

A pair of 'Maximilian' Mitten Gauntlets
Southern Germany, Innsbruck or possibly Nuremberg
c. 1510-20



Each approx. 24 cm long by 10 x 10 cm (width and depth at the cuff); Very light pitting to the surface of the metal. Otherwise in very good condition. A small strengthening repair to the inside of one of the gauntlets. There is some indication in the wear to the metal and the appearance of the interior surfaces of the lames that one of the pair may be a later replacement or heavily reconstructed version of the lost or damaged original.

Provenance

Private collection, London, acquired on the European art market in the early 2000s

A pair of mitten gauntlets of 'Maximilian' type, elaborately decorated with radiating flutes picked out from the surrounding metal with incised line borders. The circular cuffs are forged in two sections riveted together in two places and delicately turned over and engraved with a rope design around their upper hem. Overlapping the cuffs on each gauntlet are five articulated metacarpal lames riveted to one another at both sides of the hand with dome-headed rivets, and grooved in each case to slide beneath a shapely knuckle-plate. The first of the metacarpal lames is embossed with a kite-shaped bulge. The finger guards or upper metacarpal plates consist of five lames with pronounced finger ridges shaped en suite with the knuckle-plate, the lowest lame pierced and

riveted in four places. The thumb defenses are hinged to the largest metacarpal plates and consist of five overlapping plates riveted onto leather supports.

These closely matched gauntlets are unusually sophisticated examples of a fashion first popularized under Emperor Maximilian I (1459-1519) at the turn of the sixteenth century (Fig. 1). Each one is constructed from 17 individually shaped lightweight plates which are secured together by rivets. This allowed the wearer full freedom of movement while offering complete protection for the hands. Their undulating forms cleverly combine physical comfort, structural rigidity, and visual elegance.

For Maximilian and his contemporaries, armour was the de facto art form of choice. Through intensive and competitive patronage, they encouraged the armourers working in the orbit of their powerful courts to fashion iron and steel into forms every bit as refined, expressive, and luxurious as the gem-studded reliquaries of a medieval goldsmith. The robust and shapely style of our mitten gauntlets, with their bold, structural radiating flutes and delicate surface engraving, evolved quickly in the first three decades of the sixteenth century. The same language of decoration employed in their construction would have been echoed across each section of the suit of field armour to which they once belonged, and which finds parallels among a few surviving examples in Europe, North America and England (Fig. 2). Their high quality suggests that they were produced in the armories of Nuremberg or Innsbruck (the former often stamped with the city's control marks, making the latter centre most likely). Closely related examples and variants of the design all localized to Maximilian's armories in Nuremberg and Innsbruck are today preserved in a number of the world's greatest museums. Objects of war and beauty all at once, they are a potent testament to the sophistication encouraged at late-Medieval Europe's most powerful court.



Fig. 1
Hans Burgkmair (Augsburg, 1473-1531)
Maximilian I on Horseback, detail showing Maximilian in full armour
Dated 1508, printed 1518
32.5 x 22.7 cm; chiaroscuro woodcut from two blocks



Fig. 2
A suit of field armour of 'Maximilian' type
Southern Germany
c. 1520
London, Royal Armouries Collection, Tower of London, Inv. II.14