



### **Mother-of-Pearl Pilgrim Flask**

Gujarat, India, 17th century

Mother-of-pearl and brass

13cm high, 13.5cm wide

Stock no.: A5856

This mother-of-pearl flask was made in 17th-century Gujarat, likely for the Deccani market. Boat-shaped, the flask features a flared, trumpet-shaped neck, a tubular spout to one side, and it stands on a brass splayed foot. Possibly double-spouted in origin, it lacks its original dome-shaped cover, which was probably linked and secured to the rim of the neck with a loop chain. In addition to the foot and spout, the metal fittings include bands on the edges of the vessel to secure the mother-of-pearl plaques, a collar on the base of the neck and on its rim, and two loops flanking the neck for suspension, likely by two loop chains. From its iridescence and colour, the mother-of-pearl used in its construction can be identified as the shell of the green turban snail (*Turbo marmoratus*), a marine gastropod that provided the best and most prized material for this Gujarati production.<sup>1</sup> While the sides of the body were made from two large sections of the green turban snail, the upper section consists of four sections, and the neck comprises eight vertical panels. As with other comparable Gujarati vessels made from mother-of-pearl, the neck opening features a pierced openwork roundel to facilitate a smoother flow of the liquid contained within the vessel.

The crescent shape of this flask derives from leather pilgrim bottles, its construction emulating the sewn leather panels of the original prototype. Such leather containers are frequently depicted in seventeenth-century Deccani paintings.<sup>2</sup> A notable example, likely enamelled and set with gemstones, appears in a famous painting made between 1620 and 1627 by 'Ali Riza. The work depicts Ibrahim 'Adil Shah II (r. 1580-1627), Sultan of Bijapur, venerating a Sufi shaykh, to whom he presents gifts, including the jewelled flask.<sup>3</sup> Similar vessels are also depicted in earlier Mughal paintings. One example, shown on a large folio from the Hamza-Nama (ca. 1562-1577) now in Vienna, appears as a painted leather vessel

without a spout. It hangs from a saddle set on a magical, flying earthenware barrel ridden by one of the followers of the giant Zumurud Shah.<sup>4</sup> Another example, shown in a folio of a Persian translation of the Ramayana (completed in 1594) kept in the library of Emperor Akbar's mother, also features scrolling terminals and lacks a spout. This vessel hangs from a tree and is shaded by a textile.<sup>5</sup>

A number of comparable surviving flasks is published by Mark Zebrowski in his ground-breaking volume on Mughal metalwork. According to Zebrowski, such bottles were intended to carry water or wine on journeys or into battle, their shape related to the pilgrim flasks of medieval Europe.<sup>6</sup> One example, a seventeenth-century Deccani brass pilgrim flask (21.1 cm in height) of this shape, belongs to the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (inv. [2020.11](#)). Decorated with Timurid-style vegetal scrolls, it features a single side spout, scrolling volute terminals, and a square-shaped foot.

Another vessel in the same museum (inv. [1992.50](#)), cast in a golden brass alloy, has recently been published, albeit oddly identified as a ewer.<sup>7</sup> It has been dated to around 1580-1600 and attributed to the territories of the Mughal Empire. The boat-shaped body of flasks similarly made in the Deccan is sometimes fashioned in the form of two geese facing backwards with their heads and necks coiled, while the flaring neck takes the shape of a rising lotus flower. A comparable Gujarati flask, similarly made from *T. marmoratus*, features engraved decoration on both the body and the neck.<sup>8</sup>

[1] For this production, see Hugo Miguel Crespo, Gujarat & Portugal. *Mother-of-pearl, Tortoiseshell and Exotic Woods*, Lisbon, São Roque, Antiguidades & Galeria de Arte, 2024, pp. 9-29.

[2] R.H. Pinder-Wilson, M. Tregear, "Two Drinking Flasks from Asia", *Oriental Art*, 16.4 (1970), pp. 337-341.

[3] Made at the Bijapur court and painted with opaque watercolour and gold on paper, the painting belongs to the collection of the British Museum, London (inv. 1997,1108,0.1). See Ladan Akbarnia et al., *The Islamic World. A History in Objects*, London - New York, The British Museum - Thames & Hudson, 2018, p. 195, fig. 2.

[4] The painting, made in the Mughal court and painted with opaque watercolour and gold on cotton backed with paper, is housed at the MAK - Museum für angewandte Kunst, Vienna (inv. BI 8770-28). See Susan Stronge, "The reign of Akbar: The creation of a new art", in Susan Stronge (ed.), *The Great Mughals. Art, Architecture and Opulence* (cat.), London, V&A Publishing, 2024, pp. 35-73, on p. 57, fig. 29.

[5] The painting, depicting 'Rama and Lakshman hear from Sugriva, King of the Monkeys about the completion of the bridge to Lanka', and painted with opaque watercolour and gold on paper, is now in The David Collection, Copenhagen (16/1992). See Susan Stronge, "The reign of Akbar: The creation of a new art", in Susan Stronge, *op.cit.*, pp. 35-73, on p. 27, fig. 10.

[6] Mark Zebrowski, *Gold, Silver and Bronze from Mughal India*, London, Alexandria Press, 1997, pp. 202-203, nos. 301, and 308-315.

[7] Assadulah Souren Melikian-Chirvani, "The bronze and copper wares of Mughal Hindustan", in Susan Stronge, *op.cit.*, pp. 75-89, on p. 89, fig. 73.

[8] Alexis Renard, *Game of Gods. Game of Love*, Paris, Galerie Alexis Renard, 2016, cat. 7.