

INTRODUCTION

Since ancient times South Asia has enjoyed a uniquely sophisticated tradition of jewellery, in which gems and jewels have been an integral aspect of daily wear. This culture is partly the result of natural circumstance. The region has been home to gemstones: fine diamonds were found in the Deccan, Kashmir produced sapphires of the most beautiful hue and Badakhshan was home to the most prized spinels. Sapphires and rubies were available from nearby Ceylon (Sri Lanka) and Burma (Myanmar), and pearls were available through trade with the Persian Gulf. Emeralds gravitated to India through commercial exchange, brought by European merchants after the discovery of mines in Colombia. India always supplemented its deposits of gold through its exports : since antiquity, spices and textiles from the subcontinent were exported to East and West in exchange for bullion.

These precious materials were transformed through the ingenuity of Indian craftsmen, raised to fresh heights by patronage that continues until today. Jewellery in India is not merely for adornment; every gem has a significance, reflecting a cosmic purpose or invoking a favourable horoscope. In popular culture, particular forms of jewellery reflect rank, caste, region, marital status or wealth. Precious metals and gemstones have also been used in the adornment of courtly articles, from ceremonial apparel to weapons and furnishings.

The creation of this collection by His Highness Sheikh Hamad bin Abdullah Al Thani has been driven by his passion for the taste and style of Indian jewels across various historical periods. In this exhibition pieces from the Al Thani Collection are complemented with loans of celebrated jewelled objects from the Bibliothèque nationale de France, British Museum, Metropolitan Museum of Art, State Hermitage Museum, Victoria & Albert Museum as well as prestigious private collections. Together they tell a story of the jewelled arts of India from the age of the Mughal emperors (1526-1858) through to the British Raj (1858-1947) and the present day.

THE MUGHAL TREASURY: DYNASTIC GEMS AND JEWELS

A descendant of both Timur (Tamerlane) and Ghenghis Khan, Zahir ud-din Babur arrived in India in 1526, establishing a dynasty whose identity is inextricably linked with the possession of precious stones. Indeed, when Europeans arrived at the Mughal court they were overwhelmed by the richness of the treasury, evident in the profusion of jewels on the emperor himself and on everything around him. This collection of gems was acquired through conquest, as gifts and as purchases. Court chronicles and memoirs reference the jewels in the treasury, confirming that the emperors themselves were directly involved in assessing their quality and value. The Mughals inherited from their Timurid ancestors the custom of inscribing their names on the most precious gems and passing them on as dynastic heirlooms. This appreciation of gemstones found greatest expression during the reign of Shah Jahan, who commissioned a magnificent throne of enamelled gold encrusted with diamonds, emeralds, spinels, rubies and pearls. Along with vast holdings of precious stones, this spectacular "Peacock Throne", as it came to be known, was looted by the Iranian warrior Nadir Shah, who sacked Delhi in 1739, striking a blow which set the empire in irreversible decline.

OBJECTS OF JADE AND ROCK CRYSTAL

As among European princes of the period, hardstones were deeply admired by Mughal rulers and came to be used for all manner of luxury accessories and decoration. In addition to their intrinsic visual and tactile qualities, these materials were often endowed with a spiritual purpose. In Islamic culture jade was understood to invoke victory and was particularly used for weapons and accessories for warfare or hunting. Jade was also believed to detect and counteract poison, proving to be both a practical and useful material for drinking vessels in an environment of courtly intrigue. The working of agate, onyx and rock crystal - the colourless variety of quartz - were likewise raised to a high art at the hands of Mughal lapidaries. These materials were sometimes further enhanced by encrusting them with precious stones, creating a dazzling effect that came to characterise the richness of Mughal courtly life.

OBJECTS IN GOLD AND ENAMEL

Much Indian jewellery is characterised by *kundan*, a technique in which gems are set in gold without the use of a prong. Instead, strips of malleable pure gold are used to fashion the mount, forming a molecular bond around the gem. Using an iron stylus, a goldsmith can manipulate the gold to create a pliable but strong hold around a gem. The process has meant that in Indian jewellery gemstones are typically closed-set. Unlike in the West, where they were fashioned into symmetrical shapes, in India gemstones were cut to retain as much of their size as possible.

Another characteristic technique is enamelling, which first made its appearance in the Mughal period, probably inspired by an appreciation of the sophisticated enamelled jewellery of Renaissance workshops, which arrived as gifts from Western ambassadors. The dominant role that this technique has come to play in India is evidence of the ingenious assimilation of foreign techniques.

