

Match Safes from the Subcontinent of India

By Neil Shapiro

The history of match safe 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 since 3000 BCE. Among the myriad types of metal articles they created were match safes, also called vestas.

Most of these match safes were made from 1858-1920 (England ruled India as a colony from 1857 - 1947.) 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 but 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 Wynyard Wilkinson, an expert on Indian metal work, assured this writer that 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, Madras (Chennai). There were also individual cities that made match safes, Alwar, Jeypore, 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.

Cutch

Cutch, located in northwestern India, made match safes with delicate chased designs. Many of the designs were elaborately foliated and some included animals. The silver smiths 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 silver smith created openings or piercing in the designs. To date no match safes from India have been found with a pierced type of design.

According to Wilkinson, in 1880, only about ten families were making silver objects in the Cutch manner. But 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 other companies were producing Indian-style match safes (vestas) 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 of the English silver made in the Indian style was marked so it is not difficult to distinguish between silver match safes made in India and those made in England.

Most Indian silver match safes were not marked. In his book, *Indian Silver, 1857-1947*, Wilkerson, 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:



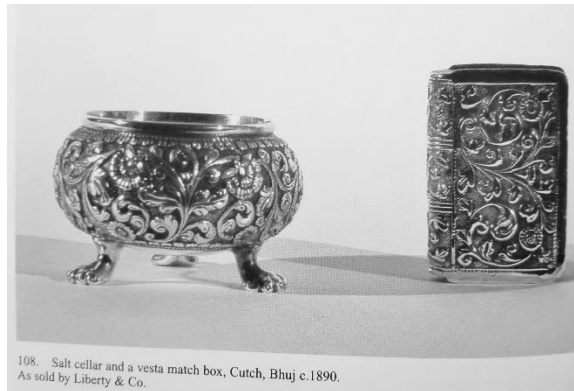
DP (unknown maker's mark) T.85 (Indian mark of silver purity)



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



Two Cutch style match safes, c. 1890



An advertisement, c.1890, of a match safe and a salt. Items retailed 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 Wilkerson, 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, but sometimes used as a border decoration. The Karachi Cutch silver work often featured animals but usually the animal scenes were incorporated into a whole scene and not singly. Below is an example of a Karachi Cutch style match safe and the traditional Cutch use of an animal on a match safe.



Karachi Cutch style, c.1885



Cutch, rosette pattern, lac filled, c. 1885

Above: Karachi style silver work differs from the traditional Cutch silver work with its use of multi-petaled flower sometimes placed in the center of the design. Additionally, the chasing is deeper than other Cutch work.

Below Cutch style: 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 lac filled and the silver is 90-985 pure. Both safes measure 2" x 1 3/8" x 3/8".

Below: Cutch match safe with a deer, c.1890



Above: Cutch match safe with a dog, c.1890



Closeups images of the dog & deer safes

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 silver work on match safes from Kashmir differs from Cutch silver work in design and in technique. That is, a separate embellisher, or chaser is used on Karachi silver work, whereas in Cutch whomever 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. This pattern was taken from the famous designs on the Kashmiri woven shawls. (Note: The Paisley pattern was not original to the Kashmiri area of India. It originated in Paisley, Scotland and was 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 (lac is the resinous secretion of a number of

species of lac insects) 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 as 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. The enameling technique appears to be simply painted on the surface of the match safes. There are no partition walls (cloisons), but there are hollowed out concavities to hold the silicate and the extra enamel would probably be removed by abrasion after the firing of the silicate. The enamellers worked with the silver smiths and designed the enamel designs as per customer request. But before the enameller began his work he had the silver smith hollow out and hatch the depressions in the silver to better hold the enamel.

By varying the depth of the depressions the silver smith and the enameller could create different color tones in the final product.

According to a T.H. Hendley 1886 article*, all known colors could be applied to gold work, but only black, green, blue, dark yellow, orange, pink and salmon could be applied to silver work, or at least up until the early twentieth century.

*(T H Hendley, *Journal of Indian Art*, Issue 2, Volume 1, W Griggs, London, 1886)



Enamel, Arabesque pattern, c. 1885



Enamel, Shawl pattern, c. 1880

Left: Enameled safe is from Kashmir, Srinagar, circa 1885, and is in the arabesque 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 enameled on the sides as well as the front and back. Both safes measure 2" x 1 3/8" x 3/8".



Kutch silver & enamel



Poppy pattern, Kashmir, Srinagar, c. 1880



Chinar pattern, Kashmir, c.1885

Left: This poppy pattern was very popular with the Kashmiri silver smiths 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 is also known as the Plane Tree Leaf 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”.

Below are photographs of a coriander and poppy flower and plant.



Coriander plants



Poppy plants

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 silver smith to melt it down and form it to the desired shape. The silver smith 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 silver smith, and the middleman sells it to his client.

