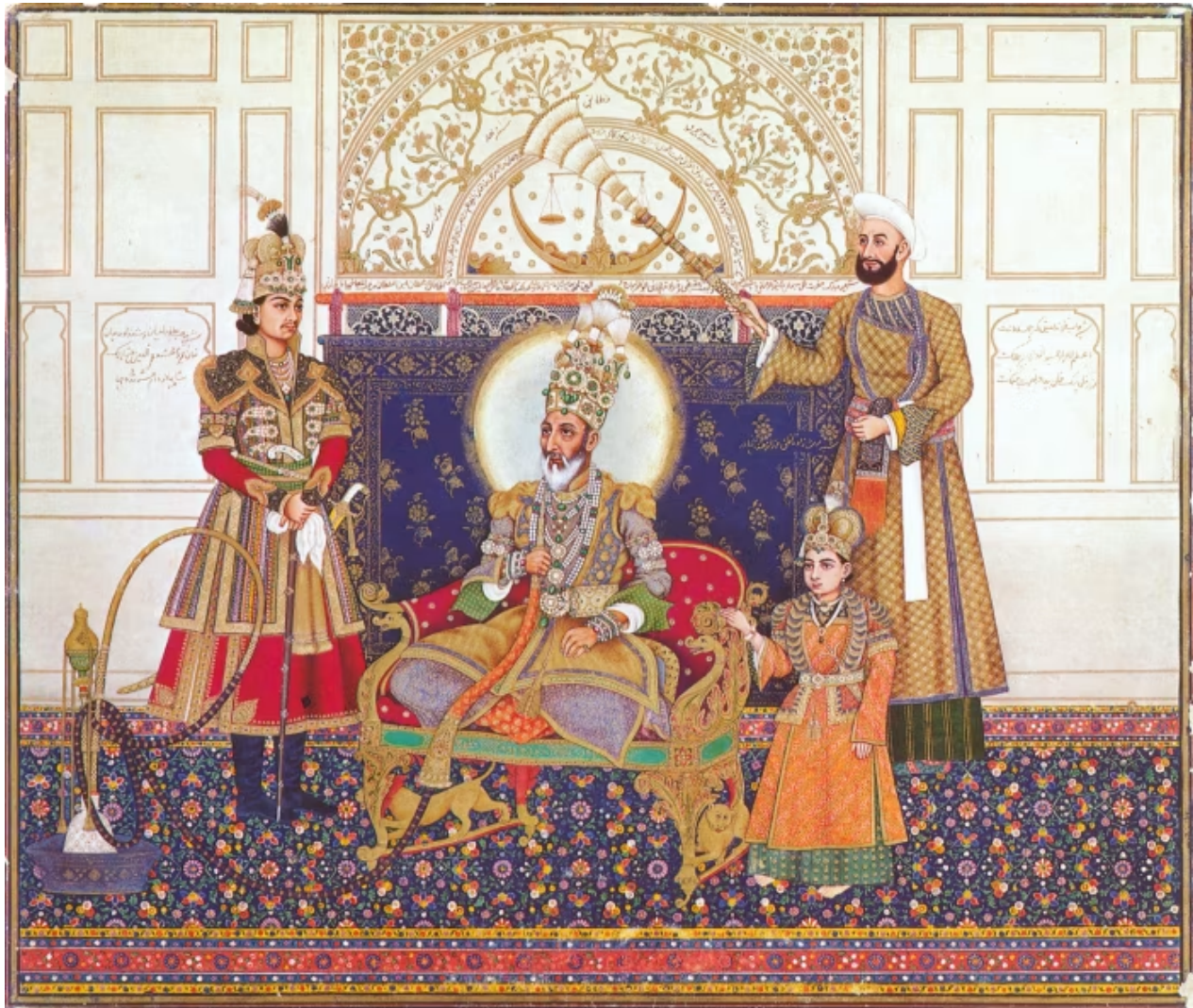


Watches & Jewellery [Luxury goods](#)

Why the Mughal aesthetic isn't a thing of the past

The empire's exquisite craftsmanship is proving a rich source of inspiration for the next generation of Indian jewellers



19th-century painting of Bahadur Shah II, the last Mughal emperor © Granger/Historical Picture Archive/Alamy

Melanie Abrams 6 HOURS AGO

When India's Mughal emperors commissioned glittering jewellery, little did they realise that, centuries later, these pieces would still have creative and commercial value for the country's homegrown jewellery designers.

Keeping the embers aflame are new books on Mughal jewels, as well as international museum displays showcasing objects ranging from bejewelled daggers in the Louvre in Paris to a pearl forehead ornament in the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston.

For Salam Kaoukji, curator of the Al-Sabah Collection in Kuwait, the appeal of Mughal jewels for today's practitioners lies in their aesthetic and their makers' techniques.

The Kundan setting technique, for example, which uses soft 24-carat gold ribbon to set gemstones directly on to surfaces, is still used today. So is the mosaic-like inlay technique called *pietra dura*: seen on the walls of the Taj Mahal, it is practised by local jewellers such as Hanut Singh and Vishal Kothari, founder of VAK Jewels.

The Mughal dynasty, which lasted from 1526 to 1858 — when the last emperor, Bahadur Shah II, was replaced by the British Raj — is defined by colourful, swashbuckling characters. The most sophisticated jewels were made in the 16th and 17th centuries, when the Mughal empire was at its height, writes Kaoukji in her upcoming book *Adornment and Splendour: Jewels of the Indian Courts*.

That era marked a way of making and wearing jewellery that continues to this day. The emperors “wanted to show their power, but they showed it not only in richness, to have more and more stones, [but] in a delicate kind of making jewellery”, says Cornelie Holzach, director of the Pforzheim Jewellery Museum.

Holzach is the curator of the *Historical Mughal Jewellery and Objets d'Art* exhibition, due to open late next year, which includes bejewelled weapons, pendants and brooches from a private collection.

Some jewellers use Mughal motifs in a literal way. Hanut Singh turns weapons, like daggers, into pendants. Vishal Kothari, however, prefers a subtle approach; otherwise the piece “becomes very traditional”, he says.

Unusually, Kothari has used portrait-cut diamonds for a minimalist collection. Visually, there is no connection to the Mughals, but the cut is associated with Emperor Shah Jahan — fabled for building the Taj Mahal — who had hand-painted or enamelled portraits of himself with a “portrait diamond . . . covering for it, instead of glass”, Kothari explains.

Associating collections with the Mughals helps homegrown Indian designers expand internationally, he adds. “It's the first thing that people connect from abroad to the country.”

A collection of VAK jewellery is on sale at Bergdorf Goodman in New York until next March, which includes a pair of 18-carat white- and pink-gold diamond earrings in the shape of Mughal-inspired lotus flowers, with Taj Mahal-esque arch designs and spinels — a common Mughal gemstone.



VAK white gold and diamond earrings

Unsurprisingly, the artistic heritage of the Mughals attracts deep-pocketed art collectors and auction houses, which are increasingly hosting private sales and exhibitions that help introduce collectors to the homegrown jewellers.

Kothari, for example, is selling a collection of jewels at Sotheby's new outpost in Geneva, on the third floor of the Bucherer store, starting on Monday.