

## SMALL SWORDS— OVERLOOKED COLLECTIBLES

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Photos by author



(top left) Small Sword, French, c. 1770. An exquisite silver hilted formal small sword with diamond effect bright cutting and elaborate piercings worked into every element of the hilt. Too ostentatious to have been carried by anyone but a high military figure or prominent member of society. More likely the former as the hollow blade is gilded and etched with military motifs including kettle drums. Pigskin covered scabbard with a single silver mount and carrying ring. Blade-31".

(top right) Small Sword, English, 1772/73. Cleverly wrought and tasteful silver hilt with compound guard, the inner decorated with radiating flutings. Stamped with date, letter "R" and two unidentified marks. Plain hollow blade is both longer and slimmer than usual. Blade-33".

(bottom left) Small Sword, American, c. 1800. An early United States naval officer's sword, possibly a surgeon's, of classical small sword form including hollow blade. While naval regulations of 1813 call for "small swords," specimens surviving from this date back to the founding of the navy in 1794 are great rarities. The gilded brass hilt of this example features oak leaves and acorns engraved on pommel, knucklebow, and guard — traditional symbols of naval usage. The blade is gilt etched with numerous American devices, including an eagle with ribbon containing national motto, a cluster of 13 stars, and a bow and arrows with liberty cap. The blade is marked "E1/New York" (unquestionably the same cutler misread as "FT" on Peterson's #90). Blade-31½".

(bottom right) Small Sword, American, c. 1750. Classic example of an American silver hilted small sword of the pre-Revolutionary period revealing the purity of form typical of such production. Marked with the touch of Rufus Green (1707-1777), of Boston. Green, the son-in-law of John Singleton Copley, made this sword for Richard Fenner of Rhode Island, whose initials appear on the shell guard. European hollow blade. Blade-27½".

AS EUROPE'S SOCIO-RELIGIOUS and military upheavals in the early and mid-17th century began to abate, a need was felt for a male costume and an accompanying civil sword more reflective of the enlightened times.

Brocaded surcoats, massive hip boots, slashed sleeves, and dripping feathers were beginning their reluctant withdrawal from vogue. The process would take over a century, but the trend toward a more form-fitting, anatomical, almost comfortable mode of dress had been definitely established.

At the same time, voices could be heard within the new fencing academies pleading for lighter weapons suitable for the finesse in play that was starting to dominate their art.

The two forces — fashion and finesse — were to work in tandem and, by 1650, the bladesmiths of France and Germany were on their way to providing a sword that was both elegantly dainty and deadly. The culmination of their efforts was the small sword, the most lethal instrument of hand-to-hand combat ever devised.

The father of the small sword was the rapier, a weapon which, especially in its beautiful swept-hilt form, was the final development of the knightly sword. It was an efficient instrument for its day, though heavy, long in point and complicated in construction. It was also a frequently painful embarrassment in crowded drawing rooms. Nonetheless, this noble sword was an essential part of the dress of a gentleman as well as a soldier, although it was apparent that something smaller, lighter, and more reactive to the budding schools of fence needed to be found.

There was absolutely no thought given to eliminating the sword from civil dress. Cities were dangerous by day and uniformly riotous after dark. In London, "killing affrays" continued to be a popular way of settling scores. In these affairs, any individual with a few coins could choose from among a number of hired bands of assassins and acquire immediate violent remedy to a social slight. Protection in the streets was the responsibility of the individual. Gentlemen traveled in parties whenever possible and personal sidearms were a matter of the most basic necessity. The small sword, in trained hands, could effectively meet this need.



