ANCIENT GOLD RINGS FROM ASIA
The Tuyet Nguyet Collection

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Photographs by William Furniss
“Vanity may be a private characteristic, but its outward expression is molded by society.”

HISTORICALLY, scholars have considered jewellery to be a minor art form and not as a testimony to the significant aspects of traditional life in ancient societies. This subject matter was considered rather decadent, and little attention was given to the quality and quantity of jewellery that adorned idols and gods throughout Asia. It is, therefore, admirable that a collection of such breadth and depth was formed when not in scholarly fashion. Tuyet Nguyet, in her position as publisher of *Arts of Asia*, has been exposed to many forms of art throughout her lifetime and her love for the “minor arts” led to the creation of this important collection.

Tuyet Nguyet (Snow Moon) was born in Vietnam in Tan An province near the Mekong River in South Vietnam. She was educated in Saigon (now Ho Chi Minh City) and Paris, and then studied journalism at Mundelein College in Chicago. She married Stephen Markbreiter in 1959, and moved with him to Hong Kong where she founded *Arts of Asia* in 1970. Over a period of forty years, Tuyet Nguyet judiciously acquired her collection of 100 rings, some of which are featured here, with the aim of collecting the best regional examples. She sourced from private collections and from many of the best dealers in the field. In order to understand the importance of this collection, one needs to understand the historical context. Conquerors have come and gone, and borders and boundaries are blurred, but jewellery remains a mirror on the ancient world.

**Oc Eo Culture**

The earliest evidence of gold working in Southeast Asia is found in the coastal regions of southern Vietnam, and dates to the 3rd–2nd centuries BC. The Chinese emissaries to Funan describe the kingdom’s sphere of influence as including the Malay Peninsula; indeed, burial masks made from sheets of gold have been found as far afield as Bali and the Philippines. The people of Funan imposed a tax on gold, emphasising its commercial importance in Southeast Asia. They were also thought to be the precursors of the Khmers.

“Funan was famed for its trade in perfumes, ivory, brightly coloured birds and every imaginable type of rare and precious merchandise. There were extensive libraries and archives; wooden houses were built on stilts. Surrounded by jewelled young women wearing ornamental fly whisks, the king of Funan sat on a carved naga that served as a throne, with a vivid scarf the colour of the dawn sky draped over his bare shoulders. His high pointed crown was adorned with golden flowers and set with precious stones. He wore a golden belt, cords and necklaces.”

**Java**

*Pre-Classical period (500 BC–AD 200) and Proto-Classical period (200–650 AD)*

Since the beginning of human activity and probably re-enforced by the arrival of Hinduism and Buddhism from India, gold had a particularly esteemed position in ancient Javanese society. Greco-Roman traders not only exported vast quantities of gold to India, but also exported traditional gold-making techniques. From 250 AD on, they turned their attention to Southeast Asia in the search for gold. This resulted in huge demand: not having gold in Ancient Java was shameful and isolated you from your peers. It was used not only as a currency, as in Oc Eo, but also in the production of symbolic objects for worship. Once gold became the measure of wealth it had to become standardised. The earliest reference to this dates to the 4th century BC in India.

In Hindu mythology, it was believed that the universe was born from a golden embryo and Brahma, the creator, was born from a golden egg. The fire god of the Vedic scriptures, Agni was symbolised by gold, which, thus, became the symbol of creation. Kings and royalty in Southeast Asia were said to be infused with a “golden light of inflamed passion”, but more likely this was the reflection from the amount of gold worn by them. Gold does not tarnish or decay, so also fulfills a protective purpose. During this period, gold was mined in Sumatra and Borneo.

Before the Common Era, the Javaneses traded with the known world. South China, Vietnam and the Philippines have sites where similar gold objects have been found. During the early Chinese Han dynasty (206 BC–AD 220) there were many references to the gold of Sumatra and it played an important role in tribute money during the Classic Java period. The Chinese traded gold into Java and the Javanese returned it to the Chinese in the form of tribute.

