



Rare Fish Spoon Rest, Silver, Chennai, Tamil Nadu, Southern India, Ca. 1870.

This rare silver spoon rest, crafted during the colonial period, is a fine example of how utilitarian objects could be elevated into works of art. Used in kitchens to rest a spoon or ladle while cooking, it reflects not only domestic function but also the artistic imagination of Indian craftsmen working under colonial influence.

In British India, the lifestyle of the colonial elite shaped the kinds of silver objects commissioned, but their decoration often drew from local traditions. This spoon rest is a perfect instance of that blend.¹

The object takes the form of a fish—elongated and open, with a deep bowl that would catch drips and a raised tail that supports the spoon's handle. Its design is both practical and symbolic: the fish's body forms a shallow receptacle, while the forked tail completes the imagery and ensures balance. The entire piece has been worked using a combination of repoussé, chasing, and punchwork techniques that create both depth and texture.

The fish's head is particularly striking. A large, rounded repoussé eye bordered with chasing dominates the face, while the body is covered in tiny crescent-shaped punch marks that mimic

¹Shax Riegler, "Indian Silver for the Raj," *The Magazine ANTIQUES*, February 1, 2009, accessed September 8, 2025, https://www.themagazineantiques.com/article/indian-silver-for-the-raj/?utm_source=chatgpt.com

scales. The fish's slightly raised mouth is smoothly shaped in a fancy artistic way, creating an arabesque motif.

At the centre of the bowl, the decoration turns richly narrative. An oval medallion depicts Kṛṣṇa dancing triumphantly on the serpent Kāliya—a theme celebrated in many regions and periods of Indian art. Similar imagery is seen in the famous Chola bronze of Kṛṣṇa in the National Museum. (An image has been attached for reference.)²



The medallion has been flanked by two attendants, in different postures and resting their hands on their waists respectively. They are the guardian figures as feathers are attached to their backs. Below, a four-armed goddess seated on a lotus, almost certainly Lakṣmī, represents prosperity and auspiciousness. She is four-armed, the front hands are in varada and abhaya mudrā, while the hind hands are holding the padmā (lotus). This kind of image is found in other objects of the colonial period (an image has been attached for reference)³.



On the tail end, another four-armed figure—likely Viṣṇu, crowned with a kirīṭamukuṭa—appears, though his attributes have not been depicted. His front hands are in añjali mudrā, and the hind hands are holding the padmā (lotus). The background surrounding these figures is intricately stippled, resulting in a rich, textured surface that enhances the prominence of the relief figures. In addition to the central figures, the composition is enriched by the presence of delicate rosettes and gracefully swirling leaf tendrils. These botanical elements not only contribute to the overall aesthetic but also create a sense of harmony within the piece.

²*Kāliya-mardana Kṛṣṇa*, Early Chola period (c. 900–1000 CE), bronze sculpture, 59 × 23 × 16 cm, accession no. 70.11, National Museum, New Delhi; Google Arts & Culture entry, accessed September 8, 2025, <https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/Kāliya-mardana-Krsna-unknown/xwHHPb69Ge79Uw>.

³Madras Silver Art, Behance, accessed September 8, 2025, <https://www.behance.net/gallery/17491231/Madras-Silver-Art/modules/118859035>

The tail and handle are adorned with scrolling vines and chased linear motifs, ending in a forked fin that not only completes the fish imagery but also serves as a rest for the spoon's handle.

What makes this object especially intriguing is its rarity. Comparable colonial silver is known—Vidya Dehejia has documented ornate spoons featuring deities or yālī figures (An image has been attached for reference.)⁴ —but spoon rests of this kind are virtually unrecorded. This piece, therefore, represents a hybrid form, at once utilitarian and devotional. Hence, as Dehejia has observed, Indian workshops of this period often produced objects that were familiar in function yet decorated with richly Indian motifs.⁵ This spoon rest embodies that cross-cultural current—an everyday utensil transformed into a symbolic and decorative art piece.



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

⁵Angeline Thangaperakasam, "Indian Silver for the British Raj," *Asia Society India Centre*, March 5, 2009. Accessed September 8, 2025. <https://asiasociety.org/india/indian-silver-british-raj>