

# Indian Minakari - A declining art and craft practice

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## Abstract

This paper studies the declining art of minakari on jewellery and metalware. Introduced in the sixteenth century, mina prospered for the following three hundred years as a favoured technique in India. It thrived with a structured system of workshops and systematic working under the Mughals and also the efforts of Maharaja Man Singh of Jaipur, in the nineteenth century. The reasons for its dominance as an art and its gradual downfall are enumerated. Techniques and mina colours used in the two samples images of old minakaris, considered for this research are described. Considering a contemporary mina painting and a small mina disc, applications in the field of art and fashion today are offered. The research results in suggestions of incorporating mina in our current lifestyle.

Key Words: Mina, Minakari, Meenakar, enamel, enameled artifact, jewellery.

## Introduction:

Minakari, known as enamel art, was introduced, patronized, and flourished in India from the sixteenth century, under the Mughal Dynasty. Its jewel like colours and brilliance on gold and silver enhanced the metal and lasted for centuries. Mina was applied on gold and silver jewelry, daily use metalware, furniture, and myriad metal objects. The ostentatious lifestyle of monarchs, nobility, and the elite, allowed minakari to reach a high level of excellence. The decline of the Mughal dynasty impacted minakari as the political and economic conditions changed by the end of the eighteenth century. Arrival of the Europeans, their interference in local politics also affected the production of mina and the lives of the Minakars. By the twenty first century mina had lost its place as a coveted art due to changing lifestyles, lack of patrons, and high cost of production. Lack of demand and insufficient remuneration further forced the younger generation to look for alternate professions.

## Literature Review:

Reviewing the writings of various authors on the historical progression and development of mina in India, several facts come to light. Emperor Humayun spent his exile years with the Shah of Persia, and on his return to India in 1555, was accompanied by Minakar artisans who settled here [3]. Though sixteenth century is documented as the beginning of this art form, we find a reference of black and white carnelian beads from the third century BCE [8]. Discovery of the red

sealing wax cake at Taxila in North India, very similar to those found at Tara Hill in Ireland, between hundred BCE and two hundred AD, testifies that some form of this art was in practice in India [1]. Artisans from Persia, invited by Sikander Shah of Kashmir, encouraged to settle and practise their trade in 1405 also mentions mina as a flourishing craft, pushing the date of mina practice to the fifteenth century [6]. The detailed biography of the Emperor Akbar leaves no doubt that under his patronage guilds were formed, workshops structured, and Minakars favoured for their craft. The details found in 'Ain-I Akbari' firmly establish the importance and widespread application of mina on metalwork, be it ornaments, utensils, artifacts or animal trappings [2]. The Mughal court influenced the smaller kingdoms under their suzerainty, and Jaipur records a similar structure of mina workshops under their Rajas, which prevailed even in the nineteenth century [5]. The setting up of a Museum, art school for crafts, organising of a craft exhibition in 1883, put Jaipur mina on the international stage [11]. The skills of Jaipur Minakars surpassed all other mina Centers [7]. The catalogue published after the official exhibition 1902-1903, of the Arts of India has a list of mina Centres, their style of work, names of the Minakars, images with the value of the mina exhibited [4]. Any established system of working takes time to reflect its downward spiral, as was seen in the next two hundred years. With the arrival of the Europeans, mina deteriorated in quality [9]. Even though the quality of mina suffered, since jewellery in India was a caste necessity, a symbol of marriage for women, and an investment for adverse times, the use of mina in jewellery continued [9].

## Historical Journey:

Arriving in the sixteenth century, mina was actively promoted by the ruling class all over India. The close relationship of the Mughals with the Rajput princes through marriages played an important part in the development of mina. The excellence of Jaipur mina is attributed to the efforts of Raja Man Singh, who is said to have brought five mina workers from Lahore, setting up organized "karkhanas" and putting Jaipur mina on the world map [5]. Known as enamel all over the world, in India it adopted the Persian moniker of 'Mina' which means heaven and the technique was called 'minakari' and the artisans were called 'Minakars'. Mina, resembling bright gems on gold, fueled the passions and creativity of the Mughal kings, queens, as well as the nobility, well into the eighteenth century. By the time Aurangzeb ascended the throne,

Europeans had arrived in large numbers and started impacting the economic, cultural as well as the creative crafts of India.

Portuguese arrived in the fifteenth, the English, French and the Dutch in the seventeenth century, and were firmly entrenched in the local political scene by the end of the eighteenth century. All these different factors influenced the demand, quality, and skillset of the minakar. India of the nineteenth century was fighting for independence. The freedom struggle and the creation of an independent India in 1947, changed the balance of power totally. The small and big Indian States merged with the Indian Union and the former erstwhile Kings either joined the new Government or became pensioners with little or no wealth, dying out in penury. This was a huge blow to the Indian craft industry, which had already suffered under the British Empire. Post-Independence, the disappearance of the royal lifestyle, paucity of funds, as well as scarcity of basic necessities for the public had no place for the luxury of mina. Decorated metalware and expensive jewellery was a relic of the past with no place in independent India.

The development due to the industrial revolution led to the application of mina in industries. As women joined the workforce, they no longer wore ornate and cumbersome jewellery. Lifestyles changed with the royal courts now a bygone era and industrialists, film stars, businessmen, professionals were the new elite. Twenty first century saw both men and women contributing to a professional workforce, leading to clothes worn for comfort rather than show or tradition. Ornamental jewellery was only used for special occasions and replaced by functional jewellery in everyday life. This further axed the demand for mina, making it difficult to earn a decent living for the minakar.