*Classic period: Early Classic period (650–1000), Middle (1000–1292) and Majapahit (1293–1519)*

The Early Classic period was based in Central Java but, from the 9th century, political power shifted to East Java. Government alternated between the Buddhist Sailendra dynasty (778–830) and the Hindu Sanjaya dynasty (732–760). The Majapahit Empire—the largest Kingdom of pre-modern Indonesia—characterises the Late Classic period, of which the 14th century is now considered that empire’s height, stretching from New Guinea in the East to western Sumatra in the West. However, with the arrival of Islam in the early 14th century, the empire declined and came to an end in 1519. A group of three rings from the Tuyet Nguyet Collection display characteristics from this period (1–3). These rings were cast in one piece out of gold, with the bezels decorated by incising imagery usually associated with Vishnu. Most of the rings found during this period were from the Dieng Plateau.

Dieng style rings take their name from the Dieng region in Central Java during the Wonosobo Regency. They were used as seal rings for personal identification (4). The *sri* inscriptions have motifs associated with the Sanskrit word “*sri*”, luck, fertility and prosperity. *Sri* is the consort of the Hindu God Vishnu. Through her association with Vishnu, motifs usually attributed to him, such as the conch shell and fish, have become symbols of good fortune, abundance or fertility. Some rings were cast as blanks and then engraved and polished. Sometimes the decoration was simply cast and not subsequently engraved.
Khmer, Cambodia

The great Pre-Angkor period (1st–8th century) was also heavily influenced by India, whereas the Angkor period (9th–13th century) developed its own distinctive artistic style. The Javanese conquered part of the Pre-Angkorian empire in the later part of the 8th century, which influenced greatly the style of ornamentation found in the Angkor period (5–8).

Gold rings inset with precious stones have been found throughout what was formerly the Angkor Empire, comprising present-day Cambodia and parts of Thailand. Most were found in temple precincts and probably served as temple offerings. The shanks are made from hammered gold and the rough-cut stones are set using four triangular claws. Commonly used stones included agate, ruby, garnet, crystal and sapphire. The stone and shank are usually separate elements and the shanks are mostly plain, but sometimes worked in a manner reminiscent of the stone work on temple walls. Similar rings appear on Khmer sculpture, adorning both hands and feet. Both solid and hollow rings were made. The hollow rings can be very large in order to keep the weight light. Rings of this form were found in northwestern India during the Gupta period (4th–5th century). The clear influence from India is seen here.²

The Khmer Empire was a powerful empire in Southeast Asia from 802 to 1431 which, at its peak, covered much of present-day Cambodia, Thailand, Laos and southern Vietnam. In 802, Jayavarman II (802–835) led a series of suc-

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5
Solid gold ring of a double lotus
Pre-Angkor, 1st–8th century
Height 3.3 cm, width 2.8 cm, diameter 2 cm
Solid gold ring moulded in one piece and inset with a tumbled blue glass bead. This is an indication of early manufacture.

6
Gold finger ring
Khmer, 8th–11th century
Height 3.3 cm, width 3.3 cm, diameter 2.1 cm
Gold ring consisting of a heavy gold shank rising to support an oval bezel, which is bordered with spiral wire and holds a cabochon crystal by means of four triangular claws. The shanks were cast and the bezel added as a separate element.

7
Gold finger ring
Khmer, 8th–11th century
Height 2.9 cm, width 3 cm, diameter 2 cm
Gold ring consisting of a heavy gold shank rising to support an oval bezel, which is bordered with spiral wire and holds a cabochon ruby by means of four triangular claws.

8
Gold finger ring
Khmer, 8th–11th century
Height 2.5 cm, width 2.2 cm, diameter 1.7 cm
Gold ring consisting of a heavy gold shank rising to support an oval bezel, which is bordered with spiral wire and holds a cabochon crystal by means of four triangular claws. The shoulders show fine repoussé work.

