

Itinerant Jewellers in Indonesia

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Jewellers in Southeast Asia incorporate a myriad of cultural influences in the design and making of jewellery. Part of the lively production flourished under local patronage for a diverse clientele, including the non-aristocratic classes. Made for different functions – from royal regalia to represent the sovereignty of kings, to objects reflective of personal taste – jewellery continues to play a central role as part of the everyday, and is collectively valued across all social strata.

Through 17th century letters of Jesuit missionaries like Francisco Ignacio Alcina, it was apparent that “Europeans were frequently astonished at the way seemingly ordinary Southeast Asians presented themselves with hundreds of dollars’ worth of gold on their persons” (Ried 1988, 85). Gold jewellery was in constant demand as it served as a practical

means of portable savings and as an indication of wealth and status. Royal capitals and wealthy merchant-aristocrats in particular “established a tradition of gold working which survived the collapse of the royal court, subsequently sending itinerant smiths out to sell or do commissioned work on a temporary basis in newer centres” (Ried 1988, 100). Native jewellers also faced intense competition from immigrant Chinese and Indian artisans who settled throughout the region. The incorporation of foreign styles further entrenched the iconography of hybridised jewellery. The influence of European and Chinese motifs on Malay taste is seen in this group of jewellery.

This necklace (Figure 1) of gold plaques linked by lozenge-shaped chains is a form reminiscent of the traditional *dokoh*, a necklace consisting of



Figure 1. Necklace with crown pendant, gold and diamonds, late 19th or early 20th century length, 39 cm, Indonesia. Gift of Dr Roger and Mrs Betty Mariette, collection of Asian Civilisations Museum, National Heritage Board.

plaques suspended one above the other by chains. *Dokohs* have been worn at Malay weddings by both the bride and bridegroom for over two hundred years. In this example, a crown pendant takes the place of the central plaque. This European-style crown mirrors the one on the Dutch coat-of-arms. Crown motifs were popular in Southeast Asian jewellery by the early 20th century and can be read as symbols of allegiance to the ruling colonial power of the day. Their popularity in the Dutch East Indies is evident from their widespread inclusion in objects such as wayang orang masks, *keris* hilts, and ceremonial headdresses.

The crescent form attached under the crown pendant is seen in jewellery from the Eastern islands of Indonesia, where it can represent sea vessels, buffalo horns, and the crescent moon. The imaginative addition of pomegranate-shaped tassels under the crescent likely alludes to the auspicious significance of pomegranate fruits in Chinese symbolism. Pomegranate fruits are full of seeds, and thus seen as symbolic of fertility and appropriate for weddings.

Aspirational attitudes towards foreign imperial and courtly traditions are seen in the fingernail guard (Figure 2), a popular accessory among women of the Chinese Qing court in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Accompanied by a crown ring, this ensemble is cast in solid gold and studded with diamonds. The use of fingernail guards embodies ideas of genteel upbringing, and is indicative of one's noble status. This fingernail guard's impressive weight, however, distinguishes it from Chinese examples, which are typically made of light filigree work, allowing fingers a high degree of dexterity. The weight of this fingernail guard suggests it was worn only for show, such as when having one's portrait taken.



Figure 2. Fingernail guard (right), late 19th or early 20th century, gold and diamonds, 5 by 4 cm; and ring (left), late 19th or early 20th century, gold and diamonds, length 10 cm, Java, probably Batavia, Indonesia. Gift of Dr Roger and Mrs Betty Mariette, collection of Asian Civilisations Museum, National Heritage Board.

With the advent of photography in the mid-19th century, the increasingly powerful middle class, conscious of their newly attained status, began to drive demand for personal portraits. The wearing of privately commissioned jewellery became part of the process of image-making and a way of displaying status.

Flora and fauna and mythical animals provided a rich source of motifs for local jewellery work. The deer appears on both the finger ornament and brooch, and recalls the appearance of a spotted deer, a species native to East Asia and one that often features in Chinese works of art.



Figure 3. Brooch, gold and diamonds, late 19th or early 20th century, 15.5 by 5 cm, Java, probably Batavia, Indonesia,. Gift of Dr Roger and Mrs Betty Mariette, collection of Asian Civilisations Museum, National Heritage Board.

In Chinese mythology, the deer is associated with immortality and good fortune, as exemplified by their functions as mounts to Shoulao, the god of longevity, and companions to Magu, the goddess of immortality. Set with rose-cut diamonds (*intan*), likely from Kalimantan (Borneo), the similarity in the workmanship of both objects suggests that they were produced by the same maker. Unlike their European counterparts, Indonesian jewellers favoured the heightened individuality of *intan* diamonds over perfectly identical brilliant-cut ones (Richter 2000, 174).

The long gold brooch (Figure 3) is decorated with a row of butterflies and scrolling foliage made of filigree. Called *peniti tak* in Malay, these long brooches were popular among women of various ethnicities in Batavia (the capital of the Dutch East Indies 1619 – 1949 and present today Jakarta) and other parts of Java in the early 20th century, as they were suitable for a *baju panjang* (a long robe with front opening) (Lee 2014, 217). □



Figure 4. Seated lady wearing a *baju panjang* with *peniti tak*, 1910s – 1920s, gelatin silver print, photograph by studio Yiet Sing (日升), 10.5 by 14.5 cm, Batavia, Indonesia. Gift of Mr and Mrs Lee Kip Lee, collection of Peranakan Museum, National Heritage Board.

This group of jewellery will be displayed in the Asian Civilisations Museum's upcoming permanent Jewellery Gallery, which will open at the end of 2019.

Bibliography

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