

# COLLECTORS' FOCUS



**E** edged weapons is a broad term that covers many different specialisations: from medieval and renaissance weaponry, to small swords of the 18th century and military swords of the 19th; from daggers and hafted weapons and, of course, there is then the further split between eastern and western items.

The experts agree that edged weapons have been the best performers in the broader arms and armour market during the past decade. In particular, eastern and Russian pieces have done spectacularly well. Robert Hales, who deals in fine eastern arms and armour, attributes their explosion in prices to a number of factors. First, and most obvious, the amount of Arab and Russian money that has been available. These collectors are anxious to buy their heritage back and are willing to dig deep to get what they want. One of the most extreme examples of this was the Christie's Islamic sale in April 2004, which included items from the collection of Clive of India. Sheikh Saud al-Thani of Qatar, **buying for the Museum of Islamic Art in Doha, which opened last year**, secured a large number of lots, including two of Mughal jade-hilted daggers, one of which fetched £733,250, 11 times its high estimate of £50,000.

But it is not only foreign money that is driving up 'Eastern' prices. According to Mr Hales, there is an ever-increasing number of collectors of all

## FINE EDGED WEAPONS

The 'aggressively bouyant' market in edged weapons has seen estimates smashed and records set at recent auctions writes **Roger Field**.

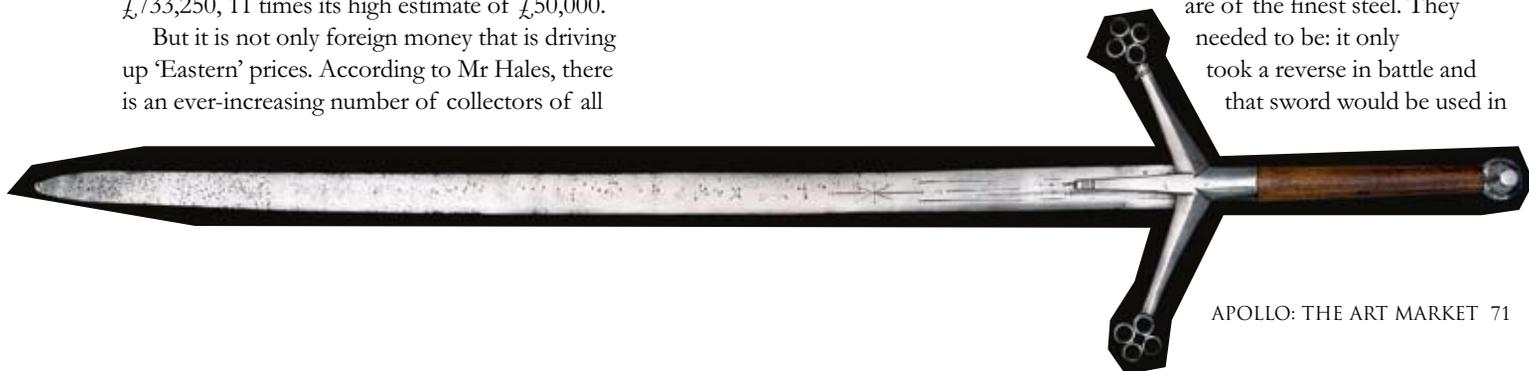
**1** Trafalgar Sword And Belt, 1805 Bonhams, London, **dims, sale and date** £183,435

**2** Claymore sword, Scotland, 16th century, **med, dims, sale day July 2007 Tom Del Mar?/ Sotheby's.** £250,000

nationalities. Europeans are drawn by recent scholarship, which helps them better to understand the weapons. When added to an increasing scarcity as items are bought and taken 'home', this explains why Mr Hales was prepared to cause a sensation at Holt's auction in September 2008 when he paid **£47,000** (see caption - Holt's say **£38k**) for a Khyber knife estimated at £500-£1,500 (Fig. 3). The reason? 'It was the best I had ever seen of its type.'