#### Process:

Mina is the art of high firing glass powders with metallic oxides on metal. The metal blanks are prepared to receive different coloured mina in various ways. Mina colour recipe varies according to the colour, which is laid and fired one colour at a time. The final mina requires many firings and gold is best suited, as it adds an incomparable luminosity. Adding emeralds, rubies, diamonds, and pearls, creates a stunning effect. Under the Mughals, materials and gems were provided, but today the Minakars have to invest themselves. Minakari requires a perfect intricate design in gold, and accidents are common which increases the value of the final product, often exceeding the material cost [6]

Earlier perfection was pursued, as time was never a constraint. After the Mughals, the minakari patrons, zamindars and merchants, sustained the minakar in a small way. With the European and the East India Company officials as the buyers, quick and low cost mina objects were made with commercial considerations.

#### Artifacts:

Mina was applied to ornaments, artifacts, daily use items like

wine glasses, vases, trays, hookahs, betelnut boxes, swords, daggers, animal harnesses, throne decorations, stools, armor, guns and daggers, all kinds of elaborate jewelry with equally elaborate names. Fabricating the metal to the required shape for mounting was possible. We have inherited mina mounted ivory, wood, jade and other artifacts of daily use.



Figure 1: minakari tray in gold [website 2]

This gold tray, 30.8 cms in diameter is large for mina work. The central octagon has a background of gold with the central floral motif, surrounded with a floral vine design engraved into the metal base. The gold outline of the centre flower creates a cell to give the petal shape, as well as, space for laying the mina. The red and green mina laid into the design is in the champleve

technique. The wide border of the outer octagon has white mina in the background and green mina in the leaves. From the image it appears that rubies are set in the petals with an emerald as the centre of the flower. This tray made in the seventeenth century is now in the Hermitage Museum and has rubies set along all the borders. It was gifted in 1741 by Nadir Shah to Ivan Antonovich.



Figure 1: Turban Ornament [website 1]

Turban ornaments were in fashion during the glorious Mughal rule and were an emblem signifying the rank of a person. This eighteenth century gold ornament made in the champleve technique in Jaipur has red, green, and white mina inlaid. The loss of mina in some of the leaves and petals enables us to visualize the raised outline in gold with the mina inside it. This ornament is today the property of Victoria and Albert Museum, South Kensington, London.



Figure 1: Contemporary enamel painting on steel by artist Ritu Sangal [website 3]

The painting is twelve inches into twenty-eight inches. It is composed of seven steel plates, each four into twelve inches in size. The composition was drawn with different painting mina and using techniques like graffiti, stencil and rendering fired to maturity. The colours have a glass shine and the painting is mounted on an acrylic sheet.



Figure 1: Mina on Copper  
[website 4]

The mina on copper, is one inch in diameter. The disc has two coats of blue mina, with a stencil used for the design. Firing for 2 minutes each time, it was made in two hours. This mina disc is small enough to be used in different contemporary products. It can be used as a setting for a pendant, shoe buckle, purse clasp, button, or a finger ring.

### Findings:

We find a phenomenal downfall in the minakari skills in present day India. By the twenty first century, the demand for mina diminished and the Minakars moved away from this trade as it was no longer lucrative. With a lack of patrons, a fall in demand over the years, traditional mina families can be counted on fingertips today. The luxury of spending months or years creating only one masterpiece is absent, affecting the quality of minakari. Mina today is applied more on gold jewelry, fabricated to be sold in shops and showrooms. The gold ornament blank is supplied by the big Jewelry houses, sent to the "minakar" to apply the colour as per set guidelines. Minakari is thus reduced to a craft, with no incentive for the Minakar to develop and hone his skills. Market trends are often influenced by in house designers, and the client given readymade options, allowing a few Minakars to subsist.

### Suggestions:

Mina can have multiple applications in the contemporary art and craft world. The contemporary fashion industry can use this technique with modern design sensibilities, using cheaper metals like copper and steel to create fashion accessories. It is perfect for art installations in public spaces. Introduce mina as a contemporary medium for art and craft to students.

### Results:

The above images prove how mina can be reinvented to incorporate modern sensibilities. A few artists are using mina as a medium of expression today. Textures in mina art engage all the senses allowing for a complete sensory experience. Also, as it is high fired it can be placed out in the open and is thus perfect for outdoor installations and sculptures. Minakars are few and the art is not economically viable for the next generation. The visual and cinematic

appeal of mythological stories, historical movies, and daily soaps, promotes copies of the opulent jewelry of yesteryears. This desire for period jewelry, has given rise to a thriving artificial jewelry market and has further affected the Mina craft. Copies of old designs in paste jewelry are being churned out for mass consumption. There are many tools and materials as well as mina colours available today which can impact the minakari in a positive way. Introduction of new techniques and ideas can uplift the present status and give mina a new lease of life.

### Conclusion:

Lifestyle changes, political turmoil, and reduced demand over the last six hundred years has made mina take a backseat in the field of art. Traditional 'guru-shishya parampara' has confined this art form within the mina families. The problems faced by the artisans need to be addressed with upgradation of tools and method of fabrication. Artisans need to be trained in contemporary designs and methods. An awareness needs to be created within the art community. An effective marketing strategy commensurate with the sensibilities and demands of the twenty third century needs to be formulated.

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