

TRACING THE TRADITIONS





**A pair of Dinner Table Bells,
Silver, 1890-1900, Rangoon, Burma.
Registered Antiquity - Non-Exportable Item.**

This pair of silver dinner table bells is a fine example of colonial Burmese silverware, where European dining forms were reimagined through the artistry of local craftsmen. The bells follow a European model in function — a standing bell with body, clapper, and handle — yet their decoration bears the unmistakable touch of Burmese silversmithing. For much of the colonial period (1858–1947), Burma was part of the British Indian Empire. Rangoon emerged as a cosmopolitan hub, where the long tradition of Burmese silverwork was adapted to meet colonial tastes¹.

The handles of the bells rise as bold twisted columns, resembling entwined ropes or serpentine vines, and are crowned with rounded knob finials. Their sculptural abstraction conveys strength and movement, differing from the figural finials often seen on Burmese bowls or betel boxes².

The bodies are decorated in horizontal bands. Around the shoulder, repoussé acanthus-like foliage spreads in rhythmic repetition, blending European neoclassical leaf motifs with Burmese stylised lotus petals. Below, scrolling flowers and foliage — a signature of Burmese chasing — seem to grow organically across the silver surface.

The central panels of each bell are deliberately left plain to bear engraved inscriptions. One dedication reads: “Presented to The Officers’ Mess 3rd Bn. Gloucestershire Regt by Capt. W. E. P. Burges and The Hon. D. G. Carnegie.”

This confirms their function as presentation objects, tied closely to British regimental life in Burma. Unlike Burmese bowls, which often depict Jataka tales or courtly scenes, these bells avoid narrative imagery³ in favour of commemorative inscriptions.

On the underside, concentric rings of floral motifs frame central rosette-like designs, evoking wheels or blossoms. Such patterns connect the objects back to the Burmese visual vocabulary, where floral and cosmic symbolism often appear. In the wider landscape of colonial silver, Burmese silversmiths produced a relatively narrow range of forms — mostly bowls, vases, platters, and betel boxes, which had deep roots in temple and court traditions. Western tableware such as tea services, mugs, and trophy cups was comparatively rare. As Harry Tilly observed in 1904, “the Burmese silversmith has little variety of shape to show his European customers, and does not succeed particularly well in making teapots, race cups and other things which he has never used. But on the squat forms of bowl or betel box, his fancy depicts the immortal stories of the past.”⁴ These table bells, therefore, stand out as unusual commissions, a Western dining form with Burmese ornamental language.

Altogether, they achieve a hybrid aesthetic. Their shape and function are colonial-European, yet their surfaces carry the dense floral repoussé, rhythmic ornament, and symbolic patterns of Burmese tradition. They do not narrate stories in panels, but they speak eloquently of cultural exchange — blending the discipline of European dining etiquette with the ornamental imagination of Burmese silver workshops.

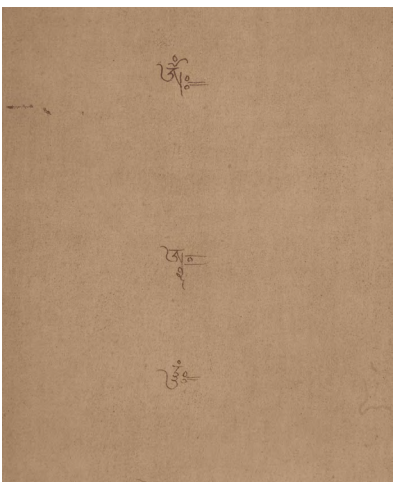
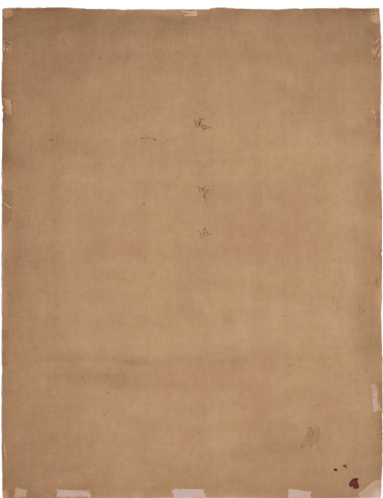
¹Vidya Dehejia, *Delight in Design: Indian Silver for the Raj* (Ahmedabad: Mapin Publishing, 2008).

²“Master Silversmiths c. 1880-1910: Excerpt from *Burmese Silver Art*, Asian Review of Books,” accessed September 15, 2025, <https://asianreviewofbooks.com/master-silversmiths-c-1880-1910-excerpt-from-burmese-silver-art/>

³“Burmese Silver: Unveiling the Craftsmanship of Rangoon,” Pushkin blog, November 16, 2023, accessed September 15, 2025, <https://pushkins.com/pushkin-antiques-blog/2023/11/16/burmese-silver-unveiling-the-craftsmanship-of-rangoon>

⁴ Vidya Dehejia, *Delight in Design: Indian Silver for the Raj*.





classic mandala, characterised by a circular cakra nestled within an elegant square enclosure. At the heart of this intricate painting, one finds a striking illustration of Avalokiteshvara, the renowned eleven-headed deity, also known as Ekadasamukha. Although not all eleven heads are visible, seven are artistically rendered, each reflecting a sense of serenity and wisdom. This focal placement in the centre signifies the enlightened and perfected realm of Potalaka.³ It is a mystical mountain in Buddhist cosmology, believed to be the dwelling place of Avalokitesvara.

He is depicted with eight arms, the main pair clasped against his chest in anjali mudra, concealing the jewel of enlightenment, and the other six hands bearing various characteristics that are not clearly described in this artwork. His eleven heads represent the Dasabhumis, or ten levels of enlightenment. The Buddha Amitabha, Avalokiteshvara's progenitor, is represented by the eleventh head, which stands out above the rest. This visual association reinforces Avalokiteshvara's status as a fully enlightened Buddha.⁴ Buddha Amitabha is one of Mahayana Buddhism's five dhyani buddhas, noted for his longevity, profound insight, pure vision and ability to purify aggregates through a deep awareness of the emptiness of all phenomena.⁵

Two medallions encircle the center deity, and within those circles, the other buddhas are seated. The inner circle has 12 Buddhas in number, while the outer range has 20 Buddhas. The mandala has 3 Buddhas, each in a corner of the square, lining up on a diagonal axis. Outside those circles

are the four gates (at the cardinal directions), each represented by an ornate temple portal filled with smaller Buddhas in niches. Over each gate, a multi-storied golden shrine rises, and we see Buddha figures enshrined on each level. Outside the square, the larger medallion opens into paradise-like scenery: wispy white clouds in curl up like a style float on a dark sky, studded with small sitting Buddhas in circular form. Scattered in the uppermost background are assemblages of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas in clouds. The top corners each have a stupa surmounted by a Buddha figure, and Tibetan syllables, "Om", inscribed on the dome.

The Thangka is filled with the miniature images of Buddha and bodhisattvas, all in different postures, mudras and attitudes, but all in seated position, defining the form of enlightenment, purity. Formally, the painting is highly balanced and symmetrical. The use of bright mineral pigments – especially gold and white – on a deep, dark background makes the deities pop; this is characteristic of durable pigments on cloth fabric. The delicate rendering of lotus petals, jewellery, and clouds shows fine Nepalese influence. There are appearances of trees, valleys and mythical creatures. At the same time, the architectural framing recalls Tibetan palace motifs, suggesting a syncretic workshop.

On the reverse of the painting, the Bhoti script of the Tibetan language with three syllables, from top to bottom, starts with "OM AH HUM", the holy syllable of the Vajrayana tradition refers to the purification and transformation of body, speech, and mind.

Eleven-Headed Avalokiteshvara Mandala,
Thangka, Linen, Tibet, Himalayan Region, c.a. 1890 to 1905. Registered Antiquity - Non-Exportable Item.

Buddhism became predominant in Tibet in the 6th century. From the 7th century onwards, while extensive literary activity began and the composition of Tibetan literature was in progress, a corresponding development in art also took place.¹ This Thangka illustrates the Mandala of the eleven-headed Avalokiteshvara. Thangka paintings are traditional Tibetan Buddhist scrolls

created on cloth, typically portraying a Buddhist deity, scene, or mandala. These scrolls are often rolled up for convenience, allowing Buddhist monks or philosophers to carry them on their journeys. Furthermore, Avalokiteshvara is defined as a Bodhisattva—an enlightened being who chooses to delay their attainment of Buddhahood to guide humanity.

The Rubin Museum of Art housed many collection of Tibetan artefacts in their permanent collection, where we do find one such painting under the same subject. The Himalayan Art Resource has precisely catalogued its collection with description. (an image has been attached)² The composition showcases a beautifully crafted

¹ *Sacred Arts of Tibet: Art from the Roof of the World*, Educator Workshop presented by the Asian Art Museum, Chong-Moon Lee Center for Asian Art and Culture, April 21, 2001.

