

Match Safes from India

**Match safes from the Indian
Sub-Continent
During the Years of
British Rule
1858-1947**



Neil Shapiro

Acknowledgement:

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Naturally, I am responsible for any errors in this essay.

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IMSA members,

This essay has been included with your IMSA newsletter mailing.

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Match Safes from India

By Neil Shapiro

The history of match safe/vesta studies has usually confined itself to Europe, the United States of America, and Japan. To date, there have been no exclusive studies about match safe manufacturing in India. Based upon the pioneering work by Wynyard Wilkinson, particularly in his book, *Indian Silver 1858–1947*, it is now possible to study the construction, area of origination, and ornamentation of match safes made in India.

Indian metal workers have created intricate articles of jewelry and utilitarian objects for thousands of years. Among the myriad types of metal articles they created were match safes. Most of these match safes were made 1857–1947, when England ruled India as a colony. The Indian metal workers used traditional metalworking techniques and mostly local motifs to ornament the match safes. By examining the form and the design elements on the match safes, it is sometimes possible to determine where in India they were made. Many of the match safes are not signed, so identifying a maker is often difficult. However, some makers are so closely identified with a particular geographical area that attributions may be made. Extant examples of Indian match safes are usually made of silver, but, according to Wilkinson, copper match safes, as well as enameled match safes, were also made.

The major geographical areas of match safe manufacture in India were Cutch (Kutch), Bombay (Mumbai), Calcutta (Kolkata), Kashmir, Lucknow, and Madras (Chennai). There were also individual cities where match safes were made: Alwar, Jeypore (Jaipur), Bangalore, Karachi, Poona (Pune), Trichinopoly (Tiruchirapalli). [The names used for this essay are the Anglicized names used during the period of match safe manufacture, and the names in parentheses are the new Indian place names.]



1880 Map of India

Cutch

In Cutch, located in northwestern India, match safes were made with delicate chased designs. Many of the designs were elaborately foliated, and some included animals. The silversmiths used various punches and a hammer to create the design they wanted. To prevent unwanted damage, a mixture of resin and wax filled the object while the silversmith punched the design. In some pieces the silversmith created openings or piercing in the designs. However, to date, no match safes from Cutch have been found with a pierced type of design.

According to Wilkinson, by 1880, only about ten families were making silver objects in the Cutch manner. By 1900, the style of Cutch silver was so popular that other areas of India imitated the Cutch style, so it is sometimes difficult to definitively state that a particular item was made in Cutch and not Lucknow or Bombay or elsewhere.

Additionally, the Indian Cutch silver was enormously popular in England, and English companies like Elkington and others were producing Indian-style match safes in both silver plate and silver. In fact, in 1885, Liberty & Co. brought Indian silversmiths to work at their store and produce Indian-style silver products for sale in the UK. Most English silver made in the Indian-style carried British marks, so it is not difficult to distinguish between silver match safes made in India and those made in England.

However, most Indian silver match safes were not marked. Wilkinson provides a sample of marks that can be identified and a few marks that have not been attributed to a particular maker. Below are two generic types of marks for Cutch match safes:



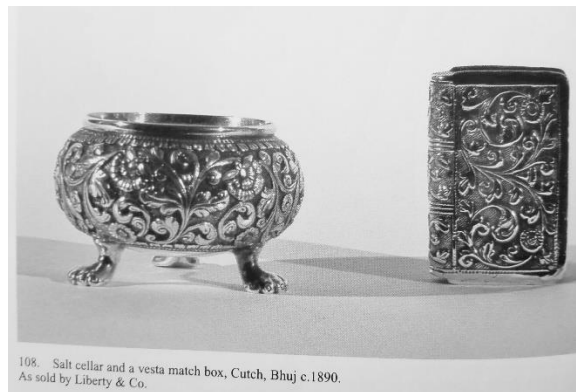
DP (unknown maker's mark); T.85 (Indian mark of silver purity)



