

RUNJEET SINGH

ASIAN ART IN LONDON



# ASIAN ART IN LONDON

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Bowman Sculpture  
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# RUNJEET SINGH

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ASIAN ART IN LONDON

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I

**TRI-BLADE KATAR**SRIRANGAM, SOUTHERN INDIA  
17TH CENTURY

OVERALL 480MM

*Katar*-daggers of the type to which this example belongs are characterised by their intricately chiselled and pierced decoration.

The ends of the side-bars have each been pierced to depict a prancing *yali* which twists its body back toward itself; their mouths flare open and their eyes bulge. The hilt's single grip-bar has then been cut and pierced to convey a symmetrical scheme of two smaller four-petalled flowerheads at either side of a larger example at the heavily swollen centre. Throughout its surface, the hilt still retains some of its original gilded silver sheet.

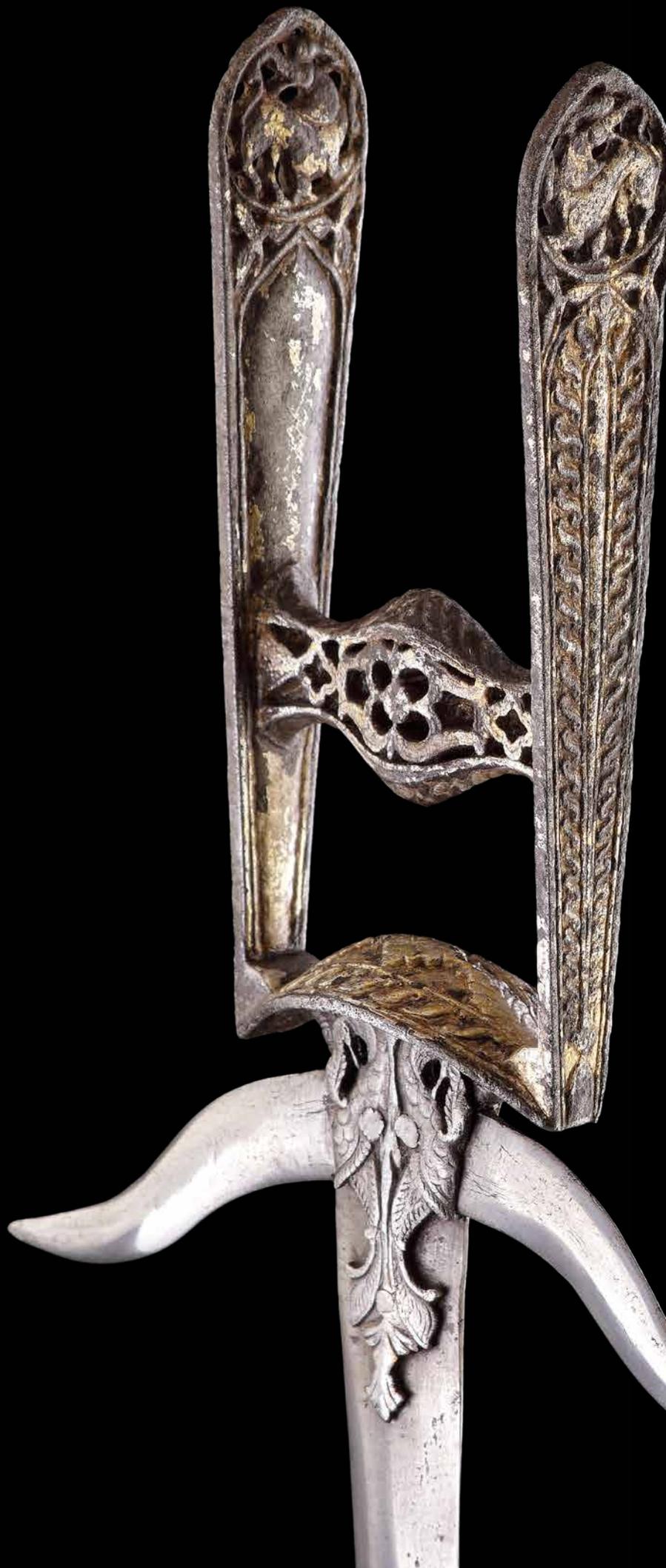
The forte of the blade has been chiselled and engraved to depict a mirror-image of two bending *yali* with their backs lined up against each other. The creatures' scaly crests have been picked out in fine detail and their lower halves curve gently into a blossoming lotus.

