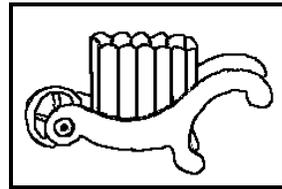


Salty Comments

Facts and Opinion about Open Salt Collecting



Number 62

May 1998

Silver Salts

We think of silver salts as a good news-bad news situation. (What? An open salt bad news?? You've got to be kidding!!!) Well, not really bad, but hard on the pocketbook. Usually we can get two or more glass or china salts for the price asked for a single silver salt. The situation dates back a number of years ago when the price of silver rose to about \$50.00 an ounce. This is about 10 times what it brought a year earlier or what it sells for today. The speculative surge caused many silver articles to be sold (or stolen) for their silver value, and many nice dishes were melted down at the time. The others were passed from one person to another for ever-increasing prices. When the price went back to normal, the dealers couldn't bear to sell the silver dishes for less than they paid, so in many cases they are still sitting in inventory, waiting for inflation to catch up with the marked price.

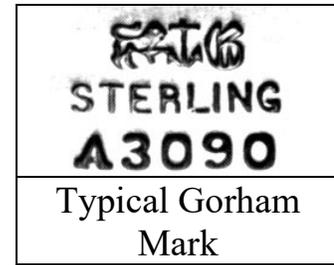
The good news about silver salts is that their origin is often easy to identify. Because silver has been such a valuable metal in the past – even more so than it is today – many governments set up a marking system so that unscrupulous persons could not pass off inferior metal as solid silver. England and Russia set up assay offices, and each piece had to be approved and marked by them before it could be offered for sale. This applied even if the silver was only a ring around the rim of a glass or china dish. Anything that claimed to be sterling must have a mark if it was to be sold.

The English system is perhaps the most helpful, because so many of the silver salts we see are of English origin. It was started in the 14th century, so salts from then on can be identified as to who made them and when (not that we have any that old to worry about). A sample of the tables of English silver marks is shown on the right. The mark includes a lion, (designating sterling silver), a town mark (like the leopard's head for London), the year mark (a letter) and the maker's mark, usually initials. For the years 1784 to 1890, a mark showing the head of the current monarch was included to show that the tax being levied then had been paid. The complete tables for 12 English cities are published in several books, but we would recommend "The Book of Old Silver", by Seymour B. Wyler. He gives 155 pages of information on silver marks including England, Ireland, France, the USA, and Germany.

MARKS ON LONDON PLATE

LEOPARD'S HEAD	DATE LETTER	LION PASSANT	QUEEN'S HEAD	LEOPARD'S HEAD	DATE LETTER	LION PASSANT	QUEEN'S HEAD
1876-7	A	1876-7	B	1916	18		
1877-8	B	1877-8	b	1917	19		
1878-9	C	1878-9	c	1918	20		
1879-80	D	1879-80	d	1919	21		
1880-1	E	1880-1	e	1920	22		
1881-2	F	1881-2	f	1921	23		
1882-3	G	1882-3	g	1922	24		
1883-4	H	1883-4	h	1923	25		
1884-5	I	1884-5	i	1924	26		
1885-6	J	1885-6	j	1925	27		
1886-7	K	1886-7	k	1926	28		
1887-8	L	1887-8	l	1927	29		
1887-8	M	1887-8	m	1928	30		
1888-9	N	1888-9	n	1929	31		
1889-90	O	1889-90	o	1930	32		
1890-1	P	1890-1	p	1931	33		
1891-2	Q	1891-2	q	1932	34		
1892-3	R	1892-3	r	1933	35		
1893-4	S	1893-4	s	1934	36		
1894-5	T	1894-5	t	1935	37		
1895-6	U	1895-6	u	1936	38		
	V		v	1937	39		

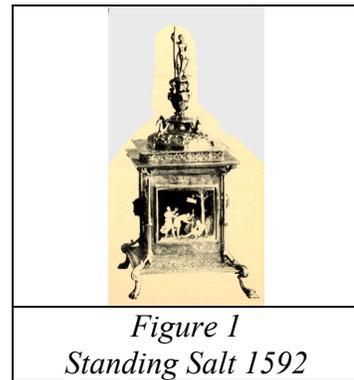
With American silver the system is not as accurate. A few companies, notably Gorham, have given each piece a date stamp as well as the maker's mark. These are detailed in the book, "Handbook of Gorham Open Salt Dishes", by George and Carolyn Tompkins. This shows over 450 of their open salts and gives details for interpreting the date marks. A typical Gorham mark has their Lion, Anchor and G beside each other, with a design number and a date mark somewhere else on the bottom.



We know of one other American maker where the manufacturing date can be determined. Tiffany marked each of their pieces with a design number, assigned sequentially. The table on the right gives a few of these numbers and the corresponding date. If you are lucky enough to have a Tiffany salt, you can determine the date they first made it from their number on the bottom.

