

RUNJEET SINGH

SULTANS, EUNUCHS & SIKHS



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Asian Arms, Armour & Works of Art

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INTRODUCTION

This year marks twenty-five years since I purchased my very first antique object (a nineteenth century *tulwar* that I bought for fifty pounds from a dealer that remains a friend to this day). This was also the moment when I realised I had a true passion for antiques, which in subsequent months turned from a passion into an obsession! I've always had an interest in antique objects and can remember when I was as young as ten years old, being fascinated by an old brass cigarette case from India that my father kept in the garden shed to store drill-bits.

Nine years ago I set up the gallery and became a professional antiques dealer, a role that I enjoy every bit as much now as I did when I started out. The intrigue I had as a boy on finding that cigarette case, is the same feeling I get now when I discover an artwork. This catalogue represents thirty such moments, made all the more significant, because as I spent time with each one, I grew to love it even more, confirming my gut-feeling that I had acquired something special.

I've always had a passion for art born out of Asia, and despite advice from others and a consideration to diversify into European art, I've remained true to my taste. Although I admire European art, I've stuck within my Asian niche. This can of course make it difficult when seeking items of sufficient quality to publish and show at TEFAF, one of the world's most important art fairs. However, this is now my third

time exhibiting here, after starting in the showcase section in 2020 and progressing to the main fair in 2022. I'm incredibly excited to present an exhibition that I have titled 'Sultans, Eunuchs & Sikhs'.

I did not have a theme in mind when buying for this exhibition, but as luck would have it, one presented itself to me. A beautiful Indo-Ottoman dagger (cat. no.6) found its way back into my hands after I first sold it in 2016, and it is undeniably fit for a **Sultan**. I'm extremely pleased that it now graces the cover of this catalogue. An Indo-Ottoman sword (cat. no.10), with some careful palaeographic analysis, has been identified as having the *tughra* (calligraphic seal) used by Sultan Mahmud I (r. 1730-1754). As well as this, catalogue number one (cat.no.1), a stunning *katar* from Awadh (India), is marked with the name of the owner, who research shows was probably a **eunuch** and officer in the service of Shuja 'al-Daula, the nawab of Lucknow. Lastly, I have been fortunate enough to discover a small group of **Sikh** items, which are of course, very close to my heart, but in service to my clients, I shall remain only a temporary custodian and present artworks from my private collection, such as cat.no.29, a large painting by the contemporary artist Jatinder Singh Dhurhailay (born 1988).

And so, on behalf of myself and all those who have contributed, nothing can give me greater pleasure than sharing with you 'Sultans, Eunuchs & Sikhs'.

Runjeet Singh
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I

JAMDHAR (KATAR) INSCRIBED WITH SHI'Ī LEGENDS

AWADH (INDIA)
18TH CENTURY

OVERALL 460MM
BLADE 245MM

The hilt of this 'jamdhar' is beautifully decorated on every surface with graceful lines of Islamic calligraphy in *naskh* script. The hilt is silver, while the calligraphy is deeply inlaid into the metal in black enamel. On the bulbous centre of the hand grips, starting on one side and carrying over to the other, is a Persian couplet in praise of Imam 'Ali:

يا قاهر العدو يا والى الولى
يا مظهر العجائب يا مرتضى على

'O vanquisher of the enemy, O guardian of (God's) friend! O locus of wonders, O Murtaza 'Ali!'

In smaller letters, on the sides of the grips, repeated:

الله

'God!'

On the underside and top of the grips:

صاحب جمدهر / نشاط على خان

'The owner of the jamdhar is Nishat 'Ali Khan.'

The possible owner has been identified as Nishat 'Ali Khan, who is recorded as an officer of Shuja' al-Daula, the Nawab of Lucknow.² It appears that he was made a eunuch by Muhammad 'Ali Khan of Khairabad³ and then gifted to Shuja' al-Daula. He was employed mostly by Bahu Begum, the Nawab's queen, as a revenue collector and remained with her in Faizabad even after Shuja' al-Daula's death (instead of following Asaf al-Dawla to Lucknow).⁴

Along the exterior of one side arm of the hilt and down the inside of the other, reads the Nadi 'Ali quatrain:

ناد عليا مظهر العجائب
تجده عوناً لك في النوائب
كل هم وغم سينجلي
بنيتك يا محمد بولايته يا على
يا على

'Call upon 'Ali, the locus of wonders and marvels,
You will find him a help in trials,
All difficulty and grief will disappear
Through your prophethood O Muhammad, through your trusteeship
O 'Ali, O 'Ali, O 'Ali!'

Inscribed down both the outside and interior of the two arms of the hilt and continuing along the base, is the call on God to bless the Fourteen Innocents:

اللهم صل على محمد وعلى وفاطمة
والحسن والحسين والعباد والباقر
واصادق والكاظم والرضا والتقى والنقى
والعسكري والمهدي صاحب الزمان
صلوات الله عليهم اجمعين

'O God! Bless Muhammad and 'Ali and Fatima and al-Hasan and al-Husayn and al-'Abid and al-Baqir and al-Sadiq and al-Kazim and al-Rida and al-Taqi and al-Naqi and al-'Askari and al-Mahdi, the Lord of Time. God's blessings on all of them!'

The quality of the calligraphy is sublime and the use of elaborate diacritics is very aesthetically pleasing. Empty spaces are filled with various decorative dot arrangements, which serve not just to make the calligraphy more readable, but also provide an elegant embellishment to the divine words. The edges of the hilt provide a border to the religious text where four dots sit in small flower-like arrangements between double lines. The quality of the blade reflects the calibre of the hilt and is forged from *jawhar* steel, commonly known as wootz. The central area has the *jawhar* pattern and the edges are polished bright. A slim medial ridge sweeps down the blade from a trefoil pendant and converges with two others set at angles before coming together to form the tip.

Only a small group of weapons from Lucknow are known to include black enamel on silver, but none with such elaborate and deep-set calligraphy as this one. It is likely a special commission. As of yet, we know of no comparable weapon.

The beauty of the long flowing characters elevates this katar from a weapon to a work of art as well as an object of religion and devotion. In the words of Zebrowski "...it should be remembered that if the design is to have any originality, the excavation of a hard surface with a metal stylus demands as much, if not more, training, control and talent as painting with a brush".⁵

My thanks to Will Kwiatkowski and Raheel Hussain for the translation and identification of Nishat 'Ali Khan, and to Arthur Bijl for additional information regarding the man's life.

Provenance

Private European collection
Paris art market circa 2000

References

- ↑ The word jamdhar (referred to in the inscriptions on the hilt) is not as commonly used as the colloquial term katar, but it does show up in several old sources such as Ain-i-Akbari see Abu'l Fazl, Ain-i Akbari, Tr. H.Blochmann & H.S. Jarrett, 3 vols. Delhi, 1988 (the pertinent page from the British Library copy is published by Elgood. See Robert Elgood, *Hindu Arms and Ritual, Arms and Armour*, pp/18, cat.no.1.5. It also shows up in an illustration discovered and published by us in 2020. See Runjeet Singh, *Discoveries*, 2023, pp.98-103, cat. no.38 which is also available online. See https://www.runjeetsingh.com/inventory/449/illustrations_of_arms_and_armour
- ↑ Ashirbadi Lal Srivastava, *Shuja-ud-Daulah, Vol. II: 1765-1775*, Lahore, 1945, p.292
- ↑ <https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.103986/page/n51/mode/2up>
- ↑ <https://www.proquest.com/openview/dedd6e493a779b803cf3500823d2aef8/1?cbi=1819375&pq-origsite=gscholar&parentSessionId=rjy rAmMgU1ML53vux%2Bavjgi4m3O4uAxTlPOa5FpepuA%3D>
- ↑ Zebrowski, Mark, *Gold Silver & Bronze of Mughal India*, 1997, pp.81

فَلَا تَحْزَنُوا إِنَّا نَكْتُبُهَا لَكُمْ



الْأَهْمِيلُ عَلَى عَمْدٍ وَعَلَى قَاطِبِهِمْ وَالْحُسَيْنُ الْحُسَيْنُ وَالْمُهْدِي

وَالْكَافُّ وَالصَّالِحُ وَالنَّقِيُّ وَالْعَسْكَرِيُّ وَالْمُهْدِي



HEAVY KATAR

PUNJAB OR RAJASTHAN (INDIA)
19TH CENTURY

OVERALL 495MM
BLADE 228MM

A heavy *katar* from nineteenth century Punjab or Rajasthan. The double-edged steel blade has a 27mm thick diamond section to it, which is slightly thicker than that of an analogous *katar* we sold in 2018.⁶ Its sturdy blade is capable of slitting chainmail links as well as piercing heavier armours. The forte on either side is characterised by an arrow-shaped recessed panel inlaid in gold with an epigraphic inscription in free-flowing *nasta'liq* script which is proving difficult to read.

Gold *kofīgari* decoration is rendered on the slender hilt as repetitive patterns of vegetal meanderings running all along the frame. The grip is formed from three overlapping horizontal bands, which protrude through the sidebars. Similar specimens have been published by Jens Nordlunde⁷ and dated back to the eighteenth century. Earlier models are also shown in the collection at The Metropolitan Museum of Art (MET)⁸ as well as in Robert Elgood's insightful book about the Rathores⁹. Examples from both the MET and Elgood have been attributed to the seventeenth century (the former coming from South India, the latter from Ahmadnagar in the Deccan), pre-dating any known North Indian specimen. It is highly likely that these earlier *katars* provided inspiration for the design of eighteenth century North Indian models, like this one.

The scabbard of this *katar* is a noteworthy survivor, as Indian sheaths and scabbards often deteriorate over time due to their lightweight construction. In this case, the openwork silver fittings are likely to have contributed to the remarkable preservation of its wooden structure. The fittings are pierced and chased on either side with pairs of regardant peacocks on the throat piece and parrots on the chape, amidst vegetal trellis. Originally lined in green velvet, the central area of the pile has now worn away, but a squared silver chain link remains fitted to the throat piece.

Provenance

Zebregs & Röell, Netherlands

References

- 6. https://www.runjeetsingh.com/inventory/237/heavy_katar
- 7. J. Nordlunde, *A Passion for Indian Arms*, 2016
- 8. <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/31733>
- 9. R. Elgood, *Rajput Arms & Armour: The Rathores and their Armoury at Jodhpur Fort*, Niyogi Books, 2017, p.678 (SSP/213E)





KATTHI (DAGGER)

TANJORE (INDIA)
17TH - 18TH CENTURY

OVERALL 320MM
BLADE 220MM



The hilt of this magnificent South Indian *katthi*¹⁰ (the Tamil word for dagger) is modelled as a *yali*, a benevolent demon, popular in South India on arms, armour and buildings for protective reasons. The hilt is made from heavily gilded copper-alloy and the head of the beast forms the large pommel, which has a sculpted crest with bulging eyes. The ferocious mouth gapes beneath a long, curling nose and the moulded wings act as a grip as well as having an aesthetic purpose. The feathered and scaled body is carefully chased on an attractive bed of flowers. A knuckle guard, with a chevron design, curls gracefully up from the base of the hilt to the mouth of the creature and terminates in a lotus bud finial. Two further lotus bud finials sit on either side of an oval shaped lower guard, which is made of gilt copper-alloy and attached to the blade strap in the form of a double *yali* crest. The blade has a recurved form and a pair of long deep fullers on each face.

An important correlative sword sits in the private collection of the Raja of Tanjore and is published by Elgood¹¹ in his important work on South Indian arms and armour. It is dated by him as seventeenth or eighteenth century. Elgood also published details of a dagger that can be used as another analogous example, with a silver hilt¹², also from the collection of the Raja of Tanjore and dated as being from the second half of the seventeenth century.

Provenance

The Roy Elvis (1944-2022) collection

Literature

Roy Elvis, *The Hindu Warrior*, 2020, pp.248, fig.no.202, cat.no.D106.

References

- ^{10.} *Katthi* is the word for dagger in the South Indian languages of Kannada, Tamil and Malayalam, and *chaku* a more colloquial term used in Karnatka. (from personal correspondence with Nidhin Olikara)
- ^{11.} Robert Elgood, *Hindu Arms and Ritual – Arms and Armour from India 1400-1865*, 2004, pp.99, fig.8.64
- ^{12.} *IBID*, pp.175, fig.no.16.26





4

LARGE JADE
KHANJAR

KISHANGARH,
RAJASTHAN (INDIA)
LATE 18TH CENTURY

OVERALL 420MM
BLADE 290MM

A handsome Mughal style *khanjar* (dagger) of unusually large proportions. The jade grip is carved in a pistol-grip shape in a creamy white colour with a hint of green. The steel blade is of heavy section and cut with two fullers separated by a median ridge. The two fullers display *jawhar* or a wootz steel pattern and the edges are polished bright. An inscription clearly chased into the blade in Devanagari script reads:

Ra. Ki. Pho. 40¹³

The important exhibition catalogue *Splendeur des Armes Orientales*, published in 1988¹⁴, includes a *tulwar* and *katar* garniture with the same abbreviation and the number 18 (although the marking is acid etched, not chased like ours¹⁵). The garniture is said to have formerly been in the armoury of the Maharaja of Kishangarh. The author notes that the KI probably stands for Kishangarh.

The original wooden scabbard accompanies the dagger and is covered in a luscious red silk velvet. There is also a tassel attached that perhaps once would have carried pearls or other precious stones for adornment.

Provenance

UK art market

Purportedly belonged to Sri Pratap Singh (Maharaja Pratap Singh (b. 1763 – d. 1798) ruled Kishangarh state from 1788 till his death).