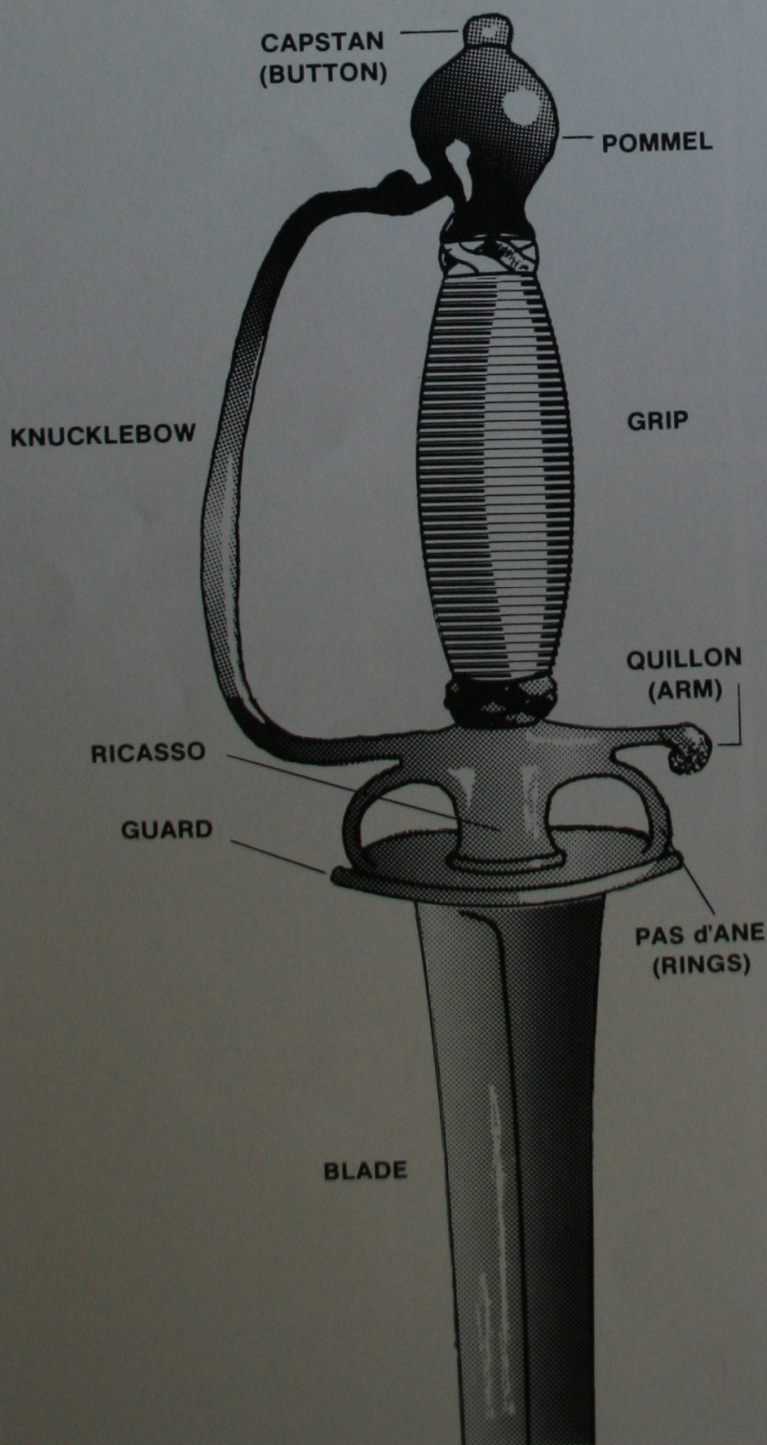




## Anatomy of the Small Sword

A general knowledge of the parts of a sword is required before references to it can be completely understood. The sword is composed of two parts, the *blade* and the *hilt*. The blade is divided into four sections: the half nearest the point known as the *foible* (feeble); the half nearest the hilt is the *forte*; the frequently flat, shouldered portion immediately next to the hilt is the *ricasso* (heel); and the *tang* (tongue) is a section made of soft iron welded to the blade proper which runs through the grip to attach the blade to the hilt, usually by riveting over the capstan.

The hilt is comprised of the *shell* (guard); the *pas d'ane* (rings); the *quillon* (arm), the *knucklebow*, the *grip*, the *pommel*, and the *capstan* (button) (see diagram).



Hanger for suspending the Small Sword, *European*, c. 1780. This device hooked over the belt or waist sash and attached to the sword scabbard with a pair of snap-hooks. It could easily and quickly be removed when indoors. Steel.

