

The Kremlin Armory Workshops

Leonid Tarassuk

The earliest direct reference to the Kremlin Armory occurs in the year 1547, when it was mentioned in a Russian chronicle. It can be surmised, however, that the Armory, at least as a repository for the arms and armor of the Grand Princes of Moscow, existed no less than forty years earlier, since the Court rank of Master of the Panoply (*oruzhnichiy*) was recorded in 1511.

In contrast to this early period in the Armory's history, the 17th and 18th Centuries are well documented by inventories, account books and various working records. These valuable manuscripts, formerly accumulated in the Armory's Office, are now preserved in the State Central Archive of Ancient Acts (Moscow). Another important source of information on the Armory are those works of art which bear relevant marks and inscriptions or can be identified with the descriptive entries in historic documents.

An excellent example of this class of objects is a gala sabre with a gold-inlaid Russian inscription in Latin letters (Fig. 1). The inscription states that the weapon was completed, at the Tsar's request and by order of the Master of the Armory Mikhail Saltykov, by master-craftsman Proswits during the month of May, 1618. The maker's name, the term *tesak* (from German *Düssack*) used in the inscription, and the method of transliteration of Russian words, indicates that the craftsman was of German origin. But the decoration and form of the sabre display an original combination of Oriental, Russian and Western elements, which was one of the most distinctive features of the Armory's artistic style.

Initially intended mainly as a repository of the personal panoply of Moscow's grand-princes, the Armory, from its very beginnings, must have required the services of various craftsmen for the maintenance and repair of the military, hunting and ceremonial arms and equestrian equipment. It is reasonable to believe that at least some of these objects were also manufactured on the Armory's premises, although the scale of production during this ancient period cannot be determined at present.



Several defensive pieces made in Moscow, possibly at the Armory's workshops, may illustrate the 16th-century art and style of Russian armorers. The most popular head defense was still the *shishak*, a tipped conical helmet, in use for several centuries, sometimes decorated by a copper band with a stamped floral design. One such helmet, now at the Hermitage Museum, belonged to the boyar family Sheremetev, which played an important role at the Court of Moscow's rulers. Another *shishak*, in the Kremlin Armory Museum, was made in 1557 for the three-year-old son of Ivan the Terrible (Fig. 2). The gold-inlaid decoration on the helmet includes a dedicatory inscription and follows Islamic ornamental patterns, which were frequently used in Russian decorative art of the period.

A late 16th Century *baydana*, attributed to the Tsar Boris Gudunov (1598-1605), represents a heavy coat-of-mail (Fig. 3) made of large, flat rings whose ends were not riveted but joined by sheer pressure, as was often done in the Middle East. Each ring was cut from sheet iron with a die which had a chiseled inscription — a quotation from a letter of Apostle Paul to Romans: *God [is] with us, who [can be] against us?* (Rom. 8, 31).

The treasures of the Armory and other State depositories at the Kremlin fortunately suffered only minor losses during the Time of Troubles of the early 1600s, when domestic and foreign factors fought for power in Moscow. However the performance of the Court workshops was then severely hampered. After



4. Helmet (*yerikhonka*) by a Turkish master, redecorated by the Armory's master Nikita Davydov in 1621 for Tsar Mikhail.



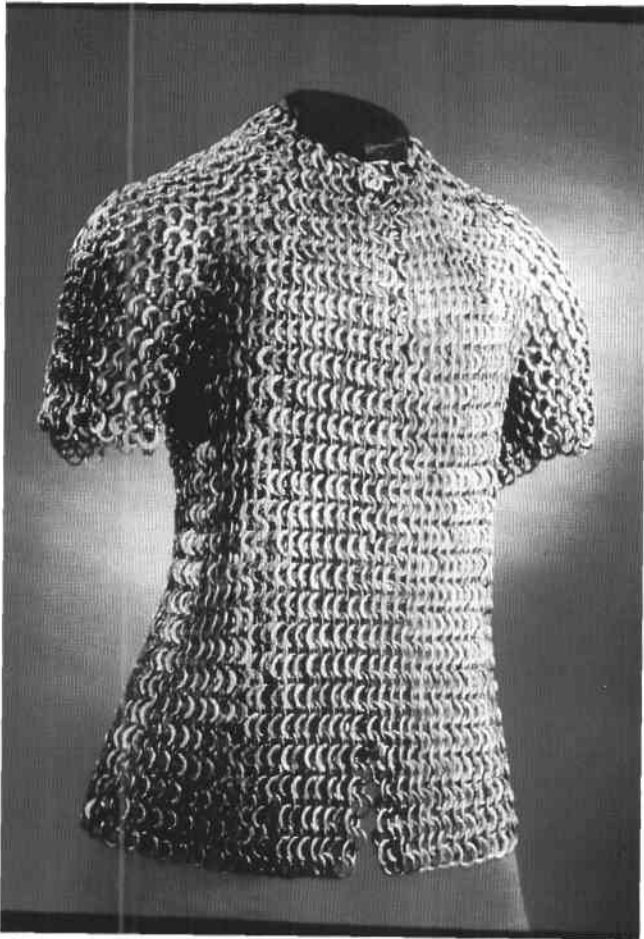
12. Helmet (*yerikhonka*), mid-17th Century.

the accession of the Tsar Mikhail Romanov in 1613, the Kremlin stores and workshops underwent a thorough reorganization. The Armory maintained its basic function as an arsenal for all of the tsar's personal armor and weapons, whether these were produced domestically, given by foreign dignitaries, taken as war trophies, or acquired from merchants. The Armory's workshops were vastly expanded by hiring many craftsmen of various specialties from handicraft centers in Russia and abroad. The archival documents and museum exhibits show that in a matter of only a few years the production of the Armory Workshops reached a remarkable level.

