Sri Lankan Jewellery Through the Years

Posted on

Sarasi Wijeratne



Walk down any of the more populous streets of Colombo, or any other town in Sri Lanka, and you will be amazed by the number of jewellers in business. The signboards of jewellers, drawn in arresting colours, will be seen amid those of textile

merchants, stationers, grocers and tea kiosks. Even the smallest town in the remote provinces will have at least two jewellers doing good business. Not surprising when one considers the Sri Lankan penchant for jewellery, especially gold jewellery.

Jewellery is part of anyone’s worth in Sri Lanka. It is an investment. An obvious sign of wealth. An assurance of financial security. It is an essential part of a bride’s dowry, or wedding gift from the parents. The manufacture of jewellery has a long tradition in – Sri Lanka. Records show that from the day of the early Sinhalese kings jewellery manufacture was a well-established profession. Whole communities or castes were engaged in the trade, a tradition which remains even today. It is this ancient tradition which has also led to the development of the special skills of the jewellers, their competence in turning out pieces in a variety of traditional styles and designs, as well as their adaptability to master new trends in the trade.

The earliest influence on the jewellery designs in Sri Lanka came from India, as did most other influences. The gifts brought here by the ambassadors of Indian rulers and the goods brought for exchange by early Indian traders included jewellery – particularly gold jewellery.

Today’s jewellery industry, however, is largely traceable to the period of Dutch rule in the country in the 16th and 17th Centuries, when the flourishing jewellery trade of South India influenced the jewellers and people in Sri Lanka. While Indian merchants who came to trade in gems, gold and spices brought some influence on the jewellery trade, this period also saw a large number of traditional South Indian jewellers – the Chettiars – settling down in the maritime regions in Sri Lanka and establishing themselves in business.

Today there are two main types of jewellery design in Sri Lanka: the Low Country jewellery, with its South Indian and Western derivations, and the Kandyan jewellery, which is a blend of old Sinhalese designs with those of the South Indian styles of the 16th and 17th Centuries. The jewellery of the North is in tum a blend of both these traditions with greater influence from the styles of South India. There are many areas of the country in the South; Central and Northern regions where jewellery manufacture is still carried on as a cottage industry, by people who have been in the trade for many generations. Some of these areas are Galle, Hikkaduwa, Ambalangoda and Belideniya in the South; Pilimatalawa, Nattaranpotha and Danrure in the Central Kandyan District; and Jaffna in the North. In many of these areas whole villages are engaged in the manufacture of jewellery using traditional techniques which have changed little through the centuries. Some still use the

bellows worked by hand in preference to the modem blowtorch to smelt gold and spend hours beating out intricate designs on 22-carat gold or sterling silver. Part of the reason for the great demand for Sri Lankan jewellery abroad is the use of 22-carat gold in its manufacture. While design is of great concern in buying jewellery, the Sri Lankan is always more interested in the carat value of the gold used. Any gift of jewellery given will be judged in terms of the value of the gold used, and the worth of a bride in a traditionally arranged marriage will also depend on the amount of pure gold jewellery she brings with her.

Traditional Kandyan jewellery is usually of greater value because of the larger quantity of gold used in the making of these chunky pieces. The designs still found in Kandyan jewellery could be traced to the Kandyan Court in the 16th and 17th Centuries, when members of the royal family were often seen decked in the finest of jewellery. These styles, mainly brought from South India, from where many of the Kandyan queens came, were soon adopted by the larger landowning families of the Kandyan aristocracy. Some of these families still have prize pieces of jewellery dating from this period among their family heirlooms.

Most of the motifs in Kandyan jewellery are drawn from flowers, leaves and birds. The principal designs have distinctive names after the actual flower or bird the pattern is based upon. Among the best known of Kandyan necklaces is that named after the coconut flower, called the “pol mal malaya” or coconut flower garland. It is made up of large golden beads linked together with strands of gold. The “aralu malaya” is made of even larger golden beads resembling the gall nut seed. A veiy popular design in Kandyan necklaces is the “peti malaya” made of a string of golden discs resembling flower petals, while the “gedi malaya”, another popular design, has the beads in the shape of fruits or seeds.