Gujarati script found on Cutch-style match safe, used c. 1900-1930



Two Cutch-style match safes, c. 1890



108. Salt cellar and a vesta match box, Cutch, Bhuj c. 1890.
As sold by Liberty & Co.

“Salt cellar and vesta match box. Cutch c. 1890. As sold by Liberty & Co., England”

In the late 1890s, a number of Cutch silversmiths moved to Karachi (now in Pakistan) and made match safes, as well as many other silver products. According to Wilkinson, the design patterns on the Karachi Cutch silver differed from the traditional Cutch patterns. The Karachi patterns often featured a sunflower or a six petal flower, frequently in the center of the design, or sometimes used as a border decoration. The Karachi Cutch silverwork often featured animals, but usually the animal scenes were incorporated into a whole scene and not singly. Below are examples of Karachi Cutch-style match safes and the traditional Cutch use of an animal on a match safe.



Karachi Cutch-style, c. 1885 Note: the chasing is deeper than other Cutch work.



Cutch match safe with a deer, c. 1890



Cutch match safe with a dog, c. 1890



Cutch, rosette pattern, lac filled, c. 1885

Above: Cutch-style match safe, circa 1885, rosette pattern with delicate chisel work highlighting slender petals running across the face of the match safe, surrounded by a ribbed border with curvilinear incised decorations on the sides of the safe. The background is filled with lac, the resinous secretion of a number of species of lac insects. At one time, lacquer was made from lac, but in modern common usage, it refers to a separate product with similar properties. The silver is 90-98.5% pure. The safe measures 2" x 1 3/8" x 3/8".

It is worth noting that the flat sides of match safes allowed the Cutch silversmiths to show their great skills at chasing, and the results are easily seen.

Kashmir

The silverwork on match safes from Kashmir differs from Cutch silverwork in design and in technique. A separate embellisher, or chaser, is used on Kashmiri silverwork, whereas, in Cutch, whoever makes the unadorned object is usually the worker who ornaments the object. The most visible difference is that the decorative work is mostly in the shawl or paisley patterns. These patterns were taken from the famous designs on the Kashmiri woven shawls which originated in Paisley, Scotland, and were adapted by the Kashmiri weavers to help their sales to Western countries.

Kashmiri match safes also feature what have become known as the "Mosaic" and "Arabesque" decorative patterns. The Mosaic pattern usually has scrolling leaves and vines, and, in some cases, the background is filled with dark colored lac to emphasize the chased portions of the design. The Arabesque pattern usually has discrete panels highlighting poppies or coriander plants. It is difficult to distinguish between these two patterns; they are often incorporated into a single match safe, and, to date, these patterns are found on Kashmiri silver in general and not always on match safes.

Some Kashmiri match safes are enameled in green and blue colors. There are no partition walls (cloisons), but there are hollowed out concavities to hold the silicate. The enameling technique appears to be simply deposited on the surface of the match safes. The extra enamel would probably be removed by abrasion after the firing of the silicate. The enamellers worked with the silversmiths and designed the enamel designs as per customer request. But, before the enameller began his work, he had the silversmith hollow out and hatch the depressions in the silver to better hold the enamel. By varying the depth of the depressions, the silversmith and the enameller could create different color tones in the final product.

According to an 1886 article (T. H. Hendley, *Journal of Indian Art*, Issue 2, Volume 1, W. Griggs, London, 1886), all known colors could be applied to gold work, but only black, green, blue, dark yellow, orange, pink, and salmon could be applied to silverwork, or at least up until the early twentieth century.



Left: Enameled safe from Kashmir, Srinagar, c. 1885, in the arbesque pattern with an ordered panel with stylized coriander plants, and an undulating border. The blue-green enamel is only on the front and back sides of the safe.



Right: Kashmiri shawl pattern safe, c. 1880, enameled on the sides as well as the front and back. Both safes measure 2" x 1 3/8" x 3/8".