Nick McCullough, head of arms and armour at Christie's, endorses Mr Hales's view that when it comes to the finest pieces the rules on price are transcended, as people are no longer collecting just a weapon but an object of wonder and quality. Moreover, the finest edged weapons possess a rare mixture of high art and functionality. Princes and generals carried swords that displayed their wealth and rank – with hilts engraved, enamelled, gilded, inlaid or, even, studded with gems – but their blades

are of the finest steel. They needed to be: it only took a reverse in battle and that sword would be used in



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**3** Khyber knife, Indo-Persia, c. 1775. gold-damascened watered steel, horn, cloth, wood, silver, silver-gilt, turquoise. **dims.** Holt's, London, **sale name** (25 September 2008). £38,000

**4** Hunting trousse, France, **date, med, dims.** Peter Finer, London, \$500,000. Enquiries: +44 (0) 20 7839 5666



deadly earnest.

Such top-quality items very rarely come to market: most are already in museums or armouries. When Christie's sold works from a Rothschild collection in 1999 princely weapons fetched princely prices. For example a gold and silver damascened rapier dated 1556, which is decorated in the manner of Damianus de Nerven fetched £16,100, a price that is in the hilt. Mr McCullough estimates that the rapier would make between five and eight times that price today.

Tom Del Mar, who stages auctions under his own name although associated with Sothebys, saw what a huge premium a princely provenance, coupled with superb condition, can produce when he sold the Hannover collection in 2005. One Turkish sword captured at the siege of Vienna in 1683 fetched £160,000: 10 times the estimate. In fact, all estimates were exceeded, often in 'huge multiples'.

Mr Del Mar says that, for the past five years, the market in edged weapons has been 'aggressively buoyant'. He, like the other auctioneers, reports that he has a keen number of collectors, both British and international, who buy much more for pleasure than investment. As a result, this is an area that has traditionally weathered recessions much better than others in the art market. In July 2007 Mr Del Mar achieved a world record when a 16th-century Scottish claymore sold for £250,000 (Fig. 2). In contrast to other super-high value weapons, which are almost always highly decorated, this sword was desirable for its rarity (there are only a handful remaining and most are in museums); its provenance (from Warwick Castle); its elegant form; and, most probably, that extra magic of a 'Celtic' ancestry.

Del Mar's most recent sale, in November 2008, demonstrated that the market is still buoyant in spite of relentlessly grim economic news. Just about every weapon sold and some items achieved high multiples on their estimates including, perhaps not surprisingly, a Russian sword that achieved £22,800 against an estimate of £1,000-£1,500 and a silver-mounted Turkish sabre, also captured at Vienna, which fetched £16,800 (est. £2-3000).

David Williams of Bonhams, who had a successful November arms and armour sale,



with over 80% sold, confirms the importance of provenance and condition. Nothing reflects that better than the success he has had with Lloyds Patriotic Fund Swords, which were presented during the Napoleonic Wars for Acts of bravery. In 2005 he achieved a world-record auction price of £179,200 for one that had been presented to one of Nelson's 'band of brothers' at Trafalgar: Captain Charles Tyler of HMS *Tonnant*.

Dated 21 October 1805, it retained virtually all its original blued and gilt finish and was in its original presentation case (Fig. 1).

Among the leading specialist dealers is Peter Finer, whose gallery is at 37-39 Dukes Street in London. He agrees with Mr Williams that that one collecting area particularly worth exploring is 18th-century small swords. These were in effect jewellery for men and, unlike earlier 'fine' and decorative swords, plenty of them survive as they were rarely used in anger.

For sums in the high hundreds and very low thousands of pounds, one can still purchase swords with blued and engraved blades and with hilts that are worked in silver or chiselled steel. The best ones can be bejewelled or have porcelain plates in their grips, although these are of course rarer and much more expensive. Mr Finer also recommends hunting swords as undervalued, given that they can be richly and beautifully decorated by the best craftsmen.

At the top end, hunting accoutrements can fetch the very highest prices. Mr Finer currently has a French hunting *trousse* of around 1575 in its original leather case for sale in the region of \$500,000. One reason for its price, apart from its superb condition, is that it is 'the most complete known and the only one recorded as retaining its whetstone' (Fig. 4).

Like the auctioneers, Mr Finer regards collectors of edged weapons as a passionate and resilient group. He has seen some items traded back since the present crisis began but, after 40 years in the business and a number of recessions, he believes that most of his clients would prefer to sell their wives and children before they part with their collections.

**Roger Field is ...**