Karimnagar filigree art works in the Salar Jung Museum

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Filigree refers to laces like decoration using gold or silver wire. It is ideal for arabesque designs. One of the necessary steps in making filigree is the forming of the wire. It is made by twisting very tightly two pieces of very small silver wire and then flattened. Country-seeds, feathers, leaves, fruits, flowers, animal bones, claws and teeth have been used in early India to fashion ornaments. Even today such ornaments are popular in tribal societies. In India, filigree work of Karimnagar, Orissa, Srinagar, etc. are known for their intricate designs and artistic work. The paper describes the filigree work of Karimnagar and some of the filigree objects housed in the Salar Jung Museum, Hyderabad.

Keywords: Filigree Art Work, Salar Jung Museum, Karimnagar Filigree Work, Silver Filigree Work

Archaeological explorations at Mohenjodaro, Harappa and other sites of the Indus Valley Civilization have unearthed a wealth of ornaments. During the 17th and 18th centuries, there were several major centers where articles of filigree jewellery were produced. In India, these were the Portuguese state of Goa on the western coast and the city of Karimnagar in Deccan, in the central part of the country. Many orders for filigree were filled in southern China, in Canton (Guanchou) and Macao, as well as in the regions of Southeast Asia where there were cities open to trade with Europe and settlements of Chinese masters, as for example in Manila in the Philippines or in Batavia (Jakarta) on the island of Java. Karimnagar district of Andhra Pradesh is bounded by Madhya Pradesh state in the east, Nizamabad district in the West, Warangal and Medak districts in the South and Adilabad district in the North (Fig. 1). Karimnagar is famous for Silver filigree, Nakashi Paintings, Sirsilla cottons and Ramadugu Stone Craft.

It is probable that in India and various parts of central Asia filigree has been worked from the most remote period without any change in the designs. Whether the Asiatic jewellers were influenced by the Greeks settled on that continent, or merely trained under traditions held in common with them, it is certain that the Indian filigree workers retain the same patterns as those of the ancient Greeks, and work them in the same way, down to the present day.

Filigree has its origins in Mesopotamia and Egypt from where it spread into parts of Asia around 2500 B.C. From Asia, filigree was exported into Europe. Making filigree jewellery requires a great deal of skill and patience. The same craftsman carries out all the work involved in the creation of filigree jewellery. This involves the design of the object as well as the production of the silver wire from which the frame, and infill motifs, are made. The production of the silver wire for filigree involves risk, considerable strength and special equipment.

In Filigree work, twisted silver wire is the material, and the articles have the trellis-like appearance of jali, which endows them with a rare charm. The silversmith crimps thin strips of fine silver into zigzag patterns and loops using it to fill up the ground of designs formed by thicker silver strips. The strips and fine silver are then deftly soldered, carefully avoiding the trellis-like filigree pattern. Leaves, flowers, trees, animals, and birds in the area of origin seem to be predominant. However, the versatility of the art is not restricted by tradition. The art has been extended from jewellery to other household articles like tea trays, ornament containers, key chains and even cigarette boxes.

Silver filigree work is a style unique in itself. This work involves pure silver, which is put through a wiredrawing machine. In olden days, the silver was beaten on an anvil and elongated into long wire by passing it through a steel plate with apertures. Two of the thinnest wires are wound around the 'charkha'
after heating. It is then flattened again to get it as thin as the single wire originally was, and is bent to give it different shapes. A filigree article is thus a combination of different parts pieced together. The space within the frame is filled with the main ribs of the design, which are usually, stems, leaves, creepers, etc. Articles in plain silver are also made in the shape of boxes, trays, bowls, spoons, etc.

The Indian antiquity of the use of metal proved by the finds from the excavations at Harappa. The ‘Dancing Girl’ with ornaments such as bangles, etc. from the Indus Valley Civilization is a fine example of metal art of ancient India. Iron Pillar from Qutub Minar is one of the numerous examples of the durability of the old iron works in the country. Copper and bronze were probably the earliest non-ferrous metals which man shaped into tools, when copper and tin were mixed to contrive them into a new alloy, bronze. The metals used for producing metal objects are iron, copper bronze (bell-metal), brass (an alloy of copper and zinc), gold, silver, panchaloha, etc.

