Abstract

Weapons have been the earliest invention of man to protect himself from animals and enemies. They have come a long way since they were first invented. The most primitive form of weapons was in the form of simple sticks or stones which were sharpened at the edges to turn them into deadly objects. The weapons have come a long way from being just a stone tool to dagger to club to javelins to catapults and so on. The evidences of the weapons can be found in the cave paintings of various civilizations. How these weapons turned into some of the most wonderful masterpieces of art and art expression is a thing of great interest. These weapons of artistic expressions have travelled a long way from stone to be inlaid with the most precious gemstones and metals. They not only help us trace a phase of development of an object but also provide evidences of the taste of a particular culture or a ruler who got them made. The present research paper aims to throw light on the development of weapons from the earliest ones which were made for hunting to the weapons which with the passage of time acquired their place a form of decorative arts which transforms its image as being just a weapon of attack and defence to a medium of expressing the art of its time as well as the taste of the ruler who got them customized.

1 Introduction

Decorative Arts is a term used for the works of art which also have a functional character in addition to its design and beautification. Precisely, Decorative Arts are the arts concerned with the production of arts that are both beautiful and useful. The prime objective of Decorative Arts is to “ornament utilitarian objects”, such as rugs, textiles, weapons etc.. They may be divided into two categories: “the ones that are valued purely for their intrinsic value and those that are subordinate to some other artistic uses.” Modern Decorative Arts include jewellery, textiles, furnishings etc.. It is in opposition to “Fine Arts” in the sense that, the latter gives us only a visual pleasure and has no utilitarian objective. This research paper is about the advancement of weapons from being completely an object of utility to an object of Decorative Art wherein, in addition to its primary purpose, its embellishments and adornments also provided visual delight.

The use of arms and weapons can be seen in the arts of various civilizations be it wall paintings, cave paintings, reliefs or sculpture. In India which is a country of many religions and diverse cultures one can see weapons and arms been shown in all forms of visual arts. India is a country in which art is partially away from realism as far as the depiction of deities (Gods and Goddesses) is concerned.
These deities have been shown with multiple arms holding weapons in each one of them which is an “Indianized way” to depict the power of the deity. For example, the Maheshasuramadini panel from the Maheshasuramardini cave from Mahabalipuram, the goddess is shown with multiple arms and each of her arms holding an attribute. Similarly, in the Vishnuanantsyana panel from the Dasavatara temple from Deogarh, all the attributes of God Vishnu have been shown in a personified form, the mace, the sword, the chakra and the bow respectively. Lord Shiva has been shown with his attribute, the Trident or the Trishula numerous times in Indian Art. Not only have the gods and goddesses shown with weapons but also there are many Kings and warriors that have been shown holding their weapons. For instance, the statue of Vima Kad Phises from Mathura shows the king in a standing form holding a mace in his right hand. It emphasizes on his muscularity and masculine power. Likewise a Greek warrior from the railing of the Bharut Stupa shows a foreigner holding his sword and standing in an erect position.

There are also similar depictions in paintings also. Goddess Kali, who has been shown with multiple arms and each of her arms holding a weapon, is slaying Shiva, several times in Indian paintings. The paintings of many Rajput Kings have been shown holding well decorated swords and Mughal and Pahari kings mounted on horsebacks holding their swords covered with decorative sheaths. In addition to all these themes there are many battle scenes depicted in Indian painting which throw considerable light into the kinds of arms and weapons being used in the period in question.

2 Weapons Evolution

The first humans led a nomadic life. They were hunter-gatherers. They lived in small groups and when the sources of his survival began to perish, he changed his abode. Until he discovered farming, he relied completely on hunting and this is when he invented the earliest weapons. They were made of stone, chiselled and chipped on the edges so as to give it a fine finished edge and with these sharp stones were attached long sticks of wood and gave them the shape of spears which could be thrown from a distance at the prey or an enemy. Eventually man also started using animal bones and transformed them into deadly weapons, for instance, the leg bone of an antelope could be made into a good club and horns of animals could be made into wonderful daggers.

