

Nostalgia One Man's Rubbish Is Another Man's Collectable

The British first arrived in India in 1758, as the British East India Company. In 1858, the British Raj (British India) was formed by the Government of India Act. This lasted for 89 years, during which time there were many changes made to the way of life of the local people. Nonetheless, one thing that remained steadfast was the way they carried their cooked food to work or play – a tower of separate containers clipped together with an arrangement that formed a carrying handle. They called it a ‘Dabba’.

To the British, this was a somewhat incongruous way to handle food, but as it seemed the contents would be cold and quite sparse, compared to their lunch, they named the device a Tiffin Carrier. “Tiffin” meaning a light meal served in the middle of the day. It is no surprise therefore that the Tiffin Carrier became popular in the Straits Settlements which had trod a similar path to India, the company from 1826 and British Crown Colonies in 1867. British entry to Perak in 1874 also introduced Tiffin Carriers to the Peninsula.



Initially, the Tiffin Carrier was a set of stacking metal dishes with enamel inside and out for hygiene. A locking handle completed the outfit. Some examples were of plain brass. However, it was not long before the Baba Nyonya population adopted the culture, ordering beautiful carriers heavily embossed with flowers, birds and traditional motifs. Each tray also carried an appropriate phrase on the rear to bring good luck. These examples were works of art and a delight to use, but at the other end of the

scale, simple wooden carriers also appeared for the lowly Chinese coolie. The carriers covered all levels of society, right across the nation.

One regular user of the Tiffin Carrier was Ipoh's Justice Ong Hock Thye (later Tan Sri and Chief Justice of Malaya), who often preferred to eat in his chambers. He would send a clerk to collect his 'Curry Tiffin' from the nearby Indian stall, under a tree close to the South Western corner of the

State Mosque. He was the hawker's most prestigious customer.



The Baba Nyonya

Over the 180 years or so, the Tiffin Carrier has thrived and remains in use today as containers for catered food, delivered to order, or as an 'eco' alternative to plastic and polystyrene when 'buying back'. But gone is the enamelled, beautifully decorated pieces. Today, having first been taken over by decorative aluminium they are now all plain stainless steel. It seems that we no longer value style, elegance or artistry in the production of everyday items.

Nonetheless, discarded by their original owners as outdated rubbish, many of the old artistic pieces remain – not as food carriers, but as expensive

collectables to admire while reminiscing with nostalgia about the old days. Highly prized by these collectors, they have found their way to antique shops where they command high prices.

From our food diva, SeeFoon: "These enamelled Tiffin Carriers are once again available as enterprising craftsmen in Johor are now making them. Available in the PWW Shop on Market Street, Old Town."