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FINE ART AUCTIONEERS





Pill Box, Silver, Chennai, ca. 1870 - 1890.

In British India, the lifestyle of the colonial elite uniquely influenced the types of silver objects they commissioned, often leading to designs that harmoniously blended European forms with rich local traditions.[1] A quintessential example of this synthesis is the oval silver pill box, a standout piece of Madras Swami style silverwork. This object reveals traditional Hindu iconography with a distinctly European-inspired shape, reflecting the cultural intermingling of the era.

The box is elegantly oval, featuring a smooth, uncomplicated rim that serves to enhance the intricate embellishments adorning the piece. The lid is brimming with high-relief figures that are artistically framed within a scrolling floral arch. At the centre, the prominent divine figure of Lord Rāmaḥ stands out, recognisable by his iconic bow, arrow, and quiver, which he cradles in both hands and across his shoulder. Flanking him are the figures of Sitā and Lakṣmaṇa, contributing to a composition that is strikingly frontal, reminiscent of a miniature temple frieze. This framing evokes the architectural motifs of South Indian shrines, with pillars and arches that echo the region's religious structures.

The design cleverly reinterprets the temple frieze concept, integrating floral motifs at the centre and delicately rendered foliage at both ends, subtly grounding the divine figures. This artefact serves as a testament to the Swami Style, which is deeply rooted in the rich Hindu traditions of Madras, now known as Chennai. Often referred to as "Swami silver," it embodies these traditions

[1]Shax Riegler, "Indian Silver for the Raj," *The Magazine ANTIQUES*, February 1, 2009, accessed September 16, 2025, https://www.themagazineantiques.com/article/indian-silver-for-the-raj/?.

through intricate decorative designs that highlight Hindu idols, where "Swami" translates to "idol" in the context of Hinduism.[2]

Swami Silver's popularity was notably amplified by the English company P. Orr & Sons, which catered to a European market while being produced in southern India by skilled local jewellers and silversmiths.[3]

Encircling the sides of the pill box is a repeating frieze of circular medallions, each enclosing celestial figures that embody layers of meaning. These figures include elegantly rendered four-armed deities seated in a cross-legged posture, though their exact identities remain ambiguous due to the absence of specific iconographic attributes. Among them are guardian figures depicted in dynamic postures, one of them is adorned with feathers, and attendant deities either seated or engaged in lively dances, their limbs arranged in rhythmic gestures that suggest movement. Such divine or semi-divine figures are a hallmark of Swami style silverware, as documented in Vidya Dehejia's work, which features a similar object identified as a pair of gravy boats under the lot number 31. Each figure is framed within cusped arches and interspersed with delicate floral rosettes, creating a harmonious balance of order and ornamentation. (For reference, an image has been attached.)[4]



The sculptural modelling throughout the piece is bold, employing deep repoussé techniques that imbue the figures with a vibrant three-dimensional quality. Repoussé is a metalworking method that involves hammering from the reverse side, resulting in raised designs that come to life on the

[2]Vidya Dehejia, *Delight in Design: Indian Silver for the Raj* (Ahmedabad: Mapin Publishing, 2008).
[3]Neil Shapiro, *Match Safes from India*, Match Safe Scholar, accessed September 16, 2025, https://matchsafescholar.com/assets/pdfs/articles/Match_Safes_from_India.pdf.
[4]Vidya Dehejia, *Delight in Design: Indian Silver for the Raj*.

front. Decorative scrolls and floral patterns adorning the borders soften the overall structure, adding a touch of elegance to the robust narrative imagery. Swami silver pieces allow artisans to capture detailed representations of deities in various dynamic poses. Frequently, these figures are encased within circular cartouches, as evident in this box, or designed in the likeness of stylised temples. These figures are often set against lush backgrounds of scrolling foliage or arranged in celebratory processions.[5] Wynyard Wilkinson emphasises that the intricate ornamentation in 'swami' designs, which showcase Hindu deities and mythological figures, garnered significant admiration in Europe and Great Britain for their exquisite craftsmanship. Among the deities commonly depicted in this artistic genre are Viṣṇu and Brahma;[6] notably, the seventh incarnation of Viṣṇu, Lord Rāmaḥ, has been depicted in this object. Henceforth, these figures highlight the rich tapestry of stories expressed through Swami Silver.

[5]Ibid.
[6]"State of the Art: Posts tagged with *P. Orr & Sons of Madras*," *Saffronart Blog*, accessed September 16, 2025, https://blog.saffronart.com/tag/p-orr-sons-of-madras.