### Opposite page:

(top left) Small Sword, *American*, c. 1750. This silver hilted small sword, attributed to William Corvell, Jr. (1713-1761) of Boston, passed down through five generations of the Henshaw family according to initials engraved on the shell guard. The blade pre-dates the hilt and is inscribed with the verse, "Si fortuna me tormente, sperato me contenta," translated "If fortune torments me, hope will content me" (Henry IV, Part II, Act II, Scene 4). The grips were originally wrapped with silver wire.

(top right) Small Sword, *French* (?), c. 1700. This attractive silver-hilted arm has had the knucklebow removed and a second quillon introduced in its place. The alteration appears to have been done in period for a purpose that must remain conjectural. It may be that the original owner had a style of fence that required a freer movement of the hand. Or perhaps the alteration was commissioned as a cheap alternative to replacement of a broken bow. A beautiful, elaborately decorated blade of hexagonal section may pre-date the hilt. Blade-31".

(lower page) Small Sword, *European*, c. 1675. A handsome weapon. The hexagonal blade with elaborate etched and chased decoration may indicate French origins. The solid brass, gold washed hilt is quite heavy providing enough weight in the hand to permit the fitting of a blade somewhat longer than usual. The flat oval guard may indicate a re-hilting sometime around 1750 — not extraordinary for a quality blade. An interesting inner guard is pierced and decorated with two classical urns and what appears to be a pair of eagles with spread wings. Blade 33½".







### Evolution of the Small Sword

The first step in the small sword's evolution from the heavy rapiers of the early 17th century began about 1640 when the French school of fence broke away from those of Italy and Spain. The transitional rapiers employed in the two latter schools were just too slow in manipulation to be used for the more scientific play being taught by French masters such as Besnard and La Tousche. Both of these swordsmen fought with the body turned in profile and included in their play a number of the very fast movements that can still be seen in modern-day fencing. Such rapid movement, featuring straightline advance and retreat, called for lightning parry and disengagement of the blade before a thrust or counter thrust. It demanded a sword having a blade so light as to permit nearly all play to be accomplished with flicks of the wrist rather than action of the entire arm, a weapon with nearly all its weight concentrated within the mass of the hilt.

In an attempt to meet this requirement, the transitional rapier was scaled down by shortening the blade. What was left was reduced to the bare minimum in width and thickness necessary to allow sufficient stiffness in delivering the thrust. The knucklebow was also frequently eliminated at this time. The dish, or cup guard usually became two thin shells, often pierced, and the quillons were thinned out as much as was thought possible. Many smiths fabricated such weapons, including Germany's Angio Teschi, and Tomas Di Aiala and Francisco Rviz, both working in Toledo, Spain.

By 1675, the knucklebow had returned and the shell guard, usually symmetrical, had assumed a configuration that would remain in use until supplanted by a flat, oval guard quite late in the period.

The main preoccupation of the swordsmith, however, was how to further lighten the blade without, according to C. T. Haven, so weakening the foible as to make it "so whippy that it was difficult to tell just where a thrust was going." A flat blade became, in use, so limp when overlighned that it quickly gave way to diamond and hexagonal cross section treatments. These also had limitations, and further thought was given to the problem.

One solution, known as the Colichemarde (said to be a French corruption of the German name "Konigsmark" mentioned below) was rather extreme. This style of blade had most of the forte — approximately 1/3 of the upper part of the blade — widened to at least twice the normal width and then, with a sudden taper, the remaining portion of the blade was reduced to a more narrow width than usual. It was an attempt, partially successful, to get more weight concentrated at the hand while providing a more reactive point. The Colichemarde was particularly effective, according to contemporary accounts, in executing a bizarre fencing manoeuvre known as the *Botte du Paysan*. In this trick, the forte of the blade was suddenly grasped by the left hand and, using the strength of both



(above) Swept Hilt Rapier, Italian, c. 1580. A somewhat ponderous but lovely weapon that maintains a useful balance in the hand through the device of a massive pommel which acts as a counter weight. Excavated Blade-36".

(below) Transitional Rapier, German, c. 1630. A useful weapon, though blade heavy, with several characteristics in common with the much later arm known as the Spanish *Bilbo*. The semi-cup guard, almost boat-shaped, is engraved with what may be Tudor Roses but which probably are Dogwood Flowers. The hexagonal section blade is chiseled with the running wolf of Solingen inlaid with copper. The knucklebow features a heart-like piercing above the quillons. While much more deft in use than the heavy rapier, this type of arm was still too ponderous for rapier swordplay and enjoyed only a short civil career. Blade-36".







