

Museums in Dresden / Germany

General Note

Despite of all the criticism coming up below: go and see Dresden if you have a chance! It's definitely worth your time. There are many places to go and things to do (like drinking unique kinds of beer) besides visiting museums. And what you see in there is generally marvellous stuff!

● Even the museums I criticize below are fun to see. Just don't expect too much when it comes to metals.

Advanced

"Türkische Cammer" (Turkish Chamber) in Dresden, Germany The Exhibit

"The 'Türkische Cammer' (Turkish Chamber) is one of the oldest and most important collections of **Ottoman art** anywhere in the world outside Turkey. Thanks to their aesthetic tastes, their passion for collecting and their desire for princely prestige, the electors of Saxony between the 16th and the 19th century gathered together a wealth of treasures associated with the fashion for 'turquerie' ", says the official Web page. Most of those treasure are swords and other weapons made from steel. All are in perfect shape and typically no older than 16th century.

Yes, the collection is splendid, indeed - but the way those treasures are presented leaves a lot to be desired. Photography is not allowed, so I can only give pictures from "the book" ([see below](#)). From a "sword" or "metals" point of view, the exhibition is a disaster.

Here are a few major critical points about the *exhibition*.

● It appears that all blades have been [brush polished](#) to a high sheen, destroying all structures. If you expected to see some choice examples of damascus or wootz blades - tough luck. They probably have some but it is neither pointed out nor visible. The word "wootz", "damascus" or "true damascene", amazingly, is never used in the (bi-lingual German / English) exhibition.

From the way most swords are displayed it wouldn't be easy to see details of a blade, anyway. They all look like they were chromium plated.

● The text to the objects displayed is generally not very illuminating or just plain wrong. For example, a collection of backswords or to be more specific, "[Pallaschs](#)", made for the guards of famous Saxonian ruler "August der Starke" in a supposedly Turkish style are presented as:

"*Pallasch mit einem Gefäß von...*" (...). Very few Germans will know what a "Palasch" is and that "[Gefäß](#)" is the specialist term for the [hilt](#) of a sword. Every non-specialist German would take the word "Gefäß" to mean "vessel", "jar", "container" and so on.

That's bad but it gets worse. The English description given in parallel (a principally good thing) reads: "*Pallasch with a vessel of...*" Good, old BS, confusing English speaking visitors even more than German ones.

What really put me off in a major way was that the museum has a "replica" of the "[zulfiqar](#)" the [famous sword of the Prophet Muhammad](#) . As far as I remember from the description, it was supposed to have been made by German smith who only knew that the zulfiqar had a split blade. What was produced is shown below:

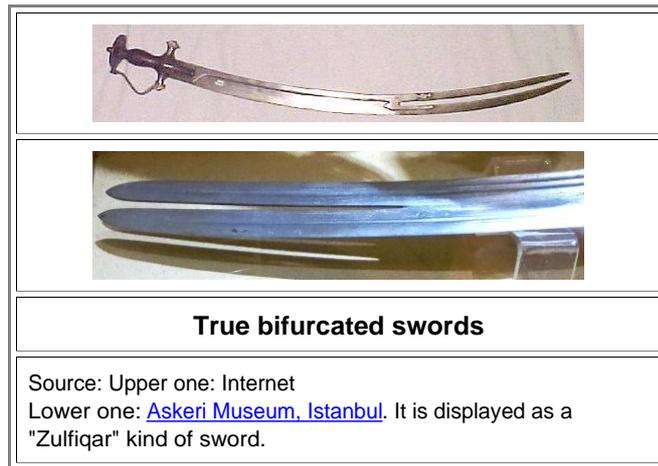


● The text explains that this kind of sword would be useless in a fight, Yes, indeed!

Later I found that Dresden isn't alone. Here is a "double blade" Zulfiqar from the Georgian National Museum in Tbilisi



