



Silver Pot, Chennai, Southern India, c.a. 1865- 1885.

This silver pot is crafted using the repoussé technique. It opens up like a flower in the moonlight. At the centre, framed within arch-like mandorlas, figures—possibly avatars of Viṣṇu or ethereal guardians of sacred space—are depicted in serene poses. Their limbs are gently extended, and they are adorned in flowing drapery that elegantly conveys a sense of both movement and stillness, capturing the divine essence of these figures. Along with the figures, the pot has a busy, continuous pattern of a delicate row of flower petals nestled along the bottom, while the neck of the pot is graced with a lavish garland of intertwining flowers and vines. The rim features a scalloped or lobed edge, mirroring the undulating petals of a fully bloomed lotus. This design, known in traditional Indian aesthetics as a "kamala mukha" (lotus mouth), is an object of both beauty and reverence.

In India, a silversmithing tradition established by Europeans in then Madras and Calcutta continues since 1840 onwards. In Madras, Silver artefacts (began with the craftsmanship of teapots) adorned with images of deities in temple processions, receiving the label of Swami (god) silver.¹ A name referred to a unique style of silver object from current day Chennai during the British rule, characterised by figures of Hindu deities. Swami silver was popularised by the English company P.Orr & Sons.

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

In British India, silver objects represented status and royalty. These beautifully crafted items not only served practical purposes but also reflected the rich cultural heritage and identity of the royals, highlighting the intricate relationship between craftsmanship and nobility during that time.

Silverware in India, reflecting a unique amalgam of taste, was produced from 1865 to 1940, continuing a silversmithing tradition established by Europeans in Madras and Calcutta from the 1760s. By the 1860s, Indian artisans developed distinctive decorative styles, showcasing a strong inclination for ornamentation. This included intricate patterns and, particularly in Madras, Silver artefacts (began with the craftsmanship of teapots) adorned with images of deities in temple processions, receiving the label of Swami (god) silver.² A name referred to a unique style of silverware from Chennai (formerly Madras) during the British rule characterised by figures of Hindu deities.



Swami silver was popularised by the English company P.Orr & Sons (for reference, an image has been attached)³ for European use and produced in southern India by local jewellers and silversmiths, many of whom worked in workshops of European firms in colonial Madras, the main centre for its manufacture.⁴

This exquisite silver object, likely sourced from Chennai, features intricate embossments of divine figures that gracefully encircle the piece. Drawing inspiration probably from the renowned Swami Silver, it showcases remarkable craftsmanship and cultural significance.

This artefact is crafted using the repoussé technique, a sophisticated metalworking method where intricate patterns are shaped or embellished in relief by hammering and pressing from the reverse

²Vidya Dehejia, *Delight in Design: Indian Silver for the Raj* (Ahmedabad: Mapin Publishing, 2008)

³Michael Backman Ltd., *Madras Colonial Indian Silver Water Pot (Lota)*, accessed July 25, 2025, <https://www.michaelbackmanltd.com/object/madras-colonial-indian-silver-water-pot-lota/>.

⁴Neil Shapiro, *Match Safes from India*, Match Safe Scholar, accessed July 25, 2025, https://matchsafescholar.com/assets/pdfs/articles/Match_Safes_from_India.pdf.

side. The silver pot opens up like a flower in the moonlight. Its round shape looks like the sacred lota, which is commonly used in Indian spiritual rituals.

At the centre, framed within arch-like mandorlas, figures—possibly avatars of Viṣṇu or ethereal guardians of sacred space—are depicted in serene poses. Their limbs are gently extended, and they are adorned in flowing drapery that elegantly conveys a sense of both movement and stillness, capturing the divine essence of these figures.

Along with the figures, the pot has a busy, continuous pattern of a delicate row of flower petals nestled along the bottom, that serves as a subtle reminder of nature's beauty, while the neck of the pot is graced with a lavish garland of intertwining flowers and vines. This abundant floral motif evokes themes of fertility and the bountiful richness of the natural world, celebrating the interconnectedness of all life.

Although the silver pot is characterised by its globular and round form, the rim features a scalloped or lobed edge, mirroring the undulating petals of a fully bloomed lotus. This design, known in traditional Indian aesthetics as a "kamala mukha" (lotus mouth), not only enhances the visual appeal of the piece but also symbolises purity and spiritual awakening, reinforcing its significance as an object of both beauty and reverence.