



**Thai, Niello, Silver and Gilded gold. Late 19th century, altar vessel  
POA**

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Regarded as a classic form of Thai decorative arts,<sup>1</sup> niello relates primarily to black material which comprises of one or more metal sulfides inlaid into a recess in metal.<sup>2</sup> The black metal alloy is fused to the silver by heating and the artefact is subsequently smoothed and polished, the details incised. The silver contrasts with the black background, creating a shimmering effect.<sup>3</sup> With its popularity extending as far back as 1st CE in the Roman Empire, niello is still commonly produced in the Middle and Far East.<sup>4</sup> Known in Thailand as kru'ang thom, niello artefacts were typically intended for nobility and royalty, with nielloware serving as symbols of status due to the excellent artisanal techniques and skills required to produce it. It is uncertain when niello was first produced in Thailand, with sources stating that it was introduced by the Portuguese traders in the 16th century as well as being attributed to 13th century Persian merchants, the latter trading in Nakhon Si Thammarat, which is still a centre of nielloware production.<sup>5</sup> Thailand was an important trading destination for merchants and voyagers travelling from around the world for hundreds of years, with objects entering into Thailand from China, Japan, Europe and Arabia. <sup>6</sup> It is also possible that nielloware was introduced to Thailand by Muslim pilgrims who acquired the artefacts along routes from Hajj. The first documented reference to nielloware is in the Royal Laws from the reign of Borom Trailokanath (1448-1488), which states that ownership of niello objects was indicative of one's social standing.<sup>7</sup> The 18th and subsequent centuries saw an expansion of silver production in Thailand.

<sup>8</sup> This intricately inlaid vessel is an excellent example of such artisanal expertise. Produced circa 19th century, with a similar example in the British Museum,  
<sup>9</sup>10 this beautiful vessel was most

likely used for an altar in a temple and reflects Thai Buddhist architecture, the lid fashioned from three tiers and a bud finial. The water vessel (also known as altar vessel) is decorated with floral and petal motifs, the repetitive and consecutive designs imitating flowers framed by arches constructed from leaves. Floral arabesques, animals and deities were popular motifs in Thai art,

<sup>1</sup> Paul Bromberg, *Thai Silver and Nielloware*, (Bangkok, Thailand: River Books, 2019), p. 43.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid p. 44.

<sup>3</sup> Promsak Jermsawatdi, *Thai Art with Indian Influences*, (New Delhi, India: Abhinav Publications, 1979) p.

<sup>106.</sup> <sup>4</sup> Susan La Niece, "Niello: An Historical and Technical Survey", *The Antiquaries Journal*, 63.2 (1983)

279- 297, (p. 279).<sup>5</sup> "Silver on the High Seas: A Brief History of Siamese Nielloware", RCB Auctions, [accessed 2nd April 2025].

<sup>6</sup> Atthasit Sukkham, "Ceramic Decorations on Buddhist Temples in Surat Thani and Nakhon Si Thammarat, Thailand", in *Maritime Contacts of the Past, Deciphering Connections Amongst Communities*, ed. by Sila Tripathi, (New Delhi, India: Delta Book World, 2015), 275-299 (p. 275). <sup>7</sup> Bromberg, pp. 43-44.

<sup>8</sup> Jermsawatdi, p. 105.

<sup>9</sup> "Altar-vessel", British Museum, [accessed 2nd April 2025].

<sup>10</sup> Alexandra Green, *Southeast Asia: A History in Objects* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2023), p. 85. with floral designs commonly used as decorations in niello artefacts as border patterns.<sup>11</sup> The motifs on this vessel appear to correspond with lai bai phai thet (exotic cotton leaf) designs, which are frequently found around borders.<sup>12</sup>

The designs and techniques of the niello indicate that this vessel was produced in the mid-19th century. Nielloware produced prior to this typically had freestyle patterns etched with a chisel which resulted in greater space to apply niello amalgam whereas this example exhibits elaborate and minute details and patterns. Later nielloware was orderly and consistent in pattern, the silver occupying more space and leaving less space for the niello infill.<sup>13</sup> This vessel is an excellent example of its later type, a remarkable demonstration of the intricacy and skill mastered during the peak of technical perfection of nielloware production. With the comparable example housed in the British Museum, this is a rare opportunity to own a museum quality piece of great refinement and artisanal excellence.

Measurements:

Width: 20cm

Height: 33cm