

OTHER-WORLDLY CREATURES

*Zoomorphic Metalwork
from India*

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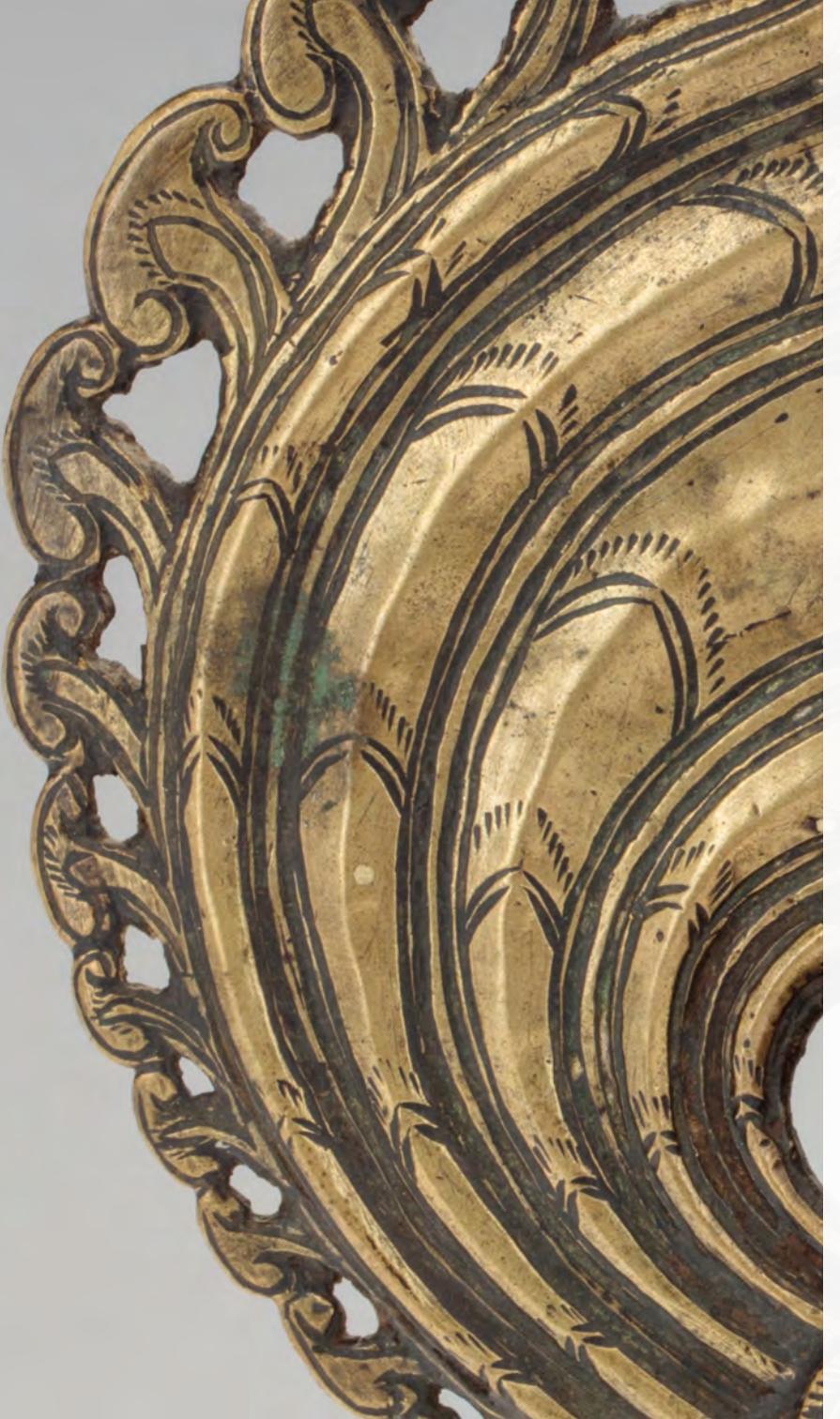
A M I R M O H T A S H E M I

I first encountered one of these fantastical animals more than 20 years ago and that sparked an interest which led me gradually to assemble this collection. I was fascinated to imagine how Indian craftsmen manipulated hard metal to create images of such refinement and spiritual power. I am delighted to be able to present these extraordinary beasts all together in this catalogue.

