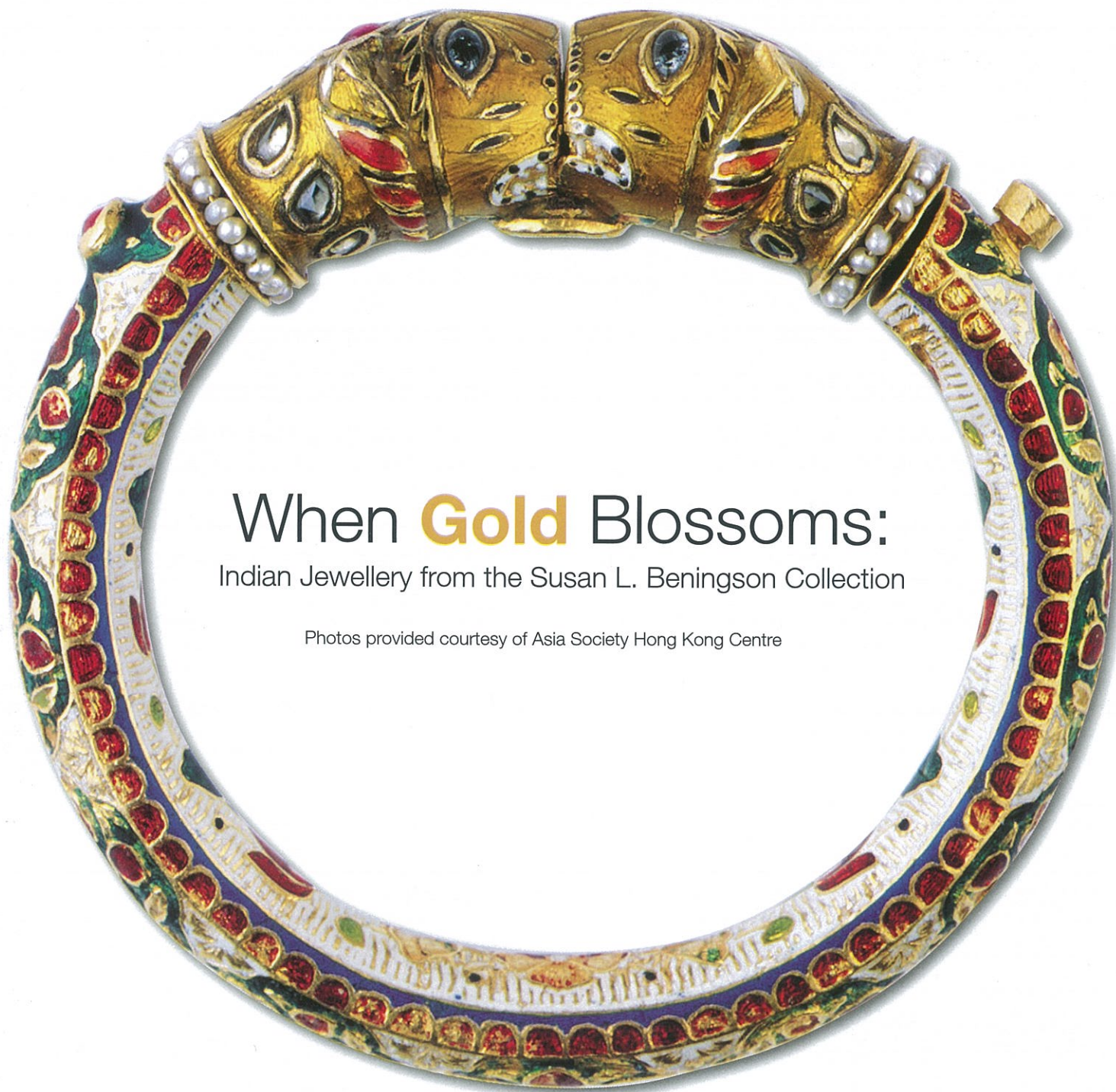


## When **Gold** Blossoms:

Indian Jewellery from the Susan L. Beningson Collection

Photos provided courtesy of Asia Society Hong Kong Centre



Gold bracelet with enamel work, set with rubies, diamonds, and pearls, South India; late 18th century, Susan L. Beningson Collection.

When Gold Blossoms: Indian Jewellery from the Susan L. Beningson Collection offers visitors a glimpse into India's rich cultural history. The focus of the collection is jewellery from the south of India, in particular, jewellery for deities and women. The exhibition features more than 160 jewellery pieces from Beningson's personal collection. It includes exquisite bracelets, rings, earrings, necklaces and hair ornaments of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Divided into two realms of experience, 'Women's jewellery', and 'Devotional Jewellery', the pieces on show are fashioned in a South Indian style, featuring distinctive forms and a preference for gold and rubies remarkably different from jewellery of north India, which shows predominantly curvilinear shapes and is adorned mainly with precious and semi-precious stones.