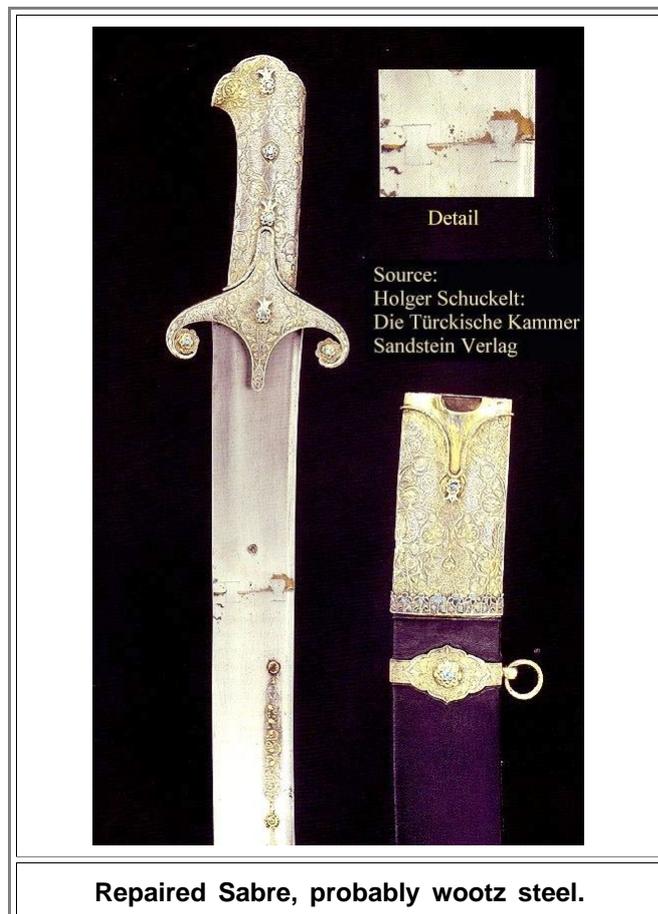
Below is what a true "Zulfiqar" looks like, and here is all about the [Zulfiqar](#)



"Türkische Kammer (Turkish Chamber) in Dresden, Germany The Book

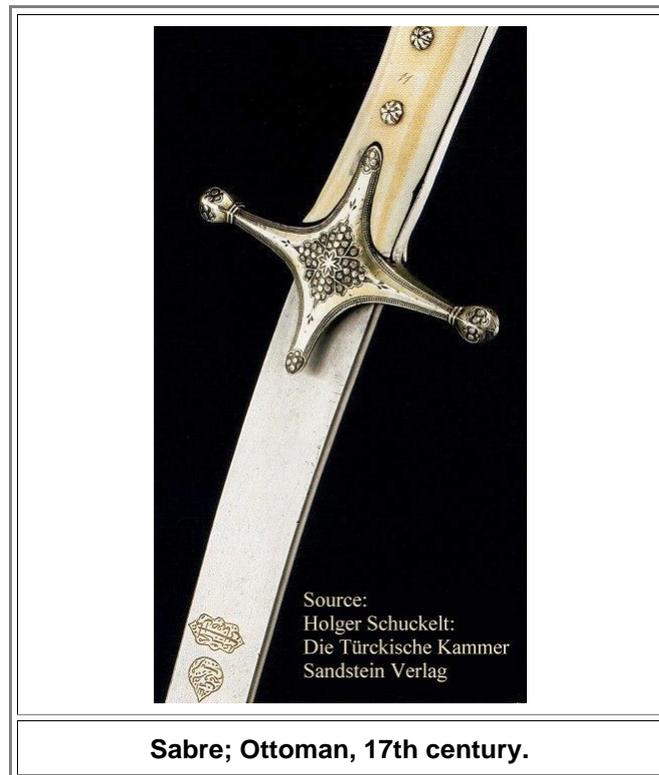
There is beautiful big [book](#) about the "Turkish Chamber". That is a very positive thing to say because most museums do not have books, big or small, coming with their exhibitions. I didn't buy it because it is expensive and common opinion holds that my wife and I have too many books already, cluttering up the house. Professors, however, have the privilege that their university library can get every book for them via the university library network. I got it on loan, and that's what I found:

- A large number of swords and other steel objects are shown in beautiful large pictures and described in loving detail with respect to their history: who got them, the artistic value of their hilt, the kinds of gems used, everything you want - except the *blade*! All blades, without exception, were described as "*iron, forged*". Only if some pattern not yet completely destroyed by polishing could not be overlooked, it says: "*iron, forged, damascened*". That's it! And it is even better than what you find in-situ. The word *Stahl* (German for steel) never appears in the main part of the book. Here is an example of what you can find and how it is not appreciated



- From the text we only learn that this is a late 17th century Ottoman sabre. Full stop. It's almost for sure valuable wootz steel but there is no way of telling from the picture. The rather interesting detail that this sabre was broken and rather cunningly **repaired** (see the details in the picture I assembled) is not even mentioned.

