

Swordcanes

by Kurt Stein

ALTHOUGH SWORDCANES, sometimes called cane swords, swordsticks, or dagger canes, have attracted collectors for a long time, one gets the feeling that they have, nevertheless, been among the stepchildren of the edged weapons field. This certainly need not be so as, at their best, they satisfy all the requirements of a good collector's item: a fine blade, beauty, workmanship, and rarity. Not least, the degree to which a swordcane's nature is disguised adds to its appeal, and even specimens of only average quality are interesting and desirable.

It is not clear just when swordcanes made their appearance. It might be vaguely useful to know that an inventory made after the death in 1547 of England's King Henry VIII enumerates a cane which had in its "toppe" various personal gadgets, including a knife and a whetstone. No swordcane is mentioned. On the other hand, the renowned Wallace Collection in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, includes a cane containing a sword with a wheel lock pistol and dates from the late 17th century.

As it was the custom, during most of the 18th century, for gentlemen to wear a sword as part of everyday dress, one assumes that the cane, also a part of daily wear, was not a swordstick. Certainly, one encounters a relatively greater proportion of swordcanes from the late 18th century on, when the wearing of civilian swords declined, this trend continuing into the early 19th century. In any event, almost all swordcanes found today are from the period c.1750-1900, with the great majority dating from the second and third quarters of the 19th century. That swordcanes were not merely peripheral accessories is indicated by an advertisement (Fig. 1) and a story clipped from the "The New Hampshire Statesman and Concord Register" of November 3, 1827 (Fig. 2).

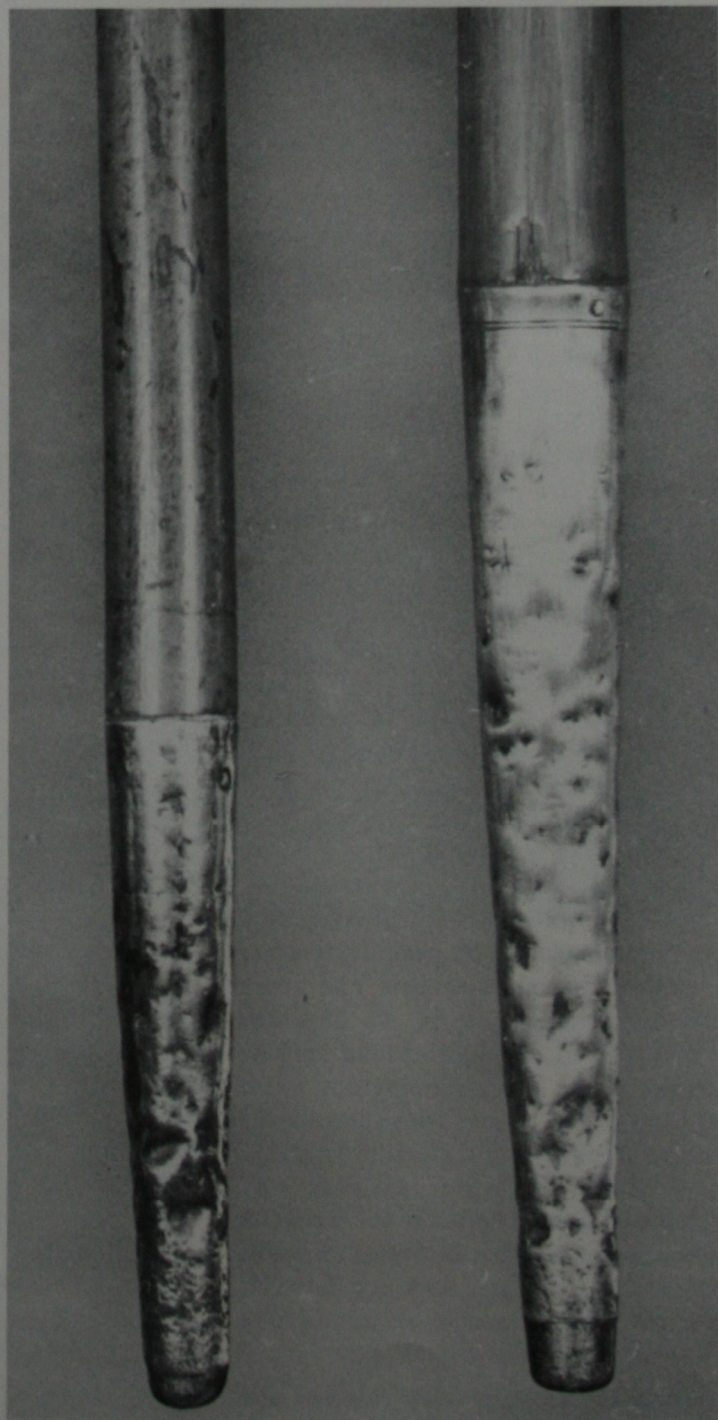
It is appropriate to touch upon certain aspects which pertain to canes in general. As in all collecting, and especially since canes were related to fashion and dress, it is helpful to know as much as possible about styles of decoration and materials such as woods, precious metals, brass, steel, bone, ivory, horn, mother-of-pearl, blades, finishes, and more.