CULTURE Magazine spent a bit of time with the collector and found out more about how she started collecting and what inspires her.

**Susan, please tell us about your background—especially about how and why you became a collector.**

My parents were art collectors, so we often joke that it's a genetic flaw that got passed down in my family! So it was a very natural thing for me to start collecting in my early 20s. I focused on different areas than my parents. Early on I was collecting Chinese textiles, small bronzes and ceramics, and then started collecting Indian and Southeast Asian art. My collection is quite eclectic. It's whatever I fall in love with.

I currently teach Asian art history at the City University of New York. My PhD in Chinese art history is from Columbia University and my doctoral dissertation was on Buddhist cave-temples at Dunhuang in northwestern China on the ancient Silk Road. I also had an earlier career in the corporate world.

**When did you start collecting Indian jewellery?**

I started collecting Indian jewellery thirty years ago. My first piece was a ruby studded gold bead necklace, and at that time I knew nothing about Indian jewellery. I just flipped for the necklace and wanted to wear it. I bought it at a jewellery store in Bangkok en route to Angkor Wat in Cambodia! When I got home to New York, I wanted a pair of earrings to go with the necklace, and so it began. Prior to that I had collected a small group of Classical gold



Gold ear studs in the form of lotuses, set with rubies, Assam, India; 19th century, Susan L. Beningson Collection.



Gold cobra-head braid ornament (nagar) set with rubies, emeralds, diamonds, and pearls, South India; 18th century, Susan L. Beningson Collection.



## When Gold Blossoms: Indian Jewellery from the Susan L. Beningson Collection

jewellery, Greek and Roman, and so I was used to looking at antique and ancient gold. I just fell in love with Indian jewellery, and here we are 200 objects later....

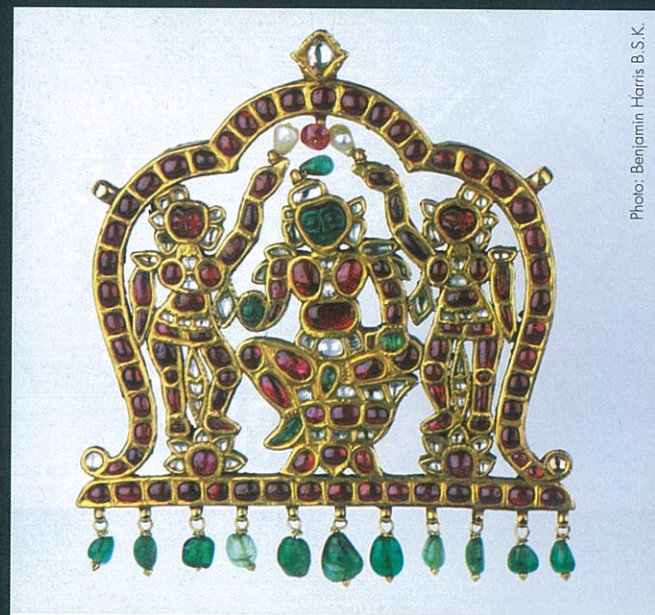
### How did you become interested in this type of jewellery?

Initially I was just buying objects to wear, but after awhile I became intrigued with temple jewellery and ritual objects. This eventually became my main focus.

### What are some of the unique features or details about this type of jewellery that are most significant?

Every collection is very individualized, based on that person's taste. I was never trying to create a representative collection, just things I liked or felt passionate about. At the time I started collecting Indian jewellery, South Indian gold was often being melted down for its gold content. It wasn't collected as it is today. At that time, people who were collecting Indian jewellery were focused on North Indian jewellery or carved Mughal gemstones. For me personally, I liked the workmanship and techniques used in South Indian gold. I also liked the gemstones. South Indian jewellery primarily uses rubies, diamonds, emeralds, and pearls. One of the reasons Vishakha [see question and answer below] wanted to do the exhibition was to show things that hadn't been seen before. At that time, people weren't really focused on South Indian gold.

## The focus of the collection is jewellery from the south of India, in particular, jewellery for deities and women



Gold pendant for a deity, set with rubies and emeralds, some of them engraved, and diamonds, South India; 18th-early 19th century, Susan L. Beningson Collection.

