

Press release

Exhibition

July 6–September 4, 2006

Napoleon Hall



Dagger and scabbard, ca. 1615–1620; Mughal India. Gold, rubies, precious and semi-precious stones, ivory. The al-Sabah Collection, Kuwait National Museum © The al-Sabah Collection / E. Owen



State of Kuwait

This exhibition is organized by The al-Sabah Collection, Kuwait National Museum, in collaboration with the Louvre.

Communications

Aggy Lerolle

Press relations

Céline Dauvergne

+33 (0)1 40 20 84 66 / Fax: 84 52

celine.dauvergne@louvre.fr

“Treasury of the World” Jeweled Arts of India in the Age of the Mughals

This exhibition presents the most beautiful pieces from the collection of Indian jewels and precious objects assembled over many years by Sheikh Nasser Sabah al-Ahmad al-Sabah. It pays tribute to the keen appreciation for beauty and rarity, the extreme refinement and opulence that dazzled visitors to the princely courts of India during the reigns of the Great Mughals. The jeweled arts of the Mughal period provide a splendid illustration of the fruitful confluence between the aristocratic civilization carried from Central Asia by the descendants of the 14th-century Mongol conqueror Tamerlane (or Timur) and wondrous India with its flourishing trade routes, where artists and craftsmen employed their talents, spurred by the enthusiasm of highly enlightened and wealthy patrons. Before definitively returning to the Kuwait National Museum, the Mughal marvels of the al-Sabah Collection are today revealed to the French public for the very first time.

The aim of this exceptional exhibition is to provide the most complete overview possible of the resplendent, elegant and highly developed range of Indian jeweled arts during the Mughal period. More than anywhere else in the world, it was on the Indian subcontinent that jeweled arts found their fullest expression, reaching their zenith under the Great Mughals, who ruled in India from 1526 until 1857 and were renowned for their grand imperial vision, opulence and appreciation of artistry.

Among other works of Islamic art spanning the 7th to the 19th century, the al-Sabah Collection includes the largest grouping of Mughal jewels in the world.

The exhibition is organized thematically into thirteen sections to reveal the rich range of motifs and styles as well as the enormous variety of techniques mastered by Indian artists and craftsmen in the Mughal period. Their prodigious inventiveness and boundless imagination are amply demonstrated by the more than three hundred breathtaking objects displayed (rings, necklaces, earrings, bracelets, turban ornaments, daggers, flasks, boxes, etc.) - all exquisitely crafted with extraordinary delicacy and refinement. The objects on view may elicit a reaction similar to that of the first English ambassador to the Mughal court, Sir Thomas Roe (1580–1644), who, astounded by the opulence of Emperor Jahangir’s jewels, described him as “*the treasury of the world*”:

“In jewells (which is one of his felicities) hee is the treasury of the world, buyeing all that comes, and heaping rich stones as if hee would rather build then weare them.” (Letter written on October 30, 1616, to Prince Charles, later King Charles I).

Exhibition curators

Manuel Keene and Salam Kaoukji, curators of The al-Sabah Collection, Dar al-Athar al-Islamiyyah, Kuwait National Museum and Sophie Makariou, curator, Department of Islamic Art, Musée du Louvre

Publication

"Treasury of the World": Jeweled Arts of India in the Age of the Mughals, by Manuel Keene, with Salam Kaoukji, Thames and Hudson, 160 pp., €29.95



Turban ornament, probably second half 17th century India, probably Deccan. Gold, enamels, emeralds, diamonds. The al-Sabah Collection, Kuwait National Museum © The al-Sabah Collection / Bruce M. White

Visitor information

Place:

Musée du Louvre, Napoleon Hall

Hours:

Open daily except Tuesdays from 9 a.m. to 5:30 p.m., and until 10 p.m. on Wednesdays and Fridays

Admission fees:

Admission to the "Treasury of the World" exhibition only: €8.50

Admission to permanent collections + "Treasury of the World" exhibition: €13 before 6 p.m.; €11 after 6 p.m. on Wednesdays and Fridays

Free admission for youths under 18, the unemployed, and holders of the "Louvre Jeunes", "Louvre Professionnels", "Louvre Enseignants", "Louvre Etudiants Partenaires" or "Amis du Louvre" cards.

