

Exhibition catalogues

A study of Islamic arms and armour from Danish collections approaches them as works of art and status symbols

Fighting, Hunting, Impressing: Arms and Armour from the Islamic World 1500–1850

By Kjeld von Folsach, Joachim Meyer and Peter Wandel. 296 pp. incl. 237 col. + 12 b. & w. ill. (Strandberg Publishing, Copenhagen, 2021), £50. ISBN 978-87-92596-10-9.

by ARTHUR BIJL

This catalogue accompanies an exhibition of Islamic arms and armour at the David Collection, Copenhagen (closes 2nd January). Supplemented by objects from Danish private collections as well as the National Museum of Denmark, Rosenborg Castle and the Designmuseum Denmark, all in Copenhagen, *Fighting, Hunting, Impressing* is the spiritual successor to the 1982 landmark exhibition *Islamic Arms and Armour from Danish Private Collections* at the same venue.¹

Arms and armour studies have undergone significant change since 1982 and the contents of the catalogue reflect this. The ethnographic approach that characterised scholarship in the subject in the twentieth century has made way for a more art-historical approach. Underpinning the book as a whole is a desire to present fine arms and armour as works of art; attention paid, for example, to hunting and to making an impression with what was in effect male jewellery and status symbols with significant cultural resonance, serves to broaden the scope of the study of a subject stereotypically associated with fighting only (no.127; Fig.15).

The years 1500 and 1850 bookend the early modern period, when the Islamic world was dominated by three major empires: the Ottoman Empire, Safavid (and later Qajar) Iran and Mughal India. In part, this scope is dictated by the available material, since comparatively few works of arms



and armour survive from before the sixteenth century, but it also serves to counter the commonly held notion of arms and armour as a primarily medieval subject. Seven themed essays aim to provide historical context and form the first hundred pages, followed by the catalogue, an appendix of inscriptions and a glossary.

Despite the constraints of sourcing arms and armour exclusively from Danish public and private

15. Dagger (*katar*) with scabbard. Indian, the Deccan, Hyderabad(?), 18th–19th century. Steel, wood, gold, rubies, diamonds, emeralds and textile, total length 35.9 cm., dagger length 33.8 cm. (David Collection, Copenhagen; photograph Pernille Klemp).

collections, the curators have put together a well-balanced group of remarkable objects that effectively address the chosen themes of fighting, hunting and impressing others.

The entries are well researched and informative and the common pitfall of privileging the older pieces is generally avoided, with nineteenth-century works of art, such as a powder horn from Kota (no.51; Fig.16), given just as much attention as the earlier ones.

Unfortunately, some of the introductory essays feel oddly placed in the catalogue. Despite the stated timeframe of 1500–1850, it is not until halfway through the third essay that anything made in this period is mentioned. The first essay, on fighting and arms in the Qur'an and *hadith*, by Thomas Hoffmann, serves to anchor the exhibition in the Islamic religion, but is mostly concerned with the early Islamic textual tradition and does not do enough to demonstrate its relevance to the early modern period. Although interesting, the essay does not facilitate an understanding of the objects in the exhibition.

Peter Wandel's essay, which follows, on teaching chivalry in the Islamic world, ends just at the start of the early modern period and is exclusively concerned with the Arabic-speaking Near East, a region in relative decline in the early modern period and therefore scarcely represented among the objects in the exhibition. The prominence of the text of the Qur'an in the first essay and the absence of the Persian heroic cycles – a key component of notions of chivalry in India, Iran and the Ottoman Empire – in the second essay also puts undue emphasis on the role of Islam in the development of arms and armour from Islamic lands. It is disappointing that despite this emphasis on the Islamic, very little attention is paid to *ta'ziyeh* performances and other traditional Shi'a Muslim ceremonies, which played a key role in the production and use of arms and armour in Iran and India in the early modern period, especially since a number of objects in the exhibition were made for this express purpose, such as a standard from the Ottoman Empire (no.14; Fig.17).

