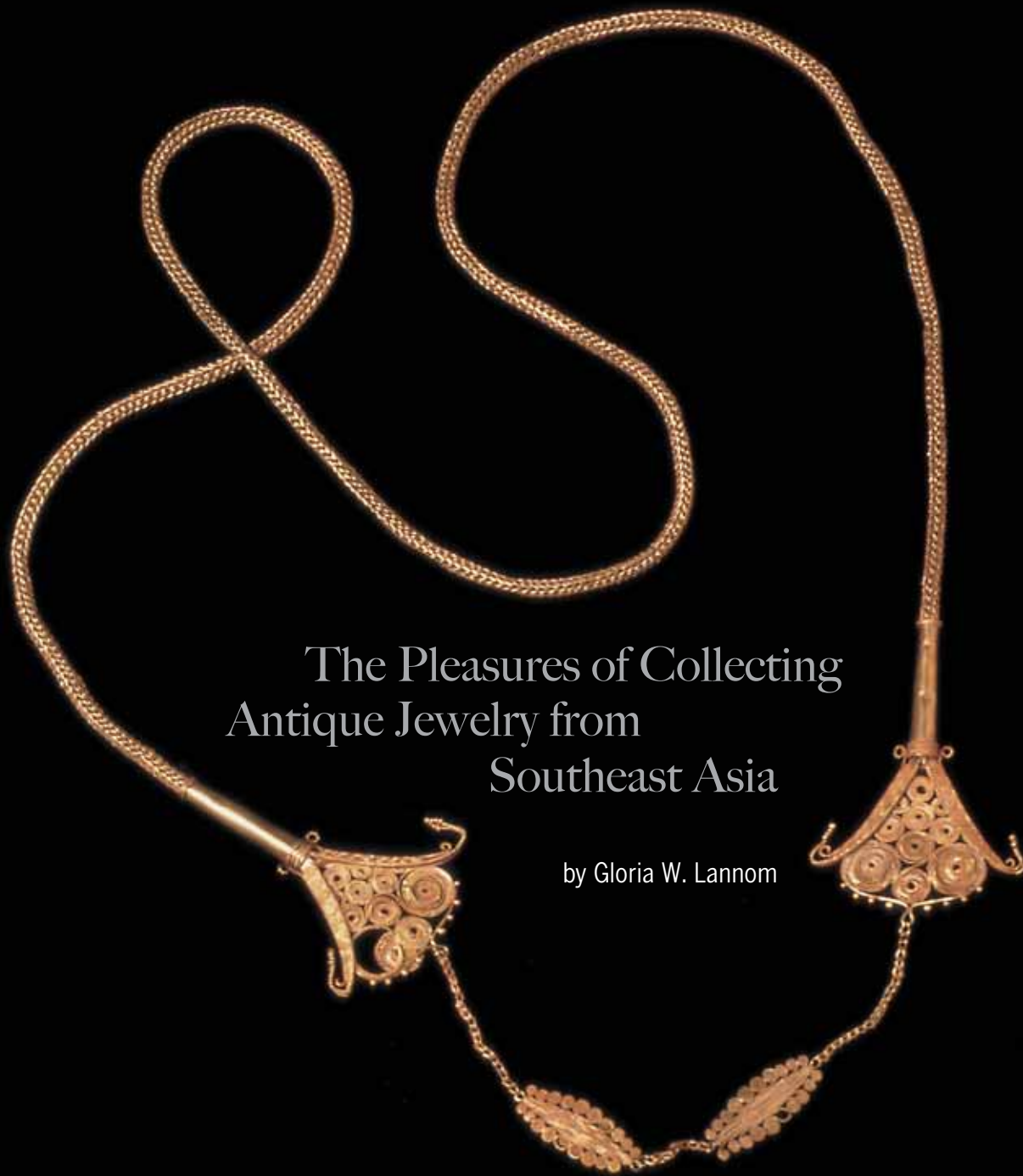


The Jewelry of



The Pleasures of Collecting
Antique Jewelry from
Southeast Asia

by Gloria W. Lannom

Southeast Asia

In 1989, after donating to the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco 200 Thai ceramics dating from the fourteenth to the seventeenth centuries, James and Elaine Connell began exploring a new area of collecting. In forming their ceramics collection, James, part owner and manager of an international trading company, and Elaine, a longtime docent at the Asian Art Museum, had gained considerable knowledge of Southeast Asian art and culture. It seemed natural for them to become interested in jewelry from that part of the world.

Their first purchase was a nineteenth-century finely woven gold-wire royal "chain of office" from the Indonesian island of Sumba (Fig. 1). Since then they have acquired over 400 Neolithic, classical, and tribal objects representing thirteen Southeast Asian cultures. Dating from 2000 B.C. to the twentieth century, many are fashioned of 22 or 24 carat gold, but some are of silver, ivory, semi-precious stones, shell, feather, or quill. All of the pieces belonged to members of the royal, noble, or tribal elite.

