

The artistic metalwork of Oman

By Noura Eskander

In times such as these when unity of thought and deed is increasingly important to maintaining peace and stability in the region, there is a real and understandable need also to celebrate difference.

Alongside language, among the strongest ties that bind the people of the region is that of religion and, of course, the art that has grown and developed in celebration of the Islamic culture.

The sultanate of Oman is unique among the countries of the Gulf and the wider Middle East in that a majority of the population there are Ibadi Muslims.

As long ago as the 3rd millennium BC, Oman was known as the land of Magan, from where Ancient Mesopotamia imported the copper it needed to make vessels, weapons, decorations and early artistic creations.

Early Omanis had developed the necessary skills to extract copper from the ore they mined and, it is assumed, that parallel to the development of mining and smelting, the craft of the coppersmith developed, about five thousand years ago.

A host of artefacts exist in local and regional museums whose role was, presumably, functional, these include containers, pots, bowls and the like, some of which are decorated in elaborate designs. The form of certain vessels could not be forged in one piece and in these cases, parts of the vessels, such as spouts or bases, had to be soldered on to the main body of the object. Cooking pots and containers in which food was served or prepared had to be lined with tin to prevent corrosion and to avoid the contamination of food with poisonous copper oxides and salts. The now famously shaped Omani coffee pots did not appear until the 17th century, after the introduction of coffee to the region. In the intervening centuries they became well known and much sought after for their elegance of shape and the intricacy of the designs with which they were decorated. A special group of vessels produced by Omani coppersmiths were pen boxes. Since these were exclusively the province of the educated classes who were able to read and write, many of them were lavishly decorated.

These metalwork artisans took enormous pride in leaving their artistic signature on a wide variety of objects, ornate spoons as well as keys are testament to their remarkable skill and creativity. Elaborate designs were also used to enhance the appearance of weaponry, including swords, guns and most famously the Omani khanjar, or dagger. The khanjar has been used and worn in the sultanate for centuries and, even today, is an important part of the ceremonial attire of Omani men.

While practical considerations require a top quality

Right: Khanjar, 19th-20th century (Saayid Faisal bin Ali Museum)
Top: spouted bowl (Museum of Ministry of Culture and Heritage)
Right: penbox and a selection of keys (Library of Sayyid Mohammed bin Ahmad Al Busaidi)





blade for a sword or khanjar, the creators of these weapons strived to produce aesthetically attractive *objects d'art*. The sheath of the Omani khanjar, is traditionally made from wood, covered in leather, as well as its grip, is usually embellished with silver sheet and wire and sometimes even gold decoration, depending on the wealth and prestige of the owner. Decoration may also be carried out as silver or gold thread embroidery. Such is the importance of the khanjar that it forms part of the Omani national flag. ■

From Islamic Art of Oman by Abdulrahman Al Salimi and Heinz Gaube Lorenz Korn

