

Confident Connoisseurs

The Mughals had an eye for colour and beauty

By Mary Leadbetter

Treasury of the World: Jewelled Arts of India in the Age of the Mughals, a travelling show of over 400 pieces from the Al-Sabah Collection of Kuwait, is an exhibition of great beauty, quality and diversity that has thrilled viewers at the British Museum, The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and The Hermitage in Russia. We are fortunate to have an opportunity to see this major exhibition, which is on view at the Asian Civilisations Museum (ACM) until 13 June.

The history of the collection itself is as dramatic as the history of the pieces in it. When Sheikh Nasser Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah and his wife Sheikha Hussah Al-Sabah made their first acquisitions of Islamic art objects in the 1970s, their goal may not have been to return a comprehensive collection of Islamic art and objects to the Islamic world, but that has been the fortunate result. Quietly making purchases over several decades, these educated and passionate collectors first put their extensive collection (of which this exhibition is only one part) on public display in 1983 – and drew immediate international attention, though not all of it welcome!

Soon after Iraq invaded Kuwait in August 1990, an Iraqi team arrived in Kuwait to 'extract' the art collection. With neither art-handling experience nor shipping materials at their disposal, the invaders bought metal trunks in the Kuwait market and used rare medieval textiles to wrap and cushion 7000 artefacts for the 500-kilometre road trip



Pendant with cameo portrait of the emperor Shah Jahan set with rubies

Circa 1650 – 1660
3.7 x 3.3 x 0.8 cm

to Baghdad. Remarkably, most of the treasures survived and after Iraq lost the war, the treasures were returned to Kuwait in 1991. In comparison to earlier travels – across India, into Persia, on camelback, in pockets or pouches, or on ships to Europe – travelling in metal trunks swathed in exotic textiles was probably pretty cushy! If only those pieces could talk...

The exhibition is grouped thematically but you may want to begin with the weaponry – daggers, archery rings, swords, scabbards and a shield – on view in various sections of the exhibition. These beautiful and extensively jewelled weapons, some of which were primarily ceremonial in nature, remind us of the tumultuous and militaristic history of the Mughals. Babur (the name means Tiger), the first of the Great Mughals, was a Turko-Mongol and a descendant of Timur and Genghis Khan. Such princes survived and even created their own destinies by the sword. It was a common rite to mark battlefields with pillars of severed enemy heads! At the Battle of Panipat in 1526, Babur, with only 20,000 men and an arsenal of weapons, defeated Ibrahim Lodi of the Delhi Sultanate and approximately 100,000 Afghans. Five hours of fighting was all it took for Babur to take control of an empire.



Finger ring with rotating and bobbing bird
India, Mughal or Deccan, c. 1600 – 1625
5.3 x 2.5 cm



Inscribed royal spinel ('balas ruby')
4.8 x 3.6 x 1.8 cm



Turban ornament
India, probably Deccan
c. 1650 – 1700, 17.3 x 5.3 x 1.3 cm

With its established history of trade, gem and textile production as well as other arts, India was a rich prize. Babur wrote in his chronicles that "India was a large country [with] masses of gold and silver [and] workmen of every profession and trade were innumerable and without end." With control came immediate wealth. To each of his 12,000 soldiers and officers Babur gave jewels, textiles and gold as spoils. Of course, as emperor, fame and glory were his, as were extravagant gifts and tribute. His son Humayun gave him a diamond so large that it was regarded as being of sufficient value to feed the known world for two and a half days. That diamond is believed to be the diamond we know today as the Koh-I-Noor, a 105-carat stone whose name means 'mountain of light'.

The Great Mughals ruled for almost 200 years, each ruler stamping court life and ritual with his own personality and passions. The social hierarchy was strict and jewellery a symbol of power and wealth. Under Emperors Akbar, Jahangir and Shah Jahan, the making of jewellery and jewelled objects reached a high point – amply demonstrated in the wonderful reverse-enamelled necklaces and pendants on view in the exhibition.

Sir Thomas Roe, sent to the court of Jahangir by King James I of England, failed to obtain the trade treaty he sought, but his reports of Mughal court life have lasted through the ages. In one of his letters, he wrote of the Emperor Jahangir, "In jewells (which is one of his felicities) hee is the treasury of the world", thus providing the source of the exhibition's title.

The Mughal rulers were both curious connoisseurs and politically astute. They established laws to ensure great gems came into their treasuries and also grew the treasuries through tribute, taxes and revenues, booty and gifts from overseas rulers. With its abundant gem resources, India was the world's sole diamond supplier into the 18th century. What it did not have, it imported: emeralds from Columbia and Egypt, coral from the Mediterranean and turquoise from Iran.

Skilled Mughal craftsmen produced unparalleled examples of carved and inscribed gemstones, many excellent examples of which are included in this exhibition. Huge spinels were tumble-polished, drilled, inscribed and worn as pendants or ornaments in accordance with the Indian tradition of maintaining maximum stone bulk. A diamond-tipped stylus was generally used to cut inscriptions into the surface of such gemstones. Once inscribed and worn – power dressing at its best – the gem served a dynastic tradition harkening back to the Timurid era (1370-1507) practice of each successive ruler adding his name to a stone. Emeralds, often ornamented by relief carving and inscriptions believed to enhance the stones' inherent powers were worn as upper armbands so as to be near the wearer's heart.

The ACM exhibition reflects the richness, diversity and profusion of goods produced by the royal workshops. To the Mughals, how you dressed and the ornaments you wore indicated who you were and your position in society. According to a well-known scholar of Indian jewellery Oppi Untracht, state occasions, the Emperor dressed lavishly and, was a "glittering living metaphor of imperial omnipotence". In the style of the day, every Mughal gentleman and lady was bedecked with turban ornaments, rings, necklaces and bracelets on wrist and ankle, but strict sumptuary laws prohibited those outside court circles from emulating this lavish style without royal permission. *Khil'at*, the practice of

presenting jewels and textiles as a reward from the Emperor to a courtier or soldier, also required a steady flow of goods, and documents show that the resources were there.

The Mughals imported jade to India, and the exhibition includes a number of lovely jade items including an armband, cups and bowls, archery rings and even that most practical piece of medical equipment – crutch heads. These jade pieces also represent a variety of techniques from carving to inlay work using precious stones set in gold in the *kundan* technique.

Whether your passion is the history or the personalities of the era, the techniques of jewellery-making, the wondrous gemstones or the beautiful jewelled objects themselves – go and indulge. You will not be disappointed.

After retiring from legal practice, Mary Leadbetter studied Asian Art and Culture at the British Museum. She has been an active FOM member since 2004, guiding at the Peranakan Museum, the ACM and special exhibitions. Indian jewellery is a personal passion.

Editor's Note: Mary Leadbetter will lecture on the turbulent history and splendid jewellery of the Mughal era on 11 March at 7:30 pm in the ACM.

Images courtesy of © The al-Sabah collection, Dar al-Athar al-Islamiyyah, Kuwait



Dagger and scabbard
India, Mughal, Circa 1615 – 1620; 33.3 x 11.7 cm