

Rapiers

by Michael Ottati

My subject is the Rapier, its development, rise and fall.

My interest in swords started from tales of the Vikings, told to me by my mother when I was a small boy. Later, I became interested in fencing. With the passage of time, collecting rapiers became a substitute for fencing. It is amusing now, to recall my dad's comments concerning my interest in swords in general and rapiers in particular to the effect that "I was born three hundred years too late."

Since the rapier is a member of the sword family, some reference to the history of the sword is required to place the rapier in its proper place in history.

It is interesting to note, that from the origin of the sword, its major function was to develop a cutting type of attack. This type of attack was required to effectively destroy the shield and the many different types of protective clothing or armor.

The European Medieval Sword was specifically designed for the cutting attack required and was most effectively used in the hand of a very powerful man.

While the cross-bow and the long-bow required certain design changes in making suits of armor, these changes were incorporated into the armorers' skills. The armorers reached the peak of their skills during the late sixteenth century.

The appearance of the gun with its ability to penetrate armor and kill without personal combat resulted in armor, shields and the European Medieval Sword becoming obsolete. While suits of armor for use in war has completely disappeared, some of the armor skills have been perpetuated into our time. Modern armor was used in both World Wars as well as all undeclared wars since then. For example—airplanes, tanks, helmets and protective clothing.

The European Medieval Sword is the ancestor of the rapier.

It is approximately at this point in history (1550) when the rapier appears. Spain is credited with the initial development of the rapier. Whether this is a fact or not, the rapier first appeared in southwestern Europe and from there spread to Italy, France, the Netherlands, Germany and England. The rapier was specifically designed to provide a thrusting attack plus use as a defensive weapon. This was the first time in the history of the sword that a weapon was specifically designed to accomplish both attack and defense functions. In order to make rapier blades, a particular type of forged steel with great strength and flexibility was developed. Even with all our modern science we are still unable to duplicate it.

Early rapier blades were extremely long and of many shapes, such as, diamond, square, triangular, and six sided. In England the length of the rapier



blade was regulated to 41½ inches during the reign of Philip and Mary and was shortened to 36 inches during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I. In Spain the length of the rapier blade was regulated to 39 inches during 1628. These regulations could account for the fact some rapier blades appear to have been shortened. This feat could have been accomplished by a skilled swordsmith without destroying either the balance or beauty of the rapier.

With the reduced blade length, the development of fencing proceeded into a scientific skill.

The great swordsmiths were artisans trained to work in all kinds of metals, and each stamped his mark, name, or both on all rapiers he made. Some early rapiers have the name inlaid in copper on the blade. The beauty and detail of the rapier reflected the position of its owner.

In Spain, Italy, and France, during a short period of time, the Swept Hilt Rapier was used in conjunction with a left-handed dagger, and the Cup Hilt Rapier with a Maine Gauche. This was probably a natural reaction due to prior training to ward off attack by the use of a shield, plus their reluctance to rely solely on the rapier for defense. This practice disappeared after a brief period (approximately forty years). Swept Hilt Rapiers with matched left-handed daggers, and Cup Hilt Rapiers with matched Maine Gauche were made. However, except in museums, I have never come across a truly matched pair.

With the exception of the blade, early rapier design followed the basic pattern of the European Medieval Sword. It had a single straight quillion which formed a cross. The straight quillion provided adequate protection for the hand (which was generally encased in a gauntlet) when using the European Medieval Sword. It soon became apparent that additional protection for the hand would have to be provided to fully utilize the entire capabilities of the rapier. This was done by adding a knuckle guard and numerous branches or guards, both front and back, which ultimately resulted in the cup. Since the rapier