² Himalayan Art Resources. *Mandala of Eleven-Headed Avalokiteshvara (HAR 16)*. Rubin Museum of Art. Accessed August 3, 2025. <https://www.himalayanart.org/items/16>.

³ Chaya Chandrasekhar, "Mirrors of the Heart-Mind – Ekadashamukha Avalokiteshvara Essay," 13.6 years ago (Academia.edu, accessed August 2, 2025)

⁴ Huntington Archive of Buddhist and Asian Art. "Eka-Avalokiteshvara." Sacred Arts of the Mission of Art, accessed August 2, 2025. <https://huntingtonarchive.org/Exhibitions/sama/Essays/CC93.015EkaAva.html>.

⁵ Lion's Roar. *Amitabha*. Accessed August 2, 2025. lionsroar.com/buddhism/amitabha.



Figure - 1A



Figure - 1B



Figure - 1C

swami style of gold jewellery was adopted in silverware. Through this process, swāmi silverware was born, which gained widespread popularity.

This profusely decorated artefact demonstrates rich craftsmanship behind it. The tinder tube stands erect on its circular foot. The top of the tube is closed with a lid. The lid is surmounted by a spherical finial worked with floral patterns, and a ring is attached to it. A silver chain suspends from the finial ring and attaches to the middle of the tube. Dense floral work, finely rendered avatār figures and animals, left little space unworked. Seven forms of Vishnu are protruding from the tube surface, all carved with iconographic details. Four animal motifs are placed in the object. The background for the relief animals and avatars is densely carved with flowers, worked in the chasing technique. The first form in the visible (Figure- 1A) is the first avatar from dashavatār, Matsya, or the fish incarnation of Lord Vishnu. Matsya appears with a fish-like lower body and torso of Lord Vishnu. Krishna is depicted playing a flute, standing beneath the Matsya avatār. Right below Krishna, another dancing form of Vishnu is seen with one foot in the air; in other similar representations, a fox-like animal stands below such figures. Moving clockwise, the columns that follow depict similar scenes. In the next column (Figure- 1B), the first figure is likely the Kurma avatar with a stylised motif expanding below. A Yāli lion figure is carved in the middle of this

column. Below the Yāli lion, another dancing form of Vishnu is represented, and a bird is carved below. The next column (Figure-1C) has a peacock carved on the top. After this peacock motif, another dancing Vishnu is placed below. A snake with raised hood is carved beneath the dancing Vishnu. The snake and the dancing Vishnu on top remind us of the Kaliyā daman (slaying of the snake demon Kaliyā) myth. At the bottom of this column, a four-armed Vishnu is seated. Although the object is filled with mythological figures, it is unclear if all the subjects had any correlations.

Comparable examples are rare. Tinder tubes were produced and used by the British. The British Museum has a horn-made tinder tube from 19th-century Southeast Asia that resembles the form of this tinder tube.⁴ The avatār and animals often appear in other silverwares found in the region. For example, a similar figure to the four armed seated Vishnu (Figure-1C) appears in a silver locket with Accession Number: IS.97-2009 at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London.⁵ Apart from these, very similar forms and representations can be found in some of the silverwares published in Vidya Dahejia's book *Delight in Design: Indian Silver for the Raj*.⁶

This beautifully carved 19th-century tinder tube represents the wealth of the British and the dark history of wars under the imperial power in India.

¹Dehejia, Vidya. *Delight in Design: Indian Silver for the Raj*. Ahmedabad: Mapin Publishing, 2008. (Pp-101)

²ibid

³Object Description for Object Number: 81.1.556, The MET Museum, New York <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/454087>

⁴Museum No As,Bk.33, British Museum, London https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/A_As-Bk-33

⁵Accession Number: IS.97-2009, Victoria and Albert Museum, London <https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O1139395/loket-unknown/>

⁶Dehejia, Vidya. *Delight in Design: Indian Silver for the Raj*. Ahmedabad: Mapin Publishing, 2008. (Pp-119) <https://archive.org/details/delightindesigni0000dehe/page/118/mode/2up?view=theater>

Silver Tinder Tube, Trichinopoly, Tamil Nadu, Southern India, 1850. Registered Antiquity - Non-Exportable Item.

This silver tinder tube was likely produced in 19th-century Trichinopoly, Madras, India. Trichinopoly silverware is markedly different from the works produced in other centres in India. These silverwares often feature many avatār of Lord Vishnu. However, the purpose need not always be devotional. On the contrary, this object was used to light artillery. A piece of char cloth was inserted into the tube; once lit, the glowing end could be used to light fuses. Tinder tubes were not always used for lighting war weapons; they were also used occasionally to light cigars and candles. This particular tinder tube was perhaps commissioned by the British officials specifically to light canons. The dashavatār and floral patterning are common in silverwares of the region, but the form and

function of this tube make it special. The form of the tube is an imitation of the actual cannon. This object was likely produced in the second half of the 19th century, when the imperial power was slowly beginning to conquer India.

Trichinopoly had an existing tradition of finely worked gold jewellery. Many of the gold jewellery pieces were often related to Vishnu, also addressed as swāmi or the Good Lord. Owing to the relation with swāmi, these jewellerys were also recognised as swāmi work.¹ With the rise of colonial power, silverware production increased. European firms took direct control over silverware production in the region. P. Orr & Sons is one of the important firms that produced and traded in silverware.²

The silverwares produced in Trichinopoly were exported to far away lands of United States, Australia and of course England.³ The existing



Beaker,
Silver, Kutch (Bhuj), Gujarat, Western India
ca. 1880-1900.
Registered Antiquity - Non-Exportable Item.

The silver beaker, with its tapering cylindrical body that gently widens toward the rim, presents a graceful silhouette anchored by a plain, narrower base that ensures balance. Produced in Kutch during the nineteenth century, it exemplifies the region's celebrated silver craftsmanship, where repoussé and chasing were combined to create bold reliefs enriched with intricate surface details. Objects such as this were not merely functional vessels but embodied the flourishing artistic traditions of the period, blending aesthetic refinement with cultural expression under the colonial gaze.

The central frieze features a vivid hunting scene, one of the most enduring and popular motifs in Kutch silverwork. Hunters, shown both on horseback and on foot, pursue animals such as lions and wild boars, their figures animated with dynamic energy that conveys the thrill of the chase. The animals are also preying on each

other. The interplay of hunters, prey, and swirling vegetation transforms the surface into a lively, almost theatrical narrative. Workshop sketches from Bhuj suggest that such hunting scenes were carefully composed in drawings before being transposed onto silver vessels, highlighting the degree of planning involved in their production.¹

Encircling this narrative is a dense tapestry of scrolling foliage and floral arabesques that fills the negative space with rich ornament. Delicately chased blossoms emerge from curling tendrils, forming what has been described as the “flowering scroll” design—sinuous vines that coil and wind in endless, undulating patterns. This ornamental vocabulary, one of the hallmarks of Bhuj workmanship², softens the intensity of the hunt and weaves human and animal figures into a harmonious natural setting³.

At the rim and base, a rhythmic border of stylised leaf motifs provides visual balance. These motifs, reminiscent of palmette leaves with a central almond-shaped vein, are arranged in a repeating scalloped sequence that echoes the organic themes of the decoration. Together, they frame

the beaker's surface and anchor the composition. The beaker thus demonstrates the silversmiths' ability to harmonise narrative, animal life, and vegetal ornament into a single unified design. Comparable examples of a couple of beakers catalogued by Vidya Dehejia attest to the consistency of motifs and figures within the Kutch repertoire⁴.

The exceptional craftsmanship of such works has been closely associated with the famed Bhuj master Oomersi Mawji (O.M. Bhuj) and

his workshop, active between 1860 and 1890. Patronised by rulers such as the Gaekwads and Maharao Khengarji III of Kutch, their creations gained international recognition at regional and world exhibitions⁵. This beaker, in its intricate design and technical finesse, embodies the refinement and global reputation of nineteenth-century Kutch silver.

¹ Stephen Markel, *Mughal and Early Modern Metalware from South Asia at LACMA: An Online Scholarly Catalogue* (Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 2020).

² Stephen Markel, “Kutch Silver: A Study of Stylistic Sources,” *Across the South of Asia: A Volume in Honor of Robert L. Brown* (2020), Academia.edu, accessed September 16, 2025, https://www.academia.edu/44937343/Kutch_Silver_A_Study_of_Stylistic_Sources.

³ Stephen Markel, *Mughal and Early Modern Metalware from South Asia at LACMA: An Online Scholarly Catalogue*.

⁴ Vidya Dehejia, *Delight in Design: Indian Silver for the Raj* (Ahmedabad: Mapin Publishing, 2008).

⁵ Stephen Markel, “Kutch Silver: A Study of Stylistic Sources,” *Across the South of Asia: A Volume in Honor of Robert L. Brown* (2020), Academia.edu, accessed September 15, 2025, https://www.academia.edu/44937343/Kutch_Silver_A_Study_of_Stylistic_Sources.



