

## Whose Taste? Colonial Design, International Exhibitions, and Indian Silver

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Silverware reflecting a remarkable amalgam of taste was produced in India for a period of about 75 years, from 1865 to 1940. Indian silversmiths satisfied the demand for elegant silver tea services, bowls, wine and water ewers, beer mugs, and goblets that would normally adorn the sideboard or mantelpiece in a British Raj home, creating European forms to fulfil European requirements. In this sense, they continued a tradition of silversmithing that had been established by Europeans in the Presidency towns of Madras and Calcutta from the 1760s onwards.<sup>1</sup> By the 1860s, however, Indian silversmiths adopted a unique manner of embellishing these objects, displaying what came to be considered an innate and ubiquitous Indian fondness for decoration. In the context of such ornamented forms, what was admired was “the admirable taste with which they [Indians] harmonise complicated patterns.”<sup>2</sup>

The shape and function of Raj silver catered to colonial taste and demand, but its exterior surfaces displayed ‘native’ decorative skills in portraying patterns and figuration that appealed to its consumers. A sharp distinction may, in fact, be made between the forms created for European use and the traditional forms of Indian silver that had been produced for centuries prior, for the princely rulers of the various courts of India. Such Indian shapes continued to be made throughout the period of the Raj and include the *surahi* or water vessel (Cat. No. 67), *paan daan* or betel leaf container, *attar daan* or perfume container, *gulab pash* or rose-water sprinkler (Cat. Nos. 55–57), spice boxes, and a variety of plates and cups, all of which are labeled ‘For Native Use’ in an 1883 list of art manufactures. The same document proceeds to list “teapots, coffee pots, milk jugs, sugar basins, vases and cups of all shapes and sizes, salt cellars, spoons, knife handles, dishes, salvers, &c,” labeling them ‘For European Use,’ explaining that such silver plate, the term used to describe these items, “is in large demand by Europeans for whom it is principally worked.”<sup>3</sup>



*Kutch teapot with snake handle and elephant-head spout, ca. 1880  
Private collection*

OPPOSITE PAGE, BELOW LEFT: *Finial of silver spoon depicting kuruvanji or gypsy (See Cat. No. 37)  
Paul Walter collection*

OPPOSITE PAGE, BELOW RIGHT: *Kuruvanji against granite column, Tirukurunkudi temple, Tamil Nadu, Nayak period, ca. 17th century*

Each region of India that created European silver plate adorned it with a recognizably local pattern. Tea services, consisting of a tray that held a teapot, milk jug, and sugar bowl, were seen everywhere, both in Britain and the colony. But in India, regardless of where exactly a tea service was made, its surfaces would be richly adorned. A silversmith from Kutch would create heavily embossed work to adorn a teapot, giving it a wonderful twisted snake as its handle, and a magnificent elephant head where its spout emerged from the pot (opposite page). This was the Kutch decorative style adapted to adorn a European object, in this case a teapot. If made in Madras or Bangalore, the decoration of the teapot would consist of images of gods being carried in procession to the accompaniment of music and dance; thus the designation of this ware as *Swami* (god) silver (Cat. Nos. 25–38). A beer mug, something unknown in the context of Indian culture, followed the designated European shape, but its sides were decorated in a manner never seen in Europe. If made in Calcutta, it would carry a series of rural scenes such as men and women carrying water, husking grain, or ploughing fields, against a backdrop of palm trees and village huts (right).

At the same time, if so required by a patron, a Kutch silversmith might also display his virtuosity by so accurately copying a classical statue as to create an image that seems to defy classification. With a muscled torso, a fig leaf to cover his nudity, strapped sandals on his feet, and a kid-skin flung over one shoulder, an elegant male figure gently bends his head and gazes downwards (Cat. No. 40). The copy is amazing in the way it captures the spirit of the Neapolitan original on which it is based.<sup>4</sup> In fact, if it did not so clearly have the initials ‘O.M.’ (for Oomersee Mawjee, silversmith to His Highness, The Maharao of Kutch) and ‘Bhuj’ (the capital of Kutch) stamped on its base, as indeed do several tea services, wine ewers, and goblets, one might have wondered about the ethnic origins of its creator.<sup>5</sup> No doubt, this unconventional and unique image, so much at odds with the objects of Indian and European use created in 19th-century India, was fashioned at the express request of the Maharao of Kutch.

