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Tiger-Head Palanquin Finial

Palki Head / Pole-End Ornament

Deccan, c. 1870-1890 C.E.

This tiger-head palanquin finial comes from the Deccan region and is attributed to the period ca. 1870–1890 C.E. It is a brass zoomorphic ornament made to be mounted at the terminal end of a wooden palanquin pole. Known also as a palki head or pole-end ornament, the tiger-head palanquin finial served two purposes: it protected the end of the wooden pole from wear and damage, and it transformed that functional end into a bold decorative and symbolic meaning. This tiger-head palanquin finial belongs to a class of ceremonial metal fittings used across South India, the Deccan, Mysore, Rajasthan, Gujarat, and Odisha between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries[1].

This tiger-head palanquin finial is divided into two main sections: the sculpted tiger head that forms the forward-projecting terminal and the hollow cylindrical sleeve that extends behind it. These two elements are joined by a pair of raised moulded collar rings at their junction, which depict the boundary between the sculptural zone of the head and the decorated surface of the sleeve. The collar rings join between the two sections. Together, the three zones of the tiger-head palanquin finial—the tiger head, the collar, and the engraved sleeve—form an artistic finial.

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[1] The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin, n.s., vol. 54, no. 2, Recent Acquisitions: A Selection, 1995–1996 (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Fall 1996), pg no. 18–19

The tiger head of this tiger-head palanquin finial is modelled in the round with sculptural presence. The muzzle is broad and rounded, pushing forward from the rest of the head in a way typical of feline anatomy but shown in a stylized rather than realistic manner. The nose of this finial is marked by two small drilled holes for the nostrils. The mouth is rendered open, with the upper and lower jaws separated by a clear incised horizontal line; inside the mouth, rows of closely set teeth line both jaws, and four long canine fangs are displayed at the corners—a detail that gives the tiger-head palanquin finial its fierce and predatory energy. Fine engraved lines radiate outward from the muzzle to represent whiskers. The eyes are almond-shaped, outlined by incised lids, and set beneath brows rendered in short hatched marks that give the face of the tiger-head palanquin finial a watchful, alert, and commanding expression. The ears are small and rounded, set low on either side of the broad domed cranium.

At the center of the forehead of this tiger-head palanquin finial sits a floral ornament—a stylized rosette with petals radiating outward from a central raised point, modeled in low relief and carefully engraved. This element is more than decorative. In Indian artistic and religious tradition, the forehead is the site of sacred marking, and the placement of a lotus rosette at this location consecrates the tiger-head palanquin finial, transforming the fierce animal into a ceremonially sanctified guardian figure and also depicting both protective power, symbolic meaning and the auspicious quality of the sacred flower.

The cylindrical part of the tiger-head palanquin finial is entirely covered with fine engraved scales, laid out in a continuous rhythmic pattern. This engraving gives texture and visual richness to this part. The quality of the engraved decoration on the tiger-head palanquin finial is consistently fine, pointing to a craftsman of considerable skill and experience. The hollow interior of the sleeve of the tiger-head palanquin finial was to contain the wooden carrying pole and its open circular end was large enough to have taken the poles of the palanquin.

It is made of brass, a copper-zinc alloy widely used in the ceremonial metalwork traditions of South India and the Deccan for its warm golden tone, workability, and resistance to corrosion. This was made by using the lost-wax casting method—known in French as "cire perdue"—the most famous technique of fine metalwork in South India since at least the Chola period (c. 9th-13th century C.E.) and carried forward by hereditary bronze-casting communities in the centuries that followed. In this process, a detailed wax model is first made, capturing every

feature of this tiger-head palanquin finial. This wax model is covered with the layers of clay to form a mould. When the mould is heated, the wax melts away through small channels, leaving a precise negative cavity. Molten brass is then poured into this cavity. Once the metal has cooled and solidified, the clay mould is broken away to reveal the raw casting of the tiger-head palanquin finial.

