

Major Project in Progress

*What is the significance of Gold
Inheritance within the generations of
South Asian Women.*

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Project Statement

This project will be exploring the significance of gold jewellery inheritance within the South Asian community and what different values that the jewellery holds within the generations that inherit them. I had inherited my mother's gold jewellery collection after her passing last year and had this discussion with her about what this meant for her as it would provide me an emergency fund if I were to be in any financial struggles. I on the other hand had seen this collection of jewellery as memories and sentimental ornaments that would remind me of her memory. We had two different views on the collection of gold jewellery and I was sparked by the colliding values between our generations. Through this I decided to explore this theme as an 'Author' through research and investigation of the 'Collection' of gold jewellery through my practice. I aim to educate and inform the importance of gold jewellery with others in my similar background, who don't know the historical context.



History.

I wanted to develop knowledge and understand the tradition of passing down gold in the south Asian community, which I had researched to find out the significance it had as a role in history. Through different historical periods in India, archaeological evidence (as seen in Fig 1.) shows how significant gold ornaments had on maintaining people's socio-cultural, religious and economic stability (Raha, 2024). Adorning yourself with gold was a way to expressing status and power, a representation of religious ideas or even a material sign of beauty (Demandt, 2016) in many ways in multiple cultures.

In Hinduism, gold was an important metal as it was written and depicted on ancient sculptors and artworks of religious entities and royalty. It also was an auspicious colour and symbolises beauty and fertility (Mehrotra, 2004) as well as protection against evil, which is why Hindu countries had more 'elaborate and varied' gold jewellery (as seen in Fig 2.) compared to other cultures. Because of this religious connotation, '...on all ritual occasions people like to buy it or whenever there is an extra income in the family, they invest' (Mehrotra, 2004). This is where collections have started within most Asian households acquire gold '...from kinship, inheritance, and gift-giving to social groups, subcultures, and identity, from power structures to money and finance...'



Fig 1. Evidence of trade of gold probably dates to the first millennium AD - Photo taken at The British Museum

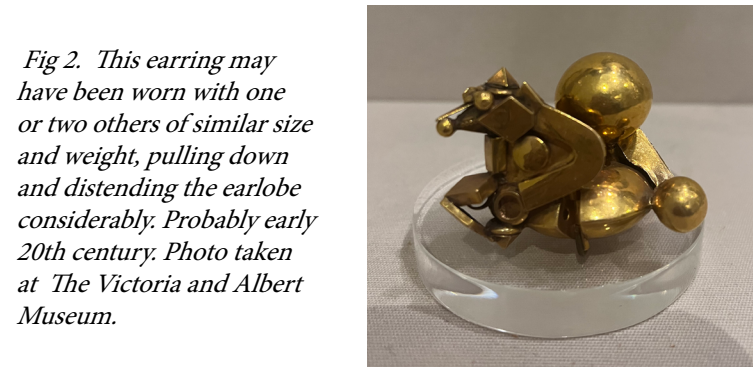


Fig 2. This earring may have been worn with one or two others of similar size and weight, pulling down and distending the earlobe considerably. Probably early 20th century. Photo taken at The Victoria and Albert Museum.

One of the most forms of gifting gold jewellery is when South Asian women are given a dowry (for example Fig.3 and Fig 4.). This is a cultural practice which was integral in Indian marriages, where it was a custom in India for many centuries where ‘Traditionally, rich and royal families not only gave the bride as a gift at the time of marriage but also accompanied her with small gifts in cash, land/or ornaments.’ (Rao & Rao, 1980). However, after British colonial rule, this concept has now been skewed as a form of dowry and commercial transaction in marriages, by prohibited women from possessing property, reverting her assets to her husband and in-laws. ‘This fight with women for ownership over property gave birth to a number of socio-religious crimes’ (Halder & Jaishankar, 2008) causing drastic social status of women being inferior to their male counterpart that increased sexual violence, femicides and financial suffering. Through various attempts to prevent this practice continuing, parliament implemented the Dowry Prohibition Act in 1961, but was difficult to regulate and prevent the tradition in the marriage process.



Fig 3. Marriage Necklace, Gold on black cotton thread, from Madurai 19th century - Photo taken at Victoira & Albert Museum.



Fig 4. Collection of gold jewellery from South Asia- Photo taken at Victoira & Albert Museum.