A highly eclectic creation is evident in a set of elegant spoons with finely worked handles and figurative finials, produced to nestle within a velvet-lined presentation case (Cat. No. 37). Incised decoration adorns both surfaces of the spoons’ bowls, and the six spoons each have deftly carved stems with an elaborate finial that replicates in miniature the striking pillar figures in Nayak-period temples. Pillars adorned in this fashion were repeated in temple after temple in South India. They obviously attracted sufficient admiration in British India to be replicated in wood in half-size, and displayed to flank the entranceway into the main hall of the 1903 Delhi International Exhibition as a fine specimen of Indian carving.<sup>6</sup> The figure of the *kuruvanji* or gypsy that adorns one 1903 wooden replica pillar is also the finial of one of the spoons of the spoon set mentioned above. It is important to examine the role of international exhibitions as a channel which, in varying ways, provided impetus and inspiration for the creation of Indian silver. We shall also see that the display of silverware at such exhibitions, and their enthusiastic reception by sections of the British press, created a new market for the purchase of Indian silver which acquired overnight a certain desired status.



*Calcutta beer mug featuring rural scenes, ca. 1890  
Private collection*





Above left: Drawing showing designs of cutlery labeled "Fish No. 360; Napkin Ring No. 386; Muffineers No. 390; Napkin Ring No: 385; Dessert No. 365." Plate 20 of the P.Orr & Sons catalog (1877)

Above right: Drawing showing designs of varied spoons labeled "Tea Spoon 380; Dessert Spoon 375; Fruit Spoon 370." Plate 21 of the P.Orr & Sons catalog (1877)



Swami Work is peculiar to Southern India, and represents in alto-relievo or embossed style, distinct designs or figures of Heathen deities or "Swamis" of the Hindu Pantheon. When treated by skilful workmen, very handsome articles of Jewellery highly finished in this style are produced, of exceptional richness, and are greatly admired for quaintness of design as well as for their intrinsic value.<sup>43</sup>

The drawings of their merchandise reveal that the *Swami* decorations were *designed* – composed and juxtaposed – in order to fit within European shapes, and did not necessarily adhere to prescriptive iconographic rules. Instead, these drawings indicate that the silversmiths might have had other visual inspirations and priorities on their mind.

#### Photographic Traces of 'Manufacturing'

As we ponder over the manner in which the native silversmith drew upon a repository of circulating visual images in the making of *Swami* silver, a photographic album commissioned by P. Orr & Sons provides a view into the firm's manufacturing practices.<sup>44</sup> This album, probably assembled to mark the 50th anniversary in 1899 of the founding of the firm,<sup>45</sup> was markedly different from the documents published by the firm following the visit to India of the Prince of Wales. In the 1890s, the firm was listed as 'Manufacturing Jewellers, Goldsmiths and Silversmiths,' by warranted appointment not only to the Prince of Wales, but also to other important princely states in India such as the Nizam of Hyderabad, the Maharajah of Vizianagram, and the Maharajah of Mysore. While copies of Emery's handbooks provided a list of *Swami* silver merchandise that could be visualized in the drawings of the



P. Orr & Sons' Primary Showroom fitted with glass and mirror showcases filled with silverware  
P. Orr & Sons Album (1899?)

Orr *Swami Catalogue*, this photographic album provides a visual context for these objects through its views of showrooms and workshops.<sup>46</sup> Each opened page of the album presents a photograph on the verso and text on the recto.

