

The Schinasi Collection of Central Asian Jewellery at the Textile Research Centre, Leiden. Part I

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The Textile Research Centre (TRC), in Leiden, the Netherlands, is home to a growing collection of jewellery from various cultural groups worldwide. The jewellery is part of the 'Dress and Identity' section of the TRC collection of textiles, dress, and accessories, which date from pre-history to the present day. The collection has just over 47,000 registered items, all accessible online: <https://trc-leiden.nl/collection/>

The study of dress and identity reveals what people wear in order to express themselves. Jewellery, such as necklaces, pendants and rings, but also body piercings, both visible and hidden, are an integral part of this study. Although an essential component, jewellery is often displayed separately from the garments it was designed to complement. While this separation is sometimes necessary, it can mislead viewers about the cultural context of the objects. It was this understanding that influenced the TRC's acceptance of the Schinasi collection of jewellery from Afghanistan and beyond.



Fig. 1. Head ornament, metal, stone and glass, Samarkand, Uzbekistan, early 20th century, TRC 2024.0324, Schinasi Collection. © TRC, Leiden.

May and Rolando Schinasi from Nice, France, both have a fascinating history. Rolando, an Italian born in Egypt before the Second World War, initially went to Afghanistan in 1957 as an importer and exporter. May, French by birth, studied Persian and its Afghan dialect (Dari) while living with her uncle, Daniel Schlumberger, director of DAFA (Délégation Archéologique Française en Afghanistan). The couple met in Kabul in 1964, married in France in 1965, and lived in Afghanistan until 1977. Few foreigners lived in Afghanistan at that time, and they began their collection of clothing and jewellery before the start of the hippy trail and the growth of tourist markets. Over the last few years, May and Rolando

Schinasi have donated parts of their collection of textiles and dress items from Afghanistan and neighbouring countries to the TRC. These items, acquired in the 1960s and 1970s, include garments worn by the Schinasis themselves, embroidered blouses as well as karakul caps made from lamb skins (such as TRC 2024.0211). Other items were either given to them, custom made, or purchased simply because they liked them. May Schinasi said: 'I never intended to start a collection. I bought them [i.e. the clothes and jewellery] for pleasure, wherever I saw them, in bazaars, villages, nomads' tents, wherever we travelled. I hardly wore them, except for the rings.'

Some of the Schinasi garments and jewellery were featured in an exhibition of Afghan dress held at the TRC in 2010-2011. And then, in 2016, more items were donated and registered in the TRC Collection. In 2024, the collection was again expanded by a gift of Turkmen, Uzbek, and Nuristan jewellery, also from Afghanistan and beyond. There are now 774 Schinasi objects housed at the TRC.

The Schinasi jewellery collection in Leiden includes headdresses, such as a Turkmen woman's head ornament (TRC 2024.0321) and an Uzbek example (fig. 1), forehead bands, earrings, nose rings, hair decorations, bracelets and bangles, clasps and panels for Turkmen dresses and coats, heavy silver torcs from Nuristan, tweezers and other items associated with personal grooming, amulet cases and amulets, scissor cases and other containers for personal use. There are also moulds for making amulets and appliqués (fig. 2) as well as a jeweller's scales (TRC 2024.0275).

In addition, there are toe and finger rings in a myriad of different forms, sizes, weights and styles of decoration. This variety of form and ornament reflects the cultural mix of tribes in the region, each with its own different traditions.

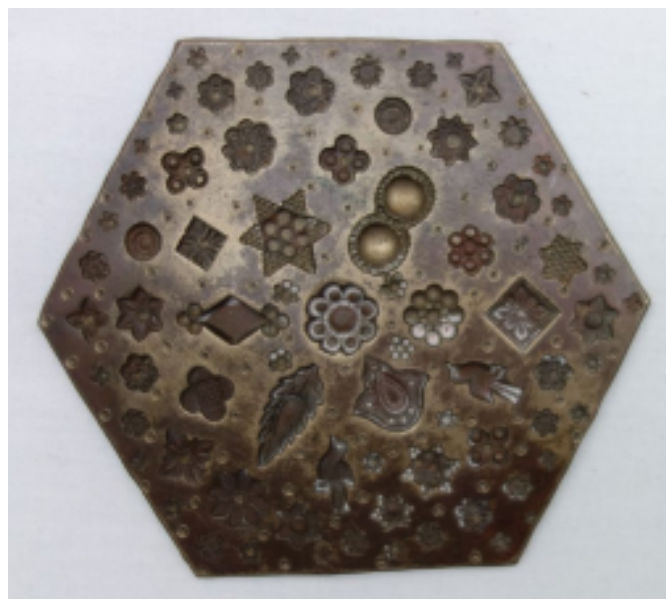


Fig. 2. Mould, metal, Afghanistan, 20th century, TRC 2024.0276, Schinasi Collection. © TRC, Leiden.

A distinctive sub-set in the collection are the rings with colourful glass inlays and ornate decoration, which are often classified as Kuchi jewellery (fig. 3). Kuchi is a term applied to various nomadic groups (mostly Pashtuns) from across Afghanistan and the surrounding area. There are many pendants and earrings in the Kuchi style in the collection, which gives us the opportunity to study how these pieces interact with each other and with the garments, and allows us to reconstruct the dress of a person in its entirety.



Fig. 3 Ring, metal and glass, Afghanistan, 20th century, TRC 2024.0713, Schinasi Collection. © TRC, Leiden.

The Schinasi's recent gift of jewellery also includes rings from Multan, a city in Pakistan which has always maintained close contacts with people from the Afghan mountains and highlands to the west (TRC 2024.0743). These thumb rings, patterned with deep blue enamelling, set with a mirror and elaborately decorated on the underside, have a very specific purpose. Worn by a bride at her (arranged) wedding ceremony, the mirror allowed her a first, demure, glimpse of her husband-to-be [compare an example in the V&A which retains its mirror: V&A IM.218-1924 – Ed.].



Fig. 4 Ring, metal and glass, Afghanistan, 20th century, TRC 2024.0755, Schinasi Collection. © TRC, Leiden.

Other rings are less easily categorised and identified. There is, for example, a ring which is so large that it goes over two fingers. The setting is not the usual stone or glass, but consists of a layer of textile fabric under clear glass. There is also a swivel ring, in the shape of a little figure wearing a hat. And then there is a peacock design with colourful beads around a central stone. Another intriguing piece from the Schinasi Afghan collection resembles an up-cycled earring (fig. 4). The hoop has clips, similar to earrings in the collection, and the glass inlay of the bezel is also earring-like. However, the circular shape of the bezel and the decorative granulation are more suited to finger rings. So is this piece a ring, an earring, or something else? The band is not ring-shaped, but fits comfortably on a finger. As an earring, it would point straight down, hiding the (earring/ring) head. As a brooch, the hoop is too wide, forcing the front downwards. The head and clip do not align.

Classifying this object is challenging. The closest items are two circular rings (TRC 2024.0723 and TRC 2024.0716), but they are larger and bevelled. This piece defies clear classification, reminding us that not everything fits neatly into categories. Words and categories are man-made, and transitional pieces exist everywhere.

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This is the first of a two-part article on the Schinasi donation; the second piece will focus on rings, and torqs from Nuristan.

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