



Silver Card Case, Chennai, Southern India, c.a. 1880 - 1890.

This silver case, probably a card holder features a beautifully scalloped edge, enhancing its aesthetic appeal. At the centre, Lord Viṣṇu is depicted in a sampada (standing with the feet together or even) posture, standing on a lotus pedestal. Surrounding the central figure are several smaller figures, which appear to be dancers or guardians, each captured in various dynamic poses, enriched by a foliated with a central motif of Kīrtimukha (face of glory). On top, at both ends of the piece are detailed figures in classic poses that attract attention. In the middle section, two guardian figures stand watch. On the right, a makara guardian is shown in añjali (salutation) mudra, bowing to the lord. On the opposite side, another figure appears captivated by the divine presence. In the foreground, to the left, one figure has a crown resembling a nāga, while next to it, a middle-aged man shows wisdom. In the centre, an ornate elephant sits on a narrow platform, adorned with jewellery that suggests a divine status. The entire scene features an array of botanical motifs that create a sense of life and movement and enhance the scene's spiritual quality.

The engravings beneath the representation of Viṣṇu feature the initials "W.H.C.," likely linked to a colonial official or a significant battlefield. One side references the Hastings Battlefield, possibly commemorating a historical victory, while the name "Hastings" might connect to a British official, though not necessarily Warren Hastings. Another side of the engraving bears the phrase "keep cracking," which could serve as an inspirational quote related to Hastings. Additionally, the markings "Juncal 691" and "Callo 555" are etched into the surface, possibly denoting important dates or military units. Overall, the piece reflects a blend of colonial history and personal legacies.

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.¹ A name referred to a unique style of silverware from Chennai (formerly Madras) during the British Raj, characterised by figures of Hindu deities.

Swami silver was popularised by the English company P.Orr & Sons 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.²

This silver object, which is either a tablet or a frame (features a tiny stand-like material attached to its corner, allowing it to stand upright). It has been acquired from the lands of Madras and is exquisitely unique due to its engravings. It could have served as a gift from one official to another or been purchased, as silverware was one of the most prestigious trading items during that period.³ This artefact is crafted using the repoussé technique, a sophisticated method of metalworking where intricate patterns are created in relief by hammering and pressing from the reverse side.

The frame features a beautifully scalloped edge, enhancing its aesthetic appeal. At the centre, there is a divine figure depicted in a sampada (standing with the feet together or even) posture, standing on a lotus pedestal. This figure is likely Lord Viṣṇu, identifiable by his upper left hand holding a śaṅkha (conch) and a padma (lotus) in his right upper hand. His lower left hand is depicted in the varada (boon-giving) mudra, while the other hand is shown in abhaya (protection) mudra. The upper portion of the figure is bare, contrasting with the lower garment that is intricately embellished, topped with a crown.

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

²Neil Shapiro, *Match Safes from India*, Match Safe Scholar, accessed July 25, 2025, https://matchsafescholar.com/assets/pdfs/articles/Match_Safes_from_India.pdf.

³Vidya Dehejia, *Delight in Design: Indian Silver for the Raj*.

Surrounding the central figure are several smaller figures, which appear to be dancers or guardians, each captured in various dynamic poses. They are arranged within a foliate niche, suggesting a sacred context. The central niche features a Kīrtimukha (face of glory), elegantly crafted with curling scrollwork, adding to the overall intricate design of this remarkable artefact.

On top, at both ends of the piece are detailed figures in classic poses that attract attention. In the middle section, two guardian figures stand watch. On the right, a makara guardian is shown in añjali (salutation) mudra, bowing to the lord. On the opposite side, another figure appears captivated by the divine presence. In the foreground, to the left, one figure has a crown resembling a nāga, while next to it, a middle-aged man shows wisdom. In the centre, an ornate elephant sits on a narrow platform, adorned with jewellery that suggests a divine status.

The entire scene features an array of botanical motifs, including curling vines and blooming lotuses, each petal carefully crafted to create a sense of life and movement and enhance the scene's spiritual quality.

About the engravings, beneath the Viṣṇu's representation, the initials "W.H.C" are inscribed, which may denote the initials of an official connected to the colonial era or a significant battlefield site. On one side of the engraving, there is a reference to the Hastings Battlefield, likely commemorating a historical victory that took place there. The name "Hastings" could also suggest a connection to a British official (not potentially referring to Warren Hastings, a notable figure in British colonial history and the first Governor-General of India).

Additionally, on another side of the engraving, the phrase "keep cracking" appears, which may be interpreted as an inspirational quote or a badge of honour associated with the person named Hastings.

Furthermore, on the lengthwise section of the engraving, the numbers "Juncal 691" and "Callo 555" are etched into the surface. These could represent important dates, locations or military units related to the history of the figures or events commemorated by the engraving, although the exact

significance of these engravings remains uncertain. Overall, the piece encapsulates a rich tapestry of colonial history, personal legacies, and battlefield memories.