Kandy jewellery is usually easily identifiable by its essential chunky nature. This is common to necklaces, either in gold or precious stones, heavy bangles, the “havadi” or waist chains usually made m heavy silver, the large globular earrings or “thodu and the anklets. A Kandyan bride will usually wear seven golden necklaces done in different designs dangling golden earrings, a waist chain, a special golden ornament on the forehead known as the natal pati and anklets done in gold filigree.

Kandyan bridegrooms who dress according to tradition also wear heavy gem-studded gold pendants, and chunky gold rings on their fingers et in blue sapphires or rubies.

While the Low Country jewellery designs how greater influences of the West, the traditional designs are also held in high esteem both by the craftsmen and those who buy jewellery. Some of the popular designs in Low Country jewellery date back to many centuries. Among these is the “hansa purruwa” or design of two intertwined swans. This design often used in the making of gold and silver pendants, is traceable to the ancient rock sculptures in n Lanka. It depicts two swans with their long graceful necks intertwined to face each other, each holding a sprig of flowers in its beak. Their inner legs are also intertwined as if a “bird handshake”.

The “kurulu padakkama” or bird pendant is a large piece of jewellery, with a frontal depiction of a bird form, while the “bherunda pakshi padakkama” is a pendant which depicts a two-headed eagle similar to those found in the coats of arms of some European countries.

The many jewellery shops in Colombo will stock jewellery in a large variety of designs. There are the very delicate necklaces, pendants and earrings done in filigree work Bangles in a fascinating array of designs from the plain thick bangle which needs several gold sovereigns to make it to the thinner and delicately ornamental ones.

Gems are also widely used in the manufacture of jewellery in Sri Lanka, which is also not surprising considering the large variety of gemstones found in the island. The more valuable pieces of ornamental jewellery are those set with blue and star sapphires and wine red rubies. The jewellers in Sri Lanka are skilled in the cutting of gems and many an exquisite piece is turned out quite often using 22-carat gold and some of the best gems available. While some of the older jewellery in the country will have many natural pearls used in their design, the abundant availability of cultured pearls has led to the
decline in the use of pearls in jewellery as the value may be questionable. Gems are used in the making of all types of jewellery from rings and pendants, to earrings, bangles, brooches and anklets too.



Western – style brooch studded with gems. (Aruna Keerthisinghe)



A collection of contemporary Sri Lankan jewellery.

From long tradition both gems and jewellery have been associated with good luck in Sri Lanka. It is not uncommon for a person to have a pendant made depicting the sign of the zodiac he or she was born under. Similarly, jewellers make pendants and bangles depicting some mythical birds and beasts which are believed to afford supernatural protection to the wearer. The most common of these is the “makara” design – the image of a mythical bird-beast, which adorns the entrances to temples and palaces. Many Buddhists in Sri Lanka will wear a small golden pendant made in the shape of a “bo leaf’ – the leaf of the peepul tree which is widely venerated in the country. It is not unusual to have the birthstone, or lucky gem of a person to be mounted on this leaf, for extra luck and protection. Similarly the Christians wear a gold cross round their neck, and those who can afford it will also have one or more gems mounted on this. Many Hindus and Buddhists also wear special pendants depicting the five weapons of the Hindu God Vishnu, known as the “panchayuda”, as a special protection. Another popular pendant, which is used widely by Hindus in the North is a pure gold pendant, the symbol of the Hindu God Skanda.