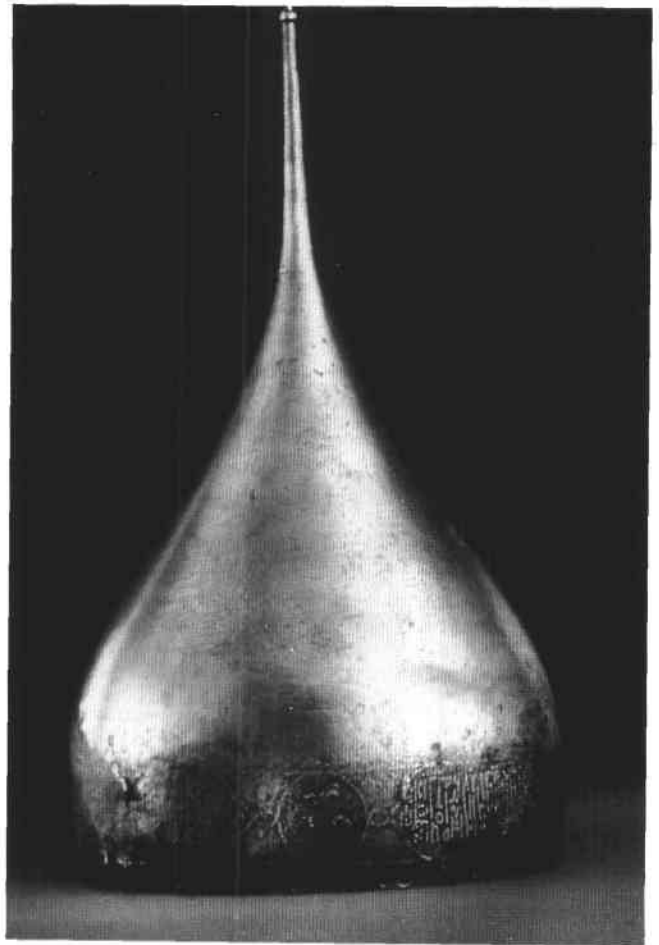
Besides the sabre by the master Proswits, this period of renovation can be illustrated by a sizable number of important pieces. Among them, there are firearms (mostly preserved at the Kremlin Armory Museum) marked by Pervusha Isayev, who was recorded in 1616-1625 as a lockmaker, firearms tester and decorator. He made locks of a luxurious pair of pistols whose gold-damascened barrels display the tsar's heraldic emblem, the

double-headed eagle, indicating his ownership. The stocks of these pistols were certainly made by craftsmen of the German school for they show a mannerist form and elaborate ornamental inlays typical of German style of the turn of the Century. Around 1625, Isayev produced two revolving firearms, the earliest Russian specimens of this kind. Still more important, one of the them is provided with the French-type flintlock, a great invention of that period. There is a definite significance in the fact that the earliest recorded use of this revolutionary mechanism outside France occurred in Moscow, so far from its birthplace.

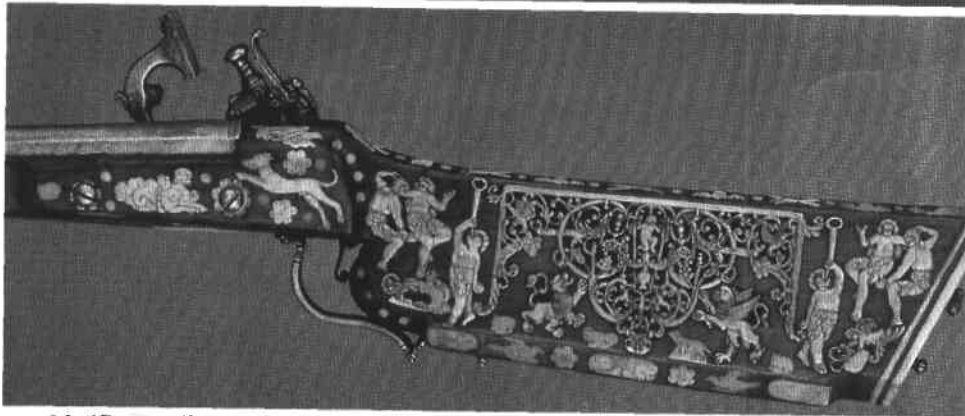
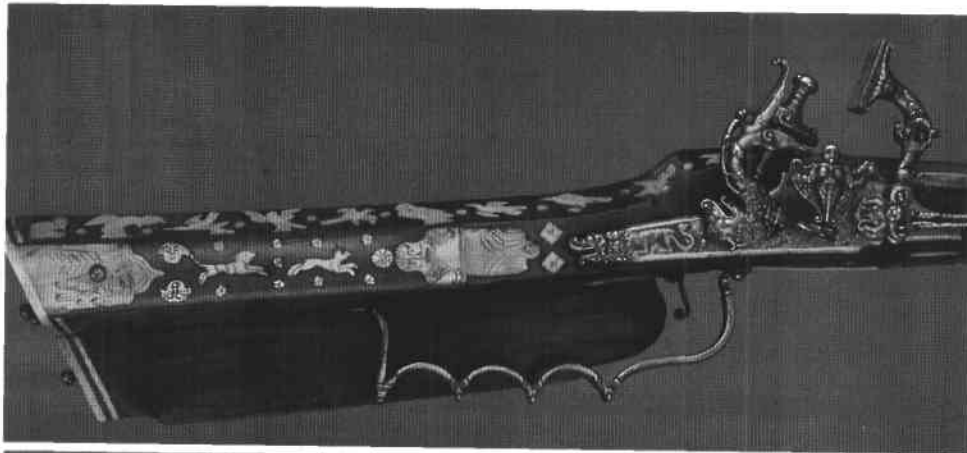
An important part in re-starting production in the Armory belonged to an outstanding armorer, gunsmith and decorator Nikita Davydov, who was appointed Senior Master in 1613 and left the service some fifty years later. In 1621, he embellished the Tsar's Turkish helmet, gold inlaid with fine arabesques and quotations from the Koran. Working in the same technique, Davydov added to the Oriental patterns new ornamental details,



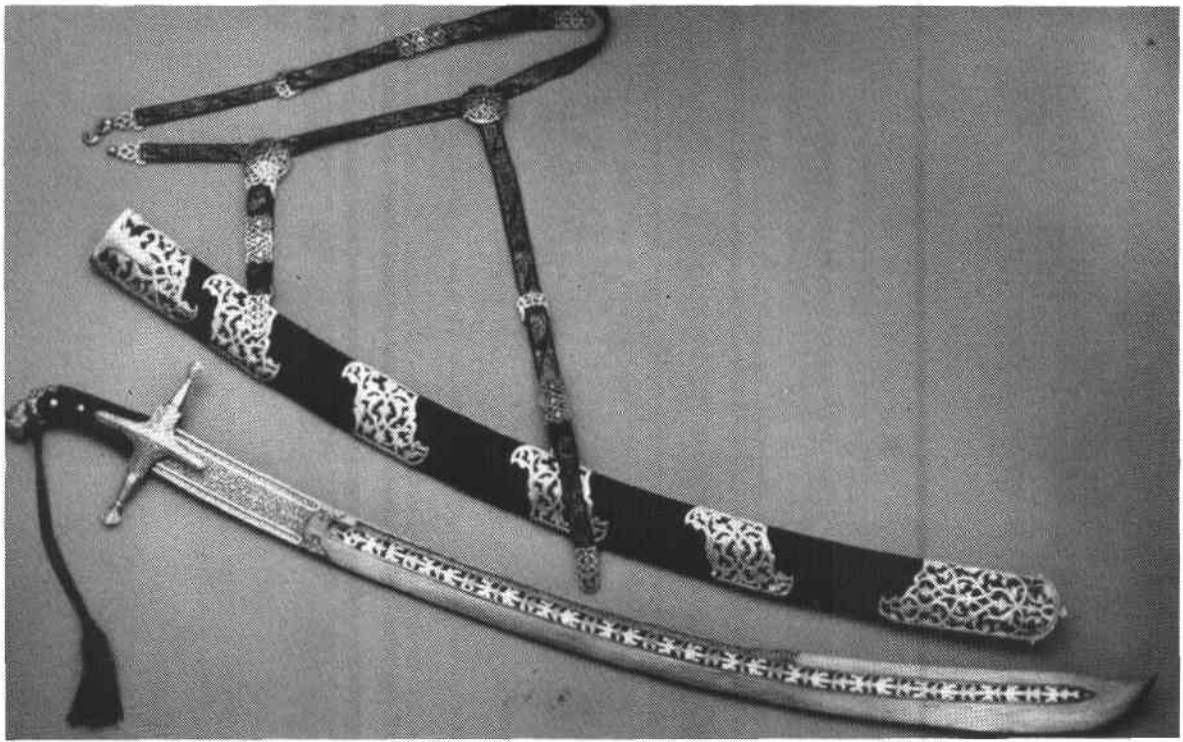
3. Shirt of mail (*Baydana*) made for Tsar Boris Godunov (1598-1605).



