



Tinder Tube, Silver, Trichinopoly, ca. 1850 to 1860.

The silverware produced during the Raj period marks a distinctive chapter in the history of Indian decorative arts. The present artefact, closely resembling a tinder tube, reflects both the functional origins of such objects and the refined tastes of a colonial clientele. Traditionally, tinder tubes were designed to hold a length of flammable rope or cloth, used to ignite cannon fuses. This nineteenth-century specimen, however, was almost certainly intended for more genteel use—passed around after dinner to light cigars.¹

This piece originates from Trichinopoly (modern Tiruchirappalli), a South Indian centre once under French influence before passing into the control of the British East India Company and, later, the Crown. Trichinopoly developed a highly distinctive silverworking tradition, renowned for its delicacy and intricacy. While Delhi and Cuttack are more commonly associated with Indian silver of the period, Gee in *The Silversmiths' Handbook* specifically notes Trichinopoly as one of the principal centres where craftsmanship attained “the highest perfection.”² Surviving colonial-era silver from Trichinopoly is comparatively rare, further enhancing the significance of this piece.

Formally, the object exhibits a slender cylindrical body that tapers gently at either end, balancing portability with elegance. Its surface is enveloped in exuberant repoussé work of extraordinary

¹A *Trichinopoly Silver Tinder Tube, 19th century*, Fine Asian Art Summer Sale, accessed September 7, 2025, zacke.at

²George E. Gee, *The Silversmith's Handbook: Containing Full Instructions for the Alloying and Working of Silver* (London: Crosby Lockwood & Son, 1921).

finesse. This metalworking technique involves intricately hammering or pressing the reverse side of a thin metal sheet, thereby creating raised designs on the front surface. The silversmith demonstrates remarkable control in achieving crisp, high-relief motifs set against a chased ground. The interplay of polished highlights with shadowed recesses creates a subtle chiaroscuro effect, imbuing the silver with jewel-like brilliance. The decoration consists of scrolling foliage, undulating tendrils, and clustered blossoms, motifs animated with rhythmic vitality. As Vidya Dehejia observes in *Delight in Design*, such dense floral relief—so finely executed that it almost mimics the effect of granulation—is characteristic of Trichinopoly workshops.³ The curving vegetal scrolls also recall the fluid plumage of birds, suggesting a dialogue between natural and ornamental forms.



As the tube narrows towards the base, it flares slightly at the mouth, which is elegantly encircled by a decorative border of engraved acanthus leaves, a feature confirmed by comparable examples from the Trichinopoly region. (an enlarged image has been attached for reference)⁴

A particularly striking element of this piece is the inclusion of small, protruding hand-shaped motifs crafted in repoussé, extending short arms terminating in loops. These elements serve a dual purpose: they act as decorative flourishes while also functioning as anchors for a suspended chain. Their design resembles the trunnions on cannons, showing how this piece nods to its military origins. Overall, this tinder tube combines practical use with stunning artistry, highlighting the rich tradition of South Indian silverwork.

³Vidya Dehejia, *Delight in Design: Indian Silver for the Raj* (Washington, D.C.: Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, 2008).

⁴*Trichinopoly Silver Tinder Tube for the 1862 International Exhibition, London*, Michael Backman Ltd, accessed September 7, 2025, <https://www.michaelbackmanltd.com/object/trichinopoly-silver/>.

As a category, silver objects from Trichinopoly are typically heavy-gauge, densely ornamented, and small in scale. During the early nineteenth century, the city's workshops largely catered to male East India Company officials and military personnel stationed there without families. Their commissions favoured portable, personal items such as jewellery, card cases, small boxes, goblets, and tinder tubes, rather than larger domestic silver.⁵ This tinder tube, with its refined form and intricate decoration, exemplifies both the virtuosity of South Indian silversmiths and the colonial adaptation of utilitarian forms into luxury objects.

⁵*Antique Indian Silver Chatelaine Hanger, Trichinopoly, c. 1880*, Joseph Cohen Antiques, accessed September 7, 2025, <https://www.josephcohenantiques.com/products/antique-indian-silver-chatelaine-hanger-temple-style-trichinopoly-tiruchirappalli-india-c-1880>.