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Late-Safavid or Early-Qajar Helmet

Persia, 18th century

Steel overlaid with gold

69cm high, 20cm diameter

Provenance: From the estate of Albert Joseph Gasteiger von Raabenstein and Kobach, General and engineer at the court of the Shah of Iran. Thence by descent.

Stock no.: A5625

The long spike, distinctive nose guard and two angled feather holders of this Persian helmet create the unmistakable silhouette of the *kulāh-khūd* (کلاه خود), sometimes known as a devil mask amongst English-speaking arms and armour collectors for its fearsome appearance.¹ Of watered steel, the elongated domed form is consistent with helmets dating to the late Safavid era. The 11cm-tall pyramidal spike is screwed into the helmet, which is characteristic of helmets from the 18th century.² Riveted at the front of the skull is a screw bracket that secures a sliding nose protector (*damāghak*). On either side of the nose protector are two small porte aigrettes (*jā parī*) with flattened lobed bases, used to mount feathers (*ablaq*) from birds such as the heron, egret or peacock.³ The feathers taken from the helmets of vanquished enemies were sometimes displayed in the *jā parī* as a trophy.⁴

A long mail aventail, intended for neck protection, is attached through holes around the rim of the bowl. The lower edge of the aventail is vandyked, terminating in four long triangular points and two shorter ones. Hours of skilled labour were required not only to mesh the unwelded rings, each only 4mm in diameter, but also to add contrasting golden brass rings to the dark grey steel mail to create diamond patterns in the aventail.

The helmet is decorated with *koftgari*, a technique of inlaying gold into watered steel. The ornamentation consists of interweaving vines with characteristic polylobed Saz leaves and buds.⁵ As is

typical for Safavid helmets, the densest area of decoration is found below the spike. Persian verses are inscribed in large polylobed cartouches on the crown, reading:

این خود [مرصع] بسر مرد دلاور
خوشر بود از تاج کی و افسر قیصر
ز آهن بود و گشته مرصع بزر [و] سیم
همچون فلک هشتم از آرایش اختر

‘This inlaid helmet on the head of the brave hero,
Is more beautiful than a mighty king’s crown or a Caesar’s diadem.
It is made of iron and set with gold and silver,
It is adorned with stars like the Eighth Heaven.’

The border of the helmet bowl is composed of 8 cartouches, damascened with more verses:

ای خود صیقلی تو مگر مهر انوری
یا کاسه حیات ز دریا اختری
رستم طبیعتان همه را بر سری کلاه
بهرام صولتان همه را زیب افسری
صهرا برا [کذا] بخونه [کذا] زین از تو صد شکوه
دارا برا بمعرکه سدی [کذا] اسکندری
جوزا اگر نه ز چه شمشیر میکشی
مریخ اگر نه ز چه خون ریز خنجری

‘O polished helmet, surely you are the resplendent sun?
Or a cup of (the water of) life from the dark blue sea?
You are the headdress on the head of all those who have the nature of Rustam,
You are the ornament of the crown of all those who have the ferocity of Bahram.
Suhrab in his saddle has a hundred splendours thanks to you,
For Darab on the battlefield, you are like the wall of Alexander.

If you are not Orion, then why do you draw a sword?

If you are not Mars, then why a blood-thirsty dagger?

These verses are commonly found on helmets dating from the Qajar period (1789-1925). By invoking such figures as Mars, the Roman god of war, Suhrab, a legendary warrior from the *Shahnameh*, and Alexander the Great, the wearer might hope to assume some of their bravery on the battlefield.

A helmet in the collection of the Victoria & Albert Museum, London, also dated to the 18th century shares very similar dimensions as well as similar swirling vegetal koftgari ornamentation (accession no. [693-1889](#)). Large calligraphic medallions feature on the body of the helmet, as well as cartouches around the rim. A late Safavid helmet in the collection of the Military Museum Tehran (inventory no. 11) features similar floral arabesques, interspersed with birds and bunches of grapes.⁶ A helmet with such similar ornamentation that it could come from the same workshop as the present example, in the National Museum of Scotland (accession no. [A.1890.266](#)), is dated to the early Safavid period.

This helmet comes from the collection of the Albert Joseph Gasteiger von Raabenstein and Kobach (1823-1890) in Tyrol. Gasteiger was hired by the Persian government in 1860 to oversee major modernisation of the roads, bridges, and buildings. He was an instructor at the Dar ul-Fonun University. As a civil servant, he oversaw the reorganisation of the Persian army. He was the first European to be given the title of “Khan”, known in Persian as Gāstager Khan.⁷

¹ Gahir, Sunita and Spencer, Sharon (eds). *Weapon – A Visual History of Arms and Armor*. New York City: DK Publishing, 2006. P. 23.

² Moshtagh Khorasani, Manouchehr. *Arms and Armour from Iran: The Bronze Age to the End of the Qajar Period*. Tübingen: Legat, 2006. P. 718.

³ Ibid. p. 268.

⁴ Ibid. p. 284.

⁵ Abdullahi, Yahya and Rashid Embi, Mohamed. ‘Evolution of Abstract Vegetal Ornaments in Islamic Architecture’, *International Journal of Architectural Research* 9.1 (2015). pp. 31-49, 43.

⁶ Moshtagh Khorasani, Manouchehr. op. cit. p. 718.

⁷ Slaby, Helmut (2000). ‘Gastgeiger, Albert Joseph’, in Yarshater, Ehsan (ed.) *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, Volume X. London: Routledge. Pp. 320-321.