Recurving blades extend from either side of the centre – likely a 19th century addition. The long central blade, probably of European origin and dating to the 16th or 17th century, then extends and tapers towards the point.

This piece is related to a dagger exhibited by Runjeet Singh in *Iconic 2017* (Cat. No. 5).<sup>1</sup> The “moustache” of side-blades is likely a homage to the rare 17th century daggers of this form preserved in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York (see, for example, Accession Number 36.25.1028).<sup>2</sup>

**References**

- <sup>1</sup> [http://runjeetsingh.com/inventory/145/tanjore\\_katar](http://runjeetsingh.com/inventory/145/tanjore_katar)
- <sup>2</sup> <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/31425>





2

**JADE KHANJAR**INDIA & TURKEY  
17TH - 18TH CENTURY

OVERALL 510MM

The pale 'pistol-grip' hilt of this jade dagger (or *khanjar*) has been carved to depict a harmonious floral pattern at its guard and pommel. A symmetrical flowerhead of precise proportions with incised petals sits between the lobed quillons which have themselves been cleverly worked to resemble unfurling leaves. Another flowerhead with splayed foliage reappears at the centre of the pommel, the hilt's brim lined with a row of ridged leaves.

The watered steel blade is Turkish and overlaid in gold with a spiralling foliate pattern over one face at the forte, and at the other with a calligraphic verse from the Qur'an, which reads as follows:

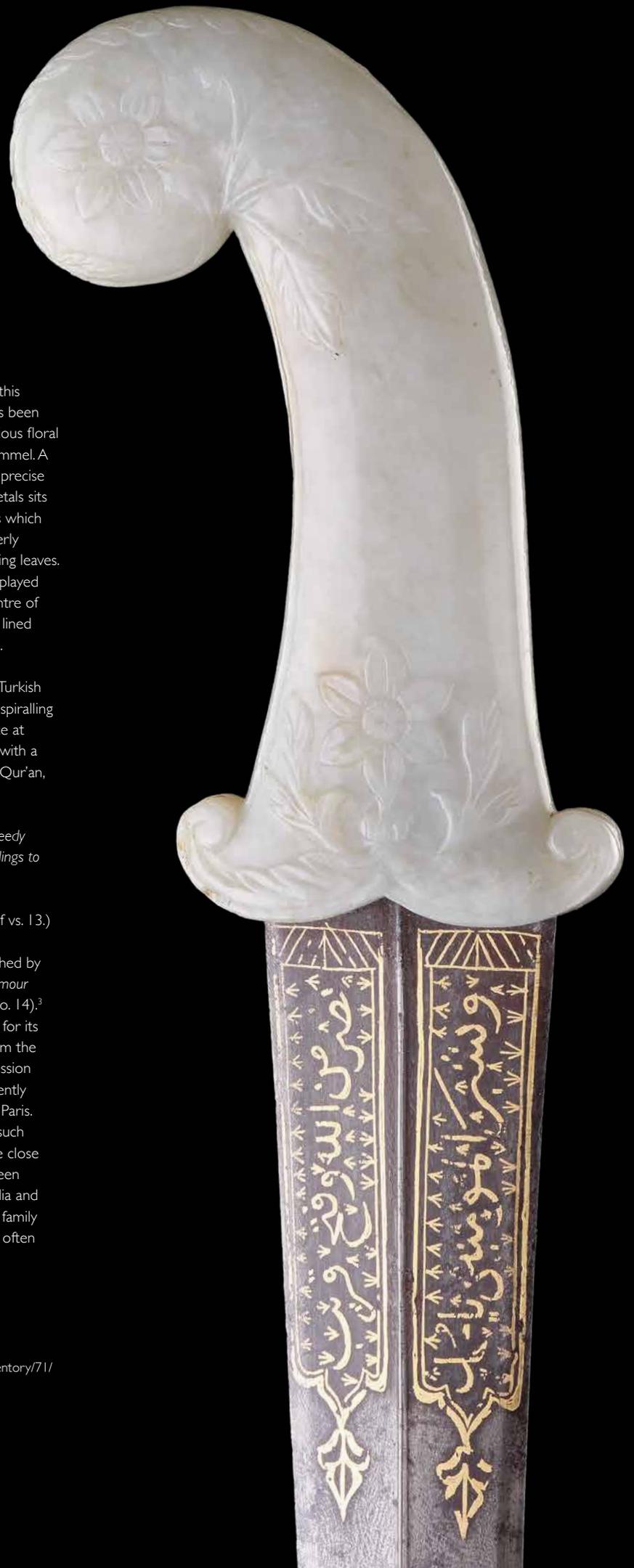
*"Help from Allah and a speedy victory. So give the Glad Tidings to the Believers."*

