Cradle

Place of origin: Coromandel Coast (made)
Date: 1660-1680 (made)
Artist/Maker: Unknown
Materials and Techniques: Carved and pierced ebony
Museum number: IS.15-1983

Gallery location: Europe 1600-1815, Room 7, The Sheikha Amna Bint Mohammed Al Thani Gallery, case PL3

Public access description
The shape of this cradle is based on European models made from about 1640 to 1660. However, the richly carved decoration is a mixture of Christian and Hindu subjects. Indian furniture makers on the Coromandel coast used this style of decoration on many of the pieces they made for European customers.

The headboard has a carved central winged female head, which is clearly based on western versions of cherubs at the time. The head supports a scallop shell, a symbol of the Virgin Mary, with a fleur-de-lis, the royal arms of France. On either side is a mermaid - another western element, although it may have been inspired by a Hindu snake goddess with the head of a woman and the tail of a serpent ('nagini'). The mermaids' tails end in a flourish, a feature that relates them to South Indian representations of mythical beasts with the head and torso of a human and the tail of a fantastic bird ('kinnaras'). The headboard and footboard carry a pair of 'makaras', fantastic sea beasts with the head of an elephant or crocodile and the body of a fish, often used on the top rails of chairs by furniture makers on the Coromandel coast.

In colonial India, people fitted beds and cradles that had posts with a length of fine cotton fabric. Mosquito curtains were sewn to the edges of the fabric as essential protection against insects. These mosquito curtains were of local or imported Chinese gauze that was always dyed green to reduce the need for frequent cleaning. People would beat the curtains to ward off insects before getting into bed. Once in bed, they tucked the mosquito nets into the sides of the bedframe.

Descriptive line
Cradle of carved and pierced ebony, Coromandel Coast, 1660-1680.

Physical description
Cradle of carved and pierced ebony. This elaborately carved cot follows Dutch models and combines Indian and European motifs in its carved ornament.

Dimensions
Height: 157 cm, Width: 142 cm (bottom central bar), Depth: 71 cm

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Object history note
"The cradle is based on mid-seventeenth-century European prototypes but is richly decorated with a mixture of Christian and Hindu motifs in the manner of other Coromandel coast furniture. The headboard is carved with a central winged female head - clearly based on contemporary Western representations of cherubs - supporting a scallop shell with a fleur-de-lis (a symbol of the Virgin Mary and the central motif in the royal arms of France). On either side is a mermaid, another Western element, but whose representation might have been inspired by a Hindu snake goddess with the head of a woman and the tail of a serpent (nagini). The tails of the mermaids terminate in a flourish relating to South Indian representations of mythic beasts with the head and torso of a human and the tail of a fantastic bird (kinnaras). As is commonly found on the top rails of chairs from the Coromandel coast, the headboard and footboard are defined by a pair of fantastic sea beasts with the head of an elephant or crocodile and the body of a fish (makaras).

In early British India, beds (as opposed to cradles) were of two types: those with posts and mosquito curtains, and Indian-style cots (charpoy), which consisted simply of a caned or strung frame on four turned legs. Bedsteads with posts were designed after the European fashion, but were built higher off the ground so as to deter vermin, which were a constant threat in India. They were most often constructed in hardwoods, such as teak and blackwood, and fitted with mattresses usually stuffed with horsehair, coir or cotton, and supported on a frame of cane or wooden slats. Bedding was minimal and sometimes consisted of little more than a sheet, a chintz bed cover (palampore), pillows and cases. Whereas beds in Europe were swathed in rich textiles, much needed in the cold, beds in India were most often only fitted with mosquito curtains. In the words of an American traveller in India, 'There would be no such thing as sleeping here, were it not for the mosquito curtains which we use.' Mosquito curtains were of locally-made or imported Chinese gauze that was always dyed green in order to diminish the need for frequent cleaning. Before entering the bed, curtains were beaten in order to ward off insects, and once in bed they were tucked in to the sides of the bed-frame."

Historical context note

On acquisition, the cot was said to have been in the 'Clumber sale (1937), lot 569. It was the property of the Earl of Lincoln, inherited from the 7th Duke of Newcastle.

URL

http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O16732/cradle-unknown/