References

- 13. My thanks to Kalama Lucas for the reading of the inscription
- 14. Ricketts & Missillier, *Splendeur des Armes Orientales*, 1988, pp.116, cat. no.201
- 15. In private communication with Jonathan Barrett he observes that objects of the finest quality seem to have been engraved (with the Kishangarh marking) and less valuable items were etched



रा. कि. फो. ४०



5

KARD WITH DOWNWARD TURNED BLADE

IRAN
18TH - 19TH CENTURY

OVERALL	375MM
BLADE	245MM

An unusual and substantial Qajar *kard* (dagger) from the turn of the nineteenth century. The downcurved blade is a rare anomaly and is forged from very high quality dark black *wootz* or watered steel. The steel is not what is known as *Kirk-Narduban* or 'Muhammad's ladder' (a pattern formed by deliberate and decisive trauma to the hot steel in regular intervals creating a 'ladder' pattern). However, among the whirls and swirls of the watered pattern some naturally occurring 'rungs' can be seen, so perhaps the maker initially planned to make a laddered blade but decided the natural beauty of the steel was sufficient.

The spine has chiselled fullers that culminate at a simple trefoil pendant, but the dagger is otherwise unadorned. The straps that run around the grip are also made of *wootz* and the two-piece grip is made of a beautifully veined walrus ivory, secured with four pins, and crowned with a small bulbous pommel of steel. The scabbard has been covered in antique green silk velvet to protect the original worn material and is mounted with a top locket of white metal and chape of silver which appears to have been salvaged from another object. The top locket and the grips both have an old collection number of '2-W-94'.

A comparable example can be seen in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.¹⁶

Provenance

Private UK collection

References

¹⁶ <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/25009>



GEM SET
JADE-HILTED
KHANJAR

HILT, SCABBARD AND CHAPE,
POSSIBLY DECCAN OR
NORTHERN INDIA; AND BLADE,
OTTOMAN TURKEY

18TH CENTURY

OVERALL	495MM
BLADE	318MM

An exemplary specimen of the armorial bejewelled aesthetic and steel blade design, typical of the Islamic Gunpowder Empires¹⁷. This wonderful *khanjar* or *jambiya* dagger is a long-standing witness of the intricate exchanges and mutual influences occurring in the Islamic and Indian lands throughout the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries.

Its form is almost identical to another well-known example located in the Dresden Armoury (*Rustkammer*, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden)¹⁸, which was captured as 'booty' at Varna, Bulgaria, by the Russians in 1828, and presented to Prince Carl of Prussia by Tsar Nicholas I.

Like other eighteenth-century bejewelled daggers that entered prestigious European and American collections, this example features intriguing characteristics which make its attribution all the more interesting. Firstly, its hilt, often referred to as *pistol-grip* or *parrot-headed*, presents a ubiquitous ancestry. After a hiatus of several centuries, pistol-grip hilts made an important return in the armorial aesthetic of the Islamic Empires in the second half of the sixteenth century. This was evidenced through surviving examples and also by documentary evidence such as Indian and Iranian manuscript illustrations and paintings of the time.¹⁹ The Mughal emperors appeared particularly fond of this shape, as they commissioned some of the most exquisite gem-set specimens, a large portion of which are now preserved in the Al-Sabah Collection in Kuwait.²⁰

These complex lapidary masterpieces often distinguished themselves by using the local Indian hyper-purified gold setting technique called *kundan*. This truly autochthonous method was never practiced outside the borders of the Indian Subcontinent.²¹ Concurrently, in Iran and Ottoman Turkey, gemstones were often set in high collets and embellished with floral collars, or thin claw mounts, using slightly clunkier setting methods than Mughal models.

The pale nephrite jade hilt and scabbard mounts of this dagger feature a lavish lapidary decoration of unevenly sized cabochon rubies and emeralds arranged as lobate flower heads and buds with tiny drop-shaped leaves. The arrangement of these jewelled clusters is reminiscent of pomegranates, a universally revered fruit symbolising abundance, ripeness, and good tidings. The quillon is further enhanced with a row of small rubies and larger emeralds of ascending size, and the apex of the pommel includes a double row of rubies terminating with an emerald foliate trellis on each side. These gemstones appear to be secured within parcel-gilt shaped collets and straps applied directly onto hollowed recesses carved into the jade hilt, possibly attempting to imitate Indian *kundan* work. This type of setting with an analogous floral arrangement can be seen on a *jambiya* dagger attributed to eighteenth-century Ottoman Turkey at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, once part of the George C. Stone's collection.²²

Both daggers feature unevenly sized cabochon rubies and emeralds set in flower-shaped parcel-gilt collets directly applied to the jade hilt. Another eighteenth-century Ottoman gem-set hardstone-hilted dagger with pistol grip, sold at Sotheby's London in 2012 (25 April 2012, lot 613)²³, showcases the same fashion of adding clusters of unevenly (and often roughly) cut and sized cabochon gemstones onto metal collets set into the hilts. In conclusion, the setting technique and overall lapidary arrangement unequivocally point towards an Ottoman attribution, rather than Indian.

The distinctive wavy blade of watered steel features traces of gold-inlaid vegetal decoration remaining at the forte and a highlighted border along the sinuous edges, further reinforcing this dagger's connection to Ottoman Turkey. Indeed, throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Ottoman steel blades were often embellished with gold-damascened vegetal trellis, scrolls, and foliage, as evident in the two previously mentioned daggers as well as in another two sold respectively at Christie's London, 20 April 1999, lot 387, and more recently, Sotheby's London, 26 October 2022, lot 135.²⁴ The focus on the vegetal and foliate decorative pattern, instead of the dense floral triumph often seen on Indian blades, can perhaps be linked to the traditional Turkish motif known as *rumi*, consisting in intricate vegetal meanderings and scrollworks already widely in use in Anatolia and Central Asia starting from the fourteenth century CE.



The original wooden scabbard, covered with modern velvet to dress and preserve the older, now-worn fabric, is fitted with a jade top locket, presenting the same jewelled clusters in the shape of flowers or pomegranates of the hilt, and a jade chape, characterised by an unequivocal Indian motif and gem setting method. In fact, the stones are set in *kundan* and arranged in a floral blossom stemming from a circular seed, developing into a cusped flower head accompanied by a pair of symmetrically positioned drop-shaped leaves. This motif is ubiquitous in seventeenth and early eighteenth-century Mughal chapes originating from the Deccan plateau.²⁵

This mesmerising dagger takes the beholder on a *Grand Tour* from India to Turkey. It seems fair to assume that the hilt (possibly originally plain); the wooden scabbard; and the encrusted chape made their way to the Ottoman lands from Deccan or Northern India, as lavish and desirable exotica pieces or diplomatic gifts. Once landed in the Ottoman domains, the hilt might have been subsequently carved and embellished with a floral arrangement of cabochon rubies and emeralds in Ottoman-style settings and fitted onto a Turkish gold-damascened wavy steel blade. Composite daggers with Indian hilts and Ottoman blades are not uncommon. Often joined in the cosmopolitan mercantile centre of Istanbul in the second half of the nineteenth century, separate armorial elements originating from the Eastern frontiers of the Islamic lands yielded new, opulent, and flamboyant creations ready to mesmerise and be sold to the highest bidders, which were commonly wealthy European and American travellers and collectors.

Among the most recurrent characteristics of these composite daggers, was the inclusion of faceted gems set into applied filigreed or collared strapwork settings; the frequent use of Indian hardstone hilts; and blades of crucible steel, either chiselled in bold relief or damascened in gold with interlocking vegetal scrollwork and palmette designs.²⁶

The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York vaunts a remarkable selection of these such daggers. They entered the museum's collection thanks to the bequests of two private collectors, notably the well-known American arms collector and author George Cameron Stone (1859 – 1935) and the Venetian financier and banker Giovanni P. Morosini (1832 – 1908), who is believed to have acquired nine examples of this hybrid group in Istanbul around 1900, including an impressive tray of five Indo-Turkish bejewelled *pastiche* daggers.²⁷

B.C.
Contributions by R.S.

Provenance

Private New York collection

Sold by Runjeet Singh Limited in 2016

London art market

Purchased in 1953 in the U.S.A. by Jerry Lamb, Portland, Oregon, USA

Literature

Runjeet Singh, *Arms & Armour from the East 2016*, pp.38-39, cat.no.14

References

- ¹⁷ The term 'Islamic Gunpowder Empires' was coined by Marshall G. S. Hodgson and William H. McNeill at the University of Chicago to collectively refer to the three Muslim Empires concurrently ruling over the Islamic and Indian lands from the 16th to the 18th century. For further reference, please see Douglas E. Streusand, *Islamic Gunpowder Empires: Ottomans, Safavids, and Mughals* (2011), p. 3
- ¹⁸ Illustrated in Holger Schuckelt, *The Turkish Chamber* (2010), pp. 124-5, Inv. No. Y143
- ¹⁹ S. Kaoukji, *Precious Indian Weapons and Other Princely Accoutrements* (2017), p. 147
- ²⁰ IBID, pp. 148 – 184, especially cats. 46, 48, 49 and 58
- ²¹ M. Keene, *Treasury of the World*, 2001, p. 18
- ²² <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/31834>, inv. No. 36.25.662a, b
- ²³ <https://www.sothebys.com/en/auctions/ecatalogue/2012/arts-of-the-islamic-world/lot.613.html?locale=en>
- ²⁴ <https://www.sothebys.com/en/buy/auction/2022/arts-of-the-islamic-world-india-including-fine-rugs-and-carpets-2/an-ottoman-dagger-with-banded-agate-hilt-and>
- ²⁵ S. Kaoukji, *Precious Indian Weapons and Other Princely Accoutrements*, 2017, pp. 182 – 183, cats. 63 and 64
- ²⁶ D. G. Alexander, *Islamic Arms and Armor in The Metropolitan Museum of Art*, 2015, p. 205, cat. 79
- ²⁷ <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/32930>, inv. No. 23.232.1



7

MIXED BLADE
PATTERN KERIS
TRITIK PAMOR

BALI, INDONESIA
19TH CENTURY

OVERALL 625MM
BLADE 435MM

A nineteenth-century bejewelled and gold-mounted keris dagger from the Indonesian island, Bali. The gently curved, double-edged blade with tapering and pointy tip, known as *urubing wilah*, presents 3 waves (*luk*). This distinctive blade pattern (*pamor*), usually referred to as *tritik*, showcases mixed and multiple blade patterns that are achieved through alternating laminations of iron and nickelous iron. The most recognisable *pamors* in the present example are the creeping snake (*uler lututh*) and sitting locust (*untu walang*). To pay respect to the *keris* tradition and the skilled craftsmanship of the smiths (*empu*) who produced them, it is important to note that *keris* blades were said to be imbued with magical and spiritual qualities. In this dagger, the powerful combination of *uler lututh* and *untu walang pamors* aim to foster spiritual and material wealth.

Keris scabbards usually feature a *wrangka*, which is typically a boat-shaped, horizontal section located at the top of the scabbard. The *wrangka* is a functional component of the design. It is used to rest the *keris* over a traditional Indonesian fabric waistbelt, into which the *keris* is tucked in. The present *wrangka* is made of wood (*pelet kayu*) that becomes stained with uneven, dark, grain-like patterns due to a fungal infection.

The wood used for this particular *keris* is a highly prized autochthonous clear wood called *beras wutah*.

The front of the *wrangka* is adorned with a cusped, gem-set repoussé gold sheet plaque encrusted with five unevenly sized semi-precious red stones that are mounted on high collets among embossed vegetal motifs. The gold sheet scabbard cover (*gandar*) showcases conventional Indonesian patterns, such as beaded bands, lavish vegetal meanderings, and an endless knot over a quadripartite diamond-like shape filled with stylised flowers. The rounded wooden hilt with its slightly bulbous middle is fitted with brass mounts. The ring sitting between the hilt and the blade (the gilt *mendak*) is encrusted with rubies and red cabochon semi-precious stones, echoing the repoussé plaque on the *wrangka*.

Provenance

European art market





8

**KERIS BLADE
WITH MAKER'S
THUMBPRINTS
KERIS PICHIT**

JAVA, INDONESIA
12TH - 15TH CENTURY

OVERALL 283MM

A rare and early blade of a dagger (*keris*) from Java, Indonesia. Crafted from a single piece of steel, the blade exhibits extraordinary craftsmanship. The maker's thumbprints (*pichit*) are visibly marked seven times on both sides of the blade.

Chiselled at the base of the blade are two humanoid or foetus-like figures, known as *putut*. The bottom of the tang has a twisted end, which is most likely to secure the blade into a hilt. These blades are exceptionally rare. This one, even more so, due to the illustrated figures.

Keris blades are considered to be spiritually powerful and were thought to be reserved for royalty and high-ranking members of society. Each blade pattern (*pamor*) is thought to possess talismanic properties. Such blades were forged in Java during the Majapahit era.

What makes this *keris* blade unique is the clear impressions of the maker's thumbprints in the metal. As a further show of skill, each thumbprint is decoratively circled with silvery *pamor* lines. This subgroup of *keris* with thumbprints is known as *keris pichit*.

To leave these imprints on the steel, the impressions must have been made during the forging process. How the maker could achieve this without causing significant harm to the smith remains a mystery. The *keris pichit* was never intended to serve as a weapon. Rather, it was a purely ritualistic object used by Malay shamans. All considered, it is unsurprising then that the theories and legends shrouding *keris* allude to its magical qualities and the supernatural craftsmanship behind it.²⁸

A similar example but without the *putut* figures is illustrated by Karsten Sejr Jensen.²⁹ Jensen writes that blades with imprints are said to have been made by the *kris* blade maker (*empu*), Ni Brok Sombro, a woman with supposed magical skills who lived in Pajajaran, Java during the tenth century. Legend has it that Sombro made the *pichit* depressions on the red-hot blade with her thumb and then hardened the blade by passing it through her labia.

Sold to a private New York Collector

References

- ^{28.} Sheppard, M., *Taman Indera: Malay Decorative Arts and Pastimes*, Oxford University Press, 1972, p.132
- ^{29.} Jensen, K. S., 'The Kris and its symbols' in *Arts of Asia*, May – June 2008





9

TULWAR

MUGHAL DOMINIONS
OR DECCAN (INDIA)
MID-TO-LATE 17TH CENTURY

OVERALL 925MM
BLADE 755MM

The steel hilt of this magnificent sword (*tulwar*) is decorated in an unusual but effective reverse manner. Heavily applied gold forms the ground and floral silhouettes of darkened steel are left bare, to then be finished with more precise gold details. Although the shape of the hilt provides subtle clues to the date of this sword, it is the undeniably Mughal and Deccani floral theme that ultimately characterises it.