Lucknow match safes are best known for the “jungle” pattern. Usually the pattern depicts animals, lions, elephants, tigers, and deer, amidst palm trees. Since Lucknow has a Muslim history it is speculated that 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 match safe. Note the rather crude rendering of the animals and the trees growing from the rough looking ground. These are identifiers of Lucknow silver work. The safe measure 2" x 1 3/8" x 3/8".

While the jungle pattern is the most known Lucknow pattern on match safes it is not the only one as Lucknow silver smiths 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, Burma, and made pieces of silver in the Aesthetic Style during the 1870-80s. To date, we do not have any match safes made in these styles but since match safes were made during this period it is likely that there are still some in existence.

Madras

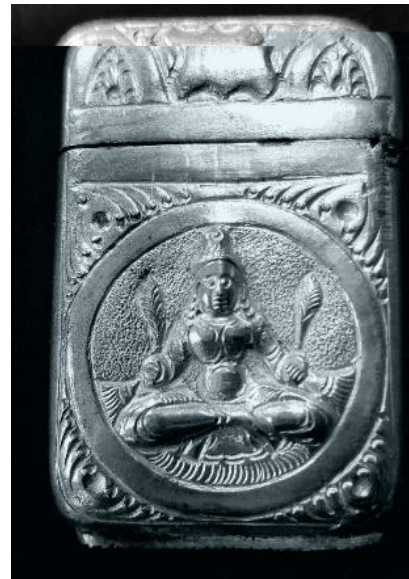
Unlike many silver smiths in India those smiths working in Madras, after 1850, were fortunate to work for large firms, usually owned by Europeans, who gave them fairly regular employment. The best known of these firms was P. Orr & Sons (founded 1846), employed 600 Indian craftsmen by 1900.

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 silver work. 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 Indian match safes from Madras to identify the images on their safes.

The swami style of South Indian decoration proved popular to the Europeans and in an ironic turn the very people Europeans considered heathen and provincial provided the ornamentation for their match safes.



Madras, swami style, c. 1880



Madras, swami style, c. 1880



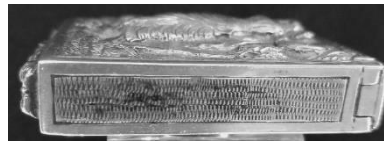
Madras, swami style, c. 1880



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) have straight sides and both the top and bottom of these safes have repoussé deities. The strikers on these safes is on the side of the safe. All four safes measure 2" x 1 3/8" x 3/8".

Trichinopoly

Match safes from Trichinopoly are uncommon. The former French city in southern India made match safes of outstanding quality. The chasing is usually tight with intricate floral patterns covering all sides of the case.



Trichinopoly, c.1880



Trichinopoly, c.1880



Detail of chasing



Side view

The dimpled background and the tight, intricate chasing on this safe is exquisite. Note the different treatment of the interior of the flowers and the swirling interconnectedness of the stems. The fine floral detailing is continued on the sides of the match safe. The silver workers in Trichinopoly were noted for the fine work on small objects.

Conclusion

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, other designers adapted it for fabrics, wallpaper, and other fashionable objects. Two examples might suffice if we consider the Arts and Crafts movement and the work of William Morris who was influenced by the Indian silver smith'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.

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 silver smiths.

It is worthwhile to note that India has some metal working techniques that are not mentioned in this essay. Whether Indian silver smiths made match safes in these decorative techniques is not known at this time but it certainly seems possible. Some speculative examples are below:

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 Koftagari or damascening work, where one metal is encrusted into another in the form of wire.

Koftgari closely resembles the damascening found in Persia and Syria. To create koftgari the silver smith forms the piece and engraves or chases the design into the base metal. The inlay, gold or silver, is then hammered into the grooves and polished.

Andhra Pradesh:

Andhra Pradesh, on the southeastern coast, is famous for bidri ware 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.

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.

Currently, we do not have any Indian match safes made from these areas or in these techniques, but maybe with more research we will find some.



1880 Map of India

Koftgari is the Indian form of damascening which closely resembles the damascening found in Persia and Syria.

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.

Bidri is a technique of inlaying zinc vessels with brass, silver or gold. 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.



Iron & gold Bidri



Steel Koftari box lid



Indian bidri box

Bidri is the black alloy, Bidriware is decorated bidri. This is normally done by inlaying silver gold or brass. To do this you need to cut into the bidri and force the decorative metal into the depression. Most bidriware is polished so that the surface of the bidri and the inlay are flush, but I understand Lucknow and Poona made bidriware where the inlay stood proud.

Koftgari is gold or silver laid onto another metal, almost invariably steel. This is done by hatching

the surface of the steel and beating the silver or gold onto it so that the hatching grips the overlay. Usually gold or silver wire is used, but sheet is also possible.

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

