

# AMIR MOHTASHEMI



## **Coromandel Cabinet on a Stand**

c. 1650-1680

Sri Lanka or Coromandel Coast

Ebony and rosewood

Cabinet: 82cm high, 109cm wide, 56cm deep

Stand: 69cm high, 114cm wide, 56cm deep

Provenance: Thierry-Nicolas Tchakaloff Collection

Stock no.: A5505

A striking carved ebony cabinet belonging to a very small group of ebony furniture made for local Dutch VOC officials in South India, the Coromandel Coast, Batavia and Ceylon (present-day Sri Lanka) in the second half of the seventeenth century (Terwen-de Loos 1985; Veenendaal 1985; Jaffer 2001; and Veenendaal 2014). This group of furniture is characterised by low relief carving with vegetal motifs, a blending of Christian and local imagery, the use of solid ebony for the turned, carved, or openwork elements, plaques, and twist-turned components which were common in contemporary European furniture.

This two-door cabinet, finely carved in low-relief and profusely decorated throughout, has eleven drawers and sits on a separate stand that is fitted with two large drawers. All elements of the cabinet and stand are made from joined and pinned solid ebony (Ceylon ebony, *Diospyrus ebenum*), apart from two internal shelves in the cabinet which are probably Indian rosewood edged in ebony, and a top board of European pine in the stand, added later.

The identical pouncing within the carving and their shared distinctive drawer construction confirms that

the cabinet and stand are of a piece. The lavish use of ebony or kaḷuvara in Sinhala, illustrates the natural wealth of the Sri Lankan and south Indian forests. Both rare and expensive, ebony is also an extremely hard wood and difficult to work with, thus requiring a high level of skill in the production of a luxury piece such as this.

When open, the interior of the cabinet reveals its architectural form, with banks of drawers surrounding a central cupboard door which opens to the right. The door has two carved columns and a capital, further emphasising the architectural form of the cabinet. The top drawer is flanked on each side with three arched niches. While the interior sides of the cabinet doors are plain, the exterior of the cabinet and the fronts of the drawers are defined by the same delicate low-relief carving. The decoration of the exterior sides consists of a central field with two concentric scalloped medallions featuring vegetal scrolls in two-fold symmetry. These forms are known in Sinhala as *liya væla* and form the basis for much of the decorative repertoire used in Ceylonese and South Indian carving (Coomaraswamy 1956, pp. 98–99).

Made by highly skilled, local craftsmen, and influenced by contemporary European elements, this early example is rare. The Ceylonese imagery across the carving suggests that it was most likely made in Sri Lanka or South India. It is likely that artisans would have travelled between the two regions (Veenendaal 1985, p. 24). Compared to ebony chairs and smaller two-door table cabinets and caskets from this period, ebony cabinets on stands are seldomly found (Veenendaal 2014, p. 41).

A Sri Lankan mythological bird-like creature known in Sinhala as *serapenḍiyā* (also as *guruḷu pakṣiyā*), meaning ‘ruler of serpents’, and a double-headed eagle, known locally as *bhēruṇḍa pakṣiyā* (Coomaraswamy 1956, p. 85) are deployed throughout to ward off evil and protect the precious contents stored in this type of furniture from unscrupulous people. The *serapenḍiyā* has the head of a lion or *makarā*, albeit with the snout curled inwards, the body of a bird, and an S-shaped tail (Coomaraswamy 1956, p. 83). It appears as a pair of masterfully carved entangled birds with their tails transformed into vegetal scrolls over the fronts of the eight smaller drawers on the inside (flanking the cupboard door), and the larger two on the lower register, as well as on the stand on the fronts of its two large drawers and over its sides. The double-headed *bhēruṇḍa pakṣiyā* decorates the drawer in the first register of the cabinet. Highlighting the architectural design of the cabinet, the decoration of the central cupboard door consists of a niche covered by entablature enclosing what seems to be a European-derived heraldic shield with a combination of lozenges (the field divided into lozenge-shaped compartments) with *semy-de-lis* (the field strewn with *fleurs-de-lis*). On top of the ‘shield’ rises an oversized eagle with outstretched wings. Crowning the entablature, flanked by two Classical-shaped urns, there is a crowned cherub, also with open wings. The crowned cherub possibly points to the Christian identity of its owner.

The cabinet belongs to one of the least understood groups of so-called Indo-European furniture (Jaffer 2001, p. 130), partly on account of the misunderstanding by Horace Walpole (1717–97), the British writer and influential collector and connoisseur who amassed a large collection of such ebony carved furniture in his palatial residence, Strawberry Hill, London, who believed that they were made in England. The presence of these types of ebony carved pieces of furniture in many aristocratic British houses was mistakenly associated with the Tudor period, and the use of twist-turning was believed to be typical of Elizabethan furniture. This may have led Walpole to infer that such pieces were of early English manufacture, an error that persisted throughout the nineteenth century.

#### Comparative material:

An ebony table from the Coromandel Coast in the Victoria and Albert Museum (IS 73-1981), dated 1660-80, has the same low relief vegetal carving, and also features Christian-inspired motifs and carved *serapenḍiya* as well as parrots (Jaffer 2001, no. 2 p. 138-9). A slightly similar cabinet on a stand made in Sri Lanka for the Dutch market (133.0 × 78.0 × 47.5 cm), set with Chinese-style silver fittings, belongs to the collection of the Kunstmuseum Den Haag (formerly the Gemeentemuseum), inv. 0540200. A more lavish cabinet on a stand, also deploying quintessential Ceylonese motifs belongs in a prominent Dutch private collection.

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#### Literature

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