Swept Hilt Rapiers

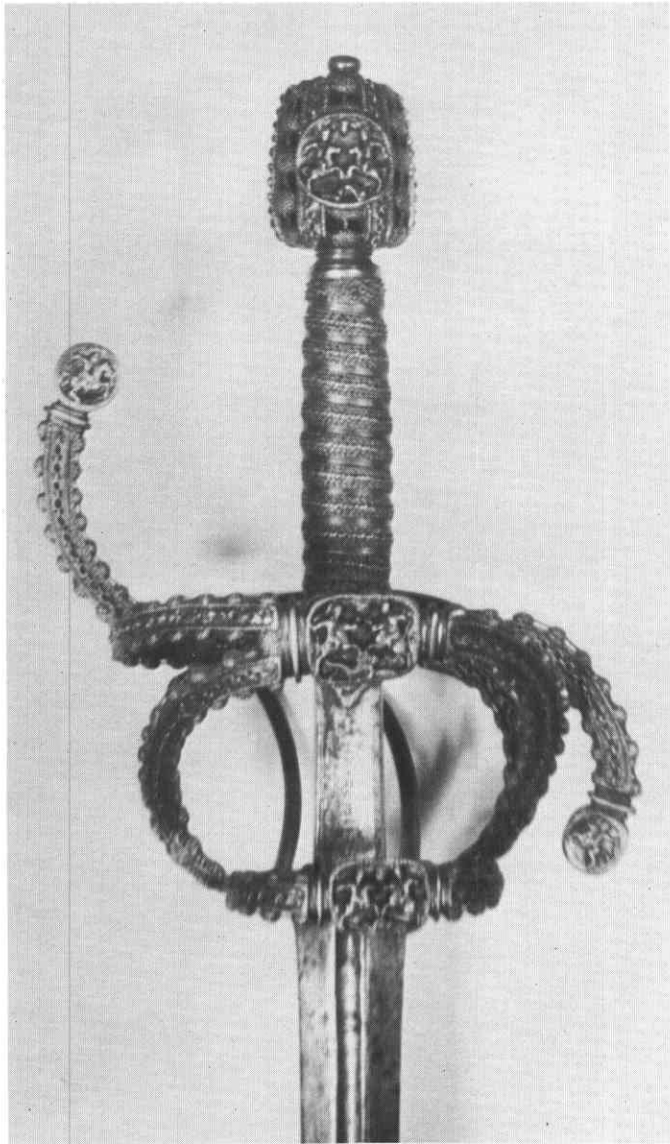


Figure 1

German Rapier, circa 1590, Maker Matson, S-curved quillion—very fine chiseled iron work, with separate chain swedge on. Blade inscribed—M x (0) x M x (0) x M x (0). Blades with the same inscription are in the Wallace and Keasbey Collections.

was the weapon of the noble, musketeer, and cavalier, the variations of the types of hilts designed to accomplish the additional protection were many. From these many variations, four basic types of rapiers developed. They are: Swept Hilt Rapiers, Cup Hilt Rapiers, Shell Hilt Rapiers (this is my classification; others have designed this group as "Transitional Rapier"), and Court Rapiers.

The story of the rapier can be best presented by the following pictures.

The Court Rapier was not a true fighting rapier. It was carried as a badge of office, rank, or position, but in an emergency it could be used as a fighting rapier.

In my opinion, the rapier period (1550–1700) represented the finest period in the history of the

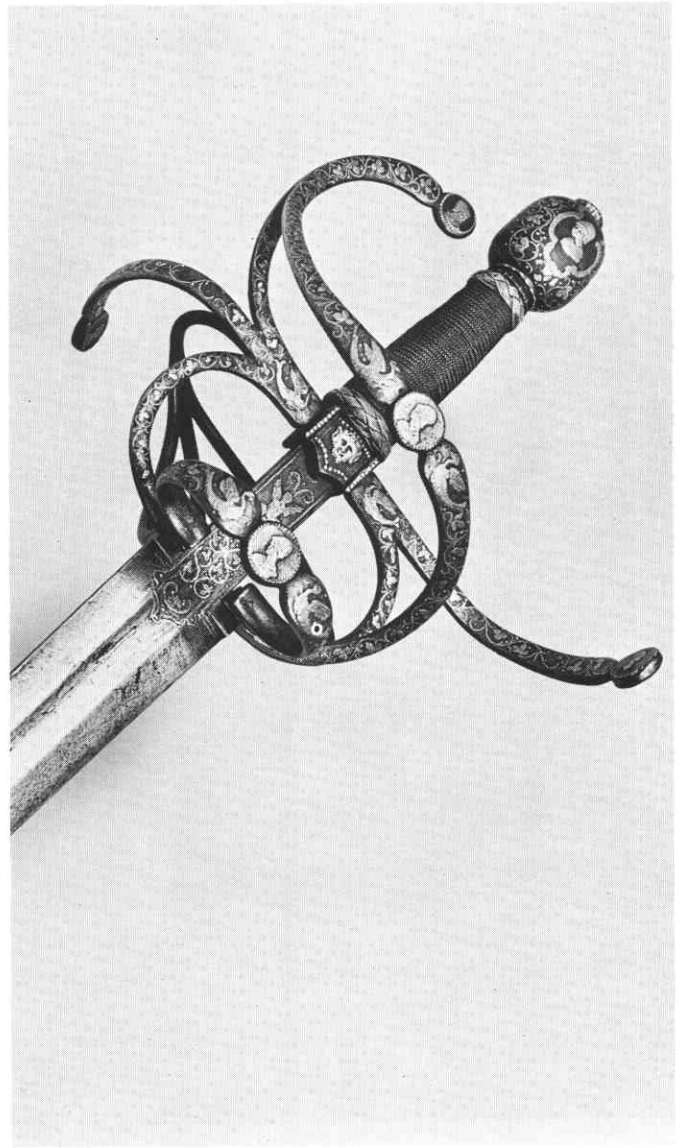


Figure 2

German Rapier, circa 1560. Richly ornamented with fine inlaid silver. Slender pommel with twisted silver wire wound around hilt. S-shaped quillion. All iron parts, including the joint of the blade, are richly decorated with embossed silver inlaid metal work.

See Karl Gimbel, Baden-Baden, sale 1904, item 385

The hilt is fitted with a tapered, double edge blade of flattened hexagonal section which is grooved and pierced for a distance of 9 inches from the hilt. The ricasso is stamped with a bell shaped armorer's mark which has yet to be identified. The sword measures 51 inches in overall length whereas the blade is 45 inches in length. This is a fine example of a late 16th Century rapier.

sword, and the rapier the finest sword of all.