(Surah 61 (al-Saff), part of vs. 13.)

A similar dagger was published by Runjeet Singh in *Arms & Armour from the East 2016* (Cat. No. 14).<sup>3</sup> Another piece comparable for its fine jade carving comes from the Rothschild collection (Accession Number R890) and is currently on display at the Louvre in Paris. The style and structure of such hilts beautifully illustrate the close relations that existed between the Deccan in southern India and the Ottoman empire: royal family members from the regions often intermarried.

**References**

<sup>3</sup> [http://runjeetsingh.com/inventory/71/bejewelled\\_dagger](http://runjeetsingh.com/inventory/71/bejewelled_dagger)







## 3

### MINIATURE KNIVES

FROM LEFT TO RIGHT:  
NORTH INDIA, GUJARAT (INDIA),  
SYRIA, NORTH INDIA.  
17TH - 18TH CENTURY

This group of fine miniature knives constitutes a pleasing example of the varied and intricate artistry that can be observed in arms and armour.

The leftmost knife shown in the images dates to the 18th-19th century and comprises walrus ivory grips, a blade of wootz steel with elegant surface patterns, and a dark-green velvet-covered scabbard.

The second knife comes from the state of Gujarat in India and dates to the 17th or 18th century. Its grip-scales are made from mother-of-pearl which has been carved into an interesting shape, possibly

intended to convey the outline of a bird's head and crest in profile.

The watered blade is overlaid with winding vine tendrils in gold and exhibits the much sought-after 'Mohammed's Ladder' patterning over its surface whereby pillars of whirling wootz steel surge into the body of the blade from its sharp edge. It is complete with a leather-covered scabbard which has been painted black.

The third knife is 19th century and originates from Syria, its slender hilt covered throughout with long spays of palm leaves in gold *kofrigari*. The blade is overlaid at the forte with a network of gold quatrefoils

and along the back-edge with an inscription. The maker's style extends to the metal scabbard which is decorated in gold *en suite* with the hilt and fitted with a gently sloping suspension bracket.

The fourth and final knife comes from northern India and is dated to the 18th-19th centuries. Its grip scales are formed from elephant ivory and are secured to the tang of the slender wootz steel blade with small iron pins. A silver locket and chape are fitted to the dagger's scabbard, the wooden surface of which exhibits a rich reddish colour.



4

**GOLD JAMBIYA**SAUDI ARABIA  
20TH CENTURY

OVERALL 243MM

This dazzling jambiya has been lavishly applied throughout with mounts of gold. The surface of the typically 'I-shaped' hilt is filled completely with a dense array of decorative motifs. At the pommel, trios of small gold kites converge on a central green stone amidst beaded lines – a schema repeated in slightly elongated form at the other flared end of the hilt.

A curved steel blade of the expected form is fitted to the hilt and has been cut with a pronounced medial ridge along its full length. The scabbard is decorated mostly *en suite* with the hilt. The first panel nearest to the hilt comprises concentric squares whose borders are made from various patterns: tightly oscillating waves of gilt wire alternate with rows of small lobed arches. This approach is mostly repeated just before the scabbard's chape, though in place of a coloured stone the centre is applied with a four-petalled flowerhead set within a diamond-shaped frame.

