

## Colonial-era Silver and Shawls from India on Display at the Arthur M. Sackler Museum



Thomas Lawrence, Mirza Abu'l Hasan Khan, 1810. Oil on canvas, 88.9 cm x 69.2 cm. Fogg Art Museum, HUAM. Photo: Photographic Services, HUAM, © President and Fellows of Harvard College.

CAMBRIDGE, MA (August 8, 2005)—Kashmir shawls and silver tableware produced in India during the Colonial period (18th and 19th centuries) will be on display at the Arthur M. Sackler Museum August 27, 2005 through January 29, 2006.

*Silver and Shawls: India, Europe, and the Colonial Art Market* will feature some 30 pieces of silver and 11 shawls, most loaned by private collectors. The objects, which illustrate the influence of colonial patrons and the international market on the design and form of Indian decorative arts, were created at a time when foreign demand for Indian textiles and luxury goods was at its peak.

“This exhibition is a refreshing change for us with its focus on decorative arts—an area we would like to devote more interest to,” said Thomas W. Lentz, Elizabeth and John Moors Cabot Director of the Harvard University Art Museums. “Visitors will see why Kashmir shawls were the most sought-after textiles in 19th-century Europe, and how brilliant Indian silversmiths incorporated ‘exotic’ elements into the restrained Georgian-style designs favored by the British.”

“The exhibition hinges on two opposing stylistic developments,” said Kimberly Masteller, assistant curator of Islamic and Later Indian Art, who co-organized the show with guest curator Jeffrey B. Spurr. “The shawls become closer to European taste, whereas the silver takes on more exotic, Indian design elements.” Spurr is Islamic and Middle East Specialist in the Aga Khan Program for Islamic Architecture at Harvard’s Fine Arts Library.

## **Colonial Silver**

The silver tableware on display in *Silver and Shawls* chronicles the dynamic changes in form that took place in Indian metalwork during the Colonial period. As early as 1720, jewelers and goldsmiths from Britain were working in Madras, and shortly after in Bombay, Calcutta, and elsewhere in India. By the late 1700s, they expanded their production to silver tableware based on European forms but redesigned to accommodate local styles of cooking and serving. Specialized containers and utensils were developed to warm and serve curries and roasted meat, to filter milk and claret, and to cover drinking water.

In the 19th century, many expatriate gold- and silversmiths began to employ Indian craftsmen who had been trained in indigenous styles. During the mid- to late-1800s, these smiths began to embellish European-style objects with local designs. This hybrid style became popular after it was displayed in the Indian section of the Great Exhibition of London in 1851.

One famous workshop represented in the exhibition was that of Peter Orr & Sons, founded in Madras in 1851 by Peter Nicholas Orr, a watchmaker from London. One of the largest and most successful silver manufacturers in India, the Orr workshop produced tableware and gold, gilt, and silver “swami” jewelry populated with Indian deities and exotic scenes.

## **In the exhibition**

Visitors will see several pieces made by Peter Orr & Sons, including an oval tray with serpent border created in 1904 for presentation to a captain in the Ooregum Gold Mining Company of India; a “swami-style” gold necklace and earrings bequeathed to the Fogg Art Museum in 1895 by its founder, Mrs. William Hayes Fogg; and an engraved circular racing trophy from 1884 that is an exact copy of a gold dish given to the Prince of Wales on his visit to India in 1875 and 1876.

Hybrid silver was also produced in Indian-run workshops in other regional centers, particularly Lucknow, the capital of the Muslim kingdom of Awadh. Awadh was known for its traditional metalsmithing and enameling, and its manufacture of textiles with gold and silver brocade and embroidery. Lucknow is represented by two objects: a Renaissance Revival Ewer, made in 1860 and embellished with applied palmettes and round faces representing Surya, the Hindu

sun god; and an unmarked silver presentation bowl decorated with fish, the emblem of the Awadh kingdom.

From Kutch, a major center for textiles, embroidery, leatherwork, and jewelry in western Gujarat state, comes extremely ornate silver that was favored by Europeans. Six objects in the show are from the famous workshop of Oomersi Mawji, who marked his silver with the initials OM and—true to his background as a cobbler—punched his designs into metal from the exterior. Visitors will see a striking claret jug, circa 1880, completely covered in punched-out foliage designs and embellished with a long silver cobra curled to form the pitcher's handle; a two-handled cup from around 1880 decorated with figures from Greek mythology; and a creamer jug from around 1894.

Other silver pieces in the exhibition were made in Calcutta and Kashmir. Most of the objects on display are from the Collection of Richard Milhender; the remainder are from anonymous private collections.

### **Kashmir shawls**

The history of the Kashmir shawl reaches back centuries before colonial silver. What had been a local product with limited distribution and distinguished by the fineness and rarity of its materials became a product of exacting technical quality and artistic refinement under the Mughal emperors.

