

The Kandyan Regalia



Maureen Seneviratne

On 13th June 1820 one of the most famous auction sales ever to be held in London took place in the “great room” of one Thomas King in Covent Garden. It was announced as the “Sale of the Regalia of the King of Kandy”. Many priceless articles “went under the hammer at precisely one o’clock,” to quote from the catalogue which also described the Regalia as a “splendid and valuable collection”. But any visitor to the National Museum in Colombo can visit the room in which the Regalia of the last king of Kandy (Sri Lanka) is exhibited.

The opulent throne-chair, the royal footstool and the crown are prominently displayed. What then of the “Regalia” that “went under the hammer”? Ever since the deposition of the last king, Sri Wickrema Raja Singha, in 1815, researchers have been asking this question; and even before the famous auction took place at King’s in London, not only sundry treasure-hunters but the British Raj itself in Sri Lanka were looking for the king’s treasure, including vital components of the Regalia. Apparently Sri Wickrema Raja Singha, no longer deluded by hopes of retaining power, had made his own arrangements: the Regalia was deposited in “safe” places, given into the keeping of trusted officials at least three months before he fled from the oncoming British Army entering his royal city of Kandy from all directions. It took years before the royal treasure was found—and then too only a part of it. But the Regalia itself, according to records, was appropriated by Sir Robert Brownrigg, Governor of Sri Lanka, to be taken away to England. When he returned after his tenure of office was over, he presented the items personally to King George IV of Great Britain, Ireland and the Dominions Over the Seas at a ceremony at Carlton House, London.

For over a century the Regalia of Kandy’s last ruler, consisting of crown, sword, sheath, velvet headband, the ancient royal flag and the king’s throne and footstool, remained in England. After many representations had been made, the Regalia was returned to Sri Lanka by the British on September 22, 1834. At the auction sale held in Thomas King’s “great room” in 1820, one can only surmise that diverse other articles, also considered to be part of the Royal Regalia, but also comprising a crown “of the purest massive gold” (to quote the catalogue again), were sold to the highest bidder. The king, no doubt, had more than one diadem. The state crown of the last king, displayed in the National Museum of Colombo today, is more in the style of a bejewelled cap or turban, a style first created by King Rajasingha II more than a century earlier. That monarch had a predilection and evident talent for designing his own royal wardrobe and his regalia and for setting his court fashions. The crown is impressive indeed and has a decided oriental look about it and is studded with gems. While a crown took second place to the white parasol of royal dignity held over the king-in-council or when the king gave audience or travelled through his kingdom, some form of gemstudded headband, or a diadem, or the turban-type crown of

King Sri Wickrema Raja Singha of Kandy was always worn. A golden sword of State at some time replaced the "Yahala" or wooden yoke of justice a king carried when pronouncing the law; but other items like the "ekawali" or pearl necklace, the piece of cloth at the waist, the girdle, ear ornaments and the mystic cat's eye armlet were among those used in the "Abiseka" or coronation ceremony. "Abiseka" simply means "anointing", and the kings of Lanka were always "anointed" by the purohita or court chaplain (a priestly brahmin) and ritually sprinkled with water.

The throne-chair is a study in dignity and grace. It is in the finest tradition of 17th century furniture-craft in the island, given such an impetus by the Dutch who themselves were heirs to the fine tradition of cabinetmakers in France and the Low Countries of Europe coming down from the Renaissance and gathering momentum in the Court of Louis XIV- "Sun King" of France. It is not known for certain if the chair was imported from the Netherlands or turned out in the coastal regions of the island over which they ruled.

We know, of course, that the "Moratuwa tradition" of furniture-craft dates back to Dutch times and Dutch influences and inspiration.

The throne-chair and footstool - both "finished" in Sri Lanka, if they were imported - are covered with sheet-gold inlaid with precious stones. It is evident the 'style' blends the best and most opulent of East and West. The most prominent features are the two golden lions or sphinxes forming the chair arms, the heads of the animals turned outwards with their mouths open: the whole giving the impression of fulsome awe, the 'aura' of which must always surround a king. On the back of the chair, near the top, a large golden representation of the sun and the moon symbolizes the Solar and Lunar Dynasties from which the kings of Lanka claimed descent. They were the Sons of the Sun (the Suriya Dynasty) and they were related to the Moon (the Lunar Dynasty). The sun and moon also represented from ancient times the span of 'everlasting power' of a king's laws and edicts. "As long as the sun and the moon shall last" was how their pronouncements were concluded (so long was the rule of their law to carry binding force in their domains). The footstool was also of European design and is intricately decorated. Most pleasing in appearance, it is ten inches high, a foot broad and two and a half feet long. A moulding of cut crystal runs about the sides of it, beneath which in front are designs of flowers exquisitely inlaid with amethysts, crystals and other gemstones. The burnished crimson of velvet upholstery of both the throne-chair and footstool has faded somewhat with age and time, but the sheen of the original fabric can yet be admired while the gold inlay and sheeting remain as brilliant as ever.