The central section of the scabbard is fitted with a series of rings bound together by woven gilt wire, so that the dagger could be attached to a belt for suspension at the wearer's waist.





5

**CASED KHANJAR**PERSIA (MODERN-DAY IRAN)  
19TH CENTURY

OVERALL 410MM

The carving exhibited on the bone grips of this khanjar is delightful. On one face of the hilt, a moustachioed figure draped in finery and sat atop a short throne looks out towards the viewer amidst an array of trinkets and flowerheads on a cross-hatched ground. The lines of his baggy garms are picked out in fine detail, the entire scene set within an inverted frame of curling arches flanked by mysterious animal heads. The reverse is similar in style, though instead the scene shows a pair of moustachioed men engaged deep in conversation, the figure at the left holding a sceptre and orb in his hands. A third character of smaller proportions kneels before them in supplication.

A panel at the forte of the blade depicts a hooved animal under attack by a long-tailed lion in gold, the scene framed within a lobed arch and the remaining background filled with upturning vines and blossoming flowerheads. The curved blade is forged from a steel which has been faux-damascus etched. A red velvet-covered wooden scabbard accompanies the dagger and is fitted with a chape and locket overlaid throughout in gold with foliate motifs and panels of Islamic calligraphy.

Examples of similar quality are found in various museum collections. Two in the Wallace Collection (Inv. Nos. OAI713 and OAI714)<sup>4</sup> and another at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (Accession Number 36.25.1058) are useful comparanda.<sup>5</sup>

**References**

<sup>4</sup> <https://wallacelive.wallacecollection.org:443/eMP/eMuseumPlus?service=ExternalInterface&module=collection&objectId=62243&viewType=detailView>

<https://wallacelive.wallacecollection.org:443/eMP/eMuseumPlus?service=ExternalInterface&module=collection&objectId=62244&viewType=detailView>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/31454>







6

**ENAMEL KHANJAR**PERSIA (MODERN-DAY IRAN)  
18TH CENTURY

OVERALL 410MM

The hilt and general form of this dagger are typical, but the quality of the enamelling here is exceptional. Flowers in bloom adorn the front and back of the hilt in hues of sapphire-blue and magenta on milk-white grounds, their vines and stems generously overlaid with gold. The sides repeat similar floral motifs, though the ground instead exhibits a deep turquoise colour.

The blade curves very gently and tapers just towards the tip, a medial ridge cut over the greater part of its length. The dagger is accompanied by a modern scabbard made in the traditional Persian style from tooled leather and fitted with a horn finial. The enamelwork has been retouched slightly, particularly at the pommel (the pommel stone is also a later replacement).

Hilts of this type with brightly enamelled decoration are found in a wide range of countries in the Near and Middle East, including Turkey, Persia, and Syria. A comparandum exhibiting both similar colours and an identical decorative pattern-structure is preserved at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (Accession Number 32.75.263a, b),<sup>6</sup> and another dagger with decoration similar to that seen on our example was recently sold at Sotheby's.<sup>7</sup>

**References**

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/32258>

<sup>7</sup> Sotheby's, Lot 147 ("An enamelled dagger and scabbard, Persia, dated A.H. 121[0]/A.D. 1795"), *Arts of the Islamic World*, London, 1st April 2019.



7

## RAM'S HEAD SHAMSHIR

LUCKNOW, UTTAR PRADESH  
(NORTH-EASTERN INDIA)  
19TH CENTURY

The present shamshir is an elegant and refined example of the artworks produced at Lucknow. The cross-guard of the silver hilt is engraved and applied over its front to depict a cobalt-blue poppy flower at its centre surrounded by a swirl of bristling emerald-green leaves. A bird with cherry-red chest and recurved neck spreads its wings atop the central flower; two smaller birds issuing from the brush below. The quillons are formed as rams' heads, the ridges of their spiralling horns coloured bright orange, and the grips – which are made from carved and faceted rock crystal – exhibit a translucent marble-like colour and are secured to the tang with small pins. A splendid pommel recreates the rams' heads at the quillons in larger form, the horns given an even greater sense of texture through fine engraving and the animal's silver smile glowing brightly on a ground of deep blue enamelling.

