

RUNJEET SINGH

ASIAN ARMS & ARMOUR & ASSOCIATED OBJECTS



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RUNJEET SINGH

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CONTENTS

Daggers	4
Swords	15
Polearms	17
Archery Equipment	21
Works of Art	23
Armour	27
Armour & Shields	29

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I

SHIKARGAH (HUNTING) KATAR

RAJASTHAN, INDIA
CIRCA 1850

OVERALL 440MM

The present dagger or 'katar' is a rare variant of the type thought to have been made in the town of Bundi in Rajasthan.

The hilt is engraved throughout with blossoming lotus flowers and leaved vine tendrils on a punched ground, the gap between the centrally swollen grip-bars then filled with the aforementioned fretwork which conveys a symmetrical array of four-petalled flowerheads set between stylised lotuses in miniature (it is this unique style of fretwork which suggests the dagger originates from Bundi).

A watered steel blade is inserted into the foliate v-shaped knuckle-bar and has been chiselled over the greater part of its sunken surface on one face with an elephant's head and the goddess Durga sat astride a tiger with Shiva shown running in front with her head turned back. Chiselled over the other face, the ends are similar; though in place of the divine scene a striped tiger is depicted hunting an antelope. The main section of the heavy blade tapers to a heavily reinforced, armour-piercing point.

These religious and *shikargah* (hunting) scenes set the dagger apart from most others. An essential comparandum, however, is to be found in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, where a katar (Accession Number 35.24.912) confirmed to originate from Bundi shows precisely the same decorative arrangement in its fretwork as the present piece.¹

References

- ¹ <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/31504>





2

HUNTING KNIFE

TIFLIS, GEORGIA
19TH CENTURY

OVERALL 400MM

In place of twin grip-scales, this exceptionally rare and important hunting knife, originating from the old city of Tiflis (or Tbilisi) in Georgia, has a walrus-ivory handle formed from a single piece, the steel bolster decorated in gold on a cross-hatched surface with vine tendrils and three-leafed splays. The lobed panel at the base of the blade is decorated mostly *en suite* with the bolster, though its gilt foliage slopes downwards and rises again to display the head of a long-beaked bird in profile. The blade itself is forged from coveted *bulat* (or 'wootz') steel that exhibits an elegant patterning over its surface and maintains its broad section for the greater part of its length before the spine and section thin and taper to a slender point.

The *kard* is complete with its original wooden scabbard covered in black velvet and fitted with a chape and locket of pattern-welded Damascus steel which have been generously overlaid in gold with arabesque panels and other foliate designs. Remarkably, even the leather strap and bracket used to secure the dagger to the wearer's left side are extant.

In this case, the most important dagger with which we can compare the present example is one preserved in the Hermitage Collection in Saint Petersburg, Russia, especially with reference to its blade (Inv. No. B.O.-2287).²

References

- ² See Vsevolod Obraztsov (2021), *Oriental Arms and Armour in the Hermitage Collection*, State Hermitage Museum, pp.148-149.







3

STEEL KARD

QAJAR EMPIRE
(MODERN-DAY IRAN)
18TH CENTURY

Forged entirely from steel, this kard dagger originates from the Qajar Empire (modern-day Iran).

A trio of calligraphic panels are etched over the hilt, the bolster and backstrap then overlaid with a series of miniature panels which alternate between foliate emblems and further calligraphic inscriptions in gold. Further panels at the base of the blade are chiselled with an enchanting array of unfurling flowerheads and intermingled vines which frame an arabesque calligraphic panel in gold.

The superb artistry of the dagger's decorative elements is matched by a 'wootz' steel blade in pristine condition which on close inspections shows a rich patterning, the blade tapering elegantly to a slender point. The dagger retains its black-painted shagreen scabbard with maroon-coloured cord for suspension.

The dagger's inscriptions are translated below:

On the hilt, Side A:

هولل رص نه ا ج ا ذا / می حرلا نم حرلا هولل م سب
نی دیف نول خدی / س انلا ت ی ا رو حت فللا و
چا وفا هولل

"In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful. When the help of God and the victory arrive, And thou seest men entering the religion of God by troops."

On the hilt, Side B:

كهنا / ه رغغت سا و كب ر دم حب حب سف
علا نی ز ما ای / (؟) عقت هان و ه اب او نا
نی دب
"Then utter the praise of thy Lord, implore His pardon; for He loveth to turn in mercy." (Qur'an 110) Ha. And He is a faithful companion(?). O Imam Zayn al-'Abidin!"