Parasol Handle,
Silver, Chennai, Tamil Nadu, Southern India
ca. 1875 - 1900.
Registered Antiquity - Non-Exportable Item.

This silver parasol handle, crafted in Chennai between 1875 and 1900, belongs to the well-known style of “Swami silver.” This distinctive colonial-era craft brought together the devotional world of South Indian temple imagery with objects of daily use that were fashionable among the colonial elite. The handle is long and slightly tapering, made to serve as the finial grip of a parasol—a common accessory for British ladies in India at the end of the nineteenth century.¹ Beyond its practical function of shade, the parasol was also a marker of style and social status. Walter, an art collector, noted during the “Delight in Design: Indian Silver for the Raj” exhibition at Columbia University in September 2008, “It is fascinating how the silversmiths of Colonial India took English forms and adorned the objects with Indian decoration. Some pieces are quite mad, but lovely.”² This parasol handle exemplifies that cross-cultural spirit.

The design is organised into horizontal registers, much like the friezes on South Indian temples. Each register contains repoussé figures of Hindu deities, placed inside medallions framed with stylised lotus petals. The deities stand frontally in high relief, their upper hands holding lotuses while their lower hands are posed in mudrās—likely abhaya (gesture of protection) and varada

(gesture of blessing). The tradition followed in crafting the swami style silverware. The repetition of these figures along the shaft creates a strong sense of rhythm and verticality, echoing the upward thrust of the parasol pole itself.

There is definitive evidence of silver parasol handles crafted in Madras, as documented by Stephen Markel.³

Between the registers, floral rosettes and beaded borders provide visual breaks, keeping the composition lively and ordered. The top and bottom ends are finished with leaf-and-petal motifs, recalling the borders of temple columns. This design (leaf-and-petal motifs) has been successfully implemented in another parasol handle, showcasing the deities in the distinctive Madras Swami style⁴. The very top of the handle forms a rounded dome, practical as a grip but also serving as a symbolic closure to the whole composition.

Swami silver objects first appeared in Madras in the 19th century, often on teapots and tableware, before extending to personal accessories like this parasol handle. They earned their name because of their prominent depiction of swamis (gods), turning devotional figures into decoration for colonial luxury objects⁵. Such artefacts are noted by George Watt’s Indian Art at Delhi (Delhi Durbar Exhibition, 1903) records umbrella handles in different materials⁶, pointing to their cultural presence.

¹ Makers: Michael Evlampievich Perchin; House of Fabergé, *Parasol Handle*, circa 1886-1903, gold, enamel, diamonds, platinum filigree; 8.5 cm × 3.2 cm; Cleveland Museum of Art, Bequest of John B. Black, 2018.226, Cleveland, Ohio. <https://www.clevelandart.org/art/2018.226>.

² “Delight in Design: Indian Silver for the Raj, Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Art Gallery, Columbia University, September 17 – December 13, 2008,” Columbia University. <https://www.columbia.edu/cu/wallach/exhibitions/Delight-in-Design.html>.
³ *Mughal and Early Modern Metalware from South Asia at LACMA: An Online Scholarly Catalogue*, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, accessed September 11, 2025, https://www.academia.edu/44937355/Mughal_and_Early_Modern_Metalware_from_South_Asia_at_LACMA_An_Online_Scholarly_Catalogue.

⁴ “Large Indian Swami Silver Umbrella Handle, Madras, c.1900,” Silverspoon Antiques, accessed September 11, 2025, <https://www.silverspoonantiques.com.au/products/large-indian-swami-silver-umbrella-handle-madras-c-1900>.

⁵ Vidya Dehejia, *Delight in Design: Indian Silver for the Raj* (Ahmedabad: Mapin Publishing, 2008).

⁶ George Watt, *Indian Art at Delhi, 1903: Being the Catalogue of the Delhi Exhibition, 1902–1903* (Delhi: Central Printing Office, 1903).



Depiction of a Ramayana scene (Death of Vali)

Mughal Miniature Painting (One folio), Ink and Gouache, circa. Late 18th Century (1780-90), Lahore, Pakistan. Registered Antiquity - Non-Exportable Item.

The Ramayana (Adventures of Rama) narrates the epic saga of the valiant Prince Rama and his dutiful wife, Princess Sita, who Ravana abducted, the arrogant ten-headed King of Lanka (probably modern Sri Lanka), during Rama’s unjust fourteen-year forest exile from his capital of Ayodhya (near Faizabad in Uttar Pradesh). To rescue Sita, Rama and his faithful brother Lakshmana assembled a great army of monkeys and bears led by the Monkey-King Sugriva and his Monkey-General Hanuman. After several magical battles, the princess was freed, and the happy couple triumphantly returned home to rule Ayodhya¹.

These manuscript folios feature a miniature painting depicting monkey figures that are likely the ‘vanara’ host on whom the Hanumān legend in the Ramayana is based. The work is divided into two panels: the left panel shows two monkeys (Vali and Sugriva) clad in red robes, and the right panel contains a small group of figures conversing. Behind the picture are five more figures, of which the first two are Ram and Lakshman, and the other three figures are Hanuman, Jambuvan and Angad. An emotional scene of grief and pathos, The Death of Vali depicts an incident from the Ramayana, one of the great epics of Indian literature. The painting originally adorned a manuscript of the story. In search of his kidnapped love, Sita, the hero Rama has befriended the king of the monkeys, Sugriva, whose throne has been taken by his evil brother Vali. Rama promises to help Sugriva regain his throne if he and his followers will help search for Sita. Sugriva agrees and then challenges Vali. Just as Sugriva seems to be losing the battle, Rama intervenes, mortally wounding Vali with an arrow.

The painting depicts the moment when Vali, close to death, admonishes Rama for shooting him².

The picture is encircled by Persian (or Persian-script - nastaliq calligraphy) inscriptions, both above and below the painted image. These folios can be dated to circa. late 18th century (1780-90) and were definitely not done under Akbar’s reign. The region is Lahore, now in present-day Pakistan. The artists who produced these works were usually not named, and thus gained neither religious merit nor permanent artistic renown. We can surmise that they worked on commission for anyone with the resources and desire for their services. (The translation of the script is provided at the end.)

The total disposition, border treatment, and script style suggest a hybrid vernacular idiom—Indian mythological theme executed within a manuscript folio inscribed in Persian script. This visual and verbal synthesis is reminiscent of illustrated manuscripts generated under Mughal and post-Mughal patronage, which attempted to bridge Indic narrative culture with the Persianate literary universe. These include the clearly documented Persian Translation of the Ramayana (c. 1597–1605), of which some examples have come down

in collections like the Rare Books Society of India. These manuscripts reflect a moment of cultural translation in which Sanskrit and vernacular Hindu epics were retranslated for Persian-literate publics, frequently through the agency of visual translations that condensed Indic narratives within the manuscript culture of the Persianate court.

Stylistically, the work is marked by flat areas of colour, stylised foliage, and a simplified approach to landscape features. Such elements direct one towards a regional Indian miniaturist tradition—presumably North Indian—over the highly realistic idiom characteristic of the Mughal imperial workshop. The visual economy and narrative simplicity of the work suggest that it was potentially created for didactic or devotional purposes rather than as a purely courtly luxury item. The inclusion of Persian script also places this folio squarely within the context of cross-cultural manuscript production in the early modern subcontinent, where subjects from Hindu mythology were being shared among Persian-reading elites, reflecting syncretic taste and intellectual exchange of the time^{3 4}.

¹ Hanuman Visits Sita in Lanka and Other Exploits, Folio from a Ramayana (Adventures of Rama) India, Gujarat, circa 1775-1800, Drawings; watercolors, Opaque watercolor and ink on paper 6 1/2 x 12 1/2 in. (16.51 x 31.75 cm). Purchased with funds provided by Christian Humann (M.72.11) <https://collections.lacma.org/node/238305?utm>

² Pahari miniature folio, Death of Vali, Mughal Period, 1780-1800, opaque watercolour and gold, drawing, Purchased with funds from the Libbey Endowment, Gift of Edward Drummond Libbey, Object number 2007.102 <https://emuseum.toledomuseum.org/objects/61061/the-death-of-Vali>

³ Similar folios in the collection of Invaluable, an auction website. <https://www.invaluable.com/>

[auction-lot/two-persian-manuscripts-364-c-a6b4bffb51#:~:text=Dimensions.%20Framed%2018%201%20x%2013%201%204%2C%20sight%2013%20x%208%201%204%20inches](https://www.auction-lot/two-persian-manuscripts-364-c-a6b4bffb51#:~:text=Dimensions.%20Framed%2018%201%20x%2013%201%204%2C%20sight%2013%20x%208%201%204%20inches).