Kashmiri silver & enamel, c. 1890



Kashmiri parcel-gilt, c. 1900

Both match safes are in the Ganga-Jamuna pattern, named after the two rivers which sandwich a tract of land. The water of the Ganges is said to be white, and Jumuna is said to be red with mud, so when the patterns are side-by-side, it is called the Ganga-Jamuna.



Kashmir, Srinagar, Poppy pattern, c. 1880



Kashmir, Chinar pattern, c. 1885

Left: This poppy pattern was very popular with the Kashmiri silversmiths as they were influenced by Mogul art and design. As can be seen, the opened poppy flowers are chased along with the buds and stems of the plant.

Right: The chinar pattern takes its name from the Plane Tree leaf's design. The story goes that the Emperor Akbar saw the trees in bloom and shouted, "Chin-ar," which means blazing color. Since then, these trees have been called Chinar. Both safes measure 2" x 1 3/8" x 3/8".



Srinagar, Kashmir, c. 1900



Kashmir, shawl pattern, c. 1885

Left: The leaves chased on this safe may be from a white teak tree that grows in Northern India.

Right: A shawl pattern without any enamel. Both safes measure 2" x 1 3/8" x 3/8".



Kashmir, c. 1885



Kashmir, c. 1885



Side view



Chasing detail

Lucknow

Silver match safes made in Lucknow followed a series of steps, outlined by Wilkinson in his work on Indian silver:

- 1- A middleman secures some old silver and employs a silversmith to melt it down and form it to the desired shape. The silversmith does not meet the client who has commissioned the object.
- 2- The object in this case, a match safe, is filled with resin so it can be worked by an engraver using a set of specialized chisels.
- 3- The finished match safe is given to the middleman, who pays the silversmith, and the middleman sells it to his client.

Lucknow match safes are best known for the “jungle” pattern. Usually the pattern depicts animals (such as lions, elephants, tigers, or deer) amidst palm trees. Since Lucknow has a Muslim history, the jungle patterns on Lucknow silver may have derived from Muslim miniature paintings.



Lucknow, jungle pattern, c. 1880



Lucknow, jungle pattern, c. 1880

Right & Left: Two sides of one Lucknow jungle pattern match safe, c. 1880. Note the rather less finely wrought rendering of the animals and the trees growing from the rough looking ground, typical identifiers of Lucknow silverwork. The safe measure 2" x 1 3/8" x 3/8".

While the jungle pattern is the most known pattern on Lucknow match safes, it is not the only one, as Lucknow silversmiths used patterns from other parts of India. It takes an Indian silver specialist to know which of the other known Lucknow patterns (Coriander flower, Hunting, Vignette, and Bamboo), are truly made in Lucknow. Additionally, Lucknow smiths copied designs from China and Burma, and also made pieces of silver in the Aesthetic Style during the 1870-80s.

Calcutta

Recently, the author acquired a match safe made in the Calcutta rural style (shown below). According to Wilkinson, this rural style may have been developed by Calcutta silversmiths in response to the need to have a “local style.” Most of the other areas of

silver manufacture in India had a particular style when they exhibited at international fairs and expositions. Calcutta had no distinctive ornamentation prior to an exposition in 1883, so, in an effort to establish their own “culture” of silverwork, they created this rural style, which proved to be popular and commercially successful.

The pictured match safe is 1 7/8” x 1 1/2” x 3/8”, and it is curved to fit the waist. It depicts an Indian man, wearing a dhoti, walking with a piece of wood over his shoulder, and set against a stippled background with repoussé trees. On the other side, the man is sitting beneath the shade of a tree. On most Calcutta silverwork, the leaves of trees share a distinctive appearance, a good sign that the work was made by a silversmith from this region. The bezel is scalloped and part of an interior wall.

In addition to the rural style, the Calcutta smiths created scenes from the local religious traditions which depicted various deities set against a backdrop of mountains and rivers. To date, no match safes with these motifs have been found.



