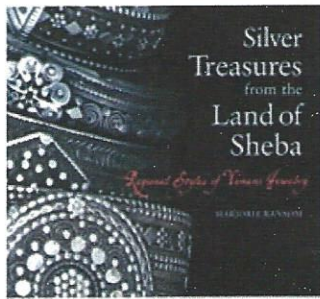


Books

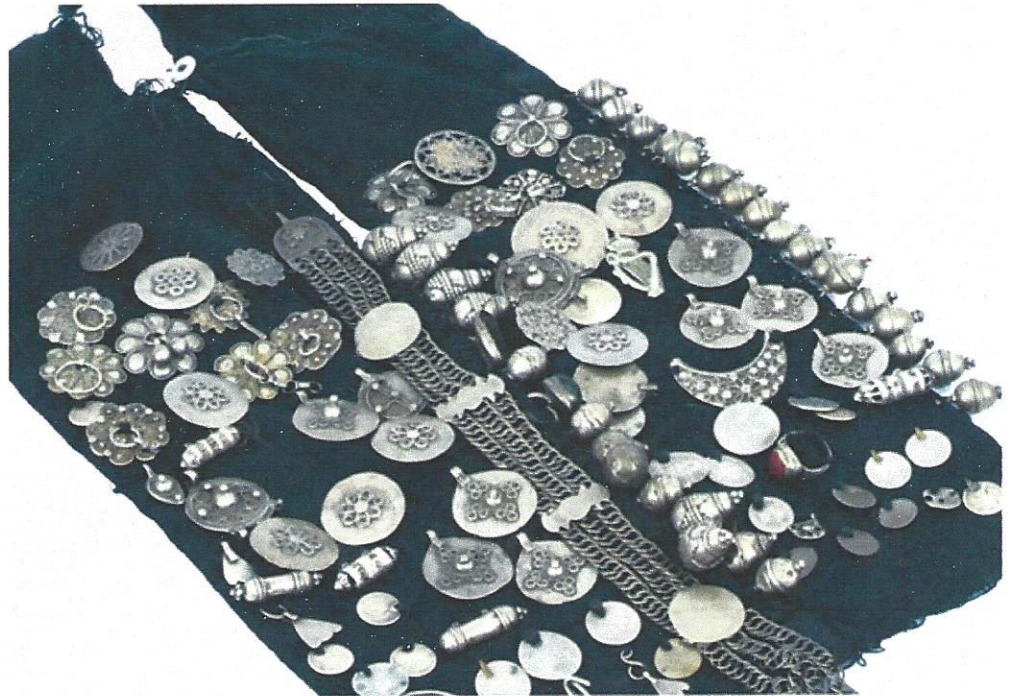


SILVER TREASURES FROM THE LAND OF SHEBA: REGIONAL YEMENI JEWELLERY

Marjorie Ransom
 The American University in Cairo Press
 Hardbound, 264 pages
 Reviewed by Linda Pastorino

As a dealer and collector of ethnographic jewellery, I collect books to assist me in finding the next great item to buy or sell. I have come across other publications on the subject of Yemeni jewellery, but this one, I particularly liked. Although it deals primarily with the jeweller's arts, it is also very much a book about costume and textiles. Any costume collector, particularly one specialising in Arabian clothing, should obtain a copy.

Collectors of ethnographic jewellery and costume accessories are a special breed. From our viewpoint, an important function of such a book is to arm us with the wisdom of scholarship, so we can avoid buying fakes or recent imports. In that regard, this one goes to impressive lengths, outstripping its predecessors with regard to regional differences and jewellery styles made by non-Jewish smiths. Jewish-made jewellery from this culture is now



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widely collected and there are several books on the topic.

The author's foreword explains how she began as a collector. Starting with a cuff from Mardin, Turkey: the first piece she bought and the first step towards what is now a collection of more than 1,900 items. She still owns this item, just as I retain and still love my first piece of jewellery.

The book is set out according to regional classifications, enhanced by colour-coded maps. These are supplemented by panoramic street scenes, showing markets and notable architecture. The key pieces of the collection are used to demonstrate significant design

styles, the work of particular jewellers, or regional variations. In this important way the book differs from any other on the subject.

Most cultures can boast a rich variety of both costume and jewellery. They combine to express the wearer's station in life, religious affiliations and status. It is virtually impossible to accurately identify such artefacts or to gain a true understanding of how pieces were used without seeing them worn. This book's use of actual field photos, with examples from the author's collection of samples (many previously unpublished), will help collectors in identifying their own

objects. Many of the pieces were commissioned for marriage in the dowry tradition observed by a large number of cultures. They are shown worn by women who have also been interviewed for the text.

When not shown on real wearers, the pieces are photographed on a black background in a table-top position. Unfortunately this results in the details being obscured. Though the effect is solid and strong, it often overexposes the light on the granulated and filigree surfaces which are techniques often used in these regions.

One of my favourite pieces is, however, well photographed (2). One of the rarer pieces in the book, it is possibly the work of the famous jeweller Harun Bawsani. The author dates it to the early 20th century; but, to my eye, the workmanship looks much earlier. Another piece I was happy to see



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identified was an indigo cotton dress front from Rayma (1), which sports a profusion of coins and silver amulets. I bought one myself more than fifteen years ago; I love it and wear it, but until now I could not figure out where in Yemen it was from, since none of the existing titles on Yemeni jewellery featured ornaments of this type.

Two dresses (3) are of a type I have not seen before. These to me are special in that they are both tribal and whimsical in appearance, in an uplifting way. They contrast with the limited palette and more sombre cloths of other areas. I particularly love the leggings and feel that with the right marketing they could start a great trend!

Just as colourful, but at the other end of the spectrum of Yemeni styles, is a fabulous belt from Wadi Da'wan. It is another

piece I would like to own myself.

As a scholarly document, the book is a useful and timely tool for students of cultures and for people researching their own collections. It will also be of value to dealers needing to make appraisals. It is diligent in determining where the pieces are from. However, it lacks a thorough discussion of individual jewellers and techniques, and an in-depth look at dating, which is only briefly discussed, but the author is currently working on another publication that will contain records of each jeweller's work and techniques.

For beginner collectors the book has unfortunately come too late. Because of specific political and cultural factors, much of what is in this volume has greatly appreciated in value or is now unavailable. Many of the jewellers have either retired or migrated to Israel to flee



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religious persecution; the Islamic jewellers, dealers and wearers of such pieces are having a very difficult time finding or replacing them. Add this to the restrictions on travel within Yemen and across its borders, and it becomes increasingly difficult to sustain commerce in these arts.

Marjorie Ransom's collecting was a passion shared with her late husband. Both of them were diplomats. They saw acquiring these items a way of learning more about what was at the time a little-known culture, and of sharing that understanding with the world. I believe that her mission has been completed successfully with the publication of this book. As a cultural interpreter and documenter of a dying art form she has presented a gift to scholars, to fellow collectors and to the society of Yemen itself.

1 Indigo-dyed cotton dress from Rayma governorate. Women would attach family heirlooms, broken jewellery pieces, or items and stones that offered amuletic protection to clothing that became like a scrapbook of her life

2 Gilded filigree necklace with coral beads, unsigned, but possibly the work of Harun Bawsani, one of the most important Yemeni Jewish silversmiths of the early 20th century. The hollow, two-sided, 7 cm triangles are made of fine filigree and granulation. The larger beads are of finely wrapped wire

3 Silk and cotton embroidered dress, Taiz governorate, first half 20th century.