Panel at the base of the blade (both sides translated together):

ک دن ا م زاب ا م ا ذک / زاک تس ی شقن ض
ی یاقب م نیب ی م ن ا ر ی ت سهه
ن هس ۱۱۹۷

"The intention of the design is that something of us should endure, For I see no permanence in existence. Year 1197 (1782-3)" (from Gulistan, a famous Persian poem by Sa'di)

Spine of the blade and backstrap:

ن ای دای / ن ان م ای / ن ان حای / هولل ی
"O God! O Affectionate! O Beneficent! O Requirer!"

Underside of the tang:

یل عای / دم حمای / هولل ی
"O God! O Muhammad! O 'Ali!"

Bolster:

رک الو / لالچلا و ذای
"O Possessor of Majesty and Generosity!"

Daggers made in this style - with chiselled decoration in arabesque panels and foliate motifs - were exhibited by Runjeet Singh Ltd in *Iconic: New York 2018* (see Cat. Nos. 4 & 5).³ Further comparanda can be found in important museum collections. See a dagger (Accession No. 36.25.1043a, b) preserved at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York thought to have been made in the workshop of Muhammad Nami,⁴ and another (Accession No. 824-1893) at the Victoria & Albert Museum with similar chiselled decoration to our own.⁵

References

- See Runjeet Singh, *Iconic: New York 2018*, pp.18-21, Cat. Nos. 4 (http://runjeetsingh.com/inventory/176/kard_dagger) & 5 (http://runjeetsingh.com/inventory/177/pierced_kard).
- <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/24308>
- <https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O71512/knife-unknown/>



4

TAOTIE KNIFE

CHINA OR HONG KONG
EARLY 20TH CENTURY

OVERALL 420MM

The eye-catching orange visage that comprises the wooden pommel-cap of this mysterious knife is thought to depict the *taotie*, an ancient creature in Chinese mythology which predominantly appears in bronze works of the Shang dynasty, typically depicted as here with bulging eyes, thick brow, and with the animal's lower jaw missing.⁶ The pommel's larger section has been carved to convey the face of a demon with similarly enlarged eyes, as well as stretched scrolling ears, sharp teeth, and an unnerving grin. Moving eyes mounted on springs, a spirally carved hilt, scalloped wooden guard and red-painted scabbard add further to the piece's enticing aura.

Besides the subsequent entry in this exhibition, we do not know of similar knives, though other Chinese works of art help us to identify and contextualise the *taotie* in particular. Though dating to the 6th-5th Century B.C., a small plaque preserved at the Denver Art Museum (Accession Number 1997.200),⁷ for example, similarly depicts the creature with enlarged eyes, squat nose and heavy brow.

References

⁶ For an overview of the creature's iconography and possible interpretations see: Ladislav Kesner (1991), "The Taotie Reconsidered: Meanings and Functions of the Shang Theriomorphic Imagery", *Artibus Asiae*, Vol.51, No.1/2, pp.29-53.

⁷ <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/community.1454531>





5

SMALLER TAOTIE KNIFE

CHINA OR HONG KONG
EARLY 20TH CENTURY

OVERALL 270MM

Like the previous example, this knife is most striking for its alluring *taotie*-pommel with moving eyes, though the black horn hilt is instead carved in deep relief to convey leafy branches, and the copper quatrefoil guard has been made from a Chinese Imperial 20 cash copper coin (Yunnan Province, minted in 1906). The blade, furthermore, is cut close to its filed back-edge with a series of five bracketed fullers.







6

SILVER INLAID TULWAR

DECCAN, INDIA
17TH - 18TH CENTURY

OVERALL 1000MM

This fine silver tulwar exhibits delightful artistry and an elegant composition, likely originating from The Deccan in southwestern India. A pattern of slender silver leaves (possibly of the betel plant) framed within a border of four-petalled flowerheads and long splayed branches in miniature is inlaid across all surfaces of the hilt which comprises stylised floral langets, domed quillons, a recurved hand-guard terminating in an engraved *makara*-head finial, and a disc-shaped pommel attached with a pierced bracket for suspension.

The pattern-welded blade fitted to the hilt is formed with a wide section at the base which gradually tapers towards the point, as well as a pronounced cutting-edge. As is typical of such swords, the blade curves sharply to one side at approximately halfway along its length.

