
DMITRIY MILOSERDOV

ORNAMENTATION AND DECORATION TECHNIQUES USED ON COLD WEAPONS IN AFGHANISTAN FROM THE 18th TO EARLY 20th CENTURIES

This article discusses various techniques for decorating bladed weapons of Afghanistan from the 18th to early 20th centuries and their ornamental designs. It explains the unique features of three decorative approaches – Indian, Persian, and Afghan. It also focuses upon design patterns that have survived since pre-Islamic times. Afghanistan's cold weapons are characterized by a mix of ornamental motifs and decorative techniques.

Keywords: : Afghanistan, Persia, India, *koftgari*, *kundan*, *cartouche*, *arabesques*, *torture scenes*, *solar symbols*, *khyber knife*, *pulwar*, *talwar*, *chura*, *lohar*

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THE multi-ethnic state of Afghanistan is inhabited by more than twenty nationalities. The largest include the Pashtuns, Tajiks, Hazaras, Uzbeks, Chahar Aimaq, Turkmen, Baluch and Nuristanis (Kafiristanis) (*Bellew* 1880: 13-14; *Snesarev* 2002: 93-94). This variety of nationalities, tribal groups, and clans resulted in the development of different decorative styles, which are also observed in weapons. This stylistic diversity in weapon design was also due to almost every village having its own blacksmith (*Elphinstone* 1839, Vol. II): 108). Also, the ornamentation of Afghanistan's weapons was undoubtedly influenced by neighboring India and Persia. Since Babur's time, hundreds of craftsmen captured in India lived and worked in Kabul and Afghanistan's other cities, working as armorers and jewelers (*Ackerman* 1964: 1144). In the 19th century, the country's blacksmiths and armorers even studied in India (*Schinasi* 2016: 82). Persia also influenced Afghanistan's weaponry and its decor. According to *Elphinstone*, rich Afghan men carried "Persian-shaped sabres. Its hilt is similar to ours [the *English*], except that it has no finger guard; the blade is narrower and more curved than ours. Indian steel is considered the most valuable as raw material, but the best sabres are made in Persia and Syria" (*Elphinstone* 1839 (Vol. II): 353, emphasis by author). Durrani soldiers were known to carry Persian sabers (*Elphinstone* 1839 (Vol. II): 273). Alexander Burnes, the English explorer and spy, referred to Persian blades from Khoras-

an in his memoirs writing that they were valued by the Afghans and were quite widespread in the region (*Burnes* 1843: 54).

Eventually, at least three decorative styles developed in Afghanistan: Indian, Persian, and Afghan. Each had its own distinctive features. Persian and Indian ornamental styles in cold weapons were associated with the prosperous. Yet, it must be remembered that the vast majority of weapons belonging to low-income people often contained no decoration. For example, the handles of *pulwars* and *talwars* were almost completely smooth.

Indian influence. According to the British collector, Egerton, an author on Indian and Oriental weapons published in the late 19th century, "pure," geometric, and floral ornamental designs in weapon décor were found in the northwestern regions of India, Kashmir, and the Punjab bordering Afghanistan. Images of flowers were typical (*Egerton* 1880: 46-47). The Indian ornamental style is most often found on the various elements of *khyber* knives and on the handles of *talwars*.

Although the *talwar* or *tulwar* is rightly considered a cold weapon from India (*Stone* 1961: 601; *Gilles* 1860: 231), it was also used in Afghanistan, as noted in the memoirs of many British officers (*Rattray*, *Carrick* 1848: 9; *Sterndale* 1879: 80; *Hensman* 1882: 398, 417; *Grant* 1884: 137). In rare cases, the handles of Afghan *talwars* were decorated with floral designs made from precious metals using the *koftgari*



Fig. 1. The handle of a Khyber knife with metal details decorated with a floral ornament, inlaid with gold using the *koftgari* technique. 19th century Afghanistan. Private collection (UK). Photo: D. Toor

technique (Fig. 1). First, the craftsman applied lines resembling a grid with a needle onto an item's surface on the site where the design was to be placed. Then, pliable gold or silver wire was hammered into the pattern's grooves tracing its contours. The wire was twisted in various directions until the entire pattern was filled with gold. The handle was then heated to the necessary temperature, and in the final stage was sanded with agate powder and cleaned with lemon juice. This firmly affixed the precious metal to the handle's surface (Egerton 1880: 46-47). However, the very thin layer often wore off over time, exposing the grid lines.



