

COLNAGHI ELLIOTT

MASTER DRAWINGS

Thomas Daniell
(Kingston upon Thames 1749 – 1840 London)

A Soothsayer and a Madras Sepoy

Inscribed: *Soothsayer / Madras Seapoy - Sipauhee*

Pencil on paper

20.5 x 16.5 cm. (8 x 6 ½ in.)

Provenance:

Iolo Anuerin Williams (1890-1962);

Thence by descent;

By whom sold, Olympia Auctions, London, 2 October 2024, lot 41 (as 'attributed to William Daniell').



Although previously attributed to William Daniell, this pencil study of a soothsayer and a Madras sepoy is in fact by his uncle and travelling companion Thomas Daniell. Comparable drawings by Thomas Daniell, annotated in the same hand, include a pencil study of a sepoy in Tipu Sultan's army (fig. 1) and a pencil and wash study of a *nair* (fig. 2).¹



Fig. 1, Thomas Daniell, *A Sepoy in Tipu Sultan's Army*, pencil on paper, British Library



Fig. 2, Thomas Daniell, *A Nair*, pencil and watercolour on paper, 25.5 x 19 cm, Private Collection

Thomas and William Daniell arrived in Calcutta in early 1786 and spent the next seven years travelling extensively through India. Their numerous sketches and studies captured the landscapes, architecture, people, customs, and flora and fauna of the Subcontinent. Upon their return to England in 1794, they published a series of one hundred forty plates issued in six volumes from 1795 to 1808, collectively called *Oriental Scenery*. This collection enjoyed significant success and ensured the Daniell's reputation, placing them alongside Johan Zoffany as the most outstanding of the European artists working in Indian during the late 18th century.

The Daniells visited Madras twice, bookending their excursions to the ancient site of Hampi and the Kingdom of Mysore, then ruled by Tipu Sultan. Their first visit to Madras, capital of the Madras Presidency, occurred in March 1792, with a second in January 1793. It was likely during one of these two visits that Thomas Daniell sketched the sepoy and soothsayer.

Without always having the time to colour his drawings, Daniell meticulously annotated each garment to ensure accurate colour representation. In this study, he provides three close-up

¹ The Yale Centre for British Art possesses several dozen sheets by Thomas Daniell, many with annotations in the same hand. See, for example, the study of a rhinoceros (B2001.2.772).

details of certain fabrics to capture their intricate patterns precisely. Similar annotations appear on other Indian sketches, though none as extensively as here. Forty years later, Delacroix would employ similar methods in his Moroccan sketchbooks.

The sepoy was an Indian soldier employed by the East India Company, in the armies of the Madras, Bombay and Bengal Presidencies. The term 'sepoy' derives from the Persian term '*sipahi*', meaning 'soldier'. Recruited locally and trained in European military tactics, sepoys formed the core of the Company's military forces in India. With his distinctive knee-length breeches, well-suited to the climate, the sepoy in Daniell's sketch aligns with other known depictions of Madras sepoys from the period (fig. 3). This sepoy may have served in action against Tipu Sultan's forces during the Second Anglo-Mysore War, which concluded in 1792.

Soothsayers, or fortune tellers, have long played a prominent role in Indian society, offering counsel on everything from personal matters to royal decisions, and continued to do so during the colonial period. Though many British officials dismissed soothsaying as superstitious, some were intrigued. Warren Hastings, the first Governor-General of Bengal, was known for his engagement with astrologers and soothsayers, promoting the study and documentation of Indian beliefs. Sir William Jones, founder of the Asiatic Society, also expressed a strong interest in Hindu astrology. In Daniell's sketch, the soothsayer—with his rattle, distinctive headgear, and large hoop earrings—closely matches other contemporary depictions of this traditional figure (fig. 4).



Fig. 3, Company School Artist, *A Madras Sepoy and his wife*, c. 1810, watercolour on paper, National Army Museum



Fig. 4, Artist from Tanjanvore, *A Soothsayer and his client*, c. 1840, gouache on paper, Wellcome Collection