(above) Small Sword, English, 1660. An early small sword featuring a short diamond section blade marked, *Johanni Koniny Londini*. Johann Konig of Solingen, Prussia, arrived in London 1607/08 where he set himself up as a cutler specializing in gentlemen's swords. His name was commonly Anglicized as *John Counyne* (Koniny). Knucklebow is missing. Hilt decorated with biblical figures, pommel with St. Andrew. Blade-26½".

(below) Small Sword, French (blade), c. 1690. The steel hilt with faceted grip and pommel is much later than the blade and may have been fitted in England around 1790. The high quality blade, of the Colichemarde pattern, is etched with a motto in French translated roughly as "Don't draw me without reason, nor sheath me without honor." This sword provides a radical example of the long service that could be expected from a fine blade; perhaps one with family traditions. Blade-32".



hands, the opponent's sword was hammered or clubbed in such a violent and unexpected manner as to provide a momentary gap in his defense through which a quick following-up thrust could be made. Some specimens having diamond section blades were also designed with this in mind, and they can be recognized by the upper six inches or so of the blade which has been rounded to provide comfort to the hand. While the attack was in vogue principally during the last part of the 17th century, both styles of blade lingered into the next century — long after any opponent naive enough to fall for the stunt could be found.

The search continued for the ideal blade, and sometime around 1690 it appeared. Said to have been an invention of one Königsmark, a Polish count, and Marshal of France serving Louis XIV, the blade was triangular in section and featured hollow grooves on all three of its sides. It was both stiff and incredibly light. Employed at first on blades of the Colichemarde configuration, the hollow treatment proved to need no compromise and in quick order the entire length of the blade was so treated.

The resulting weapon became so light in point that one could literally sign one's name at arm's length. Now the most delicate of fingerwork could be used in feinting, disengaging, and thrusting; all within the most compact of areas. One notorious French fencing master became so proficient that, even when well into his 70's, he was able to flick the buttons from the waistcoat of his adversary — and in the order dictated by his entourage gleefully watching the duel. The mortification of having this done was said to be more damaging to the opponent than anything that could possibly accrue from mere wounds.

While the technique for manufacturing hollow blades is supposed to have originated in France, the art certainly lost no time in reaching the great sword producing centers of Germany, principally Solingen. Not satisfied with producing these blades by hand — laboriously beating-in the grooves with hammers — and because such fabrication was too slow to meet market demand, the German smiths set about devising a better method. The result was "secret machinery" employing "little wheels"

MAN AT ARMS is pleased to present its first centerfold. We regret that, in spite of the fact that this magazine is aimed at enthusiasts of all ages (and sexes), it was necessary to show our Man At Arms of the Month in a state of partial undress! We hope that readers will understand that our motives are toward information and truth rather than simple titillation. A large (22" x 28") print on heavy art stock, suitable for framing, will be sent upon request in a plain brown mailing tube. Send \$2.50 to "Knight Print", Man At Arms Magazine, 222 W. Exchange Street, Providence, RI 02903.



for rolling-in the grooves. The increased production this afforded so upset the traditional scheme of things as to create dramatic frictions and widespread unemployment within the trade. Those working on the machines were sworn to secrecy and a flow of blades began that soon threatened swordmaking industries throughout Europe.

Deciding it necessary to protect their own national sword production, the English government reacted by slapping a duty on imported hollow blades. This did nothing to improve the supply of such weapons within Great Britain, and a private company was formed to exploit the situation. By 1685, a number of workshops had been established at Shotley Bridge on the Derwent River near Newcastle. Personnel to man the works were recruited from Solingen where religious pressures had made the timing ripe. Soon nineteen families, led by men reputed to be experts in the art of hollow-rolling, were assembled in the English village. Patents Royal were secured to provide protection for the venture, and blade making began — but along traditional lines.