The long, sweeping curved blade is made of *jawhar* steel, also referred to as *wootz* or *Damascus* steel. It is of seventeenth-century Persian manufacture. An inlaid gold cartouche is filled with the name of the bladesmith:

عمل مير علي اصفهاني

It reads, 'Made by (*amal*) Mir Ali Isfahani.' The use of *Isfahani* indicates that the maker is from the Persian city of Isfahan – an area synonymous with sword-making excellence.

An astonishingly similar *katar* can be found in the Al-Sabah collection.³⁰ The same reverse gold decoration reveals identical iris blossoms and leaves overturned on their tips. This alone could make a strong enough case to suggest that these two items were made in the same workshop. However, both objects also share a more intricate detail; one that shows it is not just a copied pattern but rather a consistent theme. The edges of both *katar*'s hilts have a repeating four-petalled flower head enclosed within double crescents. This detail is mirrored on the *mogra*, the small bulbous button that crowns the pommel disc of the hilt of our sword.

The pattern is repeated on the edges of the *nath*; the hinged loop that is attached to the *mogra* for a wrist loop. The identical decoration on both objects provides a motive to confidentially state that they were decorated at the same time, in the same workshop, and almost certainly by the same hand. Another assumption might be that they were made as a garniture and then later separated.

The overall floral theme can be seen on yet another seventeenth-century Deccani or Mughal sword in the Al-Sabah collection with what also looks like a Persian blade.³¹ The hilt on this sword is decorated in enamel but the theme is comparable, and the shape of the iris blossoms and leaves can be compared closely with the sword in focus.

The scabbard of this sword is a later addition that has an English inscription. It is made of black leather, with copper mounts, all having traces of gilding. The top locket is marked thus:

S. Brunn
Sword Cutler
to H.R.H the
Prince of Wales
-56
Charing Cross
London.

Samuel Brunn was a leading royal sword cutler and gun maker to the Prince of Wales.³² He was 'By appointment to H.R.H. The Prince of Wales from 1800 to 1811' and 'to the Prince Regent from 1811 to 1820'.³³



An important sword relating to the Napoleonic wars is currently in the Royal Museums Greenwich and bears an almost identical mark on the top locket.³⁴ On that sword, the address is recorded as no.55 Charing Cross, where Brunn was active from 1798 to 1804. The address found on our scabbard is no.56, where Brunn was active between 1803 and 1819.

The English scabbard, which was made for this sword, alludes that it was brought to England by an Englishman, probably engaged in military service in India. The quality of the sword suggests he would have been somebody of high rank or status, as does the fact he used Brunn to make the scabbard.

My thanks to Henry Yallop, Royal Armouries for the Brunn references.

Provenance

Private UK collection

References

- ³⁰ Salam Kaoukji, *Precious Indian Weapons and Other Princely Accoutrements*, 2017, pp.78-79, cat. no.23
- ³¹ IBID, pp.290-291, cat.no.104
- ³² L.Southwick, London, *Silver-hilted Swords*, Royal Armouries 2001, pp.58-59
- ³³ *Swords For Sea Service* by May,W.E; Annis, P.G.W.V. Publisher: London HMSO 1970, 2 volumes, pp.271
- ³⁴ <https://www.rmg.co.uk/collections/objects/rmgc-object-78569#:~:text=BRUNN%2C%20Sword%20Cutler%20to%20H.R.H.,after%20his%20action%20in%201806>



KILIJ WITH MUGHAL JADE HILT

INDIA AND TURKEY
EARLY 18TH CENTURY
DURING THE REIGN OF SULTAN MAHMUD I (r. 1730-1754)

OVERALL 790MM
BLADE 570MM

The sword is comprised of steel, nephrite jade, silver, and brass. The blade is thought to have been made in Turkey sometime in the eighteenth century. Also Turkish, the sword's features, scabbard, and guard have all been refitted during the reign of Sultan Mahmud I (r. 1730-1754). The scabbard is wood and silver and boasts velvet with metallic thread. The grip can be traced back to Deccan, India.

This one-handed long and curved scimitar sword is called a *kilij*, so named from the Turkish *kiliç*, meaning sword. It features a curved, single-edged steel blade with a central fuller and a defining sharp false edge (*yalman*), near the flared tip.

The blade bears a mark of three circles on either side of its forte. The grip, originally designed for an Indian dagger (*khanjar*), is carved from dark green nephrite jade and features a pistol-shaped pommel and a down-swept quillon block. The pistol shape appeared in sixteenth-century Europe and India simultaneously.³⁵ The grip is inlaid with silver, showcasing floral scrolls of stylised carnations (*Dianthus caryophyllus*) and star-shaped flowers with serrated leaves.

The silver inlay decoration, contrasting with the near-black appearance of the jade, is reminiscent of contemporary *bidri* ware made in the Deccan. Similarly, bidri ware has darkened cast zinc vessels that are inlaid with silver and brass.

The style and fine quality of the grip suggests an early eighteenth century date. It compares favourably with two dagger grips currently in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. One of the daggers is made of dark green nephrite jade (inv. 02.18.785) and features the same small star-shaped flowers as this sword. The second dagger (inv. 36.25.667), pale green and inlaid with carnations, is associated with a curved blade.³⁶ Indian jade objects of this kind and with similar decoration markings have been attributed to the city Hyderabad in the Deccan, which was under Turkish influence in the eighteenth century.³⁷

The cross-guard, perfectly adapted to the down-swept quillon block of the grip, features curled ends. It is made from silver, worked in repoussé, and finely chased with a trellis pattern on the upper section. Curved mouldings frame a large scallop shell motif on the lower half. The sinuous curved vegetal mouldings, trellis pattern (*quadrillage*), and shell motifs (*coquilles*) on the cross-guard are typical of the French Régence style during the first decades of the eighteenth century. This period predates the emergence of the *rocaille* with its asymmetrical decorative repertoire that is typical of the Rococo.³⁸

The silver cross-guard on the sword bears a small stamp near the upper section, partially mutilated by a later brass stump, which was likely added to reinforce the union between the cross-guard, grip, and blade tang. Additionally, there are assayer's test marks made freehand with a burin on both sides of the cross-guard.

The wooden scabbard, composed of two halves joined together, is covered in crimson silk velvet with the middle seam decorated with metallic thread lace trimmings. En suite with the cross-guard, the scabbard features silver fittings, similarly worked in repoussé and chased with identical Régence-style motifs on a punched ground. These fittings include a locket, a ring mount with two loops for suspension, and the chape, protecting the tip.

The rounded stamp on one side of the cross-guard can be identified with the *tughra* of an Ottoman sultan. *Tughra* comes from the Turkish *tugra* - a calligraphic seal or monogram signature. Since the late fifteenth century, it was a legal requirement that gold and silver wares be assayed and stamped at the state's mint in the Ottoman Empire.³⁹ Each sultan possessed a distinctive *tughra*. While slight modifications might occur when crafted by different artisans, the defining elements of a *tughra*, such as the written text and word arrangement, remained constant. Despite the similarities in the *tughras* of all sultans, they differed considerably in both content and style.

Although partially mutilated, careful palaeographic analysis enables its identification with the *tughra* used by Sultan Mahmud I (r. 1730-1754). While the sultan's name, written in the lower section (*sere*) is impossible to read, the design of other elements makes identification possible.

For example, the loops to the left of the *tughra* (*beyze*), the graphic relation between the upright vertical lines on the top of the *tughra* (*tug*) with the S-shaped lines crossing them (*züffe*), and the way the words 'forever victorious' (*muzaffer da'ima*) are written inside the loops.⁴⁰ Mahmud I's reign was marked by wars in Persia and Europe. The Persian war in question occurred between the collapse of the Safavid dynasty and Nader Shah's rise to power (r. 1736-1747), and in Europe, it was the so-called Austro-Russian-Turkish War (1735-1739). Significantly, Shah was the founder of the Afsharid dynasty.

It is possible that the Indian jade hilt was a gift to the Ottoman court by Nader Shah, who, in 1739, returned to Iran from Delhi after plundering the imperial Mughal treasury. In 1741, the Ottoman Sultan received a large embassy, bringing an exuberant gift of bejewelled textiles, elephants, and costly weapons. These treasures were sent by Nader Shah, who aimed to maintain peace between them. However, this peace was broken in 1743 when the Sultan closely cooperated with the Mughal Emperor, Muhammad Shah (r. 1719-1748), who could also have presented the jade hilt to the Ottoman court at this time.

The chronology of the Régence-style silver fittings aligns with Mahmud I's reign and attests to the growing influence of European art at the Ottoman court during the eighteenth century. The reflection of an earlier French style in the courtly arts during Mahmud I's reign is not surprising, given the significance of the Ottoman embassy to the court of Louis XV (r. 1715-1774) of France in 1720 and another in 1742 during Mahmud I's reign.⁴¹

Following the return of the 1720 embassy from Paris, led by Mehmed Efendi (ca. 1670-1732), which prompted a lasting trend of westernization in the Ottoman Empire, flamboyant architectural motifs began to adorn both royal residences and mosques.

This Turkish sabre, most likely assembled by an Ottoman court jeweller in the service of Mahmud I, may be compared with a similar albeit later composite sword in the Metropolitan Museum (inv. 23.232.2a, b).⁴² Featuring a late seventeenth-century Safavid blade and a similarly-shaped eighteenth-century Mughal grip also carved from nephrite jade, the sword in New York is fitted with a gem-set cross-guard. Both the Indian jade hilt and the Iranian blade were enriched with gold inlays set with gems at the Ottoman court. The refitted sword received a golden scabbard, similarly set with diamonds, emeralds, and pearls. According to tradition, it was used in 1876 for the investiture of Sultan Murad V, who ruled for merely three months.⁴³ Unlike in Europe, where crowns ae favoured, the most significant ceremony in the inauguration of various Islamic rulers was the investiture with a sword. Although less ornate, it is likely that the present sabre was refitted during the reign of Mahmud I and was intended for the same type of ceremonial use by a high-ranking member of the Ottoman court.

H.M.C

Provenance

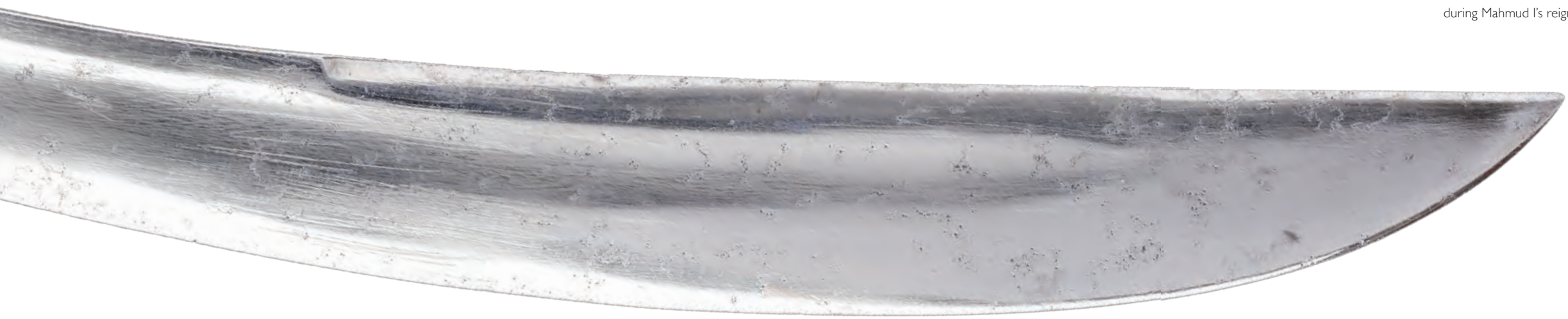
Private New York collection

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References

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- 36. David G. Alexander, *Islamic Arms and Armor in the Metropolitan Museum of Art*, New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2015, p. 216, cat. 85
- 37. Stephen Markel, "Non-Imperial Mughal Sources for Jades and Jade Simulants in South Asia", *Jewellery Studies 10* (2004), pp. 68-75
- 38. See José de los Llanos, Ulysse Jardat (ed.), *La Régence à Paris (1715-1723). L'Aube des Lumières* (cat.), Paris, Musée Carnavalet-Histoire de Paris, 2023, and namely Ulysse Jardat's contribution on the decorative repertoire, "Dessins, estampes et arts décoratifs", pp. 144-145
- 39. Garo Kürkman, *Ottoman Silver Marks*, Istanbul, Mithusalem Publications, 1996
- 40. The complete *tughra* reads: *Mahmud Han bin Mustafa muzaffer da'ima* or 'Mahmud Khan son of Mustafa is forever victorious'. Mahmud I was the son of Sultan Mustafa II (r. 1695-1703)
- 41. See Mehmed Efendi, *Le paradis des infidèles. Relation de Yirmisekiz Çelebi Mehmed efendi, ambassadeur ottoman en France sous la Régence*, Paris, François Maspéro, 1981; and Fatma Müge Göçek, *East encounters West. France and the Ottoman Empire in the eighteenth century*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1987
- 42. David G. Alexander, *Islamic Arms and Armor in the Metropolitan Museum of Art* [...], pp. 174-177, cat. 66
- 43. Another Ottoman ceremonial sabre, similarly, refitted in the nineteenth century with a dark-green nephrite jade Mughal grip, belongs to the same museum (inv. 36.25.1293) - see David G. Alexander, *Islamic Arms and Armor in the Metropolitan Museum of Art* [...], pp. 172-173, cat. 66





SHAMSHIR

BLADE, CROSS-GUARD,
SUSPENSION RINGS:
IRAN
18TH - 19TH CENTURY

SCABBARD:
CENTRAL ASIA (BUKHARA)
OR CRIMEA
EARLY 19TH CENTURY

OVERALL 1020MM
WITHOUT SCABBARD 990MM

This remarkably complete sword with belt has a heavy blade of wootz (watered) steel, that is curved, single-edged and without fuller. On the blade, in gold inlay, are two cartouches of oval and droplet-like shapes and a further panel of calligraphy:

خان با جله بهادر بدور

Khan with the glory of the valiant

«ساحاخان

Saha Khan, possessor of greatness, brave Budur

In the elongated panel is part of verse 13 of Surah 61 ("As-Saff") of the Quran:

نصر من هلا وفتح قريب

Help from Allah and imminent victory

On the other side of the blade, an octagonal cartouche is etched into the blade, on which a part of the inscription can be read:

عمل اسماعيل

Made by Ismail

The hilt is fitted with a cross-guard of wootz steel and is decorated in gold overlay with a scrolling and repeating border that has a central cusped and lobed palmette. The grip scales are in two parts on each side in beautifully veined walrus ivory, secured by three pins. The pommel is in the form of a small iron cap decorated in a similar way to the cross-guard.