It was common practice for a father, upon his death, to leave his rapier to his oldest son. Sometimes the son would have the hilt changed, as from a

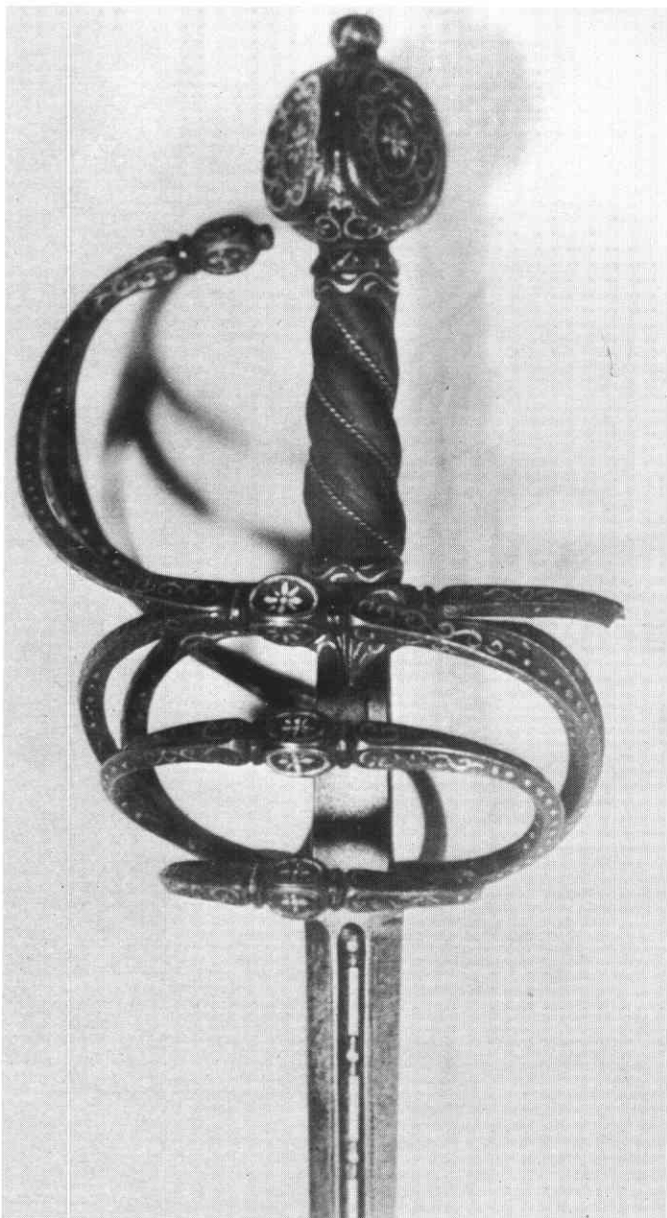


Figure 3

Italian Rapier, circa 1570. Swept hilt rapier of russeted steel decorated in damascene of silver with dot flower and scroll motif. Pommel is formed as a slightly tapered cylinder with four concave panels which are decorated with silver. Grip is of wood covered with velvet and a twisted silver wire which follows grooves in the wood. The single quillion has been broken just where it begins to turn. From a photograph of the sword on Plate IX of Part II of the Keasbey sale (#102), the quillion terminated in knob similar to that of the knuckle guard which repeats the form of the pommel.

Swept Hilt to a Cup Hilt. This is one reason for earlier blades having hilts of a later period. Another reason is that Mr. Ansel Leo took all the rapiers in his collection apart, and displayed the hilts and blades separately. After his death, they were reassembled and in some cases were not properly match-

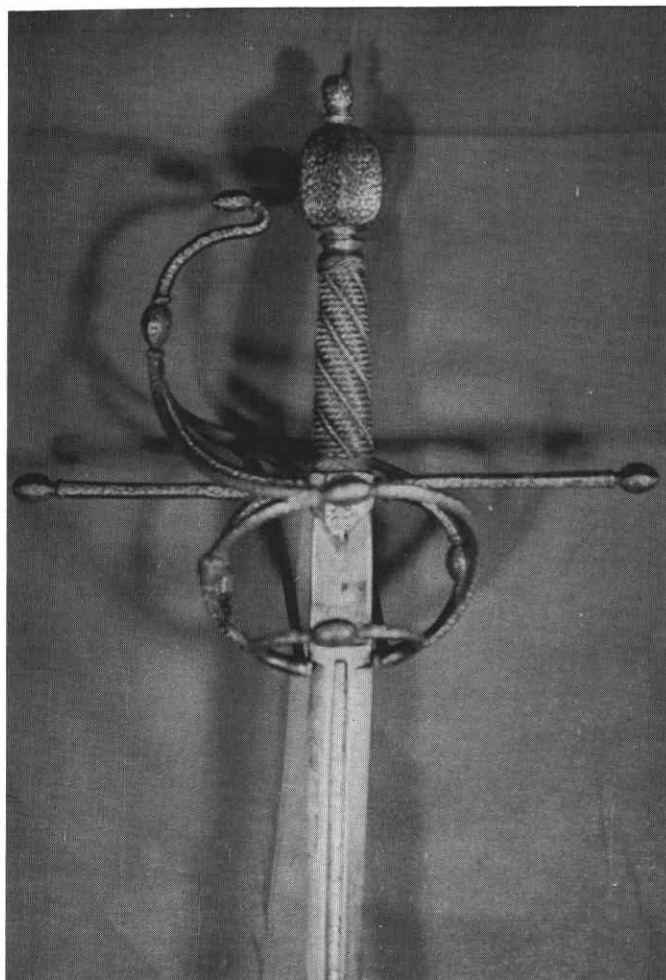


Figure 4

French Rapier, circa 1615, marked with the Fleur Delys. Note the gold decorations which form a flower and scroll motif.

ed. In other cases, hilts and blades have knowingly been improperly assembled.