Although there was a twisted view of dowries historically, the initial value of gifting their daughter an asset as a form of financial independence still thrives with South Asian households. But now jewellery can be converted into currency in a case of crisis, as possessing gold became one of the important ways of achieving financial and social independence for women. This has continued through to this day and age where 'women saved the gold they received to pass it on to future generations. It was a way to create generational wealth and an heirloom from previous generations.' (Iftikhar, 2024) This financial literacy was passed down from grandmothers and great grandmothers as they had experienced the importance of financial independency without the struggle of banks and inheritance laws. Thus, creating this subtle empowerment that South Asian women have when passing gold down to the future female generations.



Fig 5. This portrait of an Indian woman was taken in 1880 (Unknown, 1880)



Fig 6. (Bansal, 2024)



Fig 7. (Nadeem, 2021)

Conceptualising.

Through this research, I was able to understand the values that my mother and her generation had held in mind when she was building her collection of gold jewellery. I want to illustrate her voice and the narrative of creating this generational wealth through her collections of gold. However, I also want to explore my sentimental values that I hold when receiving her collection. The two distinct values that our generations have was something I want to look into; as another voice to this story of inheriting gold in a South Asian perspective, positioning myself as an 'Author'.



Fig 10. My mother's gold earrings



Fig 11. My mother's Navratan Astrology Ring with a Ceylon yellow sapphire, which corresponds to Jupiter in Vedic Astrology.



Fig 9. My mother's necklace gifted as a dowry.

Fig 8. My mother's jewellery box filled with her gold jewellery.



Fig 12. My mother's Thali - a necklace symbolising marriage in Tamil culture

Fig 13. My Mother and Father doing the traditional Hindu ceremony - my Mother wearing her gold jewellery.

To further explore this, I had looked through the collection of jewellery and leaned the stories of how my mother came to receive these pieces. I didn't have my mother to directly tell me how and why she received these jewellery pieces, so I had found old pictures documenting certain moments and close relatives helping me piece together how she come to gain certain gold jewellery. One example of this was my father telling me how he gifted her a necklace (Fig 15.) for their wedding, as my mother was borrowing one from her sister.

My father found out that she didn't have a statement necklace of her own and gifted it to her on their wedding day. Although this was from my father's perspective, it was funny hearing how irritated my father was that she was wearing someone else's necklace on their wedding day and that lead to her getting her first gold piece from my father. To me this increased its value as this necklace was the personification of my father and mother's relationship, solidifying the fact I wouldn't want to sell these pieces in the exchange of my mother's memories.



Fig 14. My Father attaching a Thali (Wedding chain) around my Mother's neck.



Fig 15. The gold necklace my Father gifted my Mother.

Experimental Work.

I was now experimenting with how I can express the sentimentality of these pieces through illustration. I started by drawing detailed sketches (Fig.16) of these pieces, annotating the style and designs of them. However, due to the age of these you can see some wear, as some jewels have fallen off or certain surfaces have starches. I also went to investigate further into older jewellery pieces in galleries and museums, as my mother didn't obtain any of my grandmother's jewellery due to family scuffles. Through looking at gold artefacts from south Asia centuries ago, I could see the stark differences in style being 'elaborate and varied', where South Asian 'men and women preferred rich, heavy ornaments' as described by Demandt from my research on the history.

Fig 16. Detailed drawing of a 'Turban Pin Ornament' from the V&A Museum

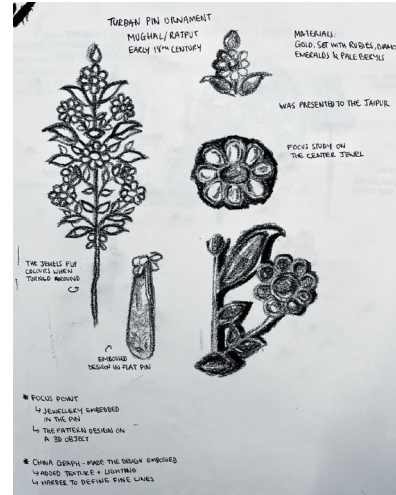


Fig 17. Detailed illustrated drawing of my Mother's Thali pendant

Fig 18. Detailed illustrated drawing of late 19th century Marriage necklace from V&A Museum



I used my own collection of jewellery and the pieces from museums as reference to create some visual experimentation and exploring methods of practice that would be suitable for conveying the forms of jewellery. I created a collection of work experimenting types of relief prints to assess which produced an illustrative style that was more suitable for the narrative. Through testing out how to translate the jewellery into illustrations, I tried experimenting with adding hand holding the piece (Fig.6) as it illustrated the gifting aspect of the necklace, as the perspective of giving the necklace or even receiving it. Thus, showing the tradition of passing down the gold piece as well and being the receiver of this gift from both generations. I believe that adding these gestures could create a narrative and give direction into visualising sentiment and affection without description.