Further information:

+33 (0)1 40 20 53 17
www.louvre.fr

The al-Sabah Collection

Assembled beginning in the mid-1970s by Sheikh Nasser Sabah al-Ahmad al-Sabah and his wife Sheikhah Hussah Sabah al-Salim al-Sabah, this distinguished collection was offered by the couple on permanent loan to the Kuwait National Museum in 1983. All but 59 of its outstanding pieces survived the vicissitudes of the 1990 Gulf War, during which most of the holdings were transported to Baghdad under the orders of Saddam Hussein, later to be returned to Kuwait through the agency of the UN. With passion and rigor, Sheikh Nasser has amassed a collection that he has intended as representative of the breadth and diversity of Islamic art. Although it is unquestionably one of the most comprehensive and remarkable collections of Islamic art in the world, the al-Sabah Collection is celebrated most of all for including the most exceptional grouping of Indian jewels and precious objects in existence. Most of these works of jewelry were produced before the end of the 17th century, reflecting Sheikh Nasser's particular collection strategy: while naturally attracted to the most beautiful pieces, he is especially interested in those that make a significant contribution to the overall appreciation of the artistic production of the region during this period. The origins and unrivaled quality of the works in the collection reflect a historical reality: the most beautiful and inventive pieces were generally those produced at the height of the Mughal empire, during the reigns of the Great Mughals Akbar, Jahangir, Shah Jahan, and Awrangzib (between 1556 and 1707).

The golden age of Indian jeweled arts

This exhibition, the first visit to France of the jewels of the al-Sabah Collection, is also the first international exhibition devoted to jeweled arts in the Mughal period.

The pieces presented exemplify the artistic subtlety, creative genius and technical mastery of the Indian artists and craftsmen of the 16th and 17th centuries.

The Indian subcontinent is a land naturally rich in gems and was also the first to develop connoisseurship in precious stones. From ancient times, Indian artists and craftsmen constituted a unique body of technical knowledge, which gave rise to the most widely varied range of jeweled arts in the world. These pieces were commissioned by Mughal patrons not only for their personal adornment and use, but also to serve as precious gifts between rulers, courtiers and diplomatic emissaries. Some of the most remarkable pieces on view here belonged to a succession of Mughal emperors, while many others were the proud possessions of a number of princely patrons. Without exception, they illustrate the dazzling mastery of Indian jewelry artists, whose preferred materials were gold, rubies, emeralds, diamonds, and pearls.

Historical background

In the 8th century, Arab and Central Asian armies made significant incursions into the Indus Valley, establishing governorships which later became principalities. The yearly raids by the Afghan emperor Mahmud of Ghazna into Indian territory during the 11th century and the creation of a Ghaznavid capital in Lahore, which became a highly evolved cultural center, consolidated Islamic power and ensured the long-lasting dominion of Islamic culture over the subcontinent.

From that time forward, a series of Turkish and Afghan dynasties ruled from Delhi over increasingly larger swaths of the region. This Delhi Sultanate was itself conquered in 1526 by Babur, the great-grandson of Timur, who declared himself the first Mughal emperor. His son Humayun was forced out of power after ten years but reclaimed his former position fifteen years later. The Mughal empire then survived without interruption until its last emperor, Bahadur Shah, was deposed by the British in 1857. The grand imperial vision and opulence for which the Mughal rulers were renowned, the magnificence of their courts attaining legendary status in the East as well as the West, mainly attained prominence during a hundred-year period of power and glory (1556–1657) under the reigns of Humayun’s son Akbar and his two successors, Jahangir, a great connoisseur of gemstones, and Shah Jahan, who achieved fame as the builder of the Taj Mahal.

Thirteen thematic sections

The exhibition’s thirteen thematic sections illustrate the full range of technical mastery and stylistic approaches of the Mughal period’s artists and craftsmen. Some of these sections are relatively large and cover extensive historical periods and are thus organized chronologically. Others are smaller in size because they present a particular type of technique or object, thereby allowing visitors to appreciate its specific characteristics.

The first section focuses on the most remarkable pieces illustrating **stone-setting techniques**, highlighting *kundan*, unique to Indian jewelry artists and which gave them unparalleled freedom in the realization of their designs - pure (24-carat) gold foil is packed in layers at room temperature then burnished down, fusing into a solid mass to cover a surface or surround a gem. This technique enabled artists to perform the most astonishing exploits of assembly and to adapt to a startling variety of settings and surfaces, thus creating sculptures of gold and precious stones that are breathtaking both in their forms and their motifs.

The second section deals with objects in **hard stones** (especially jade) **inlaid with gold**, most of which are also set with precious stones. Here again, the *kundan* technique enabled artists to give especially free rein to their creativity and mastery in the use of these materials, which would not have been possible otherwise. Among the heart-stopping examples in this section are a set (sword hilt, quillons and locket) carved from walrus ivory and inlaid with gold as well as probably the oldest dagger hilt sculpted in the form of a horse’s head, carved from rock crystal inlaid with gold and set with rubies, emeralds and banded agate in a floral motif.

The next section presents pieces illustrating the technique of **hammered relief in precious metals**, one of the most important Indian artistic disciplines. Among the masterworks in this section are a gold box (end 16th - early 17th century) ornamented with trees, flowers, and birds. This exquisite decoration reveals the presence in India of 15th and 16th century artistic traditions originating in China, Iran, and Europe. The fourth section presents **jewels with engraved gold backings**. The extraordinary renown of the jeweled arts of India is in large part due, beyond the sheer opulence and magnificence of the gemstone settings on the fronts of pieces, to the masterfully delicate and complex decoration on their backs, which are widely thought to be consistently enameled. On view in this section of the exhibition is another major, although rare, type of back decoration, involving elegantly engraved gold.

