

# The Ransom Collection

## Silver Jewelry from the Middle East



by Robert K. Liu

**H**ow a collection is gathered and how it is treated greatly influence its value. Many collections start innocently enough but develop into something quite unexpected. A few items purchased with no plan or pattern do not constitute a collection but if a rationale is developed and opportunities to acquire occur with sufficient frequency, the accumulation can easily become a noteworthy collection. In over twenty-five years of studying assemblages of ornaments in this country, I have followed the path of many. Even if one collects with some degree of passion and a strategy, but the collection is not curated well, the end result may range from sad, to tragic or to a waste of resources, one's own and those of the cultures involved. For those who carefully catalog and attribute their collections, their efforts can become significant and meaningful. Museums or other institutions can recognize the importance of a collection and organize an exhibition from it, and/or request that it be donated to the institution. A number of collectors have even started their own museums, as with the Picards (see article in this issue) and the Lieses.

The Ransom Collection of silver folk jewelry from the

Middle East is intimately connected to the professional lives of the owners. Marjorie and David Ransom were career diplomats of the State Department, both having served some 30 years before active retirement in 2000-2001. Both are Middle East specialists and Arabic speakers. Marjorie Ransom bought her first piece of jewelry in 1960 when she was a graduate student in Damascus, Syria. Throughout her career with the U.S. Information Agency, she specialized in cultural exchange, press and education. She was in charge of Public Affairs sections of American embassies in Sanaa, Yemen; Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates; Damascus, Syria and Cairo, Egypt, as well as serving in Amman, Jordan. From 1994 to 1997, David Ransom was ambassador to Bahrain, so she is also knowledgeable about that country. While jewelry collecting was ancillary to their State Department duties, exposure to this wide range of countries, the opportunities offered for buying and their linguistic and cultural skills resulted in the present collection of over a thousand pieces. Usually one partner collects but in their case, David Ransom also participated, obtaining pieces such as the Omani headpieces in their collection, wherever he traveled

in the Middle East. Like his wife, he also did more than just collecting, often wearing a Circassian belt buckle and Syrian coins as buttons on his blazer. Their Washington, D.C. home is decorated as they did their various abodes in the Middle East. Their friends in the United States love their jewelry collection and view it as both art and an expression of their Foreign Service careers, despite the current attitude about the politics of that region of the world.

During 1969 in Saudi Arabia, they found old ornaments in the souk/suq that were about to be remelted into silver, partly a consequence of the desire of brides to have new, distinctive pieces for their weddings. Thereafter they went frequently to this marketplace, buying old jewelry that was wearable. It became the only jewelry that Marjorie Ransom wore; such jewelry was also the favorite of her three daughters. While in Yemen from 1975 to 1978, she started buying pieces that were too large to wear. This marked the real beginning of her collection of silver folk jewelry. A few pieces are gilded but none is gold, except for a pair of earrings from the Siwa oasis in the Western Desert of Egypt. She left Saudi Arabia in 1971; at that time, only bedouin and peasants wore silver jewelry. Saudis did not wear it themselves or hang jewelry on their walls, but were thrilled that Americans were both wearing and showing their jewelry, evidence of an appreciation of the Saudi culture.

In 1985, she returned to Syria, the first time since graduate school. Ransom started mounting her Saudi and Yemen folk jewelry on velvet-covered boards and hanging these on the walls of their home. Since they had a large apartment, jewelry boards were continually added. This enabled her to start noticing the differences in styles and motifs of her collection. Whenever she was on State Department duties, she wore silver folk jewelry. Again, this wearing and display of jewelry in their home and in public met with favor by the inhabitants, since upper middle class Syrian women only wore gold jewelry. If any silver jewelry was worn, it was much more modern in design, fashionable and lighter in weight than folk jewelry. But the Syrian women were well aware when non-native jewelry was being worn by foreigners.

The Ransoms continued to collect, seeking out vendors in the suq who had old jewelry.

In Egypt, such sellers were both Christian and Muslim. They carried silver items, some modern pieces, but not gold jewelry. In Damascus, antique dealers sold the old jewelry. There were no prohibitions against the export of such jewelry. Once in the women's suq of Riyadh, Marjorie Ransom overheard a young customs officer saying in Arabic that this foreign woman was stealing their heritage. She pointedly replied in Arabic that she was saving their heritage. The Ransoms did buy jewelry in the country of origin. In Damascus, they got Syrian, as well as Saudi, Libyan, Algerian, Turkish and Central Asian pieces. While in the United Arab Emirates, they purchased Omani ornaments from a jeweler and found Tunisian jewelry when in Egypt. They did obtain native jewelry in Yemen, Saudi Arabia and Syria.

When buying jewelry as a foreigner or expatriate, Marjorie Ransom was treated well and fairly; good pieces were set aside for her. In the process of collecting, she was exposed to a number of authors and experts in Middle Eastern jewelry, although she missed an appointment to meet Angela Fisher in Yemen, due to illness. Ruth Hawley, author of a book on Omani jewelry, photographed some of the Ransom collection in Abu Dhabi. Shelagh Weir, well-known for her Middle Eastern work, was a researcher in Yemen while Marjorie Ransom was a cultural attache there and also visited her in Damascus in 1996. She



Above: RANSOM DINING ROOM, with three panels of mounted Middle Eastern silver jewelry, as well as one piece hanging by itself. These integrate well with the Japanese screen, antique Syrian chest and Shiraz rug. This room, like the rest of the house, is a reflection of their life, while serving in the State Department and its attendant travels. *Opposite*: SAUDI ARABIAN HEADPIECE, set with glass cabachons and beads, 18.3 cm long, excluding the loop. Made of low grade silver, it is similar to a Najrani headpiece shown in Topham (1981 Traditional crafts of Saudi Arabia: 69.). Over one hundred pieces, including this one, will be the subject of an exhibition, entitled *Silver Speaks*. Co-curated with Ellen Benson, it will be at The Bead Museum, Washington, D.C., from October 27 through May 31, 2003. A full-color, 48 page companion book will accompany the show. *Photographs: Robert K. Liu/Ornament*.