EAST MEETS WEST

JEWELS OF THE MAHARAJAS
FROM THE AL THANI COLLECTION
"Providence created the maharajahs to offer mankind a spectacle."
—Rudyard Kipling, 19th century

The jewelry and precious objects within this exhibition illustrate the cultural and material exchanges between India and Europe from the sixteenth century to the present. They feature more than one hundred fifty pieces associated with Mughal emperors, Indian maharajahs, and their courts. These objects include jewelry to be worn on ceremonial occasions, weapons such as swords and daggers, and precious works of art for display or use in court life. Gender plays a significant role in this exhibition as, contrary to Western expectations, in India the most splendid jewelry was supplied exclusively for the male rulers. Furthermore, great pieces of jewelry conceived to adorn the queens of Europe, such as Catherine the Great of Russia or Empress Eugénie of France, were worn by male rulers, or maharajahs, in India.

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The Mughals and Their Empire
The Mughals, descendants of Timur (Tamerlane) and Genghis Khan in Central Asia, arrived in India in 1526, conquering much of the subcontinent. Their empire grew to be the largest economic power in the world in the 1600s. They created a hybrid culture, fusing traditional Indian and Islamic forms, of which the Taj Mahal is the most famous example. European visitors were astonished by the richness of the treasury of the Mughal rulers, who sat on thrones of gold and silver encrusted with gemstones. In turn, the Mughals were curious about European technology and goods. They allowed trading posts to be set up and fostered a vigorous cultural and economic exchange. Mughal power was greatly diminished with the Sack of Delhi in 1739 and disappeared altogether when British rule was declared in 1858.

The Maharanias
The term maharania is Sanskrit for "great king or ruler." Indian rulers were also known as raja, rana, or tahaw or nizam if they were Muslim. Following the Sack of Delhi in 1739, which reduced the power of the Mughal Empire, the maharanias and other rulers established sovereignty in the 564 or so Successor States that made up the Indian subcontinent. Some maharanias presided over large geographic regions such as Hyderabad in central India while others ruled only a single town. The maharanias, underpinned by the British, lived in lavish palaces, wore profusions of jewels, conducted great ceremonies, and rode in processions with elephants. The rule of the maharanias ended officially when India gained independence from Britain in 1947. Their titles and revenues were abolished under Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in 1970.
Timeline

1526
The Mughal dynasty is founded by its first emperor, Babur (1483–1530).

1632
The Mughal emperor Shah Jahan (1592–1666) builds the Taj Mahal.

1600
English merchants establish the East India Company.

1739
Mughal power weakens with the Sack of Delhi by Nader Shah (1688–1747) of Iran. With the subsequent power vacuum, political control is established among many rulers within the "Successor States."

1857
The Indian Rebellion challenges the East India Company's military and political power in India.

1858
British Raj (rule) is established. The British elevate the maharajas as their allies.

1877
Queen Victoria is proclaimed Empress of India.

1947
British rule in India ends.

1970
Indira Gandhi, prime minister of India, abolishes the titles and revenues of the maharajas.
“The jewels of the Mughals were equal to the wealth of all the monarchs of Europe combined.”
—Jacques de Coutre (ca. 1575–1640), Flemish gem trader and traveler

The Mughal Court: Gemstones

When European visitors arrived at the Mughal court, they were dazzled by the richness of the Imperial Treasury, evident in the profusion of jewels on the emperor himself and on the ceremonial objects around him. The Mughals acquired a rich collection of gems as a result of conquest, as gifts, and through assiduous purchases. They preferred emeralds because of their green color, sacred to Muslims; spinels were prized because of their association with the Mughals’ Timurid origins in Central Asia; and the diamonds sourced from Indian mines were admired for their size and clarity.

Gemstones remained important symbols of authority among the maharajas in the Successor States after the Mughal Empire’s irreversible decline after 1739. With the establishment of the British Raj in 1858, and through the end of the century, gemstones continued to be worn by the rulers of India in spectacular pieces of jewelry. However, gem-set jewelry for the maharajas reached its zenith in the early twentieth century, when many pieces were remounted by the famous jewelry houses of Europe, such as Cartier.

The Diamonds of Louis XIV of France

Like the Mughal emperors, the monarchs of Europe developed a passion for Indian diamonds during the seventeenth century. To underscore their power, kings such as Louis XIV of France wore diamonds in great profusion on ceremonial occasions. In 1668 or 1669, Louis acquired more than one thousand diamonds sourced from India, which were to form the foundation of the French crown jewels.