⁴ Hanuman in a Persian translation of a Ramayana (1597-1605), Zayn al’-’Abidin (Indian) Mughal dynasty, Opaque watercolor, ink, and gold on paper, Northern India Source : Smithsonian Museum https://www.rarebooksocietyofindia.org/postDetail.php?id=196174216674_10150441029911675

⁵ Earliest Ramayana paintings were in Persian, commissioned by Mughal king Akbar. Konrad Seitz 03 December, 2022 <https://theprint.in/pageturner/excerpt/earliest-ramayana-paintings-were-in-persian-commissioned-by-mughal-king-akbar/1246918/>



Silver Tray,
Répoussé, Kutch, Bhuj, Gujarat, Western India
ca. 1870.
Registered Antiquity - Non-Exportable Item.

This silver tray from Kutch is a striking example of the artistry and skill that made the Bhuj workshops famous in the late nineteenth century. Circular in shape, it has a scalloped edge pierced with curling leaves and flowers, creating a lace-like border that lightens the weight of the silver. At the top rises a bold handle formed from two animal-like bodies with a human face—probably the mythical sea creature—curving upward to meet in an arch. The article Indian Silver mentions that the explicit craft of figural handles often took the form of snakes, elephants, tigers, or lions¹, blending strength with symbolism made in Kutch by O.M. Mawji & Sons. The handle is not only practical for lifting but also protective and auspicious, in keeping with Indian tradition.

The inner surface of the tray comes alive with a hunting scene and human figural composition, a subject that was a favourite in Kutch silverwork. At the very centre, a small plain circle may have been reserved for an inscription, while the surrounding field bursts with activity: a wild boar battles a lion or tiger, deer and antelope leap through curling vines, and hunting dogs



chase after their prey, depiction monkeys². A rider on horseback charges into the fray, while human figures, both composed of men and women in turbans and tunics, join the pursuit with animated gestures, showcasing their survival and pastoral life alike. These figures, though drawn from familiar images, are modelled with such detail in clothing, activity, and movement that they seem full of life. The combination of animals in combat, hunters in action, and swirling vegetation creates a vivid, almost theatrical narrative. Additionally, Vidya Dehejia, in her book *Delight in Design*, added a chapter called *A Cache Uncovered: Workshop Drawings of Oomersee Mawjee & Sons of Kutch*, where she has documented a series of drawings of hunting animals which were subsequently crafted in Kutch Silver³.

The background is filled with spirals of flowers and vines, a hallmark of Kutch silver. This “flowering scroll” design, described as sinuous vines coiling and winding in infinite, undulating patterns, is one of the most recognisable features of Bhuj workmanship⁴. Stylised poppies and blossoms curl and twist in every stage of bloom, leaving no space⁵. Against this lush surface, the raised figures stand out dramatically, their forms sharpened by the dark, textured punchwork behind them. The design is arranged in a circular rhythm around the centre, so that the viewer’s eye naturally follows the chase, as though reading a moving story around the tray.

The technical brilliance of the piece lies in its combination of repoussé—hammering the silver from the back to raise forms—and chasing, where details are worked from the front. These methods create depth, texture, and a play of light and shadow. The pierced border and neat beaded bands demonstrate the precision of the silversmith, qualities strongly associated with the famous Bhuj master Oomersi Mawji (O.M. Bhuj) and his workshop. Mawji & Sons, active between 1860 and 1890, and later his sons, brought international recognition to Kutch silver⁶. Supported by patrons such as the Gaekwads



and Maharao of Kutch, Khengarji III⁷, their work was exhibited at regional and world fairs, where it became celebrated for its beauty and craftsmanship.

This tray, most likely made between 1880 and 1900, was not only a serving vessel but also a statement of status and artistry. Owning such a piece showed refinement, wealth, and a connection to both Indian tradition and colonial tastes. Today, it stands as more than a functional object—it is a piece of history in

¹ Pushkin’s, “*Indian Silver - History & Silversmiths*,” Pushkin’s, accessed September 13, 2025, <https://pushkins.com/indian-silver-full-article>.

² “*Indian Silver from Kutch, Gujarat, 1850–1920*,” Silver from India, accessed September 13, 2025, <https://silverfromindia1850-1920.blogspot.com/p/indian-silver-from-kutch-gujarat>.

³Vidya Dehejia, *Delight in Design: Indian Silver for the Raj* (Ahmedabad: Mapin Publishing, 2008)

⁴ “Stephen Markel, “*Kutch Silver: A Study of Stylistic Sources*,” *Across the South of Asia: A Volume in Honor of Robert L. Brown* (2020), Academia.edu, accessed September 13, 2025, https://www.academia.edu/44937343/Kutch_Silver_A_Study_of_Stylistic_Sources.

⁵ Stephen Markel, *Mughal and Early Modern Metalware from*



silver. Henceforth, in *Delight in Design*, Dehejia catalogued many such Silver Salver from Kutch (Salver is a flat kind of dish without handles) which represented many hunting scenes and floral motifs⁸, but this particular tray is rare as, along with the hunting scenes and foliages, it represented the figural composition in animated form, which make it an absolutely rare art piece. Thus, the legacy of Kutch silver continues to be admired for its blend of Indian motifs and European influence, and for its ability to transform everyday objects into works of art⁹.

South Asia at LACMA: An Online Scholarly Catalogue (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 2020).

⁶ Stephen Markel, “*Kutch Silver: A Study of Stylistic Sources*,” *Across the South of Asia: A Volume in Honor of Robert L. Brown* (2020), Academia.edu, accessed September 13, 2025, https://www.academia.edu/44937343/Kutch_Silver_A_Study_of_Stylistic_Sources

⁷ “Silver Tray by Oomersi Mawji & Co., Gujarat, signed ‘OM BHUJ’; Saffronart, ref. no. 60538, 14.5 in (37 cm) wide, gross weight 550 g

⁸Vidya Dehejia, *Delight in Design: Indian Silver for the Raj*

⁹“Salver, Kutch Silver — Marg Art, product UHJvZHVjdDoxNzM2, Marg, accessed September 13, 2025, <https://marg-art.org/product/UHJvZHVjdDoxNzM2>.”



Carved Panel,
Rosewood, Western India, probably Gujarat,
1800-20AD. Registered Antiquity - Non-Export-
able Item.

A carved panel from Western part of India, most probably from Gujarat, intricately crafted from rosewood. It is especially valuable due to its intricate amalgamation of Hindu deities alongside the temple śikhara, incorporating various Indo-Islamic motifs and elements, all of which were creatively merged during the period of European colonial influence. The panel is designed in the form of a miniature temple shrine and one of the rarest pieces of art.

At the top of the panel, three distinct śikharas can be observed, exemplifying the Nagara style of temple architecture. Adjacent to these śikharas, two pairs of onion-shaped domes typical of Mughal architecture. Additionally, the trefoil arched battlements and projecting eaves showcase design influences stemming from the architectural styles of both the Mughals and Rajputs. The pillars of the shrine are notably diverse in their adornments, featuring clustered and tapering forms that draw inspiration from Mughal architectural design¹. This carved panel houses numerous Hindu deities. At its apex, the figure of Lord Viṣṇu is rendered in his Śeṣaśāyī incarnation. Beneath a rectangular frame in the centre lies a miniature shrine, housing a figure of Gaṇeśa in a seated position upon a throne.

Flanking Gaṇeśa, three other gods or sages are portrayed in a row on either side. At the top, a standing figure of Lord Viṣṇu is depicted. The second figure represents a fierce goddess, whose specific identity remains uncertain, engaged in an act of chopping off a demon's hair with a sword. On the right side, a seated yogi is shown holding a trisūla (trident), a pāśa (lasso), an unidentified object, and a manuscript or cloth, while a lady presents offerings. To the left, another figure of Gaṇeśa appears, mirroring the one in the centre. The figures of these gods and goddesses are adorned with three-tiered conical crowns, a characteristic often found in Gujarati iconographic figures. At the bottom row, four large circular outlines highlight additional deities. To the right and left are representations of the fierce goddess, while the two central circles contain a seated, meditative god figure. The intricately carved panel is a breathtaking tapestry of dense foliage and intricate floral motifs, creating a visual feast that captivates the eye while leaving scant opportunity for respite.

Gujarati wood carving is known for its detailed and elaborate designs. These carvings are seen in furniture, doors, and architectural elements, giving both traditional and modern spaces a unique touch². B. A. Gupte noted in 1886 that wood carving for architecture in Western India primarily belongs to the Gujaratis. This emphasises the uniqueness of Gujarati wood carving³.



¹ V. S. Parmar, Wood Carvings of Gujarat.

² "A Historical Exploration of Wood Carving in India," Cottage9, accessed August 31, 2025, <https://www.cottage9.com/blog/a-historical-exploration-of-wood-carving-in-india/>

³ Jigna Desai, "Naqsh: The Art of Wood Carving of Traditional Houses of Gujarat—Focus on Ornamentation," Academia. edu, accessed August 31, 2025, https://www.academia.edu/192948/Naqsh_The_Art_of_Wood_Carving_of_Traditional_Houses_of_Gujarat_Focus_on_Ornamentation



underscores the hybrid aesthetic of the colonial period. Surahis, from Lucknow, also have such kind of ornamentation³.

