Sarah Boynton's Anatomy of a Design

WAFA India was an extraordinary flower show in February 2020. With over 30 countries represented, this was one of the most exciting shows in the world. The class I entered was called "The Maharaja's Jewel," and we were tasked to create a turban ornament fit for a Maharaja (royalty). The committee provided a head form and gold turban to all the entrants, and our work was to be pinned on the front of the turban.

The first step was to research the types of turban ornaments that are worn in India by the Maharajas. I learned the term Sarpech was used for turban ornaments. Sar means head and tech means screw; hence, the word Sarpech conveys something screwed onto the front (of the turban). The design I chose to create was one that would resemble a plume of a peacock, which was typical of those produced in the 17th century. The peacock is the national bird of India because of its rich religious and legendary involvement in Indian traditions, and I wanted to honor that history.

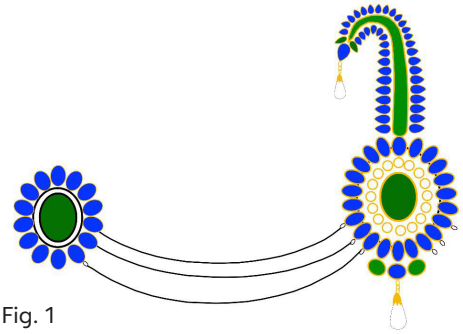

Fig. 1

I used my computer to draw out the design I wanted to create (Fig. 1). The first section I made was the "plume" section. I outlined my template with rattan after soaking it in water and allowing it to dry. To make the cut "gems" that would go inside the rattan, I sanded down a dried mushroom (Fig. 2) and cut it, following my template with a jewelers saw (Fig. 3). I then cut that piece into smaller pieces to resemble individual emeralds.

Fig. 2

Fig. 3

Fig. 4

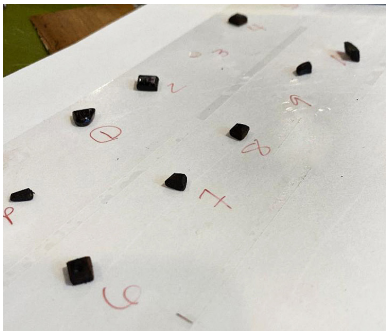

Fig. 5

Fig. 6

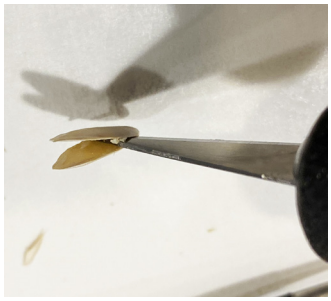

Fig. 8

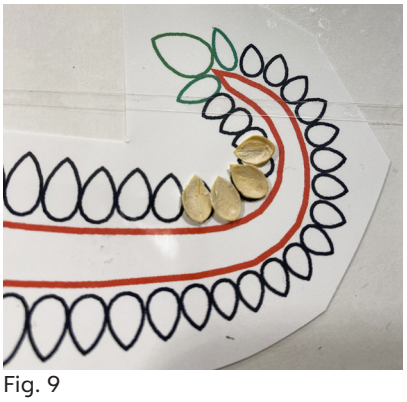

Fig. 9

It was difficult to sand these tiny pieces without sanding my fingers until I found a small tool called a sanding stick (Fig. 4). I glued each piece onto card stock and beveled the edges by sanding them at an angle. It was important to keep the pieces numbered (Fig. 5) so I could easily fit them back into the rattan form I had created (Fig. 6).

The artisans who made real Sarpechs would use gems that were finely polished instead of cut to preserve as much of the original gemstone as possible. They were then set into a gold 'cup' lined with silver using a dot of resin to hold it in place. To replicate the gold 'cups,' I used acorn, white pumpkin, and cantaloupe seeds because of their shape. This was a tedious and tiresome process of harvesting seeds, cleaning them, and then splitting them (Fig.7).

Fig. 7

I found the seeds were less brittle if I worked with them while still wet. I would, therefore, split them (with an X-Acto knife) right after they were cleaned (Fig. 8). If I needed to use dried seeds, I soaked them in warm water for a bit to make them more flexible. I cut open the seeds and put them on the template until I was happy with the design (Fig. 9). I needed to add a wire base for each seed to keep them secure. I glued the rattan outline onto banana bark (any thin bark would do) and then drilled small holes in the rattan to receive raffia covered wire (Fig. 10). I glued each of the halved seeds 'cups' onto the structure tapering in size.

Fig. 10

Photos by Sarah Boynton

To create the large gem for the front of the headpiece, I used more of the dried mushroom (Fig. 11), cutting it into an oval and sanding it to resemble a faceted stone (Fig. 12). I then painted a coat of epoxy over the sanded mushroom to seal it. I made the bezel for these gems out of rattan glued to birch bark (Fig. 13). I glued cupped eucalyptus and mustard seeds around the perimeter for the "diamonds" to make the large "emerald" really pop. (Fig. 14)


Fig. 11


Fig. 12


Fig. 13


Fig. 14

The two side pieces were made similarly to the large emerald in the front. I sanded a mushroom and outlined them with rattan, creating the bezel. I then cut cherry pits in half and drilled small holes to connect them with the rattan bezel using the raffia covered wire (Fig. 15).


Fig. 15

I then began the most difficult part of the whole piece. I had to cut the centers out of acorn seeds to make a see-through section (Fig. 16). These were more fragile than I had anticipated (Fig. 17), so I added more of the seeds on top without hollowing them out, ensuring it was more structurally sound for its long journey to India (Fig. 18).


Fig. 16


Fig. 17


Fig. 18

I knew I wanted three rows of pearls, so I began the process of sorting soybeans. To do this, I used a template to ensure they were all similar in size and shape (Fig. 19). I drilled a hole through each soybean using a Dremel and Dremel drill press. Then I used a tiny bit of white glue to secure each on a toothpick making it easier to paint the soybeans to resemble pearls (Fig. 20). After the pearls dried, I was able to take them off the toothpicks and re-drill them for stringing. I created gold "spacers" by drilling holes through the center of pokeweed (Fig. 21) and painting them. The soybean pearls and pokeweed spacers were strung on raffia covered wire.

Fig. 19

Fig. 20

Fig. 21

The dangling pearls were made out of a pine nut and an almond. Each was sealed with epoxy then painted with the same nail polish used to paint the pearls (OPI "Kyoto Pearl"). Each was embellished with dried eucalyptus leaves painted gold. The links were twisted raffia.

All of the blue gems were made from the sap of an Indian White Mahogany plant, melted and tinted blue with resin pigment. Though sap is allowed in other countries, it is not allowed for flower shows in the USA.

I was so grateful to Peggy Moore, who was attending the show to judge and offered to carry my entry to India for me. Packaging it up was nerve-racking. Peggy did a fabulous job bringing it to the show and installing it on the turban. My style of a more realistic piece did not appeal to the judges. The entries that won awards came from India and were beautiful and grand. The Maharaja's jewel was fun and challenging to make, and I loved learning about the culture and the history of turban ornaments.