Brilliant-Cut Diamonds

While the Indians traditionally polished the natural form of diamonds to preserve precious weight, in the mid-1600s the Europeans innovated the brilliant cut. This new style of cut employed scientific principles to maximize the refraction of light as well as create symmetry and “fire.” However, it meant losing valuable weight. The successors to this type of cut prevail in diamonds today.
Diamonds have been prized since ancient times for their hardness and brilliance, and the Mughal emperors employed them in abundance. Diamonds were set into jewelry and ceremonial objects such as thrones, vessels, and jade weapons. European monarchs in the West followed suit that century, similarly acquiring large diamonds to reflect their prestige and power and setting them into their crown jewels.

Until the 1730s, the world’s diamonds were sourced principally from India. They were found in the Deccan region in Southern India and then cut and traded at the city of Golconda. These Indian “Golconda” stones have a reputation for clarity and fine color, and in fact some of the world’s most famous diamonds are from Golconda. They include the Koh-i-Noor (British crown jewels, now at the Tower of London); the Regent (French crown jewels, Musée du Louvre, Paris); the Hope (formerly French crown jewels, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC), and the Orlov (Diamond Fund, Moscow). Indian diamonds were supplanted by the large deposits discovered in Brazil in the 1720s.
Emeralds

Emeralds were highly regarded by the Mughal emperors for their intense green hue. Green is sacred for Muslims, and therefore emeralds took pride of place in Mughal jewelry. They were often worn as pendants carved with stylized floral and foliate designs. Either religious or dynastic in nature, the inscriptions were usually worn turned toward the skin, while the emerald’s decoratively carved faces were turned outward. Emeralds were also made into beads for turban ornaments and necklaces. A huge treasury of emeralds was maintained by the Mughal emperors, much of which was taken to Iran as loot after the Sack of Delhi in 1739.

Although emeralds had been sourced in India since ancient times, by the period of the Mughal Empire, the finest emeralds were being imported from distant Colombia in South America. They were transported through the Spanish trade to Europe and then by the Portuguese to their trading post at Goa, India. These Colombian emeralds were then cut and carved in India and became inextricably identified with the jewelry of the Mughals and the maharajas.
Rubies and Spinels

Rubies and spinels were mined in Badakhshan, a province in what is today Afghanistan and Tajikistan, as well as in modern-day Sri Lanka and Myanmar. Rubies were prized for their dramatic red color and referred to in ancient Sanskrit writings as the “king of precious stones.” Reputed to protect the wearer in battle, they were often included in precious ceremonial weapons such as the daggers made for the Mughals.

Spinels, also called balas rubies, were frequently confused with rubies because of their red coloring. The two gemstones were not identified as separate entities until the nineteenth century. Some famous rubies, such as the Black Prince’s Ruby in the British Imperial State Crown, are in fact spinels. Being the color of blood, spinels in India were associated with vitality, and wearing them was believed to enhance life force and stamina. For the Mughal emperors, spinels were especially significant and ranked above all other gemstones. They were often engraved with dynastic inscriptions and, like emeralds and rubies, worn as pendants, as beads in necklaces and bracelets, and as rings.
“This ladle cup is carved from exquisite jade. . . . [This design] is fantastic and the concept behind is comprehensive. The smoothness makes it easy to get close to, and the nature is soft.”

—Emperor Qianlong’s inscription of 1779 applied to a Mughal jade cup

**Hardstones: Jade, Agate, and Rock Crystal**

As they were among European courts at this time, hardstones were deeply admired by Mughal rulers and came to be used for various luxury accessories and decorations. These materials were often endowed with a spiritual significance and purpose. In Islamic culture, jade was understood to invoke victory and was especially used in the production of weapons and objects used in warfare or hunting. Jade was also believed to detect and counteract poison, making it a suitable material for drinking vessels in an environment of courtly intrigue.

The working of agate, onyx, and rock crystal—the colorless variety of quartz—was raised to a high art in the hands of Mughal lapidaries. These materials were sometimes further enhanced through being encrusted with precious stones, resulting in a dazzling effect that came to characterize the richness of Mughal stately apparatus.

**Mughal Jades**

The Mughal emperors perpetuated a long history of collecting and prizing jade. Influenced by forms of Chinese porcelain and Islamic metalwork, they initially favored dark-green jade, which was occasionally carved with inscriptions reflecting its rarity and importance to the emperors. From the time of Emperor Jahangir in the 1600s, Western influences began to appear in use of paler colors and carved floral decoration based on hardstone artworks (*pietra dure*) from Italy. These highly refined imports probably first entered the Mughal court as diplomatic gifts and were subsequently fashioned in India by European crafts persons who sought work there.

**Jeweled Decoration of Jade**

The most distinctive treatment of Mughal jade was its decoration with precious stones. Rubies, emeralds, and, to a lesser extent, diamonds were inlaid into the surface and set in gold to create stylized floral and animal motifs. In the eighteenth century, the wider availability of jade allowed it to be used for more varied purposes, from jewelry such as turban ornaments and pendants to hookah bases, boxes, crutches, and flywhisks.
“In other countries, the jewels are secured in the sockets made for them, but in Hindustan, it is effected with kundan.”