During the late 1800's, it was customary for certain Americans to tour Europe and purchase arms and armor. Since the number of arms and armor was very limited, fakes were made in different parts of Europe and sold to these tourists. Unfortunately, fakes are still being made both in Europe and here. I must confess, I was fooled a few times.

When rapiers are displayed, they should be mounted perpendicular to the floor with the quillions all at eye level. This presents the rapier in the best position for exhibiting the entire rapier.

It is my hope, that some way can be found where all the finest examples of rapiers, now in museums and private collections, can be photographed and published so that a permanent record of the history of the rapier can be preserved for future generations. That period in history when the rapier was used as a fighting weapon, was a major period in the development of the world as we know it.

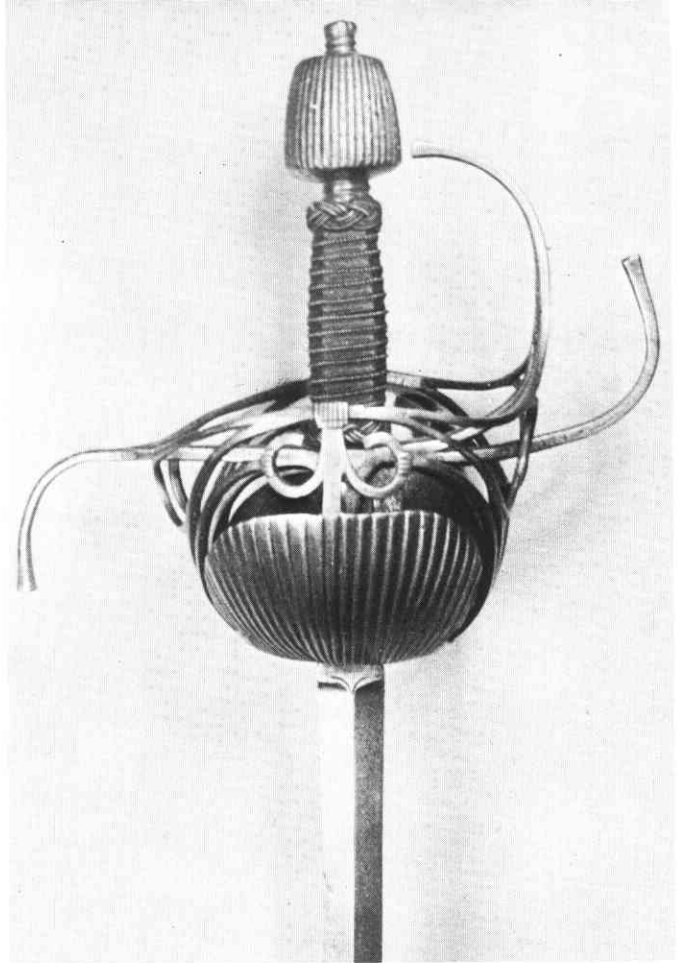
It has been said, history repeats itself. The gun also made the rapier obsolete.

I am very grateful the gun appeared in history when it did, otherwise the rapier might never have been developed. In which event, I certainly would not have had the opportunity and pleasure of meeting so very many, very interesting people.

The finest rapier it has been my pleasure to see and examine was a Daniel Sadeler Swept Hilt Rapier in Joe Kindig's personal collection. While Joe's first love was guns, he also was an expert on other European arms and armor.

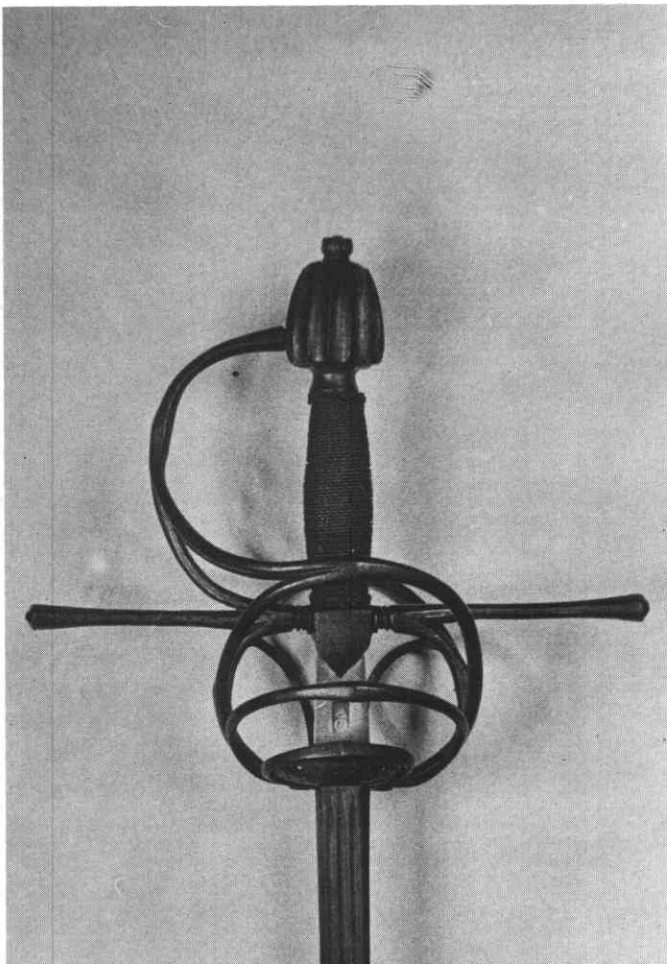
Perhaps on some of your future trips for additions to your collection, you may come across a rapier. I recommend that you spend a little time examining it. While the rapier was a deadly fighting weapon, it also was a work of art and you may find your time was very well spent.