There are many cave paintings found in various parts of the world which show evidences to the kinds of weapons used by the nomadic man (Fig. 1) and when various pieces of history of the usage of weapons is seen, one can trace the development of weapons. Cave paintings in Australia dating back about 20,000 years show the use of boomerangs during that period. Other than spears, daggers, stones and horns, slings were also used as a deadly form of weapon which was made from two leather cords fastened to a leather pouch. A small stone, mostly round in shape, was held in between the cords, held back and then aimed at the target. With the help of slings, one could aim at a prey or an enemy at a distance. The slings have been used by many ancient civilizations although it is a difficult weapon to master but very deadly at the same time. After the slings one sees the invention of bows and arrows which remained as a medium of attack for a long period of time. The early bows were made of flexible wood such as that of an elm or ash and for arrows they used strong reeds or branches and to these reeds were attached sharp pieces of flint. There are also some pre-historic cave paintings which depict scenes of battle. These ancient weapons find mention in old stories and poems too.

The early human being had developed weapons for hunting but there was hardly any reason for a large scale fight. This was due to the fact that he had no permanent dwelling of his own and moved from one place to another in search of food and shelter. The challenge began when he knew how to grow crops, irrigate them and domesticate animals.

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Once he began to settle down he became conscious of his possessions and this is when battles began to occur and weaponry underwent an enormous change. Around 5000 B.C., men began to develop weapons made of more durable material such as copper. By 3000 B.C. men learnt that copper when mixed with tin gave a much stronger metal which lasted longer and did not fade with frequent use and the metal was bronze. By about 1550 B.C. invaders from modern day Turkey marched towards Mesopotamia (Iraq) and they were called Hittites and their power rested in their iron weapons. These iron weapons turned out to be even better than the bronze ones. Then, with the invention of chariots one could shoot an arrow from a larger distance. Men mounted themselves on horses which helped them to travel with a greater speed and blew arrows and swords with a much greater velocity. From the earliest civilizations, the best of the inventions were made in the field of weaponry even if there were not much advancement made in the development of utensils and furnishings etc.

3 Weapons As Masterpieces Of Decorative Arts

However, as time passed by weapons served not only a medium of attack and counter-attack but they were now being turned into masterpieces of art. They served two purposes: primarily, they were designed to be used exclusively in wars and secondarily, they were fashioned for the sake of decorative purposes. Consequently warfare did not just mean attacking and combating and just driving through ones possession, rather, warfare turned spectacular with the beautification of arms even though the efficiency in performance remained the fundamental requisite. For instance, the Japanese sword which is well known for its “moral and symbolic connotations” as well as an expression of artistic skill yet its principle function of attacking and defending remains primary. Even though the arms were beautified, its artistic characteristics were linked to its main function. Weapons as tools of defence or attack do not fulfil their function as isolated and self-contained entities. Their power and utility depends on a functional synthesis of various objects of various forms that act as accessories to them. For example quivers for bows and arrows, sheaths for blades and daggers etc. What form a weapon acquires is truly influenced by the culture of which it is a part.

Its secondary function as an object of art and beauty lies in its display and magico-religious beliefs. The power of weapon has been realized by man since the earliest times. Beautifying them added much power to the weapons. The earliest evidences of these beautifications can be found on the weapons of a Palaeolithic hunter which depict animals in incised form. The same animals have also been found in his caves pointing towards the fact that he believed that those particular animals had some magical power and that associating himself with the animal would connect its power with him. For this reason man covered himself with the animal skin which earlier was a requirement for protecting himself against the odds of climate but later he assumed that the animal whose remains he wore gave him the
power of the animal himself. Images of super-natural beings or depiction of symbols related to divine character or votive objects on arms and arms gave an additional assurance of protection and also infused a sense of fear on the enemy. Thus the weapons also assumed a religious, devotional and a ritualistic character.

It is the secondary component that I will be throwing light upon. A brief introduction given above tells us about the transformation of weapons as an instrument of merely killing for survival to adding supernatural character which is taken one step further with ornamentation of the same with gems and precious metals such as gold. The hilts of the daggers were inlaid with gems like rubies and diamonds, and the blades and the swords of steel encrusted with gold in the historic civilizations of Europe and Asia. But at times the weapons were over adorned as a result of which they lost their primary characteristic. The display of flora and fauna and geometrical patterns were among the most widely used form ornamentation and most of the times the ornamentation was done in accordance to the part of the weapon which was to be embellished.