The ten works included in the section devoted to **gemstones on gold floral ground** are undeniably the product of the Mughal court’s workshops at their very zenith. The common aspect of these pieces is the richness of the gold background, which is usually engraved and chiseled to create highly elaborate floral and vegetal motifs before being set with precious stones. The celebrated dagger and its scabbard covered with more than 2,400 rubies, emeralds, and diamonds, one of the masterpieces of the collection, illustrates the supreme heights of technical virtuosity reached by artists during this period.

The **developments in enamels** form an extensive section of the exhibition, demonstrating the broad range and superior quality of Mughal enameling, following its introduction into India in the 16th century by Europeans. Often considered as limited to the so-called “Jaipur” style, Indian enamels on view here reveal a great variety of styles and color schemes. A 16th century ring is the most accomplished piece in the collection: its form is specifically Indian while its design and colors are typically European. The seventh section is devoted to **gold-embellished steel**. The “Oriental damascene” technique of chiseling and overlaying ordinary metals with silver or gold in weapons and armor is legendary. The artistic marvels presented here range from elegant and refined Katar daggers to a powder horn ornamented with iris motifs and inscriptions.



Finger ring with rotating and bobbing bird, probably 1st quarter 17th century India, Mughal or Deccan. Gold, rubies, emeralds, chrysoberyl cat's eyes, diamonds, and a single sapphire. The al-Sabah Collection, Kuwait National Museum © The al-Sabah Collection / Bruce M. White

The eighth section groups **sculpted marvels (three-dimensional expressions)**. The synthesis of the Islamic artistic tradition of subtle motifs with the specifically Indian understanding of form resulted in the production of a considerable quantity of superbly wrought objects: daggers and knives with hilts made of jade carved to represent animal heads, vases and other containers in pure and simple forms. Two finger rings, each mounted with a bird in gold and precious stones, are particularly remarkable. As a complement to the preceding section, the ninth displays pieces notable for their **relief ornamentation** carved in hard stones (jade, agate, emeralds). Indian artists were without rivals in the engraving of precious and semi-precious stones and this grouping includes some of the most beautiful examples in the world of this type, especially the vegetal motifs decorating jade vases and containers and the large sculpted emeralds.

The tenth section presents a very small selection of works, whose shared characteristic is that they are **set with gemstones sculpted in relief**, in other words a specific form is given to each stone so as to create a design on the object. One of this grouping's exceptional pieces is the head of a walking stick in the shape of a dragon's head: its upper portion (the crest) in relief, the spectacular sculpted rubies used for the beak and the brow, as well as the jowls set with precious stones all deserve special attention.

The eleventh section presents unusual **gemstone forms**, namely single settings of stones that were sculpted in a particular manner. These include two diamonds in the shape of amulets (*taviz*), worked in such a way as to evoke natural rock crystals, a dagger whose hilt is made of three enormous emeralds, and two miniature vessels each carved from a single stone (one in emerald, the other in star garnet). **Gemstones engraved with imperial inscriptions**, executed with a diamond-tipped stylus chiefly on spinels (ruby-like gems), are one of the main characteristics of Mughal art. Apart from the beauty of the stones and the calligraphy, these inscribed pieces are also historical documents of singular importance. The al-Sabah Collection is home to the second largest group of inscribed spinels in the world, after Iranian National Jewels Collection. The largest inscribed gemstone is a 249.3 carat spinel bearing the inscriptions of six monarchs, the earliest of which dates to the reign of the Timurid ruler Ulugh Beg (1447–1449). This stone was presented to Emperor Jahangir in 1621 by the ambassadors of Shah Abbas the Great of Iran, whose own name is also inscribed on the stone, as are those of two other Mughal emperors. Also on view in this section is an 85.6 carat emerald inscribed with the entire Throne verse from the Koran.



Pendant with cameo portrait of emperor Shah Jahan, ca. 1760 India; front: Mughal; back: 19th century Deccan. Original part in gold with rubies and a cameo; the back in silver, engraved and inlaid with niello. The al-Sabah Collection, Kuwait National Museum © The al-Sabah Collection / E. Owen

The thirteenth and last section brings together all the styles and techniques illustrated in the preceding sections to highlight several **exceptional pieces**, exemplifying the creativity and inventiveness of the period's greatest artists. All these pieces pay tribute to an unrivaled virtuosity whereby materials in themselves exquisite were incorporated within genuinely harmonious and majestically accomplished artistic creations. While the sumptuousness of each of the elements as well as their undeniable intrinsic value might have defeated the creative spirit of the artists, on the contrary they were able to exalt the magnificence of these materials through the supreme mastery of their art.