Early on the Connells established criteria for shaping their collection. Authenticity was foremost, and to this end they established ties with astute and reputable dealers. Rarity and uniqueness are also factors, here illustrated by tenth-century Cambodian ear pieces with microscopic mythological *naga* heads (visible only through a jeweler's loupe). They are unusual because such ear pieces are usually made of gold-covered bronze; these are the only known examples in solid gold (Fig. 2).

In evaluating tribal objects, James Connell considers whether they are typical of a specific group or type of owner. He believes that understanding objects in cultural context enhances their significance. For example, the chain of office in figure 1 was worn not only by the Sumba ruler who owned it, but also by his personal slave. For non-ritual purposes, the ruler would have ordered his slave to wear the chain in his place, thus underscoring the importance attached to the proper use of sacred paraphernalia.



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Fig. 1: Finely woven gold-wire royal "chain of office." Sumba Island, Indonesia, 19th century. L. 44 in.

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Fig. 2: Solid-gold ear pieces, bearing tiny images of *naga* heads, mythical serpent deities. Cambodia, 10th century. Diam. 1¾ in.

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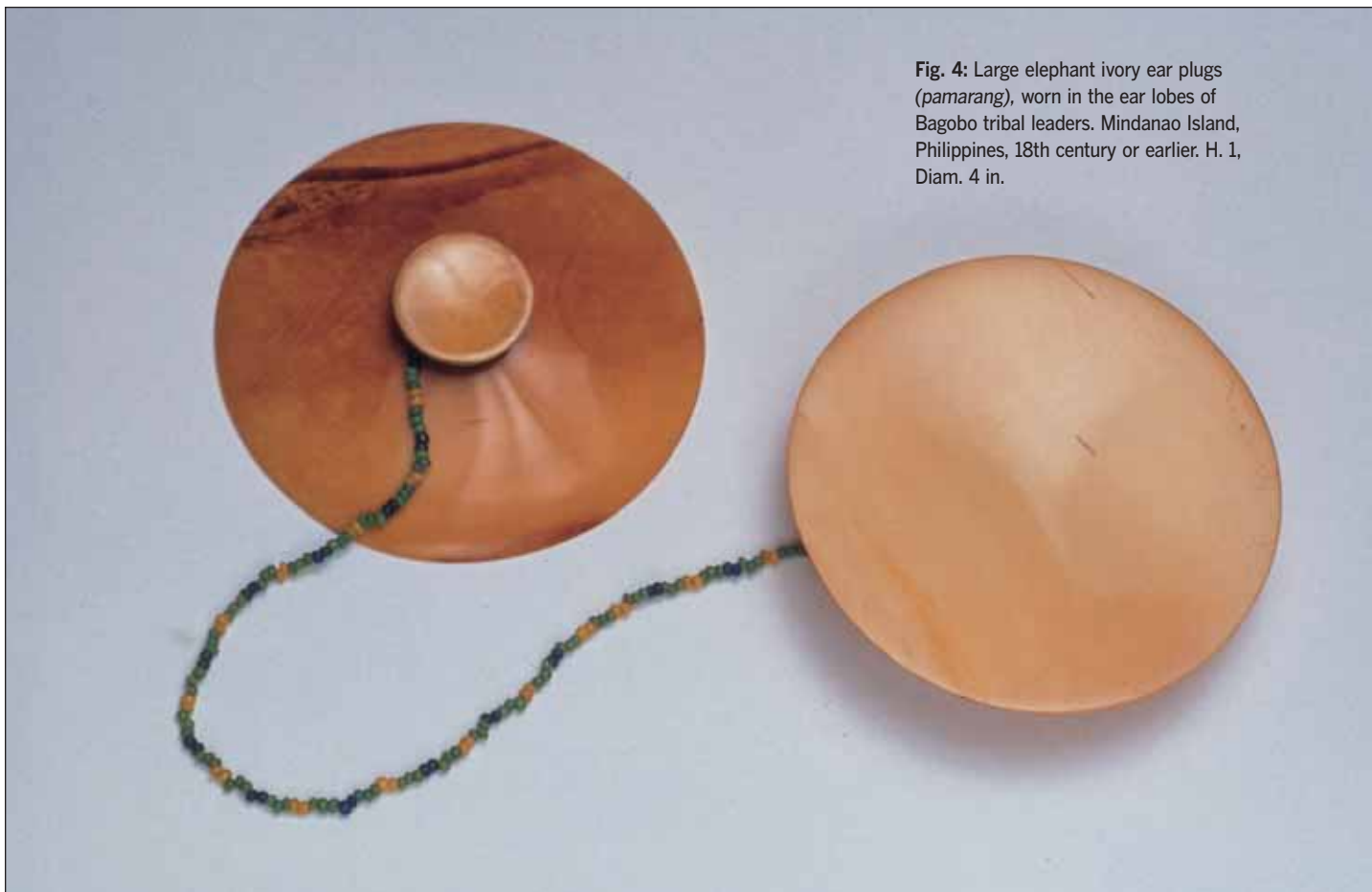
Fig. 3: Dazzling gold repoussé necklace. Central Java, Indonesia, 9th–10th century. H. 6¾, W. 10¾ in.

