Set of four antique sterling silver & tortoiseshell place card or menu holders

E S Barnsley & Co

£1,150



REF: 8735

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Height: 35 mm (1.38")

Diameter: 33 mm (1.3")

Description

Set of four antique sterling silver menu or place card holders, with silver frames and bases, fitted with tortoiseshell disks inset with finely detailed, hand engraved family crests. The silver surrounds are decorated with laurel leaves.

This set are rather special as they have obviously been custom made for the family of Fowler-Butler and probably commissioned and owned by Major General Robert Henry Fowler-Butler (1838-1919) of Pendeford Hall and Barton Hall in Staffordshire. He served in the 7th Royal Fusiliers as its colonel and later commanded the 38th Regimental District. Later, he commanded British troops in Barbados and was promoted to major general in 1898.

The technique used on these place card holders is called piqué, where gold or silver is inlaid into another material, in this case silver on tortoiseshell. Despite being expensive, the use of tortoiseshell in the decorative arts was very popular in 18th and 19th century Europe. Not only did it have a beautiful mottled appearance and was durable, but it was also lightweight and could be easily fashioned into other shapes; jewellery boxes and tea caddies were prime examples.

Tortoiseshell is quite malleable when heated, so when very fine gold, or in this case silver, was fashioned into delicate designs and then pressed into the warmed tortoiseshell, the silver then cooled and the shell contracted to hold the silver in place.