

Rare icons on sale at India's first gemstone art auction

India's love affair with gemstone carvings dates back nearly 5,000 years ago when Alexander the Great invaded the country. They flourished during the reign of the Mughals, though never finding a place in the genre of conventional Indian art - but they will now be available to aficionados.

Jaipur-based Ma Passion, a house of gemstone crafts, is giving this ancient Indian tradition the legitimacy of contemporary Indian miniature art with the country's first-ever auction of gemstone sculptures in [Mumbai](#) Oct 22.

"For centuries, gemstone crafting was categorised as an indigenous craft because of its historicity and overt commercialisation,' Dinesh Poddar, who owns Ma Passion with his wife Shilpa, told IANS at a preview of the sculptures that will go under the hammer.

"Our auction will give it the status of contemporary Indian miniature art because it will be treated as conventional art at the sale," he added.

Poddar is eyeing collectors and corporate houses for the auction, which will see 50-plus lots of exquisite motifs culled from Indian mythology, lores and the country's rich flora and fauna. They have been crafted in rare semi-precious and precious stones sourced from across the world.

The price bands of the sculptures vary from Rs.60,000 and Rs.75,000 at the lower end for the smaller jasper and jade figurines to Rs.800,000-Rs.900,000 for the emerald, topaz and ruby icons of Ganeshas, Vishnu, Laskhmi, Radha-Krishna and Siddhartha - deities of the Indian pantheon.

The lots have been sculpted by artisans of the Jaipur-based Kumawat (Kumhar or the potters') community, who learnt the art from gemstone sculptors of the Mughals and handed it down the generations. Most of the craftsmen live in Sanganer and Jhotwara on the outskirts of Jaipur.

The Kumawat craftsmen specialise in rose quartz, emerald, light and dark green aventurine, ruby, aquamarine, jasper and rock crystal sculptures. Each icon, on an average, takes three years to be crafted.

Every sculpture and its stone bear a history. A delicately-crafted sequence from the Ramayana depicting Ram, Lakshman, Sita and Hanuman on a single mount in red tourmaline or rubellite changes colour when held against the light.

According to Egyptian legend, tourmaline passed over a rainbow during its journey from heaven to earth and acquired its colours. It is called the "gemstone of rainbows".

"Tourmaline is found in six colours- green, red, blue, black, pink and orange," Poddar explained.

Poddar sources most of his stock - especially his collection of quartz and opals - from the Tucson Mineral Show in Arizona in the US, billed as the world's largest, and the rest from Brazil, Madagascar, Ethiopia, Brazil, Australia and Burma.

In India, the mines near Bellary in Karnataka yield the maximum variety of gemstones.

A miniature of a sitting Ganesha in pink opal purchased from the Arizona show was the high point of the preview lots. The sculpture, detailed in craftsmanship, has to be seen with a magnifying glass to bring out its fine lines and thread like patterns.

Almost all the gemstones used for the sculptures are power stones with strong healing and psychic properties.

Nisha Jamwal, a Mumbai-based crafts activist, stylist and lifestyle columnist who is partnering Ma Passion to promote its sculptures and help preserve the livelihood of the artisans as its brand ambassador, has written a book on the Kumawat community and its craft. It will be released Oct 17.

"It started by just looking at the works. I became so passionate about the craft and the craftsmen that I resolved to write a book so that it does not become extinct,' Jamwal told IANS.

"I travelled to