9
Gold ring inset with tumbled rubies and sapphires
Angkor period, 9th–13th century
Height 3.4 cm, width 3.2 cm, diameter 2 cm
The shank is a hollow plain shank curled on the shoulders in the style seen in Burma and Vietnam. However, the four pointed petals forming a star-like form is the base for a more complex flower set with granulation and a central sapphire held with four claws, as seen in earlier pieces. There is a clear correlation of this ring and those made during the Fatimids period (9th–11th century). The six-pointed star, a familiar symbol in Islamic art, was believed to ward off evil.

10
Gold ring set with tumbled crystal
Angkor period, 9th–13th century
Height 3.4 cm, width 3.2 cm, diameter 2 cm
This ring shows a development on the last ring (9) in that the ring is now of one form and not laid one layer upon another. The full ring is decorated with a sophisticated use of granulation. The central stone is held with two triangular claws that could be a regional difference.
successful campaigns subjugating neighbouring minor states. He took the title of chakravartin, “universal ruler”, and it was rumoured he came from Java. The Hindu and Buddhist faiths became predominant. The Javanese conquered part of the Pre-Angkorian empire in the later part of the 8th century.

Angkor was the biggest city and was called Yashodharapura, or Glory Bearing City. Jayavarman VII (1181–1218) was considered to be the greatest of the Khmer rulers. He recaptured Angkor from the Cham in the 12th century and, in turn, invaded the Cham Kingdom. The Thai Kingdom of Ayutthaya conquered Angkor in 1431, which bought the Khmer reign to an end.

The Khmers did not have a system of coinage and, therefore, apparently used a more random form of gold (not standardised as in Java). Nevertheless, gold under the Khmers was centrally controlled, permeating every aspect of life; Khmers decorated their bodies, temples and deities in gold. They followed the Indic belief that the body was the temple of the spirit and so should be properly adorned to worship the gods. Very few pieces, however, survive, as the Khmers were cremated, not buried. Whatever gold survives was found hidden in caches. Gold mining was not native to Cambodia although there were a few gold-working areas. There are a few references, but not many examples, that date from the Pre-Angkor period that refer to repoussé gold inset with stones. Further information on dating is taken from sculptures that are carved wearing jewellery. Contemporary Chinese chronicles describe the lavishness of gold in the royal households.

In his famous chronicle, The Customs of Cambodia, Zhou Daguan describes a royal procession of Indravarman III (reigned 1295–1308) as follows:

Gold ring set with brown onyx
Angkor period, 9th–10th century
Bezel length 3.7 cm
Height 3 cm, width 3.6 cm, diameter 2 cm
The dark brown onyx is mounted in a plain gold ring similar to Greco-Roman and Hellenistic examples. The intaglio is iconographically unique to Southeast Asia. The motif describes the myth of Ganesha receiving the head of Airavata, Indra’s elephant.5

Solid gold ring with a cast and worked figure of a Ganesha
seated on a lotus and flanked by two rats (two views)
Angkor period, 8th–9th century
Height 3.2 cm, width 3 cm, diameter 2.2 cm

When the king goes out, troops are at the head of [his] escort; then come flags, banners and music. Palace women, numbering from three to five hundred, wearing flowered cloth, with flowers in their hair, hold candles in their hands, and form a troupe. Even in broad daylight, the candles are lighted.

Then come other palace women, bearing royal paraphernalia made of gold and silver...

Then come the palace men carrying lances and shields, with the king’s private guards. Carts drawn by goats and horses, all in gold, come next. Ministers and princes are mounted on elephants, and in front of them one can see, from afar, their innumerable red umbrellas. After them come the wives and concubines of the king, in palanquins, carriages, on horseback and on elephants. They have more than one hundred parasols, flecked with gold.

Behind them comes the sovereign, standing on an elephant, holding his sacred sword in his hand. The elephant’s tusks are encased in gold.