The Kandyan Regalia

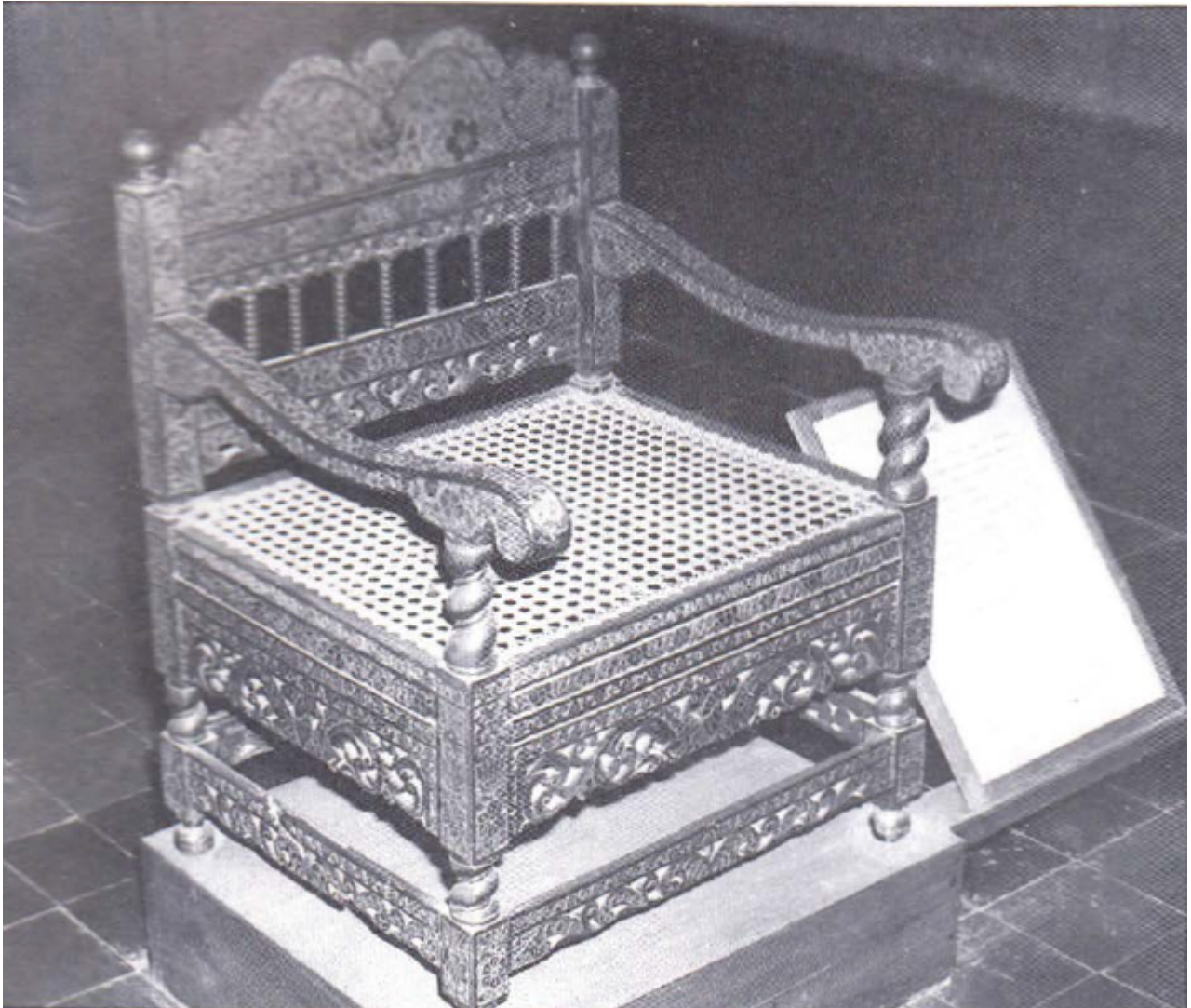


The elaborate chest with carved floral motifs and studded with gems



The royal crown and sword.

The Kandyan Regalia



The carved ebony chair inlaid with ivory which the Queen used.



*The last King of Kandy,
Sri Wickrema Raja
Singha, and his consort,
Venkata Rangammal.*



Throne-chairs of great magnificence to match that of the last king were always the “seat” of Lanka’s rulers. The Mahavamsa Chronicle describes at length and in rhapsodic cadences the throne-chair carved entirely out of gold of King Dutugemunu in the 1st century B.C. on which the monarch sat in the throne room of the Brazen Palace in Anuradhapura. In the exalted ideal of kingship in the Theravada Buddhist tradition maintained for thousands of years in Sri Lanka, “the king was only a servant of the people appointed by them to protect society from chaos and for this reason he received a portion of the field produce” and was formally anointed as their ruler. Something of the dignity as much as the power and prestige of royalty remains in these magnificent items of the Royal Regalia of the last king of Lanka, preserved in a very special manner in the National Museum.