Here is another example



- We learn that the inscriptions read: "*Made by Muhibb Ali Isfahani; meaning the blade originated in Isfahan, Persia*". The blade thus could be much older than the hilt. I would bet that this is wootz steel. I increased the contrast as much as possible to capture details of the blade structure but there is not much to see.
- What "*damascened*" means in the stereotypical blade description: "*iron, forged, damascened*" is explained in the glossary. Here is my translation of what you find there:
"*Damascene Steel: forged from alternating layers of one or several iron or steel kinds, showing a clear, usually wavy structure if polished or etched; in oriental regions also melt or crucible damascene made from carbonized cast-iron (wootz)*"
I rest my case.

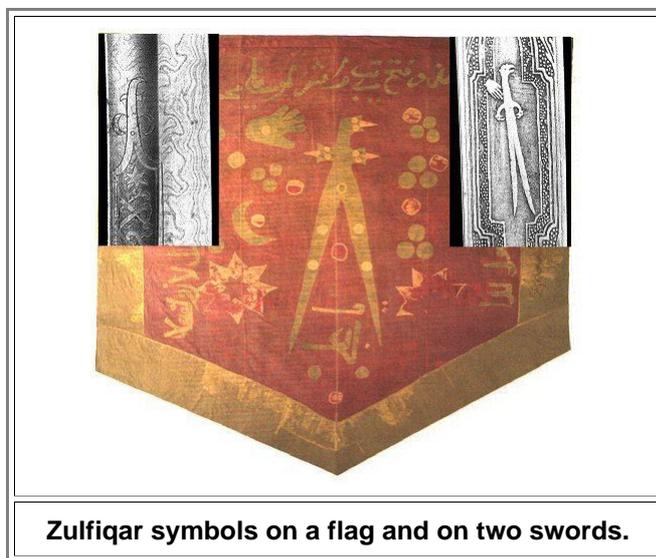
The book completely misses the opportunity to point out the importance of the **zulfiqar** to the Moslem world. It has two pictures of the the nonsense replica discussed above, and points out that a split sword as shown had no fighting value. In contrast to what I (perhaps wrongly) remember from the exhibit, it gives the origin of that replica as "*Ottoman, 18th / 19th century*".

- Now that is interesting for two reasons:

- The zulfiqar, as the book points out in a different part, was given to Ali, the prophet's cousin and son-in-law, who used it in several battles. Ali used it at least once to kill enemies of the Prophet. How do you do that with a sword that has no fighting value?
- As the book points out several times too, the zulfiqar is mentioned in many inscriptions on ottoman sword (Typical "*There is no sword but the zulfiqar*") and often shown in a stylized way (see examples below)

[Advanced Link](#)

The Zulfiqar



- The swords are Ottoman and from the 17th century. The one on the left shows a "*wavy damascene pattern*", indeed. It looks a lot like a typical 19th century composite or *pattern welded damascene*, rather like my nimcha shown [here](#). Now why would the Turks do that, being the masters of the superior wootz technology, as it is generally believed?

There are probably a lot more zulfiqar symbols found on the objects in the Turkish Chamber. One can be rather sure that none of them shows a split blade as in the "replica" [above](#) but the bifurcation in the proper if exaggerated way as shown above.

- Could there be a better opportunity to study the significance of the zulfiqar to the ottoman fighting men? How it was perceived, how it changed through the centuries, why two-pronged or bifurcated blades were indeed the style in the Prophets time and how and when that style went out of use, and so on, and so forth. This [link](#) tries to impart a flavor of this.

It's like not getting the meaning of cross symbols in the Christian world and then showing a replica that wouldn't "work".

- Well. It's not too late. Maybe in the not too distant future the "Turkish Chamber" will truly reveal its treasures.

The "Rüstammer" or Armory

- The armory is full of mail, swords, spears ...; you name it. Plenty. Typically 16th century or younger. Interesting to see but you won't learn a thing about swords and how to make or use them.

- I won't go into details. In contrast to the "Turkish Chamber", where one could have expected to find oriental wootz steel blades and other items that were radically different from European technology, in the armory you just expect mainstream European *steel* technology.

- As remarked elsewhere, one of the truly remarkable objects, the purported [scythe sword](#) of **Thomas Müntzer**, i.e. a sword with a blade made from a *real* scythe and not just a sword with a scythe shape. Scythe swords are known from old writings, they represent about the opposite of the modern "turning swords to plowshares" - for good reasons. It seems that the Dresden scythe sword is the only one that survived, making it rather unique.

[Making a good scythe](#) is not so different from making a good sword, and it would be interesting to learn more about that. Unfortunately there aren't many old scythes left; this already would make a detailed look on that sword even more interesting.

It goes without saying that the Dresden armory displays its scythe sword in some corner and doesn't give it the attention it deserves.