2. Helmet (*Shishak*) made in 1557 for Prince Ivan, son of Tsar Ivan the Terrible (reigned 1533-84).



16, 17. Details of a Russian rifle with an English-type snaphaunce lock, ca. 1670-80.



1. Sabre of Tsar Mikhail Romanov (1613-45) by master Proswits, dated 1618.

among them princely crowns of European forms, Russian-form crosses, and a medallion with a figure of St. Michael (Fig. 4).

With the increasing splendor of the Court under the new dynasty, there developed a growing demand for luxurious utensils and accessories reflecting the wealth and power of Russian rulers. By 1620, two specialized workshops, called the Silver and the Gold Chambers, were set up in the Kremlin. Apart from works in their own domain, the two "chambers" closely co-operated with the Armory Workshops and were responsible for the manufacture of mountings made of precious metals and stones. A number of German and Dutch jewelers, gold and silversmiths were hired to work there along with Russian craftsmen and apprentices. Scores of these masters took part in making a splendid Grand Dress of State for the Tsar Mikhail Fyodorovich in late 1620s (kept in the Kremlin Museum). The regalia for this dress included a saddle and a *saadak*, that is an archer's set of matching bow case and quiver. Their golden mounts display an intricate floral design enriched with enamels and precious stones. The central elements in the decoration are double-headed eagles, the Tsar's seal, a figure of St. George — Moscow's patron saint — and symbolic animals used in European heraldry. As is the case with many other works of art from the Kremlin Workshops, these objects combine Western

artistic style and craftsmanship with local forms and taste for a joyful diversity of bright colors.

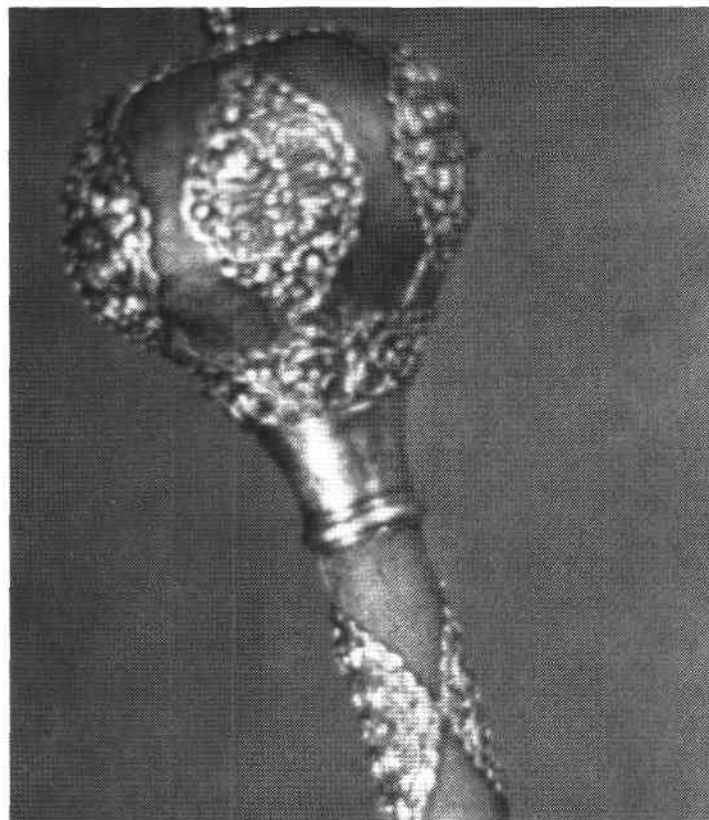
Due to frequent military conflicts, the country's arms production was greatly increased during the second third of the 17th century. The Armory Workshops were often required to produce and repair military weapons, in addition to the customary catering to the Court. To ease the problem, special workrooms for military arms were set up within the Kremlin to function under the close supervision of the Armory's staff.

A new era opened for the Kremlin Workshops with the accession of the Tsar Aleksey Mikhaylovich (1645-1676), who was very fond of arts, heraldry, hunting, and fine arms. He chose one of his boyars, Grigory Gavrilovich Pushkin, for the post of Master of the Armory (1647-1655). The Armory's staff, which had already trebled between 1614 and 1630s to 66 masters, was further enlarged to more than 200 master craftsmen of some twenty specialties. The Tsar's closest associate, Bogdan Matveyevich Khitrovo, distinguished for his education and love for arts, was the Tsar's best choice for the next Master of the Armory (1657-1680). A symbol of his authority, a parade mace (Fig. 5), shows the skills and taste of the Armory's craftsmen. It is made of finely granulated and blackened silver, in imitation of leather, with silver-gilted appliques chiseled with festoons and floral scrolls.

Most appropriately, the Silver and the Gold Chambers were also placed under Bogdan Khitrovo's direct authority for better coordination between various production departments. The Workshops of the Court Stable Office participated, too, in carrying out some orders placed with the Armory. This was the case, for instance, when a leather *saadak* was required for a bow and arrows, or saddle holsters were to be made to fit a pair of pistols. Certain works also involved craftsmen from the Tsar's Household Workshops or from the so-called "Velvet Courtyard." Combined special skills of various workshops are demonstrated in a leather *saadak*, now in the Kremlin Museum, exquisitely embroidered with gold and silver threads by master Prokopiyy Andreyev. The floral patterns frame the cartouches with heraldic emblems of Russian principalities, the central piece being Moscow's Eagle symbolically spread over the Kremlin. A silversmith's work is represented in this masterpiece by silver-gilt mounts decorated with engraving and niello in the style inspired by Turkish designs.

The second half of the 17th century was the golden age in the history of the Kremlin Workshops. A greater-than-ever number of Russian and foreign craftsmen were employed at the Court. Both in quality and quantity, their production reached its peak. The best of these works of art equal their counterparts made during this period in Western Europe and the Middle East (Fig. 6-8).