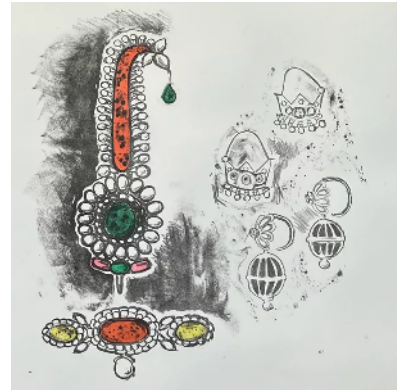


Fig 19. Lithography with coloured paper of another Turban pin and earrings from the V&A

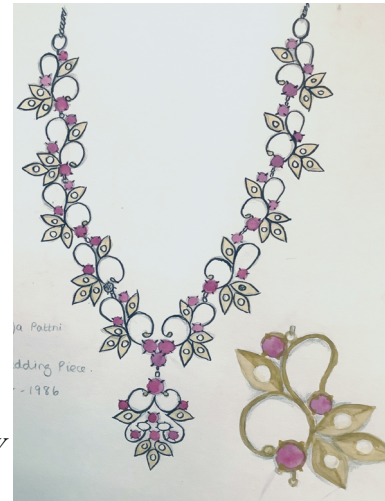


Fig 20. Original sketch of my Mother's dowry necklace.



Fig 21. Screen print of my Mothers dowry gold necklace.

I participated in a workshop about ‘Repurpose and Reconstructing’ which was going through making collages to then scanning them into negatives for screen printing (Fig 9,10.). This was a interesting concept to use and repurpose them into more things like screen-prints and wood cutting. I was also able to explore what types of imagery and textures can be created using the same image.

I also participated in a workshop on Surface Prints on Clay. I had seen some imagery of images of gold and royals’ paintings with embedded jewels and gold painted on top. I had later found out that these paintings were a style of Indian portraitures from a town called Tanjore. ‘Tanjore Painting was first used for decorating the doors and walls of homes, palaces, and temples in Thanjavur.’ (Balakrishnan, 2022). My initial idea going into this workshop was to print designs and then to add additional clay to create the three-dimensional style that Tanjore paintings had. However due to the restriction of time and tools I didn’t have time to put the three-dimensional idea into place. But in conclusion I believe that these workshops was diverting my path away from my initial idea of the story of the jewellery collection and how other generations perceive their gold.



Fig 22. Collage created for the workshop



Fig 23. Collage repurposed into a screenprint.



Fig 24. Screenprint design cut into a woodblock.



Fig 25. Example of Tanjore paintings (Chola, 2020).



Fig 26. Adding underglaze screen-prints on top of frames



Fig 27. Final product after firing

Artist Research.

With this in mind, I had looked into finding artist who looks into generational dynamics and South Asian perspectives. I had then bumped into Alia Romagnoli's piece (Fig 28.) which was a series of photography encapsulating the bond between the two generations. These photos were capturing the soft and affectionate gestures between the two women, but clearly conveyed the sentimental atmosphere that I wanted to illustrate into my own practice. Using this image as reference, I replicated it through monoprint (Fig 29.) using texture to build warmth and spirit into the image, while also highlighting the jewellery worn by both generations. I further developed the initial image, by animating this into an animation (Fig 30.) and portraying a narrative similar to my own personal experience of loss.

Fig 28. Romagnoli, A. (2021)
Mothers and Daughters.



Fig 29. Mono-print using
Romagnoli, A. (2021) *Mothers and Daughters.* as reference.



Fig 30. A frame of an animation based on
Mothers and Daughters. as reference.



Fig 31. Redrew the image using the
animation projected on the paper.