Fig. 2. The handle of a Khyber knife, the jade lining of which is decorated with precious stones using the *kundan* technique. 19th century India. Private collection (Ukraine). Photo: O. Feldman

The khyber knife, sometimes considered the embodiment of Afghanistan, was apparently so functional that after Babur's Afghan invasion these knives became established in northern India, where ornate samples can be found in considerable number throughout museums in the country. Therefore, quite logically, Khyber knives decorated in the Indian style using Indian jewelry techniques were also widespread in Afghanistan. An example includes Khyber knives in which the handle's metal elements are decorated with gold and silver in the above mentioned *koftgari* technique (Skralivetsky, Efimov, Obratsov 2013: 106-107). Much less common are Khyber knives



Fig. 3. Stylized carvings of flowers on the metal parts of the handle of a Khyber knife.
Late 19th century Afghanistan.
Private collection (Russia). Photo: P. Bogomazov



Fig. 4. Highly artistic carvings of flowers in the Mughal style on the metal parts of the pesh-kabz knife handle.
18th century Afghanistan (India?).
Private collection (Russia). Photo: P. Bogomazov

with handles decorated with the *kundan* technique. This special method consisted of attaching precious and semi-precious stones to the handle's base (Gray 1895: 81) (Fig. 2). *Kundan* translates as something made from ultra-refined gold. This most refined gold is flattened into the thinnest of strips. Its degree of purity ensures a molecular bond under the pressure of the tools, which are used to crimp the gold foil around the precious stones. Then, the stone in the foil is pressed into a recess of any hard surface (Kin 2009: 18), such as rock, bone, or metal. The handle's metal elements were often embossed or carved. The khyber knife blades decorated with gold in the Indi-

an style and using the *koftgari* technique, were also quite common in Afghanistan, particularly Kabul (Gray 1895: 81). The handles (Skralivetsky, Efimov, Obraztsov 2013: 106-107), blades (Volkov 2018: 79), and scabbards of khyber knives were commonly decorated with classical Indian plant or floral designs. Most 19th century knives decorated this way were characterized by a somewhat dry style (Fig. 3), which reflect the degradation from a realistic approach in depicting flowers and plants typical of Mughal art from the 17th and 18th centuries (Fig. 4). Yet even this should not be taken literally, in the European sense. The flowers are not beyond recognition. Their



Fig. 5. Cartouches made on the plane of the blades using the gold incision technique (left) and carving technique (right). Private collection (Russia).

Photo: P. Bogomazov

images follow a certain convention, a general compositional formula (Despande 2008: 256). As for *talwars*, with their richly decorated handles, along with some decorated khyber knives designed in the Indian style and common among Afghans, it is impossible to say whether they were made by craftsmen in Afghanistan or brought from India in the same way as most armor. (Gray 1895: 82; Mahomed Khan 1900: 202).

Persian influence. During the 18th and 19th centuries, no strict borders existed between Afghanistan and Persia. Based on this connection, individual decorative elements typical of Persian weapons common in the region were used by Afghan craftsmen to decorate weapons. For example, *shamshirs* – sabers of Persian origin – were found in the region. The blades considered most valuable were supposedly made in Persia by armorers from Isfahan named Asad Ullah and Zaman. Often such weapons with these blades had no decoration except for a cartouche (an elaborate frame with an enclosed text) with the manufacturer's information (Fig. 5). Also, the flat of the blade could be decorated with verses from the Qu'ran or the owner's name. This, however, did not necessarily make the blade more valuable. For example, a *shamshir* taken from Isfahan by the Afghans and sent by the ruler of Kabul to the governor-general of India, was undecorated except for a few gold features on the hilt and gold embossing on the scabbard (Egerton 1880: 53).