Only the ruler can dress in cloth with an all-over floral design...Around his neck he wears about three pounds of big pearls. At his wrists, ankles and fingers he has gold bracelets and rings all set with cat’s eyes...When he goes out, he holds a golden sword [of state] in his hand.6

13
Solid gold ring, cast and worked, with a round bezel depicting Lakshmi flanked by two elephants (two views)
Angkor period, 9th–10th century
Height 3.2 cm, width 3 cm, diameter 2.2 cm
The round bezel is set over deeply worked shoulders of the shanks depicting architectural details found on buildings of the period. The work is very deep and detailed.

14
Solid gold ring, cast and worked, depicting Shiva and Parvarti seated on Nandi (two views)
Angkor period, 9th–10th century
Height 3.2 cm, width 3.3 cm, diameter 2 cm
The central bezel is suspended over heavily worked shoulders on the shank that in itself is fluted. The shoulders reflect architectural details. A later insert has been added.

15
Solid gold ring, cast and worked and set with a cat’s eye
Angkor period, 9th century
Height 3.6 cm, width 3 cm, diameter 2.2 cm
This magnificent ring is a fine example of the superb workmanship from the period. A large cat’s eye tumbled stone is held in a double open lotus, which is held in place by four Asparas wearing large round ear plugs. Two complex and deeply worked Makaras flow down the shoulders of the shanks that flank the bezel. The ring was first cast and then very finely chisel-cut. The designs are outlined distinctively with small punched dotted decoration.
The most remarkable group of rings in this collection come from the Angkor period; these can be dated from stylistically architectural forms mirrored in the gold work (9–17). Due to the quality of the work and sumptuousness of the rings, they must have been made for the royal courts. The complex workmanship and details echo the friezes found in and around the Angkor Wat temple complex. Very little has been recorded about these rings, with the only research undertaken, to date, by Derek J. Content and Claudine Bautze-Picron. There is a typical use of foliage with real and fantastical animals. A large lotus carrying precious stones emerges from scrolls, likely depicting the cosmic waters. Makaras feature predominantly in the repoussé design. Dwarfs ride on the undulating Makaras. Leoglyphs jump out of the open mouths of Makaras as seen on Khmer lintels.
Burma (Myanmar)

Evidence of gold usage has been found in many excavation sites in Burma, indicating the role of gold as a status symbol early in the history of Burma (18-20). Early Chinese chronicles refer to the Burmese as the “gold teeth people” and, indeed, jawbones with gold covered teeth have been excavated. Gold has been found in hoards buried for safekeeping, in burial grounds honouring the dead and by farmers ploughing the land.

The Pyu was an association of five city-states in Central Burma from the 2nd century BC to the 11th century AD. They were a result of the southward migration of Tibetan people and spanned an incredible period from the Bronze Age to the Pagan (Bagan) Civilization that emerged in the 9th century. They were on the trade route between China and India and were heavily influenced by their trade with India and the embracing of Buddhism. However, many iconographic images from Hinduism—Hindu Trinity, Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva, to Garuda and Lakshmi—have also been found, mostly in Lower Burma.

The Pyu city-states were contemporaries of the Kingdom of Funan (Cambodia), Champa (southern Vietnam) Dvaravati (Thailand) and Srivajaya (Indonesia).

Vietnam

Research shows that gold was as important to the early people of this region as it was in Java (21-25). Chinese writings discuss Funan ( difíc) as a powerful kingdom that conquered many areas of Southeast Asia. Taxes were paid in gold, and silver and gold bars were used as currency. Goldsmithing was an important occupation in Funan. Imported gold and beads from Taxilla, northern Pakistan and Greece have been found: the Greco-Roman objects probably came via southern India. The kingdom of Funan disintegrated in the 7th century.

Vietnam did not adopt an Indian courtly style because of Chinese occupation of the north from the 11th century BC to the 10th century AD.
The ancestors of the Cham probably migrated from the Island of Borneo. At its height in the 9th century, the Cham controlled the area from Hue to the Mekong Delta in southern Vietnam, its wealth coming from maritime trade. It was, however, an Indianised kingdom; its people started to convert to Hinduism and then Islam in the 11th century.