Fig 32. Bhati, L.S (2022) 1018

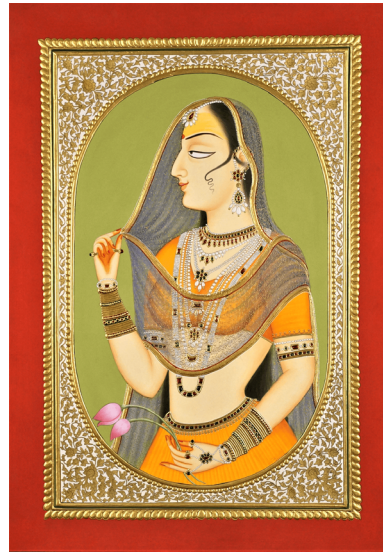


Fig 33. Shah, A (2019) Modern



These exploration of work through this one reference helped me delve into building a narrative that I could continue from one still image. This was a good exercise as I had liked the compositions I was producing, as it had also reminded me visually of Indian miniature portraits, as many of the portraits contained women adorned in jewellery. I decided to look into it further into Indian miniature portraits (Fig 32.) and could see the resemblance in the composition of portraiture even conveying a narrative. Although these miniatures had a been painting and portrayed by the male gaze (Mukherjee & Mukherjee, 2016), these portraitures had a stories and narratives about the artist love and affection shown through the woman's gestures and poses. I had then found Arpita Shah's work Modern Muse (Fig 33.), portraying her own Mughal miniatures in a photographic style and reframing these contemporary women in a new perspective. I had also been inspired from contemporary South Asian jewellery brands' photography such as Amlanjyoti Bora, framing soft intimate poses between women (for example Fig 34.) while still being commercial for his client. Certain poses were very inspiring to how I want to capture gestures between mother and daughter dynamics for my composition. I had drawn some of these references (Fig 35.) as inspiration and wanted to continue creating this imagery into illustrations.



Fig 34. Bora, A (2022) Bunka Festive



Fig 35. illustration inspired by Bora

Approach.

Through inspiration, I decided to curate my own references in a portraiture format by directing my aunt and her family wearing their own collection of gold jewellery. I was influenced by the style of work I had seen from Shah and Bora's work, I wanted to replicate the images with all three generations. Through this I can produce a narrative of their values passing down gold to their daughters.. Because most of the gold pieces are mainly worn with sarees I had requested my models to dress in traditional clothing and wear their own gold jewellery pieces. I also wanted this series to be personal, so I had requested this specific family as they had 3 generations of women - my aunt, cousin, and my two nieces. From this shoot I was not only gaining visual references, I was also able to discuss the topic with them and gain more perspectives on the tradition. My cousin had said that passing down jewellery generation to generation is an emotional tradition. Especially because nothing was handed down to her mother as our grandmother couldn't afford gold at the time. 'So it starts with her and I think it's important for her to start the process of generational heirloom. Knowing that I will be handing down jewellery to my children that my mum handed to me holds great sentimental value.'

Fig 36. Photoshoot with baby niece with her gold chain.



Fig 37 My aunty and her granddaughter.



Fig 38. My cousin and her niece.

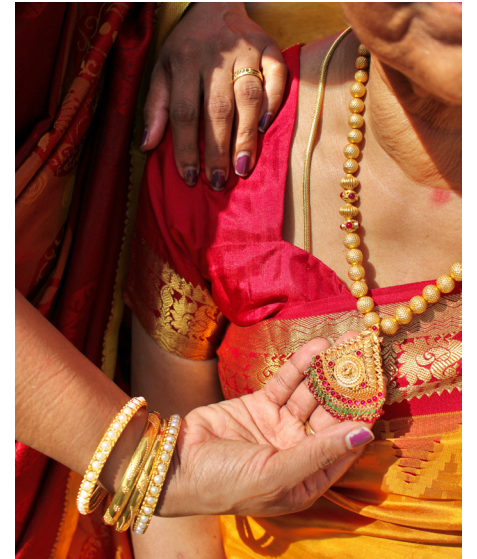


Fig 39. My cousin holding her mothers gold necklae.

The portraits I produced (Fig 36-39) were able to capture the affectionate familial bond between the generations and sentiments that the gold pieces are to them. I used these photo series to become references to my relief print compositions. I had used a jelly plate to produce mono prints and it had created these series of glossy but textured prints highlighting the gold pieces. I decided to not include the faces (as seen in Fig 41.), as I wanted to make the narration of the print ambiguous. Making it more relatable to the audience and the viewer putting themselves in the position of each generation, inheriting or passing down this jewellery. I was producing another mono piece again, however was restricted to a timeframe, so I didn't finish the piece. But this had unintentionally made a more abstract image of my auntie holding a gold necklace (Fig 37.) on a ghostly image of my niece (Fig 42.). This resonated to what my aunt had said, which was that she 'hoped that she could free the financial burden of her future generation when they need it the most.' I continued to develop this idea further by painting on my niece's gold jewellery with metallic gold paint as well as my auntie's jewellery pieces. I believe it shows my aunt's values of building the generational wealth for her niece and future family, even when she's not there. I continued to develop this idea further by painting on my niece's gold jewellery with metallic gold paint as well as my auntie's jewellery pieces. I believe it shows my aunt's values of building the generational wealth for her niece and future family, even when she's not there.

