



Bulletin

A QUARTERLY NEWS LETTER BY, FOR AND ABOUT THIMBLE COLLECTORS

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Madras Work: The Elegance of Decorated Ivory

By Virginia Neill, Massachusetts

Many antique sewing tools are whimsical in form or decoration, especially those of the Victorian era, many of which took the form of people, animals, or household objects. And, the mother-of-pearl items from the promenade at the Palais Royal are magnificent in their opulence, many of which are figural as well. In contrast to these, Madras Work pieces are of classic design and timeless elegance, truly understated gems. Like a gentleman dressed for a formal affair, Madras Work sewing tools are resplendent in black and white and quite handsome.

The word, *Madras*, is shortened from the name "Madraspatnam," a city on the Coromandel Coast of the Bay of Bengal in India. Although known as Madraspatnam, the official name of the city was Chennai. Originally a group of fishermen villages, the area was developed by the British in the 17th century. The British trader, Francis Day, representing the Honourable East India Company, established a British presence in 1639 and quickly began the construction of the fort and trading post (Fig. 1). Trade flourished, and the local population established villages close to the fort in order to take advantage of the employ-

ment opportunities offered by the British manufacturing operations, including more modern textile and leather production. The abundance of manufactured goods, together with the favorable location, led to prosperity and expansion of such magnitude that by the mid-1700s the area was

known as the "Gateway to Southern India" and had become the commercial capital of British India. The goods produced on the Coromandel Coast were mainly for the European market. Tortoise shell, horn, and ivory goods were very popular in Europe

at that time. The primitive tools and methods employed made thin slicing of ivory very difficult. As a result, the ivory items from this area were heavy and the decorations dark and heavily applied.

Decorated ivory items from India - boxes, game markers and spinners, vases and vessels - were greeted with delight by the English, whose interest increased the demand for such goods. The method used to decorate the ivory was hot needle carving and shellac fill. First, the design was drawn onto the ivory with a pencil. Then, a hot needle was used to



Figure 1: The original fort as shown in the mid-1700s.

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