Calcutta-style safe, c.1880



Unusual curved bezel

Madras

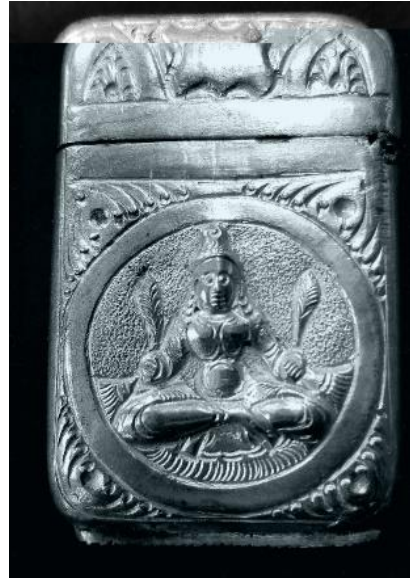
Unlike many silversmiths in India, those smiths working in Madras, after 1850, were fortunate to work for large firms, usually owned by Europeans, who gave them fairly regular employment. The best known of these firms was P. Orr & Sons (founded 1846), which employed 600 Indian craftsmen by 1900.

P. Orr & Sons established the “Swami” pattern of ornamentation on much of its silver, including match safes. It was called Swami-style because of the use of Hindu deities and other mythological figures on the silverwork. This type of decoration, dominated by gods and heavenly beings, done in superb repoussé style with great care and craftsmanship, proved to be very popular with the Europeans. Wilkinson states that the primary source for most Swami depictions came from E. Moor’s book, *The Hindu Pantheon*, published in 1810. Using Moor’s book and having some knowledge of Hindu mythology enables the owners of Madras match safes to identify the images on their

safes. The Swami-style of South Indian decoration proved popular to the Europeans. In an ironic turn, while Europeans, with their colonial mentality, considered their Indian subjects heathen and provincial, still they accepted Indian ornamentation for European match safes.



Madras, Swami-style, c. 1880



Madras, Swami-style, c. 1880



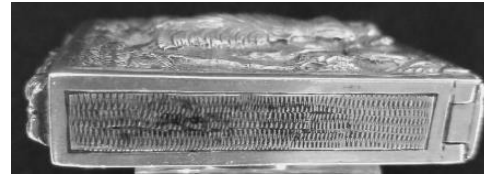
Madras, Swami-style, c. 1880



Madras, Swami-style, c. 1880



Bottom of match safe



Striker on Madras Swami-style safe

All four Swami-style match safes from Madras have deep repoussé work on the representations of the detailed figures. The figures are all deities in the Hindu pantheon. Three safes (not the upper right safe, p.13) have straight sides, and both the top and bottom of these safes have repoussé deities. The striker on these safes is on the side of the safe. All four safes measure 2" x 1 3/8" x 3/8".



Madras Swami-style w/multiple images

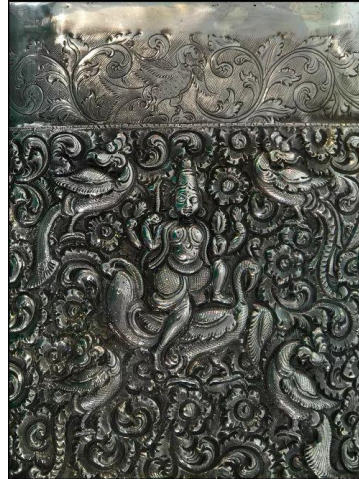
Trichinopoly

Silverwork from Trichinopoly, a former French city in southern India, is of outstanding quality. The chasing is usually tight with intricate floral patterns covering all sides of the object. In particular, the silverworkers in Trichinopoly were noted for the fine work on small objects.

Although match safes were made in Trichinopoly, I do not have an example. Below is an example of the type of workmanship that would be on a match safe from Trichinopoly.