After casting, the tiger-head palanquin finial was refined by hand through chasing and engraving. The incised eye outlines, whisker lines, hatched brow markings, the dentition within the open mouth, the forehead rosette, and the scale pattern decoration on the sleeve were all worked into the surface at this finishing stage using metal tools. This combination of cast sculptural form and hand-engraved surface ornament is a hallmark of quality ceremonial metalwork from the Deccan during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It is a fine example of this artistic tradition and shows a high level of skill.

The zoomorphic form of this tiger-head palanquin finial is the tiger. The tiger has its deep roots in the artistic, religious, and political traditions of South India and the Deccan. The tiger carried layers of meaning in this cultural world—meanings connected to royalty, to divine power, to martial strength, and to sacred protection[2]. In the religious tradition of South India, the tiger is closely related to Goddess Durga servering her vahana and symbolising strength. Shiva is often depicted wearing a tiger skin as a part of his clothes, symbolizing his authority and control over the tiger's power and wild nature. The tiger of this tiger-head palanquin finial, stands within a deep iconographic tradition in which the animal represents divine power and serves as a sacred symbol of protection.

In the political traditions of South India, the tiger was equally important as a royal emblem. The great Chola dynasty (c. 9th-13th century C.E.) also used the tiger as their royal insignia. The Sindas and the Hoysalas also used tiger imagery in their dynastic identity[3]. So, the tiger is related with royal authority and martial power in the Deccan and South India was ancient and culturally important, giving it strong royal symbolism.

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[2] Pupul Jayakar and John Irwin, Textiles and Ornaments of India: A Selection of Designs, ed. Monroe Wheeler (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1956), pg no. -82

[3] Kate Brittlebank, Tiger: The Life of Tipu Sultan (New Delhi: Juggernaut Books, 2016) pg no. 44 - 60

The tiger was a very important royal symbol in the Deccan under Tipu Sultan who ruled Mysore from 1782 to 1799 C. E[4]. He used tiger imagery on his throne, weapons, coins, flags, military equipment and ceremonial objects, which made it a powerful symbol of authority, courage and kingship. Although this tiger-head palanquin finial was made several decades after Tipu Sultan's death, around 1870–1890 C.E., it reflects the visual tradition he helped establish. In nineteenth-century Karnataka and the Deccan, the tiger continued to symbolize prestige, power, and aristocratic status. Displayed on a ceremonial palanquin, the tiger-head finial would have conveyed these associations to those who witnessed the procession.

This tiger-head palanquin finial was made for use on a palanquin — the mode of transport for persons of high social standing in India before the introduction of railways and motor vehicles in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries[5]. Kings and nobles were carried in palanquins. Wealthy patrons and aristocratic women used them. And the images of deities were carried through the streets in palanquins during religious festivals — a tradition that survives in some South Indian temple communities to this day. The palanquin was therefore far more than a vehicle. It was a visible declaration of the authority, prestige, and identity of whoever or whatever it carried. Every element of a finely made palanquin contributed to this declaration, and the tiger-head palanquin finial was among the most visible of these elements. This tiger-head palanquin finial was therefore not a hidden detail but a public statement, made in brass and visible from a distance.

The choice of a tiger for the tiger-head palanquin finial was not casual. Historical evidence and surviving material record indicate that fierce animal imagery — tigers, lions, and mythical creatures such as the yali and the makara — was consistently associated with palanquins belonging to male aristocratic and royal patrons, projecting ideals of courage, martial authority, and territorial power. Floral finials — lotuses and rosettes — were more commonly used on palanquins carrying women of rank, reflecting ideals of grace and auspiciousness[6]. The tiger-head palanquin finial, with its open jaws, visible fangs, and commanding expression, belongs clearly to the tradition of male aristocratic display, while its forehead rosette introduces the additional dimension of sacred protection.

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[4] Richard H. Davis, *Lives of Indian Images* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1999), 146–48.
[5] George Michell, Architecture and Art of Southern India: Vijayanagara and the Successor States, 1350–1750, The New Cambridge History of India, vol. I, no. 6 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pg no. - 229
[6] Navina Najat Haidar and Marika Sardar, eds., Sultans of Deccan India, 1500–1700: Opulence and Fantasy (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2015), pg 246-247

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