



Silver Tea Set (Swami Silver), ca. 1870, Madras, India

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 Kutch.¹

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 Sundareshwarar, 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.

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

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 relief.²

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.

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>.

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 occasions.³

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.

³Madras 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>