



Vase, Silver, Chennai, ca. 1870 - 1890.

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. 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 rule, characterised by figures of Hindu deities.

This exquisite silver vase, likely sourced from Chennai, features intricate embossments of divine figures that gracefully encircle the piece. Drawing inspiration from the esteemed tradition of Swami Silver, it showcases remarkable craftsmanship and cultural significance. The form of the vase reflects a tall conical body rising from a circular pedestal and flaring into a rippled mouth that evokes the silhouette of Western Victorian vases, reminiscent of Victorian table ornaments. The vase's fluted rim introduces a dramatic flourish, akin to lotus petals, which ties it symbolically to concepts of fertility and divinity. This deliberate design choice not only resonates with cultural significance but also aligns with Victorian tastes that favoured ornate and naturalistic decor. (for reference, an image has been attached.)² The



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

²Dan D'Imperio, *The ABCs of Victorian Antiques* (Atglen, PA: Schiffer Publishing, 2001).

pedestal base, with its concentric ridges and beaded borders, echoes European silverware design, grounding the work in a hybrid aesthetic.

Utilising the repoussé technique, the artisans have expertly raised intricate details on the vase. This meticulous metalworking method involves hammering and manipulating the reverse side of a malleable metal sheet to create high-relief designs. The work on the surface showcases finely modelled Hindu deities in different seated postures, each framed within a decorative cartouche. While the missing iconographic attributes hinder precise identification, the four-armed depictions suggest divine significance. Surrounding these figures are delicate foliate scrolls and floral motifs, which not only soften the strict geometry of the vessel but also enhance its visual appeal.

Interestingly, the combination of sacred imagery and ornamental design implies that the vase was not intended for ritual use but rather serves as a display object. It was thoughtfully crafted to capture the attention and intrigue of colonial patrons, who were fascinated by the exotic allure of Indian art. Vidya Dehejia opined, in her book, “Swami silver pieces are typically crafted using repoussé and chasing techniques allowing artisans to create detailed representations of deities in various poses. These figures are frequently encased within circular cartouches (which is quite evident here) or designed in the form of stylised temples, and they are often set against backgrounds of scrolling foliage or arranged in celebratory parades.”³ (for reference, an image has been attached.)⁴



Thus, this vase becomes more than a vessel; it is a dialogue in metal. On one hand, it upholds the South Indian tradition of honouring gods through meticulous craftsmanship. On the other hand, it adapts to colonial demands for portable luxury objects that embodied the “authentic” spirit of

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

⁴Ibid. (This is an image of Madras Swami silver bowl, catalogued in author’s book with a lot no. 38)

India. In this duality, the vase captures the tension and creativity of the colonial period, where art became both a continuation of devotion and a reinvention for global trade.