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Silver Tea Set ca. 1880, Madras, India.

This tea set was likely produced in 19th-century Madras, India. A teapot, a sugar cup, and a milk jug together make this tea service complete. A set with all elements present in one place is a rare find. Tea service became a crucial element in colonial celebrations. The British culture of tea drinking and serving made these ornate tea service sets possible.[1] It is interesting to note that the tea sourced from Darjeeling or Ceylon, the sugar brought from South America or South Africa, and the luxurious silverware produced in South India would make this tea service complete. This set would also serve as surviving pieces of of colonial history.

The objects represent Vaishnava deities and foliage, worked in repoussé and chasing . The mentioned features are typical Swami style silverware. The longstanding tradition of gold jewellery making in Madras was meant for Lord Vishnu. Vishnu is also often known as the Lord or the Swami. When the Britishers started commissioning the craft and the swami style was adapted silver, it came to be known as Swami silverware.[2] Anglo Indian companies like P. Orr & Sons particularly flourished during this period.[3]

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[1] Marks, Tasha, In celebration of Afternoon Tea week, food historian Tasha Marks explores the *history of the much-loved afternoon treat*.British Museum Blog, 14 August 2020 https://www.britishmuseum.org/blog/tea-rific-history-victorian-afternoon-tea

[2] Dehejia, Vidya. Delight in Design: Indian Silver for the Raj. Ahmedabad: Mapin Publishing, 2008. (Pp-101)

[3] Object No- 81.1.556, Description, The MET

https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/454087

The teapot is carefully carved with vegetal patterns and Vaishanava icons. The sugar cup follows a similar visual programme. The milk jug has a long neck with a curved opening and similar icons and foliage. The decorated bands in the centre of the pots are unifying feature of the pots, much like the handles . The low relief and the depths are worked in repoussé and chasing techniques, respectively.

The teapot stands on a circular base, the body of the pot is richly worked with foliage and multi-lobed medallions. Inside each medallion, a figure is placed, except for the floral-worked medallion behind the spout. On the three medallions on one side, the central figure is four-armed Vishnu as his upper arms hold a *shankha* and a *chakra*.[4] Sri Devi or goddess Lakshmi, is placed on the right side of Vishnu. The *shankha* and *chakra* on the upper arms of the goddess help identify her as Lakshmi. On the left medallion to Lord Vishnu, goddess Saraswati can be seen; the *veenā* in her hand helps us identify the figure as goddess Saraswati. Lord Vishnu is often depicted with his wife, Lakshmi, and sister Saraswati, standing on his right and left. The four medallions on the other side have four figures related to life and *avatār* of Lord Vishnu.

The nearest figure to the handle has two arms and is seated; he holds a plough or Hala in his right hand, his iconographic features confirm him to be Balarama, the eighth *avatār* of Lord Vishnu. Two four-armed figures with *shankha* and *chakra* can be observed to Balarama's right; these figures could be generic representations of Lord Vishnu.[5] The medallion near the spout shows *Krishnā* dancing on the serpent *Kaliā*, also known as *Kaliā Daman* or the slaying of the serpent demon *Kaliā*. The z-shaped spout ends with a narrow opening with a V-cut. The body of the spout is profusely worked with foliage and two peacocks on each side. The handles have angular planes that meet and create a rise in the centre. The handle is worked with stylised acanthus leaves. The upper part of the handle has a slightly raised swirling hood. This little hood was perhaps meant to be supported by the thumb while pouring tea.

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[4] Dehejia, Vidya. Delight in Design: Indian Silver for the Raj. Ahmedabad: Mapin Publishing, 2008. (Pp-115)

[5] Dehejia, Vidya. Delight in Design: Indian Silver for the Raj. Ahmedabad: Mapin Publishing, 2008. (Pp-115)

All the figures and floral designs are carved within the central band of the teapot. Acanthus leaves pattern runs through the top and bottom of the band. The lid of the pot has a carved band with eight mythical figures in small medallions. The rest of the lid is plain and polished. This dome-shaped lid has a flat top. An elephant-riding figure with four arms is the final finial.The figure on the elephant resembles four armed Vishnu.

The sugar cup has a circular base and a is a smaller form of the teapot and lacks a spout and a lid. Both of the handles are similar to the rest of the set. The central band in the sugar cup is worked much like the teapot; the top and bottom bands are unworked and plain polished. The figures in the medallion likely relate to Vaishnava mythology. The horse-headed figure is likely *Hayagrivā*, a form of Lord Vishnu. Another medallion has a figure with a hair bun resembling *Krishnā*. The rest of the figures also belong to the Vaishnava pantheon.

The milk jug has a vase-like lower body and a tall top, a sling neck, and a curved opening. The wavy opening balances the waves of the liquid from spilling out. A Z-shaped handle is attached to the top, which swirls and ends near the neck of the jug. The jug comprises a bulbous belly and a high handle, making it ideal for holding and serving milk. Like the other pots, the central band of the jug is decorated with figures and foliage. This band is paired with stylised acanthus rows on top and bottom. The work in the central band is relatively simple for this jug. The medallions in the jug are four-lobed. Two of the medallions may represent *Krishnā*. The neck of the jug has a row of foliage. The throat of the jug has another row of upward-facing acanthus leaves. The jug opening has rounded voluminous edges. The handle of the jug is similar to the rest of the set. The jug has a circular base with a row of downward-facing achanthus leaves. The base shrinks near the bottom of the jug and expands again in the belly area.

Swami silverware from South India gained popularity during the 19th and early 20th centuries. Although this silverware was primarily a product of British culture, it had an Indian market. A teapot, a sugar cup, and a milk jug are seldom found together as a set in museums or private collections. The Sri Devi or goddess Lakshmi depicted in the teapot can be related to a swami silver locket at the Victoria and Albert Museum.[6] The MET Museum has a pair of armlets that resemble the *Krishnā* figure depicted in the milk jug.[7] Another coffee pot in the British Museum has a similar appearance like the milk jug of this set.[8]

This tea service set preserves the history of blending cultures and meticulous craftsmanship in colonial India. The objects in the set exhibit the design and aesthetics of the time. Vaishnava imagery, Indian craftsmanship, and European consumption make this set of objects valuable traces of the material culture of colonial India.

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[6] Accession Number: IS.97-2009, V&A, London
https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O1139395/locket-unknown/

[7] Object No- 81.1.556, The MET
https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/454087

[8] Museum number: 2017,3038.2 https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/A_2017-3038-2