I would like to thank Arthur Millner for his thorough research and cataloguing which has shed light on their age and origin.

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1. *Hamsa*

Deccan, 18th century

22.5 x 23 x 12 cm

This brass oil bottle from a lamp has a bulbous body, supported by a sturdy cylindrical column flanked by the bird's relatively slender legs, on a square platform. The body is incised with patterned layering of stylised feathers, with a pair of small wings on either side. At the bottom of its tapered neck is a heavy necklace with disc-like pendants. From its flattened beak issues a leafy sprig, which terminates below the chest, from where the oil pipe projects downwards. The rear portion of this bird is dominated by the magnificent scrolling fan-like swishing tail (*later stand*).

The function of this object is revealed by the pipe on its underside, which originally fed into a tray, now missing, where the wick for the lamp would be burned.

The *hamsa* is a mythical swan or goose with early origins in Hindu and Buddhist India. The story of the Golden Gander from the *jatakas* (stories from the life of Sakyamuni Buddha) is illustrated in a stone relief in the Los Angeles County Museum (Pal 1988, no. 80). Rows of similar birds are depicted on exterior friezes of Hindu temples, such as the 12th century Hoysalesvara Temple in Karnataka. At the same time, the metal animal-shaped vessel has Middle Eastern origins (see note to Cat. No. 5), so both indigenous and imported themes are incorporated here.





2. Cow

Northern India or Deccan,

16th/17th century

11 x 16 x 6 cm

This is a sprinkler in the form of a cow who is depicted with her head lowered for grazing, a bell attached with a chain to the neck, and a blanket on her back.

The function of this object is suggested by the fact that the mouth and the



udders are pierced with holes to allow liquid to flow through. It was probably filled via the hole at the back, where the break in the upper part of the tail suggests an attachment, now lost, possibly a funnel. Ritual pourers in the form of cows or cows' heads are commonly seen in Hindu temples, where the sacred image is unctioned with milk or holy water. For various forms of pourer, see Untracht, no. 28; Bussabarger & Robins, p. 80 and Jain & Aggarwala, p. 40.



3. Goose

North India or Deccan,
circa 17th century

20 x 14 x 9 cm

The goose perches on a circular, lotus base, its claws splayed out. Its body, neck and wings are engraved with semi-abSTRACT patterned feathers, the wings joined into a single cape-like covering. Its heavily lidded eyes are wide and alert.

The function of this object is not immediately apparent; the square panel inserted at the back merely covers the hole necessitated by the casting process. A clue is the disc cover at the top of the head, which conceals an opening. This suggests that the object was originally either a lamp, with a wick passing through the opening or a container. For a bird lamp with an opening on the head in the Fowler Museum, Los Angeles, see Anderson, p. 87.