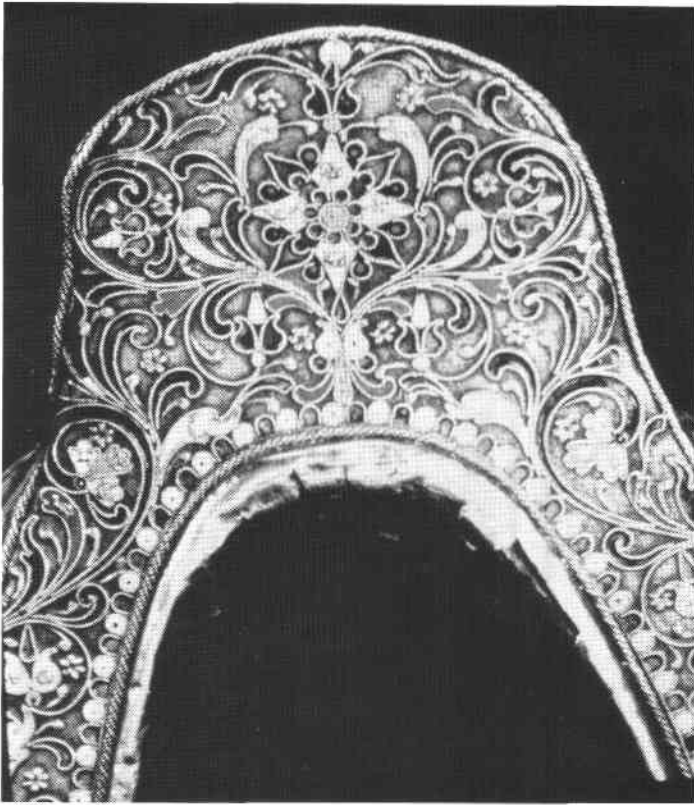
The Armory Workshops turned out hundreds of fine arms and accoutrements of every description, including defensive pieces and equestrian equipment for the tsar, dignitaries and elite officers. Among the elements of armor preserved in the Kremlin, there is a so-called *alam*, a gunner's breast shield and emblem, embossed with a lion's mask holding a cannon (Fig. 9). The emphasis in the Armory's output was laid on richly decorated firearms, mostly for the Tsar's personal use and collection. Apart from some guns based on Turkish mechanical and decorative patterns, firearms made in the Armory followed Western European designs. The "snap-haunce" flintlock of Dutch and English forms (Fig. 10) was the favorite mechanism with Moscow gunmakers and their customers. From mid-17th century, the French-type flintlock gradually won a larger recognition, as did certain technical novelties from Western Europe — such as the flintlock "wender gun" with two revolving barrels, attributed



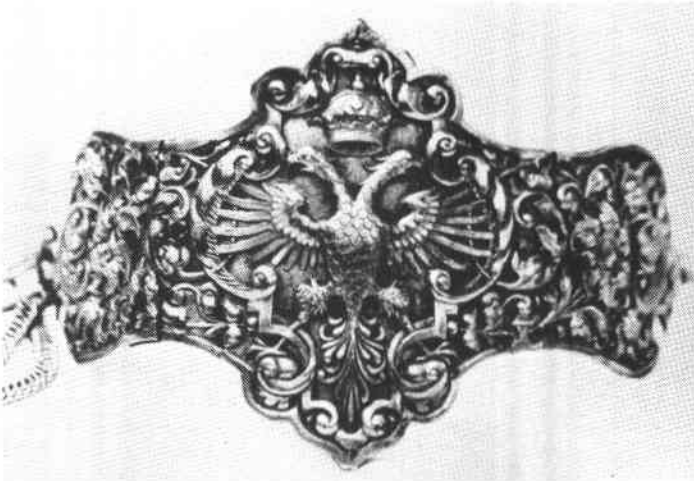
5. Parade mace (*bulava*) of Boyar Bogdan Khitrovo, Master of the Armory, ca. 1660.



6. Parade saddle (*archak*) of Tsar Fedor Alekseyevich (1676-82) made by the Armory's craftsmen Larion Afanessyev, Luka Mymrin and Semion Fedotov in 1682.



7. Detail of the front bow of the saddle in Illus. 6, made of silver-gilt with polychrome enamels.



8. Silver-gilt noseband (*reshma*) of a parade horse harness, 2nd half of the 17th Century.

to the Armory's masters Ivan Boldrev and Yevtikhiy Kuzovlev.

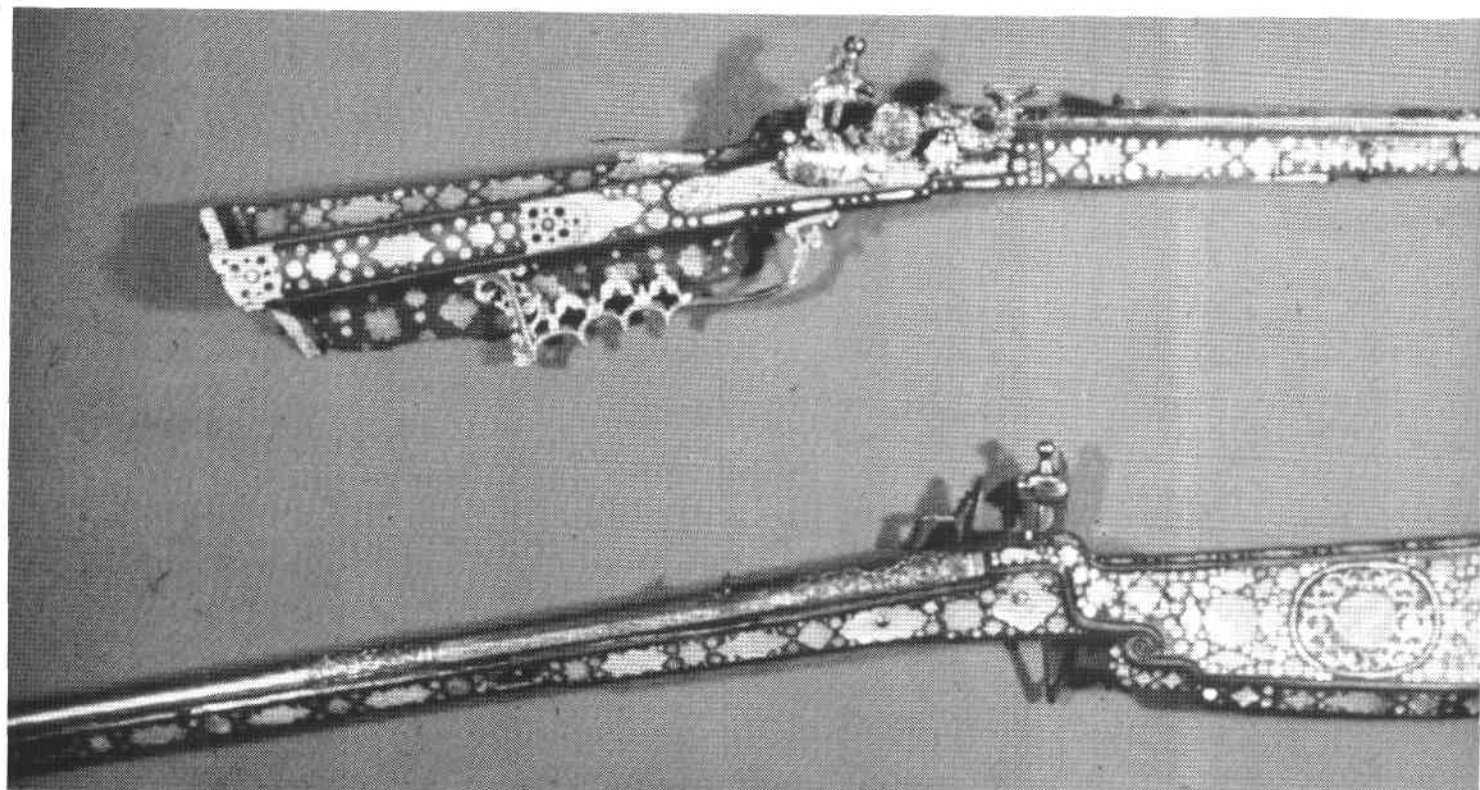
The splendor of the Moscow Court was well known far beyond Russia's boundaries, and employment in the flourishing Kremlin Workshops appeared as an attractive engagement to many European craftsmen. Some of them firmly settled in Moscow, married there, and, having joined the Russian Orthodox Church, even changed their native names. Masters from Germany, the Netherlands, Poland and Britain were particularly numerous in Moscow. One remarkable mechanic



