

South Indian Jewellery Motifs and Metaphors

By Dinesh Sathisan



*Rudraksha Mālai,
19th Century,
Tamil Nadu*

The love of gold is widespread among Indian communities because of its purity and its association with the sun, the source of life. Beyond financial worth and beauty, jewellery plays a significant socio-cultural role in the everyday lives of Indians. In South Indian cultures, for instance, the *tāli*, a gold marriage ornament, represents one's marital status. One can often determine, from examining the shape and patterns on the *tāli*, the wearer's sectarian affiliation and caste. Devotees often donate gold ornaments such as the *kavacam* (breast plate) and other forms of jewellery to temples to adorn their favourite deities. You can see such pieces on the processional figure of Murugan (also known as Skanda or Karthikeya) during Singapore's annual *Panguni Uthiram* festival. Such gifts to the temple are believed to bring merit to the donor.

Motifs inspired by nature — flowers, plants, fruits, animals — are very popular because of the symbiotic relationship man has with nature. The term *tāli*, some historians of jewellery explain, may have its origins in the talipot (*Corypha umbraculifera*), a species of palm native to South India and Sri Lanka, where it was traditional for the bridegroom to tie a talipot leaf around his bride's neck. This palm tree was likely revered because it can live to an age of 80 years and can grow as high as 25 metres. It is said that, even today, the Gonds and Munda tribes in India follow this practice.

Over time, gold was used to create the marriage ornament in complex shapes and designs. The Chettiar marriage ornament, *Kazhuththu Uru*, which is in the collection of the Asian Civilisations Museum (ACM), is a classic example of elaborate marriage jewellery, even though it is an incomplete set. A complete *Kazhuththu Uru* should have 34 different pendants, gold beads and ornaments strung in two tiers. The five projections of the pendant ornaments are said to be stylised depictions of crab claws as Chettiars were once a seafaring community who lived on the coast near Chidambaram. This may be one way the Chettiars express their early humble

origins while still conveying their present mercantile affluence. Others posit that the pendant may represent the claws and teeth of a tiger, because of their protective powers, which explains why the pendant is shaped like a tiger's paw. There is also a theory that the pendant may be abstractions of the newlyweds' hands. The central pendant has four spikes that are believed to represent the four *Vedas* (*Rig*, *Yajur*, *Sama* and *Atharva*), the primary texts of Hinduism. Others believe that they represent the four cardinal directions. The central pendant also often bears the image of Lakshmi, the goddess of prosperity, and characterises the wish that the bride, like the goddess, embodies auspiciousness and wealth. The central pendant of the Chettiar wedding ornament at the ACM, however, bears the image of Shiva and his consort Parvati riding on Shiva's bull, together with their son, Murugan. The image personifies a blissfully wedded couple with their child; it is not surprising that Chettiars, being devout Saivites (worshippers of Siva), would adorn their marriage ornaments with these symbols. The representation of these sanctified deities also offers perpetual proximity of the gods to the wearer. This may be the earliest example of South Indian jewellery to use deity representation in micro-repoussage, a form and technique seen later in other traditional Indian jewellery.

In some *Kazhuththu Uru*, one may find a long cylindrical talisman holder as well as a stylised depiction



Female gold kavacam, wearing several necklaces including a Mānga Mālai

of the *rudraksha* berry in gold. The *rudraksha* (*Eleocarpus ganitrus*) is sacred to Shiva and we're fortunate that ACM has in its collection a *Rudraksha Mālai* (necklace), a piece of Chettiar jewellery worn by men and used as a ritualistic emblem. Devotees of Shiva wear the *rudraksha* beads as a way of harnessing Shiva's creative energy since as Nataraja, the Lord of Dance, Shiva keeps the cosmos in motion, ensuring the continuity of the life-cycle. This explains the Nataraja motif on the central pendant of the necklace. According to legends, the seeds represent Shiva's eyes (*Rudra* = Shiva; *Aksha* = Eyes). Shiva was said to have gone into penance for 1000 years in order to destroy evil and when water from his eyes fell to the ground, a tree was formed bearing the *rudraksha* fruit. The seeds are considered highly auspicious as they can change one's fate and fortune and protect one's health. Below the pendant is a lingam box, in a stylised *rudraksha* form, which holds a miniature lingam. The lingam or *linga* represents Shiva's phallus is an aniconic (non-figural) representation of Shiva and his creative energy. It is also very common to find depictions of Murugan wearing the *Rudraksha mālai*.

Other South Indian ornaments also incorporate elements from nature. A simple necklace with small carved projections simulating grain symbolises fertility and abundance, while a necklace simulating jasmine buds (*Mullai Arumbu Mālai*) imparts the delicate beauty of the auspicious jasmine flower, conjuring the image of the carnal scent the flower produces and enhancing the sexuality of the person wearing the jewellery.

Very common in South Indian jewellery is the *Mānga Mālai* (Necklace of Mangoes), which can also be seen on the female *kavacam*. The auspicious mango motif is said to be uniquely South Indian, very similar to the Persian *boteh* motif. It is believed that the mango tree is a wish-fulfilling tree and a symbol of love, fertility, fruition and long life. Equally auspicious are mango leaves, which are revered for their protective powers; it is common to find these leaves thatched at the entrance of a Hindu household. Women in Tamil Nadu often wear stylised silver mango necklaces as amulets. Another famous amulet that can be seen at the ACM is the tiger-clawed (*pulinagam*) pendant that is believed to impart qualities associated with the



Image of Murugan wearing the Rudraksha necklace



Mānga Mālai with Ruby Stones; Tiger-Clawed Pendant, mid-20th Century, Tamil Nadu, Private Collection

tiger. The tiger, a mount of Parvati (who is also known as Shakti, meaning power or strength), is believed to impart valour to the wearer. Most importantly, it is believed that tiger claws have the power to deflect any form of evil which may attack the wearer. In a similar vein, jewellery such as rings with strands of elephant hair are also believed to have such protective qualities.

The next time you see a piece of Indian jewellery, try to spot what aspects of nature are represented and think about what they may represent. Such observations are a great help in gaining insight into other cultures and traditions.

For further reading on South Indian Jewellery, see:

Aiken, Molly Emma. When Gold Blossoms: Indian Jewellery from the Susan L. Beningson Collection (Philip Wilson Publishers, 2004)

Untracht, Oppi. Traditional Jewellery of India (Thames and Hudson, 1997)

Usha Bala Krishnan et. al. Icons in Gold: Jewellery from the Collection of Musee Barbier-Mueller (Somogy, 2006)

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Photos courtesy of Asian Civilisations Museum, unless noted