Concerning the Persian decorative style, arabesques carved in metal were the primary feature. These complex oriental designs were often used in Islamic (including Persian) art (Riegl 1893: 259), with combined geometric and floral motifs, the latter being most predominate. Thin spirals or arcs with in-



Fig. 6. Images of animals typical of Iranian art and “tormenting scenes” on the metal parts of the pesh-kabz knife handle. XVIII-XIX centuries Iran. Private collection (Russia). Photo: P. Bogomazov



Fig. 7. Shackle guard on the handle of the Khyber knife. 19th century Afghanistan. Private collection (Russia). Photo: P. Bogomazov

terwoven, shaped lines were among the most remarkable arabesque elements in the Persian style. Several basic types repeated in various combinations (Riegl 1893: 261) (Fig. 6).

Specific Persian craftsmanship is easily identified, which in contrast to Afghan examples, is characterized by more detail, elegance of lines, and carving accuracy. Additionally, animal images (Owen 1868: 75) and depictions of people were often found on Persian weapons, not typical for the rest of the Muslim world which displays Shiite influence upon the Persians (Obraztsov 2010: 66). However, such images were extremely rare on weapons in Afghanistan whose majority population adhered to Sunni Islam which prohibited the depiction people and animals. Even today, the minority population professing Shiism are Persians (mainly in Herat and Farah), Tajiks inhabiting the mountains, and Hazaras with some Pashtuns living in eastern Afghanistan. Probably, it was these people who used weapons depicting animals and torture scenes typical of Persia (Fig. 6). Even so, such images in the décor of bladed weapons were relatively rare, with only individual examples originating from Afghanistan. Weapons with crudely engraved animal images on their blades—in recent years exported to



Fig. 8. Pulvar saber pommel decorated using the through-perforation technique. 19th century Afghanistan. Private collection (Russia). Photo: P. Bogomazov

Europe and the United States—are modern reproductions for tourists, which, judging by the time of their appearance on antiquity markets, were made specifically for the soldiers of the International Security Assistance Forces led by NATO. It is curious that the crooked Persian *khanjars*, traditional for the 19th century, are never recorded in Afghanistan. Perhaps, this was because the bone handles for such daggers were often decorated with carved anthropomorphic figures, which are unacceptable for Sunnis.

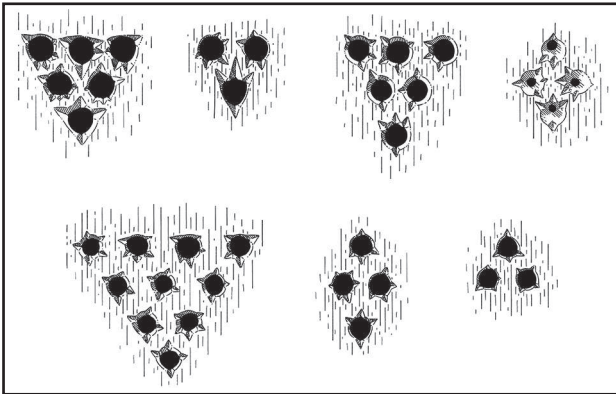


Fig. 9. Geometric ornaments made of perforated holes, found on the details of the weapons of Afghanistan. Drawing by A. Dementieva

The elegant shape of the curved hand guard, which are found on many examples of medium- and long-bladed weapons in Afghanistan from the late 19th century, was probably also of Persian origin (Fig. 7). The curve of the blade evokes clear associations with swans typical of Persian art and found on both household items (Allan 2005: 59) and Persian weapons (Khorasani 2006: 425, 665; Pinchot 2014: 16).

Afghan influence. Concerning weapons decorated in the Afghan style, it is necessary to distinguish between objects produced in cities – such as the cultural centers of Kabul and Herat where dozens of armorers and jewelers worked (Elphinstone 1839, Vol. I: 336) – and those made and decorated by blacksmiths in rural areas. Those weapons manufactured at large production centers are characterized by elegant decor and sometimes a mixture of decorative styles. The designs found on items made by rural blacksmiths are usually more archaic.

It is possible that openwork décor on steel elements of weapons could be considered typical for Afghanistan. Most often, such ornamentation is found on the surface of pulwars (Fig. 8). Similar perforated designs are found sabers and khyber knife handles as well as the crosspieces of shamshirs, crimp rings, chape, and in some instances, on the mouths of scabbards. In some examples, variously shaped non-perforated holes usually form a geometric ornament of triangles and rhombi (Fig. 9). They are either separate geometric figures or combined into decorative lines. In other cases, holes fill the flattened surface of the crosspiece ends (Fig. 10). The open holes form a design made on various objects with varying degrees of accuracy, which, from this writer's opinion, provides a distinction between weapons decorated by urban craftsmen with those decorated in rural areas (Fig. 11).