It is possible that the surahi was crafted in the workshop of Girish Chunder Dutt, the celebrated silversmith of Bhowanipore, Calcutta (active 1872–1947). Dutt’s workshop is known to have produced tea services, claret jugs, bowls, and boxes⁴ richly adorned with repoussé scenes of farming, processions, women fetching water, and episodes from folklore⁵.

This surahi shares that same narrative language, suggesting a possible connection. What makes the object even more remarkable is its rarity. While surahis from Lucknow are well documented—often in chased and parcel-gilded silver⁶—scarce ‘visual’ examples from Bengal have been recorded. Rustom J. Mehta, writing on *The Handicrafts And Industrial Arts Of India*, makes passing mention

of Bengal surahis, describing them as “the slender, long-necked surahi with more or less



globular body—a favourite vessel for decorative treatment.⁷” This particular example, therefore, stands out as a rare survival, offering invaluable evidence of Bengal’s contribution to the silver traditions of colonial India.

Wine Flask (Surahi),
Silver, Perhaps Bowanipore, Kolkata,
West Bengal, Eastern India, ca. 1890 - 1910.
Registered Antiquity - Non-Exportable Item.

Surahis, with their slim necks and graceful profiles, are vessels designed to serve water much like a pitcher¹. Their form is both practical and aesthetic: the narrow neck allows controlled pouring, while the often globular body provides generous capacity. Many surahis also include handles and chains to secure the lid, combining utility with ornament.

The surahi here demonstrates this balance of function and beauty with striking clarity. It stands on a broad, slightly raised base that supports the rounded belly, which provides ample surface for decoration. Rising above is the tall, tapering neck that ends in a flared mouth for pouring. At the transition between the neck and the belly, a circular protruding band has been added—likely intended as a gripping point, making it easier to hold the vessel while serving. Just beside it sits a small hook, which would have once held a chain connecting the body to the lid. Now, the chain is missing in this object. The lid, now detached, is domed and crowned with a bud-shaped finial, completing the vessel’s vertical silhouette and ensuring it reads as both a utilitarian object and an ornamented art piece.

The body is the true canvas of artistic imagination. Here, the silversmith employed repoussé to create a continuous frieze in high relief. The decoration unfolds like a panoramic story of rural Bengal: palm trees rise vertically to punctuate the composition, thatched huts anchor the scene with architectural rhythm, and human figures appear in lively gestures—carrying pots, tending animals, or engaged in everyday tasks of pastoral life. These scenes transform the surahi from a mere water vessel into a celebration of culture and craftsmanship. As Vidya Dehejia observes, although many such pieces were produced for European patrons, their decoration often dwelt on local village life, sometimes in almost cartoon-like representations. This gives the surahi a fascinating hybridity: an object made for the colonial table, yet adorned with imagery deeply rooted in Bengali identity².

The motifs are not merely ornamental. They embody the visual culture of colonial Bengal, where daily life was reimagined in silver relief. Above the crowded frieze, the neck and shoulder are treated with restraint. Bands of floral scrolls and creepers provide a visual pause, balancing the density below. Notably, the silversmith has also included a band of acanthus leaves—a motif derived from Greco-Roman art and popular in colonial India, where European decorative traditions were frequently blended with indigenous forms. This layering of motifs

¹ Jahnvi Lakhota Nandan and Shivani Gupta, *Pukka Indian: 100 Objects That Define India* (New Delhi: Lustre Press, Roli Books, 2017). .

² “Michael Backman Ltd, “Indian Colonial Silver Calcutta,” *Michael Backman Ltd*, accessed September 10, 2025, https://www.michaelbackmanltd.com/archived_objects/indian-colonial-silver-calcutta/.

³ “Michael Backman Ltd, Lucknow Silver Surahi, Water Flask, India – *Scottish Influence*, c. 1880, accessed September 10, 2025, https://www.michaelbackmanltd.com/archived_objects/lucknow-silver-surahi-water-flask-india-scottish-influence/

⁴ Pushkin Antiques, *Indian Monumental Solid Silver Ewer, Calcutta*, c. 1900, accessed September 10, 2025, Pushkin Archive, <https://pushkins.com/indian-archive/?itemId=antique-20thc-indian-monumental-solid-silver-ewer-calcutta-c1900>.

⁵ Charles Moore Fine Arts, “Silver in the City of Palaces, Grish Chunder Dutt,” *Charles Moore Fine Arts*, accessed September 10, 2025, <https://cmfinearts.wordpress.com/2014/05/31/silver-in-the-city-of-palaces-grish-chunder-dutt/>

⁶ First Image- Sir George Christopher Molesworth Birdwood, *The Industrial Arts of India*, vol. 1 (London: Chapman & Hall for the Committee of Council on Education, 1880). Second Image- Stephen Markel, *Mughal and Early Modern Metalware from South Asia at LACMA: An Online Scholarly Catalogue* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 2020).

⁷ Rustam Jehangir Mehta, *The Handicrafts and Industrial Arts of India: A Pictorial and Descriptive Survey of Indian Craftsmanship as Seen in Masterpieces* (Bombay: D.B. Taraporevala’s Treasure House of Books, 1960).



The priest and his wife performing a pūjā, Miniature Painting, Decan, Hyderabad, ca. 1720 - 1730. Registered Antiquity - Non-Exportable Item.

This miniature painting is carefully structured within a rectilinear format that establishes a clear hierarchy of space. The composition unfolds across distinct layers: a foreground terrace floor,

mid-ground figures, and a detailed architectural backdrop rendered in marble-like tones. The architecture, in a cool grey-white, is animated by bright yellow window frames and a rolled red blind patterned with yellow motifs and edged with a pearl fringe, introducing sharp contrasts of colour and texture. Such depictions of marble architecture, paired with vibrant surface ornament, are recurring features within the Deccani miniature tradition.¹ At the centre of the scene sits a pūjāri (priest) on

14
A Brahmin at prayer counting his beads which are within the bag in his right hand. The small vessels round him contain water & oil - which are intended to be thrown by him from time to time on the lights which his wife is presenting him with.

a mat, distinguished by his vaiṣṇava attributes: a forehead tilaka, Tulsi or Kaṇṭhī beads, a high-tied bun, and simple saffron attire. His figure is presented in a three-quarter profile, a convention shared with Rajput and Mughal painting. With his hands poised in ritualistic gestures, he is shown absorbed in devotion, discreetly holding a japa mala beneath a cloth cover. Surrounding him lie ritual implements—vessels, bowls, a conch shell (śaṅkha), a manuscript, a stick-like object, and several glasses—each contributing to the sanctified ambience.

Beside him, his wife advances with a lamp to perform the ārti. She wears a richly coloured outfit of red and orange, accented with gold, characteristic of Deccani miniatures², where the lavish use of gold paint enhanced luminosity³. Her attire—comprising a colaka, ṭhaṇḍī, and ghāghrā—draws from regional sartorial traditions. Her jewellery, including an ornate nātha (nose ring), bangles, and necklaces, complements the auspicious tilaka on her forehead, all testifying to the painter’s attention to cultural detail. The artist elongates torsos and shapes the eyes into almond forms, heightening elegance. A dominant palette of saffron, muted greys,

whites, yellows, and reds is carefully balanced with touches of blue sky and soft green foliage. Precision black contouring defines figures and garments, contributing to clarity and restraint in the midst of vibrant colouration.

On the verso of the painting, an inscription offers an additional layer of interpretation: “14____ A Brahmin at prayers counting his beads, which are within the bag in his right hand. The small vessels round him contain water & oil which are intended to be thrown by him from time to time on the lights which his wife is presenting him with.” The number may signify a folio sequence, suggesting this work once formed part of a series.

The wider artistic context enriches our understanding of this work. The Sultanate courts of the Deccan patronised painting styles deeply informed by the ateliers of Persia and Afghanistan. Yet these were not simple imports: they were transformed by the hands of Indian artists trained in Hindu and Jain traditions⁴. It was precisely this confluence of stylistic vocabularies that gave Deccani painting its hybrid vigour, catalysing a profusion of regional styles from the early sixteenth century onward.

Against this backdrop, Hyderabad emerged as one of the most significant centres of production, alongside Ahmadnagar, Golkonda, and Bijapur. Deccani painting, flourishing from the latter half of the sixteenth century, developed almost in tandem with Mughal art.⁵ Its charged compositions, linear refinement, spatial geometry, sensual figures, and saturated colours embodied a visual language that was at once cosmopolitan and deeply local. The present painting, with its devotional subject, elegant figures, and luminous colour, exemplifies that legacy.⁶

¹ Academy of Fine Arts and Literature, Indian Miniature Paintings: The Deccani and Paithan Schools, Google Arts & Culture, <https://artsandculture.google.com/story/LwUhY7nLvdXCIA>.

