



Antique Sumatran Silver Parcel Gilt Betel Container, Indonesia - 18th Century
£11,000.00

This very fine antique Sumatran parcel gilt silver filigree betel container is of bellied hexagonal shape and comprises three parts: the filigree container which stands on six filigree curled leaf shaped feet, a lift off filigree cover and a removable hexagonal silver gilt liner. Although a number of 18th century Sumatran silver filigree betel boxes are known, the design of this box is fascinating and extremely unusual, particularly with respect to the applied braided silver ropework to the edges and the gilt 'tribal style' figures, resembling owls, which appear almost three dimensional and as if illuminated by moonlight, positioned against the richly gilded metal behind them. These figures can be found at the mid-point of each of the six sides and influenced by the metalwork of the Batak people. The filigree cover has been lined with gilded sheet silver to the underside and has also been ornamented to the interior with applied filigree floral and foliate elements to the flat section to the top, once the cover is in place.

This container is an absolute tour de force of filigree work which uses wires of different thicknesses and profiles in a variety of different ways. The craftsmanship is superb, the design has been planned with great care and imagination. It has been executed flawlessly. The box bears no silver marks, but the metal has been tested and the tests confirmed that it has been made from high grade silver whilst the finial, tribal panel designs and removable hexagonal liner are of silver gilt.

This container was made to safely store and carry the array of ingredients needed to prepare a betel quid. Betel containers were important objects which reflected the status of their owners. Chewing betel and offering betel to guests were important rituals which permeated all aspects of everyday life and ceremonies were part of the prevailing social and business etiquette. The removable gilt liner would have been filled with smaller boxes, tools and packages containing all the ingredients necessary to prepare a betel quid.

In 1784, William Marsden published 'The History of Sumatra', following his travels to the island. In Chapter 15, he discusses the betel ceremony and describes two containers owned by the Sultan of Moco-moco which seem to compare closely to this one in terms of their size, shape and being fashioned from precious metals. Marsden wrote:-

'This custom has been accurately described by various writers, and therefore it is almost superfluous to say more on the subject than that the Sumatrans universally use it, carry the ingredients constantly about them, and serve it to their guests on all occasions--the prince in a gold stand, and the poor man in a brass box or mat bag. The betel-stands of the better rank of people are usually of silver embossed with rude figures. The Sultan of Moco-moco was presented with one by the India Company, with their arms on it; and he possesses beside another of gold filigree. The form of the stand is the frustum of a hexagonal pyramid reversed, about six or eight inches in diameter. It contains many smaller vessels fitted to the angles, for holding the nut, leaf, and chunam, which is quicklime made from calcined shells; with places for the instruments (kachip) employed in cutting the first, and spatulas for spreading the last.'

We are most grateful to Jan Veenendaal, an expert on objects from this region and author of 'Asian art and Dutch Taste', amongst other works, for his expert opinion and assistance in helping us to identify this container's origin and date of manufacture. Jan believes that it was made in West Sumatra and dates to the 18th century, as the style of the filigree is consistent with other 18th century examples and 19th century filigree from the area was of a very different style. He thought that it was probably made for a member of the European community who was living in Sumatra. Another possibility might be that it was commissioned by a European as a gift for a Batak ruler or senior member of the tribe as we know from botanist, Charles Miller's letters of 1772, quoted by William Marsden, that it was customary to bring gifts when visiting a Batak chief.

The European ex-patriot community in Sumatra comprised Dutch and Germans working for the Dutch East India Company (V.O.C.) and British in Bencoolen (now Bengkulu) a British possession on the west coast, south of Padang, which they held from 1685 to 1824. They had a smaller factory in Natar from the mid eighteenth century, close to Batak lands, to facilitate trade with the tribe, later establishing a post at Tappanuli in the heart of the Batak lands. From the Batak they obtained camphor, benzoin, cassia, brass wire and fresh produce for trade and provisioning ships. The British of Bencoolen managed plantations of nutmeg and pepper vines which were grown for export and they also exported Trippany, Bichos do Mar and edible birds' nests. In his book of 1837, Edmund Roberts provides a vivid description of Bencoolen around 1833, about ten years after the territory had been ceded to the Netherlands.

Europeans acquired filigree objects for their own use, to give as gifts and/or to resell for profit to