9. Artillerist's breast shield (*alam*), 17th Century.

and gunmaker, who worked in the Kremlin, was Casper Kalthoff of Solingen. He produced there advanced multisho magazine guns, invented in his family. However, the bulk of masters and apprentices in the Workshops were Russian craftsmen headed by the veteran armorer Nikita Davydov. His contemporary Yevtikhiy Kuzovlev certainly was the most prominent stock decorator, as is demonstrated by a pair of superb pisols, now at the Hermitage Museum, whose stocks are signed with his initials, a unique case in Russian firearms of this period. The fine wood-carved arabesques are well matched here by silver-gilt mounts chased and engraved with foliation and heraldic emblems (Fig. 11).

The Tsar Aleksey Mikhaylovich died in 1676 and was outlived by the boyar Khitrovo, his Master of the Armory, by four years. The well-organized Workshops continued to run fairly efficiently, and the young Tsar Piotr Alekseyevich, future Emperor, could also enjoy the skills of the Armory's craftsmen. The Kremlin Collection has preserved two snaphaunce sporting guns which belonged to Peter I. The smaller one is a light carbine gracefully shaped and decorated, made for Peter as a boy. The full-size hunting gun was produced for him later in the century.



10. Two hunting snaphaunce rifles (*pishchal* or *samopal*), 2nd half of the 17th Century.

The reforms of Peter the Great (1682-1725) and the 20-year-long Northern War led to a complete restructure of the country's arms industry. The post of Master of the Armory was discontinued in 1690, and at about the turn of the century the Court Workshops were greatly reduced. The Silver and the Gold Chambers, as well as the "Velvet Courtyard" merged with the Armory Workshops whose enlarged staff was turned over to the production of military weapons. During the first four years of the War, the Armory issued well over 200,000 firearms and edged weapons, while the Workshops' painters made almost 700 banners for the armed forces.

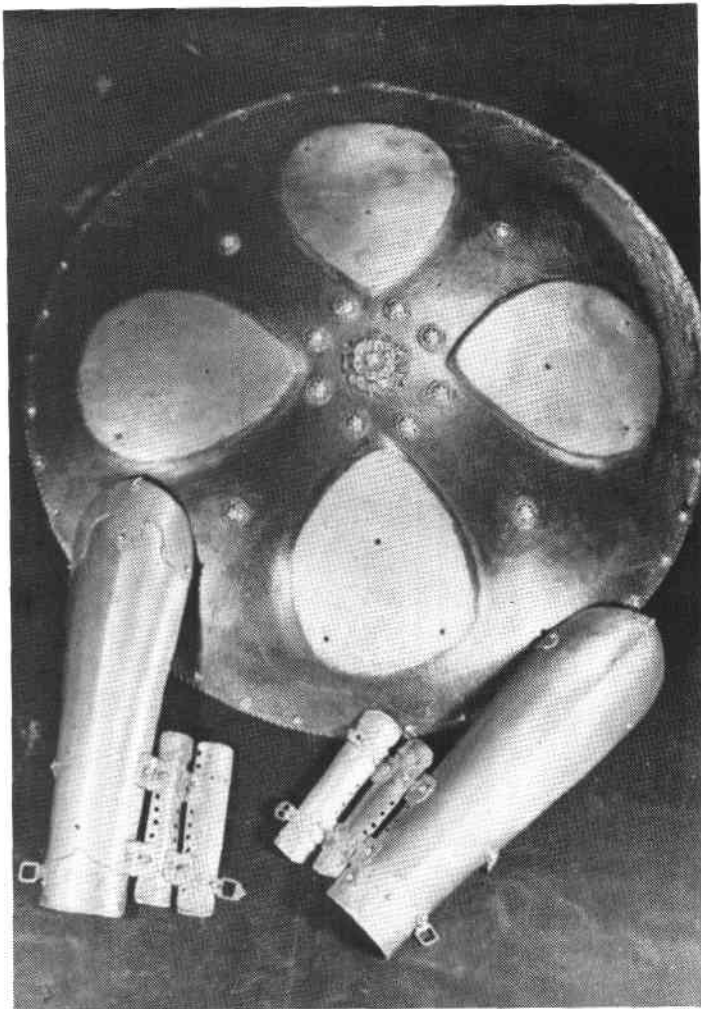
In 1711, more than 200 craftsmen were transferred from the Armory to Saint Petersburg, the new Russian capital, to manufacture the regulation weapons. A few years later, the Armory Workshops ceased to function altogether. Since then, the Kremlin Armory has existed only as a State treasury, a repository of old collections and more recent memorabilia. Trophies from the battlefields, historic relics, gifts to monarchs and art objects from ancient cathedrals and imperial palaces joined the Armory's collections in the 18th and 19th centuries.