—The A’in-I Akbari by Abul Fazl Allami, vol. III, 16th century

Jade Daggers and Weapons

Prized by the Mughal emperors for its purported ability to bring victory in battle, jade was often employed for highly valued ceremonial weapons worn by the emperors and their court. Some were given by the emperor to conquered foes, royal princes, and ambassadors as diplomatic gifts to make alliances. Dagger handles displayed in the sash or waistband were the most common forms of jade in weaponry, but jade was also used for sword hilts and even in powder horns to contain gunpowder for rifles.

A favorite form of the dagger hilt beginning in the 1630s was carved with the head of a powerful animal. Other jade daggers were more abstract in form and decorated with repeating ornamental or floral patterns set with precious stones, predominantly rubies, which were also thought to protect the wearer in battle. These stones were set in gold worked in the kundan technique.

The Kundan Technique of Setting Gemstones

Gemstones set into hardstones were affixed using an Indian method known as kundan. Having hollowed out a space for the gem in the jade, rock crystal, or other surface, this method involved surrounding the gem with small strips of gold to hold it in place. The soft metal of pure twenty-four-carat gold was pushed around the stone to provide a secure setting.

For jewelry, a gold frame was fabricated first, then set with gemstones in the kundan technique. It was often elaborately decorated with enamel. Although the adoption of European setting techniques with open backs prevailed in the nineteenth century, kundan settings for traditional Indian jewelry survived and are still widely utilized today.
"It should be stated that the Great Mogul has seven magnificent thrones, one wholly covered with diamonds, the others with rubies, emeralds, or pearls."
—Jean-Baptiste Tavernier, Les six voyages des Jean-Baptiste Tavernier, 1676

The Royal Courts: Gold and Enamels

Gold was the favored material for not only jewelry but also royal paraphernalia. Many of the ceremonial objects surrounding the rulers as markers of their power were also made of gold. These included the extraordinary thrones that were the principal emblems of Mughal sovereignty, as well as courtly objects—such as pen cases, flywhisks, crutches, and ceremonial vessels. Gold was rarely unadorned. For these pieces, the metal could be decorated in a variety of ways, with gemstones set in the kundan technique or with enamel, whose rich, deep colors were akin to the gemstones. Sometimes enamel further enhanced the lavish decoration of diamonds, emeralds, and rubies to give an unparalleled sense of opulence.

The Mughal approach to gold and jewelry shaped tastes throughout the subcontinent, establishing forms and styles that continued even after the decline of the Mughal Empire in the eighteenth century.

Enameling

Enameling is typical of Indian jewelry and was made by melting colored glass and fusing it onto a metal support. This technique made its first appearance during the Mughal period, probably inspired by an appreciation for the sophisticated enamelled jewelry of Renaissance workshops, which arrived at the imperial court as gifts from Western ambassadors. The dominant role that enameling has come to play in India is evidence of the ingenious assimilation of foreign techniques.

The Peacock Throne

Among the series of gold and jeweled thrones created for the Mughal court, the Peacock Throne was the most splendid (and legendary). Reportedly the most magnificent example of a jeweled goldsmith’s work ever created, the throne was inaugurated in 1635 for the emperor Shah Jahan, who was famously the builder of the Taj Mahal. It had a canopy upon which sat two enameled peacocks, which gave the throne its later name. The fate of the throne is unknown. It was taken by Nadir Shah of Persia after the Sack of Delhi in 1739 and disappeared thereafter in Iran, presumably dismantled for its precious materials. Its name however was preserved as the symbol of the Iranian monarchy.
“Composed of Diamonds of an extraordinary size and value, beside an oriental topaz, which may be pronounced unparalleled, exhibiting a lustre like the sun.”

—François Bernier, French physician and traveler, on Emperor Aurangzeb’s turban ornament,

*Travels in the Mogul Empire, A.D. 1656–1658*

**Regalia:**

**The Mughal Empire, the Maharajas, and the British Raj**

In India, the ownership of great jewels was considered an intrinsic aspect of kingship. The finest gems were worn not by women but by men, as a reflection of the wealth and power of the state. The adornment considered appropriate for a ruler extended from turban ornaments or crowns to necklaces, earrings, arm bands, bracelets, rings, belts, and anklets. Mughal emperors and rulers of the Successor States wore turban ornaments as a sign of their rank. Often designed as large jeweled brooches and backed by plumes of feathers, these objects represented an opportunity to show off large gemstones.

