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Coral and Mongolian Ethnic Jewelry

Il corallo nella gioielleria etnica della Mongolia

1. The Ethnic Jewel

1.1. The precious metaphor

"Then the land of Buddha... will be enchanting, pure, rich, prosperous and peaceful... it will contain an area divided in eight squares surrounded by gold lines, each of which will be made precious by a tree that will bear fruit made of gold, silver, turquoise, coral, pearls, emeralds and sapphires." This is how Saddharma Sakyamuni described Paradise to his disciple Sariputra in the Saddharma Pundarika. In Oriental philosophy, through the mediation of Hinduism and Buddhism, decoration is seen as a metaphor that translates the ideals of faith. The metaphor designs the principles of superiority, singularity and refinement, and at the same time of supreme perfection.

In the thirteenth century the new religious philosophy, animated by complex rituals, and the philosophy of the elite that governed the vast land covering the territories from Korea to Eastern Europe, were brought together by the proselytism of the Buddhist priests in Tibet. Maybe not even Khublai Khan imagined how much this event would have influenced the history of Mongolia. Since then the worship of the cult of Lama, the contacts and cultural exchange with Tibet shaped the thought and customs of the Mongol population, resulting in a special form of expression, a combination of art form and lifestyle that is still present. The artists and artisans from Mongolia and Tibet observed the sacred texts when making both their works of sacred iconography and personal embellishment.

The jewel was conceived for the subtle and poignant spiritual quality that religious practice embodies. The three essential fundaments of Buddhism, Buddha, his teaching and the priest community, are called the precious "Three Jewels". The bodhisattva, *the compassionate enlightened that are reborn in the imperfect human nature to indicate the way towards liberation, are called* Ratna, *gem. The virtues of the enlightened monarch,* cakravartin, *are described as the "Seven Gems". The Buddhist master Gampopa wrote an essay on the Mahayana Way to Liberation called* The Jewel of Liberation.

Furthermore, in sacred iconography the abundance of jewels is seen not as meaningless embellishment, but as indication of precise sublime characteristics that would not otherwise be perceived. The representation of bodhisattva *is adorned by a myriad of regal vestments that codify its sublime state of enlightenment. In the words of Coomaraswamy, the ornament is "what fits a character", therefore it is similar to beauty and to what is appropriate, to what satisfies one's aesthetic and spiritual sense.*

The model of perfection that ornaments embody become reference types for the jewels of men and women. For Mahayana Buddhists choosing the proper jewel means knowing how to appreciate the wealth that life offers us, without depending on it and without ignoring the global diversity of experiences that lead to detachment from desire. It is the search for the balance of aesthetics and asceticism.

1.2. Mirror of cultural identity

In the West jewels mainly fulfill an aesthetic reason, meant to make a person look nicer. Jewels are the expression of one's individuality, of wealth and authority. In countries like Mongolia, where traditional culture is dominant, a jewel takes on a larger role. Not only does it indicate one's taste, but it also conveys symbolic messages connected to the history and religion of the culture in which the jewel was conceived. It suggests personal wealth and reveals one's political and social position. Officials who held a governing role could, and had to, wear certain ornaments, taken from the rank classification of the Chinese Qing dynasty. The governing ministers of the Mongol Khanoto wore a hat which had a ruby at the top, while military officers, men of law and educators wore coral. Nothing is casual in the realm of ethnic jewels. All symbols, shapes and materials define the person who wears them. Ornaments are transformed into "identity cards", a concentrate of visual signals, through which each member of society can understand who it is he's facing. The jewel

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Tenda circolare «ger»
"Ger", circular tent

Accampamento di tende mongole
Camp of Mongol tents

Cfr. «torlok»

Mongolian in "torlok", the traditional summer clothes

tells the story of the person, his ethnic background, religion, his role in society. Jewels take on different meanings according to the environment in which they are used. Ornaments could seemingly be simply decorative, instead they are an indispensable component, a form of expression, and the image of a society.

