outside his or her own context of familiarity.'<sup>23</sup>

Sant's painting also brings the empire to life in another way: through the display of transculturation. Mackenzie is not portraying an arrogant imperial fantasy, nor proclaiming mastery over the Afghans, neither is he pretending to be an Afghan. Instead he is demonstrating by emulation, no matter how

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<sup>14</sup> Mayer, 'Cross-Dressing', 295-296.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 295.

<sup>16</sup> Alexander Arbuthnot, 'Mackenzie, Colin (1806-1881), army and political officer in India,' *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, (Oxford, 2004), <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-17574>, accessed 4 April 2018

<sup>17</sup> Mackenzie, *Storms*, 258-259, 262-265, 272-275, 352-360.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 335, 340-343, 352-360.

<sup>19</sup> Thomas Abler, *Hinterland warriors and military dress: European empires and exotic uniforms*, (New York, 1999), 8.

<sup>20</sup> Mackenzie, *Storms*, 323, 333-335.

<sup>21</sup> Corbeau-Parsons, *Artists*, 136.

<sup>22</sup> Mackenzie, *Storms*, 338.

<sup>23</sup> Mayer, 'Cross-Dressing', 286.

inaccurate, both his respect for the Afghans and his expertise over his countrymen who are the intended audience.<sup>24</sup> Mayer, examining the portrait of *John Caldwell*, again attacks the ‘Saidian-style’ interpretation that because his costume is incoherent and decontextualised, it is part of his power display.<sup>25</sup> Such imposing of post-modern theory hinders our understanding of past, complex and varied motivations.<sup>26</sup> Instead, Mayer shows, in a similar way to Macleod, that mimicry represents respect, admiration and interest; thus women adopted elements of Turkish costume in admiration of their perceived personal freedom.<sup>27</sup> Similarly Abler shows how soldiers, particularly imperial officers leading native troops, like Mackenzie, often adopted elements of their dress as a result of interaction with and personal respect for their men.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, Mackenzie’s moustache, so prominent a feature in Sant’s portrait, is a particularly important piece of cultural emulation. British soldiers saw Indians and Afghans as representing ideal forms of masculinity that the often rather feminine military styles of the 1820s-30s had lost; they thus sought to emulate particularly masculine features, like the moustache, in a very similar way to the women adventurers described by Macleod.<sup>29</sup> Returning imperial war-heroes contributed to the new popularity of the moustache, which would soon become a staple of imperial masculinity. Mackenzie clearly shared such motivations; he learnt at least two Afghan languages, including Persian, and readily embraced their title of ‘mullah’.<sup>30</sup> Recollecting, he described the Afghans as ‘an extremely hardy, bold, independent race, very intelligent, with a ready fund of conversation and pleasantry which renders them very agreeable companions.’<sup>31</sup> This respect, emulation and adoption present within Mackenzie’s costume reveals to us the two-way relationship of empire, transculturation evident in visual empire. The periphery influences the core, Britain’s future generals, politicians and iconic portrait sitters influenced in manners, fashion, ideals and behaviour by the other cultures and individual members of empire, shaping and contributing to the empire surprising and often unnoticed

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<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 289.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 288, and British school (1780) *Lieutenant John Caldwell* [Oil on canvas]. Museum of Liverpool.

<sup>26</sup> Mayer, ‘Cross-Dressing’, 289.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, and Dianne Macleod, ‘Cross-cultural cross-dressing: Class, gender and modernist sexual identity,’ *Orientalism transposed: the impact of the colonies on British culture*, (Ashgate, 1998), 64, 70.

<sup>28</sup> Abler, *Hinterland*, 152-153.

<sup>29</sup> Macleod, ‘Cross-cultural’, 64, 70, and *Ibid.*, 157.