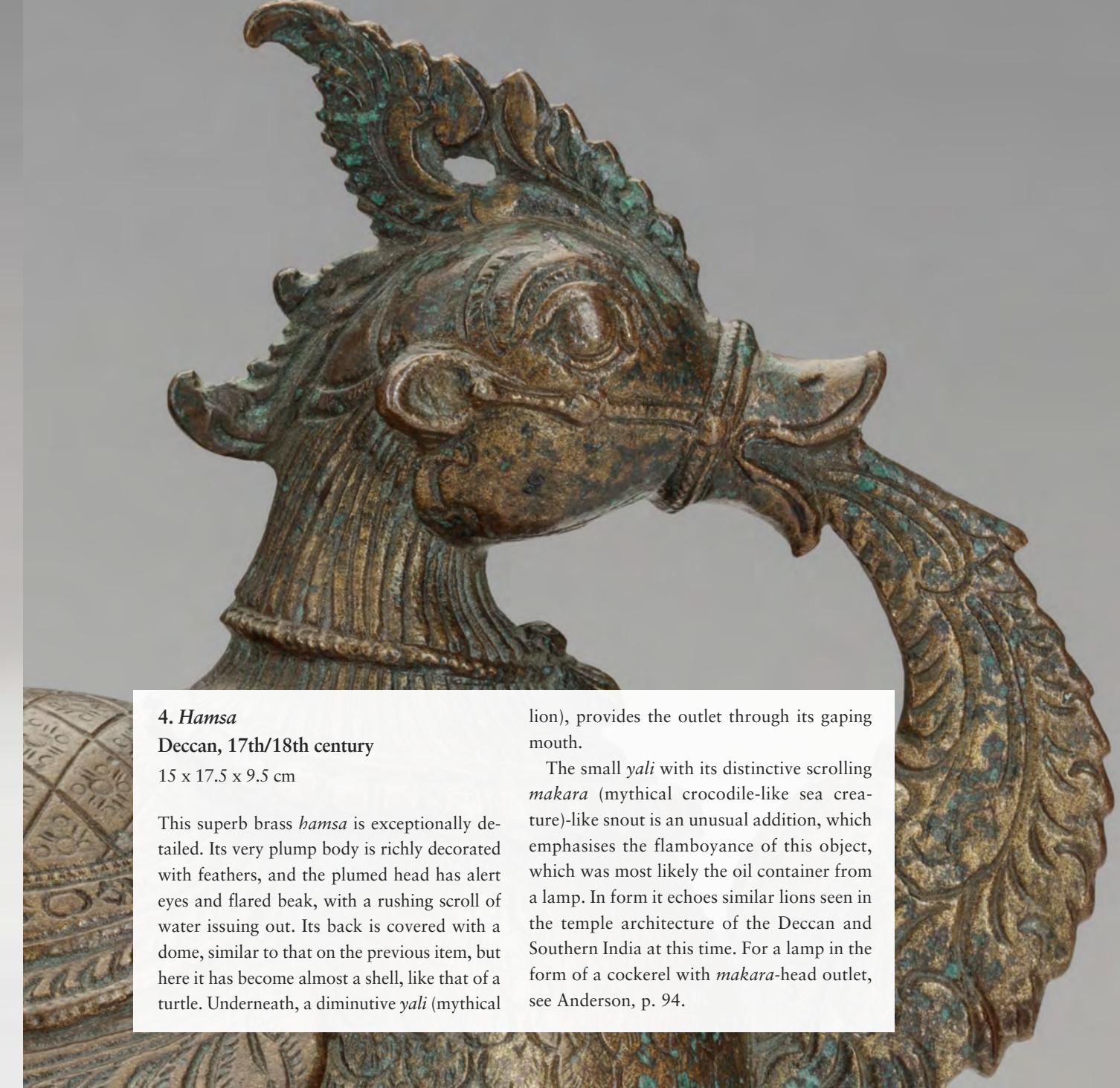


4. Hamsa
Deccan, 17th/18th century
15 x 17.5 x 9.5 cm

This superb brass *hamsa* is exceptionally detailed. Its very plump body is richly decorated with feathers, and the plumed head has alert eyes and flared beak, with a rushing scroll of water issuing out. Its back is covered with a dome, similar to that on the previous item, but here it has become almost a shell, like that of a turtle. Underneath, a diminutive *yali* (mythical

lion), provides the outlet through its gaping mouth.

The small *yali* with its distinctive scrolling *makara* (mythical crocodile-like sea creature)-like snout is an unusual addition, which emphasises the flamboyance of this object, which was most likely the oil container from a lamp. In form it echoes similar lions seen in the temple architecture of the Deccan and Southern India at this time. For a lamp in the form of a cockerel with *makara*-head outlet, see Anderson, p. 94.





5. Parrot

Northern India, 16th/17th century

14 x 22 x 7 cm

The cast brass bird is on a cylindrical shaft with feet modelled in relief on each side. The wings are highly stylised, forming “drop” shapes with conch-like spirals. The head is almost spherical, with bead-shaped eyes accented with incised circles. The extended tail decorated with herringbone feathers is in similar vein.