1.3. Amulets and Talismans

Jewels embody religious and tribal beliefs that border into magic. They become the means for one to ward off bad luck and to boost one's potential. Thus the "amulet-jewels" or the "talisman-jewels", which can be defined as ornaments that come from the desire to protect oneself. The precursor of the decorative jewel was in fact an ornament whose role was to preserve human life. This concept of a jewel as a protector can be traced back to many cultures, protecting the individual or the group from the danger of separation. In order to fulfill such a task, jewels contained typical propitiatory elements which were integrated with or absorbed in the decorative motif. Over the eras many populations believed that coral possessed these qualities.
Amulets protect a person from evil and defend him from external dangers, they neutralize bad luck and are therapeutic in general and specific illnesses. Talismans, on the other hand, bring good fortune, wealth and fertility. These two functions are often combined in the same ornaments that are true works of refined jewellery for the richness of the materials used and the clever craftsmanship. Coral, along with other gems, was also known for its thaumaturgic qualities and was often chosen for amulet boxes. In an essay of Tibetan medicine, the Blue Beryl, written in the late seventeenth century, we read: "red coral alleviates fever of the liver and ducts".

1.4. Meaning and function of coral in Mongol ethnic jewerly

In all societies the selection of archetypal materials, notwithstanding their availability, is often conditioned by cultural choices. The mid-Asian countries were rich in turquoise and jade, however coral caught the fancy of the distant horsemen of the Mongol steppes, the nomads of the mid-Asian plateaus and the mountain population of the Himalayas. Life in solitary and deserted places, the ceaseless search for livestock pastures, and the strong religious sense combined with the memory of shaman-magic cults led to a single vision of the unknown and to the common expression of their cultural likeness in art and in personal ornaments.
Coral became the sign of vital energy and mysterious symbolic forces, maybe for its sanguine red color, its indefinite origin, its durability and its magic. These qualities generated the common idea that coral fulfilled an auspicious purpose for the protection of well-being, health and good fortune. This belief is amazingly close to the tradition of our popular jewel and may be a further indication of the cultural interchange between the East and the areas of fishing and crafting of coral.
In Buddhism red represents light and all the jewels that combine elements of coral (red = fire) and turquoise (blue = air) epitomize the perfect fusion of natural elements. The vital color of coral attracts the populations of the monochromatic environment of the steppe, making it a symbol of happiness. Only during the brief summer the plateaus in Mongolia are touched with the colors of the blue, red and yellow flowers that the women use to adorn themselves. The intensity of these colors seduces the women that try to lengthen into the

Woman of the Buryat ethnic group (from E.E. Oukhtomsky, "The journey of the Crown Prince", 1893)

bare, cold winter the pleasure of adorning themselves with the same colors using turquoise, amber and coral. Such was the "amuletic" value of coral that no nomad from Mongolia or Tibet would start a journey or a pilgrimage without taking a at least a bead. Even the statues of Buddha and venerated masters are "protected" by rich red decorations. Sometimes the sacred icons are given the personal objects of the believers, as Buddhists believe that each offer is deserved and strengthens the bind between he who offers and the sacred.

In the period between the collapse of the empire of Genghis Khan and the return of the official religion of lama Buddhism in the sixteenth century, Mongols pursued the ancient cult of shaman. However even the converted Buddhists maintained a subdued worship for the spirits considered sacred by the shamans, mediated by the icons of the Buddhist pantheon. Object and formulas relative to the archaic magic rites were also introduced to the new liturgy.

One of the most representative ceremonies, that preserves traces of shamanistic rituals, is Tsam, the sacred dance in which the protagonists masked as divinities destroy the ones representing the demoniac forces that hinder the reaching of enlightenment. The power of sacred dances is considered to be found in the masks. Terrifying and comical features are expressed in the faces of the protecting forces and the mean spirits. The dancers, who are all priests, fall into a trance identifying themselves with the character represented by the mask. In Mongolia and in Tibet, where trance was regularly used to exorcise evil and to communicate with the supernatural, masks are very important. One of these masks, Begtse, the warrior spirit who protects the supreme head of Buddhism in Mongolia and, by extension, all of the nation, is completely covered by coral beads and wears a crown of skulls. His terrifying and ferocious appearance is heightened by the ornaments and by the burning shade of the coral. This masterpiece, the work of artisan priests, is one the most significant examples of goldsmith art applied to religious cult objects.