The long and curving shamshir blade is forged from wootz steel, the original waves of the metal's patterning still visible over the surface. A modern scabbard of tooled black leather, attached with shell-shaped brackets for suspension, accompanies the sword.

Enamelling was introduced to the Indian subcontinent in the late sixteenth century, as Mughal court craftsmen were taught by European enamellers based in Portuguese Goa. In this process, "coloured glass is fused to metal at very high temperatures, to create a decorative and hardwearing outer layer."<sup>8</sup>

Lucknow was a centre for the production of pieces such as this sword, the most remarkable feature of the work being the "brilliant blue and green champlevé and basse-taille enamelling" that adorned the silver.<sup>9</sup>

A fine enamelled shamshir from Lucknow was published by Runjeet Singh in *Arms, Armour & Works of Art – London 2019* (Cat. No. 16).<sup>10</sup> Another sword preserved at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (Accession Number 36.25.1302a, b)<sup>11</sup> shows a similar style in its decoration, though we do not know of an example with rock crystal grips.

### References

- <sup>8</sup> <https://www.rct.uk/collection/themes/exhibitions/splendours-of-the-subcontinent-a-princes-tour-of-india-1875-6/the-0/enamelling>
- <sup>9</sup> Stephen Markel with Tushara Bindu Gude, *India's Fabled City: The Art of Courtly Lucknow* (published by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art & DelMonico Books, Los Angeles, 2010), p. 205.
- <sup>10</sup> [http://runjeetsingh.com/inventory/337/enamelled\\_shamshir](http://runjeetsingh.com/inventory/337/enamelled_shamshir)
- <sup>11</sup> <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/31128>







8

**GILT TULWAR**NORTHERN INDIA  
18TH - 19TH CENTURY

OVERALL 950MM

The gold hilt of this sublime tulwar is elaborately decorated over its surface with a pleasing range of motifs and patterns: a large lotus flower blossoms at the middle of the crossguard and is encircled by a winding vine tendril which continues curling its way up the centrally swollen grip, flanked at either side throughout with further flowerheads on a finely stippled ground. The sides of the domed quillons are lined with chevrons, and a round pommel disc decorated with further flowerheads and vines completes the hilt.

A thick Syrian trade blade of wootz steel extends to a considerable length from the hilt and is etched over the surface on one face with a trio of cartouches which comprise two calligraphic panels and a central lion in shallow relief.

The sword is complete with a scabbard covered in green velvet which is made resplendent by its gilt locket and chape, which have each been decorated *en suite* with the hilt and cut and pierced at their edges.



9

**SIKH TULWAR**SIKH EMPIRE (PUNJAB)  
19TH CENTURY

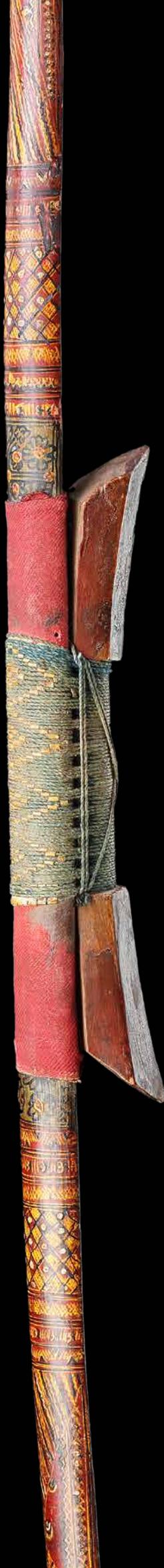
OVERALL 940MM

The hilt of this tulwar has been generously overlaid with multi-petalled flowerheads in gold: the *koftgari* work is typical of tulwars made towards the end of the Sikh Empire (1799-1849) in the Punjab workshops. The hilt comprises langets with lotus-head outlines, domed quillons, and a centrally swollen grip. A knuckle guard with animal-head terminal recurves toward the disc-pommel which has been attached with a pointed sunburst plaque, a decorative feature further fitted at its centre with a lightly fluted dome and lotus bud finial.

