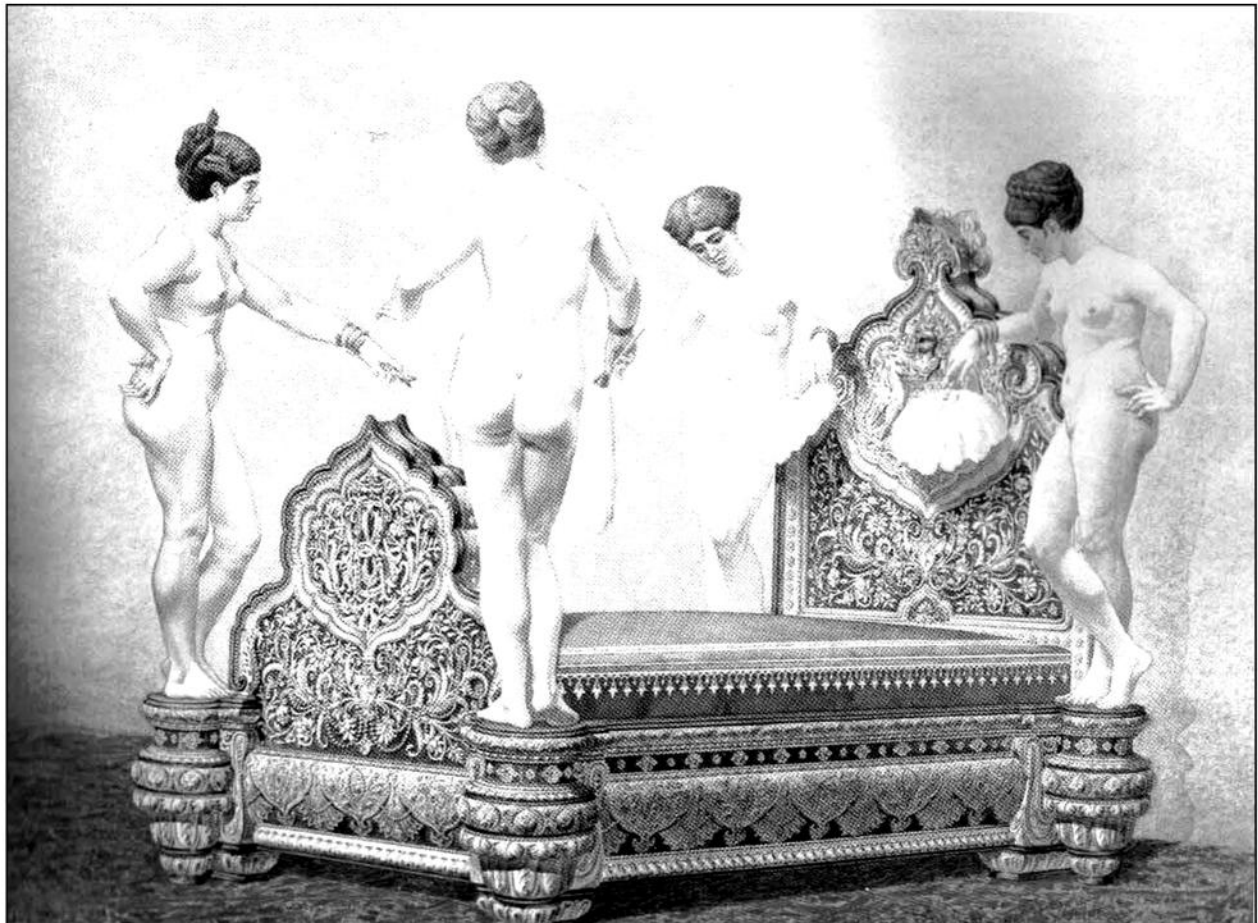


*Sweet Dreams Were
Made Like This*

By:

Kathryn Vaughn



Internationally renowned for its silver plate flatware and hollowware, the French company Christofle was the creator of a number of unique and monumental objects during the nineteenth century, ranging from a silver, bronze and crystal dressing table for Empress Eugenie (1867), a 6 m long silver bookcase for the Vatican that contained 400 translations of the Papal Bull proclaiming the Immaculate Conception (1878), to the bronze sculptures adorning the facade of the Paris Opera (1860s), among others. Perhaps the most curious commission was given to Christofle in 1882 by the governor of the southern Punjab state of Bahawalpur, S.M.K. Nawab Sadik Muhammad Khan IV.

Indian princes constructed Western-style palaces after establishment of the Raj and filled these dwellings with luxury European goods and furnishings ordered and commissioned from leading manufacturers. Imported goods had special cachet in a colonial environment. The government particularly encouraged maharajahs to consume British goods as a way to promote trade. Thus it would not have been at all unusual for Nawab Sadik Muhammad Khan IV to turn to a

European firm for a special commission.

Through his agents, the firm Aron Brothers, the Maharajah asked Christofle to make him a bed – but not just any bed. The rectangular wood frame bed was to be covered with silver and vermeil appliques of stylized paisley forms in the Indian taste on its headboard and footboard and along the sides. Four life-size bronze statues of nude European females painted in natural skin tones were to stand on semi-circular platforms at each corner as bedposts. The statues represent the Maharajah's ideals of feminine beauty – French, Spanish, Italian and Greek. These statues have moving eyes and articulated arms and wear human hair wigs. Two hold ostrich feather fans and the other two hold horsehair fly whisks.

As if the visual impact of this piece of furniture was not enough, there was an audio component as well. When the prince lay down upon the mattress, a mechanism was engaged that caused the arms of the statues to move their fans or whisks, their eyes to wink, and a musical box to play one of eight tunes from the opera *Faust* by Gounod

– six happy and two melancholy – at 30 minute intervals.

It took Christofle only 10 months to complete this extravagant project containing 290 kg of silver. It was carried out in utmost secrecy, and the Maharajah himself came to the factory incognito to oversee progress. It is not clear why the commission was so confidential: either the Maharajah's natural discretion or the slightly risqué nature of the sculptures. In fact Christofle did not discover the name of the person behind the order until a century later. The President of Christofle tracked down the bed in 1983 in Pakistan where the descendants of the Maharajah did not want to part with it. However a reproduction of one of the statues can be seen at the Christofle Museum near Paris.

The design ideas for the bed probably came from the Maharajah's own imagination. Silver beds seem to have existed in India in the nineteenth century and later. Those who saw the Art Deco exhibit at the Royal Ontario Museum in 2005 will remember a fabulous silver bed of Indian manufacture dating

to 1922. The mechanical aspect of the Nawab's bed represents an Indian fascination with automata and mechanical toys that began in the eighteenth century. These types of extravagant projects that brought together a number of different artisans and craftsmen were not the norm for Christofle. They are the reflection of a time when anything seemed possible and companies were confident in their manufacturing capability.

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