The rapier was the finest fighting weapon of Europe, it was carried to America by the Spanish, French, Dutch, and English. Thus the rapier is a part of our history.



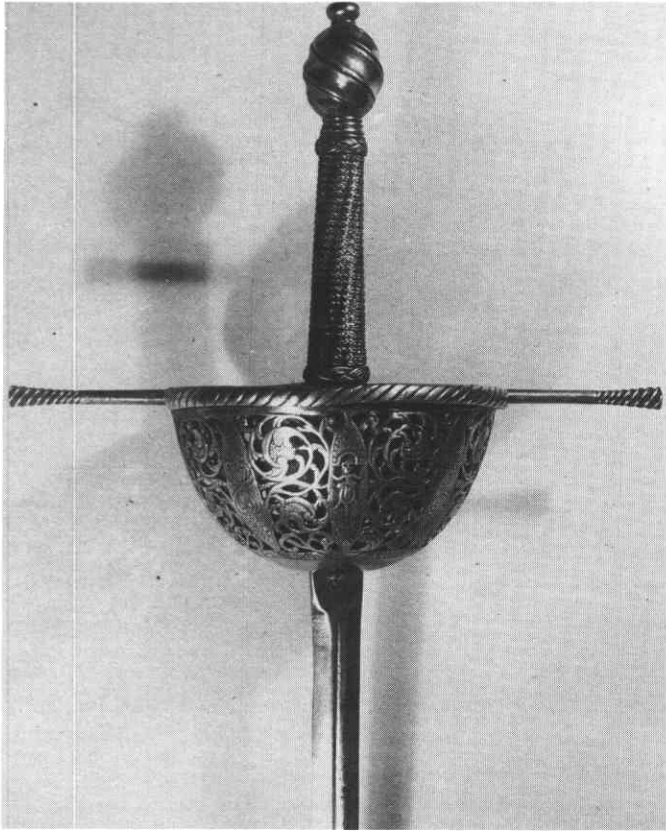
Italian Rapier, circa 1600, Cylindrical fluted pommel; wire bound grip; quillions curved in opposite directions; knuckle guard, two rings on each side and fluted shell guards, the latter being attached to the rings by a fleur-de-lys like ornament; blade 44½ inches long, stamped on the ricasso; CAINO, and his mark, an S surmounted by a crown.

See Henry Griffith Keasbey, sale 1924, item 256



Spanish Rapier, circa 1620. The entire hilt is gold wash and the ring guard has a perforated shell inserted.

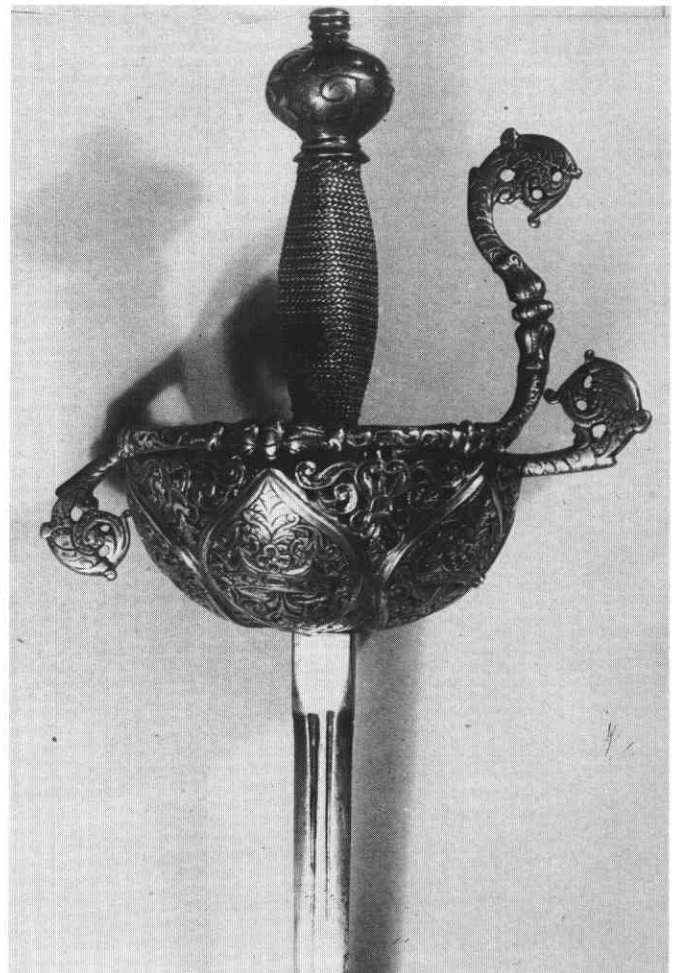
Cup Hilt Rapiers



Spanish Rapier, circa 1610, Cup hilted Rapier, of bright steel, with spirally fluted pommel and quillions. The cup decorated with an oval panel on a pierced scroll ground, the blade, 41 inches long, is grooved, has the armourer's mark on the ricasso, and inscribed Luca.

See Edwin J. Brett, sale 2895, item 351

Italian Rapier, circa 1600, the detail of the iron work is outstanding.