Fig 40. My cousin playfully touching my niece's gold earrings.



Fig 41. Mono print using my photo series as reference



Fig 42. Unfinished mono-print using my photo series as reference.

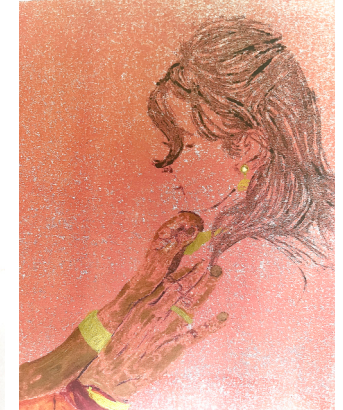


Fig 43. Added gold metallic paint to the jewellery

Final Outcome?

For my Major Project, I have concluded that I will be making a series of mono-prints in reference to the Indian miniature portraits, that will narrate the transition of values that gold jewellery has within generations of South Asian women. By this I will be positioning myself as a 'Author' to narrate the transition between the historical significance that I have researched to the new significance of holding the memory of loved ones. The intention was to work from a 'Collection' of gold jewellery that I had possessed, however through this realisation I realised there is more of a narrative with my relatives who have all three generations with multiple opinions on the subject. With this I will be using my cousin and her family to reference this change in the value of gold and documenting the history to the current age. I also think using the Indian miniature portraits is a good way to portray this narrative as it has the elements of how I want to create the story through still imagery. I will collate these mono-prints series into a small zine so it can be narrated into a book format and add text to convey the sentimentality of the narrative.

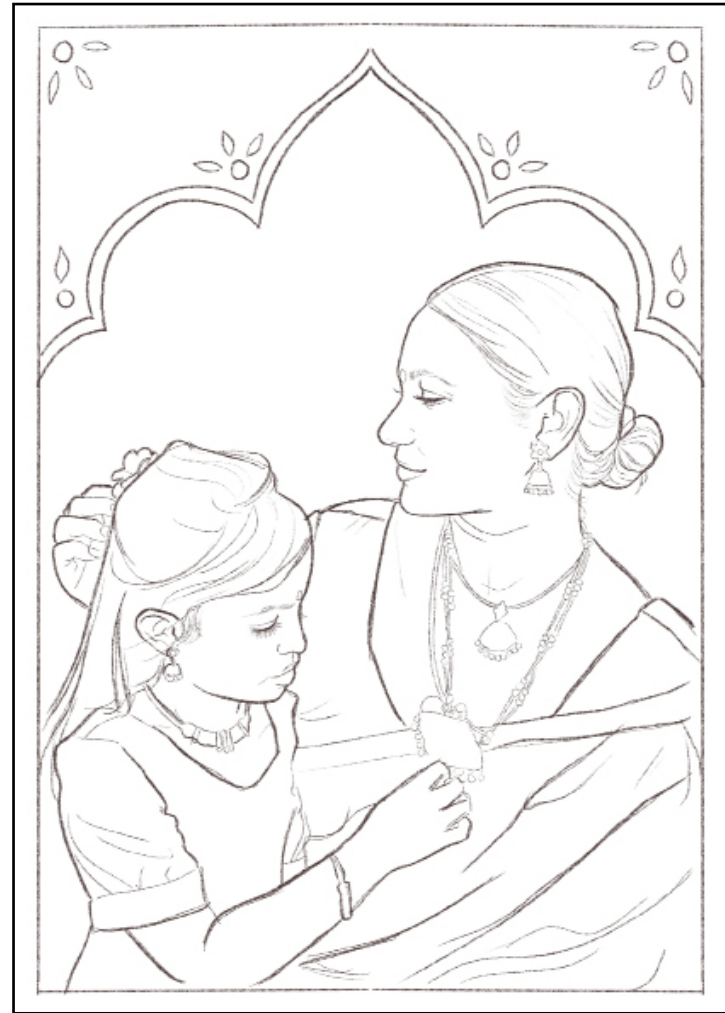


Fig 44. A rough composition for as a mono print

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