2. The historical route towards "Tartaria"

The "amuletic" qualities of coral, the Mediterranean treasure which was believed to have magical powers and to positively influence human life, migrated beyond the seas to be absorbed with the same ease by Oriental philosophy. Commerce between West and East became the vehicle of exchange of thought and customs. Coral was considered a precious and coveted good, being as it was rich in allure and highly symbolical.

In Naturalis Historia Plinio the Old underlined the importance of coral among the Indians: "Auctoritas bacarum eius non minus Indorum viris quoque pretiosa est quam feminis nostris uniones Indici" (Coral beads are not less appreciated by Indian men, not less than the large pearls of the Roman women) [Naturalis Historia, XXXII-XI-23].

Throughout the Roman Empire coral was considered a valuable exchange counterpart for cherished oriental products (spices, silk, essences, gems and pearls), until the expansion of the Arab market fragmented direct exchange between the Mediterranean and Asia. On most of the 15.000 kilometer itinerary that we now call "The Road of Silk", goods passed from hand to hand, from caravan to caravan, from segment to segment carrying the fragmented and confused tales that fed the myth of Cog and Magog for centuries, describing an unknown, distant and terrifying world.

One can easily imagine that Venetians favored the exchange of glass and crystal, whereas the Genoans preferred coral, which they grew and crafted. From the chronicles of these trips we learn about the story of the Genoan Andalò di Savignone who, sent by the Emperor Toghon Timur to take a message to the Pope, upon returning from Genoa carried with him gifts for the court of the Khan, such as horses, jewels and coral. On the way to Crimea Andalò stopped in Naples where he was expected by a papal delegation, led by the Franciscan Giovanni Marignolli, which accompanied him to the Orient. Naples had also been the destination of another ambassador, Raban Sauma, a Turk from China, designated by Arghun, Khan of the Mongols of Iran, to head an embassy in Europe. In his travel diary Sauma admiringly spoke of Naples, the city where Irrid Charladou (King Charles II) reigned, and that he liked most, together with Genoa and Paris.

Two dramatic events ruined the idyllic situation of political and economical exchange that had lasted nearly a century, the "black plague" that devastated the known world from 1344 to 1348 and the Ming rebellion that marked the surrender of the Mongol empire in 1368. But interest in the Mediterranean coral stayed alive in the Orient. During the entire era of the Ming (1368 -1644) and Qing (1644-1912) dynasties, coral was a recurring part of the contributions sent to China from Tibet. In the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Genoa, Trapani, Naples and Livorno nurtured a market that was not harmed by the changes of fashion, through complicated routes and infinite passages from hand to hand. Calcutta, in the gulf of Bengala, became the distribution center for all the Orient. In the eighteenth century Livorno sent a large part of its production there. In 1876, in his book on travellers in Tibet Markham wrote that in this nation coral beads that came from Bengala were the second-most precious trade good and that the coral was sent to Tartaria from Tibet. In the same period the Russian colonel Prejevalsky reported that: "Married women decorated their hairdos with segments of silver and red coral, which is prized among Mongols". It might have been coral from Torre del Greco. The "round" coral that arrived in Calcutta in the 1880s and "openwork" coral in Madras certainly were, as the Imperial Gazzetteer documented in 1907: "The commerce of coral originates mainly in Italy. It is reputed that a company in Naples exports coral for the amount of 80.000 rupees [the equivalent of 20.000 pounds] to Calcutta". Torre del Greco had become the link of this extraordinary connection between West and East. Thanks to the new political and cultural stability in Mongolia, this connection would perfect and enrich the commerce of the patrimony that the sea had given to Torre and that has made the town famous throughout the world.