Therein lay the rub. Whether because of fear of reprisal should they ever return home after having broken their sacred oaths to their guilds, or simply because they did not possess the knowledge and skill to make the necessary rolling machines, there is no evidence that hollow-rolled blades were ever produced at Shotley Bridge. While it is safe to assume that *some* blades were beaten out by hand to temporarily calm irate investors, no marked specimens are known to have come down to us. This default made the situation so desperate that a number of chests of Solingen hollow blades were smuggled ashore to salt the production and buy time.

Despite all these problems, the Shotley Bridge shops stayed in operation until 1832, producing almost exclusively flat, diamond section blades for military use.

With the improved blade, the last need for the *pas d'ane* disappeared. A holdover from the rapier, these finger rings had continued to enjoy some minor importance as a means of supporting a heavy pointed weapon. Translated as “hoofprints of an ass” because of their shape, the *pas d'ane* were originally placed below the guards of heavy swords sometime around 1650, and were quite useful, even necessary, as a finger protection as well as a device for getting a good grip on the hilt. Their degree of use on the small sword is an important element in approximating the period in which a particular sword was made.

### Dating

Generally, the less useful and more vestigial the *pas d'ane* appear on a sword, the later its period. This rule must be followed with caution, however. More than one sword has been dated authoritatively from the earliest years of the 18th century when, more accurately, it was made fifty or sixty years later. And nowhere is the possi-

bility for error greater than when dating American swords. Almost without exception, working with imported and frequently outdated blades, American hilters often found themselves mounting wide, flat blades made originally for military use. Consequently, these swords needed well developed *pas d'ane* to support the heavy blade. There was another factor as well. Even though their skills as craftsmen were, at the very least, on a par with their European counterparts, the Colonial hilters — usually silver- or goldsmiths — were operating far from the seat of fashion in weaponry and were prone to copy earlier examples on hand rather than employ state-of-the-art sword technology. This created a situation where the American smith's wares often resembled the flat-bladed small swords in use before the invention of the Colichemarde (c. 1680), when they were actually made for use in the Revolution or one of the later French and Indian Wars.

Dating by blade is also beset with pitfalls. While the civil swords evolved through a set series of styles, the military version of the small sword became locked-in on a form of blade that, while unsuited for the duel, was still supreme in the field. This form of blade — which was brother to the flat blades imported to America — because of its intended use called for a long, wide blade with a flattened oval cross-section. It was generally believed that this type of blade was best for military use even by such masters of fence as the 18th century's Angelo who wrote, “Some are for flat, others for hollow blades; whatever pains are taken with the former, I seldom or ever find them light in the point; it is therefore difficult to render them light in the hand; I would nevertheless, recommend the use of them in battle, either horse or foot, but in single combat, the hollow blade is preferable, because of its lightness and ease in the handling.” So we see that the earliest form of blade to be tried in the quest for lightness was still in daily military use throughout the entire period.

To further confound the seeker after truth, more than a few blades were remounted several times, and in several styles of hilt, throughout their working lives, either from necessity or because of sentiment or family tradition.

By taking all these factors to heart and by handling and studying examples that are datable either by the judgment of good authority or because of signed datings on hilts or blades, one should, in time, become reasonably clever in the guesswork and be able to affix a slot within the period during which the sword was made and first used.

### Decline and Fall

Sometime around 1780, after a reign of more than a century, the small sword disappeared as an item of civil dress. Although blackened versions continued to be worn to funerals for some time, and debased versions of the





Small Sword, *English* (?), c. 1700. Considerable traces of silver wash remain on this brass-hilted arm which, because of its simplicity, was likely intended for use by an army officer. The copper wire on the grips is terminated top and bottom by braided bands. The quillon is missing. The wide, early style hollow blade has surface decorations applied in gilt. Blade-27½".



Small Sword, *German*, c. 1690. Interesting because of its unusual "mock-hollow" blade, this very small and light-bladed weapon provides an insight into confusion among sword makers in the closing years of the 17th century. Here we have an arm light enough in blade to satisfy any fencing master yet because of conservatism, or whatever, the cutler has persisted in retaining full-blown pas d'ane, thus impairing the efficiency of the sword in play. Steel hilt, including wire on grips. Blade-25½".



1.



2.



3.



4.



5.