With the construction of a new, vast building in 1850s, the Kremlin Armory became Russia's most important museum of applied and decorative arts. It



11. Silver mounts on a pistol grip (detail of a pair of pistols); stock decorator Yevtikhii Kuzovlev, ca. 1660-70.

houses collections of European and Oriental works of art acquired by Russian rulers or received as gifts from ambassadors and merchants. Former princely possessions include ancient utensils and costumes, arms and regalia, both of domestic and foreign make. Among these treasures, of utmost importance



13. Shield and a pair of vambraces (*naruch*), 17th Century.

in the history of Russian art are objects made in the Kremlin Workshops, particularly in the Armory in its heyday during the 17th century.

Of all Russian centers of arts and crafts, Moscow generally held an exclusive position. Since the early 17th century, the best masters were brought there for the Tsar's service from Novgorod, Suzdal, Murom, Velikiy Ustyug, Kostroma, Archangelsk and other towns famous for their craftsmen's special skills. This selected group was joined by many artisans from European and some Oriental countries. The Kremlin palaces and depositories offered these masters and their apprentices rich arrays of artistic treasures as examples of arts and crafts in various countries. On some occasions, craftsmen even were sent from Moscow to other handicraft centers to study particular technological methods and decorative techniques. Thus, the Kremlin Workshops were a kind of melting pot where an extensive exchange of technical ideas and artistic trends took place. This process developed in

an environment that already possessed an ancient handicraft culture, artistic traditions, and tastes of its own. All these factors played an important role in formation of the original Moscow style which manifested itself with particular *éclat* in the production of Armory as the leading department of the Court workshops.

Russian defensive armament generally was similar to mid-Eastern, especially Turkish, forms, a consequence of frequent Russo-Turkish military conflicts and long-lasting trade relations. Oriental influence is obvious in Russian conical helmets, round shields and arm defenses (Fig. 12, 13). In Russian armor, elaborate arabesques in gold and silver on steel background were among the favorite motifs of decoration, as was the case with ornament used by Islamic artists. In Moscow, the arabesques were often combined with large floral scrolls chiseled in steel or chased on precious metals used as appliqué decoration. The most developed form of plate armor in Russia was *zertsalo* (meaning 'mirror'), akin to Persian and Turkish types of body protection. Composed of several plates linked to a round breast shield, it was usually worn over a coat-of-mail as in the suit made for the Tsar Aleksey Mikhaylovich by the master Nikita Davydov in 1663 (preserved in the Kremlin Armory). The plates of this splendid parade armor are decorated with chased chevrons, alternately silvered and gilded, and with engraved floral and animal designs.

Geometric patterns and figures of real and fantastic animals popular in folk art and legends were often used by the Armory's artists. The so-called Constantinople Apparition, a fight between the Christian Eagle and the Moslem Dragon over city walls, is quite a frequent theme in the decoration of Moscow-made weapons, reminding that the Russian tsars regarded themselves as successors to the Byzantine emperors.

Firearms made by the Armory in the 17th century followed mainly German, Dutch and English forms but featured some noticeable modifications in their locks and stocks (Fig. 14). Although some specific forms of gun locks were developed in Russia, the Anglo-Dutch mechanism was predominant in fine guns and pistols made in the Armory (Fig. 15).

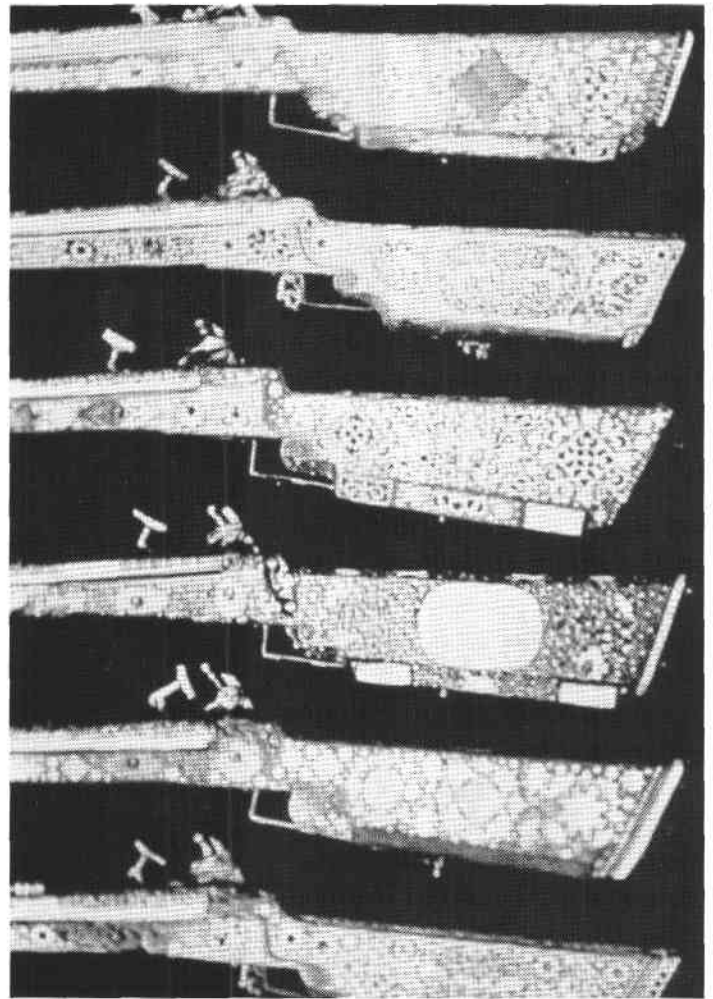
As for firearms decoration, a very peculiar style was evolved in Moscow. Even in quite rare cases when the direct influence of Western ornamental sources can be detected, Moscow stylistic features

and Russian folk-art motifs are fairly apparent. A good example is given by a fine rifle formerly in the Bedford Collection (Fig. 16). Its lock and stock are decorated with French-inspired designs while some ornamental inlays reflect the style of folk-art carvings popular in northern regions of European Russia (Fig. 17). Such combinations can be explained as the result of team work carried out by Russian and foreign craftsmen, a practice often used in the Armory. In other instances, Russian decorators would spontaneously intertwine native and alien ornamental elements or give a treatment of their own to less familiar Western motifs.

The favored technique of stock decoration in the Armory was the inlay of wood with walrus bone, horn, ebony or mother-of-pearl (Fig. 18). The ornament is either similar to abstract patterns of middle-Eastern carpets or closely reminds one of scrollwork designs in wood and bone carvings popular in the Archangelsk area. The Armory's records show indeed that many craftsmen were hired in this northern region well known for its bone and wood carvers.

In many instances, Russian pistols are almost identical to their Dutch contemporaries and can be distinguished mainly by technical details of the engraved or chased silver mounts, sometimes embellished with polychrome enamel or precious stones. On the other hand, the origin of the pistols decorated in typical Moscow style literally springs to the eyes. The effect is due particularly to the stocks, resplendent with an inlaid bone decoration such as that on the long guns. Elaborate chiselling and piercing of the locks and large silver applications on the stocks, chased with large floral scrolls, are also the distinctive features of the pistols made in the Armory Workshops (Fig. 19).