As Zebrowski remarks, “abstraction

remained more supreme in the Middle East than in India” (Zebrowski, p. 95), and we see here a close affinity with Persian, Mesopotamian and even Spanish prototypes in anatomical details, suggesting an early date and Northern Indian origin, less influenced by the exuberance of South Indian Hinduism. Although hollow cast, this object has no openings or spouts apart from the shaft, so it was probably a finial for a standing lamp (*dipa stambha*), or even a birdcage. See Zebrowski, no. 92, for a finial said to have adorned a dovecote in Gujarat.





6. Horse

Probably Western Deccan,
16th/17th century

19 x 15 x 9 cm

This brass animal stands on a pierced base, his front legs raised on a low platform or bench. He wears an elaborate patterned high saddle with central pole and his bridle is attached to reins of twisted ropes. His mane is gathered in neat plaits.

The horse is smartly turned out for what appears to be a formal procession, suggesting that there would have been a princely rider, now missing. Rather than a secular ruler, however, it is likely that the original mounts were Khandoba and his consort Mhalsa, local folk deities worshipped mostly in Maharashtra and Karnataka, which over the centuries have become assimilated with Siva and Parvati. For a horse ridden by Khandoba and Mhalsa in the British Museum, see Blurton, p. 95. See also Bussabarger & Robins, p. 90.



7. Hamsa

Deccan, circa 16th century

28 x 28 x 14 cm

The bird depicted on this incense burner has an exceptionally plump body, the upper portion of which, with its flared openwork tail and elaborately crested head, is pierced and hinged. Below is a raised round platform with lotus-decorated rim and at the rear is a tubular scrolling support in the form of an elongated *yali* standing on a mound with teardrop-shaped base.

The holes on the body allow the scented incense smoke to trickle out. This distinctive type of object, with its projecting support to provide stability for safety reasons, has several close relations in museums and collections (Zebrowski, nos. 103 & 105).





8. Durga's Lion Vehicle
(*vahana*), South India,
late 18th/early 19th century
13.5 x 15 x 7 cm

The solid cast brass mythical lion is depicted pouncing from his hind legs, his front pair raised, resting on a stylised fountain. His appearance is fierce with bulging eyes, horns and protruding fangs and his long tongue

drooping from his mouth. On his back is a slotted platform with an engraved flower.

This lion is almost certainly the mount (*vahana*) of the Hindu goddess Durga, as suggested by the platform on its back for an image of the goddess. For a pair of similar lions of monumental proportions in the Art Gallery of South Australia, carved in wood, see Bennett, p. 119.



9. Fish

India, circa 18th century

12.5 x 28 x 7 cm

This brass fish is probably a section from a ceremonial standard, with a projecting socket for a pole underneath and similar above, the latter with screw thread. The body is engraved with scales and low-set circular eyes, and the mouth has thick "lips" tightly closed (*later stand*).

As Jagdish Mittal writes, nine royal ensigns, one of which represented a fish, were carried before the Mughal emperor in the imperial retinue, and similar standards, set on the point of a spear, most probably had a role in ceremonies in the Deccan also. For one of the three metal fish emblems in the Jagdish and Kamla Mittal Museum of Indian Art, Hyderabad, see Welch, p. 323f.





10. Mythical Beast
South India, 19th century
15 x 14 x 7 cm

This brass composite animal has the body of a bird, with fanned upturned tail, but the head is that of a typical South Indian mythical lion (*yali*), with horns, bulging eyes, beak-like snout and gaping mouth. It stands on an oval lotus base.

This animal and Cat. No. 17 are curious fantasies without direct parallels in the mainstream Hindu iconography, although mythical beasts of various kinds abound in early Indian literature. Best known is perhaps the Navagunjara, a beast made up of nine animals who appears as a form of Vishnu in an Orissan version of the Mahabharata. Winged lions can be seen in early Indian sculpture (e.g. Victoria and Albert Museum, inv. IS 712 1883) and derive ultimately from Western Asiatic models, but these have bodies entirely of lions apart from the wings. The two animals here both have fine detailing and similar workmanship, although the different bases suggest they are not actually part of the same set. They probably served as subsidiary elements in a Hindu shrine, or perhaps were made as curiosities for the European market.