A pattern-welded blade of considerable size and quality is fitted to the hilt and exhibits a beautiful pattern of gentle waves and hazy swirls over its surface. A graceful fuller has been cut over the greater part of the central section, the blade curving sharply to one side at approximately halfway along its length.







10

**PAINTED BOW**KASHMIR (NORTHERN INDIA)  
18TH - 19TH CENTURY

OVERALL 1470MM

This rare and lavishly painted bow likely comes from Kashmir. The central grip is bound with a bluish threading over a thin sleeve of red cotton and further reinforced with a faceted wooden support-strut. The bow's long slender arms are then lacquered over their entire surface with a mix of motifs both floral and geometric: diagonal bands of rippling yellow lines criss-cross on a bright-red ground; panels painted in darker hues are illuminated by thickly painted four-petalled flowerheads. No space – however small – is left unfilled by decorative patterning.

In this case there are two main pieces to which we can compare the present example. The first is preserved in the Metropolitan Museum of Art (Accession Number 36.25.2515a–h),<sup>12</sup> while the second is preserved in the collection of the University of Missouri.

**References**

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/30293>



11

**OPENWORK  
ELEPHANT GOAD  
(ANKUS)**

NORTH INDIA  
19TH CENTURY

OVERALL 570MM

This elephant-goad (or 'ankus') is formed with a basal cap overlaid at its brim with alternating chevrons in silver and gold, from which rise vertical panels of curling vine tendrils in gold framed by silver borders. The openwork handle has been lined with gold and silver overlay and comprises six tiers each filled with a bell, so that the goad produces a ringing sound when swung. The ankus' head comprises two spikes – one conical and the other curved – the latter formed at its interior terminal to depict the miniaturised body and head of a *makara*. The surface is decorated throughout with gold foliate designs, the central section replicating the motif found at the base of the handle.

An example of near-identical construction is preserved at the Wallace Collection (Inv. No. OA1599).<sup>13</sup>

**References**

- <sup>13</sup> <https://wallacelive.wallacecollection.org/443/eMP/eMuseumPlus?service=ExternalInterface&module=collection&objectId=62143&viewType=detailView>





12

## LEATHER POWDER FLASK

DECCAN OR MUGHAL  
DOMINIONS, INDIA  
17TH - 18TH CENTURY

OVERALL 215MM

The decorative patterns of blossoming lotuses found on this rare, tooled leather powder flask are commonly seen on the jade dagger hilts produced by Mughal artisans and are here rendered just as beautifully. The main body of the flask is filled throughout with floral flourishes and foliate borders: winding lotus flowers in bloom stand out against a stippled ground between long splayed leaves in a sequence which tapers gradually in tandem with the flask's body. A brown leather thong is tied at each end for suspension at the wearer's waist. The stopper inserted at the flask's ivory nozzle is a wooden replacement (though originally it would have likely been formed from a more precious material).







13

**BLACK DHAL**DECCAN OR MUGHAL INDIA  
17TH CENTURY

DIAMETER 590MM

This large dhal is formed from a leather core which has been coated throughout with a thick black lacquer. Four gilt-brass bosses attached at the centre contrast brightly against the dark background and are carefully pierced at their pointed borders. The dome of each is filled with an array of leaves packed closely together, a seven-petalled flowerhead marking the centre.

The reverse is fitted with a slightly damaged leather pad which is likely stuffed with camel hair; the rim also partially missing in places. The loop for suspension at each corner is secured with a washer which is in fact a coin (probably an East India Company mint) – a rare and unusual feature which adds a deep sense of history to the shield.

A similar example was published in Runjeet Singh, *Arts des Guerriers d'Orient – Paris 2018* (Cat. No. 21).<sup>14</sup>

This in turn reveals a further comparandum within Salam Kaoukji's book and the Al-Sabah collection in Kuwait: a single shield boss which shows similar openwork to those on the present example.<sup>15</sup>

**References**

<sup>14</sup>. <http://runjeetsingh.com/inventory/230/dhal>

<sup>15</sup>. Salam Kaoukji, *Precious Indian Weapons and other Princely Accoutrements* (the Al-Sabah Collection), Thames and Hudson Ltd, 2017, p. 441, Cat. No. 165.