² Daljeet Kaur, Mughal and Deccani Paintings (New Delhi: Roli Books, 1999).

³ Andrew Topsfield, An Introduction to Indian Court Painting (London: H.M.S.O., 1984).

⁴ Parul Singh, “Indian Miniature Paintings: A History,” Google Arts & Culture, accessed September 7, 2025, <https://artsandculture.google.com/story/eAURdUsdMraLeA>.

⁵ VMark Zebrowski, Deccani Painting (New Delhi: Roli Books International, 1983).

⁶ Academy of Fine Arts and Literature, Indian Miniature Paintings: The Deccani and Paithan Schools, Google Arts & Culture, <https://artsandculture.google.com/story/LwUhY7nLvdXCIA>.



Silver Teapot, Lucknow, c.a. 1870-1890 Registered Antiquity - Non-Exportable Item.

Starting from the 17th Century, rare and exquisite silver pieces were created in both the Portuguese and British colonies¹, but the surge in demand for silver produced in India primarily occurred in the latter half of the 19th Century, particularly in British colonies. Indian silver is characterised by its exceptional quality and variety, with each region showcasing its own unique styles, themes and forms. Common items include salvers, trays, jugs, ewers, cups, beakers, boxes, vases, tea caddies, goblets, scroll holders, and particularly tea ware and bowls. These objects were often designed for Western purposes—such as calling card cases and tea services—resulting in recognisable forms adorned with strikingly exotic motifs. As noted by Vidya Dehejia, “These Indian workshops adapted ‘native’ ornamental styles to Western forms to create a unique hybrid.”² Even in the Delhi Art Exhibition of 1903, the European shapes of tea services had become commonplace in all regional centres and were featured in prominent exhibits from most of the regions represented in the Delhi exhibition. Tea services from Madras, Kashmir, Lucknow and Alwar were showcased and received commendation awards at the exhibition³.

Lucknow and its neighbouring areas of Northern India, have a long and rich tradition of silversmithing that dates back to 10th century, significantly influenced by Islamic culture⁴. From 1858 onwards, there was a marked increase in the production of Indian-style silver objects shaped specifically in European styles, with exceptional craftsmanship evident in pieces created between 1860 and 1920⁵.

Lucknow silver features three notable motifs: the

jungle, showcasing groves of date palms along with various animals like dogs, bears, deer and birds; decorative coriander leaves and flowers; and hunting scenes involving lions, tigers and horses. After 1900, silversmiths in Lucknow began to draw inspiration from other regions of India, such as Kutch, Madras, Calcutta and Kashmir. Nevertheless, the distinctive makers’ marks typically incised on the bases of this hybrid silverware serve to confirm their origin from Lucknow⁷.

This elongated teapot with an attachable lid. Afternoon tea, partaken in gracious surroundings, had become a ritual synonymous with British upper-class culture and etiquette. Tea sets were made in every part of India and decorated in every local tradition of silverware, and the Lucknow teapots carried their own legacy.

Employing the technique of repoussé, the surface of the teapot is adorned with intricate raised reliefs that have been meticulously formed by hammering from the reverse side, resulting in a tactile and visually engaging design.

The body is narrating a rich tapestry of palm leaves (An image has been attached for reference, LEFT), with artistically rendered bird and animal motifs. Among the featured birds are peacocks, sparrows and owls, each delicately integrated into the composition. They are depicted stylistically. Fish motifs, artistically rendered and arranged around the upper band of the teapot, serve a decorative purpose. The fish’s fins are also rendered stylistically on the bottom rim of the teapot, along with the border on the lid, on the handle and on the pouring mouthpiece. This row of fish and the fins, which can be observed as the decorative band, symbolise the lineage of the Nawabs of Oudh and pay homage to the traditional designs favoured by local Oudh silversmiths. This distinctive fish pattern is

corroborated by its frequent appearance in border decorations, reinforcing the piece’s provenance from Lucknow.

Notably, the artefact is crowned with a richly detailed finial in the form of a standing elephant, a motif that is reminiscent of other exquisite teapots or water pitchers acquired from Lucknow, exemplifying the region’s distinct artistry. The handle of the teapot, elegantly positioned at the top, features a striking snake design as its finial. This scaled serpent handle is beautifully crafted, showcasing the exquisite detail of the rearing cobra head. (An image has been attached for reference.) The combination of artistry and functionality makes this teapot a remarkable piece, drawing the eye and inviting admiration for its exceptional handling and design.

Therefore, all the admiration directed towards the other silver artefacts of Lucknow enhances the authenticity and intrinsic value of this remarkable piece.



¹ Pushkin’s, *Indian Silver – History & Silversmiths*, Pushkin’s (London), accessed August 26, 2025, <https://pushkins.com/indian-silver-full-article>

² Shax Riegler, “Indian Silver for the Raj,” *The Magazine ANTIQUES*, February 1, 2009 (October 2008 issue), in *Delight in Design: Indian Silver for the Raj* exhibition at Columbia University, accessed August 26, 2025, *The Magazine ANTIQUES*.

³ Sir George Watt, *Indian Art at Delhi, 1903: Being the Official Catalogue of the Delhi Exhibition, 1902–1903*, with illustrative part by Percy Brown (Calcutta: Superintendent of Government Printing, 1903).

⁴ Harish K. Patel and Veronica J. McDavid, “Lucknow,” *Indian Silver during the Raj: Lucknow, Silver from India 1850–1920* (blog), accessed August 26, 2025, *Silver from India 1850–1920*

⁵ Vidya Dehejia, *Delight in Design: Indian Silver for the Raj* (Ahmedabad: Mapin Publishing, 2008).

⁶ Stephen Markel, *Mughal and Early Modern Metalware from South Asia at LACMA: An Online Scholarly Catalogue* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 2020), accessed August 26, 2025, <https://archive.org/details/mughal-metalware>.

⁷ Vidya Dehejia, *Delight in Design: Indian Silver for the Raj*.



Bidriware (Silver plate),
Lucknow, circa. 1870-1890.
Registered Antiquity - Non-Exportable Item.

In this province [Bidar], the excellent and valuable bidri pots are manufactured ... different sorts of flowers are inlaid on them with gold and silver by the artisans of this place so delicately and nicely that even a painter could not picture them in his imagination¹. Bidri ware is a distinctive metal alloy inlaid in India, with currently nine existing types of examples in the compilation of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. According to the Indian oral traditions, the technical process for producing metalwork originated in Iran and was brought to Ajmer, Rajasthan, in the early thirteenth century by the artisans who pursued the illustrious Muslim saint Khwaja Mu'inuddin Chishti (c. 1141-1236), when he relocated there. As Stephen Markel mentions in a paper edited by S. Safrani Bombay's 'Bidri Ware in LMCA: Lyric Pattern', Expertise in the craft later made its way to Bijapur in Karnataka during the early fifteenth century through a bidri craftsman called Abdulla ibn-Kaisar. The production of bidri ware subsequently transferred to Bidar (from which the name of the metalware originates) under the rule of

Ala'uddin Ahmad Bahmani II (circa 1436-1458), attracting Bijapuri bidri craftsmen to relocate to his realm close to Hyderabad in exchange for complete royal support. The production of bidri ware thrived in Bidar and Hyderabad, starting in the late sixteenth century. Through the 1800s, the surviving works indicate that the height of artistic achievements occurred during the latter half of the 1700s. Even though it was not created by Mughal artisans, it was crafted for exporting to the Mughal court, as numerous seventeenth-century examples remain, decorated with floral motifs characteristic of the Mughal style. By the late 1700s, the unique metal items were being manufactured in various other places as well. Muslim tribunals in northern India (mainly located in Purnia, Bihar, and Murshidabad, Bengal, along with Lucknow in Uttar Pradesh) functioned throughout the nineteenth century. bidri ware continues to be crafted today in Hyderabad and Bidar, although the pieces are made for today. The current world craft market cannot be compared to the artistic masterpieces of the past^{2 3}. This image depicts a bidri ware plate originally from Lucknow, North India, dating back to either the 18th or the 19th century. Bidri ware is a famous metalwork style originating