Indian princes of the later nineteenth and twentieth centuries were actually deprived of any true military and political purpose. In such an environment, power and status were increasingly articulated through the wearing of more and more extravagant jewelry. From the late nineteenth century onward, the princes who constituted India’s ruling class began copying Western styles, replacing gold with more precious platinum as the favored setting for their most important gems and eventually having many pieces remounted in Europe in the fashionable Art Deco style.

**Turban Ornaments**

The form of the turban ornament may have originated with Iranian types of plumed devices worn by Emperor Akbar in the 1590s. Also of possible influence beginning in the early seventeenth century were European aigrettes, which were hat jewels set with heron or egret feathers. Diamond-set aigrettes were worn by both men and women among Europe’s ruling elites, from James I of England to Marie-Antoinette of France. In nineteenth-century India, the jeweled turban ornament became more elaborate, spreading horizontally in the manner of a European tiara, and could be complemented by strings of gemstone beads encircling the turban.
“The flamboyant Maharajah of Patiala . . . arrived at Boucheron’s in 1927 accompanied by a retinue of forty servants all wearing pink turbans . . . [and] six caskets filled with diamonds, pearls, emeralds, sapphires, and rubies of incomparable beauty. Boucheron was commissioned to transform this mass of precious stones . . . into tiaras, aigrettes, belts and necklaces.”

—Alain Boucheron in *The Master Jewelers*, 1990

The Twentieth Century: Jewelry Made for the Maharajas

Jewelry for the maharajas witnessed dramatic changes in the early twentieth century. European methods of manufacture, such as the use of open settings and the employment of platinum, were adopted in India. Furthermore, Indian maharajas started to patronize European jewelry houses directly for resetting their jewelry. Maharaja Bhupinder Singh of Patiala had much of his ceremonial jewelry recast by the Parisian houses of Cartier and Boucheron in the late 1920s, while Maharaja Digvijaysinhji of Nawanagar had his pieces made by Cartier London in the 1930s.

Some ornamentation retained traditional forms, but other examples incorporated fashionable Art Deco European styles. And for the first time ever, prominent pieces of jewelry were made for the wives of maharajas, signifying a major shift more in line with Western notions of gender in the wearing of jewelry. By the time of Indian independence in 1947, when the maharajas lost their ruling status, the majority of significant items were supplied to elite Indian women rather than men.

Cartier and India

In the first half of the twentieth century, all the styles adopted in Western jewelry, ranging from Chinese and Japanese to Persian and ancient Egyptian, those of India were the most persistent. Jacques Cartier was so impressed by the magnificence of the jewelry worn by the maharajas at the ceremonies marking the coronation of King George V and Queen Mary in 1911 that his firm, Cartier, began to incorporate Indian stones and designs into its jewelry. It introduced carved Indian colored gemstones, particularly emeralds, into a new Art Deco style of highly colored pieces while also adopting forms based on Indian traditional jewelry, such as the armband and the bangle.

Jacques Cartier with Indian princes during 1921. Photograph from Jacques Cartier’s show recording his voyage to India in 1921. Cartier Archives © Cartier
“Indian jewelry is finding a new design-driven direction and making its mark on the international stage.”
—Vivienne Becker in *Beyond Extravagance*, 2013

**Reworking Jewelry Traditions**

After the design excesses of the 1980s, when jewelry combined extravagant forms with bright colors and mechanical finish, European designers began to discard essentially Western approaches to jewelry, which tended toward precision and brilliance, in favor of handmade pieces. They looked to India, with its long traditions of handcraftsmanship in gold, enamel, and gem setting. This development gave rise to a new wave of Indian-inspired jewelry in the West. The jewels combined the softer traditional gold beloved in India with colored stones that were not necessarily “perfect,” in the Western manner.

Around this same time, jewelers in India underwent a sea change, opening up to new ideas in design that departed from well-worn practices. This is typified by the work of Viren Bhagat in Mumbai, who approaches Indian traditions with Western precision. He is but one of many Indian jewelers embracing new concepts and continuing the history of exchange between East and West revisited anew each generation.

**Contemporary Jewelry:**

**JAR and Bhagat**

The work of leading contemporary jewelers all over the world continues to reflect the influence of India in a variety of expressions. Renowned Parisian jeweler JAR (Joel Arthur Rosenthal) has incorporated historic Indian stones into his work, appreciating their distinctive shapes and cuts that contrast with the geometrically faceted gems that dominate Western jewelry today. His creations sometimes also draw on Indian motifs, as is apparent in the group of his objects included here.

JAR’s jewels can be contrasted with the pieces created by the Mumbai-based jeweler Bhagat, whose work is characterized by the use of custom-cut flat diamonds and natural pearls in almost invisible platinum settings. These pieces often echo traditional Indian forms, but they are executed with a sensibility that reflects the precision of the great European jewelry houses, with a fresh minimalist approach. The works of these two jewelers reflect the ongoing cross-cultural exchange between India and the West.