Bidri Buttons from India

by Kay Ferguson & Joy Journeay

Bidri is a decorative metal craft which has been practiced in India for over 4000 years. In her book, Joss Howells reminds us that bidri is also spelled “biddery” and notes the buttons are heavy for their size. This metal craft process originated in Persia, Syria and Iran.

Originally, the Bidri technique as practiced in Persia involved the inlay of gold and/or silver on a steel or copper base. While the ware can be made from tin, copper, lead and zinc, today the metal base is usually an alloy of zinc and copper. The zinc gives the alloy a deep black color when it is exposed to oxidation.

As the work became known, killed craftsmen were sought by the Indian Mughal rulers, and attracted to come to India, settling in the towns of Lucknow, Murshidabad, and Bidar (from which is taken the metal craft name).

Bidri metalwork originally ornamented swords and weapons, later finding its way into the home on boxes, jewelry, containers, and ornamental dishes. Sally Luscomb states that since “1950 most of the buttons made of biddery metal have come from India.”

The alloy is cast or molded and the surface is cleaned by filing it smooth until it acquires a...
sheen. Then it is blackened temporarily in a copper sulfate solution and a design is etched into the surface with a sharp iron tool. Silver wire or sheets (or gold) is beaten into the designed grooves (inlaid).

The soil in the fort area of Bidar city (which is in South India) has special oxidizing properties which contribute to the uniqueness of this traditional craft. During the final oxidation process, the shiny surface is briefly heated and rubbed with a thick paste of ammonium chloride. This chemical is traditionally mixed with a special clay from the walls of the Bidar Fort. The final step is using groundnut or coconut oil to polish each button.

Designs are engraved into the surface of the metal with a grooving chisel. Pure silver wire is then laid into the grooves, the button is polished, and then it is dipped into a boiling solution of ammonium chloride. This turns the zinc black while the silver retains its color.

The center of some of these buttons show intricate carving work, and miniature painting. Miniature painting is a craft that flourished under the patronage of the great Moghul emperors, a dynasty who ruled most of India for more than two centuries. Despite their Muslim faith, which disapproves of graven images, the Moghuls took great interest in promoting this painting style.
Bidri buttons featuring Moghul portraits painted on ivory insets:
(1) JEHANGIR—son of Akbar who reigned from 1605-1627 with (2) NOOR JAHAN
(3) SHAH JAHAN—son of Jahangir who ruled from 1592-1666 and built the Taj Mahal with (4) MUMTAZ MAHAL
(5) JAHANGAR
(6) AKBAR—Babur’s grandson who ruled from 1542-1605 and (7) JODHABHAI (a Hindu Rajput princess)
(8) BABUR—the first Moghul who ruled from 1483-1530 and his wife (9) ZUKIYAKHATOON
( ) AURANGZEB—the son of Shah Jahan, Aurangzef died in 1707
( ) SHAH BAHADUR ZAFAR—he was imprisoned in 1857

Close up of setting the silver into the grooves.

Annodizing the button in a solution of sodium chloride. It originally was dipped in mud of the region which turned the copper/zinc black.

Final polish of the finished button.

Attaching the shank.
Bibliography
www.wikipedia.com