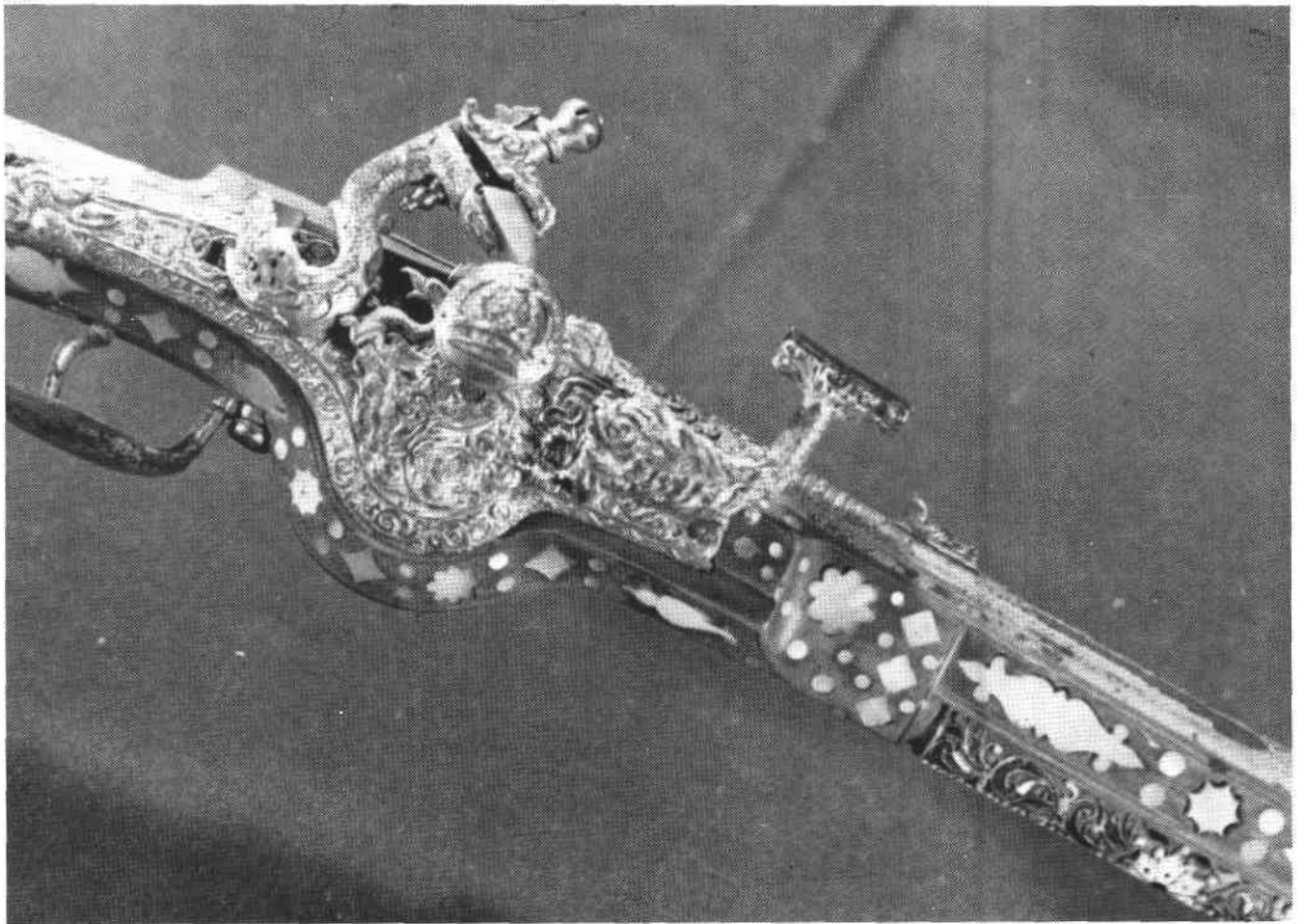
The Kremlin Workshops virtually acted as a higher art school where Russian and Western master craftsmen passed over their skill and experience to numerous native apprentices, who, in turn, would teach their own pupils. The craftsmen working in the Kremlin had special facilities and social privileges, and it was not rare that several generations of a family of artisans enjoyed employment in the Court Workshops. Production from Moscow was often used as technical and decorative patterns for Russian provincial craftsmen and state-owned arms shops. After the Kremlin Workshops closed, some of the Armory's masters established their own small enterprises in various parts of the country. No



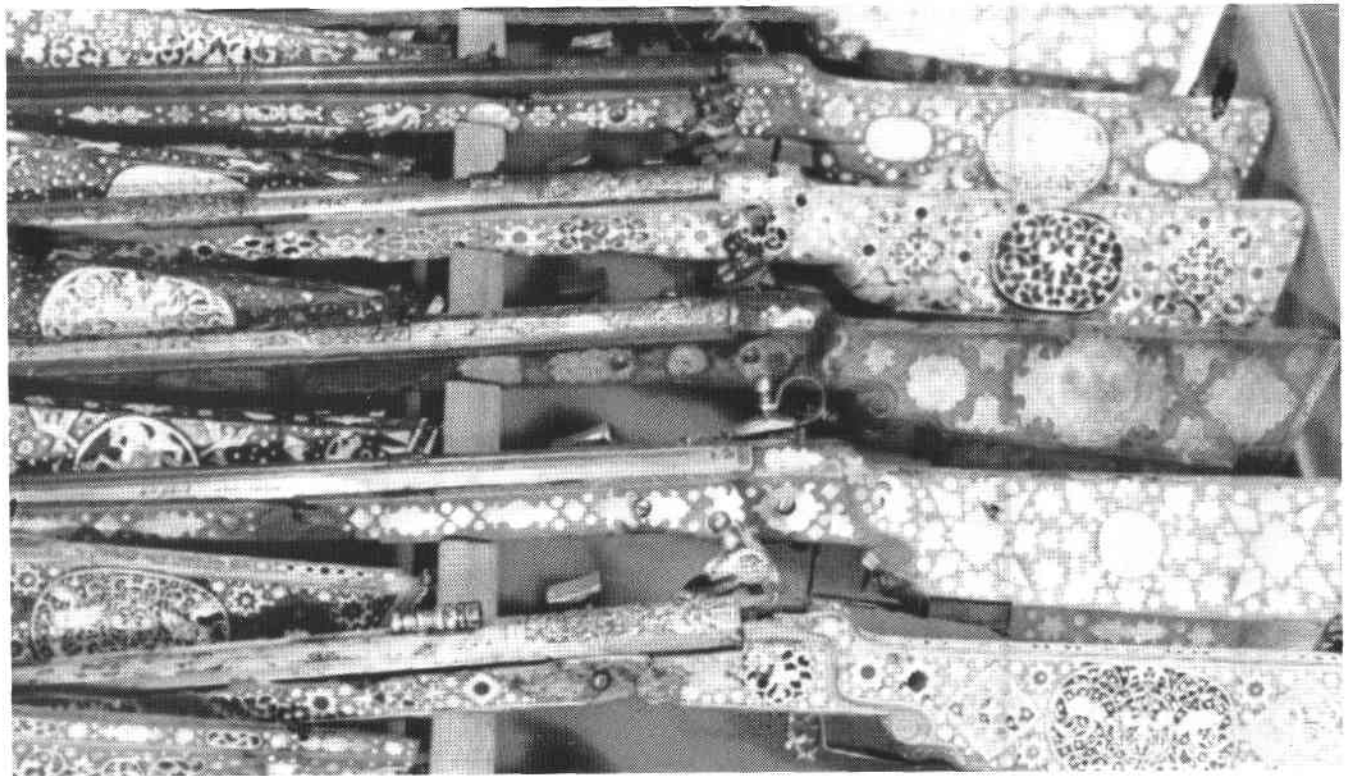
14. Butts of snaphaunce rifles inlaid with mother-of-pearl, ebony and bone, 17th Century.

