

Courting Splendour
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The inaugural exhibition of the recently restored Mohatta Palace Museum, *Treasures of the Talpurs: Collections from the Courts of Sindh* is deceptively small. Deceptive because while the number of exhibits is limited, their grandeur holds the visitor spellbound. It is an eye opener for those urbanites that are unaware of the rich culture and craftsmanship that once flourished in their own province.

The choice of theme is appropriate in more ways than one. At a time when Sindh is being increasingly seen as parochial and introverted, this exhibition demonstrates the cultural melting pot that this area has always been. The craftsmen of the courts of Sindh were influenced by the arts and crafts of their peers in Turkey, Iran and China, as by those closer to home in the Indian sub-continent. They adopted some of the latter's unique elements and added their own individual and regional touches. The period between the end of Mughal rule and the beginning of British conquest was especially creative and productive for the artisans of Sindh.

On entering the main exhibition hall, your attention is likely to be drawn to the rich, gold embroidered ceremonial spread from mid-nineteenth century Khairpur. It is simply overpowering in its presence and sheer richness. But before you have fully appreciated its intricate floral embroidery, you are likely to be distracted by the ornate silver settee, also from Khairpur. Allow yourself to be carried away by such distractions and soon you will discover linkages that were not obvious at first glance. That is the way to truly enjoy the exhibits. Placed in only two rooms, they encourage visitors to move back and forth for second looks.

The real reward for the visitor is not the opulent *masnad* or silver furniture but the discovery of the more subtle aspects of some of the other exhibits. Among the truly fascinating are the weapons; the attention to detail in decorating guns, knives and swords shows the importance of the Mirs attached to them. It should be remembered that the Talpurs possessed considerable experience of warfare. Arms and armour therefore, were of great value to them. Over time, their weapons took on another dimension: they became symbols of wealth, social standing and personal adornment. It was, one imagines, similar to making a personal statement through one's clothes.

The decoration of the weapons on display is a curious blend of faith and craftsmanship. For instance, many of them carry Quranic inscriptions or invocations of Hazrat Ali, but these are often integrated in the pattern, such as "Ya Ali Madad" inscribed in gold on a watered steel barrel. The collection of guns reflects some of the finest work in gold carving. A particularly spectacular one

has a barrel with an intricate trellis design. The knives and swords on display are similarly overlaid with gold and inscriptions. One cannot help but wonder at the intense attention paid to objects that were ultimately used to hunt down people and animals.

The exhibition catalogue quotes T. Postans, "The arms of Sindh are very superior to those of most parts of India, particularly the matchlock barrels, which are twisted in the Damascus style. The nobles and chiefs procure many from Persia and Constantinople and these are highly prized, but nearly as good as can be made in the country. They are inlaid with gold and very highly finished. Some very good imitations of European flintlock are to be met with...The belts are leather or cloth, richly embroidered...Shields are made of rhinoceros horns...embossed with brass or silver."

Though, Treasure of the Talpurs is a small representative collection, it inspires the imagination. One can imagine a time when life was more leisurely. At the courts of Sindh, it was also more self indulgent. The Mirs, however, were perfectionists. Every stitch of embroidery, each square centimeter of enamel or inlay had to be a masterpiece in its own right. Apart from the arms and armour, this perfection is captured in many of the textiles, clothing and accessories such as the caps and walking-sticks on display. The ceremonial robes of the Mirs, of course, received special attention. In one *choga*, the Chinese influence is quite apparent in its style of foliage, embroidered with floss silk in fine chain stitch on yellow velvet.

Some of the *gaj* (tunic fronts) worn by women are equally exquisite. In these colourfully embroidered items, one can also discern a bridging of the gap between the Mir and the commoner. Though primarily produced under the patronage of the courts, the *gaj* found its way into ordinary households as well. Today, it is perhaps one of the few traditional crafts to have survived in a form closest to its original, mainly because it acquired popular patronage as part of most Sindhi women's wardrobes.

Meanwhile the manuscripts on exhibition reflect the diverse interests of the Talpur Mirs. Apart from manuscripts of the Quran, they include a specially commissioned book on falconry in Persian, as well as a compendium of Shah Abdul Latif's poetry commissioned by Mir Abdul Hussain Talpur.

Treasures of the Talpurs was made possible due to the generosity shown by Mir Murad Khan Talpur of Khairpur, his son Mir Mehdi Raza as well as Mir Mohammad Ali Khan Talpur and Mir Hyder Ali in sharing their priceless heirlooms. Credit also goes to them for looking after their heritage so thoughtfully and to the curator for the painstaking job she has accomplished. However the exhibition, supported by some items borrowed from other collectors only whets the appetite. Many are tempted to ask: when do we get an encore?