



Gujarati Mother-of-Pearl Bowl

Gujarat, India, Late 16th century

Mother-of-pearl and brass

13.8cm diameter, 7cm deep

Stock no.: A5910

Provenance: From a Scottish noble estate.

This bowl is made from geometric mother-of-pearl plaques, attached with brass pins to an internal metal frame. The province of Gujarat on the western coast of India was renowned for its mother-of-pearl craftsmanship, not least because of the abundance of the green turban sea snails (*Turbo marmoratus*) in the Gulf of Kutch, whose rough outer shells could be sanded down to reveal a thick layer of lustrous nacre.¹ The numerous ports of Gujarat facilitated a thriving international market for Gujarati mother-of-pearl. Objects made in Gujarat were exported to Goa and then shipped to the Islamic world and Europe, where they had become a mainstay of the *Kunstammer*. They were valued not only for their iridescence, but also the skill of the craftsmen. Unlike a bowl made of metal or clay, which can be shaped to the desired form, the craftsmen had to find shells with the correct curvature to create the sloping sides.²

The first recorded shipment to Portugal of an Indian object in mother-of-pearl dates to 1502, a gift from Vasco de Gama to the king of Portugal.³ As traditional techniques were maintained for several centuries, these pieces are difficult to date. However, most pieces which survive today are dated to the second half of the 16th century and the 17th century, when there was a significant increase in the export of mother-of-pearl pieces to Europe.⁴

There is a set of six related drinking bowls of similar form in the Baroque Treasury (*Grünes Gewölbe*) of

Dresden Castle (see accession nos [III 31 II/1](#) and [III 182b](#)). The latter example was gifted to Christian I of Saxony in 1588, giving an approximate date of manufacture of 1580-1588.

n.b. accession nos are clickable links

[1] Stronge, Susan (ed.) *The Great Mughals: Art, Architecture and Opulence*. London: V&A Publishing, 2024. p. 72.

[2] Trnek, Helmut and Vassallo e Silva, Nuno (eds). *Exotica: The Portuguese Discoveries and the Renaissance Kunstkammer*. Lisbon: Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, 2001. p. 119.

[3] Levenson, Jay A. (ed.) *Encompassing the Globe: Portugal and the World in the 16th and 17th Centuries*. Washington, D.C.: Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, 2007. p. 54.

[4] *Ibid.*, p. 54.