



Bhagwan Das Soni



We live on a planet where the global neighborhood has broadened, with once great distances being traversed daily. The land and sea between continents are not the barriers they once were, even for those who live in small towns and villages. Worlds that were once far apart may meet, as is the case with Rajasthani goldsmith, Bhagwan Das Soni, or B.D. as he is more well known, who graced the Fowler Museum at the University of Los Angeles with his presence and wares one mildly overcast afternoon this past May. At a one-day trunk show featuring his work, exactly eight thousand, one hundred and seventy six miles away from the city in which he resides, people who might never have met had a chance to share in their passion for jewelry, culture and the handmade, face to face.

Coinciding with the Fowler Museum's exhibition on East Indian jewelry, "Enduring Splendor: Jewelry of India's Thar Desert," this event brought to the West Coast one of the four Rajasthani jewelers whose work, and livelihood, was researched for the exhibit. In 2002, Bhagwan Das was one of two Indian goldsmiths invited to the Smithsonian Silk Road Festival in Washington, D.C., a show he has since used to make engagements and pursue connections in the United States. On the second floor of the museum, in a small room perhaps used for meetings, a literal treasure trove spilled out over several tables. Jewelry from all over India, Pakistan, Nepal, and Afghanistan mingled with more contemporary work made by B.D.'s family. A stream of visitors, both ardent collectors and those simply looking to add a little flash to their wardrobe, wandered from display to display, occasionally asking a question regarding material, origin or technique that he unhesitatingly fielded. It was as if the contents of a jeweler's store in India had been transported to a foreign land and set out as a sumptuous repast.

The history of B.D.'s family in goldsmithing goes back nine generations, an unbroken line of tradition tying past to present. His father, Govindlal, worked for the Maharajah of Jaisalmer, as did his father, Inderchand. The Inderchand family originally heralded from Sind, a migration that dates back roughly eight generations. Govindlal himself had seven daughters and four sons, all of whom are either married to, or are, *sonis*; both the family name, caste and tradition, *sonis* are jewelers who work in gold, although they can also make objects from silver, brass, bronze, and copper. Part of the Soni caste of jewelers in the Thar desert region, Soni is a popular surname for goldsmiths



AMULET NECKLACE (*haar*) of silver, glass, paper, and paint worn by Hindus. WRIST BRACELET of silver worn by Rabari tribes of Gujarat. AMULET (*sikka*) of silver, pearls, turquoise, coins, and carnelian.

ERIN CONNORS, Director of Communications and Engagement at the Fowler Museum at UCLA, wearing a silver bead necklace by Bhagwan Das Soni. Photographs by Patrick R. Benesh-Liu.



GOLD FOIL SILVER NECKLACE (*jodha*) by Bhagwan Das Soni. These designs use vintage jewelry, with silver domes covered in gold foil inserted into former gemstone settings. **BHAGWAN DAS SONI AND KATHY DIGENOVA**, Museum Store Manager at the Fowler Museum at UCLA. **TRUNK SHOW TABLE** featuring silver anklets and bracelets.

in Rajasthan—thus Bhagwan Das Soni’s name is both occupation and title.

B.D.’s beginning as a goldsmith can be traced to childhood, when at the age of twelve he would carry his father’s tools to the workshop and sit with him, watching the master at work. It was through careful observation that B.D. learned his father’s craft. Once he felt his son had absorbed enough lessons, his father let him play with the least expensive of materials, copper, with which he fabricated simple rings and earrings. Slowly but surely, more valuable materials were supplied, silver, and then gold. A brief interlude took place as his father pushed him to work for the government. “When I was seventeen years old, my father encouraged me to become a civil servant because he thought my financial future would be more secure,” B.D. remembers. “I tried it for nearly one year before resigning. I didn’t like the work and wanted to return to making jewelry.” By the age of twenty, he had become an expert in granulation, and at that point began to work independently. He established his own shop, and has now built up their operation to the point where his sons are largely responsible for producing the jewelry.

The making and selling of jewelry is a family affair. “Every adult member of my family is involved one way or another in the family jewelrymaking enterprise,” B.D. explains. “Each of my brothers makes jewelry and sells it through his own shop. I especially enjoy designing jewelry. Two of my sons make jewelry and sell it through my *haveli*.” Somewhat like a cross between a mansion and a Spanish hacienda, *havelis* have a similar sense of gravity, and in Bhagwan Das’s case, is used as a gallery and storefront. His third son Yogesh, who traveled to

Ahmadabad to apprentice, also studied business administration, a valuable skill for managing the extended network of family shops. He is involved in the sale of their jewelry. “We all learn from, and support, each other,” B.D. says. “Everyone in my family is proud of being part of a multi-generational goldsmithing tradition.”

This tradition is something shared between the contemporary American art jeweler and a *soni*, a love for the care invested in making an object, and of the knowledge needed to do so. “Creative people everywhere take great pride and pleasure in making something of beauty with their own hands,” he remarks. “In my opinion, there is no comparison between a one-of-a-kind, handmade object and something mass produced by machine. If goldsmith families don’t continue to make jewelry by hand, the techniques and skills required to make it will be lost.”

In a city steeped in tradition as Jaisalmer those techniques and skills are well alive. Bhagwan Das Soni’s presence in an American museum was a reminder of the different worlds of creativity that inhabit our planet, separated by distance yet sharing that same appreciation for a life lived with care and a respect for the beautiful. 🙏



CARVED ANKLETS (*makara*) of silver, worn by tribespeople of Madhya Pradesh.

