



Indian Shamshir with Horse Head Hilt

Kutch, Gujarat, Second half of the 19th century

Gilt copper, watered steel, glass

79.5 cm long

Stock no.: A5939

A fine shamshir made in Kutch (now known as Kachchh), Gujarat, with a hilt in the shape of a horse's head. The chased, repoussé, and stippled decoration of the gilt copper scabbard and hilt is distinctive of 19th-century Kutch silversmiths. Kutch metalwork was celebrated for its quality, with sophisticated repoussé work, floral decoration, and a high standard of purity.¹ In his guide to the Glasgow International Exhibition of 1888, T. N. Mukharji wrote: 'No part of India is more celebrated for its work in precious metals than Kach.'²

The hilt follows the Indian talwar form, with short, bud-shaped quillons and an elongated langet terminating in a trefoil. The hilt is set with green, red, and clear glass 'gems' in the shape of flowers. Unlike today, glass was highly expensive and may have been imported from Europe. The horse head pommel is highly detailed, down to delicately engraved eyelashes and teeth. The curved blade is of watered steel, decorated for half its length with a panel of koftgari.

Rather unusually, the scabbard is entirely covered with gilt copper. Comparative examples tend to be covered with silk velvet, with gilding only at the chape, locket, and suspension rings. Another unusual feature is the use of figural decoration, rather than purely floral motifs. Lions, boars, and deer are chased by a mounted hunter.

Swords made in Kutch, western India, have been prized since at least the thirteenth century, when they are mentioned in Fakhr-i Mudabbir's *Adab al-harb wa-l-shaja'a*.³ By the 19th century, much of the market for Kutch metalwork was in Europe, where Kutch silver was sold in Liberty & Co., and Kutch arms were displayed at the Great Exhibition.⁴

Two similar shamshirs with horse-headed hilts attributed to 19th-century Kutch are held in the Royal Collections at Windsor Castle (accession nos [RCIN 62525.1](#), [RCIN 62525.2](#)). Whilst both hilts are similar to the present example, both have scabbards primarily covered with crimson velvet. Another pair is held in the Clive Collection at Powis Castle, dated to the 19th century.⁵

[1] Markel, Stephen. 'Kutch Silver: A Study of Stylistic Sources', in R. DeCaroli and P. Lavy (eds) *Across the South of Asia: A Volume in Honor of Robert L. Brown*. New Delhi: D.K. Printworld, 2020. pp. 153-168; p. 153.

[2] Mukharji, T. N. *Art-manufactures of India: especially compiled for the Glasgow International Exhibition, 1888*.

[3] Allan, James and Gilmour, Brian. *Persian Steel: The Tanavoli Collection*. Oxford Studies in Islamic art XV. Oxford: OUP, 2000. Pp. 113-115.

[4] Elgood, Robert. *Rajput Arms and Armour: The Rathores and Their Armoury at Jodhpur Fort*. Vol. 1. 2 vols. New Delhi: Mehrangarh Museum Trust in association with Niyogi Books, 2017. p. 139.

[5] Archer, Mildred, Christopher Rowell, and Robert Skelton. *Treasures from India: The Clive Collection at Powis Castle*. London: The National Trust / Herbert Press, 1987. p. 52, 55, cat. 48.