A sword of remarkably similar decoration (Cat. No. 18)⁸ was exhibited by Runjeet Singh Ltd in *Arms, Armour & Works of Art - London 2019*.⁹

References

⁸ http://runjeetsingh.com/inventory/338/silver_tegha

⁹ See Runjeet Singh Ltd, *Arms, Armour & Works of Art - London 2019*, pp.54-55, Cat. No. 18.





7

SWORD BREAKER

CHINA
18TH - 19TH CENTURY

OVERALL 610MM

Referred to in Chinese as a *jian*, this large copper-alloy mace is engraved on each side of its faceted shaft with a column of stylised four-petalled flowerheads within lined frames. The faceted moulding fitted near the mace's handle is engraved with a sequence of Chinese characters - 马到成功 - which translates approximately to 'Secure an immediate victory'.

These objects are rare and difficult to find in museum collections, though an earlier and less ornate example (Object Number XXVIM.15) preserved in the Royal Armouries functions as a useful comparison for the similarity of its basic structure and design (note especially the faceted moulding near the handle).¹⁰

References

¹⁰ <https://collections.royalarmouries.org/object/rac-object-36626.html>



8

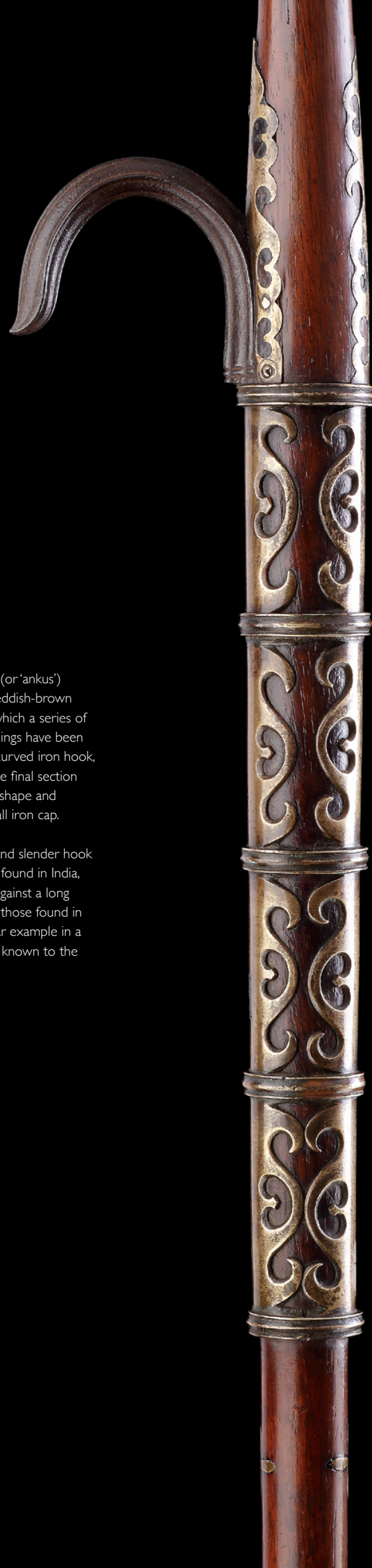
ELEPHANT GOAD

SOUTH INDIA
18TH CENTURY

OVERALL 1075MM

This elephant goad (or 'ankus') is comprised of a reddish-brown hardwood haft to which a series of curved brass mouldings have been attached, a thick recurved iron hook, two silver collars, the final section carved into a cone-shape and attached with a small iron cap.

The finely formed and slender hook is indicative of those found in India, and its application against a long pole is indicative of those found in South India. A similar example in a private collection is known to the author.





9

STEEL BOW

PUNJAB
19TH CENTURY

OVERALL 960MM

The main surface of this steel bow flourishes with a mesmerising array of spiralling foliate patterns in silver; which in turn frame a continuous series of curved cartouches each containing further leafy splays in silver and a stylised flowerhead with petals in spirals of gold.

The centrally swollen grip-section is threaded to allow the bow to be conveniently disassembled for storage or transportation. Originally, the notches at each end would likely have been tied with a silk bowstring.

