



**Antique Sri Lankan Dowry Basket, Silver Mounts, Figural Elephant – Late 18th C.  
£4,250.00**

This exceptionally fine antique Sri Lankan octagonal basket (vel- pettiya) has been woven using three colours of rattan cane and embellished with finely engraved silver fittings. The basket would have been a very high status object, intended as a dowry casket for a high caste Kandyan Sinhalese or goyigama woman. 'Dowry, usually in the form of jewels, land and cash, became important only in prestigious or hypogamous marriages' (i.e. where the woman was of a lower caste than the man) and would remain the property of the woman. Dowry was not usual in lower caste marriages. As a receptacle for jewels, the unique form of these baskets pays homage to Sri Lankan gemstone mining and the traditional use of baskets within this industry.

Sri Lanka is, and always has been, one of the world's most important sources of precious gems and its use of gemstones dates back at least 2,000 years. Its gems were famed in antiquity and known to the ancient Greeks and Romans; the ancient Sanskrit name for the island translating as 'Island of Jewels'. In 1293, the famous Italian explorer, Marco Polo, visited the island and commented on the abundance of its gemstones, including rubies, sapphires, topaz, amethysts, and garnets.

It is probable that the technique of finely weaving cane baskets was initially developed for food storage but they were also used while panning for gemstones in Sri Lanka and baskets are still commonly used for this purpose today. The miners fill the baskets with a shovel full of gravel deposits, illam, and the contents are then carefully washed to remove all soil and debris so that any gemstones mixed in with the gravel can be revealed. In effect, the basket acts as a sieve and the weave has to be very fine so that only the silt and detritus washes out and no gemstones escape during the washing process.

This dowry basket sits upon an octagonal hardwood stepped pedestal base and there is a smaller stepped octagonal hardwood insert to the centre of the lid. These inserts have been firmly attached to the cane basket by stitches of cane which run through the small drilled holes and channelled grooves in the wood to hold the cane firmly in position. The wood adds tensile strength and rigidity to the structure with the wood to the base supporting the weight of the contents and the wood to the lid providing support for the figural elephant finial. Further, particularly in the case of the base, the wood minimises wear and damage to the more fragile split cane basketwork.

The cane has been skilfully woven using a combination of split and full cane. The exterior face is split cane and three different colours of cane have been used to form the decorative repeating geometric bands of ornamentation. In effect, the split cane forms a fine mesh face. It has been woven over and binds together the thicker, more rigid full cane core at the heart of the basket's construction.

The security of the precious contents was paramount and this basket has been embellished with magnificent silver mountings including the hinge, lock plate and latch closures. To the top of the box is a charming figural silver elephant, with finely engraved detailing, crinkly ears and plain silver tusks. The elephant stands upon an octagonal silver plinth with a repeating foliate border. To the front of the basket is a large silver hinge plate with spreading triple leaf, or possibly feather, design, similar in style to the hinge plates at the back. This has been hand cut, pierced and finely engraved. It secures the hinge below which holds an engraved silver hasp or drop down flap. To the front of the base of the basket is a square shaped silver lock plate with a keyhole and narrow engraved foliate border, surrounded by a deep convex engraved foliate border to the top and sides, almost resembling a cushion. When the hasp is in place, it works with the lock and it is likely that a bar passes through the upturned scroll to the bottom edge of the hasp. Unfortunately, the key is not present but the mechanism is thought to be that of a traditional Sri Lankan bar lock or narissa yatura. All the silver mounts show great quality and craftsmanship. They have been fashioned for a heavy gauge of silver.

To the back of the basket is a large and decorative silver hinge arrangement where the hinge is secured by two large ornamental mounting plates, above and below. The plates take the form of a triple leaf or possibly, feather, motif. These have been hand cut, pierced and finely engraved. To each side of the basket is a set of silver hook and eye latch closures. The purpose of these is additional safety; to prevent the contents escaping from the sides during transit and to prevent unwarranted intrusion by others. These closures are held by a pair of small silver plates in the form of