

The Kandyan Regalia

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On the 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 displayed.

The opulent Throne-chair, the royal Foot-stool and the Crown is prominently exhibited. What then of the “Regalia” that “went under the hammer”? Researchers, ever since the deposition of the last king, Sri Wickrema Raja Singha, in 1815, have been asking this question and even before the famous auction took place at King’s, 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 Gt. 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 and Velvet Head Band, the ancient royal flag and the King’s Throne and Foot-stool, 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 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

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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 11 more than a century earlier. That monarch had a predilection and evident talent for designing his own royal wardrobe, his regalia and setting his court fashions. The Crown is impressive indeed and has a decided oriental look about it and studded with gems. While a Crown took second place to the White Parasol of royal dignity held over the king-in-council or when he gave audience or travelled through his kingdom, yet some form of gemstudded head-band was always worn, or a diadem, or the turban-type crown of King Sri Wickrema Raja Singha of Kandy. 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 Ekavali" or pearl necklace, the piece of cloth at the waist, the girdle, ear ornaments and the mystic cats-eye armlet were among those used in the 11 Abiseka" or coronation ceremony. Abiseka" simply means "anointing" and kings of Lanka were always "anointed" by the purohita or court chaplain (a priestly brahmin) and ritually sprinkled with water resembling as it does the head gear of a Moghul, a Sultan, an Oriental despot – which, of course was in the tradition of Kandyan Absolutism.



The Throne-Chair is a study in dignity and grace. It is 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 cabinet-makers 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 Foot-stool – both “finished” in Sri Lanka – if they were imported – is covered with sheet-gold inlaid with precious stones. It is evident the ‘style’ blends the best and most opulent of East and West and 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, which ‘aura’ 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” were how their pronouncements were concluded (so long was the rule of their law to carry binding force in their domains).

The Foot-stool was also of European design and 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 Throne-chair and Foot-stool 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.

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 of King Dutugemunu in the 1st century B.C. on which the monarch sat in the Throne-Room of the Brazen Palace in Anuradhapura. It was carved entirely out of gold from sacred, right-spiralled conch shells during the ceremony.

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 is preserved in these magnificent items of the Royal Regalia of the last King of Lanka preserved in a very special manner in the National Museum.



The silk jacket worn by the King at the time of his capture.



The elaborate chest with carved floral motifs and studded with gems.



The carved ebony chair inlaid with ivory which the Queen used.
(Suresh de Silva).