## TYPES OF BLADE CROSS-SECTIONS

1. DIAMOND
2. HEXAGONAL
3. FLAT OVAL
4. HOLLOW
5. MOCK HOLLOW



weapon have continued into modern days as "court swords," small swords were carried into the 19th century by only a handful of aged eccentrics. Displaced at last by the flintlock pocket pistol as the prevalent means of personal defense, the small sword gradually and reluctantly lost its favor as the prime instrument of duelling to that same weapon in highly specialized form. Descendants of the small sword can still be seen in the blades used for the sport of fencing and, until a few years ago, one could occasionally read of a duel being fought, usually in France, employing a form of the weapon that was still being manufactured in the 1920's.

### Collecting

Few artifacts of merit from the 17th and 18th centuries have survived in a more successful manner than the small sword. Preserved possibly because of their aristocratic aura, they continue to be found in surprising numbers. Most gun shows worth their salt have a selection for sale, and they are regularly featured among the stock of dealers. Once found, considering their age and romantic associations, few items from antiquity constitute better value for the collector's dollar — especially when one factors in such qualifications as artistry in manufacture and historical importance.

The economics are generally good. The prices are fair — indeed, often bargains — and the supply is reasonable. Excepting the most outstanding museum quality specimens, ordinary examples (and frequently important examples) continue to be acquirable for, by today's standards, modest sums. Often price seems to be a product of how much precious metal was used in the fabrication of the hilt. After all, many of these swords were highly enriched and since nowadays few scoff at those who collect bullion in any form, even the most pricey of the small sword offerings can still be an excellent value. Time and time again, I have seen American silver hilted swords made by famous Colonial silversmiths sell for far less than more mundane productions such as flatware which featured less artistry and a good deal less silver.

While ornate specimens are far from rare, the small sword did serve a broad slice of the social structure and, therefore, most examples were fabricated with hiltings of brass or steel, in a variety of finishes. Makers lavished equal attention on swords hilted in the baser metals, and produced weapons that had strength as well as beauty to match many a richer specimen. Those who thought they might actually be called upon to use their swords preferred to carry a weapon with a brass or steel hilt. It was widely known that silver hilts tended to shatter, and at the most inopportune of times. As a result, a gentleman could be expected to have a suite of swords: one for street use, another for dress, plus a carefully selected dueler. It is safe to assume that those of a foppish bent or of great wealth might have an additional appropriate assortment



(left) Military Small Sword, English, c. 1735. Hilt completely of brass with traces of silver wash. Grips have cast in wire effect such as found on many Shotley Bridge swords. Typical military flattened oval blade with central fuller beginning at lower ricasso and running for 6½". Type of arm that would have been used by a company officer of infantry. Blade-28".

Military Small Sword, English, c. 1735. A sturdy, flat-bladed, brass hilted military side arm typical of those sent in some numbers to the American colonies to outfit militia officers. When new, the wooden grip would have been wrapped in brass wire, traces of which remain. This style of sword saw long service, being used in the various French and Indian Wars right up to and through the Revolution. Blade-26½".

to meet the sartorial needs of any occasion. Hilts of bullion, especially when encrusted with jewels, are certainly fine, but there is no stigma in collecting swords made of less expensive materials. Remember, if the original owner of the sword you have your eye on had wanted one made of silver or gold, he likely could have afforded it.

Desirability must remain a matter of taste — and the thickness of one's wallet. There is plenty of room for that delight of the collector, specialization. Obvious areas include separation into civil and military categories. Another tack would be to specialize in a national area or a certain time-frame. Probably the best approach would be to sit back and let it happen, gathering those examples you both like and can afford. Price? The spread is considerable, with top flight examples going for thousands of dollars. However, good, solid, and even important specimens can be had in the \$100 - \$300 range, and decent swords are frequently found under \$100. As we go to press, a mid-western dealer has just advertised two interesting and quite collectible swords for, as I remember, \$186 (!) and that is for the pair!! What other major antiques of the 17th and 18th centuries can equal these prices?

Often called an item of male jewelry, the small sword must remain one of the most intimate and romantic evidences of an earlier age and of a vanished lifestyle that was often as violent as it was colorful.