The wooden scabbard is clad with silver and decorated with niello, gold and turquoise. The mouth and upper section is framed with turquoise stones, and at the centre sits a large, gilded, six-petalled flower head, rendered in a naturalistic shape, with bifurcated leaves extending in gold on both sides. The integral chape, which is separated from the main body of the scabbard with a row of turquoise, has four similar gilt-flowers ascending in size from the tip, all attached to the same leafy vine.

The main body of the scabbard is chased with large six-pointed star-shaped flower heads on a ground of densely scrolling foliage. The flower heads are clearly influenced by those on the top locket and chape, but executed in a more restrained manner.

Two gilt oval shaped mounts sit on the face of the scabbard and are securing points for the suspension rings, to which is attached the matching belt. It is made from rawhide and is adorned with numerous silver plaques decorated to match the scabbard. Two hemispherical plaques with niello and gilded floral motifs distribute the belts straps. The plaques and the large buckle, consisting of two elements, are decorated with cabochons and turquoise along the edge.

In a pleasing balance of decoration and functionality, this sword is a joy to behold, and a rare survivor, but the complex and slightly unusual blend of motifs and decorative styles, make it a challenge to confidently attribute. Rivkin and Isaac comment on this⁴⁴, observing that the style of gilding and the hexagram-like flowers belong to the Ottoman world. They also say the use of turquoise belongs to Central Asia (Bukhara) and Georgia, the signature on the blade and the use of niello to the Caucasus, and of course without debate, the blade to Persia. They conclude that the Crimea or Bukhara are the strongest candidates for this blend of styles.

My thanks to Serge A. Frantsouzzoff for translating the blade inscriptions.

Published

A Study of the Eastern Sword, Rivkin and Isaac, 2017, pp.182-183, fig. no.98.b

Provenance

Private European collection

2015 Private English collection

References

⁴⁴ Rivkin and Isaac, *A Study of the Eastern Sword*, 2017, pp.181



RAPIER

SOUTH INDIA AND GERMANY

17TH CENTURY

OVERALL 1270MM
BLADE 1160MM



An Indian cup-hilted rapier fitted with a European blade. The uncommonly large spirally fluted pommel has traces of silver and is surmounted by an oversized bell-shaped finial that sits on a four-stage arrangement of decorative washers. The waisted grip rests in a cup-shaped handguard, which is secured to a long, imported Solingen rapier blade. A pair of blade straps with extending quillons secure the triply grooved blade. Inscribed in the central groove is the name of the bladesmith, Wilhelm Tesche. The Wallace collection in London has a European rapier with a blade also made by Wilhelm Tesche. The date they attribute to their sword is c.1620-c.1635.⁴⁵

Two other spirally pommelled examples similar to the one in discussion are currently known to us. The first is published by Ricketts/Missillier;⁴⁶ The author notes that spirally decorated pommels were fashionable in Europe on swept-hilted rapiers during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century, and on Iranian daggers in an earlier period. The author adds that cup-guards show similarities to Italian cup hilts of the mid seventeenth century.

The second example is in the Metropolitan Museum (MET) and was published by Robert Elgood.⁴⁷ It should be noted that there is a typographical error in the Elgood book. The actual accession number is: 36.25.1424.⁴⁸ All three swords have sizable cup-shaped guards, spirally fluted pommels and Solingen blades. Elgood points out that the presence of a *kirtimukha* on both the MET and Ricketts/Missillier examples suggest that they are Hindu. No such protective symbol exists on the one in focus here, but the three swords still belong to the same small group and shouldn't be confused with a similar sword in the collection of Roy Elvis (1944-2022), which shares the same overall form but lacks the defining spiral pommel.⁴⁹

Provenance

Private USA collection

References

- 45. <https://wallacelive.wallacecollection.org/443/eMP/eMuseumPlus/service=ExternalInterface&module=collection&objectId=61072&viewType=detailView>
- 46. Ricketts & Missillier, *Splendeur des Armes Orientales*, 1988, pp.77, cat. no.120
- 47. Robert Elgood, 2004, *Hindu Arms and Ritual – Arms and Armour from India 1400-1865*, pp.95, cat.no.8.53
- 48. <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/31070>; My thanks to Markus Sesko for his assistance in providing the correct number
- 49. Roy Elvis, *The Hindu Warrior*, 2020, pp.70, fig.no.058, cat.no.C82



13

SOSUN PATTa

LAHORE, PUNJAB (INDIA)
CIRCA 1800 A.D.

OVERALL 925MM

A lily leaf (*sosun patta*) sword with a slender iron hilt in the Punjabi style. The surface is decorated in gold *kaftagri* with what looks like gold stars but is more likely stylised flowers. A knuckle guard gracefully extends from the quillon block and culminates in a lotus bud. The elegant re-curved T-section blade is of the highest quality wootz or *jahuar* steel. This type of steel is sometimes referred to as *kara-taban*, a Persian term that translates as 'brilliant black'. The edge of the sword is polished bright, leaving the main surface on both sides of the blade showcasing a beautiful silvery black pattern.

A modern wooden scabbard is covered in black and gold brocade silk and is fitted with a custom-made polished brass chape.

Another interesting example of this type of sword is housed at the Wallace Collection in London, with a Gurmukhi inscription on the inside of the knuckle guard that reads: 'may Guru Nanak protect Guru Sadhu Singh'.⁵⁰ Sadhu Singh (d. 1861) was a prominent member of the Sodhi clan and a direct descendant of the fourth Sikh Guru, Ram Das (1534–81), who enjoyed the patronage of Ranjit Singh, ruler of the Sikh Empire (r. 1799–1839).⁵¹

Provenance

Private UK collection

References

50. Personal correspondence with Arthur Bijl (original reading by PSingh)

51. Singh Madra and Singh, *The Golden Temple of Amritsar: Reflections of the Past* (1808-1959), 2017, p. 108





**MDUNG
(SPEARHEAD)**

TIBET
17TH - 18TH CENTURY

OVERALL 393MM

A well forged and large ritual *mdung* (the Tibetan word for spearhead)⁵². Made out of Iron, it has a straight double-edged blade with a strong medial ridge and tapering sides. The edges are designed to be blunt because of its intended ceremonial function. At the base of the blade is a bulbous knob, and below this a hollow conical socket which has a strong, semi-round, turned rim.

The decoration of this spearhead is intricately engraved, and its entire exterior surface is finely crosshatched and damascened in gold, including the undecorated areas. The motifs include three jewels; the most precious elements of the Buddhist path. There is also an arrangement of stylised flames running up both sides of the blade and a simplified version of the Sword of Wisdom along the central ridge.

The socket is decorated with a symmetrical pattern of curling scrollwork and filled in with finely punched circles, as is the background on the blade.

The present spearhead has a very close relative living in the Metropolitan Museum (MET)⁵³ (accession number 2001.63), which is published in the seminal work - *Warriors of the Himalayas: Rediscovering the Arms and Armor of Tibet* by Donald J. LaRocca. It is in the catalogue accompanying the exhibition at the museum in 2006.⁵⁴ This one is very similar indeed, with the main difference being the tip, which may have been reshaped. However, the proportions suggest that it hasn't lost much material at all and is actually 30mm (one inch and a quarter) longer than the MET's example. The other difference is that the concave sides are far more pronounced, as can be seen at the base of the blade.

Provenance

European art market

References

- ⁵² Donald J. LaRocca, *Warriors of the Himalayas – Rediscovering the Arms and Armour of Tibet*, 2006, pp.174
- ⁵³ <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/26600>
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15

CHHADI OR GEIDA
(MACE)

BIKANER, RAJASTHAN, INDIA
18TH CENTURY

LENGTH 620MM

An elegant and rare Indian mace from the seventeenth to eighteenth century. Made entirely of steel and octagonally faceted, it has a gentle curve and is flared at both ends. It bears a marking stippled on the body along with an unidentified single character, that shows it was once in the Bikaner armoury.

Sufi *ghazis* (militant religious converters) are recorded to have used such maces in the fourteenth century 'And with his iron bar he broke the head and necks of many raja and drove them to the dust of defeat'.⁵⁵ The term *ghazi* usually refers to an individual who participated in *ghazw* (military expedition or raiding). In Islam, groups of *ghazi* warriors included adventurers, mercenaries, and religious and political dissidents of all ethnicities, though predominantly Turkic. They were feared for their ruthless plunders and prone to brigandage. However in the Indian context, the word soon became linked to groups of militant Sufi *shaykhs* and saints, whose aim was to spread their knowledge and introduce the locals to their *tariqas* (Sufi order). One of the most enduring figures in this sense is Ghazi Miyan, a youthful soldier of Islam whose shrines are found all over India.⁵⁶

Indo-Islamic religious syncretism is perfectly represented in this weapon. Indeed, the *geida* or *gada*, is an ancient weapon, and its Indo-Iranian origins and linguistic etymology can be traced back all the way to Achaemenid Pasargadae.

In Hinduism, it is often associated with the Monkey-God Hanuman and Vishnu, the Preserver within the *Trimurti*, the cosmic triad that led to the Creation, Preservation and Destruction of the Universe.

The Furusiyya collection has a group of four such maces⁵⁷, and Robert Elgood also published another group of four from the Jodhpur fort's collection, India.⁵⁸

B.C. & R.S.

Provenance

Private USA collection

References

- ^{55.} Robert Elgood, *Rajput Arms & Armour*, Vol II, 2017, p.780
- ^{56.} For further reference, please access the online article by Shahid Amin, "Introduction Sufi and the Ghazi" in *Conquest and Community: The Afterlife of Warrior Saint Ghazi Miyan*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016. <https://doi.org/10.7208/9780226372747>
- ^{57.} Published in the book, *Arts of the Muslim Knight*, Bashir Mohamed, 2008, p.257, cat.no.247.
- ^{58.} In the 2017 book 'Rajput Arms & Armour', pages 780 and 787



VAJRAMUSHTI
(KNUCKLE DUSTER)

MYSORE (MYSURU) (INDIA)
18TH CENTURY

OVERALL 184MM

A rare and well-preserved steel *vajramushti*, a gladiatorial knuckle duster native to India. Nine wide spikes of descending lengths sit in a row protruding from the front of an oval grip, and two wide metallic thorns bulge from either side, somewhat resembling a blooming lotus flower. Also apparent are three small holes at the base of centre-most prongs.

Its handle, which would comfortably fill the inside of a fist, bears an inventory inscription in Kannada, a Dravidian language spoken predominantly in the Southwestern Indian state of Karnataka. In English, it reads: *"Sri Krishna I I 77. U: vajramushthi N. 18"*. This intriguing *vajramushti* is from the Mysore *ayudhashala* (armoury), housed at the palace of the Wodeyar (also spelt Wadiyar) royal family of Mysore (now Mysuru), Karnataka. 'Sri Krishna' refers to Krishnaraja Wodeyar III (1799–1868), the twenty-second maharaja of his kingdom, who marked each item with serial numbers and labels using his own name as a prefix to each marking. It is difficult to determine what the "U" means or represents but could possibly signify someone it originally belonged to or an inventory category.

Other similar *vajramushtis* exist in the Mysore armoury, including two from the eighteenth century depicted by Robert Elgood.⁵⁹ While one of them is exact in design to the *vajramushti* described above, it bears a lengthier inscription on its handle. It also appears to be the very same *vajramushti* as presented a decade earlier by H.Talwar in his book about the Mysore Palace⁶⁰ on page 35.

The other seems to be fashioned from horn and slightly cruder in construction.

The Pitt Rivers Museum is home to another antique *vajramushti*⁶¹. Made from buffalo horn and coming from Andra Pradesh in South India, it was previously owned by British anthropologist and ethnographic collector Alfred Walter Francis Fuller (1882–1961). It was given to the museum in 1913. A beautiful piece, but not as intimidating as its iron counterpart.

Vajramushti, Sanskrit for 'thunderbolt fist', is both the name of this close-range duelling weapon, as well as the medieval blood sport it belongs to. The weapon was named after a thunderbolt due to its multi-pronged appearance and the devastating effect it has on flesh and bone when pounded by it. There are several references in Hindu scriptures and epics that liken the fists of powerful warriors to that of Lord Indra's divine thunderbolt, his primary and most notable weapon of war. For instance, according to the *Ramayana*, India's oldest Sanskrit epic:

*"Thereupon that hero [Angada, a warrior of Lord Rama's army] ... clenching his fist, hard as a thunderbolt, resembling even Indra's ashani [i.e., vajra], dealt it, in great anger, upon the rakshasa's [demon's] breast."*⁶²

Full-contact *Vajramushti* duels are still displayed to this day and can be spectated annually at the Hindu festival of Dasara (Dussehra) in Mysuru. Nowadays, the *vajramushti* is usually made of wood, but horn or metal was typically used in the past. Combatants grasp this spiked knuckle duster in their right hand whilst using their empty left hand to ward off their opponent's blows. Following tradition, they enter the arena wearing only a loin cloth, devoid of any protectants. Blood from injuries usually ensue. Though, unlike other historical duels, referees break up fights before severe mutilation or a fatality takes place.