Although already known in India, this type of bow was reintroduced by Muslim invaders, and the Indians, quickly deeming it to be a superior weapon, gladly adopted it. With wood and horn being susceptible to the Indian climate, metal bows such as this one were sometimes used as substitutes.¹¹

A similar example is preserved in the royal collection at Jaipur; and another¹² was published by Runjeet Singh Ltd in *The Goddess: Arms and Armour of the Rajputs* - London 2018.¹³

References

¹¹ See R. Elgood (2015), *Arms & Armour at the Jaipur Court: The Royal Collection*, Niyogi Books, pl.158.

¹² http://www.runjeetsingh.com/inventory/256/steel_bow.

¹³ Runjeet Singh, *The Goddess: Arms and Armour of the Rajputs* - London 2018, p.62, Cat. No.22.







10

RITUAL HOOK

TIBET
17TH - 18TH CENTURY

OVERALL 120MM

Originally, this iron hook, probably dating from the 17th or 18th century, would have accompanied a rope noose (or *pāśa* in Sanskrit) to form a Tibetan ritual object used to capture harmful spirits.¹⁴ The ring and main surface of the hook are inlaid with stylised flames in gold and silver; the faceted moulding that attaches them inlaid with four-petalled flowerheads in gold.

A ferrule preserved in the Metropolitan Museum of Art (Accession Number 1999.256a, b)¹⁵ and also dating to the 17th-18th century is remarkably similar in both construction and decoration, and helps to contextualise the present piece.¹⁶

References

- ¹⁴ See Michael Henss (2020), *Buddhist Ritual Art of Tibet: A Handbook on Ceremonial Objects and Furnishings in the Tibetan Temple*, Arnoldsche Art Publishers, p.220.
- ¹⁵ <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/26629>
- ¹⁶ For a discussion see Donald LaRocca (2006), *Warriors of the Himalayas: Rediscovering the Arms and Armour of Tibet*, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, p.179, No. 82.



II

LADAKH ROBE / BUDDHIST ROBE

LADAKH, NORTHERN INDIA
CIRCA 1900

OVERALL 1520MM

Polychromatic Buddhist deities fill the canvas surface of this rare and unusual robe, posing in a variety of stances and grasping saffron-coloured vines, the skirt's lower hem painted with a scrolling foliate border.

A further article to explore the imagery is to be added soon.









12

MORO ARMOUR

MINDANAO, PHILIPPINES
19TH CENTURY

HEIGHT OF SHIRT: 610MM
DIAMETER OF HELMET: 220MM

The main body of this well-preserved armour comprises brass plates burnished bright and connected by the small links of a mail shirt. The two larger frontal plates then are studded with a symmetrical display of three silver panels depicting the outlines of stylised sea monsters, the two pairs of central latches each secured by a silver plaque cut and engraved in the form of an unfurling flowerhead with large, coiling leaves.

A burgonet helmet with upturned peak, pierced plume-holder, and ridged central comb completes the armour; the comb cut over the greater part of each face with a charming trellis of interweaving vines and flowerheads - a motif repeated in the curved plaques placed at either end of the comb and just above the hinged cheek-pieces, which are later additions.

In similar armours, there are often disappointments: latches or plates may be missing; or there may be gaps in the mail shirt. The present set, however, is especially complete, making it a particularly attractive example. The helmet of another set (Cat. No. 28)¹⁷ published by Runjeet Singh Ltd in *Iconic: London 2017* is similar in its decoration,¹⁸ and a full armour (Number 2014.12.1)¹⁹ preserved in the Peabody Museum at Harvard University - though in worse condition than our own - has silver foliate plaques with the same outlines used to hold the frontal plates together.

References

¹⁷ http://runjeetsingh.com/inventory/168/moro_suit_of_armour_with_helmet

¹⁸ Runjeet Singh, *Iconic: London 2017*, pp.86-89, Cat. No. 28.

¹⁹ <https://bit.ly/3kOcEky>



13

QAJAR HELMET

QAJAR EMPIRE
(MODERN-DAY IRAN)
19TH CENTURY

OVERALL HEIGHT: 660MM
DIAMETER: 200MM

Etched over the steel dome of this captivating helmet (or *kulah khud*) are flourishing flowerheads which simultaneously fill gold-lined panels designed to mimic the feathers of a peacock whose neck and head form a striking centrepiece. Overlaid lines of gold convey the tufted texture of the bird's face, and pins with gilt finials have been inserted at the top of the head to represent the "crest". Moreover, in forging the helmet's bowl with a gently arched ridge, the armourer has cleverly created a mimetic contrast against the frontal section of the helmet, which has been etched with further flowers in bloom and at the centre depicts the calming face of the "Lion-and-Sun" symbol (or *Šīro Xorsīd*) popularly used in Qajar work, and which would go on to become the national emblem of Iran,²⁰ the sun-rays here overlaid with lines in gold.