3. The personal jewels of the Mongolian ethnic groups

Just as for many other nomad populations, Mongolians invested a large part of their personal wealth in jewelry and in other precious objects that could be easily moved and exchanged for money. Jewels were not simply the sign of the wealth of a family and of the class of the woman that wore them, but also the symbol of the cultural identity of each ethnic group. The nuptial dowry which was to be given by the family of the bride, along with camels, horses

and cattle, included silver and coral jewelry, such as headdress ornaments, earrings, bracelets and rings.

3.1. Headdress ornaments

Notwithstanding certain analogies among ethnic groups, different were the styles, the manners of fixing hair and different were the ornaments created. The present forms of headdress ornaments have been somewhat influenced by the style of the Manchurian Chinese, who governed the Mongolian populations and territory from the seventeenth to the beginning of the twentieth century. The boghtag, *the prominent structure that elevated the figure, making it more emblematic, seems to date back to more ancient times. This is confirmed by the descriptions of medieval travellers, like the Franciscan monks Giovanni Pian del Carpine and William of Rubruk. Silver and coral were determining and common components of all these ornaments.*

3.2. The Khalkha, Dariganga and Mmyangad

Khalkha, the largest group forming 70% of the present population, are the ethnic group that adjusted less to Sino-Manchurian culture; in fact they define themselves the result of "the union between natural spirits and herds". The legendary origin of female headdresses is mentioned by the Danish explorer and ethnographer Haslund-Christensen, who offered a plausible interpretation of their symbolic meanings. The expert believed that there was a geometrical affinity between Khalkha headdresses and the horns of the wild sheep (Ovis Ammon) that live in the plateaus and play an important role in the economy of Mongol populations. The herds of sheep are indispensable to the survival of the nomad shepherd groups, as they ensure food support and provide the basic material for clothing and the felt used to cover the round tents, ger, the traditional dwellings of the steppes. Christensen's theory is counterpointed by the one that sees, in the headdresses, the representation of a divinity taken from the Hindu pantheon, that is Garuda, the mythical solar bird that had special auspicious powers associated with the bird's natural role of predator of snakes, which were symbols of evil. The winged deity protected from illnesses connected to water and to snakes.
In Khalkha hairstyles the hair of the brides is combed into two bands soaked in a sticky ointment (prepared with linen seeds, sheep fat or eggs) that make the hair "as hard as wood". The bands are molded into two wide shapes that stick out to the sides of the head and are kept steady by segments of silver, finely chiseled with coral. These great "wings" end in braids that are sheathed in cylinders made of silk brocade on which there are plates of silver engraved in flowery patterns and coral. The elements of the headdress are both functional and beautifying. The headdress is completed by a silver and coral head piece, attached to which there are chains of braided silver. The Khalkha headdress ornaments are the bride's dowry and are given by the family to the bride on the morning of the wedding during a ceremony in which the hair of the bride is combed like a " married woman's", avghai khun.
A similar headdress can be found among the Myangad and Dariganga ethnic groups. In the first group the shape maintains the two big "horns", of which only the parts that enclose the braids are decorated with silver, turquoise and coral. Among the Dariganga the braid-covers underscore the grandness of the headdress, in fact each segment is richly studded by sumptuous corals.

3.3. The Buryat

The headdress ornaments of the Buryat, a native group of the region surrounding the Baikal lake who presently live in the north-eastern territories, have little in common with the other groups. Their ornaments are more modest and plain than the Khalkha ornaments, and feature two wood or metal sticks placed over the ears, sometimes decorated in silver and coral, that support fake or real braids. The sticks, that are a prerogative of married woman, are sometimes decorated with strings of coral. A band decorated with large beads of amber, malachite, mother-of-pearl and coral covers their forehead. During winter the ornamental headband is attached to a warm fur hat.

