



Gold-inlaid steel bow

Circa: India, 18th-19th century

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108 x 10 cm (42 1/2 x 4 inches)

Stock no.: A4141

This triply curving steel bow is composed of two elements connected together by the central handgrip made of wood. The steel limbs begin to thicken from the central point, suggesting that this was a bow of considerable power. Made with extremely sophisticated steel technology to ensure that the weapon remained relatively lightweight, the metalwork is decorated in the *koftgari* (damascened) technique by hammering gold and silver wire into incised areas to form stylised scrolling leaves and floral motifs. The grooves on the upper part of the limbs provided a mechanical, as well as aesthetic, benefit to militate against the possibility of the limbs twisting, which was a common fault in composite bows.¹

Elaborately decorated steel bows were initially made as technological showpieces in India.² However, by the 18th and 19th centuries, these weapons were produced on an industrial scale and used as military bows. The arsenals of Mughal rulers were stacked with steel bows because these weapons were easier to store than composite bows (which could suffer distortion from the changing temperatures and humidity); indeed, the routine maintenance of steel bows (i.e. the prevention of rust) would be sufficient to maintain these in working order indefinitely.

Perhaps one of the most lavishly decorated examples of a steel bow, which is in the same form as this particular object, is that of Bahadur Shah II, the last ruler of Mughal dynasty in India, which is held in The National Museum in New Delhi.

Footnotes

1. See, Mike Loades. 2019. *War Bows: Longbow, Rossbow, Composite Bow and Japanese Yumi*. Oxford: Bloomsbury Publishing. p.177.

2. Ibid., p.177.