

CORRESPONDENCE

“Clive of India” Mughal Wine Flask in Doha Museum of Islamic Art

Recently, the Museum of Islamic Art (MIA) in Doha, Qatar, presented the exhibit, “Set in Stone: Gems and Jewels of Royal Indian Courts”. Among the many magnificent gems and jewellery on display was an exquisite 17th century Mughal period jade covered flask adorned with precious stones. The flask had been meticulously fashioned around a silver one using eight shaped pale green nephrite jade panels, the joints invisible, concealed beneath emerald-set delicate gold bands, and inlaid with rubies, their surface carved to resemble petals, set in gold forming a lattice. It is a superb example of the jeweller’s skill in the “kundan” method of setting precious stones in jade with tiny strips of highly refined gold. Most of the jade artefacts dating to the Mughal period (1526–1857) comprise objects associated with food and drink, such as plates, bowls and wine cups. This is not surprising as, beside jade’s aesthetic appeal, there was a widely-held belief among the Timurids, ancestors of the Mughals, that jade can detect poison.

Besides its intrinsic beauty, as one of the greatest surviving pieces of early 17th century Mughal craftsmanship dating to the rule of the fourth Mughal emperor, Jahangir (reigned 1605–1627), this particular object was identified as having been owned by “Clive of India”, adding another layer of interest. This begs the question: who was Clive of India and, more importantly, how did this piece end up in Qatar?

Robert Clive (1725–1774) was employed by the British East India Company. His victory over the army of Siraj ud-Daulah, Nawab of Bengal, at Palashi (anglicised as Plassey) on the Hooghly River in West Bengal in 1757, paved the way to the British subjugation of the subcontinent. Mir Jafar, the new Nawab of Bengal appointed by Clive, offered the Englishman fabulous works of art as gifts for King George III. The jade wine flask may have been acquired at this time. On his return to England in 1760, Clive was celebrated as a national hero and made 1st Baron Clive of Plassey. He became the governor and commander-in-chief of India and is regarded as the founder of British India.

As one of the Nabobs, Clive of India made a huge fortune during his thirty-five years with the East India Company and was the subject of judicial investigation when he returned to Britain. Historian William Dalrymple has described Clive as “an unstable sociopath”.

On April 27th, 2004, Christie’s in London held its spring Islamic sales auction, “The Clive of India Treasure—Magnificent Mughal Objects”; the catalogue cover featured Lot 156, the extraordinary 17th century bejewelled wine flask, estimated at £1 million. It had an impeccable provenance—Robert, Lord Clive of Plassey to his first son, Edward Clive, 2nd Baron Clive of Plassey and 1st Earl of Powis (3rd creation 1804) (1754–1839), by descent to George Charles Herbert, 4th Earl of Powis (1862–1952), thence by inheritance.



Museum of Islamic Art (MIA). Photo: T.W. Kern



MIA Interior, Central Hall. Photo: T.W. Kern



“Clive of India” flask, 17th century, height 24.5 cm

Powis Castle, the Clive family seat, had been acquired in 1952 by the National Trust, which established a “Clive Museum” in 1987, where the objects collected in India by Robert Clive and his son went on display, lent by their relatives. The flask had been on loan to the Victoria and Albert Museum for about forty years, since 1963.

Direct descendants decided to sell some objects and consigned the rare vessel to the Christie’s auction. Only two other flasks are known, both in the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg, that were once part of the royal collection at the Mughal Court in Delhi. Furious competition for the historic piece caused the price to soar to dizzying heights, hugely exceeding the estimate. It was bought by the late Sheikh Saud bin Mohammed Al-Thani, the then culture minister of Qatar, considered to be one of the world’s biggest art buyers until his death in 2014. A cousin of Qatar’s current Emir, Sheikh Al-Thani was in charge of developing libraries and museums.

By October 2004, an export licence for the wine flask had been deferred by the Minister for Culture, Media and Sport, following the recommendation by the Reviewing Committee on the Export of Works of Art and Objects of Cultural Interest (RCEWA), administered by the UK’s Arts Council, that every effort should be made to keep this historic heirloom for the nation. Sir Hayden Phillips, the chairman of the RCEWA, said: “Apart from the intrinsic quality of the object, and the outstanding importance for scholarship, the reviewing committee was unanimous in its recognition of the emblematic significance for our history and national life. Robert Clive was an outstanding

and, indeed, controversial figure, but absolutely central to the creation of British rule in India.”

The V&A set out to raise money to match the price, but by 2005, the Qatar government withdrew the licence application, blocking any purchase. As a result, the flask stayed in the UK, where it was lent to the V&A’s 2009 exhibition, “Maharaja: The Splendour of India’s Royal Courts”, which travelled to other venues in Europe and North America.

A new development occurred in 2016 when the flask loan agreement with the V&A was not renewed, as Qatar Museums wanted to display the flask in Doha’s Museum of Islamic Art. Designed by the renowned architect, I.M. Pei, this iconic museum, which opened in December 2008, is dedicated to reflecting the vitality, complexity and diversity of the arts of the Islamic world. Early in 2017, thirteen years after the first attempt to export the flask to Qatar, Matt Hancock, the UK Culture Minister, announced that the flask was export-deferred again, initially for four months. However, the sum a UK institution would now have to pay as a fair matching price had more than doubled since 2004, from £2,973,000 to £6,000,000 (plus VAT of £1,200,000). It is not surprising, then, that this perhaps proved to be too high for any serious fundraising attempt, instead allowing for an export licence finally to be issued.

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