14

**GUJARATI SHIELD**AHMEDABAD, GUJARAT (INDIA)  
19TH CENTURY

DIAMETER 365MM

The decorative schema of this shield places it firmly within a group produced in Ahmedabad in Gujarat, India. Its border depicts flourishing red blooms alternating with smaller green splays on a ground of cream-coloured paint. The main surface is filled throughout with dramatic, red-painted scenes on a striking black ground. Amidst a repeating foliate pattern are various hunting scenes: European men (recognisable on account of their pith helmets) hide in the brush and stalk a pair of tigers at rest, their rifles extending just a little beyond the dense foliage. Another panel shows two moustachioed Indian men already in combat with a tiger. One of the pair is held by the animal's jaws and raises his sword high in defiance, whilst the other rushes over to aid his companion.

Four sunburst-bosses with stylised floral centres frame a central series of concentric circles which replicate the patterns shown at the shield's border: geometric bands enclose a sequence of red and black flourishes, a flower of painted red and gold at its centre. The reverse depicts painted patterns of gold concentric circles on a red ground, and is attached with a fabric padding, leather straps and iron rings for suspension.

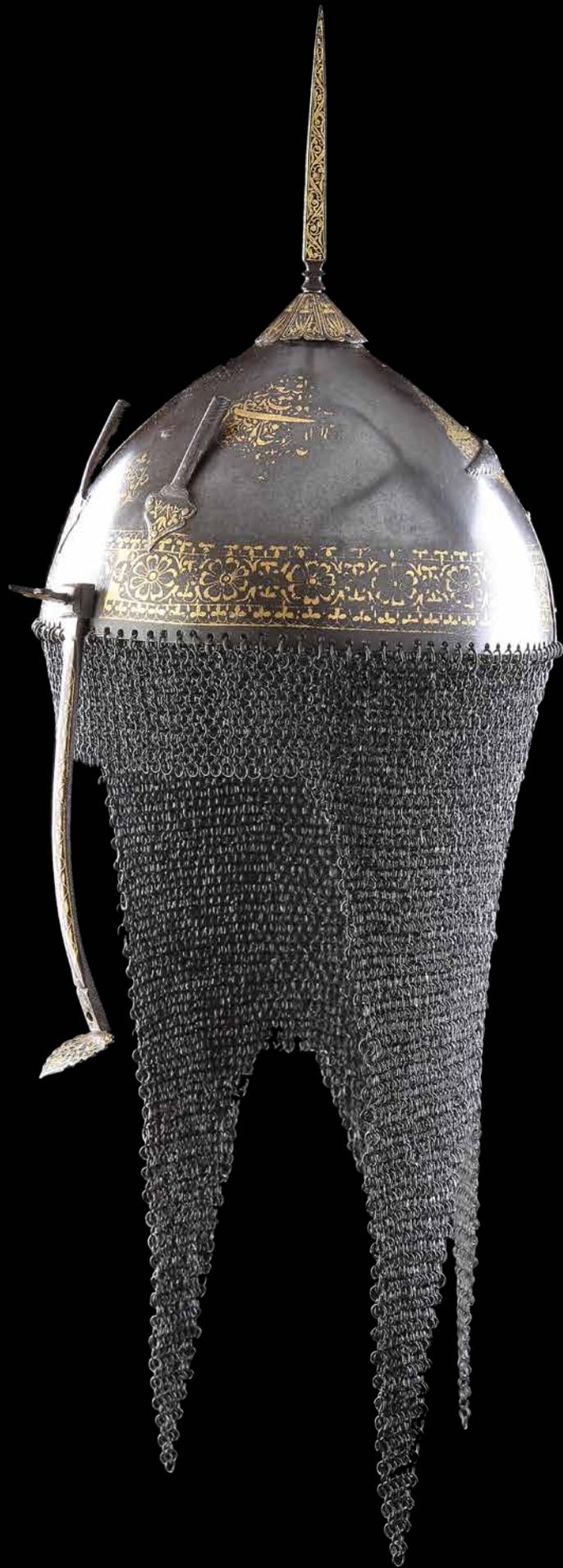
As is implied above, similar comparanda help to contextualise the present example. Thus see a shield at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (Accession Number 2015.695)<sup>16</sup> and the other pieces referenced within its cataloguing, which strongly suggest that the present piece was also made by Khooshal Dhunjee & Sons (or at least was made at the same workshop). As per the label of that shield, we even know that these "Painters and Shieldmakers" were based at Dhalgarwada Street. However, we do not know of another shield of this type that depicts such hunting scenes.