When the simple domestic metal objects spread into the prestigious ritualistic field, countless representations of gods and goddesses became one of its prerogatives together with a vast variety of temple accessories. The shaping of an object is done either by bearing the ingot or sheet metal to the approximate shape with a hammer while heating, or by pouring the molten metal into a mould, made of clay for ordinary ware, wax for more delicate objects. Further tempering is done by heating the article red-hot and immediately dipping it in cold water. If it turns black in the process, light hammering rectifies it. Silver is the most malleable and ductile of all metals except gold; one gram of pure metal can be drawn into a wire more than a kilometer long and it can be beaten into leaves of less than 0.00025 mm thickness. Pure silver is too soft for use as a coinage metal or in the manufacture of jewellery.

Silverware is used on special occasions. The bowl in which sandalwood paste is kept, is offered to guests, the rosewater-sprinkler, perfume-container, flower-baskets, trays in which gifts are given, are all in silver and beautifully ornamented. Silver is widely used in ritualistic objects like images of deities. Several utilitarian objects like glasses; plates; floral carvings; kalasa; and bowls have also been produced. Filigree, jewellery work of a delicate kind, is made with twisted threads usually of gold and silver. Indian filigree workers retain the same patterns as those of the ancient Greeks and work in the same way. Greek, Etruscan, Denmark, Norway silver filigree works are famous all over the world.

Silver is used in the manufacture of articles since the early times of history. Coins, ornaments, jewellery, etc. have been produced due to its brilliant white
colour, resistance to atmospheric oxidation etc. Silver filigree is a style by itself, which Cuttack (Orissa), Karimnagar (Andhra Pradesh), Srinagar (Kashmir), Tiruchirapally (Tamil Nadu), Kolkata (West Bengal), Jhansi (Uttar Pradesh), Agartala (Tripura), Kotah (Rajasthan), Trivandrum (Kerala), produce in pure metal and of a high quality objects like ear-rings, bangles, necklaces, some jewellery items, plates, photo-frames, ashtrays, attardans, spoons, lamp stands. For this, pure silver ingots are put through a wire drawing machine. Boxes, trays, bowls, spoons, etc. are produced in Karimnagar art centre.

In the pre-machine days, the ingots were beaten on an anvil and elongated into a long wire by passing it through a steel-plate-wire-gauge with apertures of different gauges. The very fine hair-like wires are still done only in the old drawing technique, then twisted and flattened. Two thinnest wires are wound together two or three times on a charkha after heating, then flattened again to get it as thin as the single wire originally was, but with granular edges on either side which is bent into the required shapes.

A filigree-object is a combination of a number of component parts pieced together. The space within the frame is filled with the main ribs of the design, which are usually the creeper, stems, leaves, flowers, etc., which sometimes themselves form into small frames shaped at heart, circle, flower petals, leaves, etc. The most important part, of course, is the filing of the inter-spaces with the delicately bent pieces which gives filigree its character, and the distinction comes from the contrast of the thick ribs as against the fine granular surfaces which brings out the exquisite artistry of the design.

Many articles, which made in plain silver, are also made in filigree. Filigree is one of the fine examples of manual dexterity and skilled craftsmanship. This art has been flourishing for over hundred and fifty years at Karimnagar. This craft is still showing the influence of the traditional designs and methods. Karimnagar has its own designs with more elaborate and complex patterns. There is a large complicated design, known as the Karimnagar design, which reflects the highly refined traceries that speak or powerful imagination. The perfume-containers of Karimnagar are complex in shape and a specialty of the place.

Silver filigree work of superior quality is turned out by the goldsmiths of Karimnagar. It is said that one Mr Kadarla Ramayya, a native of Yalagandala village of Karimnagar district, introduced the craft for the first time about 160 years back. Yalagandala was in fact the district headquarters till 1291 Fasli, during the Nizam period. Mr Ramayya, who was an expert goldsmith, was going about different places within and outside the state. He also visited some of the distant places in the South. During his visits in the South, he picked up the technique of the craft. Then he started practicing filigree work at his native place. He maintained a close secrecy of the method of working only behind the doors of his house. The grove work or gap in the design or the design itself is filled with the required thin silver wire that’s why the art is being called filigree artwork. In Telugu parlance, it is called venditeega pani. The artists, who generally attend this work, have been from the Kamsali / Viswabrahmana / Charti communities.