The first recorded religion of the Champa was a form of Shaiva Hinduism, brought from India. Hinduism was the predominant religion until the 16th century. The temple of My Son, dedicated to Shiva, is often compared to other historic sites, such as Borobudur in Java, Angkor Wat in Cambodia, Pagan in Burma and Ayutthaya in Thailand.

The Muslim traders of Arab and Persian origin settled along the Vietnam coast and, sometime during the 11th century, they had direct contact with the Cham, but not the rest of Vietnam. The term Cham refers to a collection of polities that extended across the coast of central and southern Vietnam from the 2nd century to 1832 when it was absorbed into the Vietnamese state. From the 7th to the 10th centuries they controlled the trade in spices and silk with China, India and Indonesia.
Thailand

Before the southwards migration of the Tai peoples from Yunnan in the 10th century, the Indianised Kingdoms of the Khmer, Mon, Sumatra and Malay States had ruled the region. The Thais established their own kingdoms that regularly fought against one another and were under constant threat from the Khmers, Burmese and Vietnamese. Thailand was heavily influenced by India through the Buddhist faith. The Dvaravarti Kingdom is thought to have followed Theravada Buddhism, with links to Sri Lanka and the ruling Gupta Kingdom in India. The Dvaravarti was part of the international trading route, with links to the Roman Empire in the west and the Chinese Tang dynasty (618–906) in the east. They lost power to Ayutthaya in the 10th century.

Sukhothai was a kingdom in the north of Thailand, formed from an offshoot of the Khmer Empire, that existed from 1238 to 1583. By the beginning of the 14th century, Sukhothai controlled most of what is present-day central Thailand, and only the eastern provinces remained under Khmer control.

In the mid-16th century, the Ayutthaya Kingdom came under repeated attacks from the Burmese, but managed to extend its influence and power as far afield as the Islamic States on the Malay Peninsula, the Andaman ports of India and the Khmer Kingdom in the north-eastern part of Thailand (26–29). Finally, in 1767, the Burmese captured and sacked Ayutthaya, burning the city to the ground.

India

Much of the gold jewellery highlighted in this article originated in India (30–34). By virtue of the purity and incorruptible properties of gold, it has become linked to spiritual purity and cleanliness, concepts central to the Brahmanical world. Hindu temples across India accrued enormous wealth entirely as dedications from devotees. For a female Hindu, personal wealth was stored in the form of jewellery. Gold in India belongs to the gods; kings (the gods’ representatives on earth) as a result were covered in gold, as were temple dancers and brides, also considered to be “gods” for the day. Each part of the body concerned with the chakras, the seven centres of spiritual power in the human body, was covered with an appropriate jewel. No other nation has placed so much faith in gold and jewels, which provided status in a caste-structured society. The dowry system meant that gold became the property of the wife, passed down through the female line.

The spread of Hinduism and Buddhism propagated traditions of adornment that spread throughout Southeast Asia. Gold jewellery has been found dating from the early periods of Taxilla and Harappa while the Kingdoms of Gandhara and Gupta have yielded many excavations containing sophisticated jewellery, heavily influenced by the Roman and Greek Empires and that of the Scythians.

In 1438, Shah Rukh from Samarkand was sent as an Ambassador to Vijayanagar. He wrote: “all inhabitants of this country, both those of exalted rank and of an inferior class, down to the artisans of the bazaar, wear pearls, or rings adorned with precious stones, in their ears on their necks, on their arms, on the upper part of the hand and on the fingers”.