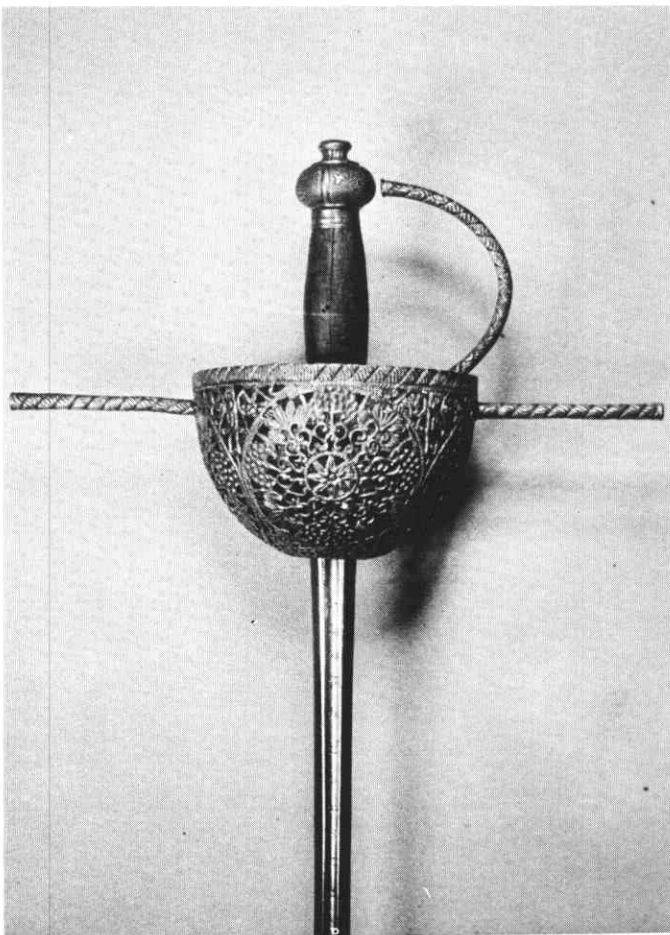


Spanish Rapier, circa 1650. Hilt of brass, perforated and gilded; wooden grip. Blade inscribed HORTUNO AGUIRE, on reverse EN TOLEDO.

See Loan Exhibition of European Arms and Armor, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1931, item 179

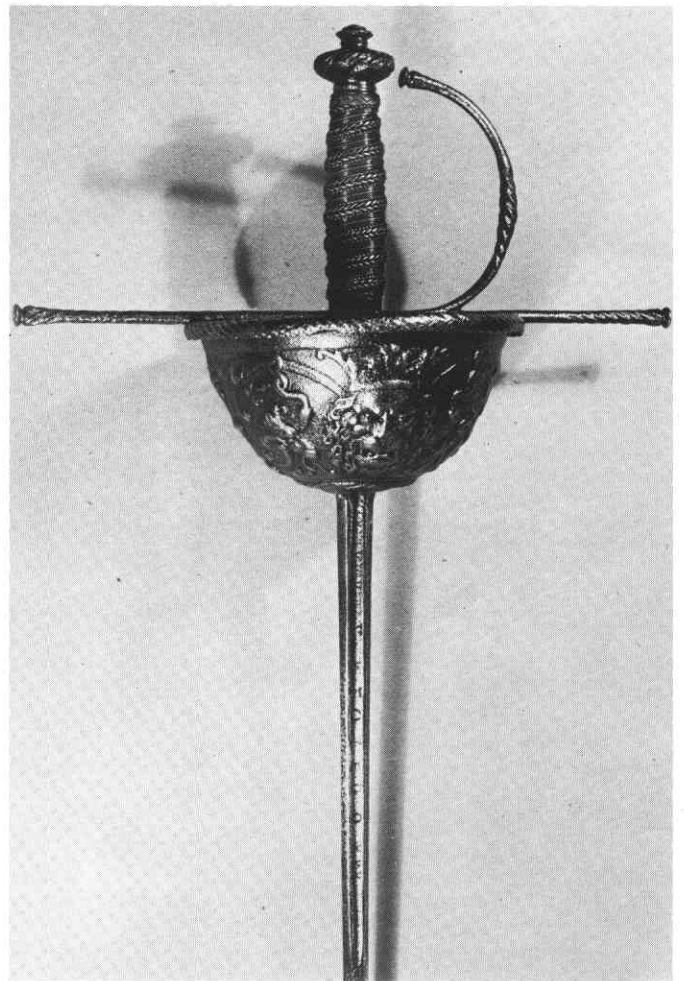


Spanish Rapier, circa 1600. Note the intricately chiseled cup guard, guard rim, quillion and pommel. From the William Ralph Hearst Collection



German Rapier, circa 1650. Pommel slightly fig shaped; knuckle guard; quillions with a ring attached to either side, and circular shell guard richly chiseled. The chiseling on the shell guard represents the interlaced flowers and leaves of the hop; blade 42½ inches long, of diamond section, is grooved near the hilt and inscribed in the groove on one side: ORD ESHE, and on the reverse, IHN SOLINGEN. The blade is German and the hilt probably English.