The Mughal approach to jewellery shaped tastes throughout the subcontinent, establishing forms and styles that continued even after its collapse in the eighteenth century and the rise of successor states and new kingdoms.

REGALIA AND JEWELLED ORNAMENTS

In India the ownership of great jewels was considered an intrinsic aspect of kingship. The finest gems were worn by men as a reflection of the wealth of the state. The adornment considered appropriate for a ruler extended from turban ornaments or crowns to necklaces, earrings, armbands, bracelets, rings, belts and anklets. While these jewellery types remained constant from the Mughal period onwards, their style and the technique used in their production changed over time. In the nineteenth century fashionable Indian jewellery was increasingly shaped by Western influence. This was evident in design, the faceting of gems and in their mounts, which gave way to open, Western-style claw settings for holding precious stones. Protected by Pax Britannica, Indian princes under the Raj were deprived of any true military and political purpose. In this context, power and status were increasingly articulated by wearing increasingly extravagant jewellery. By the late nineteenth century Indian princes began to replace gold with platinum as the favoured setting for their most important gems, eventually having their pieces remounted in Europe in the latest Western styles.

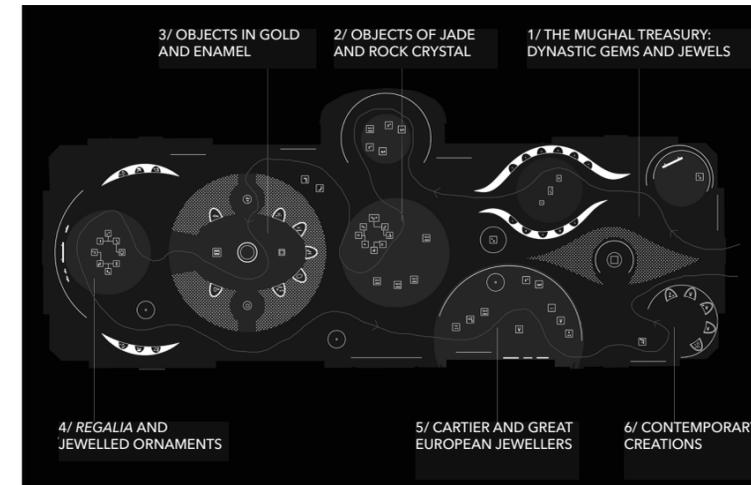
CARTIER AND GREAT EUROPEAN JEWELLERS

In 1911 Jacques Cartier travelled to India in the hope of finding new clients and fresh sources of precious stones. His visit ushered in a period of sustained contact with Indian princes that led to some of the greatest commissions executed by his firm. Cartier - and other leading French and British jewellers - engaged with India on various levels. Most immediately, they started to supply maharajas with stock products and customised creations. Over time Indian rulers entrusted Western houses to re-set gemstones and *regalia* in the latest styles, substituting traditional settings in gold for platinum. While in India, European jewellers also collected indigenous pieces, which they sometimes re-mounted or re-set to complement the exotic style so favoured in creative circles during the period. The markedly different aesthetic of Indian jewellery also began to inspire the most avant-garde creations made in the West.

CONTEMPORARY CREATIONS

The work of leading contemporary jewellers continues to reflect the influence of India in a variety of expressions. Renowned Parisian jeweller JAR has incorporated historic Indian stones into his work, appreciating their distinctive shapes and cuts which contrast with the geometrically-faceted gems that dominate Western jewellery today. His creations have sometimes drawn on Indian motifs as have those of Mumbai-based jeweller Bhagat, whose work is characterized by the use of custom-cut flat diamonds and natural pearls in invisible platinum settings that often echo traditional jewellery forms. Building on a legacy of over one century of aesthetic exchange, Cartier's jewelled dialogue with India continues to evolve, yielding fresh creations that recall the great commissions of the maharajas.

EXHIBITION MAP



From the Mughals to the Maharajahs. Jewels from the Al Thani collection (29 March - 05 June 2017)

Exhibition opening times

Open every day, except Tuesdays, from 10 am to 8 pm. Late-night opening on Wednesdays until 10 pm.

European Night of Museums (20 May 2017): all the exhibitions are open and admission is free after 8 pm. Doors open until midnight and close at 1 am.

This exhibition is organised by the Réunion des Musées Nationaux - Grand Palais in partnership with the Musée national des arts asiatiques - Guimet.



Curators:

Amin Jaffer, chief curator, The Al Thani Collection;
Amina Okada, general curator at the Musée national des arts asiatiques - Guimet.

Set design: bGc studio

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