11. Hamsa
Deccan, circa 18th century
11 x 11 x 6.5 cm

This small brass bird is solid cast with no openings. Scrolling tendrils issue from its

beak, and the elaborate tail fans out behind. Although similar to item 21, the wings here are outstretched. The legs are joined to form a single support (*later stand*).

Like item 21, this must be a finial, as there are no other indications of function.



12. Parrot

South India, 18th/19th century

12.5 x 18 x 6 cm

This cast brass bird is quite naturalistically modelled, with vigorous incised detailing. It stands on a rectangular base with a circular hole for attachment. On its back is a round blanket or saddle with cross-hatched decoration. Its chest and underside of the tail have drilled openings.

The chest and tail holes on this parrot might indicate its function as an oil container, although these look like a later alteration, because the oil outlet on similar objects is usually a projection cast with the body.

13. Parrot

Northern India, circa 16th century

13.5 x 18 x 6 cm

This brass bird grasps the worm-like stem of a plant in its beak which dangles in front of its chest, artfully hiding the oil outlet. On its back is a hanging loop for a chain. The bird's body rests on a cylindrical shaft, flanked by its legs, on a circular base.

This oil container of a lamp was clearly well-used over the centuries; the engraved decoration has partly worn



away leaving a smooth and tactile surface. It is interesting how the objects in the birds' beaks vary in different examples; usually it is a scrolling leafy tendril, but sometimes it is more like gushing water, and here it is worm-like (although the bud at the bottom affirms its identity as a plant). This feature seems to have evolved from the "handle" attached usually to the back of early Islamic birds, such as the Mesopotamian incense burner in the Islamic Museum, Berlin, inv. I. 5623. For a very similar bird in the Chabrière-Arles Collection, see Zebrowski, no. 94.



14. Peacock
Southern India, 19th century

17 x 27 x 11 cm

The bird stands on a rectangular base, with its long feathered tail outstretched, decorated with incised herringbone detailing. Its small head is adorned with ruby [?] set eyes and a crest (*later wood stand*).

This heavily cast bird has no obvious

openings or attachments to suggest function. The peacock plays an important role in Hindu iconography as the vehicle of Subrahmanyam, the son of Siva, of Saraswati, consort of Brahma and goddess of wisdom, arts and music, and this could be a finial or element from a shrine. In Buddhism, peacocks feature in several of the *jatakas*, one of which is illustrated in a Pala stone fragment in the Norton Simon Museum (Pal 2003, no. 136).

15. Hamsa
Deccan, circa 17th century

16 x 12.5 x 7.5 cm

This bird, cast in brass, has remains of tinning. The snout-like beak forms a spout. The wings and body are incised throughout with patterned feathers.

The flamboyant crest on the head and probably tail (now missing), are pure South Indian, while the highly stylised modelling of the wings points more to Islamic origins. This vessel was probably an aquamanile, with the spout in the bird's mouth perhaps originally accompanied with a stopper, while the hole in the back and lost tail are indications of the original filling funnel, such as that seen on a 16th century example (Zebrowski, no. 99).





16. Parrot

Northern India, 17th century or later

14 x 22 x 6 cm

This brass hanging oil lamp is in the form of a parrot, with flared tail and stylised teardrop-shaped wings. Its head is depicted in semi-abstract manner, and there are several necklaces around its neck. The body rests on a simple circular base, attached to the pointed wick holder below. The oil outlet on its chest is in the form of a *makara* head.

The depiction of this parrot has a bold, archaic and provincial aura; the tendency towards abstraction is emphasised by the way the artist has modelled the head, the faceted linear wings and dispensed with legs and feet.

17. Mythical Beast

South India, 19th century

15 x 15 x 6 cm

This brass animal has the body of a parrot, its body with traces of gilt, standing on a circular platform on an inscribed oval base, with long flared tail, yet its head is that of a rearing elephant, his trunk raised.