Most likely, this technique originated in Persia, where one finds weapons with openwork blades (Mo-

hamed 2008: 178) and handle and armor designs decorated with applied perforations on steel plates (Khorasani 2006: 714, 716). However, it should be noted that this openwork design found on Persian pieces is non-geometric. Usually, these types have plant motifs or calligraphy (Chodyński 2000: 378; Khorasani 2006: 714, 716; Hales 2013: 66; Pinchot 2014: 152). But it is more probable that in Afghanistan this technique was simplified and widely adopted. Therefore, this ornamental style with various weapon's decorative features possessing variously shaped open holes should be considered of Afghan origin. Of course, there are



Fig. 10. Holes on the flattened surface of the ends of the cross and crosshairs of the pulwar saber. 19th century Afghanistan. Private collection (Russia). Photo: P. Bogomazov.



Fig. 11. Pulwar saber hilts decorated by an urban craftsman (left) and a craftsman from the village (right). 19th century Afghanistan. Private collection (Russia). Photo: P. Bogomazov

several shamshirs considered Persian (Mohamed 2008: 85) whose crosspieces and crimp rings are also decorated in this style. An investigation of the largest work on Persian weapons to date provides no examples of crosspieces or sheath crimp rings decorated with perforations in the style characteristic of weapons from Afghanistan (Khorasani 2006: 424-557). While this does not confirm that Persian weapons were not decorated in this style, it does indicate that either these saber elements decorated with a similar technique, were made in Afghanistan, or made to order for Afghans. These simplified techniques and decoration may also indicate that Persians actually adopted the Afghan style.

These decorative elements on traditional, bladed weapons with red mastic is absolutely indigenous (Fig. 12). Strictly speaking, this technique is a simplified version of the one discussed above. The decorative holes, in this case, do not perforate the feature.

Rather, they are variously shaped, repeated, shallow depressions of pre-perforated holes and filled with red or black mastic. The recesses filled with mastic are grouped into rather primitive geometric designs of previously mentioned rhombi, triangles, and lines. As far as is known, the colored mastic technique was used almost exclusively for khyber knives. The weapon elements decorated in this style were usually made of brass. This technique suggests that it became widespread during the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Blade décor deserves special attention. Some were decorated with variously inscribed cartouches, others bear an image of a square talisman known as *beduh* which are found on both Indian and Persian weapons. A third type of design are symbols imitating the *gurda* motif (Winkler 1894: 292), which as not surprising, since some blades used by Afghans were Persian or Indian in origin, while others imitated these cartouches.



More primitive and common design motifs typical of Afghan blades were often small symbols resembling a three-fingered bird's footprint (dactyl) and can be found on the blade flats of Khyber knives, sabers, and pulwars. These types were made either through insertion (yellow metal) or engraving. Such dactyls are a design element well known throughout Central Asia (*Fakhretdinova* 1972: 115; *Margulan* 1986: 147; *Asankanov* 2002: 201). Actual bird claws have served as protective amulets for the region's people since pre-Islamic times (*Borozna* 1975: 282-284) It can be assumed that their schematic images on sword and knife blades served the same purpose. Such symbols provided additional sacred protection for the weapon's owner.

The second design motif found on blades are S-shaped symbols arranged in two parallel chains (Fig. 13). In some cases, these S-shaped symbols merge (Fig. 14), forming a so-called running wave. This design is known on all continents, but became most widespread in Western and Central Asia. According to some researchers, it symbolizes a snake (*Golan* 1993: 72). The snake cult is a totemic symbol known in Central Asia since the ancient times (*Sazonova* 1970: 134; *Bayaliev* 1972: 28). Snake-skin amulets are known to have been made in Central Asia during the 19th century (*Fahretdinova* 1988: 60). Some scholars are of the opinion that the drawing's accompanying dots, both between and outside the two

Fig. 12. Khyber knife, the metal parts of the handle of which are decorated with red mastic. Early 20th century Afghanistan. Private collection (Russia). Photo: P. Bogomazov



Fig. 13. Ornamental motif in the form of S-shaped signs lined up in two parallel chains, made using the technique of engraving on the blade of an army Khyber knife. End of the 19th century Afghanistan. Private collection (Russia). Photo: P. Bogomazov

S-shaped lines, indicate the spots on the snake's skin (*Golan* 1993: 72, 82). Yet, the image of a spotted snake had a deep symbolic meaning in Central Asia (*Kamalova* 1995: 16) considered to be amulets protecting the wearer against death and possessing living power (*Khamidzhanova* 1960: 219; *Antonova* 1984: 161).



