



Cast Bronze Alam

South India, 18th-19th century

29.5cm high

Stock no.: A5044

This round cast bronze *alam* ("standard" or "banner") would have been carried in processions during battles or in state ceremonies. Dominated by elegantly pierced floral decorations, it consists of features typically found in Islamic *alams*, such as its tear-drop shape and the two dragon heads surmounting the rim.¹ However, the unusual absence of Quranic inscriptions suggests that this may have been used in a secular setting or perhaps by non-Muslims; indeed, the sun disk in the centre of the medallion is reminiscent of motifs found in Hindu art.

Traditionally, *alams* were used on the tenth day of the Islamic month of *Muharram* to mourn the death of the Prophet Muhammad's grandson, Husayn ibn Ali, for it symbolised the battle standards carried by Husayn and his followers during the Battle of Karbala. Hence, *alams* were installed in *ashurkhanas* (meeting houses used for the recitation of dirges and prayers), where they were raised on poles that were adorned with rich cloths. Interestingly, Hindus of Golconda also historically observed *Muharram*,² therefore, this particular object may have been crafted and used within and for this religious community.

There is a similar *alam* without its crest of splayed finials in The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York (see Museum Number: 2012.207.2a, b) as well as an *alam* with two dragon heads (see Museum Number: 2013.37). The Virginia Museum of Fine Arts also has an *alam* with two dragon heads (see Museum Number: 81.87).

Footnotes

1. See, Mark Zebrowski. 1997. *Gold, Silver & Bronze from Mughal India*. Alexandria Press. p.321.

2. Navina Najat Haidar and Marika Sardar. 2015. *Sultans of Deccan India, 1500-1700: Opulence and Fantasy*. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art. p.215.