3.4. The Uzemchin

The headdress ornaments of the ethnic group that lives in the southern territories of Mongolia, the Uzemchin, features long cords, called shuren tatuurga, *made of beads of coral, amber, turquoise and colored glass. The cords frame the face and are long enough to cover the breast. The band that is tied around the head holding the cascade of loose cords is studded by silver plates that were sometimes in enamel according to the Chinese technique.*
In its whole the headdress is less sumptuous compared to the ones of the

other ethnic groups and its emphasis is not given by the large quantity of silver used but by the beads of coral and by their elaborate and ingenious pattern. This particular composition looks like the headdress of certain Tibet lama which is decorated by a similar frame of cords that wards off evil spirits, according to Buddhist traditions. The predominant color, the red of the coral, is linked to the most orthodox Lama sects, grouped under the name of "red hats" that distinguish them from the reformed sect, called "yellow hats" which is identified with the color of amber. The frequent use of these two elements is the proof of the worship of these two orders.

3.5. Earrings

The jewelry of Mongolia presents a style of earrings, suike, that is of such a size and weight (over 500 grams) that they can be worn only if attached to the hair or set over the ear, so that their weight does not cause irreversible deformation of the ear lobe. This technique is also used in Tibet for the impressive earrings made of gold or silver, coral and turquoise. The Mongol populations seem to have adopted the style of the earrings of Tibet, in style, shape and manner of wearing them. In the past the Mongols wore a single earring in their left lobe to indicate their exclusive social class, like the Tibet prefects and officials, the dzong-pon.
Among the earrings that are directly hooked to the ear lobe, there are some which are specifically made to indicate that the person who is wearing them has passed through the ritual of engagement. The Ordos include a pair of silver earrings in the so-called "five white gifts" that are donated during the wedding ceremony, together with a white lamp, milk, boiled mutton and a white scarf.

3.6. Bracelets and rings

Bracelets also carry a symbolic meaning in weddings. A girl that accepts a pair of bracelets from a man means that she is seriously considering his proposal. Wrist cuffs and bracelets, which are almost always made of silver, are decorated in patterns that recall Buddhist symbolism and decorative motifs, and are always studded in "amuletic" coral. In Mongolia they used to wear rings on their thumbs rather than on other fingers. This custom might be connected to their use of the archer ring that the horsemen wore on their thumbs for a better grip on the bow and arrows. The Buryat, similarly to the populations of Tibet, put rings that are larger than the size of a finger on their braids.

3.7. Personal accessories of daily use

Just as a venetion "cicisbeo" could not do without his toiletry set in the 1700s, the nomad of the plateaus have a rich array of personal objects. Snuff bottles, steels, knives, chopsticks, tweezers, nail clips and needle boxes are indications of social status and wealth. Nomad populations always carry a set of objects which are indispensable to the daily activity of the camps and to the long journeys following the herds. Because the traditional Mongol costume, del, does not have pockets, these accessories are hung to the belts on rich and elaborate hooks, thus becoming not only functional but also ornamental.
Snuff tobacco, and tobacco boxes, became popular in Mongolia only in the last century, even though it seems that its use was known since the 1600s. The exchange of tobacco boxes was associated to the rituals of welcoming guests and preceded and ended all business agreements. Ancient emperors donated refined snuff bottles to courtiers and foreign dignitaries, especially to the venerable lama that came from Tibet.
The shape and craftsmanship of the snuff bottles came from China while the choice of the materials, from plain glass to precious jade, varied according to local availability and the purse of the purchaser. The ready availability of hard stones and agate in Mongolia favored the widespread use of these materials. Coral was employed for the stoppers of the small bottles. A legend is connected to the tobacco boxes, narrating how lama doctrine had overcome an evil king who supported the dark cult of the shamans. When Mongols hold the bottles they press on the stoppers, crushing the head of the wicked sovereign and celebrating the end of the "black doctrine".
Other daily use objects are the purses in studded leather and the beautiful steels with steel blades used to friction the flint, decorated with silver medallions and coral applications. The knives are enclosed in sheaths studded in coral and turquoise, which also hold long ivory chopsticks. Pipes were also part

of the personal sets; 30 to 50 centimeters long, their silver mouthpiece and bowl are to be considered true jewels, for their precious metalwork of embossing and engraving.
The aesthetic pursuit of the goldsmiths includes the harnesses of the vigorous horses, irreplaceable companions of the men of the plateaus. The front and back of the saddles, the decorative plates and pendants of the harnesses are superb works of goldsmithry. The multi-layered gilt bronze openwork plates are set with turquoise and coral cabochons.