wonder that in later times decorated hunting guns and utensils reminiscent of the Moscow style were privately manufactured in such distant areas as Siberia and the north of European Russia. Thus, apart from the rich heritage preserved in the Kremlin Museums and other collections, Moscow craftsmen left behind artistic traditions which spread over the country and eventually became a natural part of the folk art.

The Moscow style shed its colorfulness, vivid contrasts and a sense of pagentry on all objects of art made in the Kremlin Workshops (Fig. 20, 21). It can be said with regret that in no later time did Russian works of art, especially fine arms, have such an original national expression on so large a scale as had been manifest in the creations of Moscow masters before the era of Peter the Great, which opened a new — and quite different — page in the development of Russian culture.



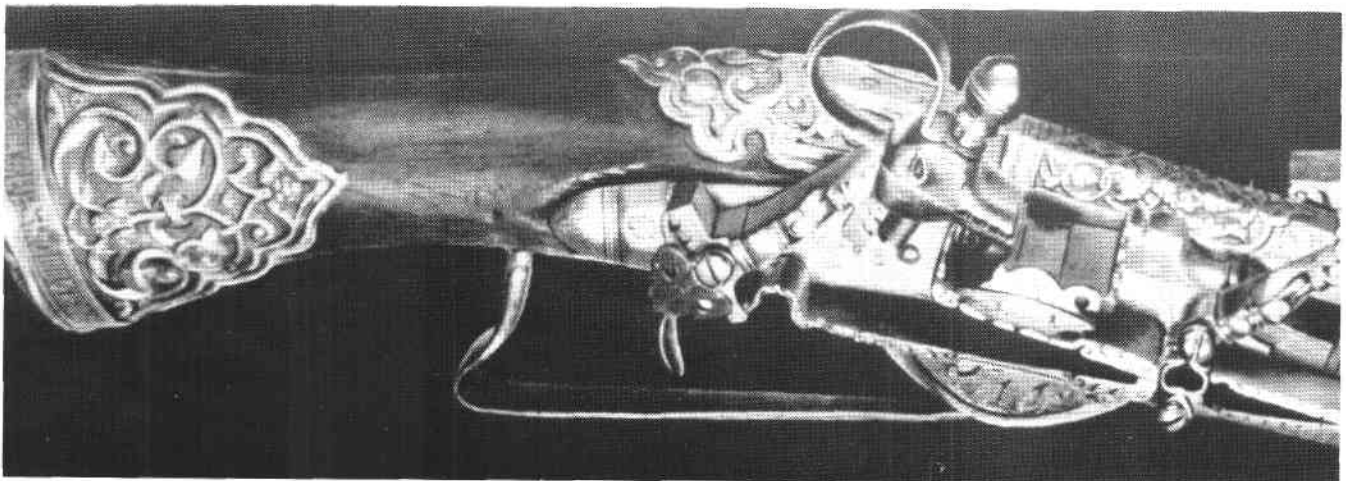
15. Dutch-type snaphaunce lock of a Russian rifle, 3rd quarter of the 17th Century.



18. Hunting flintlock rifles made for the Tsar's army, 17th Century.

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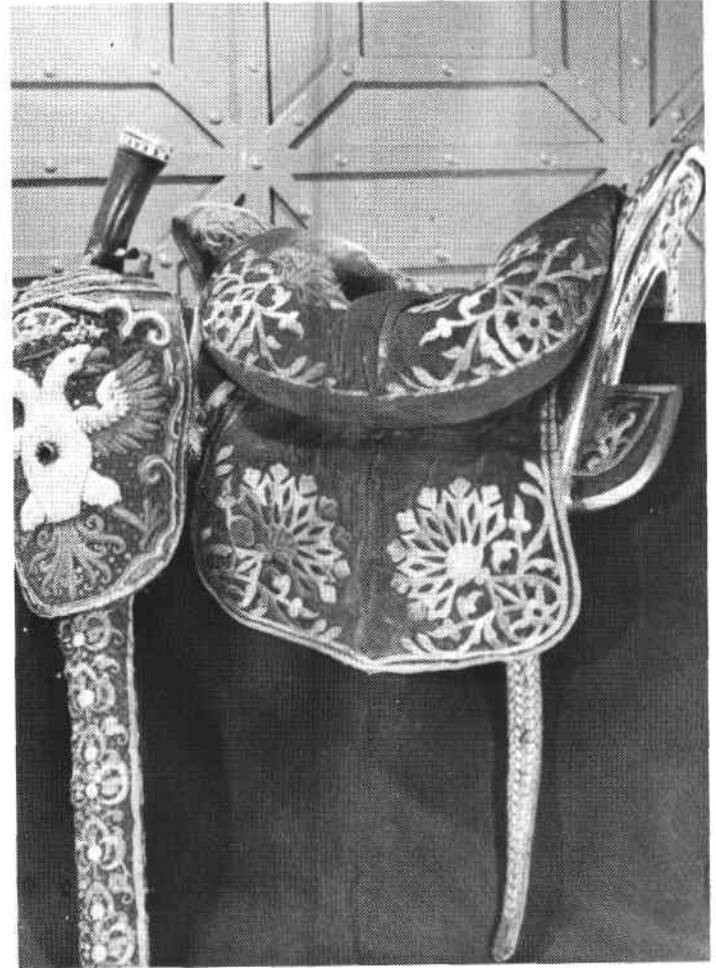
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19. Detail of a pistol (one of a pair) made for the courtier Aleksey Mussin-Pushkin; Russian-type snaphaunce lock marked by master Fedor, mid-17th Century.



20. Archer's set of cases (*Saadak*), part of the so-called Grand Dress of State made for Tsar Mikhail in 1633.



21. Parade saddle with holsters and pistols, made for Tsar Aleksey (1645-76), mid-17th Century.