

Temples and Treasures of Southern Asia

A GIA Museum Exhibit

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Gems are universally admired for their exquisite beauty and alluring interaction with light. For geologists searching for clues about Earth's processes, gems are scientific treasures as much as visual ones. Rubies and sapphires are evidence of enormous heat and pressure deep underground; aquamarines are products of continental (tectonic) collisions. Inclusions in billion-year-old diamonds offer rare glimpses into Earth's inaccessible mantle.

GIA's museum team recently explored another dimension of gem appreciation: the bridges between human beings and higher powers. This exhibit in the Rotunda gallery at GIA in Carlsbad, California, showcases the extraordinary crystals and gems central to the cultures of southern Asia. In this region, gems symbolize connections to celestial bodies and the divine. As sacred talismans,

they are seen to provide protection and wield powerful influence in every aspect of life.

Thus, when we admire a gem, we partake in a tradition almost as old as humanity. A single stone can embody beauty, wealth, Earth's history, and spiritual meaning all at once. This layering of significance gives gems their enduring power—and explains why, from ancient temples to modern museums, they continue to captivate us.

The following pages highlight some of the displays and items in the exhibit, which will be at GIA headquarters in Carlsbad until May 2026. All photos by Emily Lane. Exhibit case design by McKenzie Santimer, MCKmetal; exhibit graphics by Tom Kwolik, Ikon Ideas, Inc.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Several lenders generously contributed gems, crystals, jewelry, and artifacts that made this exhibit possible. GIA sincerely thanks the Larson family, the Somewhere in the Rainbow collection, the Department of Mineral Sciences at the National Museum of

Natural History, the Bindra family of B&B Fine Gems, and a private collector. We also appreciate donors who contributed pieces to the GIA Museum collection that were used in this exhibit: Mark Patterson, Sophie Leu, and Laura Ramsey (in memory of John Ramsey).

INDIA



MYANMAR



THAILAND



CAMBODIA



VIETNAM



SRI LANKA





Sanctuary of Splendor. Temples and Treasures of Southern Asia invites visitors into GIA's peaceful Rotunda "temple." Accompanied by the sounds of singing bowls and sitar, the exhibit allows one to pause and appreciate the riches of more than 200 fine specimens from the region.



The connection between temples, treasures, and gems reflects the view that beauty and spiritual purpose are deeply interlinked—that a gem is not just a stone, but a gift to the divine, a conduit of energy, and a testament to centuries of devotion.

Sacred Stones, Eternal Purpose. The connection between temples, gems, and treasures reflects the view that beauty and spiritual purpose are deeply interlinked—that a gem is not just a stone, but a gift to the divine, a conduit of energy, and a testament to centuries of devotion.

Burmese jewelry from the sixth to eleventh centuries AD and shrine courtesy of the Larson family.



Moonlight in the Palm of Your Hand. Moonstone, a variety of feldspar, is cherished as a mystical gem. In Hindu tradition, it was linked to the moon god Chandra and believed to hold the moon's light within. Moonstone's ethereal glow made it popular in both royal adornment and religious offerings, symbolizing purity, serenity, and the divine feminine.

Moonstones from India, Sri Lanka, and Myanmar courtesy of the Larson family.



Aquamarine. Reminiscent of tranquil waters, Vietnamese aquamarine is notable for its darker blue hue, whereas Sri Lankan aquamarine is found in lighter blue shades.

Vietnamese aquamarine crystals courtesy of the Larson family. Specialty-cut Sri Lankan aquamarine faceted by Mark Gronlund; courtesy of the Somewhere in the Rainbow collection.



Enigmatic Energy. In Indian astrology, blue sapphire is associated with the planet Saturn (*Shani*) and regarded as one of the most powerful and potentially volatile gemstones. Saturn's energy relates to discipline, karma, and justice. Wearing a blue sapphire can bring great luck or disaster, depending on one's spiritual alignment. Buddhists connected the deep blue color with heaven and offered the gems to Buddha statues as a symbol of devotion.

Sapphire, diamond, and platinum brooch designed by Raymond Yard; courtesy of a private collector. Faceted Sri Lankan sapphires (1.10 to 16.41 ct) from the GIA Museum collection. Star sapphire rings and all sapphire crystals courtesy of the Larson family.