The first Mughal ruler, Emperor Akbar (r. 1556–1605) had a large collection of shawls and favored wearing them two at a time, stitched together back-to-back. This construction hid the loose threads on the reverse of the garments and offered added warmth and bulk. The emperor's shawls were renowned for their fine material (*pashmina*, the fine winter underhair of the Himalayan goat), exceptional technique, and refined decoration.

“The shawl was a favored court dress worn mostly by men, but it became very popular among people who served in the colonies,” said Masteller. “If you owned one, it was a real status symbol.”

The heyday of Kashmir shawls coincided with the peak of European colonial expansion around 1800. Traveling soldiers, officers, and merchants brought the costly garments back to Europe, where they rose to the height of fashion and became wildly popular with women. The shawls were also exported to Iran and turned into common accessories for both men and women. Domestic manufacturers in Iran and Europe began replicating the shawls, but without the fine materials and workmanship that distinguished the originals.

Through the years, the workshops of Kashmir adapted their muted designs to suit the exuberant tastes of Western, Victorian-era consumers. Up until the 1870s, when the industry collapsed, there were between 14,000 and 24,000 looms operating in Kashmir. Each loom employed two to three weavers and also involved wool cleaners, spinners, dyers, embroiderers, and shawl washers. In the 1860s, for example, about 100,000 women worked spinning the goat hair into yarn; records from 1823 indicate that 5,000 embroiderers touched up and sewed shawls together. The finest shawls were entirely woven; lesser quality garments contained some woven material supplemented by embroidered panels or some that were entirely embroidered.

“This exhibition offers visitors the opportunity to see how remarkably beautiful Kashmir shawls are and to begin to understand a tradition that affected fashion, textile production, and design ideas wherever it was introduced,” said Spurr, the co-curator.

Among the textiles on display in *Silver and Shawls* will be:

- a fragment of a twill tapestry-woven pashmina shawl made in Kashmir circa 1810 to 1815;
- an 1810 painting by Thomas Lawrence (1769-1830) portraying Abu'l Hassan, the Persian ambassador to the Court of St. James in 1809-1810, wearing a Kashmir shawl wrapped around his head as a turban in a style highly popular in Iran at the time;
- an open-field white shawl dating to 1805, which features the *buta* (literally, “flower”) design, progenitor of the Western “paisley” motif.

## **Exhibition Programming**

### **Gallery Talks:**

Arthur M. Sackler Museum

Free with the price of admission.

**Saturday, September 3, 11:30 a.m.**

*Kimberly Masteller, assistant curator of Islamic and later Indian art, and Jeffrey B. Spurr, Islamic and Middle East specialist, Aga Khan Program for Islamic Architecture*

**Saturday, October 29, 2:00 p.m.**

*Kimberly Masteller, assistant curator of Islamic and later Indian art*

**Saturday, November 12, 11:30 a.m.**

*Anne Marie Doyle, Norma Jean Calderwood Curatorial Intern*

**Saturday, January 21, 11:30 a.m.**

*Kimberly Masteller, assistant curator of Islamic and later Indian art*

### **Lecture:**

Arthur M. Sackler Museum, lecture hall

Free and open to the public.

**Wednesday, October 19, 6:00 p.m.**

“Imperial Identity and Indian Artistry: British Responses to the Decorative Arts of Colonial India”

*Amin Jaffer, Victoria and Albert Museum, London*

Dr. Jaffer will discuss the sumptuous art forms produced in India during the Colonial era and the powerful impression they made on European decorative arts and artists.

## **The Harvard University Art Museums**

The Harvard University Art Museums are one of the world's leading arts institutions, with the Arthur M. Sackler, Busch-Reisinger, and Fogg art museums, the Straus Center for Conservation, the Center for the Technical Study of Modern Art, the HUAM Archives, and the Archaeological Exploration of Sardis, in Turkey.

The Harvard University Art Museums are distinguished by the range and depth of their collections, their groundbreaking exhibitions, and the original research of their staff. As an integral part of the Harvard community, the three art museums and four research centers serve as resources for all students, adding a special dimension to their areas of study. The public is welcome to experience the collections and exhibitions as well as to enjoy lectures, symposia, and other programs.

For more than a century, the Harvard University Art Museums have been the nation's premier training ground for museum professionals and scholars and are renowned for their role in the development of the discipline of art history in this country.

### **Location and Hours**

The Fogg Art Museum and the Busch-Reisinger Museums are located at 32 Quincy Street, Cambridge. The Arthur M. Sackler Museum is located next door at 485 Broadway. Each Museum is a short walk from the Harvard Square MBTA station.

Hours are Monday through Saturday, 10:00 a.m.–5:00 p.m., Sunday 1:00–5:00 p.m.; closed on national holidays. Admission is \$7.50; \$6 for seniors; \$6 for students; and free for those under 18 years of age. The Art Museums are free to everyone on Saturday mornings, 10:00 a.m.–noon. The Harvard University Art Museums receive support from the Massachusetts Cultural Council. More detailed information is available at 617-495-9400 or on the Internet at [www.artmuseums.harvard.edu](http://www.artmuseums.harvard.edu).

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*For more information on this exhibition or the Harvard University Art Museums, please contact:*

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