The base is marked with the Roman letters NGM4.





18. Peacock
Northern India,
probably 19th century
19 x 17 x 9 cm

This brass container from a lamp is a slender necked bird, with small head and long protruding beak. The wings and raised openwork tail are incised with semi-abstract feathers. The bulbous body rests on a central hollow shaft, joined to the bird's legs, one of which is inscribed "9" in Arabic script. Below his chest is a long oil outlet, probably a later replacement, attached with solder (*later stand*).

The technique of the chiselled or incised decoration suggests a later date, despite its traditional form. A peacock incense burner in the Fowler Museum, Los Angeles, is similar in style (Anderson, p. 86).



19. Parrot
Northern India, 17th century or later
16 x 28 x 6.5 cm

This brass oil lamp, also in the form of a parrot, has a plain, undecorated tail and body and stands on a domed base attached to a long pointed wick holder. On its back is a loop for a chain, and from

its beak is a scrolling tendril.

This object has a more provincial feel than the others in this collection and is possibly later in date; the decoration is kept to a minimum. Alternatively it may be unfinished; this may explain the fact that the oil outlet on its chest is not functional, but a simple metal projection. The scroll in its beak is a later repair.



20. Crested Parrot

South India, 18th/19th century

13.5 x 21.5 x 7.5 cm

This cast brass bird is naturalistically modelled, with accurately-detailed head and beak. It stands on a rectangular base and has a small opening on its belly.

There is no sign of a fixing to attach the base as a finial, so perhaps this is purely an ornamental item. The tail has an old repair.

21. *Hamsa*

Deccan, circa 18th century

9.5 x 11.5 x 4 cm

This small brass bird is solidly cast with no openings. In typical form, a scrolling tendril issues out of its beak, and the tail fans out in an elaborate double curve.

There is no central shaft, but the bird stands directly on its feet on a circular base (*later wood stand*).

This is a finial, as it was not made to contain anything. It probably comes from the top of a standing lamp, such as the very similar *hamsa* in the Fowler Museum (Anderson, p. 80).



22. Nandi Bull, Vehicle (*vahana*)
of the Hindu God Siva
South India, 18th/19th century
17 x 14.5 x 7 cm

This bronze figure of Nandi stands on a thin rectangular base, wearing a blanket and trappings. Necklaces and a bell adorn his neck and his eyes and ears are alert. On his back is a socket with screw attachment.

Nandi emphasises the virility of the god Siva and is often depicted in a shrine of his own within a Siva temple complex. The thin base would originally have slid into a platform stand with four short legs. The socket in the back connected to an upper section, probably an image of Siva with his consort, Parvati, or a burning tray used during *puja* for incense or oil (Bussabarger & Robins, p. 84 & 85).



23. Horse
Deccan, circa 18th century
15 x 13 x 8.5 cm

This bronze stand, probably for a betel tray, is cast in two pieces, with the upper section in the form of a horse resting on a detachable rectangular platform. The horse wears a blanket and harness and on his back is a projecting socket with screw attachment.

The horse is solid and the opening on the back does not penetrate the body; the animal's static pose and solid frame emphasise its support function, probably for a circular tray to burn camphor. For a stand with tray in the form of Nandi, see Untracht, no. 64.



24 & 25. Leaping Fish
India, 18th/19th century
10 x 17 x 4.5 cm; 15 x 11 x 3.5 cm

These two tinned brass *huqqas* are fish-shaped, modelled in the form of jumping fish, with incised scales and almond-shaped eyes. Their *makara*-type mouths hold the socket for the burner, while another socket projects from under their throats to attach to the mouthpiece (*later stands*).

The fish is a common motif in Indian art; in Hinduism it is the form taken by Matsya, fish avatar of Vishnu, while in Islamic India, the fish was an emblem of the Shia Kingdom of Oudh (Avadh), appearing on flags, heraldry and coinage. It is often suggested that smaller portable *huqqas* like these were made for ladies. For a very similar example in the Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide, see Bennett, p. 171.





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