<sup>30</sup> Mackenzie, *Storms*, 290, 317.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 278.

ways.<sup>32</sup> Again, the individual, shaped by their contact with other individuals, conveys their experience in the visual empire through their costume. 'Its otherness speaks to the possessor's capacity for otherness: it is the possessor, not the souvenir, which is ultimately the curiosity.'<sup>33</sup>

As has been mentioned with *Mackenzie*, imperial subjects can have great effect on military fashions, and consequently Imperial ideas of masculinity. William Simpson's beautiful pencil portrait of 'Gookha' *Boodibul Rana* **[Figure.3]** is humanising and sympathetic, capturing real character. In Afghanistan again for the second Anglo-Afghan war, over thirty years after the first, the backdrop is similar to Sant's, yet there are great differences. Simpson produced his drawings for the *Illustrated London News*, his audience is thus very different to Sant's Royal Academicians. Images in papers were incredibly important in creating visual empire, allowing the capital's citizens to conceptualise imperial landscapes, peoples and particularly conflicts, which played a major part in imperial imaginations.<sup>34</sup> The Gurkhas themselves were interesting members of the empire. Since the 1815 Anglo-Gurkha war Gurkha troops were recruited from the kingdom of Nepal, which remained proudly beyond the Empire's borders.<sup>35</sup> They thus retained a degree of independence from Britain. However, the uniform, carefully outlined in Simpson's sketch, as with all uniforms, acts to tame the subject, as well as in part to stylise.<sup>36</sup> The Gurkha uniform fits into Abler's classification of 'Stylised military'; this is when the traditional costume of one subject culture, having been stylised into symbol, is taken from its original context and given to troops performing a similar role.<sup>37</sup> The symbols worn by Boodibul Rana are a pill-box cap, stylised from the Highland Kilmarnock bonnet, and a collarless jacket, based on Zouave-style uniforms.<sup>38</sup> The Scottish Highlanders were the first colonial subjects to be employed in the British army and stylised Scottish uniform had become popular throughout the army, though particularly in units drawn from what the army identified as the 'martial races', like the Highlanders and Gurkhas.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Abler, *Hinterland*, 157.

<sup>33</sup> Mayer, 'Cross-Dressing', 289.

<sup>34</sup> Hooek, *Imagination*, 6, 8.

<sup>35</sup> Abler, *Hinterland*, 5, 89.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 8, 21, 154.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 92-93.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 21, 71.

Similarly Zouave-style was developed by the French empire, stylised from Algerian costume and uniform; though widely popular, it too was attached to colonial troops in particular. Loose Zouave trousers and jackets were widely popular among Indians and Gurkhas who found European uniforms incredibly restrictive, and for the Gurkhas also resembled the uniforms of their own kingdom's troops.<sup>40</sup> However, Zouave uniforms could be employed to homogenise 'exotic' troops, as was clearly done with West Indian troops. The uniform both exoticises and tames the 'hinterland' warrior, co-opting them into the British army with uniform stylised from cultures deemed similar. However, within these bounds the individual Gurkhas exerted their own influence. To Simpson, Boodibul Rana is not a generic native modelling a splendid exotic uniform, if anything the uniform is there to bring out the character of this individual man. In his diary Simpson writes that he spent five days with the 'Goorkhas' and often breakfasted with them, sketching them on the last day, perhaps over breakfast.<sup>41</sup> As an officer he commands the artist's respect, and clearly received it, as Simpson has not neglected his name from the image, perhaps developing more than an observer's relationship with his sitter. Yet his Gurkha identity is not lost, and indeed imprints itself upon the peculiar uniform, which becomes part of Gurkha pride and identity, synonymous with their exploits. A particularly strong symbol of this is the *kukri* to which our eye is drawn by Rana's gaze. Very commonly carried in Nepal, it soon became, and remains, an iconic symbol of the British army's Gurkhas.<sup>42</sup> Simpson's *Goorkhas marching through the Bazaar* [Figure.4] reveals the powerful part Gurkha identity plays in his image of empire. The 'Goorkhas', fitted out with all the instruments of a British band, lead the army, and form the focus of the image, watched from either side by shapelessly robed Afghans whom their uniforms differentiate them from starkly. The eye is particularly captured by the British bulldog leading the way, the bell of the Gurkhas' tuba and the white helmets of the British officers, the three joining to create an image of the Gurkhas at the centre of the imperial image, flanked by the oriental Afghans. The Gurkhas drawn by Simpson are thus shown at the centre of a process of transculturation. Their costume is shaped by the view of their

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<sup>40</sup> Ian Heath, *Armies of the nineteenth century: Asia, Vol.1 Central Asia and Himalayan Kingdoms*, (London, Foundry Publishing, 1999), 139-140.