3.9. Gáu - the precious reliquaries

One of the accessories that the Mongolians wear daily is the reliquary, gáu, introduced in Mongolia by Tibet. Gáu enclose sacred scriptures and mantra (mystical formulas), fragments of relics or small objects blessed by Lama. Some gáu have a frontal opening to allow the icon they hold to be seen. The inscriptions and magical formulas, the sacred images and relics that the gáu keep, have the function of mediators between the supernatural world and the human life. Thus they are an integral element of Lama Buddhist religious belief and, at the same time, amulets that protect from evil spirits and influences positively that area of life which is uncontrolled by man.
Gáu are forged in silver or copper, and sometimes decorated with Buddhist sacred symbols variously crafted or with large beads of coral. They are usually hung on intertwining or ring chains, or on necklaces made of beads of coral, ivory or shells.

3.10. Cratsmanship and decorative motifs

Genghis Khan in primis and then all of his successors did not underestimate the contribution that the craftsmen of the conquered populations brought to the nomad Mongolian culture. The special privileges and tax exemption that was offered to foreigners encouraged the immigration of valiant goldsmiths from Tibet and China. With the support of the khan, the goldsmith craftsmanship of Tibet deeply influenced the choice of techniques, materials and symbolical meanings of the ornaments, parallel to the action of Buddhism of Tibet that brought new, reforming concepts to Mongolian philosophy, starting a historical-religious convergence between the two countries that still lasts.
The itinerant Mongolian silversmiths, the darkhan, followed the requests of the nomad society, that is to say that they learned how to satisfy the styles of the different buyers and to create a network of interrelations among them.
Similar shapes of ornaments, decorative motifs and craftsmanship, permeated by Chinese and Tibet characters, are found in ethnic groups far apart from each other, even if each of them reveal a particular character. After centuries of wandering, a few fixed markets rose near Lama temples, and the innate commercial talent of the Tibetans and Mongolians was extended to the priests who became expert silversmiths.
In Mongolian jewellry embossing and engraving are two techniques that are integrated one with the other. Embossed silver acquires volume and vitality and engravement defines its contours and intensifies the chiaroscuro, enhancing the manufacture of minute details. The ancient tradition of the filigree technique reaches a high level of quality in Mongolian goldsmithry. In certain pieces of jewellry filigree does not have a purely decorative function, as it completes and supports the enamel or the setting of the coral.
The decorative motifs express, once again, an interesting syncretism between Chinese decorations and the iconographic elements of Tibetan Buddhism which have been absorbed and merged in the Mongolian repertoire. Recurrent signs connected to Buddhist symbolism are the eight "Signs of Good Fortune": the Wheel of Law or chakra (representing the unity of all things and the teachings of Buddha), the Shell or lo (the propitiating voyage), the Umbrella or san (the respect for hierarchy), the Canopy or kai (victory over ignorance and death), the Lotus Flower or hua (the purity and perfection of Buddha that rises over the transitory world), the Urn or kuan (the holy receptacle of truth), the Two Fish or yu (the love relationship and spiritual freedom), and the Mystic Knot or chang (eternity that has no beginning or ending and the fallaciousness of time). These signs are the most recurrently reproduced.
Among the eight "Precious Things" connected to good luck, the "lozenge", symbol of victory, and the "jewel", the round sign in connection with the dragon, are the designs that are most often portrayed in headdress ornaments.
From Taoism come the eight "Characters of Immortality" (the flute, the basket, the fan, the sword, the castanets, the hollow pumpkin, the hollow bamboo with magic chopsticks and the lotus flower), each referring to an episode of the life of the "Immortals". Also inspired by the Chinese are many other stylized signs, such as shou, a wish for a long life reproduced in different styles