Eyewitness accounts of *Vajramushti* duels have been recorded over the centuries. For example, British soldier James Scurry (1766–1822) provides his own account of *Vajramushti* duelling in his autobiographical book, *The Captivity, Sufferings, and Escape, of James Scurry*:

*"They had on their right hands the woodguamootie [vajramushti], or four steel talons, which were fixed to each back joint of their fingers, and had a terrific appearance when their fists were closed. Their heads were close shaved, their bodies oiled, and they wore only a pair of short drawers. On being matched, and the signal given... they begin the combat, always by throwing the flowers, which they wear round their necks, in each other's faces; watching an opportunity for striking with the right hand, on which they wore this mischievous weapon which never failed lacerating the flesh, and drawing blood most copiously,"*⁶³

The *Encyclopedia of Indian Physical Culture*, edited by Dattatraya Chintaman Mujumdar (1882–1954), contains a chapter on *Vajramushti* in which the types of strikes traditionally executed with this brutal knuckle duster are listed:

*"In order to give a clear idea of the strokes that are stuck in this [style of armed] wrestling [and boxing], the following picture is given with the names of strokes and their places on the human body. The strokes are as follows: – (1) Tamacha (left temple) (2) Cheer (on chin) (3) Cheer (on elbow) (4) Cheer (on unarmed wrist) (5) Head (6) Bahera (right temple) (7) Hool (thrust on face) (8) Panja (on armed wrist). When the armed fist is being taken to the left stroke, No. 7 is given straight on the face, while strokes No. 5, 6, and 8 are given when the armed fist is to the left."*⁶⁴

Note: 'tamacha' ('slap' in Hindi) is a forehand strike, 'cheer' ('slice' a vertical strike, 'bahera' a backhand strike, 'hool' a forward thrusting strike, and 'panja' a clawing strike.

H.S.S.

My thanks to Nidhin Olikara for translating the inscriptions.

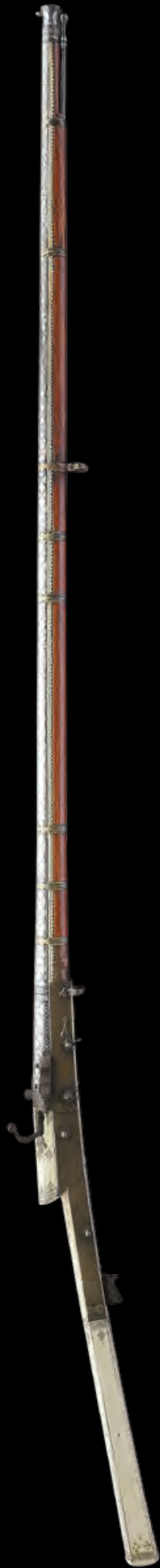
Provenance

Private USA collection

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- ↑ 2004, *Hindu Arms and Ritual: Arms and Armour from India 1400-1865*, pp.182, fig.17.1
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- ↑ https://web.prm.ox.ac.uk/weapons/index.php/tour-by-region/asia/asia/arms-and-armour-asia-96/index.html
- ↑ 1893, Manmatha Nath Dutt, *The Ramayana: Yuddha Kandam*, Bk. 6: Yuddha Kanda, Chap. 99, pp.1446-47
- ↑ 1824, James Scurry, *The Captivity, Sufferings, and Escape, of James Scurry*, Chap. 5, pp.132
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17

**BANDOOR OR
TOREDOR**

LAHORE, SIKH EMPIRE
19TH CENTURY

OVERALL 1690MM

This characteristically slender Sikh matchlock gun was made in the golden days of the Sikh empire, which in its entirety, only remained autonomous between 1799 and 1849. The wooden stock is almost completely encased with panels of animal bone and then decorated with a beaded or eyed motif. It is a design that is often found in Afghanistan, and perhaps that is where the inspiration for this piece comes from. After all, the first Maharaja of the Sikh empire, Ranjit Singh (1780-1839), invaded Afghanistan on March 1823 and captured the city of Peshawar in 1834. The circular design, which resembles a round eye shape, may be significant. It echoes the evil eye symbol (*nazar*) that is common to the area.⁶⁵ A *nazar* adornment is believed to protect the wearer or owner from evil. In the Sikh faith, it is more pertinent, due to the circle representing the oneness of God and the unbroken cycle of life and death.

The brass side plates, which are secured by rivets on rosette washers, have a lovely rich patina, and its brass belt loops and barrel bands have been preserved. The entire surface of the steel barrel with its moulded flared muzzle is decorated with silver *koftgari* in an interlacing arrangement of stylised flower heads. The fore-end has exposed and varnished timber. A decorative bone inlay between the fore-end and the barrel has been replaced where it was missing.

This gun is categorised as a matchlock, due to the trigger mechanism which activates the serpentine, or match-holder, which in turn lowers a lit match towards the pan. In this example, it still retains the original decorated pan cover. A small amount of gunpowder in the pan then comes into contact with the lit match and creates a flash, hence the well-known term 'a flash in a pan'. The consequence of this is a small explosion in the loaded breech that releases the musket ball.

A Sikh musket of this type is in the Royal Armouries Leeds and is recorded to have been acquired by the East India Company following the end of the Anglo Sikh wars in 1849.⁶⁶

Provenance

Tushingham Hall, Cheshire, England

References

- ⁶⁵ Personal communication with Beatrice Campi
- ⁶⁶ <https://royalarmouries.org/collection/object/object-1822>



TOOLED AND
SIGNED *DHAL*
(SHIELD)

AHMEDABAD, GUJARAT (INDIA)
19TH CENTURY

DIAMETER 350MM

A tooled, painted, lacquered and signed *dhal* from nineteenth-century Ahmedabad, Gujarat. A signature on its reverse helps us identify the makers.⁶⁷

Painter & shield maker
Khusal Dhunjee & Sons
Dhalgarwada
Ahmedabad
Bombay

Although shields of this type, often attributed to Ahmedabad, are not uncommon, signed specimens with their maker's mark are. A similar shield was published by us in 2015 and is now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York (accession no.2015.695).⁶⁸

The Khusal Dhunjee & Sons family firm was prolific in shield-making and painting in India, but they rarely signed their work. When they did, the intention was to vaunt and remark an exceptional example. Being already part of a rare group of signed shields, this *dhal* is further set apart by its decoration. Of round and convex form, it is made of thick animal hide and enhanced with deeply tooled concentric bands, the widest of which is filled in with dense floral scrollwork, featuring four large marigolds alternating four large frilled carnations; all connected to and surrounded by undulating leafy stalks. The centre is painted in polychromes and decorated with a wheel of minute flowers on a red ground, which is encircled by concentric friezes of repeating leaves and blossoms. A high collet with a green glass stone is set in the middle. This may have been possibly a later replacement. Next to it, four repoussé copper-gilt bosses echo the floral décor of the centre.

Their top collets are now set with decorative red glass stones. They may have originally been garnets and rubies.

The outer rim of this *dhal* is slightly turned up and painted in off-white, mirroring a painted band at the centre. The reverse presents a hand cushion, the stuffing of which is now exposed due to wear. It also presents two handles covered in red brocade fixed to four iron rings, which secure the four bosses in place.

The depth of tooling is thought to be unique within this group of Ahmedabadi shields.

Provenance

Private New York collection

Collection of Edward Frey (1920-2003) Miami, Florida

References

^{67.} Bombay here refers to the Bombay Presidency see link in footnote no.2
^{68.} <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/702016>



DEEPLY TOOLED
LEATHER *DHAL*
(SHIELD) WITH
SILVER BOSSES

POSSIBLY BIDAR,
DECCAN (INDIA)
1112 AH / 1700-1701 AD

DIAMETER 585MM

This rare eighteenth-century leather *dhal* shield, mounted with attractive floral silver bosses, is likely to have been produced in the Deccan region, Central India. Of typical convex circular form, with some slight distortion, the outer surface is made of thick stiffened hide, intricately tooled and profusely carved in relief with concentric decorative borders. The widest band features eight large-lobed epigraphic cartouches interspersed amidst scrolling leaves and arabesque designs, followed by a narrow, continuous Arabic inscription and heart-shaped palmettes towards the centre, laden with rosettes. The circumference, with a slightly upturned edge and evidence of restoration, is embellished with vegetal scrollwork. Traces of red pigment in the recesses suggest this *dhal* was originally painted. The *pièce de resistance* of this shield is undoubtedly its central medallion, showcasing four mirrored, cusped epigraphic cartouches set within a circle, of which the negative space is in-filled with wavy lines.

The Shi'a inscription reads:

*'There is no hero like 'Ali, and
there is no sword like Dhulfaqar
(Zulfiqar)'*

Followed by the Islamic date 1112 AH, which corresponds to 1700-1701 AD.

Deeply tooled leather shields are rare, and one with Islamic, and more specifically Shi'a inscriptions, such as this, is of notable significance. When compared to their lacquered and painted counterparts, the number of carved *dhals* is far inferior, leading to speculation as to whether their scarcity is accounted to their perishability, or simply fashion trends. A comparable lacquered leather shield with gilt decoration, attributed to the seventeenth century, and featuring four inscriptions like the present example, is in the Furusiyya Art Foundation⁶⁹. Another, held in our own inventory is also attributed to the Deccan region and dated to the seventeenth century⁷⁰. A later example, dating to the nineteenth century and currently located in the Saloon corridor at Sandringham House (Royal Trust Collection inv. no. RCIN 37531), presents a very similar design to this *dhal*, showcasing an upward-turned rim with vegetal meanderings, and concentric circles in-filled with flowers and foliage in the centre⁷¹. The rest of the outer surface is tooled in relief with an intricate trellis of rosettes and lotus flowers. Similarly to our example, the Royal Collection shield presents traces of paint and gilt outlines, supporting the idea that these carved *dhals* must have originally been quite colourful.

Taking into account the decorative vocabulary of many of these carved shields, the natural world seems to be the most recurrent source of inspiration, showcasing plenty of foliage, vegetal meanderings, interlocking scrollwork, and traditional Indian flowers like rosettes, lotuses and occasionally, marigolds. The rarity of the present example is enhanced by the notable profusion of Arabic inscriptions, using a distinctive rounded variant of the calligraphic script called *rayhani*.

This 'pen' style was considered the chancellery script for official letters, missives and edicts, but it soon flowed into architectural and artistic productions as well. Invented by the Abbasid Arabic calligrapher Ibn al-Bawwab, *rayhani* became the small-sized companion of *muhaqqaq*, another beloved and praised Arabic script, mostly used in the productions of Qur'ans. Both calligraphic styles witnessed a rapid decline after the seventeenth century, often abandoned in favour of simpler and neater *naskh*, the most widespread script in the Muslim world. The script's style, profusion of inscriptions, and distinctive Shi'a reference of the central medallion on the present *dhal*, suggest its strong affiliation to Iran and the Persianate world. Indeed, shields (*separ*) made in Iran are renowned for being adorned with a plethora of apotropaic inscriptions, often quoting Persian poems, but also Shi'a prayers (in particular, *Nad-e 'Ali*) and Quranic passages. The mention of 'Ali's sword, Zulfiqar, further reinforces the link between this shield and long-standing Persian military traditions and practices. Inscriptions like *la sayf illa dhu'l-faqar* (there is no sword but Dhu'l-faqar / Zulfiqar) were often considered essential protective spells by Persian soldiers, guaranteeing not only victory, but also protection in battle⁷². The frequent mention of the name of God (*Allah*) in the cartouches on the outer decorative band also contributed to the transformation of this military accessory into a portable auspicious talisman. In fact, adding the name of the Most Gracious and Most Merciful to arms and armours was believed to imbue them with a protective, spiritual charge, another practice frequently observed in Islamic and Persian models, less so in Indian specimens.

Further research on this riveting *dhal* might disclose more clues on its specific attribution and commission, but so far, it is safe to assume that this was definitely not a common example. Its owner, most probably a pious Shi'a warrior, would have been mesmerised by the intricacy of its aesthetic and would have immediately recognised (and praised) the protective halo dispensed by the dense inscriptions adorning its outer surface.

My thanks to Will Kwiatkowski for translating the central inscriptions.

B.C. & R.S.

References

- ⁶⁹ Bashir Mohamed, *The Arts of the Muslim Knight: The Furusiyya Art Foundation Collection*, 2007, p.377, no.357, inv. no. R-877
- ⁷⁰ https://www.runjeetsingh.com/inventory/283/carved_leather_shield
- ⁷¹ <https://www.rct.uk/collection/37531/shield>
- ⁷² Michele Bernardini, 'Le Armi Persiane', in *Islam: Armi e Armature dalla Collezione di Frederick Stibbert*, 2014, p. 65



**BHUTANESE
ROYAL GUARD
DHAL (SHIELD)**

BHUTAN
19TH CENTURY

DIAMETER 470MM

This nineteenth-century shield is of the distinctive two-tone type carried by the Bhutanese Royal Guard. Its quality and detail are far superior than most surviving examples, suggesting perhaps that it was commissioned for a high-ranking officer within the royal guard troops. Made from animal hide, the centre's glossy dark black lacquer finish, sets a charming contrast with the bright, red-lacquered everted border.

Mounted with four rounded brass bosses, each surrounded by a geometric fretwork band around the edge and top sections that are elegantly chased with spiralling cloud patterns. At the crest of the shield is a silver-coloured *ad-chand* (half-moon) with a gilt-copper *surya* (sun), the pair symbolising *upaya* (method) and *prajna* (wisdom). Centrally anointed with a red *tilak* dot, this mark was supposed to imbue the *dhal* with protective luck.

On the reverse, a well-preserved leather cushion retains its original bold green trim and metal fastenings on the four corners, securing two leather straps with red, plaited leather inserts - another remarkable detail not commonly found on most guards' shields. Wrapped delicately around these holders, is a long-wearing strap, weaved in a vibrantly coloured, striped traditional Bhutanese fabric.