Bismarck Sapphire Necklace.

One of the most iconic pieces in the Smithsonian's National Gem Collection is the Bismarck sapphire necklace. At its center is a stunning 98.57 ct deep blue sapphire from Myanmar. Designed by Cartier in 1935, this platinum necklace featuring more than 300 diamonds and accent sapphires was once owned by style icon and American socialite Countess Mona von Bismarck. The Burmese origin of the large sapphire was confirmed by the GIA laboratory.

Courtesy of the Department of Mineral Sciences, National Museum of Natural History; gift of Countess Mona von Bismarck.



Yellow Sapphire: Jupiter's Gem.

Brilliant yellow sapphires from Sri Lanka—formerly known as Ceylon—are prized for their luminous colors, which range from soft lemon to vivid golden shades. Their color is caused by traces of iron in corundum's crystal structure. Sri Lanka's abundant gem-bearing gravels have supplied these treasured stones for centuries, earning the island the nickname "jewel box of the Indian Ocean." In Hinduism, planets are seen as powerful deities. Yellow sapphires, or *pukhraj* in Hindi, are linked to wisdom, prosperity, and the benevolent influence of the planet Jupiter.

"Sunrise of Ceylon," a 115.13 ct unheated yellow sapphire, courtesy of the Bindra Family, B&B Fine Gems, Los Angeles. Cultured pearl necklace featuring a 10.27 ct yellow sapphire surrounded by diamonds gift of the Greenfield family. "Intensity" yellow sapphire and diamond brooch gift of Mark Patterson.



Maw Sit-Sit. Maw sit-sit is a rare, vibrant green ornamental stone found only in northern Myanmar, made up of several minerals, including kosmochlor, chromium jadeite, and albite. Although maw sit-sit was first officially described in 1963, locals had been using it long before that, believing it to be a type of jade. As a result, maw sit-sit holds the same spiritual significance as jade.

Gecko carved by Patrick Dreber; all maw sit-sit pieces courtesy of the Larson family.



Valley of the Rubies. The world's most renowned and legendary source of rubies is the remote, mystical valley of Mogok in Myanmar. Rubies have been mined from the white marble host rock for centuries. This same ruby-bearing marble extends into Vietnam.

Rubies courtesy of the Larson family.



Ruby: The Fire Within.

Rubies from Myanmar are revered for their intense “pigeon’s blood” red color, symbolizing passion, strength, and protection. Spiritually, they were thought to contain “living fire,” linking them to the life force and divine energy. This ruby and diamond necklace, the “Queen of Passion,” exemplifies the very finest quality of Burmese rubies, none of which have been heated or enhanced. The 5 ct ruby in the center is an extraordinary size for this quality.