<sup>41</sup> William Simpson, 'Diary,' (8-12 December 1878), [https://library.brown.edu/firstreading2008/simpson\\_diary.html](https://library.brown.edu/firstreading2008/simpson_diary.html), accessed 8 April 2018.

<sup>42</sup> Heath, *Armies*, 139.

British commanders, while they themselves mould their costume to represent their identity, playing into the imperial imagination right to the present day and becoming a central part of visual empire. These images also demonstrate visually to the readers of the paper how the visual empire is carried in the troops beyond the borders.

Personal relations in the visual empire, through which experiences of empire are conveyed, also exist beyond portraits and artists, in works of military history. Increasingly popular in the nineteenth century, such works often focus around central individuals, portraying their imperial experiences in dramatic narratives designed to capture the imagination. Yet they often draw on the costumes of others as visual symbols with which to illustrate the central experience. Costumes also help to provide different perspectives on the central narrative. War was central to most of these historical expressions of imperial endeavour, providing an important perspective from which to view culture and patriotism and one in which intense experience allowed some to be fitted into classical imperial models.<sup>43</sup> This kind of portrayal of the life of Lieutenant-General Sir James Outram marks sculptor and silversmith Henry Armstead's *Shield* [Figure.5].<sup>44</sup> In its aesthetics it thus holds all the cultural power of imperial transculturation, from classical artefacts in public collections to designs from contemporary British manufacture and traditional Indian works, which had so impressed at the Great Exhibition.<sup>45</sup> It combines all the cultural strength of empire to visually narrate the imperial experiences of Outram in India, with four panels of escalating conflict and increasing transculturation between the sides. First, the *Subjugation of the Bhils* shows Native Infantry fighting the Bhils, depicted half naked and turban-less, they are seen in profile, all insinuating primitiveness.<sup>46</sup> But the scene of Indians fighting Indians also foreshadows the final Uprising, though the contrast between them, with the uniformed Native Infantry opposing the bareheaded Bhils, makes the scene less shocking in its Imperial context.<sup>47</sup> In *the Civilisation of the Bhils*, despite now being turbaned, the Bhils are still mostly naked, in contrast

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<sup>43</sup> Hoock, *Imagination*, 3, 8, 13.

<sup>44</sup> Jason Edwards, 'The Relief of Lucknow: Henry Hugh Armstead's *Outram Shield* (c. 1858–62)', *Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century*, 19, 2016, <https://www.19.bbk.ac.uk/articles/10.16995/ntn.734/>, accessed 14 April 2018.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, and Lara Kriegel, 'Narrating the Subcontinent', Louise Purbrick (ed), *The Great Exhibition of 1851: new interdisciplinary essays*, (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2001) 146-178.

<sup>46</sup> Edwards, 'Shield', and Levine, 'undress', 202.

<sup>47</sup> Edwards, 'Shield'.

to Outram who wears the uniform that marks him throughout. He is represented showcasing compassion as a civilised ideal of empire to the brutal Bhils. This scene again makes comment on the mutiny, with Outram showing mercy to those he was fighting: the ‘madness of a moment’ could not obliterate, from his mind, the ‘fidelity of a century’.<sup>48</sup> In *the Dying Chieftain*, Amir Khan asks Outram to be a father to his son.<sup>49</sup> All around various costumes mark the different observers. Great care is put into the patterns and details of their costumes by Armstead, marking the different peoples. The clerics stand turbaned like the three wise men, while two courtiers kneel like shepherds before the Amir and his son.<sup>50</sup> The treacherous Persians stand behind Outram, in comparison with their similar profile poses. These different costumes, with the Bhils just before and Outram dressed the same in each, demonstrates visually the many different peoples with whom Outram has been involved. *The Defence of the Residency at Hyderabad*, again alludes to the later Uprising, the Baluchi Amirs having broken their treaty and attacked Outram. The conflict also grows visually closer to the Uprising, with the Baluchi, unlike the Bhils, clothed and well-armed. Similar bearded profiles draw the opponents closer together, despite greater ethnical difference. *The Charge of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Bombay Cavalry* depicts the Persians, ‘perfectly formed’ to resist them, ‘on the model of European armies’.<sup>51</sup> The heroic cavalry attack parallels the next of the Uprising. Additionally, both sides grow closer again, with opposing non-Europeans dressed in Westernised uniforms, while the Persian phalanx hints at their European drill. The opposition becomes more ‘civilised’, more western in appearance, and the Imperial troops more Indian in appearance, particularly in headgear, foreshadowing the ‘Mutiny’. This also charts Outram’s rising career, his opponents being more westernised, even as their treachery is also greater. *The Charge of the Volunteer Cavalry* [Figure.6], is by far the most dramatic and violent scene. At its centre, framed by horses and riders, the shocking but characteristic scene of two Indians fighting each other in British uniforms: the image of mutiny. It is an image of transculturation, both have brought native elements to their uniforms, shaping them like Simpson’s Gurkhas. The Indians are appropriated into the empire by means of the British uniforms, while the mutineer appropriates the redcoat for his own anti-imperial cause. Their costume demonstrates visually how the empire has manifested itself in the heart of the subcontinent.

