

# Clusters of Treasures To Clothe the Soul

By PAULA DEITZ

**I**N 1955, Oppi Untracht, a New Yorker who now lives in Finland, was spellbound by an exhibition of Indian textiles and jewelry he saw at the Museum of Modern Art. Since then Mr. Untracht (often with his wife, the Finnish glass designer Saara Hopea, who died in 1984) has spent years traveling the highways and byways of the subcontinent, studying jewelry-making techniques and buying jewelry. Trained as a photographer by Berenice Abbott, he also photographed people he encountered wearing their ritualistic finery.

When Nina Stritzler-Levine, the director of exhibitions at the Bard Graduate Center for Studies in the Decorative Arts in Manhattan, was in Finland organizing last year's show on Finnish Modernism, she met Mr. Untracht and asked him to curate the first comprehensive exhibition of Indian jewelry in New York. His collection of jewelry and photographs along with loans from museums and other private collectors make up "India: A Jewelry Spectrum," a dazzling exhibition on view through Jan. 31.

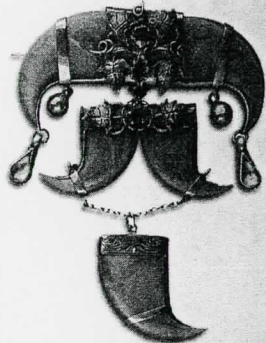
Each of the more than 300 ornaments on display could qualify as a work of art in itself. Yet, in reality, the ornaments were intended to be worn in clusters, literally covering the body from head to foot. For a

**A display of sacred  
Indian jewelry indicates  
the power such  
ornaments held over  
those they adorned.**

woman, her jewelry was her dowry, her only personal belongings; and for security reasons she generally wore all of it. Seeing the assortment of beads, amulets, necklaces, anklets and rings, emblazoned with figures of gods or religious symbols, is a reminder of the power the jewelry held over the people who wore them.

Steven Waterman, Bard's in-house designer, lined the walls of the intimate galleries with handwoven silk in the colors worn by Indian women — green, purple, saffron

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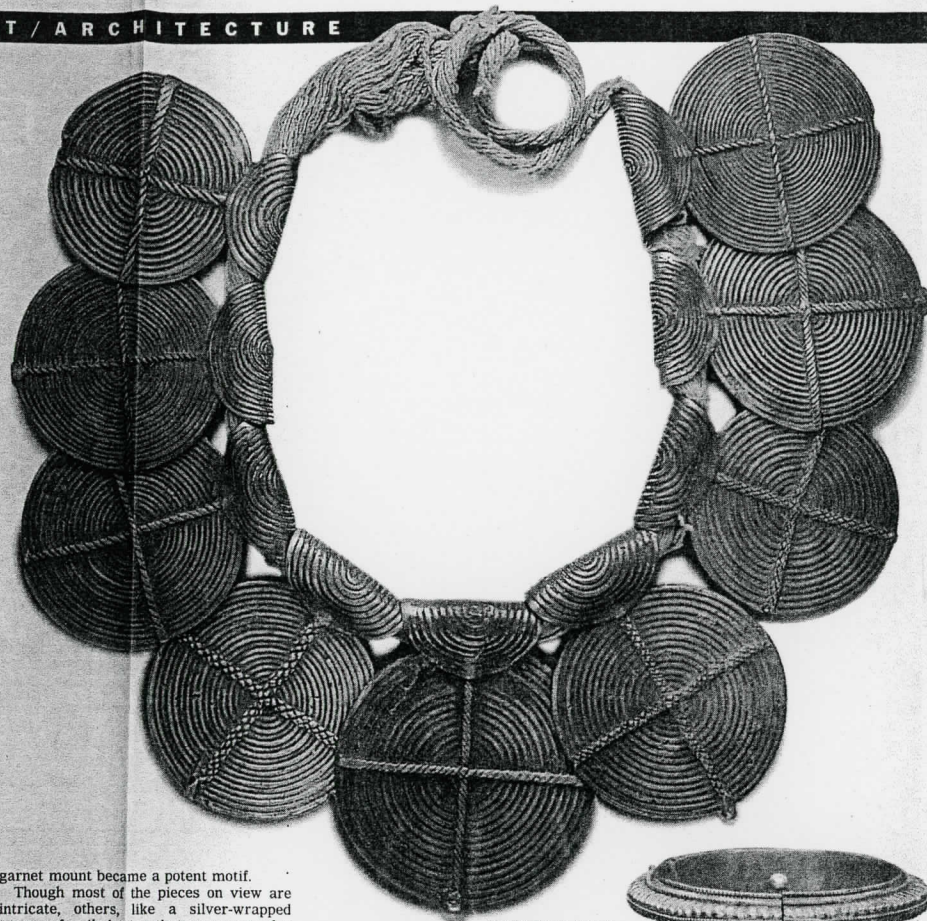


Private Collection, Finland

and rose red. The ornaments are arranged in the galleries according to their origins: bead and metal work from isolated tribal regions in one, silver jewelry from rural villages in another and gold and gemstones from the cities in the last gallery. Within each area, Mr. Untracht has grouped similar objects, beginning with head ornaments followed by ear rings, necklaces, armlets, bracelets, belts and ankle bracelets. The overall effect of the exhibition is like walking into an overflowing treasure chest.

An important insight gained from the show is that designs were often dictated by available technology rather than esthetics. A necklace from the state of Nagaland, for example, uses three conch shells, brass trumpet-shaped pendants and beads made of carnelian, glass and conch shell separated by bone. Although the tribesmen who made it had devised complex bead technologies, they used very little metal because they were dependent on metal workers from outside the tribal area. What made the jewelry precious to the inland tribes, though, were the raw materials that came from distant seashores, like coral or conch and cowrie shells.

In the villages, silver amulets that hung around the neck often depicted the wearer's personal deity or the animal upon which the deity rode — like the bull that carried Shiva. One amulet in the form of a container was shaped to represent the bull's horns, and for festivals, sacred bulls wore silver head ornaments encrusted with glass stones. The wearing of animal parts was also thought to impart the power of the beast to the wearer: A brooch with tiger claws set in silver and



Ghysels Collection, Brussels

garnet mount became a potent motif.

Though most of the pieces on view are intricate, others, like a silver-wrapped torque of coiled wire that was part of a dowry, demonstrate a simplicity that seems both contemporary and timeless.

Weddings offered sumptuous displays of jewelry, especially in cities where gold was prevalent. A groom might be festooned with a gold tinsel plume like a parade horse, while his bride in a red sari might have worn a nose ring, bangles and a cobra-shaped braid ornament. If she were a second wife, she wore an ornament of rock crystal to ward off the spirit of the former wife. With all the glitter, the gallery takes on the festivity of a wedding itself.

Gold and silver, much in demand in India in the 19th century, were also scarce natural resources. "Since Roman times, Indians would only trade their spice, ivory and textiles for silver or gold," said Mr. Untracht, "and the ships came laden in bullion." Much of the gold came from the 1940 California

gold rush. Little could a Forty-niner imagine that the gold he gathered would crown a young groom on his wedding day in the Punjab. But gold was more than a luxury. In the foreword to the catalogue, Susan Weber Soros, the director of the Bard Graduate Center, writes, "Hindu belief holds that gold is a sacred metal, symbolizing the warmth of the sun." □

A brooch, above left, a silver-wrapped torque of coiled wire, above, and an arm cuff are on view through Jan. 31 in "India: A Jewelry Spectrum," an exhibition at the Bard Graduate Center for Studies in the Decorative Arts.