Two photographs of glass and mirror showcases, shot from opposite ends of the room, provide an image of the 'primary showroom' encountered by a visitor (above). The showcases largely appear to be filled with silver plate such as trophies, cups, bowls, and trays, set in an interior space lit by chandeliers and adorned with framed copies of the accolades received by the firm. This showroom, decorated by the Madras School of Art under the direction of renowned architect R.F. Chisholm, is described as the "most striking room probably of its class in all of India... with the tasteful embellishment of walls and ceiling, the windows of stained glass, the handsome show-cases and fittings."<sup>47</sup> Collectively, these elements conveyed an image of a retail space quite distinct from the image of the Indian bazaar, which was conjured in multiple contemporaneous writings and sketches.<sup>48</sup> P. Orr & Sons wished to project their showroom's display as akin to the setting of a fine art gallery; the emphasis on showing a quantum of objects was to be perceived within the naturalizing claims of a 'picturesque' aesthetic rather than an Oriental bazaar, albeit constructed in both cases.<sup>49</sup>

While the catalogs exclusively feature *Swami* objects and jewelry, from the outset the photographic album attempted to expand the identity of P. Orr & Sons beyond sellers of 'multifarious forms of bijouterie of European and Native patterns.' The photographic album allowed the firm to present themselves as a diverse establishment that went beyond merely dealing in 'Jewellery and Curios,'<sup>50</sup> to manufacturers of "Gas Engines and Ladies' Toilet Requisites... Ecclesiastical Furniture, Sporting Outfits, Bicycles, Scientific Instruments, Presentation Caskets, Table and other Ornaments, all these and much more." The observations of local critics and travelers, as well as press excerpts on the firm's reputation, were noticeably excluded from the photographic catalog. Instead, along with the title of 'Manufacturing Jewellers, Goldsmiths and Silversmiths,' the branding of 'Engineers & Contractors,' emphasized the idea of manufacturing as the major thematic of their practice.

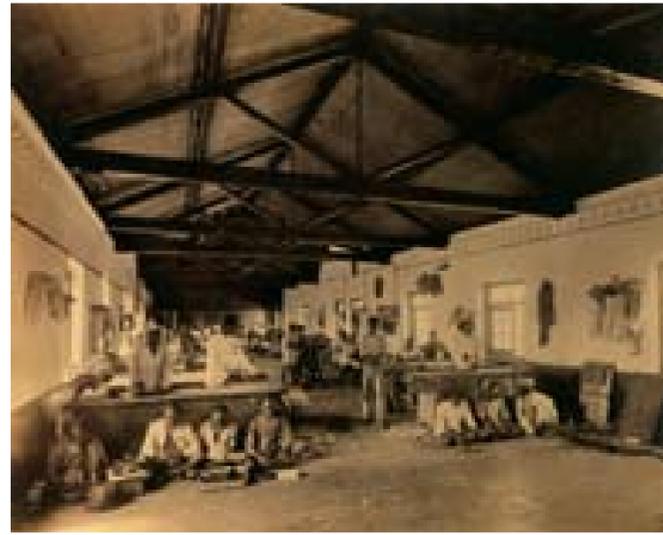


Above: Watchroom showing a group of native men working meticulously at their tables.

P. Orr & Sons Album (1899?)

Above right: A workshop space, not named in the accompanying text, but probably represents a range of native artificers working in a "series of others (workshops) in the yard."

P. Orr & Sons Album (1899?)



Several photographs in this album aid in imagining a space, marked by multiple activities, within which the native silversmith created *Swami* silverware. A photograph of the Watchroom, with its walls lined with clocks, shows a group of native men working meticulously on their tables (above left). A second, of the Fitter's Shop, that employed "a considerable number of men, capable of making, repairing and adjusting all kinds of scientific, surveying and other instruments," represents a group of craftsmen busy at work. Similarly, a photograph of a long workshop space is striking in its portrayal of a group of men working in multiple modalities – on the floor, on tables, and at machines (above). Another photograph, depicting verandah spaces and a courtyard full of activity, sought to represent the "...series of others [workshops] in the yard occupied by artificers to whom the firm entrust work of a specially native character." These photographic views blur the often-cited distinction between the Indian craftsman working with his less advanced tools on the floor, as compared to his European counterpart who worked on the bench and at the table.<sup>51</sup>