Comparable shields can be seen in a photograph dated 1905, carried by the bodyguards of Ugyen Wangchuck, who went on to become the first King of Bhutan.⁷³

A similar shield is also kept in the Royal Armouries, Leeds, UK, currently on display in case 2 in the Oriental Gallery (No. XXVIA. 107); and another in The Metropolitan Museum⁷⁴ which is also published in the pioneering work 'A Glossary of the Construction, Decoration

and Use of Arms and Armor in all Countries and in all Times. Together with Some Closely Related Subjects', Stone, George Cameron Stone, Portland, Maine: The Southworth Press, 1934, pp.53, cat.no.69.

Provenance

Art market USA

References

^{73.} Christian Shicklgruber & Francoise Pommaré, *Bhutan: Mountain Fortress of the Gods*, 1998, pp. 225

^{74.} <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/31803>, inv. no. 36.25.630 - Stone, fig.69, p.53





SUIT OF ARMOUR
WITH WOOTZ
BREAST PLATES

PROBABLY DECCAN (INDIA)
17TH CENTURY

A complete suit of Indian armour consisting of a mail and plate helmet, shirt and mail trousers holding a long all-steel lance of the same period and place. It is unusual to find a complete set, as Indian armouries nearly always stored shirts, helmets and trousers independently, meaning most were separated when the armouries deaccessioned. It is likely to be down to the distinctive decoration on the shirt and helmet that this set has managed to remain together. Both the helmet and shirt plates have cusped brass borders applied, which provide both strength and decoration. A shirt with similar adornment is published by Ricketts and Missillier.⁷⁵

The helmet is formed of nine slightly convex triangular steel plates and is surmounted by a steel disc fitted with a plume holder. Mounted on the front plate is a sliding nasal guard terminating top and bottom with tear drop shaped finials. A small hook is present to secure the guard in the up position when not in use.

The attached aventail is made of heavy, small, fine rings, providing excellent and necessary protection to the face, neck and shoulders. A small V flap at the face provides the wearer with an option to lift it to increase their visibility.

The shirt is also made of fine but heavy rings. The chest has two large plates of wootz or watered steel, a highly unusual feature, fitted with four pairs of flower shaped buckles, two of which are secured with an old fabric belt. The flower shaped buckle is a detail that makes this easy to identify as an Indian mail shirt of higher quality (also present in the Ricketts and Missilier example cited above). Fish shaped buckles were also used on similarly superior shirts. One of which, sold by us, is now in the David collection, Copenhagen.⁷⁶ The sides of the shirt are fitted with two plates under each arm to protect the kidney area and also decorated with brass borders. The back consists of three rows of overlapping steel lamellae

tapering in towards the waist, the centre row with decorative cusped arches. A pair of mail trousers completes the ensemble, to make the wearer of this suit practically impenetrable.

One of the plates on the inside has an inscription engraved in Devangari. It records the capture of the shirt by Anup Singh of Bikaner who was acting as a general for the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb.

Provenance

By repute - Eric Vaule, New York

References

⁷⁵ Ricketts & Missillier, *Splendeur des Armes Orientales*, 1988, pp.84, cat. no.139

⁷⁶ Folsach/Meyer/Wandel, *Fighting, Hunting, Impressing – Arms and Armour from the Islamic World 1500-1850*, 2021, pp.160-161, cat.no.55



QUIVER WITH
ARROWS

CHINA (QING DYNASTY)
FIRST HALF OF 19TH CENTURY

OVERALL 300MM

A Qing dynasty quiver, probably dating from the first half of the nineteenth century, made with a wooden base and black lacquered body, with bone inlays depicting auspicious Chinese symbols.

Easily identifiable are the implements associated with the *Bāxiān* (八仙) or “Eight Immortals” of the Taoist pantheon:

- Swords of Lǚ Dongbin, Scholar, poet and leader of the eight.
- Lotus flower of He Xiāngu, Improver of health.
- Jade tablets of Cao Guojiu, Song scholar who attained immortality. Crutch and calabash of Lǐ Tiégui, Immortal of medicine.
- Flower basket of Lan Caihe, Patron of florists and gardeners.
- Flute of Han Xiāngzǐ, Patron saint of musicians.
- Castanets of Zhāng Guolāo, The eccentric alchemist.
- Fan of Zhōnglǐ Quān, who can resurrect the dead and turn silver to gold.

Apart from these elements, a number of other auspicious symbols are depicted, such as books, scrolls, brushes, a *go* board and a *guqin* all part of a Chinese suite of “treasures” associated with the Chinese scholar’s class.

Other notable features include six distinctive flowers that appear like blazing stars with lozenge-shaped petals, and three stems with flower buds on the front. Below that is a stylised longevity symbol: *shòu*.

One rather unusual feature is the slot on the side of the quiver which is obviously meant to hold a long, narrow implement of some sort. However, there is no obvious archery-related piece of equipment that would fit into it. So far this is the only encountered quiver that has this feature.

Along the back are two hinges that would have held a number of pockets for special arrows, usually three. The small loop is for a counterbalancing strap. The hole at the top would have held a screw, often with a large wingnut, to tighten the top of the quiver.

This type of work, with bone inlaid in thick lacquer and reliance on lozenge shapes for floral features, is very distinct. It is sometimes found on *trousse* sets, and has also been seen on a lacquered box, albeit privately owned and without provenance, making it impossible to establish a date or place of production.

There is also a small *kang* table in the Victoria & Albert Museum accession number FE.25.2.1985 that exhibits similar work, especially in the lozenge-shaped flower petals shown within some flowers on the side⁷⁷. The museum database gives contradictory dates of “1550-1599” and “seventeenth century”, while in the museum publication, the same piece is dated to 1650-1720.⁷⁸

This is the only quiver we’ve come into contact with, that is decorated in this way. Stylistically, it would usually be attributed to Southern China, nineteenth century, as this corresponds with the profile shape of the quiver. Major centres of inlaid work at the time were in Canton and Suzhou.⁷⁹

The quiver is shown here, with four large Qing arrows of the period. Some restoration to the inlay.

The strong Chinese cultural influence on this piece may indicate that it was worn by a Chinese soldier; but some Manchus were also very much sinified and valued scholarly pursuits at this time, such as poetry.⁸⁰

P.D.

References

- 77. <https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O41311/table/>
- 78. Craig Clunas; *Chinese Furniture*. Bamboo Publishing Ltd. London. 1988. Page 61
- 79. IBID
- 80. Mark C. Elliott; *The Manchu Way*. Stanford University Press 2001. Pages 10 & 295





**KERIS HOLDER
IN THE FORM
OF A DEMON**

BALI, INDONESIA
19TH - 20TH CENTURY

HEIGHT 510MM

A polychromed wooden *keris* holder in unusually well-preserved condition carved from a single piece of wood. The red-skinned seated figure, probably a character from one of the Hindu epics, has a fiendish expression but is missing the characteristics a demon might possess.⁸¹ The figure's red eyes are bulging but his exposed top row of teeth are distinctly human, not devilish. He also bears forehead markings one might associate with a Hindu *tilak* - a religious forehead marking. One can clearly see two horizontal bow-shaped lines painted in gold and black and a third eye in gold. His unflattering body shape suggests he was not a hero in any epic, but his chest is nonetheless adorned in gold paint. His lower body is wrapped in a traditional Balinese way, and the pattern shown is reminiscent of Balinese *prada* or *perada*, which is a technique of using gold leaf dust to decorate the fabric.⁸² These luxurious cloths are worn at Balinese festivals and religious ceremonies.

The figure sits on an integral base, carved to resemble an intertwined unknown material. His arms are bent and hollowed, creating bottomless cups for two *keris* to be placed. The tips of the scabbard were designed to rest on his bent legs. His head is perhaps the most unique feature of this *keris*. He appears to have been given real hair. Whether it is human or animal is yet unknown and remains a topic of future interest. The science to determine if there is any human DNA in hair is not readily available unless the strand still possesses its root, which is not the case in this instance.

Overall, the piece is in remarkably well-preserved condition. The only notable exception is a crack, potentially caused by old age, although there are natural faults present in many *keris* holders in private and public collections.

A similar seated demon *keris* holder is in the Metropolitan Museum. It was gifted by the well-known arms and armour collector, George Cameron Stone.⁸³

Provenance

Erik Farrow, San Francisco

Thomas Murray, San Francisco

Thomas L. Cooper Ph. D. Author of multiple books on Balinese-Javanese culture

References

- ^{81.} My thanks to Siddhartha Jha for his observations on the identification of the character
- ^{82.} My thanks to Lesley S Pullen for her observations on the textile
- ^{83.} <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/24315>



ROYAL MANUSCRIPT
HOLDER AND
CALLIGRAPHER'S
CASE

POSSIBLY CIREBON, WEST JAVA,
INDONESIA, DUTCH EAST INDIES
19TH CENTURY

LENGTH	380MM
WIDTH	175MM
HEIGHT	180MM

A nineteenth-century carved and red-lacquered wooden portable writing case, possibly attributed to the Sultanate of Cirebon, West Java. Of rectangular form, the case sits on its own integral stepped base. At one end, it features three calligrapher's drawers to store writing implements and tools, which are concealed by profuse carving that enhances each side panel of the case. Decorated in cinnabar red lacquer, the four side panels showcase elegant epigraphic cartouches set against a dense ground of scrolling clouds, reminiscent of the traditional *mega mendung* (sun rays and clouds) motif, indigenous to Cirebon. Each cartouche is inscribed with three overlapping lines of *Jawi* script mixing Arabic and local languages. Condition-wise, there is a small piece missing from the corner of one of the drawer fronts, and some general wear; but otherwise it is a rare and well-preserved object.

The decorative vocabulary, overall design, and incorporation of *Jawi* Arabic script of the present case present a strong affinity with

another major artistic production attributed to West Java, and specifically Cirebon: the *batik* industry. Indeed, Cirebon and other centres located on the northern coast of the island were known to specialise in the creation of elaborate dyed textiles showcasing Arabic calligraphy and Islamic motifs, often referred to as *kain batik tulisan Arab*. Initially, the Arabic script was introduced in these textiles as a graphic element; only later, it started fulfilling a protective and well-wishing function.⁸⁴ Calligraphy, serving either an ornamental or religious purpose, was often compartmentalised in geometric cartouches, similarly to the sides of this case. Surrounding the text, one would have encountered recurrent auspicious motifs such as vegetal meanderings, cloud banners, floral sprays, along with zoomorphic figures and traditional Islamic symbols, like Ali's sword, *Zulfiqar*. Their function was to emphasise and boost the 'religious charge' of the artwork. Both these characteristics can be encountered on a *batik* cloth in the Museum für Völkerkunde, Vienna (inv. no. I 76.002)⁸⁵, as well

as on the present wooden case, testifying to the heterogeneous intersection of the Javanese arts' decorative vocabulary. The incorporation of motifs with the Arabic script remained prominent in Cirebon's repertoire of carved wooden production, well into the twentieth century. This is evident in two calligraphic panels in the collection of the Asian Civilisations Museum (ACM), Singapore.⁸⁶

The text on this specimen, addressed to a pious noble prince, refers to the customary story of the Archangel Gabriel (*Jibrā'il*) delivering the revelation to 125,000 prophets. It also discloses the purpose of the box, conceived as a holder for an important dictionary (or probably an encyclopaedic work) including almanacs of the Arab and Persian/ non-Arab languages (probably Javanese too).



The inscriptions have been deciphered as follows, and are still a work in progress:

Side 1	Side 3
Agung Aziz/Kanjeng p. al-'aẓīm/ [probably a proper name]/zaman Walanda (Great and noble Prince// during the Dutch [colonial] period)	bayna (?) ajmal al-ghulām - Seribu (?) ke-wulan Jumād al-ākhir tahun ālāf al-jibrā'il (?) (... the best child - [on the month of] Jumād al-ākhir in the year one thousand [of Hijri]....)
Side 2	Side 4
Hādihā makān al-Mu'jam (min) yaday al-shaykh faqīr/al-ḥakīm al-shāfi' fī balad al-akbar shaqī (?) tarīkh al-'arabi wa-l-'ajami— huwa al-nabī ḥaram/ghaniyyun rabbī kashafanī Allāhu fa-akhadza faḍā'ilā kalimahu (This is the place [or repository] of the dictionary from the poor; wise Shaykh in the great country [containing] the Arabic and non-Arabic almanac – He is the noble Prophet/Oh My Lord the Almighty, God revealed me, so he took the virtues of His word)	Nuzūl jibrā'il 'alā al-anbiyā' 'alayhim al-salām al-fay 'ishrūna wa khamṣu mi'ah/'ishruna khamṣa 'ashar mi'ah al-fān (the Angel Gabriel delivered [divine revelation] to 125,000 prophets.....)
	In Java, the Sultanate of Cirebon was a well-established and renowned hub of Islamic Javanese art. Its connection with the Muslim faith goes back to the fifteenth century, following the first 'Islamising' wave

in the archipelago. Around this time, nine preachers (*wali*) were tasked with the mission of spreading Allah's word. Among them was the first ruler of Cirebon, Sunan Gunung Jati (1448 – 1568), who was married to the Chinese princess On Tie, responsible for the introduction of Chinese designs and models in the local *batik* production, thanks to her vast collection of artworks, in particular Chinese ceramics.⁸⁷ Thus, it appears that from the fifteenth century onward, Cirebon established itself as a primary multi-cultural centre and homogeneous melting pot of Sino-Islamic influences and traditions, which led to the local creation of truly iconic and unusual works of art, like the present calligrapher's case. Worthy of further research, this object is a precious witness to the impact the Islamic faith and beliefs had in the Malay and Indonesian archipelagos, from the first Muslim settlements until the present day.

B.C. & R.S.

My thanks to Zacky Khairul Umam for his work in translating the inscriptions.

