

Swords of Lucknow

26 November 2025 – 22 March 2026

Five Indian swords, richly decorated and of exceptional quality, will form the centrepiece of a remarkable display at London's Wallace Collection this autumn.

Nearly a metre in length and adorned with intricate enamel and goldwork, these rare objects offer a unique window into the splendour of 18th- and 19th-century Lucknow, once a vibrant centre of power, artistry and cross-cultural exchange.

The display reveals the extraordinary craftsmanship in the northern province of Awadh, at a time when India's cultural and political epicentres were shifting. In the mid-18th century, as Delhi was rocked by instability, many of its leading poets, painters and craftspeople migrated to Lucknow and Faizabad in search of new patrons. Through this population shift, Lucknow flourished as a courtly capital, its wealth matched by a cosmopolitan atmosphere that attracted Indian elites and European adventurers alike.



The ruling Nawabs of Awadh, of Iranian Shia heritage, presided over a diverse population of Sunni Muslims and Hindus, and cultivated a cultural identity rooted in luxury and ritual. The material culture of the court reflected these influences: rich in symbolism, steeped in tradition and alive with innovation.

The five swords on display were part of the paraphernalia of the court. They signalled prestige, loyalty and masculine identity – functioning as status symbols as much as weapons. Swords of this nature were also exchanged as diplomatic gifts, carefully chosen to reflect the recipient's position and value to the court.

A distinctive visual language developed at the court of Awadh, with the fish motif emerging as a key emblem. Likely derived from the ensign of exalted rank *mahi-ye maratib* ('Fish of Dignity') granted to early rulers, it became a recurring symbol of Awadhi courtly identity and can be seen across several swords in the display.

From the mid-18th to the mid-19th century, Awadh evolved from a Mughal province into an independent kingdom. But this seeming autonomy was short-lived. In 1856, Awadh was annexed by the British East India Company and only a year later, Lucknow was ravaged by British forces during the suppression of the 1857 Uprising.

The swords in this display were purchased at auction and from private dealers during the latter half of the 19th century by Sir Richard Wallace and the 4th Marquess of Hertford. The European market for South Asian weapons was sourced largely by returning military officers, who obtained their collections through purchases, gifts and spoils of war.

This display is part of the museum's efforts to reinterpret its Asian, African and Ottoman arms and armour collections in light of new research undertaken for an upcoming catalogue, scheduled to be published in February 2026.

Nicole Ioffredi, curator of *Swords of Lucknow*, says: *"By the mid-19th century, artisans made up an estimated two-thirds of Lucknow's population. The city was – and still is – a renowned centre for enamelwork, and the swords in this display offer a rare chance to explore this regional speciality. While the names of most of their makers are no longer known, our display brings their skill to the fore, highlighting the level of coordination and creativity required to create such magnificent and complex objects."*

Dr Xavier Bray, Director of the Wallace Collection says: *"This display brings together remarkable craftsmanship and an extraordinary chapter of Indian history. These swords are objects of extreme beauty, but they also tell a powerful story of cultural exchange, royal identity and artistic ambition. We're proud to give visitors the chance to encounter them up close."*

NOTES FOR EDITORS

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About the Wallace Collection

As one of Britain's preeminent cultural institutions, the **Wallace Collection** is home to one of the most significant ensembles of fine and decorative arts in the world. Highlights include oil paintings from the 14th to the late 19th centuries by artists such as Titian, Velázquez, Rubens and Van Dyck; princely arms and armour; and one of the finest collections of 18th-century French paintings and decorative arts. Visitors can also enjoy superb medieval and Renaissance objects, including Limoges enamel, maiolica, glass and bronzes. Displayed at Hertford House, former home to Sir Richard and Lady Wallace, this outstanding collection is displayed in a manner designed to evoke the lives and tastes of its founders, creating a special ambiance that remains an essential part of its charm. www.wallacecollection.org

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