

MORE THAN JUST JEWELLERY

This Dubai family's 89-year-old heirloom jewellery collection is the gold standard in communal unity and trust and tells a precious tale of the UAE's gilded history. By Shreeja Ravindranathan

PHOTOS BY STEFAN LINDEQUE





Gold, has left a glittering trail of destruction throughout the pages of history. In his book *The Power of Gold: The History of an Obsession*, Peter L. Bernstein

outlines the shining, inert metal's uncanny ability to inflame dark emotions of greed, passion and ruin – from mythical kings and emperors seeking power such as Midas, to Spanish conquistadors pillaging gold-rich Mexican and Peruvian civilisations in the 1400s. Whether it's ancient Scythian jewellery from the 1 AD or Egyptian temples from 3,000 BC, ownership of gold dividing communities and families based on privilege and prosperity.

In the UAE though, the precious metal has alchemised into a symbol of trust, tolerance and community through the 89-year-old jewellery collection of the late Fatima Baker; her family lends it to anyone who wants it, free of charge, free of contractual obligations, based solely on their conviction in human goodness.

'This collection was given to my great-grandmother as a wedding gift by her husband Abdul Kareem Bin Mahmoud Bin Haj Qasim around 1928 or 1929,' says Ahmad Ayoub, Fatima Baker's great-grandson.

'After using it for her own wedding, she decided to hold the jewellery on trust as a *Waqf* – it's an inalienable charitable endowment under Islamic law whereby an asset is donated to the community for a charitable or religious purpose



AL SATAMI: The long necklace's medallion-sized gold coins have been engraved with Qur'anic verses



AL MORTA'SHA: The fragile choker is intricately detailed with small pearls that need to be constantly replaced

The stunning bridal jewellery collection has been lent to 2,000 women from across the region since 1928 without discrimination

with no intention of reclaiming it,' explains the law student who is currently studying at the University of Exeter in the UK.

What it means is the stunning bridal jewellery collection has been lent to more than 2,000 women from Dubai, neighbouring emirates and even neighbouring countries since 1928. It's lent to everyone without discrimination. The only caveat? There should be a mutual friend or connection who can guarantee that the borrowing family will return the jewellery once the celebrations are over.

'The concept of *Waqf* is popular in the region, but is commonly imposed on property, yields, buildings, shares in commercial companies and hospitals for the benefit of the community. My great-grandmother's jewellery is perhaps the only personal collection of jewellery to have ever been detained as *Waqf*,' Ahmad says.

While the family is unsure what Fatima Baker's intention was behind loaning out her dowry, they do have a few conjectures: 'during her wedding in the 1920s, not many Emirati families had the resources to purchase gold jewellery and people were amazed to see her collection; traditional jewellery for the UAE's common man was always pearl, so she maybe decided to just share the gold jewellery with the community instead of leaving it in a safe for years,' suggests Ahmad.

Today, Ahmad and his paternal uncle Mr Saeed Mohammad Noor, Head of the Coordination and Follow-up Department at the Dubai Ruler's Court, are the fourth and third-generation custodians of the collection, who have gladly embraced the responsibility. Ahmad recalls tottering down the staircase of his home with the casket of jewellery as a nine-year-old to hand it over to families at least twice a week: 'Previously my dad and my uncles would do it. Each generation does it with pride and we'll keep this tradition going.'

Now requests for the collection have plummeted, Ahmad laments and only around four families ask for it in a month: 'people today have enough resources to buy jewellery, and gold has been replaced by diamonds in weddings. Even those who ask for it mostly use it for pre-wedding celebrations such as the bridal shower or the henna night.'

But no ornate jewellery sets from Dubai's many jewellery shops can match the exquisite artisanship and history of Fatima Baker's illustrious collection that's older than the UAE – a fact it's lustre and magnificence doesn't betray. Made up of just 11 intricately designed pieces that are traditional elements of an Emirati bride's trousseau and adorn her from head to toe, the 2kg collection is heavy with eight decades of Dubai's history, spanning from its beginning as a tax-free port in international trade routes to



AL TASAH: The ornate head piece is covered with gold coins of varying sizes



its current status as the city of gold.

'My great-grandfather Abdul Kareem Bin Mahmoud Bin Haj Qasim was the head of the *Furdhah*, the Arabic name for the first port authority under His Highness Shaikh Saeed Bin Maktoum Al Maktoum.

'As the head of the port authority he had many contacts and relationships with traders in Dubai and foreign countries and through his contacts in India and Deira in particular, he managed to somehow get this huge amount of gold shipped all the way from India to Dubai.'

The traditional Emirati-style designs have some Ottoman influences too: 'pieces such as the Al Satami necklace's medallion-sized gold coins have been engraved with Qur'anic verses, but the Arabic script isn't very common in this part of the world and has an Ottoman influence to it. Moreover, apart from precious stones the collection is also encrusted with pearls which was used in the Gulf, so we're not very sure of its origin and whether it was a bespoke collection', says Ahmad.

It's storied past extends beyond its journey from the workshops of an unknown Indian goldsmith to its unveiling at Fatima Baker and Abdul Kareem Bin Mahmoud's wedding in 1920s.

'This gold was also lent by my great-



grandfather whilst head of the port authority during 1920-1938 to his close friends so they could use it as security in certain commercial transactions,' informs Ahmad. 'If the debtor defaulted on his loan, this jewellery would be gone. Imagine the risk!' he exclaims.

Abdul Kareem Bin Mahmoud's heirs have followed in his footsteps and parry risk with trust to this day when lending the family jewels to strangers: 'I can recall many occasions when a family requested it for the weekend but then decided to keep the jewellery for over a week or two. Often, the jewellery is returned with small pearls missing from the fragile Al Morta'sha (choker).

Great responsibility comes with its own troubles, Ahmad acknowledges, but his family is happy to deal with minor inconveniences to continue Fatima Baker's legacy.

'I once shared the collection's photo on social media and so many women commented how proud they felt wearing such a historical collection at their wedding. Had Fatima Baker been alive today, you can't imagine the happiness this would give her,' he says.

In the absence of contractual obligation or paperwork how does the family escape the risk of entire pieces going amiss or even having people claim the collection as a gift that they needn't return unlike a loan?

'It is a major risk,' agrees Ahmad, 'but I can't imagine that ever happening in the Emirati community. In the UAE, we have always trusted each other and so far we have lent this to more than 2,000 women without any mishaps,' he adds. 'What differentiates this collection from any other jewellery collection in the world is that it stems from one woman's very pure intention and it shows the extent to which people can trust each other.'

It's a collection that proves that what truly makes Dubai the city of gold is the golden hearts of its people.

