



The handmade Apassionato necklace features a crystal pendant in the traditional Indian kundan stone-embedding technique with pyrite strands.

Manjusha Jewels

A ROYAL LINK TO TREASURE

By Michelle Devera
CHRONICLE STAFF WRITER

Jyotsna “Joey” Singh’s grandfather may be famous as the maharaja with a penchant for jewels and wives, but it wasn’t until a year ago that the 55-year-old Contra Costa County resident found her calling as a jewelry designer.

“For me, there’s a spiritual connection to gems and stones,” said Singh, the granddaughter of Maharaja Bhupinder Singh of Patiala, whose necklace is part of the “Maharaja: The Splendor of India’s Royal Courts” exhibition at the Asian Art Museum.

“The gem comes from the earth; it’s like being given a gift. Those gems and stones are full of vibration.”

Singh, who retired last year after 18 years as a sales rep for Levi’s, says she never met her famous grandfather, who died when her mother was 4, but she did go to the palace for family visits and weddings. Though the government took over the palace, which now houses offices, statues of her grandfather still stand — a testament to India’s opulent past.

We spoke with Singh in between shows of her line, Manjusha Jewels, in Bangkok a couple of weeks ago before she headed out to India. She talked about her new life as a jewelry designer and what it’s like to come from a royal pedigree.

Q: Tell me about your family lineage. How many wives did your grandfather have?

A: We never really counted them all. I do have 52 aunts and uncles, and my mama would always joke that “We were a pack of cards.”

They were brought up by a group of English governesses who couldn’t pronounce their Indian names, so they were all given English names. My mother’s was Elsie.

There were two big palaces on the grounds, and the maharaja and his wives and the older kids lived in one, and the young kids in another palace. With 52 children, there was always someone being born.

It was very disciplined. I have hundreds of cousins. If you take an average of two to three children each, there would be about 150-200 grandchildren.

Q: How much do you know about the maharaja?

A: He was a very flamboyant maharaja. He always made a statement. He was very well known to all the rulers of Europe. He was known as a general; his army fought in the Second World War. You couldn’t ignore him.

He took a chest of gems to Cartier and asked him to make his crown jewels. The Patiala necklace is just one of them. It’s 1,000 carats, (with one) the size of a golf ball.

Q: What do you remember about the necklace?

A: Actually, I’ve never seen it. Every time I try to see it in an exhibition, I would miss it. But to know that it’s coming to my hometown, I feel very emotional. I get home Dec. 15 and I’m going right away to see it.

I wish my mother was here. It means more than a necklace. It’s part of my heritage. It’s telling the story of my family. A lot of my friends don’t know about my family.

I never felt the need to talk about it. It’s only since I started doing jewelry that it’s started coming up.

Q: How did you start designing jewelry?

A: I knew I was leaving (Levi’s), so I had a plan to sell jewelry. I went to Japur (India) and hired a designer there to sketch out my concepts.

I never thought I could design. But within two months, I just knew that I could design it myself and do it on my own. I got an encouragement from my friend who told me, “The colors are there, you can design.”

I went to Japur nine times. From the third time, it was like something took over. Imagine finding your passion at 54? There was a flow. It felt effortless.

Q: How would you describe your jewelry?

A: My jewelry is full of color. It’s happy jewelry. Jewelry is supposed to enhance. I don’t follow any color for seasons or for fashion.

There’s no certain style to what I do. I do statement pieces, but I do light pieces. The only thing common in my jewelry is that I use stones. Every piece of jewelry would have semi-precious stones.

I love lapis lazuli, purple amethyst, carnelian, citrine, turquoise. Pearls, rubies, emeralds — those are the three royal stones. (Semi-precious stones) give you the ability to wear these stones in a very majestic way with-

out having to pay a lot of money for it. It’s so regal and royal. I don’t do fine jewelry because I would be restricted by security, expense and how much I can use.

Q: What do you think of your grandfather being the maharaja known for jewelry and now you’re a jewelry designer yourself?

A: It seems so apt. I don’t get one design in my head, I get hundreds. And I know exactly how it’s supposed to look and the colors I need to use and the way it’s supposed to come together.

I attribute it to the fact that I’ve seen so much growing up. I think it’s in my genes.

E-mail Michelle Devera at mdevera@sfgate.com. Follow her on Twitter: @michelledevera.

CREDITS

PAGES 6-7

At top: Gucci gown, \$5,000, and Tom Ford choker, \$2,170, both Neiman Marcus, San Francisco. Ruffled gold choker, price upon request, alexisbittar.com. Diamond and jeweled bangles \$13,500- \$25,000, Reveti Jewels.

Below left: Etro tunic, \$2,500, and Dolce & Gabbana paillette leggings, \$475, Neiman Marcus. Gucci suede platform sandals, \$895, gucci.com. Black jade teardrop pendant (worn as headpiece), \$20,000, and citrine ring, \$14,500, both Bijoux by Rosalina, and raw diamond earrings, \$6,900, Reveti Jewels.

Below right: Dries Van Noten sequined jacket, \$4,475, Saks Fifth Avenue, and Etro maxi skirt, \$1,875, both Saks Fifth Avenue. Tom Ford gold choker, \$2,170, Neiman Marcus; gem necklace, \$44,000, Reveti Jewels; gold citrine ring, \$14,500, Bijoux by Rosalina.

THIS PAGE

Top: Yves Saint Laurent jumpsuit, \$5,100, Neiman Marcus, San Francisco, Gucci suede platform sandals, \$895, gucci.com. Isharya wood and gemstone bangles, \$365-\$475, isharya.com; cognac diamond pendant, \$34,000, and earrings, \$19,600, both Bijoux by Rosalina. Gold Bajra scarf, \$325, Saks Fifth Avenue, San Francisco. Christian Louboutin Swarovski-crystal-studded peep-toe pump, \$3,695, Barneys New York, San Francisco.

Above: Gucci silk chiffon gown and culottes, \$7,500, and Gucci suede platform sandals, \$895, gucci.com; diamond and enamel necklace, \$48,500, and earrings, \$19,500, Reveti Jewels. Tom Ford cuff, \$1,490, Neiman Marcus, and gold belt, \$395, Saks Fifth Avenue.

Photography: Russell Yip / The Chronicle

Stylist: Sharon Maloney / Ford

Stylist assistants (on set): Kelley Shouey, Devon Lydecker

Makeup: JR Rabello, Chanel Cosmetics, Bloomingdale’s San Francisco

Hair: Tony Le Jones / Bibbo Salon

Models: Liz / Six Flags; Mary / Ford

Photo assistants: Stephen Lam, Dylan Entelis

Shot on location at Six Flags Discovery Kingdom in Vallejo. Special thanks to Nancy Chan, Gavin Grozier, Patrick Abtey, Joshua Taugner, Jacob Brummet, Billy Charles, Tyler Tychon, Rosalina Lydster and Nandini Saraiya.

To see a behind-the-scenes video from the shoot, go to sfgate.com/video.