from India's Deccan area and is characterised by its fine designs and elegant craftsmanship. These works are usually produced using a zinc-based alloy, which is subsequently inlaid with silver, brass, or other metals. The sharp visual contrast between the dark, matte background and the metallic patterns results in a powerful design effect. The plate being exhibited is an excellent example of this distinctive art form, which demonstrates the high standard of craftsmanship prevalent in this era. The plate is made according to the Zarbuland technique, a characteristic method of the school of Lucknow Bidri ware. In this technique, the inlaid metals (often silver) are not levelled with the surface of the plate but rather slightly protrude. This lends the plate a striking, almost sculptural appearance, with the inlaid motifs protruding delicately on the surface. The protruding effect is a signature feature of the Zarbuland style, and it gives the piece depth and texture that sets it apart from other Bidri works. The motif at the centre of the plate is a pair of fish, referred to as the 'mahi-ye maratib' or 'Fish of Dignity'. These fish motifs symbolise lofty position and were employed as a representation of dignity and honour, frequently bestowed by Mughal emperors upon war generals or senior administrators. The two fish swim head-to-head, their arched bodies enclosed in a circle, symbolising unity, strength, and cohesiveness. The 'mahi-ye maratib' was not only a decorative design but also a political emblem, bestowed upon individuals who had shown courage and fidelity to the emperor. For instance, in 1720, it was conferred upon Saadat Khan, the then Governor of Agra, who was later made the Governor of Lucknow, by Emperor Muhammad Shah. This act made the fish motif a dynastic symbol of the Lucknow court. It was frequently used in the regional decorative arts and architecture. Surrounding the fish are florid motifs (flowers, vines and leaves), which demonstrate the exquisite craftsmanship of artisans employed in the Mughal and Islamic school of art. The designs are very carefully inlaid with silver, which contrasts strikingly against the blackened, dark base of metal. The silver work is not only

aesthetically pleasing, but it also illustrates the accuracy and skill of the engraver and inlayer. The skill of the craftsmen in creating such excellent details through a mix of engraving and inlay processes is indicative of the high standard of craftsmanship that existed in the Mughal courts and territories, especially in Lucknow. The plate is a classic representation of how useful metalware was elevated to an ornamental art form. Bidri ware was greatly valued by the Mughal aristocracy, and plates like this one were frequently used as gifts or displayed in palace environments as a reflection of wealth and sophistication. From the high status of the mahi-ye maratib design to the intricate floral motifs that adorn the plate's surface, every detail of the plate's design reflects the opulence of court life. Aside from its beauty, the plate also reflects the blending of Islamic and Mughal traditions in metalwork, which is a peculiar characteristic of Indian art during this time. The blending of the art influences from Persia, Central Asia, and India is reflected not just in the embellishments but also in the technical skill involved in producing such art pieces. By the employment of the Zarbuland method and the intricate inlay of silver, the dish is a testament to the skill of Lucknow's Bidri ware craftsmen and their talent for producing pieces that are as functional as they are stunningly beautiful. The exotic nature and striking appearance of bidri ware have long interested both Indian and Western collectors. In India, major collections of the acclaimed metalware survive in the Salar Jung Museum, the Government Museum, the Jagdish and Kamla Mittal Museum of Indian Art, Hyderabad; the National Museum, New Delhi; the Prince of Wales Museum of Western India, Bombay; the Indian Museum, Calcutta; and the State Museum, Lucknow. In the West, the major holdings are in the Victoria and Albert Museum (significant because of the recorded provenance details of the date and circumstance of their acquisition) and the British Museum, London; the Österreichisches Museum für angewandte Kunst, Vienna; and several private collections^{4 5}.

¹ Chahar Gulshan, book 2, British Library manuscript, Or. 1791, fol. 88. The text is a history of India written in Persian in 1759 but apparently compiled inc. 1720. This brief entry from a survey of Indians According to Mughal provinces is the earliest known account of bidri ware. Quoted and discussed in Susan Stronge "Metalwork: Bidri Ware," in Islamic Heritage of the Deccan, George Michell, ed., Bombay, Marg Publications, 1986, p. 111; and Susan Stronge, Bidri Ware: Inlaid Metalwork from India, London, Victoria and Albert Museum, 1985, pp. 15-16. https://www.academia.edu/4034822/Bidri_ware_in_LACMA_Lyric_Patterns

² Bidri ware [in LACMA]: Lyric Patterns, Stephen Markel 1992, Golconda and Hyderabad, pp. 45-56. Edited by S.

Safrani. Bombay: Marg Publications, 1992. https://www.academia.edu/4034822/Bidri_ware_in_LACMA_Lyric_Patterns

³ The technical examination of bidri ware, August 1987. Studies in Conservation 32(3):97-101, Author: Susan La Niece, Published by British Museum. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/320044637_The_technical_examination_of_bidri_ware

⁴ Salar Jung Museum, 200 pieces of Bidriware objects at display. <https://www.salarjungmuseum.in/Bidri-ware.html>

⁵ Bidriware from various parts of India in the collection of Jagdish and Kamla Mittal Museum of Indian Art <https://www.mittalmuseum.com/metalware/>



Silver Tea Set (Swami Silver),
ca. 1870, Madras, India.
Registered Antiquity - Non-Exportable Item.

This sumptuous three-piece silver tea set, consisting of a teapot, sugar bowl, and a cream jug, is a product of the lavish artistry of late 19th-century Indian craftsmanship, most prominently from the Madras region and its “Swami” style of silverwork. The word ‘Swami’ is associated with Lord Vishnu in Southern India. The finest examples of Raj silver appear to have been created between 1860 and 1920, with one such example being the object referenced above. Much of it was ordered by the British officials stationed in India from the catalogues of local firms like P. Orr and Sons (of Madras), or from workshop drawings such as those of Oomersee Mawjee of Kutch¹.

Characterised by elaborate chased and repoussé decorations of common people and deities, this set brings together the technical mastery and religious symbolism specific to South Indian metalwork of the colonial era. Each piece has a richly detailed narrative in high relief that depicts scenes with human figures, warriors, and divine beings involved in ceremonial or mythological activities. The craftsmanship of that era expresses the cultural synthesis of that time, combining traditional Hindu iconography with functional forms derived from European domestic silverware under British colonial influence. Goddess Meenakshi, an incarnation of Parvati, also has an important role during the Chithirai festival at the Meenakshi Amman Temple in Madurai. The temple’s procession of the divine

wedding of Meenakshi and Sundareswarar, named as the ‘Ther Thiruvizha,’ is an important religious practice. In the course of this festival, the divine spouses are taken around in a beautiful chariot procession for the public to view. In the same manner, the tea set presents a beautiful procession where there are characters accompanying a Devi, who in this context is Parvati herself. Parvati appears as the primary deity who is surrounded by her attendants, who are seen in dynamic positions. In fact, the craftsmanship of the tea set takes elements from the carvings at the Meenakshi Amman Temple.

The tea set’s artwork conveys the beauty and the religiosity of the temple’s iconography. This elaborate artwork not only conveys the beauty associated with the festival, for example, at the Meenakshi Amman Temple, but also imbues the tea set with meaning and significance to offer it the status of devotional art from the precursor object, which is an object used for the purpose of taking tea. The repoussé technique, wherein designs are hammered from the reverse side of the metal to create raised imagery, and the chased detailing on the front surface, which refines the surface with delicate tool work, together give the silver texture and depth, allowing the figures in those representations to shimmer in light and shadow. The zoomorphic embellishments would be among the most striking: the teapot has a spout shaped like an elephant trunk and a finial with an elephant figurine, which functions as much more than mere flourishes but as potent cultural symbols. The elephant, in Indian tradition, is a symbol of strength, wisdom, and kingly power, and as

a vahana of the god Indra or the embodiment of Lord Ganesha, relates such an object to conceptions of divine protection and prosperity. The elephant finial atop the lid brings this spiritual resonance to a full circle, indicating that the set might have been intended for ceremonial hospitality or elite domestic display rather than ordinary use. The framing of the central narrative scenes by the border motifs, which are made up of intricate foliate scrolls and beaded patterns in rhythmic symmetry, echoes the ornamentation found in South Indian temple architecture. Human figures, probably illustrating episodes from the Ramayana or Mahabharata, are rendered in dynamic poses to emphasise movement and life. This harmonious balance of mythological and courtly imagery is redolent of the artistic dialogue between sacred iconography and worldly splendour that has been a hallmark of Indian silverware throughout the 19th century. ‘Swami’ or Madras (Chennai) style silverware was inspired by and pays homage to the magnificent stone-built Dravidian temples found in southern India. These temples consisted of gopuras or stepped pyramid-shaped structures with layers of carvings of deities, kings, and dancers. ‘Swami’ silver also focuses on deities and religious scenes, with depictions standing in relief². Madras, located in south-eastern India, was one of the most significant cities in India under the British administration. The finest pieces of Swami silverware were produced by Indian craftsmen working for European-run firms, unlike the silver produced in other regions of India by independent craftsmen. The largest European firm was P. Orr and Sons of Madras; they were responsible for the encouragement of the ‘Swami’ style of decoration. Ornamentation depicts Hindu deities and mythological figures, and the style was a huge success in Europe and Great Britain. Despite European market trends, the silversmiths of Madras established a strong indigenous style that concentrated on the traditional illustration of their gods. Swami silverware designs were finely crafted and intricately detailed, allowing for the easy identification of specific figures. The Hindu tradition of religious art comprises the images of deities, illustrations of characters, and episodes

from epics like the Ramayana and Mahabharata. The stories of the ten avatars of Vishnu are some of the most popular depictions in the silverware from this region. The most frequent deities represented in Swami (Madras) silverware are Vishnu, Shiva, Parvati, Brahma, and Surya. Also depicted are Angi, Durga, Ganesh, Indra, Kali, Kama, and Yama; most of the gods are riding their vahana, or their associated animal, in these depictions. P. Orr and Sons of Madras was the most popular silverware firm in South India in the 19th century. Its silverware was chosen as a present for the Prince of Wales during his visit to India in 1875-1876, and thanks to the appreciation of this firm by the Prince, P. Orr and Sons were appointed as the “Jewellers and Silversmiths to His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales”, on 22 April 1876.

