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Deccan Buttons

Indian artisans have known the art of metalworking since 3000 B.C. More metalwork is known to have originated from the Deccan region, than from any other region in India. The making of metal ware is one craft tradition that engages many families in the state.

In India craftsmen use different metals like iron, copper, silver and alloys like bronze, bell metal, white metal, etc. to make buttons. A variety of metalwork can be seen from different parts of the country. Deccan buttons featured here are made of silver, often with enameling.

Increasing demand for traditional products, has had an effect on production. Today, these contemporary buttons are generally made in small-scale and cottage industries. Distinguishing backmarks are found on many, although some have no markings. (See backmarks at the end of this article.)

Deccan buttons on their original card. Collection of Margaret Blain, U.K.

Black buttons from the collection of Margaret Blain, U.K.

These cobalt blue Deccan buttons are found in small & medium sizes. Raised backmark reads, "MADE IN DECCAN-TRADEMARK No 230-RD 1926R-B" with a crescent moon and star. Collection of Linda Kent
VEGETAL (PLANT) DESIGNS

Plant patterns have been incorporated from traditions of Byzantine culture. Chinese motifs and patterns were adopted in the 13th and 14th centuries, though sometimes in markedly revised form. In sixteenth-century Europe, first in Italy and then in the north, Deccan-style plant patterns were developed. With the exception of the garden and its usual reference to paradise, vegetal motifs and patterns in Islamic art are largely devoid of symbolic meaning.
FIGURAL DESIGNS
Ornamentation in Islamic art came to include figural representations in its decorative vocabulary, drawn from a variety of sources. As with other forms of Deccan ornamentation, basic human and animal forms are freely adapted and stylized, giving rise to a great variety of figural-based designs.

CALIGRAPHY DESIGNS
Calligraphy is the most highly regarded and most fundamental element of Deccan button art. Inherent within the Arabic script is the potential for developing a variety of ornamental forms.

An entire word can give the impression of random brushstrokes, or a single letter can develop into a decorative knot. In some examples, calligraphy has been combined with vegetal scrolls on the same surface, though often on different levels, creating an interplay between writing and decoration.

Buttons containing calligraphy designs in combination with other patterns (above) and buttons combining vegetal (plant) designs with geometrics (below) and simple geometric designs (bottom and bottom right). NBS size medium. All from the collection of Margaret Blain, U.K.
GEOMETRIC PATTERNS

Consisting of, or generated from, such simple forms as the circle and the square, geometric patterns were combined, duplicated, interlaced, and arranged in intricate combinations, thus becoming one of the most distinguishing features of Deccan button art. However, these complex patterns seem to embody a refusal to adhere strictly to the rules of geometry. As a matter of fact, geometric ornamentation in Islamic art suggests a remarkable amount of freedom; in its repetition and complexity, it offers the possibility of infinite growth and can accommodate the incorporation of other types of ornamentation as well.

In terms of their abstractness, repetitive motifs, and symmetry, geometric patterns have much in common with the so-called arabesque style seen in many vegetal (plant) designs. Calligraphic ornamentation also appears in conjunction with geometric patterns.

The four basic shapes, or "repeat units," from which the more complicated patterns are constructed are: circles and interlaced circles; squares or four-sided polygons; the ubiquitous star pattern, ultimately derived from squares and triangles inscribed in a circle; and multisided polygons. It is clear, however, that the complex patterns found on many buttons include a number of different shapes and arrangements, allowing them to fit into more than one category.

Whether isolated or used in combination with other designs, geometric patterns are popularly associated with Islamic art. These abstract designs function as a major decorative element. Deccan artists appropriated key elements from the classical traditions of late antiquity of the Greeks, Romans, and Sasanians from Iran, then complicated and elaborated upon them in order to invent a new form of decoration that stressed the importance of unity and order.

Design information from the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The Nature of Islamic Ornamentation.

Buttons of geometric, linear shapes with geometric surface designs. Collection of Margaret Blain.
Deccan Button Backmarks

Double banner
TRADE (shank) MARK
M. 240
MADE IN DECCAN

Five pointed star & sunburst
SAGRI BUTTON FACTORY
(In double banner)
TRADE (shank) MARK
MADE IN YADGIRI

Double-Tower
Castle
GHOUSIA
BUTTON FACTORY
(In double banners)
TRADE (shank) MARK
R. No. 165
MADE IN DECCAN

THE HYDERABAD
BUTTON FACTORY
(In double banner)
Anchor & rope
TRADE (shank) MARK
R. No. 162
MADE IN DECCAN

Trident
(Banner Button Company)
TRADE (shank) MARK
H. R. N. 132
MADE IN DECCAN

Crescent with star.*
R. No. 192 S.R.
TRADE (shank) MARK
R No. 230
MADE IN DECCAN

* The Crescent and Star are often said to be Islamic symbols, but historians say that they were the insignia of the Ottoman Empire, not of Islam as a whole. However, they appear on many flags and items of Islamic and Muslim origin.

PRAKASH BUTTON FACTORY
(In single banner)
Sunburst over Lotus
TRADE (shank) MARK
R. No. 186
MADE IN DECCAN

GHOUSIA
BUTTON FACTORY
TRADE (shank) MARK
R. No. 169
MADE IN DECCAN

BHARATH BUTTON FACTORY
In two banners with a Swastika within a circle.
TRADE (shank) MARK
MADE IN DECCAN

Very thin crescent around star
TRADE (shank) MARK
MADE IN DECCAN

Image of a plane.
TRADE (shank) MARK
MADE IN DECCAN

Single tower building with star
MOHAMMEDIA BUTTON FACTORY
In double banner,
TRADE (shank) MARK
R. No. 495
MADE IN DECCAN

Star and crescent with letter B
R.No 192BR R.
TRADE (shank) MARK
R. No. 230
MADE IN DECCAN