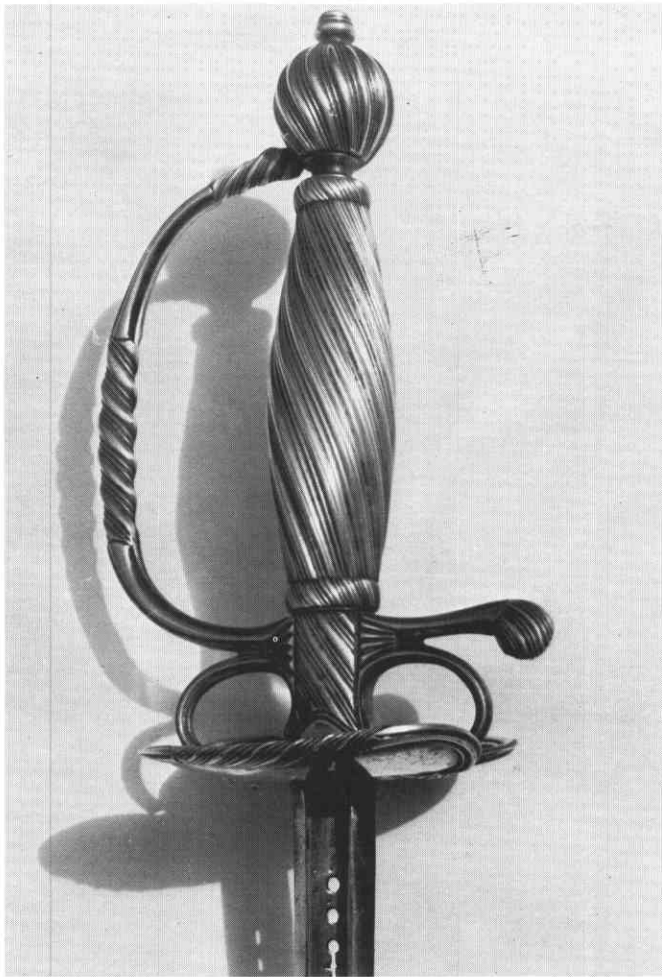
See Henry Griffith Keasbey sale, 1924, item 249



Italian Rapier, circa 1690. Notice the crowned face on the cup. The blade of this rapier is German.

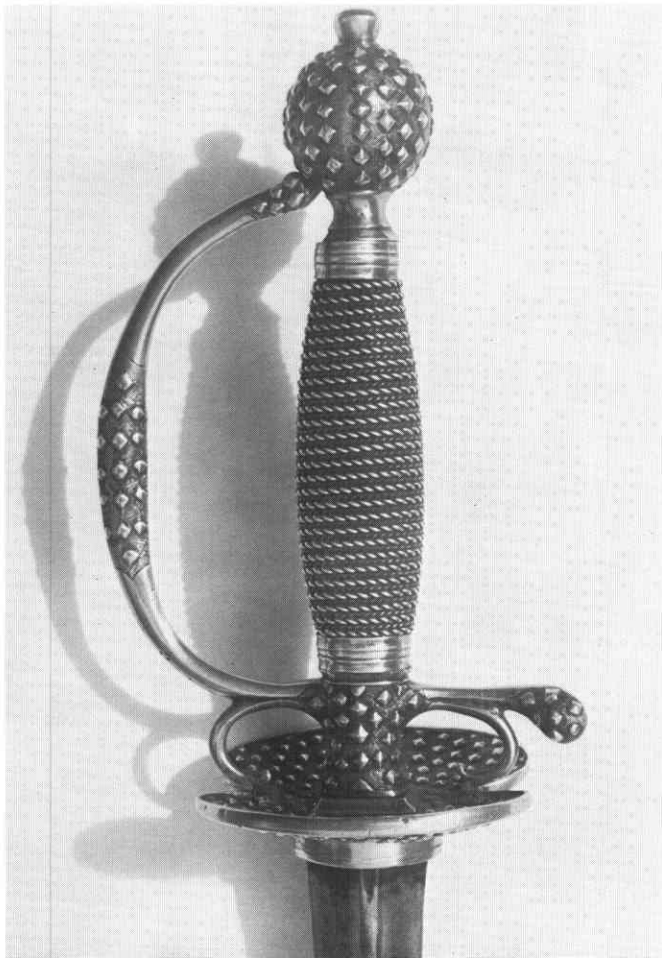
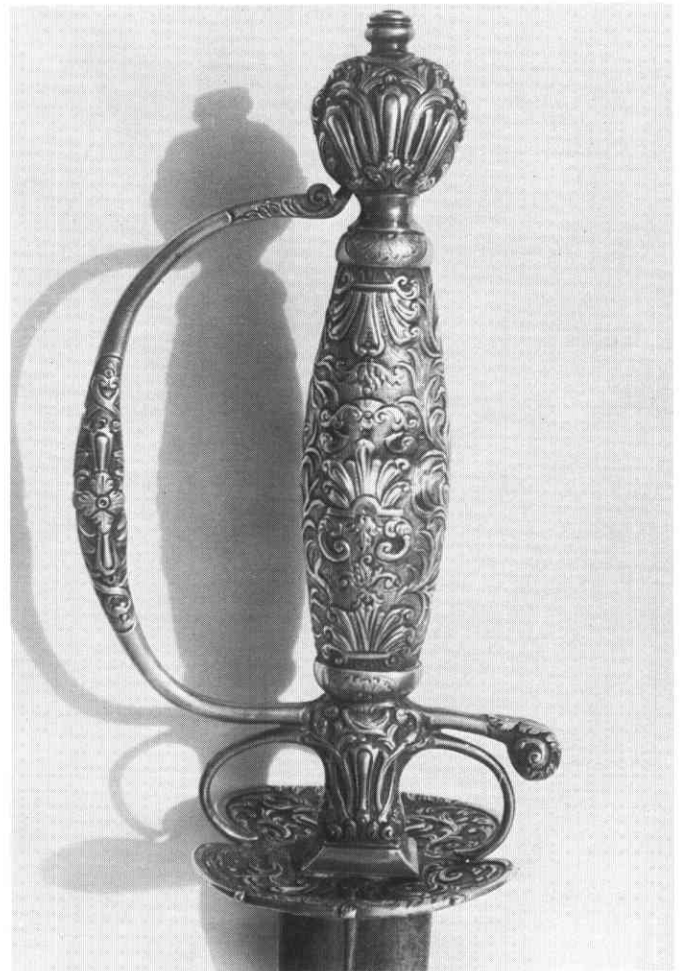
See Sir Guy Francis Laking's Five Volume set, item 1579