While swordcanes may be made of various woods or rattans, it seems that most of the best examples are made of malacca. This material is a woody cane which grows to enormous lengths in the Malay regions of southeast Asia. It combines light weight with great strength and is difficult to break. Used in canes, it is most frequently finished with a hard varnished surface which ranges in color from a dark yellow tone to a deep orange, and is nearly always shaped to a cross-section of approximate

teardrop form. Malacca appears to have been a favorite for canes during the 18th and up to the middle of the 19th centuries. After that it still appears, but other types of woods proliferate: rosewood, walnut, ebony, cocuswood, chestnut, maple, and so on.

A subject dear to the hearts of most collectors is to be able to "date" an object. To do so with swordcanes is not terribly difficult, with some feeling for style and form, not only of outside appearance, but of their blades. As in anything else, no clue should be overlooked, and here are some of them.

(Fig. 3) Long brass finials of the period before c.1830-1840.





John Ashton's Music and Umbrella STORE,

No. 197 WASHINGTON STREET,
BOSTON,

Formerly 20 MARLBOROUGH STREET.

JOHN ASHTON imports *MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS* of all kinds which are selected (in London) by the best judges: particularly, *Kent Bugles, French Horns, Bassoons, Clarionets, Patent and Common Flutes*. Also, *MUSIC*, regularly received Spring and Fall; together with the Music published by C. Graupner, making as good a collection as can be found in the city.

These gentlemen buying *VIOLIN* and *VIOLINCELLO STRINGS* for Country trade, will find it to their interest to call, as a great assortment is always to be found at this Store.

J. A. manufactures and keeps on hand, all sizes, *Silk, Gingham, and Oil-Cloth*

UMBRELLAS.

Elegant Brown, Blue, and Green

PARASOLS.

Plain and Sword CANES. BILLIARD BALLS. Oiled Silk and Linen Umbrellas new covered and repaired. - Whale bone for STAYS.

Hippopotamus's Teeth for sale.

Boston, Aug. 16, 1827.

3m-139

THE Subscribers, under the Firm of
SAMPSON BULLARD & Co.

HAVE erected a

DISTILLERY

near the Main-street in Con-



Whorter then gave Bowie a pistol, when they both fired, and both with effect. Bowie shot through the breast, and Wright had his side grazed. Wright then fled, pursued by Bowie with a drawn knife: and when within ten feet of him, he [Bowie] received the fire of the two Blanchards, and was cut down. Wright then wheeled, and with Alfred Blanchard, rushed on and stabbed the prostrate Bowie with cane swords. Bowie scuffled for some seconds, gained his seat, pulled Wright down on him, and at one stab with his knife dispatched him. Mr. M. Wells ran to the relief of Bowie, fired at

(Fig. 1) Advertisement from "The New Hampshire Statesman and Concord Register" of November 3, 1827. Note the offer of "Plain and Sword Canes".

(Fig. 2) A portion of newspaper account of 1827, of the famous Vidalia sandbar fight, mentioning "cane swords", among other weapons.

The style of the grip, or handle, is most important, as it changed with the times as surely as fashions. One can tell the period of a cane almost as certainly as a late model automobile from a very old one. Other important clues are the presence of eyelets on the shaft, the material and length of the tip, or finial, on the cane's bottom end details of ornamentation, and the blade. The best sources for the identification of canes are, of course, those of known ownership, those that happen to be marked or dated, and those that may be seen in old paintings and prints. Few, if any, canes are marked by their makers. At times, a blade may be marked by its cutler, but such a name may merely indicate the supplier of the blade to the maker of the final product. If trim of precious metals is present, the marks of the silver- or goldsmith, along with the hallmarks will be very helpful, remembering, though, that the word "Sterling" on silver did not appear before the middle of the 19th century, and appears on American silver only — it was never used on English silver.