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<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

Yet, with the visual divisions between the combatants removed, it is also a scene of imperial tragedy. Despite Outram's great nobility and kindness, the circle seems to end with scenes of treachery, war and ungrateful rebellion. This journey through Outram's career reflects well the mind of a man continually troubled by the implications of empire, the tension between parental kindness and imperial subjugation. Yet the *Roundel* ends with more positive praise for Outram, a message of the continuation of empire, just as the style and inscriptions on the shield tell of the continuation of classical empire. Here, in the most obvious feature of the work, Outram accomplishes an 'act of self-negation' with 'no parallel in military annals', handing over the glory of relieving Lucknow to his subordinate, Havelock.<sup>52</sup> Behind him the turbaned and helmeted heads of Sikhs and Highlanders reveal the imperial context, and stand in contrast to the bodies of the mutineers below: though many were treacherous, because of Outram's nobility many have stayed loyal.<sup>53</sup> The shield thus conveys visually the imperial experience of Outram, whose nobility is made an imperial ideal, seen in a classical tradition. Throughout costume plays an important role, illustrating diversity and transculturation, and adding meaning to the scenes. It creates a visual empire that is exciting and exotic, yet, also treacherous and tragic.

The interaction between the culture and politics of empire is complex, while the mind of the individual is even more overwhelming. But while we cannot fathom the individual's imagination of meaning, let alone the many millions of individuals of empire, we can analyse the cultural interactions that shaped it. Mackenzie's costume reveals his Imperial experiences, while, through his participation in transculturation, allowing the periphery to influence the metropole. Simpson's work captures the continued complex process of transculturation in the military, and, lastly, Armstead's shield summarises empire through the array of costumes that illustrate one man's experience. All these combine in the creation of a visual empire, the empire of individuals.

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<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

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Figures



**Figure.1** - James Sant, *Captain Colin Mackenzie, Madras Army, lately a hostage in Caubool, in his Affghan Dress*, (1842), [Oil on canvas]. National Army Museum, London.



**Figure.2** – Vincent Eyre, *Captain Colin Mackenzie, 48<sup>th</sup> Bengal Native Infantry*, (1842), [Coloured lithograph]. National Army Museum, London.



**Figure.3** – William Simpson, *Boodibul Rana, a Gorkha of the Province of Gorkha, Nepal, Basawal*, (Dec. 12th, 1878), [Pencil sketch], Brown University Library, Rhode Island.



**Figure.4** – William Simpson, *4th Goorkhas marching through the Bazaar, Jellalabad*, (20th Dec. 1878), [Watercolour], Brown University Library, Rhode Island.



**Figure.5** - Henry Hugh Armstead, for Hunt & Roskell, *The Outram Shield*, (1858–62), [gold and silver damascened steel, 37 in. diameter], on loan to the Victoria and Albert Museum, London.



**Figure.6** - Henry Hugh Armstead, for Hunt & Roskell, *The Outram Shield: The Charge of the Volunteer Cavalry before Lucknow*, (1858–62), [gold and silver damascened steel, 37 in. diameter], on loan to the Victoria and Albert Museum, London.