Fig. 14. Ornamental motif in the form of S-shaped signs, merging and forming the so-called "traveling wave", made using the technique of engraving on the blade of a Khyber knife. End of the 19th century Afghanistan. Private collection (Russia). Photo: P. Bogomazov

The wavy lines on the blade, broken or solid, probably were snake images serving as talismans for the weapon's owner. By the late 19th century, these pre-Islamic images original meaning was probably lost and were inscribed on the blades as ordinary, meaningless ornamental motifs.

A geometric design consisting of small circles with a dot in the center (Fig. 15), located both on blades and handle elements of Afghan cold weapons, also deserves mention. Most often, this design was found on more recent objects made during the late 19th to early 20th centuries and even later. They include *churas*, *lohars*, khyber knives, and axes. Researchers who have examined this circular ornament correctly think it was one of the most widely distributed decorations across time and location (Grach 1980: 65). Known since the Neolithic era (Okladnikov 1950: 390), it is found on almost all continents. In Egyptian hieroglyphics, a circle with a central point represented the sun and was a glyph denoting a specific object (Avdiyev 1960: 7; Doblhofer 1963: 98). In ancient Chinese characters, the same symbol also represented the sun. This same circle with a dot in the center is also seen among pictographs on ritual bronze vessels dated to the 2nd millennium BCE. (Istrin 1961: 105, 110). It is also found among late Chinese designs; used by the Indians of South and North America; and many European peoples (Ivanov 1963: 468-469) and African tribes (Hoffman 1897: 815; Buschan 1922: 501; Sydov 1923: 137).

Central Asia is no exception. The solar cult was common among nomads (Grach 1980: 62). Even today, the motif's echo is still found in the circular ornaments on household items and musical instruments used by Tajiks, Uzbeks, Persians, and Hindus. Red



Fig. 15. Circular ornament (geometric ornament of small circles with a dot in the center) on the handle of a chura knife. 19th century Afghanistan. Private collection (Russia). Photo: P. Bogomazov

or black paint is sometimes inserted into the carved contours of the circles (Ivanov 1963: 469), just as was done in the region millennia before (Weinberg 1967: 140). This exact technique is found on bone décor on some cold weapons from Afghanistan (Fig. 16). Why place them on weapons? Perhaps, because in the late 19th to mid-20th centuries the amulet's power was attributed to the sun which harkened back to the time of the early nomads (Basilov 1992: 61). Yet, the solar



Fig. 16. Circular ornament with rubbed red paint on the bone overlays of the hilt of a lohar (folding combat sickle). 19th century Afghanistan. Private collection (Russia). Photo: P. Bogomazov