Among the most widely used stone for the decoration of sword and dagger hilts was the Jade. Jade was more popularly known as Nephrite or Yashm which is a Persian term. The jades are available in three different colours, i.e., dark green, light green and white (Fig. 2). It was not only used for the embellishment of weapons but also many dishes, flasks etc were made out of this stone. The reason for the usage of this stone in such a large scale was, firstly, it was known as the ‘Victory Stone’ and secondly it cured digestive ailments. The jades were found from Yarkand, Khotan and Kashkem valley in Central Asia. The earliest surviving jades trace their lineage to Timur’s grandson, Ulugh Beg son of ShahRukh. The jade carving continued in the time of Shah Ismail (1501-24), the founder of Safavid dynasty. It was also during his period that the inlaying of the incised decoration with gold was innovated. The gold inlay work continued under the Ottomans and they went one step ahead in gold inlay work where the final inlay was flushed with the jade surface. The craftsmen from the Timurid and the Safavid dynasty further migrated to the Mughal courts. It was during the emperor Akbar (1556-1605) that the earliest jades are found in India. The recent jade of Akbar’s reign is a lion headed-dagger where also the year of its making is inscribed. The emperor preferred jades of dark green to black in colour. The stylistic characteristic of lion seen on the dagger hilt of Akbar is the same found in the paintings of his reign. The Mughal emperor Jahangir (1605-1627) was a keen collector of the jades of Ulugh Beg. He preferred light green jades over the darker ones. He got many Timurid jade objects copied by his lapidaries. Shah Jahan (1628-58), the son and successor of Jahangir was fond of white jades. Among the most beautiful of his jade works is an animal headed dagger (Fig. 3). It is inlaid with gold and other precious stones. In spite of the fact that during the reign of Shah Jahan’s successor, Aurangzeb (1658-1707), it was a period of political upheavals, the weapons continued to constitute under the category of Decorative Arts, even though in a deteriorated form.

Figure 1: Jades of varying colours: from dark green to white
After the Mughals, we see a continuation of this art form under the Sikhs. The Sikhs viewed the Mughals as their contemporary rivals especially after the martyrdom of their fifth guru, Arjan Dev, by the emperor Jahangir. Yet, there are many things which different cultures around the world have shared in spite of their differences. Mughal Art and Architecture have been an epitome of beauty in the history of Indian Art and the Sikh have undoubtedly took a lot of inspiration from the Mughals in that concern and weaponry is no exception. Maharaja Ranjit Singh was very fond of collecting weapons from the period of Akbar, Jahangir and Shah Jahan as much as he was fond of collecting their jewelry. Susan Stronge, a noted Art Historian notes that “On 18 March 1837 Fane was invited to see Ranjit Singh’s entire collection of treasures”. Fane says “The swords many of them of great value, their blades alone being on some instances valued at 1000 pounds and the gold and jewels upon their hilts and scabbards at five times the sum. Many of them had been squeezed out of Shah Shuja, the ex-king of Caboul.” Maharaja Ranjit Singh himself nurtured the manufacture of arms and weapons. The important shields, arms and armors were classified by owner and their origin as well as any embellishment carried out on the weapons was noted down. Weapons were manufactured during special occasions too is proven by the fact that Maharaja Ranjit Singh got a powder horn embellished during the marriage of his eldest son Kharak Singh. Many court servants were employed singularly for the purpose of examining the ornamented pieces of weapons. However, the scene of embellishing and creating such ornate pieces of Decorative Arts saw a change after the annexation by the Europeans which saw the manufacturing of cigar boxes and card-cases.

4 Conclusion
To consummate, I would say, weapons just like any other decorative arts has come a long way evolving with the passage of time. From being just a ‘machine’ that could kill to being included in a form of art, it has been a long process. Not only does this evolution invoke a sense of eagerness and excitement for an art historian but at the same time it gives a tremendous field filled with scope for further research on the same. It shows the flowering of the Homo sapiens from being a meagre “hungry for flesh” to someone with utter sophistication.

References
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