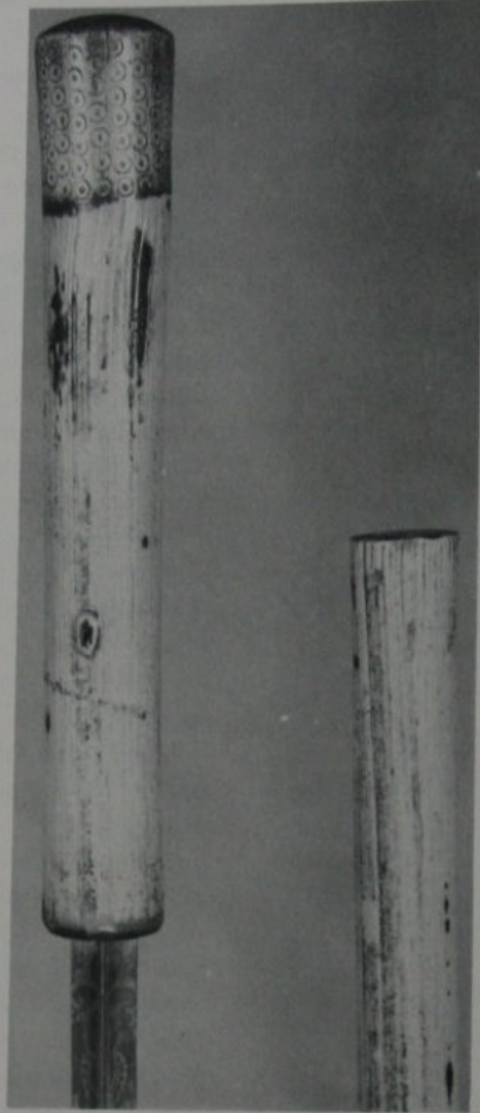
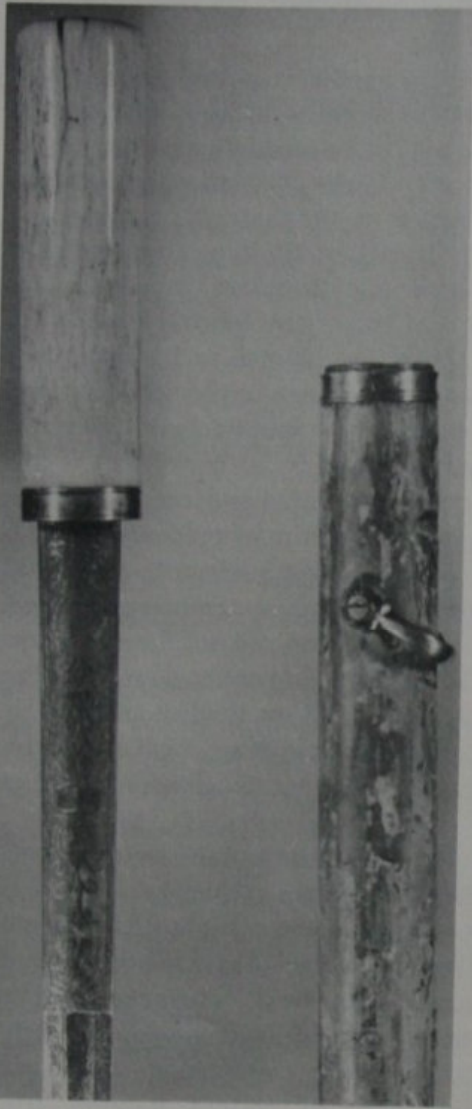
More often, however, markings of any kind are lacking and it will be necessary to form a conclusion based on other evidence.

Up to approximately 1840, cane handles were mounted as extensions of the shafts, often cylindrical (Fig. 3) or octagonal, or elongated knobs, slightly flaring or rounded (Fig. 6). From about 1800, these handles became increasingly bulbous, at times nearly mushroom shaped (Fig. 7). There seems to have been a complete absence of handles that were curved or set at right angles to the shaft, with the exception only of certain handles from continental Europe, which were of a scrolled T-shape. A type of handle which spanned this entire period was the grip of antler, often with a small silver plate fitted to its end (Fig. 5).