Provenance

Dutch art market (by repute a Dutch artist living in the Hague)

References

⁸⁴ R. Mittersakschmöller and H. Leigh-Theisen, *Patterns of Life: A Gateway to Understanding Indonesian Textiles*, chapt. 3, in *First Under Heaven: the Art of Asia*, Hali Publications Ltd., p.52

⁸⁵ Published *IB/D*, cat. 12, p. 52

⁸⁶ Inv. no. 2000-05570 (<https://www.roots.gov.sg/Collection-Landing/listing/1129664>) and inv. no. 2000-05571 (<https://www.roots.gov.sg/Collection-Landing/listing/1127915>)

⁸⁷ Dale Carolyn Gluckman, S. Muddin, and P. Petcharaburanin (ed.), *A Royal Treasure: The Javanese Batik Collection of King Chulalongkorn of Siam*, 2018, p. 190

SANDALWOOD CASKET

MYSORE (INDIA)
THE LAST QUARTER OF THE
19TH CENTURY

LENGTH 387MM
WIDTH 290MM
HEIGHT 340MM

Inspired by the dense evergreen forests of Southern India, this casket carved in sandalwood, encapsulates popular South Indian legends. The lid of the box is a dynamic tableau of three deities. At the centre, is the climax of the popular chronicle, the Devi Mahatmyam where Goddess Durga slays the Buffalo demon Mahisha earning her the title Mahishasuramardhini⁸⁸. To her left is the five-headed Shiva atop his mount Nandi. This form of Shiva, called Sadha Shiva, depicts him as a supreme singular god who manifests in five forms instead of the popular triad. This was a concept to establish his supremacy amongst the Hindu holy trinity. On Durga's right is Hanuman,⁸⁹ taunting the ten-headed Ravana. While Ravana is depicted in the Hindu epic Ramayana, as a demon and antihero, in this panel he is presented in the capacity of being a great devotee of Lord Shiva. He is seen as a very learned man, with ten heads representing his various fields of expertise. Demigods, saints, and members of the goddess's army fill the scene. The demon head Kirthi Mukha is carved on the borders, at the feet of the goddess. The presence of this head is widely believed to ward off evil.

This is a rather unusual composition of deities, probably depicting a local tale or maybe the tutelary deities of the region, such as the Sadashiva of the shrine in the town Murdeshwar and Durga as Mookambika⁹⁰, as she is referred to by local devotees. Ravana is depicted here as a great devotee dancing in bliss, who is unperturbed by Hanuman's taunts.

Surrounding the central frieze are scalloped arches with deities and saints depicted against foliated backdrops. A male figure with a spear in his hand can be attributed to the warrior god Karthikeya who is the son of Lord Shiva.

The Shaivite Saint Daksha can be identified with the curved Ram horns fashioned as a headdress and Horse, and the headed figure as the celestial musician Tumburu, with a harp stung on his shoulder. The corners of the lid each have a pair of parrots, framed by borders of flowerheads. The sides of the casket are divided into two registers and are separated by a thin border of four-petal flowers. Lions, tigers, antelopes, and elephants gallop about lush foliage in the lower tier. The top tier features pillared recesses framed by scalloped arches set against intrinsically carved backdrops.⁹¹ Within each recess are figures of deities, such as Vishnu riding his mount, the eagle Garuda, Krishna dancing on the serpent Kali, and Krishna riding on a chariot. Also seen are Hanuman, female dancers, and Saints seated under parasols with their heads veiled.

The interior of the box has a removable tray with eleven compartments that divide the box into two levels. The centre compartment has a lid with a flower at the heart. The box sits on four stylised legs that are shaped like Garudas kneeling in reverence, who are identifiable by their beaks and wings.

Characterised by extremely intricate work, usually in contrasting degrees of relief, carved sandalwood objects were expertly made in present-day Karnataka, South India, for Western consumption. One such artefact that came from this atelier, was an album cover Presented to King Edward VII, then Prince of Wales, during his tour of India in 1875-76 at Mysore.⁹² The principal decorative motifs are Hindu deities portrayed in an architectural framework, each deity positioned in an arch or niche.⁹³ Created by a community of craftsmen called the 'Guligars' who lived in Mysore and Canara, the objects were of Western forms like caskets and writing boxes.

Their design and decoration were inspired by local art and architecture. A few examples were crafted for the Great Exhibition of 1851, for the Victorian public, who were viewing art from the Indian sub-continent for the first time. From then on, sandalwood objects were featured regularly in the exhibitions that followed where they were considered the finest examples of carvings from India. Being aesthetically magnificent and functionally beneficial made these objects very popular amongst collectors. They were created in different sizes with larger pieces, such as this casket made only on commission, and what makes this a special piece.

S.S.N.

Provenance

UK art market

References

- 88. Mahishasuramardhini: Mahisha-asura- mardhini translates to She who destroyed the demon Mahisha
- 89. Hanuman: A minor god, son of the Wind god who is depicted as a monkey. He is an ardent devotee of Lord Rama, a form of Vishnu who is the nemesis of Ravana
- 90. Mookambika: Goddess Ambika, a form of Durga who vanquished the Demon, Mookasura
- 91. For similar workmanship: Cat 17, *Furniture from British India and Ceylon*, V&A Publications, 2001, p.155
- 92. Album case c.1870-75, Sandalwood and silver, 61.0 x 56.3 x 10.5 cm (whole object) , RCIN 90629 <https://www.rct.uk/collection/90629>
- 93. Amin Jaffer, *Furniture from British India and Ceylon*, V&A Publications, 2001, p.149



TAUS

PUNJAB (INDIA)
19TH CENTURY

OVERALL 970MM

A popular stringed musical instrument in nineteenth century Northern India and Punjab characterised by a zoomorphic shape.

This traditional Indian wooden bowed lute is known as a *taus* (Persian) or *mayuri veena* (Sanskrit), both names referring to its peacock form. It is polychrome-painted, lacquered, and decorated with inlaid bone crest and rectangular plaques on the edges of the headstock, profusely incised with repeating auspicious 'eyed' or 'ring and dot' motifs outlined in geometric patterns.

It features four melody strings crossing the tall, straight and narrow *dandi* (fingerboard or stem), from the top four turning pegs down to the peacock-shaped *kudam* (resonator). Its base is enhanced with long iridescent 'eyed' peacock feathers. The vibrating skin of the resonating chamber above the back of the bird, is made of a piece of animal skin with a lovely patina. To further enhance its zoomorphic rendering, the elongated eyes, curved beak and carved wings with rounded feather motifs are painted in red, white, black, and gold, and the underbelly presents the bird's feet in yellow. The fingerboard is decorated with cusped arches and flowers painted in black and gold. The tail of the instrument is fittingly adorned with later peacock feathers placed in an aperture solely designed for this purpose.

Borrowing elements from other classical Indian chordophones, this extremely rare *taus* or *mayuri veena* was probably played with a matching bow touching the four main melody strings, located over the metallic frets on the stem - one for each semitone of two octaves. Sadly, the metallic frets, and sympathetic strings, which provided additional resonance, are now missing from the present example. Departing from the standard design of Southern Indian *veena* instruments, this zoomorphic bowed lute distinguishes itself for the absence of both a smaller gourd fixed underneath the stem's neck, and three drone or side strings used for rhythmic accompaniment.

The lack of accurate written accounts recording the transmission of specialised musicians' (*kirtanee* or *ragi*) musical knowledge and the instruments they played at the time of the Sikh Gurus, makes it difficult to determine this instrument's genesis. The invention of the *taus* is commonly credited to the highly revered Guru Hargobind Sahib (19 June 1595 – 28 February 1644), the Sixth Guru of Sikhi, founder of the *Akal Sena* (Sikh military force), and commissioner of the *Akal Takht* (seat of justice and earthly authority) in Amritsar. According to the personal recollection of an esteemed Sikh *taus* player and long-standing, elite member of the *Gurbani Kirtan Parampara*, Bhai Avtar Singh (1925 – 2006)⁹⁴, Guru Hargobind's inspiration to design this new

instrument was sparked by a real peacock, which spontaneously joined a musical gathering, crying out its typical wailing sound. Its call left the Guru inspired and resolute to craft an instrument which combined the resonation of classical Hindustani string instruments and the peacock's plaintive cry.⁹⁵ In the same interview where Bhai Avtar Singh described the genesis of this instrument, he also shared the memory of how he started playing the *taus* at the age of ten, under the strict supervision of his father. He stated that: "*When the taus is being played, it has such a loud and deeply resonant sound that no other instrument can match it.*" (Bhai Avtar Singh, recorded interview, Espanola, New Mexico, 27th August 2003). From this account, it became clear that the bowed lute came to play a pivotal role in Sikh *kirtan* and as such, in the transmission of the *vidya* (spiritual knowledge) to the *sangat* (community). Its relevance still reverberates in modern Sikh history. In fact, during the *Jaito Morcha* (a planned peaceful protest which began in February 1924 against the British who had put the Sikh community under heavy siege), Bhai Avtar Singh's father, one of the Sikh leaders, was badly injured affecting his hand and joints, preventing him from playing the *taus* without being in great pain. Nevertheless, he always opened his *kirtans* with this revered instrument, quickly passing it to his son upon his closure, so he could continue playing it for the rest of the composition.⁹⁶

Another highly respected *kirtani*, Bhai Baldeep Singh (born 1969) adds complimenting oral history to that of Bhai Avtar Singh. He places on record, in a collaborative interview with the V&A museum⁹⁷ and Darbar Arts Culture & Heritage Trust⁹⁸, that it was indeed Guru Hargobind who was responsible for the invention of the *taus*, and that the Guru was impelled to create the instrument in defiance of the Mughal emperor for creating the Peacock throne (and earlier decreeing that no South Asian ruler should have his throne at the same level or higher than the Mughal throne). Guru Hargobind had already built the Akal Takht (around 1606-1609) in defiance of the decree, and the creating of the *taus* was sending a clear message to the emperor. Bhai Baldeep Singh quotes Guru: "instead of oppressing people, (with the *taus*) we will sing the praise of *Akaal* (God)"

Bhai Baldeep doesn't name the emperor(s), but the timeline confirms that it was Jahangir who bought the Mughal throne from Allahbad to Agra in 1610, and thus was responsible for the decree (in regard to the heights of other thrones), and that it was Shah Jahan who commissioned the Peacock throne in 1635. The Guru would have been 40 years old when the peacock throne was inaugurated, so this is a suggested time of the invention of the *taus*.

As has been shown, the *taus* is a classical Indian musical instrument heralding resilience and strength. Its artistic accomplishment and knowledge could have not been embodied in the visual traditions of the subcontinent by a more pertinent bird than a peacock. Revered as a sacred bird originally created from Garuda's feathers, symbolising immortality, the peacock is especially linked to two Hindu deities, namely the Goddess of Knowledge, Music and Art, Saraswati, and the God of War and Victory, Kartikeya.⁹⁹

Taus very rarely appear on the market, none are known to us in private collections of Sikh art, but comparable specimens of this remarkable instrument can be admired in the collections of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (inv. no. 89.4.163)¹⁰⁰; the V&A museum, London (inv. no. 182-1882)¹⁰¹; and the Yale Collection of Musical Instruments (inv. no. 4202.1960)¹⁰². Two lesser-known examples are also housed in St Cecilia's Hall¹⁰³, a small concert hall and musical museum in Edinburgh, and another in the Egmore Museum, Chennai.¹⁰⁴

B.C. & R.S.

Provenance

Tony Bingham collection UK

References

- 94. For further reference on Bhai Avtar Singh and his family, arguably the oldest extant lineage of Sikh *kirtanee's* and guardians of the *Gurbani Sangeet*, please see F. Cassio and Nirinjan Kaur Khalsa-Baker, "Singing Dharam: Sonic Transmission of Knowledge in the Sikh Path", in *Beacons of Dharma: Spiritual Exemplars for the Modern Age*, 2020, pp. 276 – 277
- 95. IBID, pp. 285 – 286
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- 97. <http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/exhibitions/display-musical-wonders-of-india/taus/>
- 98. <https://www.darbar.org>
- 99. Anna L. Dallapiccola, *Dictionary of Hindu Lore and Legend*, 2002, p. 135
- 100. <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/500709>.
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A SEA MONSTER
DEVOURING A SHIP

OPAQUE
WATERCOLOUR
ON PAPER

INDIA, PROVINCIAL MUGHAL,
PROBABLY AWADH

CIRCA 1780-1800

FOLIO:
HEIGHT 285MM
WIDTH 203MM

MINIATURE:
HEIGHT 212MM
WIDTH 165MM

On an album page with a repeating motif of a single upright leaf in gold.

Verso has a repeating motif of a stem with three leaves and a narrow ornamental border; numbered 29 in roman numerals in black ink at top.

This striking painting of a *Sea Monster Devouring a Ship* combines homage to tradition with its artist's unique stylistic sensibility in a scene full of drama and humour. A huge sea monster – an imaginative take on the Indian *gharial* or freshwater crocodile - rises from the water to swallow a ship and its seafarers almost in a single gulp. A band of eight survivors stave off their fate, with a valiant archer and axe-wielding man atop the bow fighting back. They are all men, despite some having a rather feminine look. The archer's arms create a strong diagonal line with the snout of the leviathan, leading to the two arrows lodged between the sea monster's fiery pink eyes. In its gaping maw, a man dressed in green with a wonderful moustache lies prone on what remains of the deck. He grabs hold of the mast and white sails, perhaps intending to use them to jam open the toothy jaw of the beast. His outstretched arm grasps in vain at his companion in yellow, who dives into the water in a beautifully stylised pose, accentuated by the way the water reveals nothing beneath its opaque surface, deliberately embracing anti-illusionism. Another moustached man is already in the water looking a little worried. Everyone else looks surprisingly relaxed, especially the young man who nonchalantly pivots his elbow to hold open the crocodile's giant mouth with a hint of a smile, as if engaged in an arm wrestle. The artist's dry wit almost borders on the ironic with this romanticising of their chivalric responses. The water is meticulously drawn with fine wavy lines on a subtly modulated grey ground. It stretches across the surface of the image as a large abstract space, disturbed only by the white foamy outline around the commotion.