Madras was the main trading settlement founded by the British in 1644, and for this reason, the best silver craftsmen were protected by European firms. By 1880, P. Orr and Sons became very successful and supplied to European, Australian, and American markets. P. Orr was also responsible for new legislation enacted in 1884, enabling the import of silverware to Great Britain under regulations.

The main characteristic of P. Orr silverware was the juxtaposition of European shapes with Indian patterns and designs. They often represented gods, or traditional Indian myths, and, as a result, P. Orr silverware is also referred to as ‘Swami silverware’ on occasions³.

This tea service set is a remarkable testimony of the combination of form, function, and faith expressed in Indian colonial silverware, with depiction of chased and repousse figures of common man and deities, an elephant-shaped spot and finial, and an overall surface decoration testifying to great skill and symbolic meaning. More than its usefulness, it holds a visual conversation between East and West, sacred and profane, functional and decorative, an enduring expression of the cultural and artistic dynamism of 19th-century India.

¹ Delight in Design: Indian Silver for the Raj, September 17–December 13, 2008, Columbia Univeristy. <https://www.columbia.edu/cu/wallach/exhibitions/Delight-in-Design.html>

² Antique Indian Silver Tea Set, Madras (chennai), India – Circa 1880, Item-140, Sold. <https://www.josephcohenantiques.com/products/antique-indian-silver-tea-set-madras-chennai-india-circa-1880#:~:text=Product%20Description,stone%20temple%20in%20southern%20India.&text=Sorry!,product%20has%20already%20been%20sold.>

³ Madras Three Piece “Swami Ware” Tea Set, Attributed to P.Orr & Sons, c. 1880. <https://www.saffronart.com/fixedjewelry/PieceDetails.aspx?iid=35975&pt=2&eid=3576>



transforming the surface into a rich and rare tapestry of intricate ornamentation. The case is adorned with repeated motifs of foliate scrolls, rosettes and clusters resembling floral buds, creating a seamless ornamental field, generating a rhythmic compartmentalization that evokes the detailed margins found in traditional miniature paintings. At the centre of the design, small relief panels prominently feature deities, embodying symbols of prosperity and divine protection that resonate with both indigenous and colonial audiences. The central figure is likely to be Viṣṇu, as evidenced by the attributes he holds: the chakra in his upper right hand and the śaṅkā in his upper left hand—elements conventionally associated with Viṣṇu iconography. His other two hands appear to be in restful gestures, suggesting a moment of tranquillity amidst the divine display. Viṣṇu is lavishly adorned, being elevated by an anthropomorphic figure resembling Garuḍa, his vahana. Garuḍa, depicted with wings extending from either side, symbolises strength and devotion. Surrounding these principal figures are four attendants, depicted as showering their reverence upon Viṣṇu. These attendants are artistically illustrated to be uplifted by two lower attendants, each bearing one of the divine beings

with care, further emphasising the devotion characteristic of such imagery. The lid of the card case features two female figures skillfully crafted to appear as if they are playing the vīṇā, a musical instrument that embodies divine energy and creativity. Notably, their lower bodies are fashioned with tails resembling birds, suggesting an ethereal quality to these kīṣṇarī figures that blend the divine with the earthly. They represent music, love, and celestial beauty. Between them, a kīrtimukha—a fierce and protective guardian figure—serves as a focal point, reflecting the merging of cultural motifs. Additionally, a thin wooden strip is attached to the card case, bearing a carved inscription reading “ANNA” accompanied by two star-shaped motifs at either end. This detail hints at its origin and use, suggesting it may have belonged to a colonial lady of significance.

Overall, this card case exemplifies a European object of etiquette, which has been indigenized through the rich traditions of Indian carving. The result is a hybrid artefact that encapsulates the complexities and nuances of colonial material culture, celebrating both local artistry and the influence of European customs hence making it as rarest.

¹ Margaret G. Powling, “It’s All in the Cards,” Discover Your Ancestors, Issue 014, June 2014, accessed August 29, 2025, <https://www.thegenealogist.co.uk/featuredarticles/discover-your-ancestors/periodical/14/its-all-in-the-cards-4489/>

² Elizabeth Moore, “Cornerstone Contributions: Calling Cards—An Introduction From the Past,” DHR (Virginia Department of Historic Resources) (blog), March 2, 2022, accessed August 29, 2025, <https://www.dhr.virginia.gov/blog-posts/cornerstone-contributions-calling-cards-an-introduction-from-the-past/>

³ Margaret G. Powling, “It’s All in the Cards,” Discover Your Ancestors, Issue 014, June 2014, accessed August 29, 2025, <https://www.thegenealogist.co.uk/featuredarticles/discover-your-ancestors/periodical/14/its-all-in-the-cards-4489/>

⁴ “Vic, “The Etiquette of Using Calling Cards,” Jane Austen’s World (blog), May 21, 2007, accessed August 29, 2025, <https://janeaustensworld.com/2007/05/21/the-etiquette-of-using-calling-cards/>

⁵ Margaret G. Powling, “It’s All in the Cards,” Discover Your Ancestors, Issue 014, June 2014, accessed August 29, 2025, <https://www.thegenealogist.co.uk/featuredarticles/discover-your-ancestors/periodical/14/its-all-in-the-cards-4489/>

⁶ Claire Green, “Calling Cards and Visiting Cards: A Brief History,” blog, Hoban Cards, September 12, 2016, accessed August 29, 2025, <https://hobancards.com/blogs/thoughts-and-curiosities/calling-cards-and-visiting-cards-brief-history>

⁷ “From Forest to Art: The Journey of Mysore Sandalwood Carving.” iTokri, accessed July 31, 2025. <https://itokri.com/blogs/craft-masala-by-itokri/from-forest-to-art-the-journey-of-mysore-sandalwood-carving>

⁸Dhanajaya S. et al., Availability of Wood for Handicrafts in Karnataka (Bengaluru: Environmental Management and Policy Research Institute, 2023).

⁹“K. Balasubramanyam, ed., Census of India 1961, Volume XI: Mysore, Part VII-A, Handicraft Survey Monographs – Crafts Using Wood as the Chief Raw Material (Delhi: Manager of Publications, 1965).”

Calling Card Case, Sandalwood, Mysore, c.a. 1800 - 1820 Registered Antiquity - Non-Exportable Item.

During the 19th and early 20th centuries, the etiquette of ‘calling’ was a firmly established social norm, and calling (or visiting) cards played a crucial role in introductions, invitations, and visits¹. By the 19th century, these cards had become a vital aspect of social etiquette in Europe and the Americas. They served practical purposes, such as arranging social visits and sharing information, but they also functioned as status symbols, enabling select individuals to gain entry into exclusive social circles while keeping others at bay². To carry these calling cards, specially designed cases were created as an essential accessory³. These cases were often beautifully fashioned; a gentleman’s card case was slightly smaller than a lady’s, allowing it to fit conveniently in his pocket. In terms of design, ornamentation on calling cards was generally deemed in poor taste. However, as the 19th century progressed, more colourful and decorative designs became increasingly popular⁴. The cases themselves were crafted from materials such as silver, polished wood, ivory, tortoiseshell, papier-mâché, or mother-of-pearl, with decoration reflecting the owner’s social

status⁵. Typically, most cards featured a name and title and sometimes included the name of a house or district⁶. This artefact is crafted from sandalwood sourced from Mysore, known as the Sandalwood City of India⁷, renowned for its vast sandalwood forests and exquisite woodwork. The traditional art of woodcarving in Mysore has been maintained by hereditary communities of Gudigars, predominantly in Shivamogga and Mysore, who are skilled in creating idols, statues, souvenirs, and decorative items from sandalwood⁸. Their craftsmanship is characterised by intricate detail, layered relief, and rich surface ornamentation, often leaving minimal uncarved space. According to the Mysore Gazetteer, the Gudigar style is described as featuring “interlacing foliage and scrollwork enveloping medallions of Hindu deities and mythological subjects, often adorned with animals.” This elaborate surface coverage, which leaves no space unadorned, became a hallmark of Mysore’s sandalwood carving. The visual outcome is both ornamental and narrative, blending flora, fauna, and figural scenes into a cohesive decorative experience⁹. This object is rectangular and elongated in shape, characterised by softly rounded edges and a detachable lid, meticulously designed to fit comfortably in the palm or pocket. The craftsmanship showcases delicate openwork and low relief techniques,

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