The metal trim consisted usually of a ferrule where the handle joined the shaft and, a few inches below that, two eyelets (Fig. 4) dressing the hole through which was threaded a tasseled cord intended, like a swordknot, to secure the cane to the bearer's wrist whenever convenient. On the bottom end was the familiar tapered metal finial. It ranged in length from 6 to 8 inches (Fig. 3) in the 18th century, to perhaps only two inches by 1840. These were of brass, with an iron tip, and later in the period entirely of iron.

After the second quarter of the 19th century, curved and L-shaped handles became fashionable, the tasseled wristcords and metal eyelets disappeared, finials became quite short, and to the metal types were added those made of horn, bone, and ivory.

Swordcanes continued to be available throughout the 19th century and, to a smaller extent, into the 20th. Tell-tale clues, however, make it difficult to determine whether a swordcane was made in 1890 or 1915.



(Fig. 4) Swordcane of the middle of the 18th century, as indicated by the blade, style of handle, and swivel (rather than the somewhat later eyelets). Malacca shaft, bone handle, brass trim, lacking finial. 36 inches overall, 29½ inch double edged blade. The blade is drawn in a straight pull and is perfectly concealed.

(Fig. 5) Late 18th century swordcane with silver eyelets and a true smallsword blade of 36" in length which draws in a straight pull. Of natural finish malacca, it measures 38 inches overall.

(Fig. 6) Late 18th century swordcane with antler grip and long triangular blade. Of maple and carved to resemble bamboo, its metal trim is of gold. Presented by George Washington to General Anthony Wayne and now in the collection of Valley Forge Historical Society.

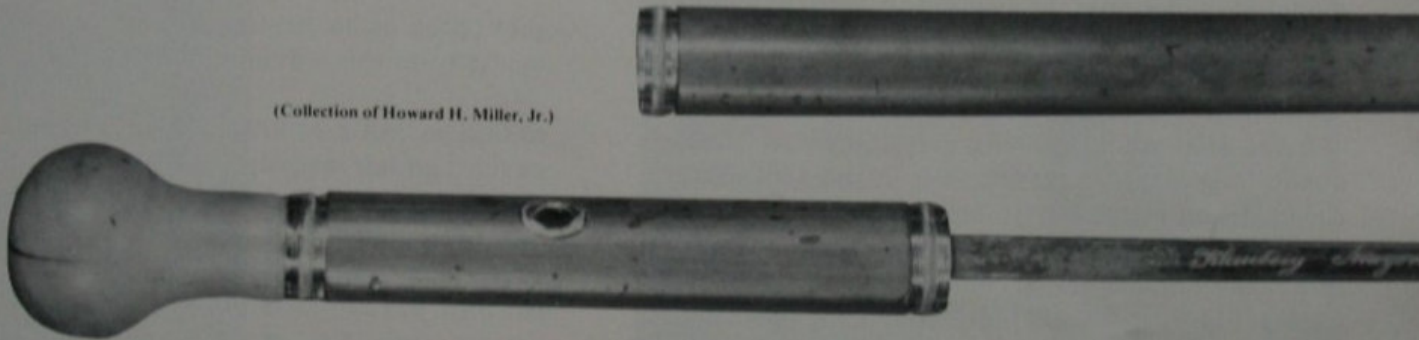
Mechanically, variety is limited: on some swordcanes the blade may be drawn in a straight pull, while others provide a spring operated release activated by a tiny button (Fig. 1), or by a twist of the handle (Fig. 12). The evidence indicates that swordcanes dating from the pre-1840 days were entirely of the "straight pull" type.

Blades alone may provide conclusive evidence of the period of a swordcane.

The simple, four-sided foil blade did not change much with the passage of time, except that in the early periods it tended to be somewhat rectangular in section, then becoming rather square in modern days. If marked, foil blades tend to show the stamps of "Solingen" (Fig. 10) or "Klingenthal," respectively the great German and French blade-making centers. These appear occasionally with the name of Lau & Co., New York, a firm of importers