In Southeast Asia, gold is not simply a precious metal, it is revered as sacred; a gift from the gods. Traditionally, skilled goldsmiths have employed techniques such as granulation, filigree, sheet work, casting, weaving, and repoussé (relief patterning on the reverse side of metal). Gold was treated with alum and salt to redden it until the nineteenth century, after which craftsmen turned to nitric acid to produce the preferred red tone.

In ninth- and tenth-century Indonesia and Cambodia in the eleventh and twelfth centuries,



Fig. 4: Large elephant ivory ear plugs (*pamarang*), worn in the ear lobes of Bagobo tribal leaders. Mindanao Island, Philippines, 18th century or earlier. H. 1, Diam. 4 in.



regional craftsmen achieved exceptional workmanship. One Filipino dealer, a close friend of the Connells, noted that longtime

pieces the Connells have acquired inform us about history. The large Bagobo tribal earplugs from Mindanao Island are made of elephant

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workers in his atelier have never been able to duplicate the superb granulation achieved by these earlier goldsmiths. An exquisite repoussé necklace from Central Java dating to the ninth or tenth century recently joined the Connell's collection (Fig. 3). To the naked eye, the delicately textured surface looks like an embroidered textile, but a loop reveals meticulously executed details.

Beyond their visual appeal, some of the

ivory, yet elephants are not found in the Philippines. The earplugs bear witness to eighteenth-century trade between the island and Sumatra or Thailand (Fig. 4).

"Southeast Asian jewelry and adornment continue to fascinate and sometimes surprise us," James Connell says, holding up a hornbill skull worn as an earpiece by a nineteenth-century Ibn Dayak tribal leader in Kalimantan, Indonesia (Borneo). Pointing at a tribal arm

band, he asks, "Would you have guessed that this arm band from Tanimbar in the Moluccas was made of cassowary bird quills steamed and bent around a bark core?"

Until the late twentieth century, Southeast Asian jewelry was largely overlooked by museums and collectors. Over the last eighteen years, however, prices have steadily risen as interest has increased. Southeast Asian jewelry seldom appears in auctions at Sotheby's or Christie's, but is often offered at auctions staged by jewelers' organizations or in specialized sales of pieces assembled from various dealers. Fine pieces start in the \$10,000 range and reach the high five figures.

Increased awareness has led to scholarship and growing interest from museums. Indonesian gold jewelry dating from the ninth to the fourteenth centuries can be seen at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, and the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. Southeast Asian gold jewelry from the Connells' collection is currently on view at the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco.

Fig. 5: Intaglios carved of semiprecious stones, Burma, Pyu period, 2nd–9th century. Intaglios of semiprecious stones were typically set in rings; the settings for the rings illustrated here were melted down to obtain the gold, leaving the intaglios intact. Dimensions range from $\frac{3}{8}$ x $\frac{1}{2}$ in. to $\frac{1}{2}$ x $\frac{7}{8}$ in.



Discoveries continue to be made. In Indonesia, gold jewelry has come to light buried in large jars as if its owners were keeping it hidden, possibly from attack by some enemy now unknown. In Cambodia, land mine recovery has revealed buried treasure.

The Connells suggest that anyone interested in developing a list of Asian art dealers should consult gallery announcements, auction exhibitors' lists, and magazines such as *Orientalism* and *Arts of Asia*. They caution against acquiring jewelry solely to fill in a gap, as adding objects of lesser merit detracts from the overall quality of a collection. For reference reading they recommend *The Jewelry of Southeast Asia* by Anne Richter (which includes illustrations of pieces from the Connells' collection), *Power and Gold* by Susan Rodgers, and *Old Javanese Gold* by John Miksick. @

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All photography by Kaz Tsuruta.



Fig. 6: Five-ribbed solid silver necklace, Hmong hill tribe, probably living in Laos, 19th–early 20th century. This necklace was made to adorn the costume of a late-nineteenth- or early-twentieth-century tribal woman; its form strikes a contemporary chord. H. 7, W. 7 in.