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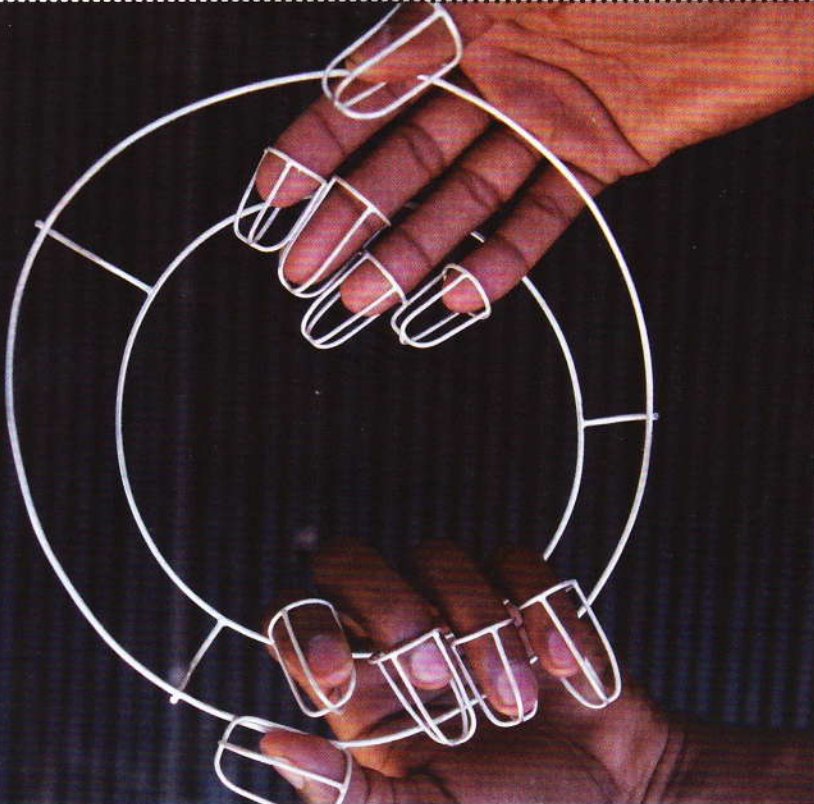
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Jewelers Speak
Out: Stirring
Voices from an
Ancient Land

Observations from
Munich Jewellery
Week 2019



Strong graphic patterns and tactile surfaces enliven vessels by three women metalsmiths who work with welding, carving, and forging. Oshiyama Motoko (b. 1958) swirls welded metals such as silver, shakudo, and copper into geometric and abstract patterns. Otsuki Masako (b. 1943) employs the shave-and-carve *hatsuri* technique to create textured patterns on silver with gold decorations, while Hagino Noriko (b. 1949) produces pieces of optical power and uncanny delicacy by means of the laborious *hagiawase* process based on forging and heat welding. Her bulbous, tapered-neck vase *Line* is literally constructed from strips of welded varicolored metals, swirled into a shimmering optical illusion of upward motion.

Andrea DiNoto writes on art, craft, and design.

1 <https://www.freersackler.si.edu/research/japanese-metalworking-residency/osumi-yukie-video-eng/>

East Meets West: Jewels of the Maharajas from the Al Thani Collection

Legion of Honor,
San Francisco
11.3.18 – 2.24.19

By Julie M. Muñiz

Often caught up in tales of intrigue and history, precious gems have long captured the world's attention. Beyond their physical beauty, gemstones

often hold cultural significance as well. The exhibition *East Meets West: Jewels of the Maharajas from the Al Thani Collection*, recently on view at San Francisco's Legion of Honor, seeks to examine the intermingling of Indian and European cultures through a spectacular display of pieces once owned and worn by India's ruling elite. Though the works are dazzling and beautiful, the show sidesteps

difficult conversations about colonialism and cultural appropriation.

Until diamonds were discovered in Brazil in 1726, India was the world's only diamond-producing country, making it a global center for trade. Early travelers brought back tales of the country's rich mines, fueling Europe's fantasies of Eastern exoticism. The mines of the Golconda region became especially legendary, having produced some of the world's largest diamonds, including the Hope Diamond (45.52 carats), the Koh-i-Noor (105 carats), the Star of Golconda (57.31 carats), and the Idol's Eye (70.21 carats). These fertile resources led to an abundance of extravagant jewelry worn by the country's powerful elite—first by the Mughal emperors in the sixteenth century and later by the maharajas, who gained power after the Sack of Delhi in 1739. Sadly, these resources also led to a history of colonialism and exploitation dating back to the formation of the East India Company in the sixteenth century.

