A Museum Display that Dazzles

Posted on

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It’s such a dazzling collection you could spend the greater part of a whole morning admiring it, was how a friend of mine, not usually wont to exaggeration, described the jewellery on display at the National Museum, Colombo.

With such a recommendation it did not take me long to find a convenient Saturday morning to visit the Museum, housed in a grand colonial building with a lawn of royal proportions, situated in Colombo’s less crowded Cinnamon Gardens area.

My interest in jewellery was not surprising. If one notices all the jewellery worn by Sri Lankan women, even in the midst of all the bustle of modern living, one is naturally inclined to learn what jewellery would have been in vogue in the past. So my Saturday morning· foray into the Colombo Museum was certainly as rewarding as my friend had promised.

One thing which struck me about this collection is the time span it covered. The exhibits go back several millenia from the adornments of Sri Lanka’s veddah down to the last years of the Kandyan Kingdom. which was ceded to the British in 1815. The oldest of the pieces on display are a bangle made of bone worn by the very

early Veddahs and a simple bead necklace made of well-rounded pebbles. Of a later period is the brass bangle discovered in a Veddah cave, and another bangle made of metal inlaid with bone.

The recent excavations in the UNESCO-designated Cultural Triangle of Sri Lanka have unearthed many examples of ancient jewellery and objets d'art, some of which are on display at a special gallery in the Museum. Among these are some exquisite bead chains discovered at the Jetavanarama site dating from the 3rd to 4th Centuries AD.

An ear ornament found at Sigiriya (4th Century) helped recreate in one's mind the lifestyle of the Court of Kasyapa. This gem-studded ornament in gold is a true masterpiece of the jewellers' art. The whole piece, which is about four inches long, is more than two inches wide at the middle. The ear lobe of the wearer would have been pulled down several inches by the weight of the ornament, as was the fashion in those days, as one notices from the long ear lobes of the Sigiriya maidens. Also dating from about the 4th Century is a beautiful golden signet ring found at a depth of 16 ft. in a gem pit in Galpottevila in the Pelmadulla area, near Ratnapura.

The largest most representative and best preserved of the jewellery exhibits on display are from the Kandyan period, where you can see the influences of Portugal, Holland and South India. There is an entire section which displays personal ornaments made of ivory and tortoise shell. The tortoise-shell combs worn by high-caste men demonstrate an intriguing facet of Sri Lankan fashion which was seen even as recently as the late 1940s, while the jewel boxes in tortoise shell, sometimes inlaid with ivory or porcupine quills, could fetch a tidy price in dollars at any Western auction of antiquities today. There is also a whole range of pill boxes done in ivory or tortoise shell, as well as several pairs of spectacle frames in ivory, and some ornamental ivory ear picks all from the 17th to 19th Centuries.

It is difficult to escape noticing a truly rare set of ivory weighing scales from the 16th Century. It is recorded that the delicate scales were a gift from King Rajasinghe of Sitawaka to 'his palace craftsman to weigh the gems used in making jewellery for the royal family.

There are ivory bangles with the most delicate carving done on them and ivory combs similarly carved, which would have been the pride of women's vanity boxes in the 16th Century. Ivory has also been used in the fashioning of handles for daggers worn at the waist by men of fashion of the same period.

There are neck ornaments from simple golden strands to thick filigreed “neck straps” like chokers, filigreed “ropes” in two strands and those with at least eight strands, held together with ornamental clasps at each end. There are the heavy Kandyan bead chains, where the large cherry-size pinkish beads are held in place by well-crafted golden clasps, as well as bejewelled pendants and lockets, where the sapphires and rubies on them would have been more valuable than any secret hidden within. It must have been a Kandyan woman of truly regal proportions who wore the six-strand necklace of silver which is at least 2.5 ft long, and some of the waist chains on display would have easily circled a slim woman’s -waist several times, before the decorative end dangled right down to the ankle.

The women of the Kandyan Court and the nobility of the day definitely liked their bracelets chunky. The extensive collection of this type of jewellery includes bracelets done in silver and copper inlaid with silver, ivory, or crystal. They are all chick bracelets, and the largest on display is at least one and a half inches in width. They are complete with fine carvings on the metal and very ornamental fastening . The huge silver anklets compete in size and craftsmanship with the bracelets. Heavy gold rings were worn both by men and women. Of greater interest here are the rings worn by the kings and the nobles of the Court. The gemstudded design of one ring, which resembles an open flower, could cover the phalange of three adult male fingers. Also to be seen are staff with handles set in rubies and garnets, which must have been the fashion in gems for such ornaments at the time.

As it is today, chewing of the betel leaf was a practice common among Sri Lankans in the Kandyan period too. The habit of betel chewing gave rise to an important piece of functional jewellery – the “Killotte” or chunam box, in which was carried the chunam or edible lime which is so important for a good chew of betel. The chunam box came in many shapes and sizes, some eYen holding as much as 8 ozs of chunam.

Many of them were designed to be carried like the old waist-coat watches of the West, or to dangle from the waist belt. They were made of the best silver and were elaborately carved. Some of the exhibits of the chunam boxes on display indicate what a valued possession it was at the time and how much pain had been taken to make each one a unique ornament. There are chunam boxes set with several gems, those which look like ornamental oysters and others like decorative pouches.

Wearing the hair high and tied in a knot behind the head, as is still the fashion among most Lankan women, the hair pin was a special decorative ornament among

the women of Kandy. There is a fascinating array of hair pins on display at the Museum, some more than six inches long, with the brooches at the head thick and heavily set with gems, and others very slim with small heads, also well adorned with gems. The brooches and pendants of the day came in many designs, among which the butterfly and “hansa puuttuwa” or entwined swans seem to have been the more popular. There is one pendant in the shape of a cluster of stars, which must have taken at least a hundred expensive gems to make, and one moonstone necklace on display had at least 25 moonstones, each not less than one inch long.

The ornamental combs worn by the Kandyan women were made of ivory or sandalwood. There are crescent-shaped combs, crown-shaped combs and two very beautiful combs which are shaped like the dragon of the Oriental zodiac. All of them have gems setting off the traditional motifs carved on them. The dragon’s head seemed to have been the favourite design among those who turned out the many “Kasthana” or ceremonial swords of the Sinhalese. There was the sword of King Bhuvenakha Babu of Yapahuwa on display, as well as innumerable others of the later Kandyan period. Most of them have gilded silver sheaths and highly ornamental handles inlaid with gems. One special exhibit at the Museum is the gold watch presented by the last King of Kandy, Sri Wickrema Rajasinghe, to Mudaliyar Don Adrian Wijesinghe Jayawardene for the acts of clemency and kindness to the king and queen when they were being conducted to Colombo in captivity by the British in 1815. The name of the Western watchmaker “‘Kroese” is still clearly noticeable on the gilded dial.

Whether it be charms and amulets little containers of perfumes which brought good luck and admirers too, beautiful necklaces, handsome bracelets, heavy anklets, ornamental chatelaines on which dangled the keys to many a treasure in gems and jewellery, combs which marked caste and rank, waist chains which measured one’s worth in girth and value of silver and gems that went into their making, all of this and much more are there to be discovered at the Colombo Museum.



Chunky Kandyan bracelets on display at the Museum.
(Suresh de Silva; Courtesy: National Museum, Colombo)



An antique ornamental container for chunam.
(Courtesy: National Museum, Colombo)