Shell Hilt Rapiers



English Rapier, circa 1690. Marked but maker unknown.

English Rapier, circa 1696. Maker, J. Kerr.

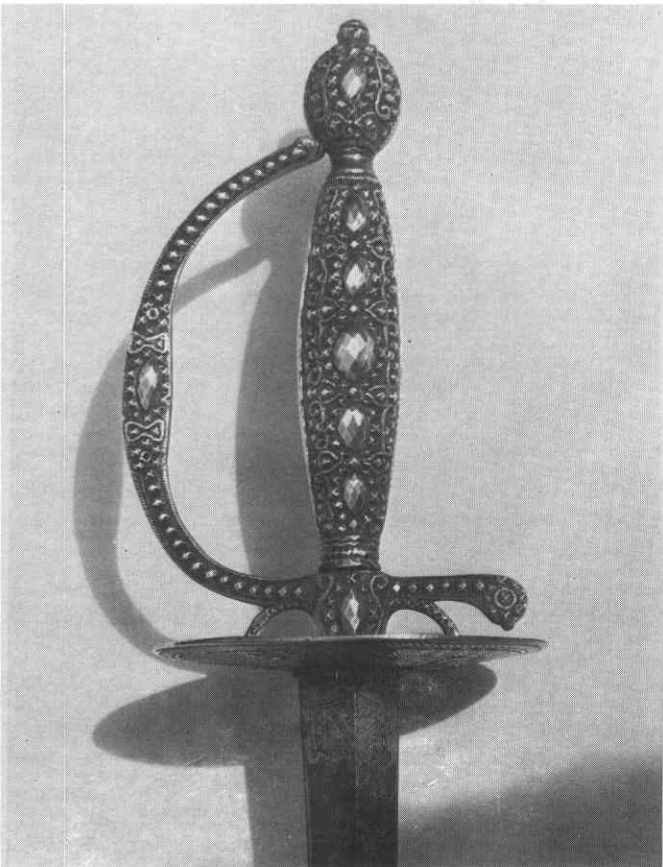
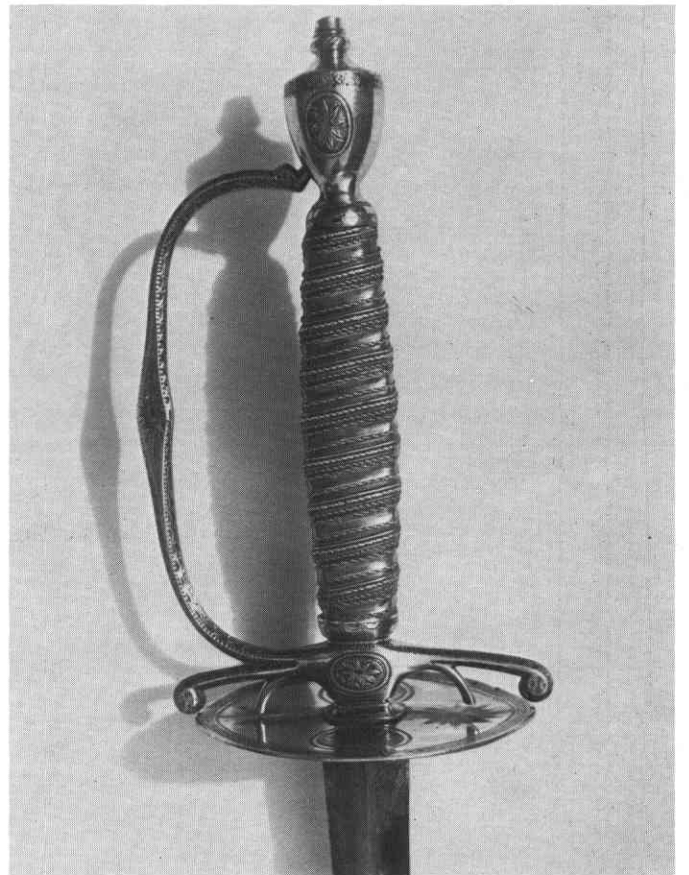


English Rapier, circa 1750. Maker unknown. Note the type of blade. There is a Russian Court Rapier with a similar blade in Bashford Dean's Court Swords and Hunting Swords—Illustration #46.



French Rapier, circa 1740. Maker Aubry.

English Rapier, circa 1781. Maker M. King.



French Rapier, circa 1840. Maker unknown.