

The Sport of Kings: Art of the Hunt in Iran and India on Display at Harvard's Arthur M. Sackler Museum Beginning January 22



Bahram Gur on a Hunting Expedition with Azada (detail), folio from a manuscript of the *Shāhnāma*, Iran, c. 1330-40. Ink, opaque watercolor, and gold on paper, 49.3 x 40.2 cm. Arthur M. Sackler Museum, Gift of Edward W. Forbes, 1957.193. Photo: Katya Kallsen, HUAM. © President and Fellows of Harvard College.

CAMBRIDGE, MA (January 19, 2005) – A new exhibition of Islamic and Indian art with the hunt as its theme will be on display at the Arthur M. Sackler Museum, Harvard University Art Museums, from January 22 through June 26, 2005. Some 43 objects – most 200-500 years old – illustrate the princes and warriors of West and South Asia engaging in various aspects of the royal hunt.

Among the objects to be exhibited in *The Sport of Kings: Art of the Hunt in Iran and India* are powerful paintings from the Rajput courts of India; meticulously rendered paintings from the Iranian epic poem the *Shāhnāma* (Book of Kings); a 200-year-old ceremonial shield made in India from water buffalo hide and vividly adorned with images of lions in combat with real and fantastic animals, rendered in watercolor, lacquer, gold, and silver paint; and various Persian and Indian weapons borrowed from a New England collector.

“Hunting is one of humanity’s oldest pursuits, and its imagery plays a key role in the arts of Iran and India,” said Thomas W. Lentz, Elizabeth and John Moors Cabot director of the Harvard University Art Museums. “This exhibition offers visitors a chance to enter that world, to understand it both as an activity of great cultural significance and as a powerful source of visual creativity.”

Most of the works on display come from the collection of the Harvard University Art Museums, including valuable manuscript pages and a 1,000-year-old earthenware bowl given to the Art Museums in 2002 by collector Norma Jean Calderwood. Twelve objects were loaned by Richard Wagner, a local collector; two came from the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; and two were loaned from a private collection. One of these, a gold-and-watercolor portrait of a hawk, is attributed to Mansur, one of the finest painters in the court of Mughal emperor Jahangir, who ruled in Northern India from 1605 to 1627.

Works show hunting's royal history

“Hunting as a royal activity has a long history in the Middle East and was thought to be physically, mentally, and morally beneficial to rulers,” said Kimberly Masteller, assistant curator of Islamic and later Indian art, who co-organized the exhibition with Mary McWilliams, Norma Jean Calderwood Curator of Islamic Art; and Rajeshwari Shah, the Norma Jean Calderwood intern. “Kings and princes also used the hunt to survey their territories, intimidate potential enemies, forge alliances, and train their warriors for battle.”

Works in the exhibition illustrate royals hunting with falcons and cheetahs, or pursuing big game such as water buffalo, lions, and tigers. In some cases, it appears that artists even accompanied the hunting parties, returning with sketches that were later developed into more formal paintings.

An Iranian earthenware bowl dating to the late 9th or early 10th century shows a collared, spotted feline atop an imposing horse. Cheetahs, known for their lightning speed but not for their stamina, were brought to the hunt on horseback. There they would be set loose on gazelles, rabbits, or other quarry.

Folios from the epic poem the *Shāhnāma* illustrate the hunt in ink, watercolor, and gold on paper. One folio, which dates to the 14th century, shows one of the best-known hunting exploits in Persian literature: the hunter-king Bahram Gur trying to impress the harpist Azada with his virtuoso skills as an archer. Later, angered by the harpist's taunts, he trampled her to

death. This work, produced when the Mongols occupied Iran, is from one of the earliest surviving, illustrated manuscripts of the *Shāhnāma*.

Also on view will be various hunting implements, including a rarely seen type of hand-thrown spear called a *jared*, a 19th-century Indian rifle adorned with silver, ivory, and gold inlay; and ceremonial swords.

One such sword, made in the 19th century in North India, features a steel blade depicting scenes from a royal hunt and a gold-inlaid hilt. On one side of the blade we see the king, seated on his elephant, leaving his palace accompanied by a retinue of armed nobles on horseback, local huntsmen on foot, dogs, and musicians; and in another scene, hunting tigers with a gun. On the reverse the triumphant hunting party returns to the palace with a tiger.

Another sword from North India, dating to the early 18th century, features a watered steel blade with gold inlay and a silver enameled hilt. An inscription on the blade dedicates the weapon to a Mughal emperor, and its hilt is covered with brilliantly colored motifs of flowers and falcons wrought in *Meenakari*, a process that involves applying colored glass to precious metals (in this case, silver).

Buffalo Hunt, a Rajput painting from the early 1700s, is an ink drawing with opaque white watercolor that shows a raja from the kingdom of Kotah seated atop an elephant leading a buffalo hunt. In this highly animated drawing, buffalo fruitlessly attempt to flee as the hunting party approach. The raging buffalo charge, killing a nobleman's horse, but they are eventually slain. The painting is a promised gift from Stuart Cary Welch, former curator of Islamic and Later Indian Art at the Harvard University Art Museums.

Gallery Talks

Arthur M. Sackler Museum

Free with the price of Admission.

Sunday, February 6, 2005, 2:00 p.m.

Mary McWilliams, Norma Jean Calderwood Curator of Islamic Art

Sunday, March 13, 2005, 2:00 p.m.

Rajeshwari Shah, Norma Jean Calderwood Intern in Islamic and Later Indian Art

Saturday, May 7, 2005, 11:30 a.m.

Rajeshwari Shah, Norma Jean Calderwood Intern in Islamic and Later Indian Art

Sunday, June 26, 2:00 p.m.

Kimberly Masteller, Assistant Curator, Islamic and Later Indian Art

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, and the U.S. headquarters for the Archaeological Exploration of Sardis, an excavation project in western 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 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 a.m. – 5 p.m., Sunday 1 – 5 p.m.; the Museums are closed on national holidays. Admission is \$6.50; \$5 for seniors; \$5 for students; and free for those under 18 years of age. The Museums are free to everyone on Saturday mornings, 10 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.

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