In contrast to the picture of these fully occupied workmen, when the album turns to the jewelry and silver workshops, it presents a detailed written narrative marked by the conspicuous absence of silversmiths in the accompanying photographs. A long shot of a workshop – described as a space "devoted to the manufacture of jewellery ... a room 150 feet in length" – captures the vastness of the space, machinery, and workstations (opposite page). Without depicting the silversmiths, the accompanying narrative gives details on the kinds of people who worked on varied specialty jobs within the jewelry and other workshops.

Lapidaries are busy grinding glasses for the optical department, or cutting, faceting or polishing all manner of precious stones with the exception of diamonds, these demanding special treatment in Europe. Seal cutters are employed for cutting monograms, crests, mottoes and coats of arms, either on gold in which case the device is engraved, or on stone, when it is cut on a lathe by the aid of diamond bort.<sup>52</sup>

Similarly, the album's next photograph depicts a workshop with salvers, dishes, cups and trophies under preparation. The accompanying narrative specifies that 100 men were employed in cutting gold and silver plates, bending or stretching rings, wire-drawing and rolling out sheets of metal. It tells us that these men were further supplemented by "forty engravers ... and fifty Mahommedans busily burnishing and hand-polishing the plate and giving it the final touches, qualifying it for its *debut* in the showroom."



Long shot of the jewelry workshop marked by the native smith's absence in the image, but the accompanying text is replete with details of his workmanship.

P. Orr & Sons Album (1899?)

Paradoxically, the narrative around both these photographs highlights how the "greater part of the work was done by hand," but without the visual presence of the laboring silversmith as such.

The verbal focus on the native workman's laboring body in the act of production is contiguous with the many generic images of the engaged craftsmen reproduced in sketches from the 1870s alongside literature on Indian art and industry. On the one hand, such images of the 'native craftsmen' produced within the framework of colonial art education iterated the representational mode of the 'body at work' in a timeless space. On the other, they conformed to a 19th century image of the 'cult of the craftsman,' who was exhibited across the metropole's museums and retail spaces as a sign of India's village space, economic backwardness, and idealized artisanal production.<sup>53</sup> This album, by contrast, locates the image of 'native workmen' specifically within P. Orr & Sons' modernizing narrative and its multifarious workshops, emphasizing the vastness of the premises, the divisions between the various manufacturing departments, and focusing on the use of latest machinery and tools. While the skill of the 'Madrassi' and his ability to learn and adapt were praised, this was done within the context of security, a good working environment, and the firm's encouragement of the native artificer's work.<sup>54</sup> Their further attempt to blur the nominal duality between a mercantile space and a fine art gallery implied that the firm was indeed selling objects adhering to prestigious standards of art and workmanship. In the following section, we shall see how the firm's efforts intersected with 19th century views on decorative arts and art production.

#### Debates on the 'Debased Anglo-Indian *Swami* Works'

The large silver presentation shield in the India Museum, covered in this way with figures of the Puranic gods, is an amazing production of misapplied official energy. The *emblemata* are admirably wrought, but the shield on which they are fastened is evidently of Anglo-Indian design; and the effect produced is most discordant and unpleasing.

George C.M. Birdwood, *The Industrial Arts of India*, 1884<sup>55</sup>

Birdwood revised his highly successful handbook to the Paris Universal Exhibition of 1878, converting it into the first encyclopedia on India's industrial arts, and describing it as a 'popular handbook on the industrial arts of India.' In this new volume, he once again situated *Swami* silver as the target of his dissent, critiquing the incorporation of mechanical production and foreign forms into 'Indian' arts and crafts.<sup>56</sup> Birdwood's verdict on what constituted 'Anglo-Indian' versus Indian design was