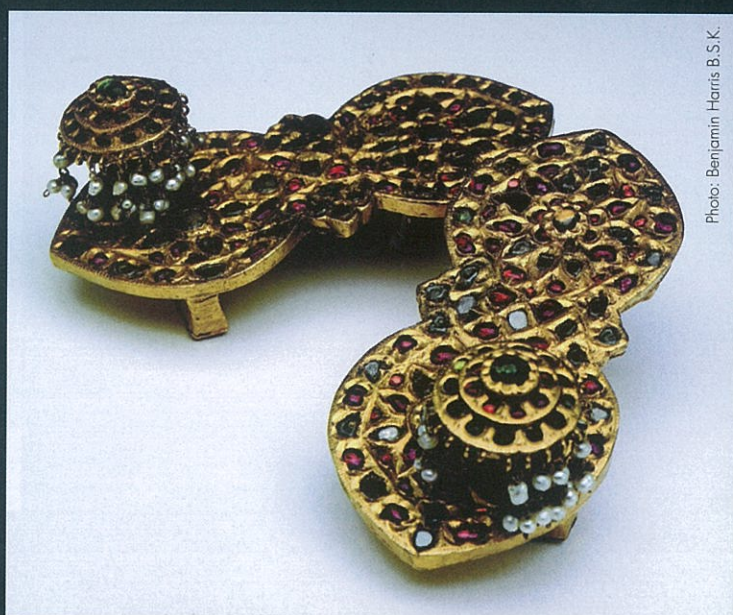
October-November 2012

### How large is your collection?

There were around 170 objects in the collection when the catalogue was published in 2004. In addition to the jewellery and temple objects, there is also a collection of antique Indian photographs of people wearing jewellery to show the objects in context. Some of the photographs are also being shown here in Hong Kong. Today, the collection has grown to around 200 pieces.

### Tell us how us about the exhibition "When Gold Blossoms: Indian Jewellery". How was the show put together?

The idea for the exhibition came from the Asia Society Museum in New York. When I started collecting Indian jewellery, I never thought that it would be shown in an exhibition. Dr. Vishakha Desai, the recently retired President of Asia Society was, prior to being President, the Director of the Asia Society Museum. She knew that I was collecting Indian jewellery and focusing on South Indian gold. When she saw my collection she thought that there should be an exhibition and decided on Dr. Molly Aitken, a scholar of Indian painting, as the curator. The exhibition was first shown at the Asia Society Museum in New York in the fall of 2004 and then extended until early 2005. While it was on view in New York, the American Federation for the Arts (AFA) came to Asia Society and asked if they could tour the exhibition. The tour became so popular that



Sandals for a deity (padukas) of sheet gold over lac, set with rubies, emeralds, and diamonds and hung with pearls. Deccan, India; 17th-18th century, Susan L. Beningson Collection.



Gold necklace and earrings set with diamonds, rubies, and emeralds, South India; 19th century, Susan L. Beningson Collection.

the AFA kept adding on venues, and after the AFA tour ended, Asia Society then toured it to an additional venue before it came to Hong Kong.

So, in total this is the seventh venue for the exhibition and the only international one! The other museums were all in the United States. In addition to the Asia Society Museum in New York, the other museums were the Dallas Museum of Art, Phoenix Museum of Art, Figge Museum, St. Petersburg Museum, Michael C. Carlos/Emory University Art Museum and now the Asia Society Museum in Hong Kong.

Some of the objects have also been shown in exhibitions at the Freer Gallery of Art/Arthur M. Sackler Museum (Smithsonian Institution) in Washington, D.C., the Rietberg Museum in Zurich, and the Brooklyn Museum of Art (New York).

### How did the exhibition come to Hong Kong?

Asia Society in New York approached me about showing the exhibition at the new Asia Society Museum here in

Hong Kong. It's a fabulous new venue and I think the exhibition looks great here. The Museum just opened in March of this year, and so this is the second exhibition. The first exhibition was from the Rockefeller Collection, which is the permanent collection of the Asia Society Museum.

This is the first international and also the last venue for the tour. I think it's poetic that the exhibition starts and ends at the Asia Society Museum.

### Do you collect other things? If so, please tell us about it.

Yes, actually my primary area of collecting is Buddhist sculpture. I also collect traditional Asian art as well as contemporary Chinese calligraphy. ■

When Gold Blossoms: Indian Jewellery from the Susan L. Beningson Collection will be on view until January 2013, at the Asia Society Gallery. For more information about the exhibition, visit the website of Asia Society Hong Kong Centre, [www.asiasociety.org.hk](http://www.asiasociety.org.hk).