



**Figure-1A**



**Figure-1B**



**Figure-1C**

### **Silver Tinder Tube, Trichinopoly, Madras, India, Mid-19th Century.**

This silver tinder tube was likely produced in 19th-century Trichinopoly, Madras, India. Trichinopoly silverware is markedly different from the works produced in other centres in India. These silverwares often feature many *avatār* of Lord Vishnu. However, the purpose need not always be devotional. On the contrary, this object was used to light artillery. A piece of char cloth was inserted into the tube; once lit, the glowing end could be used to light fuses. Tinder tubes were not always used for lighting war weapons; they were also used occasionally to light cigars and candles. This particular tinder tube was perhaps commissioned by the British officials specifically to light canons. The *dashavatār* and floral patterning are common in silverwares of the region, but the form and function of this tube make it special. The form of the tube is an imitation of the actual cannon. This object was likely produced in the second half of the 19th century, when the imperial power was slowly beginning to conquer India.

Trichinopoly had an existing tradition of finely worked gold jewellery. Many of the gold jewellery pieces were often related to Vishnu, also addressed as *swāmi* or the Good Lord. Owing to the relation with *swāmi*, these jewellerys were also recognised as *swāmi* work.<sup>1</sup> With the rise of colonial power, silverware production increased. European firms took direct control over silverware production in the region. P. Orr & Sons is one of the important firms that produced and traded in silverware.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Dehejia, Vidya. *Delight in Design: Indian Silver for the Raj*. Ahmedabad: Mapin Publishing, 2008. (Pp-101)

<sup>2</sup> *ibid*

The silverwares produced in Trichinopoly were exported to far away lands of United States, Australia and of course England.<sup>3</sup> The existing swami style of gold jewellery was adopted in silverware. Through this process, *swāmi* silverware was born, which gained widespread popularity.

This profusely decorated artefact demonstrates rich craftsmanship behind it. The tinder tube stands erect on its circular foot. The top of the tube is closed with a lid. The lid is surmounted by a spherical finial worked with floral patterns, and a ring is attached to it. A silver chain suspends from the finial ring and attaches to the middle of the tube. Dense floral work, finely rendered *avatār figures* and animals, left little space unworked. Seven forms of Vishnu are protruding from the tube surface, all carved with iconographic details. Four animal motifs are placed in the object. The background for the relief animals and avatars is densely carved with flowers, worked in the chasing technique. The first form in the visible (Figure- 1A) is the first avatar from *dashavatār*, *Matsya*, or the fish incarnation of Lord Vishnu. *Matsya* appears with a fish-like lower body and torso of Lord Vishnu. Krishna is depicted playing a flute, standing beneath the *Matsya avatār*. Right below Krishna, another dancing form of Vishnu is seen with one foot in the air; in other similar representations, a fox-like animal stands below such figures. Moving clockwise, the columns that follow depict similar scenes. In the next column (Figure-1B), the first figure is likely the *Kurma* avatar with a stylised motif expanding below. A *Yāli* lion figure is carved in the middle of this column. Below the *Yāli* lion, another dancing form of Vishnu is represented, and a bird is carved below. The next column (Figure-1C) has a peacock carved on the top. After this peacock motif, another dancing Vishnu is placed below. A snake with raised hood is carved beneath the dancing Vishnu. The snake and the dancing Vishnu on top remind us of the *Kaliyā daman* (slaying of the snake demon *Kaliyā*) myth. At the bottom of this column, a four-armed Vishnu is seated. Although the object is filled with mythological figures, it is unclear if all the subjects had any correlations.

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<sup>3</sup> Object Description for Object Number: 81.1.556, The MET Museum, New York  
<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/454087>

Comparable examples are rare. Tinder tubes were produced and used by the British. The British Museum has a horn-made tinder tube from 19th-century Southeast Asia that resembles the form of this tinder tube.<sup>4</sup> The *avatār* and animals often appear in other silverwares found in the region. For example, a similar figure to the four armed seated Vishnu (Figure-1C) appears in a silver locket with Accession Number: IS.97-2009 at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London.<sup>5</sup> Apart from these, very similar forms and representations can be found in some of the silverwares published in Vidya Dahejia's book *Delight in Design: Indian Silver for the Raj*.<sup>6</sup>

This beautifully carved 19th-century tinder tube represents the wealth of the British and the dark history of wars under the imperial power in India.

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<sup>4</sup> Museum No As,Bk.33, British Museum, London  
[https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/A\\_As-Bk-33](https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/A_As-Bk-33)

<sup>5</sup> Accession Number: IS.97-2009, Victoria and Albert Museum, London  
<https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O1139395/loket-unknown/>

<sup>6</sup> Dehejia, Vidya. *Delight in Design: Indian Silver for the Raj*. Ahmedabad: Mapin Publishing, 2008. (Pp-119)  
<https://archive.org/details/delightindesigni0000dehe/page/118/mode/2up?view=theater>