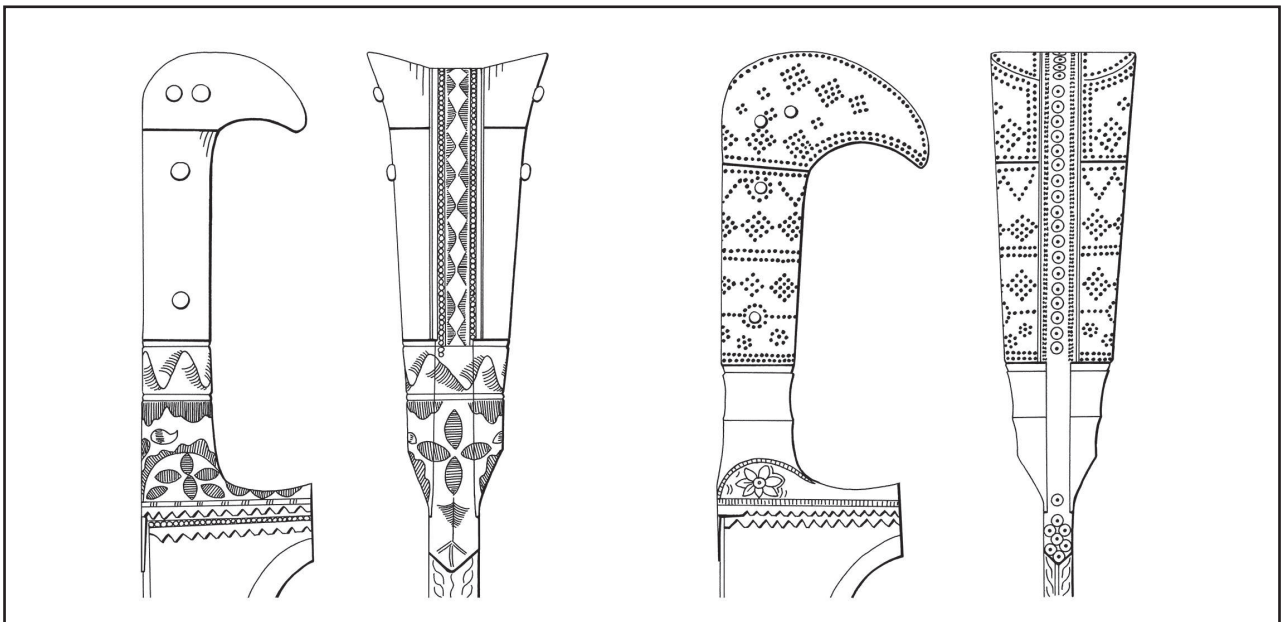


Fig. 17. Variants of mixing geometric, circular and floral ornaments on the handles of chura knives from Afghanistan. Rice. A. Dementieva

design's widest distribution on objects made of bone, horn, and metal fails to assist in knowing its origin, since the pattern and technique used are the same across time (Ivanov 1963: 473). The solar symbol with its circle and central dot existed in decorations universally across the world and symbolizing the sun, light, burning, heat, and fire. In some instances, the symbol retains this diverse semantic symbolism, in others it loses its meaning and becomes a mere or-

namental motif devoid of its symbolism (Grach 1980: 66). In the case of the weapons in question, it is very difficult to determine. However, presumably, the circular decoration (as in the two abovementioned bird's footprint and snake design) was to protect the owner of the weapon. Although, given the dominance of Islam in the region at that time, the masters who applied this ornament to the weapons were likely driven by historical memory. The deep meaning of the circu-

lar ornament as an image of the sun has been lost.

Concerning ornamentation of the *chura*, these knives were widely distributed in the early 20th century and are decorated in a variety of styles. Their décor's unique characteristics are associated with their location of production. Churas demonstrate all possible variants of mixed geometric, circular, and floral design (Fig. 17). Nevertheless, some knives are decorated in one style, such as those with only circular or geometric patterns. The decorations are engraved or embossed on the handle's metallic elements, while animal horn applique on the handles are at times decorated with engraving or small nails made of white metal. Four, six, and eight-petalled flowers on the churas are schematically depicted and, therefore, it is not possible to associate them with specific plants. But it is possible that the style's influence comes from neighboring India.

Afghanistan's cold weapons are characterized by a mixture of ornamental motifs and decorative techniques. Items typical of Afghanistan, such as khyber knives, based on the handle's material, decoration techniques, and ornamentation; are made in India or by Indian craftsmen. Yet, their scabbards are often made in the Persian and Afghan style (Fig. 18). In other cases, the Khyber knife proper is decorated in the Afghan style, but its scabbard decoratively embossed in the Persian style using the Persian technique, while its metal tip is crowned with a chape typical of Afghanistan (Fig. 19).

Fig. 18. Khyber knife, made at the beginning of the 19th century. in India, with a scabbard, the base and mouth of which are made in the Persian style, and the tip in the style typical of Afghanistan. Private collection (Russia).
Photo: P. Bogomazov

Fig. 19. Khyber knife (beginning of the 19th century) with a scabbard embossed in Persian style and technique, with a metal tip topped with a "shoe", typical of Afghanistan. Private collection (Russia).
Photo: P. Bogomazov



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