The remainder of the essays, which discuss inscriptions, collecting arms and armour, and the three titular themes, are a better fit with the rest of the catalogue. The essay on collecting arms and armour is particularly interesting for considering both the collecting of arms and armour from Islamic lands in Europe and in the Islamic lands themselves – an important step in the field. On the other hand, the role of the European empires, especially the British Empire, in the formation of nineteenth-century collections is perhaps not given the attention it warrants.

Despite these shortcomings, this publication is a long-awaited and largely successful venture towards a more contemporary approach to arms and armour in scholarship. One of its strongest points is its accessibility; the text never gets bogged down in obscure terminology or dry technical analysis



16. Powder horn. India, Kota, 19th century. Horn, ivory, lead or pewter, iron, black lacquer and leather, height 14 cm. (David Collection, Copenhagen; photograph Pernille Klemp).

17. Standard (*alam*). India, the Deccan, 18th century. Bronze, gold, silver, copper and black substance, height 45.5 cm. (David Collection, Copenhagen; photograph Pernille Klemp).



and the illustrations are abundant and of high quality. The glossary at the end is brief but helpful and includes clear illustrations describing each component of the various objects of arms and armour. Well-chosen and thoroughly researched objects, often published for the first time, as well as the list of translated inscriptions, ensure that there is nevertheless plenty of value for those already familiar with arms and armour from Islamic lands.

The catalogue's stated aim, to present arms and armour as objects that serve purposes beyond the purely practical is convincingly met. As a study of the artistry of fine arms and armour, this book is a worthwhile read for anyone with an interest in art from the Islamic world.

¹ See A.V.B. Norman *et al.*: exh. cat. *Islamic Arms and Armour from Private Danish Collections*, Copenhagen (David Collection) 1982.

Marinus: Painter from Reymerswale

Edited by Christine Seidel. 156 pp. incl. 94 col. + b. & w. ills. (Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid, 2021), €19. ISBN 978-84-8480-551-9.

by LARRY SILVER

Major museums do both scholars and the general public a great service by focusing attention on less familiar works in their collection. Such was the case in a monographic exhibition

at the Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid, in 2021, the first devoted to a fascinating artist from the sixteenth-century Netherlands, who is perhaps best known for grotesque faces and outlandish costumes: Marinus van Reymerswale (c.1489–c.1546). The Madrid museums alone – including the Prado itself, the Museo Nacional Thyssen Bornemisza and the Real Academia de Bellas Artes de San Fernando – own seven of the ten known works by Marinus, of which several are signed (*'Marinus me fecit'*) and dated. From this solid foundation, a basic corpus of works can be established, many of which were gathered in the exhibition and supplemented by loans from the Museum voor Schone Kunsten, Ghent, the Musée du Louvre, Paris, and the State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg. The curator of the exhibition and editor of the catalogue, Christine Seidel, is curator of painting up to 1800 at the Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart.

Unfortunately, little is known of Marinus's life. Adri Mackor, who has studied Marinus for decades, uses archival documents in his attempt to sketch a biography of the painter with the hope of 'restoring a good man's honour', as the title of his catalogue essay says. Several signed works name Marinus's hometown as 'Reymerswale', a small town in Zeeland. The earliest dated painting depicts St Jerome (Real Academia; cat. no.3), a subject he returned to frequently (no.9; Fig.19). It originates from 1533, although in the catalogue some paintings are tentatively dated before this date, c.1530; Marinus's last dated extant work, *Lawyer's office*, is from 1543 or 1545 (Museum of Art, New Orleans), and was not included here. Mackor places the artist's death around 1546, which would mean a short career of just over twelve years. He rejects a much later reference, once connected to the painter, suggesting that he was convicted for participating in art destruction in 1566, the year of Netherlandish iconoclasm.

Most Reymerswale archives were lost during the Second World War. However, Mackor adduces a matriculation of 1504 from Louvain