7Translation courtesy of Derek J. Content.
30  Ruby, emerald and diamond ring
South India, 19th century
Height 2.5 cm, width 2.2 cm, diameter 2 cm

31  Unusual ring in the form of a bird set with diamonds, rubies and emeralds. The reverse is enamelled with a peacock in red, white, blue and green meenakari
Jaipur, North India, 19th century
Height 2.2 cm, width 2.2 cm, diameter 1.8 cm

32  Diamond ring in the form of a flower
Hyderabad, South India, 19th century
Height 2.7 cm, width 2 cm, diameter 1.8 cm

33  Ruby and diamond ring in the form of a flower
Mysore, South India, 19th century
Height 2 cm, width 2.4 cm, diameter 1.5 cm

A  Round ring with a convex bezel depicting Nandi
South India, 19th century
Height 3 cm, width 2.4 cm, diameter 1.8 cm

B  Hexagonal gold ring with Nandi in the central bezel
Java, 16th century
Height 3 cm, width 2.6 cm, diameter 2 cm

C  Gold ring with oval bezel containing Nandi
Java, 10th–12th century
Height 2.4 cm, width 8 cm, diameter 2 cm
These rings were extensively copied in India during the 19th century, but imitations typically had a double ring on the shank.

34  Three solid gold rings depicting a common theme of Nandi, the vehicle of Shiva, show strong cultural crossovers.
Tibet and Nepal

John Clarke wrote: “Nepal and Tibet were on the cultural and economic crossroads of Asia, centre of a world-wide network of trade routes, rather than the isolated Shangri-La of imperial history.”

The use of prophylactic stones was strong in both Nepal and Tibet, and was learnt and adopted from the Indian Subcontinent. Stones were thought to represent the universe and take on the properties of the ruling planets. Indeed, the use of jewellery in imagery goes back to the inception of Buddhism in India with the Three Jewels created to represent the three pillars of faith: The Buddha; The Buddha’s teachings; and the Sangha, or community of monks.

Coral is associated with the planet Mars and is used in Tibet for strength and protection, as well as in the treatment of fevers and kidney disorder (35). It came predominantly from Italy over the southern silk route until the 16th century when the maritime trade routes opened the route to India, and vast quantities were sold in the markets of Calcutta (Kolkata) and Bombay (Mumbai). Tibet, in turn, mined a considerable quantity of gold that was eagerly needed in India and China, leading to cross-fertilization of many ideas. Gold was sent west through the Arab Caliphate and East through tribute to China. However, the Tibetans believed in the sanctity of gold and only dealt in gold dust and shavings, as they believed that by removing nuggets from the earth they would be endangering the wellbeing of the country and, more importantly, the life of the Dalai Lama. Gold had restorative qualities that could not only prolong life, but could also magically dispel demons. Diamond or Vajra plays an important role in Tibetan Buddhism, as it represents enlightenment and permanent stability (36).

Conclusion

Thus, all roads in the landscape of jewellery lead back to Ancient India: the techniques, traditions and beliefs were spread through religion, whether Buddhism, Hinduism or Islam. While retaining a national identity, jewellery across Southeast Asia has a strong common link in design and manufacture that underlines the cross-cultural nature of these very diverse peoples and the importance of jewellery in their ancient civilisations (37). There was, and remains, a common desire among these peoples to dress for the gods, wear jewellery as a proud mark of their status in society and use their jewellery as storage of wealth. Whether a high official in Lhasa or a priest in Java, they shared these common goals and provide the basis of our appreciation of jewellery as a major art form.

I have set out to try and explain the diversity of Tuyet Nguyet’s collection and to outline the importance of having so many regions represented for cross-cultural study. Her collection is unique in that she has lovingly selected masterpieces from so many regions.

Techniques

Wire: the shaping of gold is achieved by hammering or stretching (wire-drawing).

Granulation: The application of small round balls to the surface of the piece. The balls are made from a surface tension of metal or wire when tiny fragments are heated on a charcoal bed.

Casting: Pouring liquid gold into a cast either lost wax (one off) or mould.

Tooling: Decoration of sunken lines and surfaces done on the front of the piece without lifting the material.

Etching: Decoration achieved by removing gold from the surface using a sharp tool.

Punching (repoussé): The design is punched from behind into a sheet of gold and then completed with chiselling for detail.

Engraving: Shallow patterns are engraved into the surface using a sharp tool and hammer.

Bibliography