Contrary to Western traditions, in India the most splendid jewels were worn by men. The maharajas and Mughal emperors lavished themselves in jewels for state occasions. Far from simple adornment, the rich gemstones



Nawanagar ruby necklace, Cartier, London, 1937
Platinum, rubies, diamonds
8-1/16 x 7-11/16 in. as mounted
© The Al Thani Collection
Courtesy the Fine Arts Museums of
San Francisco
Photo: Prudence Cuming Associates Ltd



Nakagawa Mamoru (b. 1947), *Living National Treasure*, Vase *Calm Sea*, 2016. Cast alloy of copper, silver and tin with copper, silver and gold inlay. 7-1/2 x 14-3/8 x 8-1/4 in.

and gold stood as testaments to the wealth and power of the ruling elite, as well as the magnificence of their courts. In addition to denoting status, gemstones also held deep cultural significance. Diamonds, the hardest stone, symbolized strength and virility and were typically worn by men. Emeralds, with their intense green hue, held sacred associations in Islam and were thus favored by the Mughal emperors. The deep red of rubies and spinels was associated with blood, and therefore they symbolized good health. Sapphires, associated with the planet Saturn in Hindu culture, were thought to be unlucky and thereby were rarely used.

How the gemstones were cut and set also reflected different cultural attitudes. Favoring sparkle, European lapidaries used scientific principles of light and refraction to develop the first brilliant cuts in the seventeenth century. However, in India, where stones held deeper symbolic significance, size mattered over shine. Stones were thereby cut as little as possible and were set using a traditional bezel technique known as kundan. This highly complex process requires the

jeweler to first hollow out a skeletal framework for the stone and then secure it in place with fine strips of 24k gold. Kundan jewelry, which remains popular today, was the primary method of stonesetting before Western influences took over in the late nineteenth century. An exquisite pen case and inkwell from the late sixteenth century demonstrates the importance kundan gems held to the Mughal court. Encrusted in intricate patterns of diamonds, emeralds, rubies, sapphires, and lacquer, such objects were often given as gifts from the emperor to high-ranking officials, who wore them conspicuously in their sashes.

In 1858, the rule of East India Company transferred to the British Crown. During this period, known as the British Raj, Indian princely states formed a subsidiary alliance with Britain, surrendering their foreign affairs and military power to the British government. Devoid of any real political power but still wealthy elites, the maharajas began copying Western styles. Traveling to Europe, they patronized jewelers such as Cartier and Van Cleef & Arpels,

Turban ornament, India, 1907; reworked ca. 1935. White gold, diamonds. 5-15/16 x 2-9/16 in. © The Al Thani Collection. Courtesy the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco. Photo: Prudence Cuming Associates Ltd



often bringing with them gems and jewelry to have reset in the latest European fashions. Little of this colonial history is discussed in the exhibition labels, however, which instead focus solely on the resulting stylistic changes. Gold was replaced with platinum, for example, and kundan-set gems

were recut and remounted with prongs. A stunning aigrette designed by Paul Iribe in 1910 highlights a large emerald carved in India in the mid-nineteenth century. Framed in diamonds and sapphires, the aigrette is capped in a spray of gems and pearls, recasting the historic emerald in the Art Deco style.

That European fashion took influences from various Eastern cultures during this period is not a new observation. Art Deco and other Western styles amalgamated visions of the East into an Orientalist fantasy, paying little respect to the cultural traditions from which they borrowed. The exhibition shows several examples of jewelry in these styles, but misses the opportunity to discuss the important issues of Western colonialism and cultural appropriation that were really at play. Sadly, though beautiful, *East Meets West* is all sparkle and little depth.

Julie Muñoz is a writer and independent curator working in the San Francisco Bay Area.

Pen case and inkwell, Deccan plateau or North India, 1575-1600. Gold, diamonds, emeralds, rubies, sapphires, lacquer. Pen case: 1-9/16 x 12-1/16 in.; inkwell 4-1/2 x 2-1/8 in. © The Al Thani Collection. Courtesy the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco. Photo: Prudence Cuming Associates Ltd