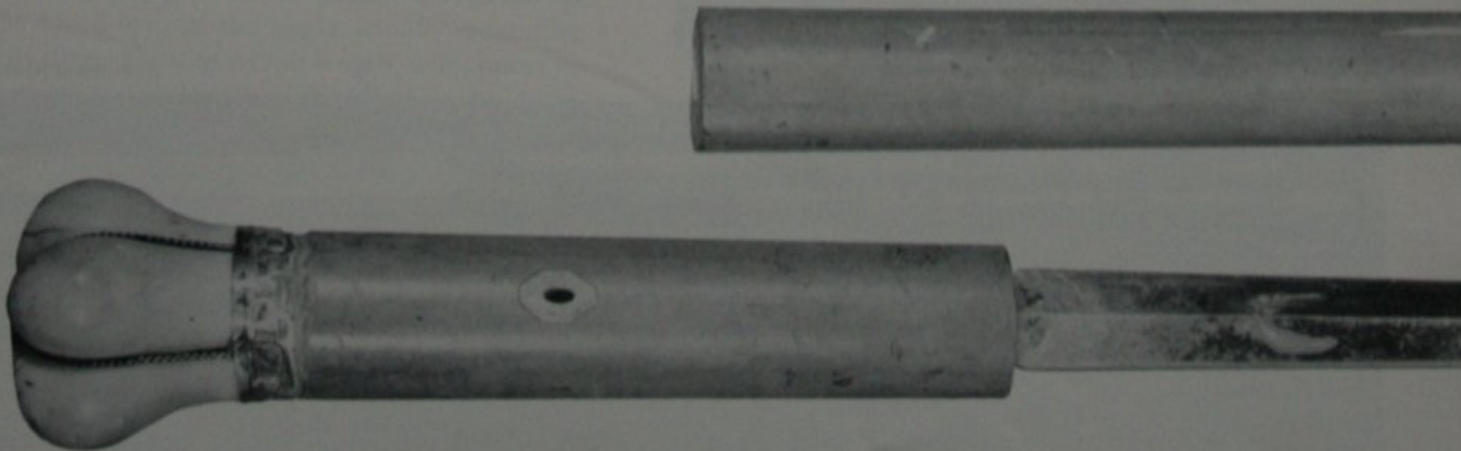


(Fig. 7) Late 18th century swordcane with long triangular blade, silver ferrules and ivory endcap. Shaft is of natural malacca of a faded yellow color. It was once the property of the Marquis de la Fayette and is now in the Valley Forge Historical Society.



(Collection of Howard H. Miller, Jr.)

(Fig. 8) Swordcane of c.1825. Note the fully developed form of a typical handle of that period, with the somewhat larger eyelets. Ivory handle, gold trim. The malacca shaft shows the teardrop profile and a rich dark orange finish, with a fine long brass finial at bottom. The 25¼ inch blade is triangular, blued for a third of its length, with the bluing ending in a straight line across the blade. The name "D. Klauberg, Newyork (sic)" is engraved upon the blade. The New York Directories from 1820 to 1831 list this firm as a "steel polisher and cutler". The blade draws in a straight pull.



(Fig. 9) Dark orange, teardrop profile, malacca swordcane. All metal trim is silver and the octagonal eyelets are engraved. 38 inches overall with finial badly worn down from use. Canes of great length are sometimes called "carriage canes" as they are assumed to have been intended to aid in alighting from carriages. The 31½ inch blade is of flat diamond section and is blued for not quite half its length, with the bluing ending in a decorative scroll. The blade is drawn in a straight pull and a brass collar forms the throat of the scabbard portion.

(rather than makers) in the late 19th century. Other names are Mole, of Birmingham, England (1832-1889), and Couleaux, of Klingenthal, France, dating from the middle of the 19th century (military swords of c. 1840 and 1862, marked by them, are known). The word "Toledo" has been noted with some frequency, mostly, however, on blades from the late 19th century on which it is part of the blade's ornamentation. Here, too, it is well to remember that blades were an item of trade and that the name of this renowned Spanish blademaking center does not necessarily indicate that the entire cane originated there (Figs. 11 and 12).

Other types of blades, less common and generally agreed to be more desirable, are those that are single edged, diamond shaped, of oval or flat-hexagon double edge, or triangular. Among the latter, one is occasionally fortunate to encounter a true smallsword blade (Fig. 5). Among pre-1800 blades, double edged and triangular styles predominate, spilling over into the early 19th century. After that period, single edged blades and diamond shapes enter the picture and, with the middle of the century one encounters an increasing number of foil blades, oval double edged blades, as well as somewhat "compressed" diamond sections.