**References**

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/702016>







15

**REPAIRED HELMET**

NORTHERN INDIA

18TH CENTURY

DIAMETER OF BOWL 200MM

The watered steel dome of this Indian helmet is overlaid in gold with intricate panels of Islamic calligraphy. A tall, faceted spike is attached with a plaque-base to the helmet's apex and decorated throughout with scrolling vine tendrils in gold. The lower edge of the helmet is decorated with a sequence of finely formed seven-petalled flowerheads between closely packed trefoils. Two plume holders and a nasal bar are secured to the bowl's front.

The reverse of the helmet has been repaired using steel plaques which have been formed to convey a pair of curious birds atop curving stems. The birds' plumage is picked out with neatly incised lines and cross-hatching, the stems' leafy texture suggested by the repeating chevrons that line them. The repair is graceful and of exceptional quality, and brings

to mind *Kintsugi*, the Japanese art of reassembling broken pottery pieces with gold, so that in embracing flaws and imperfections, the artist can create an even stronger, more beautiful piece of art. A camail of riveted iron links with four tails is suspended from the helmet's brim.







16

**THETA ARMOUR**

BIJAPUR, INDIA  
16TH - 17TH CENTURY



This long set of armour with 'theta' mail links is rare, the links so-called on account of the fact that each ring has a bar fused across its centre, so that they resemble the Greek letter 'theta' (or '0'). This imbues the armour with added strength, though at the cost of considerably greater manufacturing time and expense. A cap of mail extends over the wearer's neck so as to protect against unexpected attacks from behind and is crowned at its apex with a small copper plaque chased with foliate patterns and a central flowerhead which secures the mail. A collar of interwoven red and orange thread lines the neck and extends down over part of the chest. A number of decorative brass studs and deep red fabric can be seen mostly at one side; at the chest, however, the loss of fabric reveals the collar's thick central stitching.

As described above, the mail itself comprises alternating riveted and theta links, the central section of the armour splitting at the waist into two tails to give the wearer greater mobility – an essential allowance given the armour's weight. The features of this set, such as its fine fabric lining and theta mail links, strongly suggest it was made for someone of importance.

In *The Goddess: Arms and Armour of the Rajputs – London 2018*, Runjeet Singh published a set of armour also made from theta mail (Cat. No. 30).<sup>17</sup>

**Provenance**

Formerly in the Bikaner Armoury, India, and then the notable collection of Eric Vaule, USA.

**References**

<sup>16</sup> [http://runjeetsingh.com/inventory/264/chainmail\\_shirt\\_and\\_turban\\_helmet](http://runjeetsingh.com/inventory/264/chainmail_shirt_and_turban_helmet)



17

**MUGHAL  
BREASTPLATE**DECCAN OR MUGHAL  
DOMINIONS  
17TH - 18TH CENTURY

OVERALL 285 x 265MM

This carved leather breastplate may be unique, and it is fortunate too that the work is still in excellent condition. A central rectangular panel is filled with arched frames containing floral splays, the space between each frame then filled with an eight-petalled flowerhead. The upper section depicts further stylised flowerheads in bloom, and a calligraphic inscription is painted at the centre where a warm orange patina covers the surface in light patches. Further inscriptions appear just at the top of the central panel, as well as at the bottom of the breastplate. Two iron loops for suspension are attached at the sides of the breastplate's front face, and some traces of the original yellow silk lining on the back of the plate are extant.

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