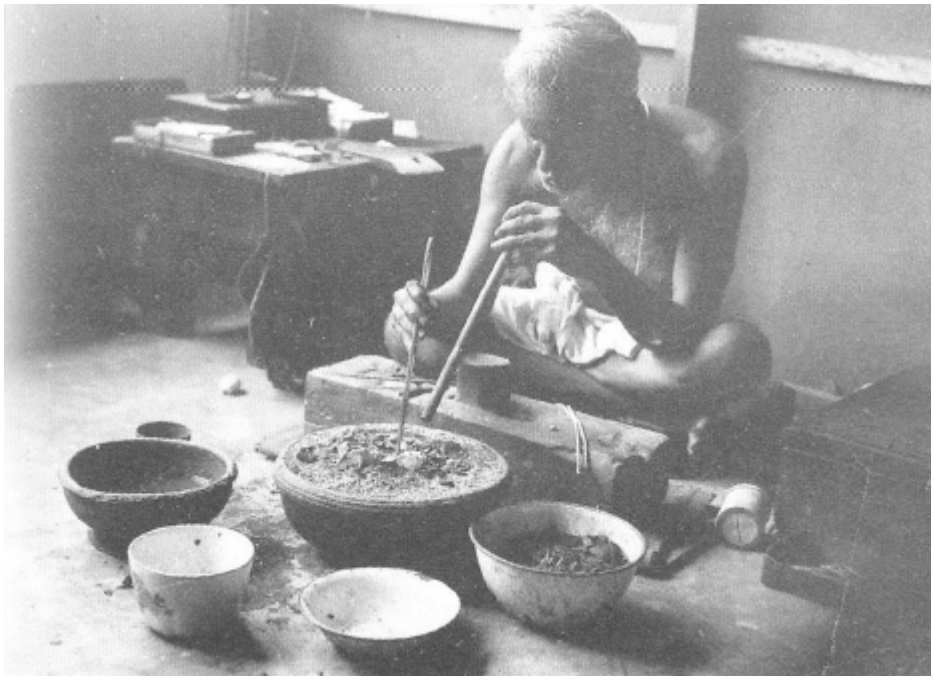
A very important tradition followed by all Hindus in Sri Lanka is the placing of a special ornament known as thali round the neck of the bride by the bridegroom at a Hindu wedding. This takes the place of the Western ring in the ceremony and is normally never removed. A thali is usually a thick golden pendant worn on chain and is done in a variety of traditional designs, special to Hindus.

The jeweller manufacturer of today, especially in Colombo and the western coastal belt, are more influenced by Western design concepts in their work. Most jewellery shop will have a resident craftsman with whom the client could discuss the design, and agree on the carat value of the piece of jewellery to be made, because it is often necessary to blend the gold with another metal for etching designs and mounting with gems.

Jewellers in most parts of the island, especially those in Colombo’s Sea Street, the street of jewellers, are adept at turning out jewellery in designs picked out from the latest Western catalogues, bringing in refreshing new design elements to gold jewellery. While these trendy designs are winning favour in the city, the traditional designs are still held in great value by the bulk of the population and remain among the most sought after of Sri l.ankan jewellery.

If you visit a jeweller in any part of the country, or more particularly in one of the traditional villages of jewellers, you will be fascinated by the skills of the craftsmen and the range of design they will offer for you to choose from. They could range from a narilata design for a pendant, which is in the shape of a mythical flower of the Himalayas which is said to blossom in the shape of a lovely woman to a complete set of pendent, bangles, and earrings made using the lotus flower as the principal design. There are ear ornaments known as thodu or koodu which are bell shaped with a fringe of pearls or other gems hanging from it that trace their origin to Andhra and Tanjore in India. A very popular design of a bangle which has held sway for more than a century is the seri walalla, a barrel-shaped bangle with engravings of flowers, and leaves on its protruding surface.

Stepping into a jewellery shop in Sri Lanka will always bring you rich rewards, either in the purchase of a delightful souvenir, gift or piece of personal jewellery in gold or with gems or simply in the perusal of the dazzling jewellery on display.



A traditional jewellery craftsman works in the age-old style.