

TWO MAGNIFICENT TREASURES, UNPARALLELED IN HISTORY

Precious Spectacles with Diamond & Emerald Lenses from Mughal India To be Offered at Auction with Estimate of Over £4 Million

Previously Unseen, the Extraordinary One-Off Objects Will be the Star of
Public Exhibitions in Hong Kong and London

Arts of the Islamic World & India
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LONDON, October 2021 – A pair of captivating, unrecorded and unique spectacles from an unknown princely treasury give the beholder the gift of observing the world through diamonds and emeralds. The ultimate status symbol, the magnificent artefacts bring together science, beauty and belief – the diamond pair named the Halo of Light, and the emerald pair named the Gate of Paradise.

They will be offered at auction for the first time, with estimates of £1.5 – 2.5 million each, having remained in the same collection for almost half a century. Ahead of the sale in October, the spectacles are being exhibited for the first time, set to go on view to the public in Hong Kong (7-11 October) and London (22-26 October).

“These extraordinary curiosities bring together myriad threads – from the technical mastery of the cutter and the genius of craftsmanship to the vision of a patron who chose to fashion two pairs of eyeglasses quite unlike anything ever seen before. They are undoubtedly a marvel for gemologists and historians alike, and it is a real thrill to be able to bring these treasures to light and to offer the world the opportunity to wonder at their brilliance and the mystery behind their creation.”

Edward Gibbs, Chairman of Sotheby's Middle East & India

The story of the spectacles begins in 17th century Mughal India, at a time when imperial wealth, scientific knowledge and artistic endeavour all simultaneously reached their peak. Commissioned by an unknown prince, an artist shaped a diamond, weighing over two hundred carats, and a brilliant emerald, weighing at least three hundred carats, into two masterpieces. Testament to the technical skill involved, no comparable example of either is known to exist. In *circa* 1890, the lenses were placed in new frames, decorated with rose-cut diamonds.

The original patron for whom these extraordinary spectacles were commissioned remains unknown, but they stem from a rich period of artistic and architectural achievement during the Great Mughal reigns of emperors Akbar (1556–1605), Jahangir (1605–1627), Shah Jahan (1627–1658) and Aurangzeb (1658–1707).

The quality and purity of the gemstones is itself extraordinary and stones of this size would no doubt have been the reserve of an emperor. The diamonds are flawless, thought to be from the mines of Golconda in Southern India. Cleaved as a pair from a single natural diamond – possibly the largest ever found – they now together weigh twenty-five carats. The faceting around the edge displays extreme skill, arranged to hold transparency in the lenses while releasing light from the edges. The teardrop-shaped emeralds also originate from a single natural Colombian emerald, and now weigh twenty-seven carats. The bevelling of the emeralds has been precisely angled to hold the intensity of the colour in the stone.

While ordinary lenses merely function to improve sight, these filters were aids for spiritual enlightenment – with diamonds thought to illuminate and emeralds believed to have held miraculous powers to heal and to ward off evil. The most famous evocation of such glasses in history and mythology can be found in Pliny the Elder's 'Natural History', a tome that has survived from the Roman Empire, which recounts the ancient Emperor Nero observing gladiatorial contests through the surface of a precious green stone. Nero's tutor, Seneca, was an expert in light refraction, mirrors, and optics, and these are thought to be one of the first-ever spectacles. Many centuries later, an inventory of the treasury of Charles V of France lists a case of beryls (a family of gemstones including emerald and aquamarine) framed as spectacles.

Closer to where these examples originate, in India, following the tragic death of Shah Jahan's beloved wife – in whose honour the Taj Mahal was painstakingly built – the emperor is said to have cried so many tears that he needed to cure his ailing eyes with emerald stones.

This princely pair joins these rare mentions in mythology.

Sotheby's bi-annual Arts of the Islamic World & India auction in London celebrates the production of historic objects, paintings and manuscripts from across a multitude of continents and over ten centuries.

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