The filigree industry flourished very well till about the end of 1948. This industry was largely patronized and encouraged by Nawabs, Raja families and other rich people. Muslims, who, following their tradition, offered articles of rare workmanship in marriages, more immensely patronized it. There was no regular work for the workers. So sometimes they got orders that engaged them throughout the year. The strength of craftsmen gradually increased as more and more persons took to filigree work, as it was more remunerative then. Consequently, as the aristocratic and the rich classes were relegated to the background, the industry suffered a general set back from 1949 onwards. The demand for filigree articles has been dwindling from year to year. The industry languished from 1948 to 1956 when a co-operative society was revived. Then goldsmith and silver smithy were relatively offered better wages. There were two co-operative societies, namely Tarakshan and Zagaram Osmania. Later the two societies were integrated with the Tarakshan Society in 1953.

**Articles and designs**

Trays, paandaans (betal leaf holders), etc. are said to have been widely used particularly by the old Jagirdari families of Hyderabad. Other fancy items like kumkum containers, scent holders, cigarette cases and matchbox holders were also produced in different shapes such as peacocks, aeroplanes etc. by joining together the component units. The designs adopted were generally floral, creeper, leaves and flowers. The oldest designs are called Karimnagar design, which reflects most delicate and exquisite workmanship. The
tools are very simple indeed which are generally used in silver and gold works. These were introduced for adoption of a wiredrawing machine and other labour saving equipments. The tools used for in craft were Siari (large pincers for drawing wire), Pilas and Patangir (pincers), Kalam (punch), Katani (wire nippers), Salai (engravers), Meghnala (Mica plate over which the wires are arranged before soldering), Charkhi (a wooden winder on which the wire is wound), Jantri (wire draw-plate made of steel), Tara gola nail (cylinders made of wood round which the wires are wound), Balancha (brush made of hog hair), etc.

Since the filigree products were costly ones the demand for the same was not so high. Common people could not afford to buy these decorative pieces. Most of the artists produced attractive filigree articles on orders or to sell in the high-class societies or foreign markets. Rashtrapati Bhavan New Delhi, Indian Museum Kolkata and Salar Jung Museum, Hyderabad adorn and house some silver filigree works.

**Salar Jung Museum objects**

The Salar Jungs, especially the Salar Jung III, Mir Yousuf Ali Khan (AD. 1889-1949) who were said to be the patrons of art and literature, acquired numerous artifacts from the handicrafts of Andhra such as Kondapally toys, Nirmal paintings, Kalamkari from Srikalahasti and Palakollu, carpets from Warangal, lacquered furniture from Baiganpally and so on. Several filigree silver works from Cuttack in Orissa and Karimnagar in Andhra Pradesh are also preserved in the Salar Jung Museum, Hyderabad.

The Salar Jung Museum, a few years back organized a special exhibition on metal-ware where some Karimnagar filigree craftsmen participated. There are a good number of art works from Karimnagar silver filigree. These are in different shapes and size. Some works of art are meant for decoration and some are for utility purposes. Most of them were probably purchased and / or are collection from presentations given to the Salar Jung III.

There are a good number of objects representing the examples of Karimnagar filigree works in the Museum. Some of them are as follows:

**Sprinkler**

Rose Water Sprinkler (M No 445/XLIV) with a height of 40.4 cm and of aprox 618 gm was probably used in the functions and marriages by the royal / noble people or Nawabs. Made of silver during 19th century AD, has a composite design of leaf, fruit, vegetable besides an architectural piece i.e., pillar. The base (concavo-convex) as stand is designed as octagonal (eight-sided). On the body of the object, which is hollow from inside (to store rose water) a tapering leaf design and a three-rope pattern leaving some space at intervals, all over showing three leaves can be seen. In the middle, leaf design, a plant with branches, flowers and leaves are shown. On the top of the narrow end of the leaf, a four-sided pillar is shown with a pumpkin on either end with leaves as petals of a flower. Each petal is fixed with a groin. The tapering pillar has a route of small pipeline till the end of the sprinkler, while on the top; a fine apple design (spherical body) is made. Small holes on the top have been left for the rose water to sprinkle. All the corner lines are facilitated with rope design while the sides are shown with lata (creepers) design. The object is made in two parts having a screw to join the both the parts at the end of the body. The fantastic workmanship of the craftsmen in this sprinkler represents an exquisite design of Karimnagar (Fig. 2).

**Trays**

M Nos 460, 461 and 515 of XLIV are all examples of trays in betel leaf, lotus leaf (Ganga Jamni) and round with crenellated designs, respectively. The betel leaf tray has 4 rope designs within at intervals in the same leaf pattern, while there is small design in the centre, shaped as small leaf. Between the outlines, creeper pattern is seen all over. A small hook is fixed to the tray at the centre. The top of the leaf is pointed. It measures 26.1×18.7 cm and weighs 25 gm. It is ascribed to late 19th century AD (Fig. 3).

The Ganga Jamni tray has one small Ganga Jamni leaf in the centre and four large and four small petal designs with round and pointed ends. The leaf in flat has creeper designs all over. It measures 36.2×32.1 cm and weighs 920 gm. It is datable to late 19th century AD (Fig. 4).

The round and crenellated tray has two circle designs in reduced scales. In the centre, a small hole is made probably to place it on the table to facilitate for circulation with a screw rod in the centre. The tray, which is ascribed to late 19th century AD, has creeper design with 22 petal-design at the outer border. Its diameter is 16.4 cm and weighs 175 gm (Fig. 5).

**Cigar Case**

Cigar Case (M No 453/XLIV) with the hinged lid
was common in making boxes in the 19th century AD. The lid is having a creeper (*lata*) design on its surface entirely with a rectangular design. Inside the case, there is an arrangement of two holds to keep two or more cigars in it. It is measured 13.8×8.6 cm and weighs 235 gm (Fig. 6).

**Spice Box**

Spice Box (M No 456/XLIV) is another utilitarian object in oval shape. The lid with hinges has a raised panel in the centre of the convex. The outer border has a rope design. The box has creeper design all over. It weighs 185 gm and measures 3.4×10.5×5.4 cm. It is datable to early 20th century AD.

**Nagardan**

*Nagardan* (M No 459/XLIV) is shaped as half betel leaf with hinges and a small lock system. The hinges bear a small rod with handle shape at the end. It has golden band and is made in 14 parts with 13 rope designs at equal intervals. The pointed top end is fixed with metal sheet for safety. The wires form in creeper-circle design. Its length is 17.2 cm and weighs 95 gm. It is datable to 19th century AD (Fig. 7).

**Paandaan**

*Paandaan* or Betel box (M No 452/XLIV) is of rectangular shape with lid having rectangular designs in reduced lines. It has three small compartments with lids inside leaving some space in the centre. In the space, probably small calcium box was used to be kept. The compartments provided are probably to place nut-powder, spices, betel leaves, etc. The lids have the same creeper design as that of the surface of the box. The inner side of the main lid has four mango designs at the corners and a rectangular design in the centre while the inside portion has small designs of diamond. There is arrangement in the box for locking. A lock is also kept with the box. A chain is fixed to the box and lid for opening and closing. Two handles are fixed in the frontal portion, one on the either side of the hasp (Fig. 8).

**Jewellery box**

*Ganga-Jamni* filigree jewellery box (M No 513/XLIV) is another object in the Museum collection, measuring 14.3×19.2×14.3 cm weighing 2650 gm. The box has 6 drawers to keep different ornaments and jewellery. Each drawer has fixed hasp and handle-rings. One drawer is on the top, 2 drawers in lower part and 3 drawers in the centre are fixed. The surface of the box is designed with creeper pattern. It belongs to 19th century AD (Fig. 9).

**References**