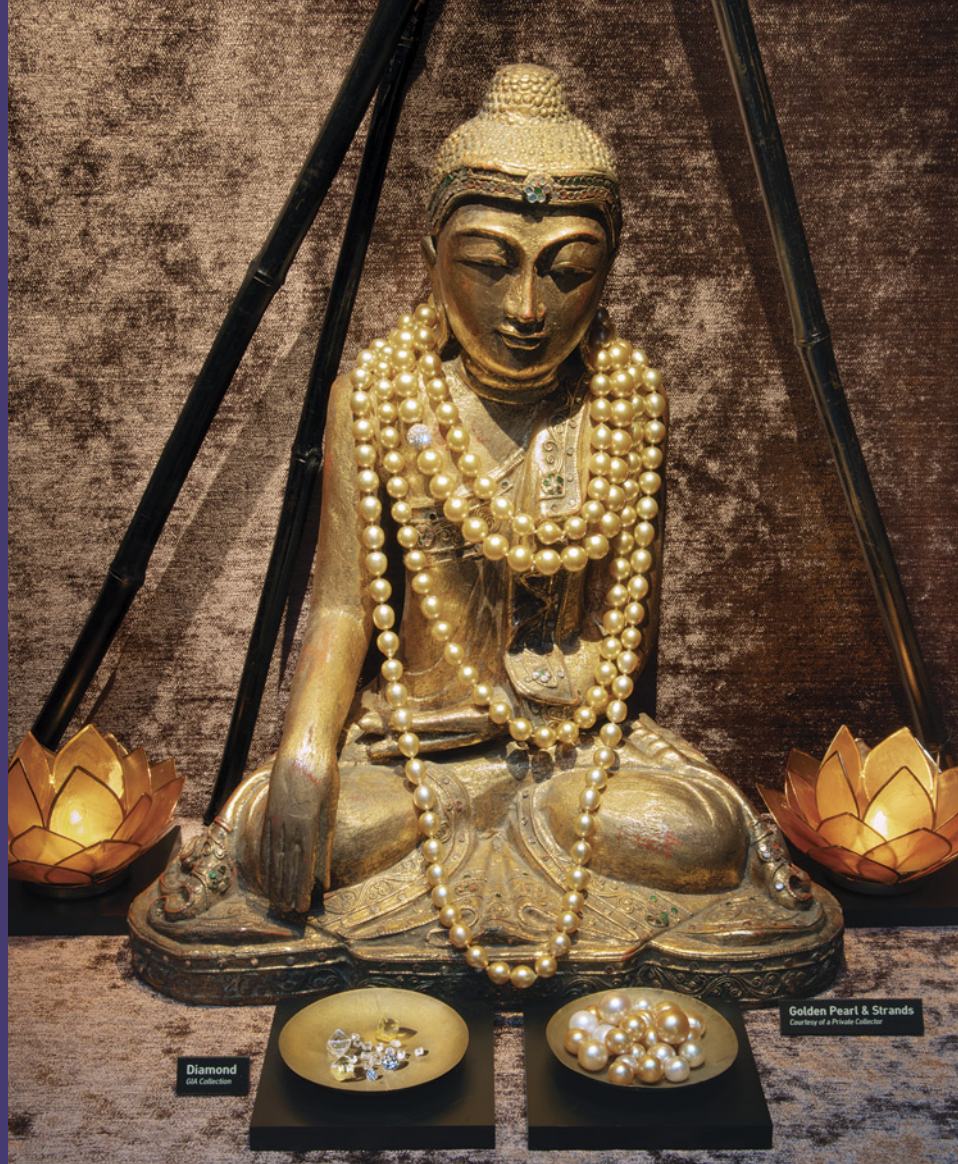
Courtesy of a private collector.



The Ultimate Trickster.

Throughout history, spinel has been mistaken for ruby and sapphire and therefore afforded the same reverence, often used in royal regalia or as offerings in temples. Spinel's perfect octahedral crystals are called *anyon nat thwe*, Burmese for "polished by the spirits."

Tumbled spinel from Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam courtesy of the Somewhere in the Rainbow collection; faceted spinel from Myanmar and Sri Lanka courtesy of the Larson family and the GLA Museum collection.



The King Gem and Queen Gem. Mined from legendary alluvial deposits near Golconda, the only source of diamonds until the seventeenth century, Indian diamonds were revered as symbols of royal authority and were considered the “King Gem.” Diamonds were believed to amplify spiritual power, making them treasures of both earthly and cosmic importance. Their rarity and mystical reputation elevated them well beyond mere material wealth.

Pearls were regarded as gifts from sea deities, especially in coastal and island communities in southern Myanmar, Vietnam, the Philippines, and Indonesia. For some, they represented spiritual wisdom and were considered the “Queen Gem.” Rarer golden pearls were connected to the sun and were symbols of wealth, prestige, and divine blessing.

Golden pearls and strands courtesy of a private collector and the GIA Museum collection. Diamonds courtesy of H.K. International and the GIA Sir Ernest Oppenheimer Student collection.



Enlightenment. The name *padparadscha* is derived from the Sinhalese words for “lotus blossom.” These pink-orange sapphires are admired for their auspicious coloring, like that of the setting sun. In Buddhist culture, the lotus and sunset are associated with enlightenment and spiritual awakening.

Padparadscha gems (5.05 to 9.05 ct) and 25.03 g crystal from GIA’s Dr. Edward J. Gübelin collection and the GIA Museum collection.