The Provincial Mughal training of the artist is clear, but stylistically it is something of a one-off. The faces in three-quarter profile, with moustaches invoke a nostalgic Persianate idiom intuitively blended with figural traits that also derive from a knowledge of European art, pointing in all probability to Awadh. Jeremiah P. Losty placed it to Lucknow in the late eighteenth century. The style has certain affinities to works by the leading Lucknow artist Mir Kalan Khan (active c. 1730-75) notwithstanding its bolder, more abstract vision and minimalist aesthetic. One of Mir Kalan Khan's signed works, *A Man rescued from a Sea Monster by a Prince's Vessel*, Faizabad c. 1750, has an entire ship and similar crocodile monster to this painting (Paris, Collection Frits Lugt, 1971 - T.76), as does an illustration in the *Karnama-i 'Ishq*, by Govardhan II, c. 1734-9, court artist to the Mughal emperor Muhammad Shah in Delhi (British Library, Johnson Album 38, f.42v). But our painter also seems to draw on a wider knowledge of Rajasthani painting in the Mughal idiom, especially from Bikaner and Jodhpur. In fact, its proximity to other works of similar composition suggest it likely derives from *charbas* (pattern drawings) that were in circulation, shared by artists who not infrequently moved from one patron to another (for comparison, see Oliver Forge and Brendan Lynch Ltd, *Indian Painting 1650-1900*, New York, March 2010, cat. 4). The verso of the painting has a repeating motif consistent with album border decoration from Awadh in the late eighteenth century. The page is numbered 29 in black ink in roman numerals in an eighteenth- or nineteenth-century European hand, indicating that it was once part of a larger album.

The composition pays tribute, at some remove, to the great *Hamzanama* manuscript made for the Mughal emperor Akbar, c. 1558-73, while perhaps also echoing stories from the great Iranian epic of the *Shahnama* by

Firdausi (934-1020). The massive project of illustrating the adventures of Hamza, uncle of the Prophet Muhammad, occupied Akbar's artists for some 15 years, comprising 1400 large paintings in 12 volumes. Of the surviving paintings a *Leviathan attacks Hamza and his party of Three Ships* attributed to Basawan is particularly relevant, portraying a huge crocodile sea monster breaching the water to the right (see John Seyller, *Adventures of Hamza. Painting and Storytelling In India*, 2002, no. 27). Hamza standing astride his boat shoots the beast in the eye with a similar downward diagonal compositional thrust.

While Basawan's busy scene is full of derring-do in swirling water of white bodycolour on a dark ground, our painting makes a feature of the smooth water barely disturbed by the ensuing *tamasha*. Conceptually, this pivots the painting away from narrative meaning into the realm of metaphor. Sea monsters point beyond themselves to deeper untameable spiritual forces. Ultimately, this painting confronts the viewer with the manner in which they themselves wish to confront fate itself.

U.W.

Provenance

Private UK collection

Simon Ray London, 2011

Bonhams, Indian and Islamic Art, 7 October 2010, lot 324

Sotheby's Indian, Himalayan and Southeast Asian Art, New York, 22 March 1989, lot 76





28

PORTRAIT OF A SIKH HOLDING HIS BOW

NORTH INDIA,
PROBABLY PUNJAB
19TH CENTURY

HEIGHT 204MM
WIDTH 137MM



This attractive *Portrait of a Sikh Holding his Bow* comes from the Punjab in the foothills of the Himalayas. The figure is seated in profile to the right on a blue and white striped rug and holding his bow and arrow in a deliberate gesture facing upwards, it was a format that became popular in this period. His profile shows a strong nose and weak chin compensated by his thick black beard that juts forward. The most striking feature of his appearance is the blue colour of his skin, associating his identity with concepts of the divine heroic, since important Vaishnavite Hindu deities, notably Ram and Krishna, are represented with blue skin (while Sikhism does not worship these deities, they are revered). Our Bowman wears a draped pink turban and a white *jama* whose careful lines of stitching belie its apparent simplicity. A cotton cummerbund is knotted at the waist with borders that match his pink turban. His *chaddar* (shawl), meanwhile, has a checked pattern in an acidic green and red that hangs loosely over both shoulders. Around his neck he wears several necklaces including one with multiple pendants. On his left hip sits a sword, which would be secured to his body with a belt, but is only partially visible. He holds a recurved bow tucked under his right arm, whose string echoes the line of his thigh as if an extension of his very person. He holds a single arrow very precisely between his thumb and index finger pointing upwards. It is a gesture that seems to mean something beyond itself – perhaps it relates in some way to his sense of purpose and destiny.

A closely related painting identified as the Sikh Chief Bhag Singh Ahluwalia ca. 1785¹⁰⁵ is kept in the Government Museum and Art Gallery in Chandigarh, where it is attributed to the family workshop of Purkhu of Kangra. Sardar Bhag Singh Ahluwalia was heir of Jassa Singh Ahluwalia of Karputhala in the Punjab. The Ahluwalia's had gained control of the region in 1772. Both the sitter in our painting and the figure in the Chandigarh painting sit on identical carpets with vertical blue stripes and wear similar clothing. Both also hold bows and arrows in the same position, albeit in different hands and they face in reverse directions. But they are clearly not the same person, even allowing for the process of copying. A further significant difference is that our subject sits in the *bir-asan* (warrior pose) with one knee up, rather than with both knees tucked under. This presumably is a recognition of his martial prowess. The portrait brings alive a character from the world of the Sikh courts with perceptive observation and close attention to the details of the fabrics and accessories they wear.

U.W. & R.S.

Provenance

UK art market

References

¹⁰⁵ Goswamy, Smith, *I See No Stranger: Early Sikh Art and Devotion*, 2006, p.174-175, cat.no.5.5



STUDY OF A
SIKH WEDDING
PARTY & THREE
TOPOGRAPHICAL
VIEWS OF INDIA

BRITISH SCHOOL
NORTHERN INDIA
1868 – 1869

SIKH WEDDING PARTY
WIDTH 310MM
HEIGHT 210MM

MOSQUE
WIDTH 355MM
HEIGHT 220MM

MAHIM FORT, BOMBAY
WIDTH 350MM
HEIGHT 205MM

DALMAU GHAT (RAEBARELI)
WIDTH 355MM
HEIGHT 180MM

The watercolour study of *A Sikh Wedding Party* by a British painter is accompanied by three attractive topographical landscapes from the same hand. The paintings are on wove watercolour paper and their uniform size and dimension indicate that they came from the artist's sketch book. Sometime later, they were mounted on cartridge paper and identifying inscriptions were written in brown ink on the mounts in an italic English hand, typical of the late nineteenth century.

The first study is identified on the mount at the lower right, 'A Sikh Wedding Party'. Five figures, both men and women, sit tightly-packed on a traditional two-wheeled Indian cart (*rath*) drawn by white bullocks, as they journey to a Sikh wedding. The *rath*, or *gaddi*, plays a pivotal role in Punjabi and North Indian culture, as an essential component of the celebratory wedding procession. The vehicle and its bullocks are decorated

with colourful *phulkari* textiles, a traditional embroidery on hand-loom cotton, typical of the Punjab. The joyous occasion is inferred through the different colours that each attendee wears. Their shawls are pulled over their heads to shield them from the sun. They are in a rather bare and desolate environment, with a patch of palm trees in the distance. This is not a wealthy wedding party and thus it captures a moment in the lives of ordinary people – something which written sources rarely capture.

An intriguing inscription is written in pencil on the reverse of the painting itself:

'The Burn of the Vat
The Vale of Cobleen
August 14th 1880
When I see some dark hill point
its crest to the sky,
I think of the rocks that
o'ershadow Cobleen'

Whoever wrote this – likely the artist - was thinking of Aberdeenshire in Scotland. The Burn O'Vat is a water pool just six miles from the Vale of Cobleen (near Dee Castle). The two lines of poetry are from Lord Byron's poem, '*When I Roved a Young Highlander*' (1817). So, this opens up an interesting question as to how the inscription relates to the painting, for the poem is about a person longing for the familiar mountains of their home and dwelling on the love of a woman they have left behind. These were experiences which no doubt resonated deeply with many colonial sojourners in India.

The three topographical watercolours date from the late 1860s, capturing the landscape of India through the lens of the picturesque. Unlike the Sikh wedding party, the scenes focus on place rather than person. Two of the scenes are located near Raebareli in Uttar Pradesh.

The first shows a mosque, a well, and a marketplace (*serai*). It is inscribed on the mount, 'Well at Hydraghur. Ray Bareilly, 15 December 1868'. On the back of the painting, there is a pencil inscription that states, 'Musjid, Well & Serai/Built by ?Chandry ?Surfurang Ahmed/1868 at Hydraghur'. The name of the architect is uncertain and probably refers to the *serai* buildings, while the white marble mosque is a typical example of Mughal architecture of the seventeenth or early eighteenth century.

The second scene in the environs of Raebareli is of Dalmau Ghat on the banks of the River Ganges some 30km from the city. The riverfront is attractively lined with temples, trees, ghats and pavilions, and the waterway is busy with boats moving to and fro.

The inscription on the mount beneath the image states, 'Dalmau Ghaet, Ray Bareilly, January 4th, 1869', repeating an inscription in pencil on the verso of the painting itself, that reads, 'Dalmau Ghaet, Ray Bareilly district, January 4th 1869.' So the artist clearly spent at least three weeks in this region over Christmas and New Year 1868-9. There is a further pencil inscription on the verso which appears to list topographical sites. It is difficult to make out, but no. 6 on the list definitely says 'Church'. These two scenes are interesting from a colonial perspective because Raebareli was established as an important administrative centre by the British in 1867.

The final landscape scene from this artist's sketchbook shows a busy beach and seaport with palm trees.

One immediately senses the landscape is further south and this is confirmed by the inscription on the verso of the painting, which says 'Mahim Fort, Bombay', referring to Mumbai in Maharashtra. No fewer than eight boats lie at anchor, and the coastline is protected by a fortress bastion, Mahim Fort, which the British captured in the late eighteenth century. There is also a European style house.

The subjects, style, palette and inscriptions on these paintings point unequivocally to the work of an itinerant British artist in India in the late 1860s onwards. Perhaps it was someone of Scottish origin, given the inscriptions on the verso of the Sikh Wedding Party. Maybe a travelling officer or engineer, given the focus on landscape views, or a woman accompanying her husband.

As a group of works together, the paintings give an insight into the colonial vision of India in the heyday of the British Raj. They tell the tale of a colonial journey, landing by sea in Bombay and then travelling widely across Uttar Pradesh and the Punjab. They capture, river, city and ocean, in an all-encompassing gaze of India as the jewel in the crown of empire.

My thanks to Olivia Allan for her initial reading of the artist's inscriptions.

U.W. & R.S.

Provenance

UK art market





THE DANCE, 2018

JATINDER SINGH DURHAILAY

OIL ON CANVAS, WHITE COTTON
ROSARY, FRAMED

WIDTH 1800MM
HEIGHT 1800MM

A rare large-sized and early work by
Jatinder Singh Dhurhailay.

During a personal correspondence
with Runjeet Singh, the artist says:

“The painting is inspired by the *saki*
(story) of the first Sikh guru, Guru
Nanak Dev Ji (1469-1539) meeting
Kalyug – a personification of ‘*kali*
yuga’ (the age of Kali, or darkness¹⁰⁶).
In the *saki*, Guru Nanak was
meditating at dawn after bathing
and washing his hair. While he
was sitting in quiet contemplation,
Kalyug appeared to him, holding
a human phallus in one hand and
a human tongue in the other. He
attempted to distract the Guru
from his transcendent reflection,
and when he discovered he wasn’t
able to, he paid obeisance and
saw that the Guru was the true
giver of enlightenment. However
his submission was based on one
condition; that he would continue
to control mankind with the phallus
(lust) and the tongue (falsehood)’’.

Dhurhailay further comments: “The
Guru’s appearance is based upon
Sikh saintly traditions I witnessed
in India. I was instructed to wash
my hair and bathe in the morning
before meditation. The palm trees
are inspired by the jungles and
forests of India where I was happiest.
The overall theme of the painting
is that of the guru – he who brings
light where there is darkness – it is a
play of light and dark’’. ”

Artist Bio

Jatinder Singh Durhailay is an
Oxfordshire based painter &
musician. He was born in 1988 in
London, United Kingdom and in
2011 received a Bachelor of Arts
from University Arts London. He
has been working as a painter ever
since. His artistic practice spans
painting and drawing, with a special
interest in the usage of naturally
derived pigments, as well as Indian
classical music.

Blending myths and contemporary
culture, Durhailay’s portrayal of the
Sikh community and
culture is humorous, heroic and
poignant. He paints intricate and
observant portraits and
sceneries in the style of Indian
Mughal miniature painting,
spanning painterly subjects from
environmentalism to Bruce Lee and
moving fluidly between traditional
tropes and an ever-
changing complex present.

Jatinder Singh Durhailay’s work
has been shown nationally and
internationally, at The Artist
Room, London (2023), HOME,
London (2022), Nidi Gallery, Tokyo
(2019), Tender Books,
London (2016), National Army
Museum - Chelsea, London (2013),
Brunei Gallery, London
(2014), and Gallery Ivory and Black,
London (2012), amongst others.

Among the museums that have
acquired his works are the Montreal
Museum of Fine Arts, Canada, as
well as the Museum of Art and
Photography in Bangalore, India.

Durhailay is trained in Indian
Classical Music, performing and
practicing Kirtan as well as
playing (among others) the rare
Instruments that are the *Dilruba* and
Taus. He is part of the
musical duo Petit Oiseau and has
performed at Victoria & Albert
Museum, London (2022 &
2019), Leighton House, London
(2022), MK Gallery, Milton Keynes
(2018), Atelier Fluss, Tokyo (2018),
and at the National Gallery, London
(2017).

Provenance

Private collection of Runjeet Singh,
bought directly from the artist

References

^{106.} In sanatana Indic belief systems Kalyug
is the fourth and worst of the four
yugas (world ages). It is believed to
be the present age, which is full of
conflict and sin. Kalyug began 5,125
years ago and has 426,875 years
left as of 2024 CE. Kalyug will end in
the year 428,899 CE. See Joscelyn
Godwin, 2011, *Atlantis and the Cycles
of Time: Prophecies, Traditions, and
Occult Revelations. Inner Traditions*,
pp. 300–301



Photographs of Jatinder Singh Dhurhailay by Ryan Gattaora

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