Complete with twin plume holders - which originally may have held the blue-and-green feathers of peacocks in keeping with the helmet's structural theme - a nasal bar, and multi-tailed, the helmet is a persuasive testament to the creativity often exhibited in the Persian metalware of this period.

A *kulah khud* (Inventory Number B.O. 5038)²¹ with near-identical decorative schema is preserved within the collection of the Hermitage museum in Saint Petersburg, Russia, though the condition of our example is slightly superior (the Hermitage's helmet lacks one of the three slots inserted at the top of the head, and the upper half of the peacock's beak is bent).

References

²⁰ See <https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/art-islam/chronological-periods-islamic/islamic-art-late-period/a/divination-bowl>

²¹ <https://bit.ly/3qo9tRU>







14

18TH CENTURY MEWAR SHIELD

MEWAR, INDIA
18TH CENTURY

DIAMETER 600MM

A range of fantastic animal-scenes are painted in miniature at the edge of this fine shield: stubborn rams lock horns; jungle cats stalk and spring towards prey; and human hunters string their bows. In their movement, the animals variously push together and pull apart, imbuing the entire sequence with a vivid tension.

Rising from the painted brim are four rocky outcrops flecked with tufts of grass, each acting as the platform for a dramatic struggle between predator and prey, as a variety of animals succumb to marauding lions and tigers whose manes and stripes are picked out in sharp detail. The contrast created against the shield's black-painted leather surface invites the viewer to inspect these details all the more closely. Two tigers even return our gaze, staring with wide eyes directly out at the viewer - perhaps to let us know we may be next!

Surya, the sun god from whom many Rajput elders claim descent and the insignia of the Mewar royal court, looks out from the shield's centre surrounded by a band of bright sunrays. Around this central panel are four domed bosses with openwork patterning and gently undulating edges, each set on a red fabric base. A red velvet cushion-pad with straps, through which the wearer would place their arm, is fitted to the back of the shield.

Similar examples published by Runjeet Singh Ltd shed further light on the present shield's artistic context, particularly an example published in *The Goddess: Arms and Armour of the Rajputs - London 2018* (No. 28), which shows a similar scheme and style of decoration in its animal scenes.²² An example preserved at the National Museum in Delhi and bearing the name of Maharana Sangram Singh II also constitutes an important comparandum in this case.²³

Provenance

Private collection, England.
Purchased in India in 1964,
purportedly from the collection of
the Maharana of Udaipur.

References

²² See Runjeet Singh, *The Goddess: Arms and Armour of the Rajputs - London 2018*, No. 28, pp.82-83, as well as the reference there cited.

²³ See G.N. Pant, K.K. Sharma, *Indian Armours in the National Museum Collection*, New Delhi National Museum, 2001, p.88, no.77.





15

19TH CENTURY MEWAR SHIELD

MEWAR, INDIA
19TH CENTURY

DIAMETER 560MM

Though from the same group, this shield shows interesting differences from the previous entry in this exhibition. Surya and the animal scenes, for example, are painted with thinner lines, and the prey-animals' wounds within the four main scenes are highlighted with trickling sprays of saffron-coloured paint.

Perhaps the most striking difference are the four bosses that surround the central depiction of the sun god Surya. The silver frame of each is inlaid throughout with luminous blue-and-green enamelling, the central arrangement depicting azure-coloured peacocks in profile amidst sky-blue flowers and emerald-green leaves.

The six arches that emanate from the centre likely depict stylised flowerheads between curving leaves, though they are possibly also intended to mimic the fanning plumage of the bird that lends its pallet to the entire display.

The schema of the enamelling is quite unusual, though similar shields include an 18th-century example published by Runjeet Singh Ltd in *Arms, Armour & Works of Art - London 2019* (Cat. No. 31)²⁴ and another preserved at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York (Accession Number 29.158.598).²⁵

Provenance

Private collection, England.
Purchased in India in 1964,
purportedly from the collection of
the Maharana of Udaipur.

References

- ²⁴ http://runjeetsingh.com/inventory/350/18th_century_shikargah_shield
- ²⁵ <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/34132>

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