Blade decoration paralleled everything else. The high quality engraving of blades, seen in the 18th century, declined, and by the end of the century cane blades were mostly ornamented with a little engraving of tiny floral sprays and similar devices, coupled with some bluing and gilding (Fig. 9). By the second quarter of the 19th century, blades tend to be merely etched, bright, and without bluing. Although the latter is encountered occasionally, it

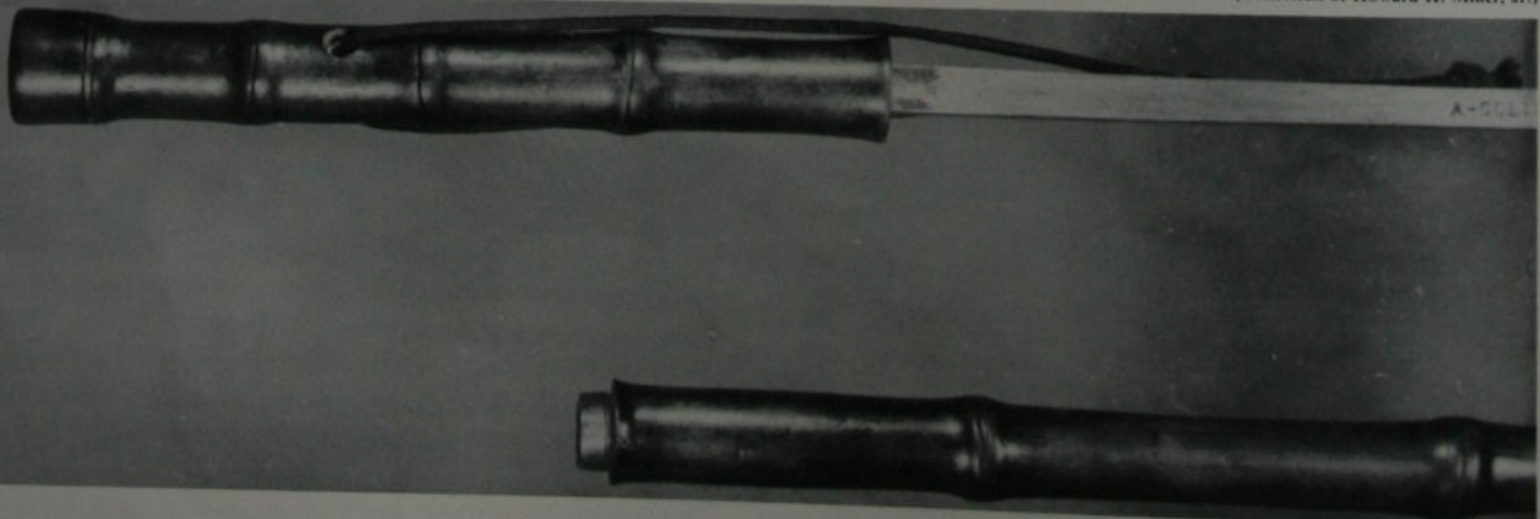
(Fig. 10, below) A dark brown bamboo cane of c. 1845, with a 28-inch foursided foil blade stamped SOLINGEN. The blade is drawn in a straight pull, and there is a brass collar over the throat of the scabbard portion. The cord is modern.



(Collection of Oliver L. Christman.)

