

Straits' Chinese Silver Match Safe

By Neil Shapiro

One of the most important highways of trade in the pre-modern world was the Strait of Malacca. Bordered on its northern side by the Malay Peninsula and on the southern side by the island of Sumatra, it was the main connection between the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea. As a result, most trade traffic in the region passed through this narrow strait, creating rich trade kingdoms on its shores.



As is usual with an international trade region there was a mixture of customs, food, belief systems, and styles of ornamentation.

One local Malaccan community, the Baba, are descended from Southern Chinese who inter-married with the local Malay and are popularly called the Peranakan. The term “Baba” refers to the Chinese descendants who have not maintained the use of the Chinese language. Some of the Baba commissioned silver objects for their personal use. One of these objects, a match safe, is the point of this essay.

Most Straits metalwork, e.g., belts, buckles, buntal plates (plates that are attached to the ends of pillows), curtain hooks, etc. is a blend of Chinese art and religion and the motifs and forms of the Hindu-Islamic culture.

The Chinese motifs of peonies, lotuses, plum blossoms, phoenixes, birds, dragons, etc., are to be found on many pieces of Straits' metalwork as are other Taoist and Buddhist symbols.

In direct contrast, Malay metalwork never has pictorial parables, religious and auspicious emblems, mythological figures or beasts. Following the precepts of Islam the Malay metalsmith was forbidden to incorporate any animal or anthropomorphic symbols in his design. His artistic work could only be expressed in geometric or floral or conventions.



Side 1



Side 2



Closeup of side 1



Opener slide to hold matches



Striker on one side

In the match safe shown above the Chinese and the Malay influence is clear on either side of the safe. Side 1 depicts Chinese images of the national bird of Malaysia, the Rhinoceros hornbill, and the spotted deer (also called an axis deer or cheetal.)



Side 2 displays the Islamic influence and offers a clean, uncluttered image of flowers, probably a species of peony blossoms.

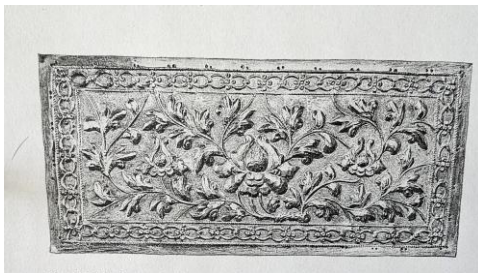


Image of a Malay buntal w/the same sort of floral design.

One of the things that make this safe interesting is that the Malay would not use this safe since it has images that are not Islamically permitted so it would seem the safe was

made for the Chinese Peranakans. But why would the Chinese Peranakans want to have a Malay design on one side of the safe?

We can speculate; maybe this safe was made as a souvenir, or as a reminder how fortunate the Chinese were to have a home in a new land, or maybe it was made for a Chinese student studying abroad and the family him to have a reminder of home. We can only guess.

But what is indisputable is that this safe was made in the Malacca Straits and is a rare example of a match safe from that part of the world

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