Trichinopoly, Silver Cheroot Case, c. 1815



Chasing detail (from Joseph Cohen Antiques)

Indian silver in the West

When Indian silver reached the West through importation, international expositions, and travel, the modes of design used by the Indians were soon copied by the avant-garde of the time. Silver manufacturers in Europe and America used Indian motifs on their own silver, while other designers adapted it for fabrics, wallpaper, and other fashionable objects. Consider the Arts and Crafts movement and the work of William Morris, who were both influenced by the Indian silversmith's hand work and designs, as well as the work of Elkington & Co., one of the leading manufacturers of silver and silver plate in Great Britain from 1850-1900. Elkington & Co. made many objects using Indian designs, including one labeled a "match pot," in their drawing books. Of course, any Indian-styled silver match holders made in England were properly hallmarked, as were some silver-plated match holders.

Other Techniques

India has some metal-working techniques for which we do not have match safe examples. Whether Indian silversmiths made match safes in these decorative techniques is not known at this time, but it certainly seems possible. Some speculative examples are below:

Andhra Pradesh:

Andhra Pradesh, on the southeastern coast, is famous for bidriware made by pouring molten zinc and copper solution into molds. The surface of the object is then engraved in grooved, interesting designs. These grooves are then inlaid with silver and polished. Finally, the objects are oxidized, which makes the surface black and allows the contrasting silver inlay to stand out.

This form of decoration is uniquely Indian and began in the city of Bidar in the Deccan. The oldest known examples date from the late 17th century, but according to oral legend, production of bidri began in the 16th century.



Indian iron & silver bidri



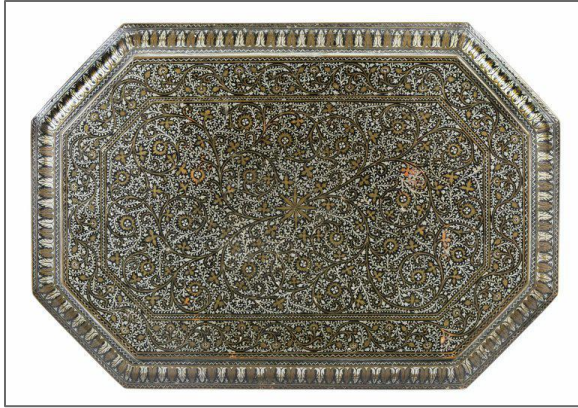
Indian bidri box

Bidri is the black alloy, while bidriware is decorated bidri. Most bidriware is polished so that the surface of the bidri and the inlay are flush, but I understand Lucknow and Poona metalsmiths made bidriware where the inlay stood proud.

With skillful burnishing, most of the hatching can be removed, so the result looks like inlay. However, examination, using a loupe, will often reveal tracing of the hatching. As you can imagine, it is also possible to combine both inlay and koftgari (see below) to various degrees, to the point where the distinction is decidedly blurred.

Alwar:

Alwar, in the northeast of India, made a number of finely decorated and engraved articles in the European fashion, and they are renowned for the art of koftgari, the Indian form of damascening. Koftgari closely resembles the damascening found in Persia and Syria, where one metal is encrusted into another in the form of wire. The inlay process begins after the piece is molded and fully formed. The intended design is engraved into the base metal, and fine gold or silver wire is then hammered into the grooves. The base metal is always a hard metal, either steel, iron, or bronze; and the inlay a soft metal, either gold or silver. This combination prevents the base from deforming when the wire inlay is hammered into the surface and results in the inlaid areas being well-defined and of sharp appearance. Swords, shield, and armor were often decorated in koftgari work, and domestic items, such as boxes and betel containers, were also made.



Steel koftari box lid

Orissa:

Orissa, on the eastern coast, is famous for its silver filigree work where intricate designs are made out of thin silver wires. They are known to have made small objects like cigarette cases and other decorative pieces.



Orissa filigree work

As more match safes made in India come to light, it will be possible to add more information about the manufacturing techniques, as well as the styles of ornamentation, used by the Indian silversmiths.