Exquisite jewelry from India shows pageantry

However, ornament was not just for show, it played role in religion.

By Catherine Fox
For the AJC

In India, ornament is king. The whole subcontinent is bedecked to the nines, with patterns and vivid colors, profusions of flowers and lots of gold. You see it not only in ornate temple decorations but also in pageantry of everyday life, particularly the dress of Indian women and their abundant jewelry, worn head to toe.

As you will discover visiting "When Gold Blossoms," an exhibition of exquisite Indian jewelry at the Michael C. Carlos Museum, this will to decorate – be it buildings or bodies – is not simply an aesthetic preference, a desire to beautify or ostentation. Ornament plays a critical role in the practice of Indian religion, the machinery of social relationships and the expression of identity. "The word 'ornament' in Sanskrit means 'to make sufficient,'" says site curator and Emory professor Joyce Flueckiger.

Exhibit preview
"When Gold Blossoms: Indian Jewelry from the Susan L. Bennington Collection." Through July 11. $8; $5, seniors, students, children 6-17; free for children 5 and under, members and Emory students, faculty and staff. 10 a.m.-4 p.m. Tuesdays-Saturdays; noon-4 p.m. Sundays. Michael C. Carlos Museum, 571 S. Kilgo Circle. 404-727-0573. www.carlos.emory.edu

This miniature gold crown — North or Central India, early 19th century — was intended for a statue of a deity. Michael C. Carlos Museum

Jewelry continued on E3
Pieces’ special meaning

“Jewelry is a magnet for prosperity. Gold is thought to purify the wearer. Gems focus planetary influences. Indians apply the same principle to the icons of deities in Hindu temples. These statues are said to be the medium through which deities are present in the world. In this incarnation, they have the same needs as humans. Practitioners dress and bejewel these statues, bring flowers and food as acts of religiosity.

“One way to love God is to adorn God,” Flueckiger says.

Jewelry is also a means through which individuals encode and broadcast their identities. Someone in the know would be able to tell the wearer’s region, caste and even family.

A woman’s marital status is indicated by the wearing of a necklace called a taiy, which functions as a wedding band, and bangle bracelets, symbolic of wifely virtue. Nose rings are thought to aid fertility and childbirth.

It’s worth noting that advocates of women’s rights in 19th-century India questioned the symbolism of the marital jewelry. One commentator likened the nose ring to the practice of putting a ring through a draft animal’s nose to better control it. Another suggested the point of all the heavy jewelry was to prevent wives from running away.

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