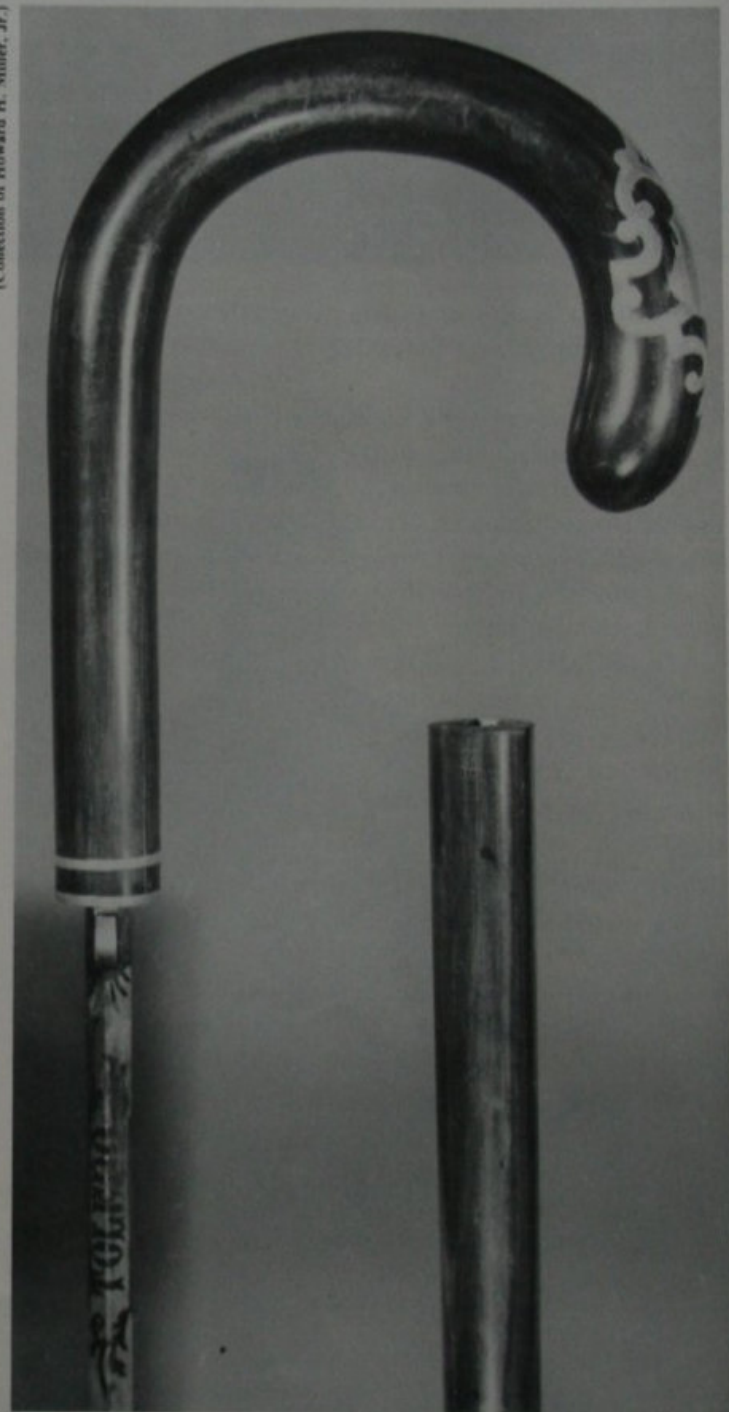
(Fig. 11) A malacca swordcane with a handle of horn, typical of the period 1870 to 1900. The ferrule is of silver, and decorated with a high relief rosette, the center of which is a tiny push button which operates the latch, visible in the photograph, to release the blade. The latter is decorated with gilding and bluing for several inches below the handle.

(Collection of Howard H. Miller, Jr.)



(Fig. 12) A swordcane of rosewood, with a diamond section blade marked TOLEDO within the blued decoration. From c.1900. The metal inlays are of silver, and the 28-inch blade may be drawn by operating a latch by a counter-clockwise twist of the handle.

(Collection of Howard H. Miller, Jr.)



is aesthetically inferior to the earlier manner. When bluing is present, a convenient rule of thumb is that, applied usually to the upper third of a blade, if made before the 1820's, the bluing ends in a straight line across the blade, while after this time, it ends in a decorative scroll.

A word about condition, concerning which collectors will follow their accustomed standards, but it will be well to watch for certain clues of tampering.

Most common is the replacement of an early, long finial with a modern looking thimble-size tip. Perhaps not very serious.

More serious is the replacement of a lost or broken original handle with another — perhaps dating from an obviously different period. These contradictions are often easily detected: a swordcane with a long finial, and having eyelets for a cord, ought not to have a curved or L-shaped handle, nor any silver trim marked with the word "Sterling" — to mention but one or two possibilities.

Most suspect, however, is the presence of a short blade, claimed to be a "dagger" cane, when actually it may be nothing more than the re-sharpened stump of a formerly long, now broken, blade. At times, this may be detected visually, by observing that the point of the blade is not very well done — perhaps somewhat rough and asymmetrical, the result of hasty or unskilled repointing. Further, the blued area of the blade, usually extending over only the upper third of its full length, will appear as covering the entire short length of the blade. It should be remembered that on a true dagger blade the bluing would also cover only the upper portion of the blade — certainly no more than half its length. A sure-fire method is to insert into the "scabbard" portion of a suspect swordcane, a length of stiff wire, such as may be obtained by straightening an ordinary wire clothes hanger. If such probing shows that the "scabbard" cavity is much longer than the blade, this may be taken as certain evidence that originally it was made for a blade of fully matching length.

All the same, and despite the scarcity of all things antique, some very respectable swordcanes turn up from time to time, an always welcome sight.

Notes

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