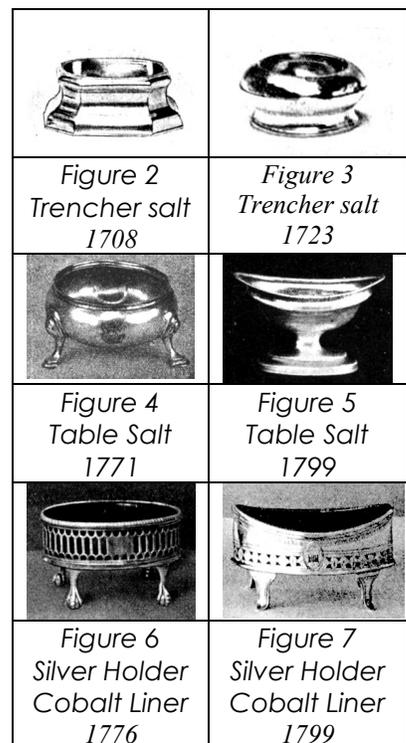
Tiffany Design Dates	
<i>Number</i>	<i>Date</i>
5910	1880
14250	1900
18683	1920
22850	1940

With the ability to determine the date of manufacture, we can develop a little history of what silver salts looked like over the years. The early information is exclusively English. The really old salts that have survived from the 16th century are the elegant ones – the standing salts that were more ceremonial than useful. Figure 1 shows one of these – a 1592 Standing Salt that was owned by the Vyvyan family of Cornwall. We don't collect this kind – they don't fit our shelves (or our pocketbook). We leave them for the Museums.



The dishes where the diners found the salt for their food were the shallow "trencher" type, shown in Figures 2 and 3, dating from the early 1700's. By 1750 the trenchers had given way to the table salts, often on legs and sometimes with a glass liner. Examples of these are shown in Figures 4 through 7. The books say that the liners in the early ones were blown into the salt itself, which made sure that it fit exactly. We're surprised that something as valuable as a silver holder would have a bubble of hot glass forced into it. We were convinced this was so, however, by a London 1794 salt which shows the outline of perforations in the silver on the sides of the glass liner. Since they were blown, all the liners had a ground rim, and some had a star cut into the bottom.

Before the American Revolution, silver was a way of storing wealth. There was no banking system like we have today, so when you found yourself with money to save, you went to the local silversmith and had him make you something. It would be useful around the dining table, and since it would be one of a kind and identifiable, it was not easy for a thief to convert it into currency. On the other hand, if you needed cash you could sell the dish for its silver value and get back most of what you had paid for it. The labor for making it was not that expensive, even if the dish had taken several days to make.



(3)

Before 1840, all silverware was hand made by master craftsmen. About this time the manufacturing process began to be mechanized, and factories were set up to make silver objects. About this same time, silver ingots became available to replace the silver coins that were previously used as raw material. In 1852, the U.S. adopted the sterling standard, which the English had been using since the year 1300. This called for any silver object, when melted down, to contain 925 parts of silver per thousand. Since coins had only 900 parts per thousand, and since the sterling was easier to work, the melting of coins for their silver content declined rapidly.

It is interesting to examine silver salts, especially the early ones, to see how they were made. Most of them start out as a flat plate of silver, with designs and perforations applied while it is in this form. In the early ones, the silver was worked by hand so you can see minute differences in the pattern from one design element to the next, just like the variations you see in the roses on hand-painted china. The plate is then bent into a circle, oval or whatever and the ends soldered together. The soldering is usually well done, so that the seam is very hard to find. A bottom ring or solid bottom is fastened on, followed by legs, handles, lion heads, or other attached decorations. The skill of the maker is evidenced by how hard it is to see the seams.

On some dishes, like the salt shown in Figure 8, you can't apply the decorations before the final shape is formed. The early ones of this type were engraved by "scratching" the metal surface, but we have a later one with raised decorations almost all the way to the rim. This was done by "pushing" the metal out from the inside, with engraving done after to add detail. We could see how the shape of the bowl was made, by spinning a silver plate on a lathe and "pushing" the metal to form it, but we couldn't figure out how the embossing was done until we read about it in the encyclopedia. The designs were raised with a snarling iron, shown in Figure 9. One end of this is held in a vise, and the other is inside the silver object. By striking the shank of the iron, a small head on the end impresses the silver on the rebound. It can raise the silver surface even when the inside of the dish is concave like our salt. Another point the picture makes is that even though the silverware processes have become mechanized, there is still a lot of hand work needed in making and decorating nice pieces.

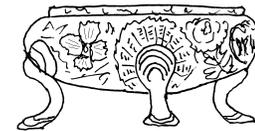


Figure 8
Embossed and Engraved Salt



Figure 9
Using a Snarling Iron

This started our hunt for the various ways of decorating silver. We had been using terms like "embossing", "repoussé" and "engraving" without really knowing what they involved. A little research has led us to the following:

Embossing – the design is formed on the metal by a die, which makes the metal flow and produces a raised surface. The back can be another die with a different design or with a "counter" design that is the inverse of the front to keep the metal thickness constant. Coins are embossed.

Repoussé – the metal is placed on a semi-rigid surface, like wood, and the design is hammered in with punches from the back side of the piece. It takes a real artist to do this effectively.

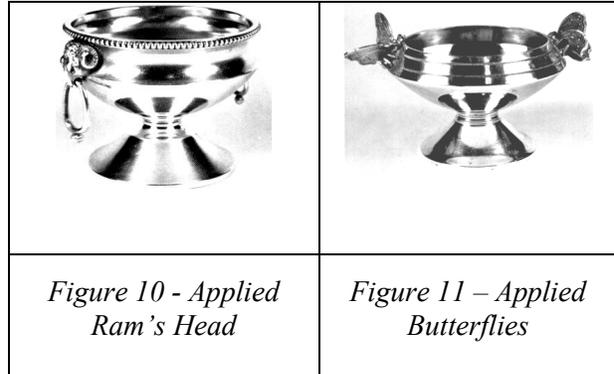
Engraving – The surface of the metal is "scratched" to produce a design, removing metal in the process.

Snarling – The metal is raised from the back, as described above. Finishing from the front is usually needed afterwards.

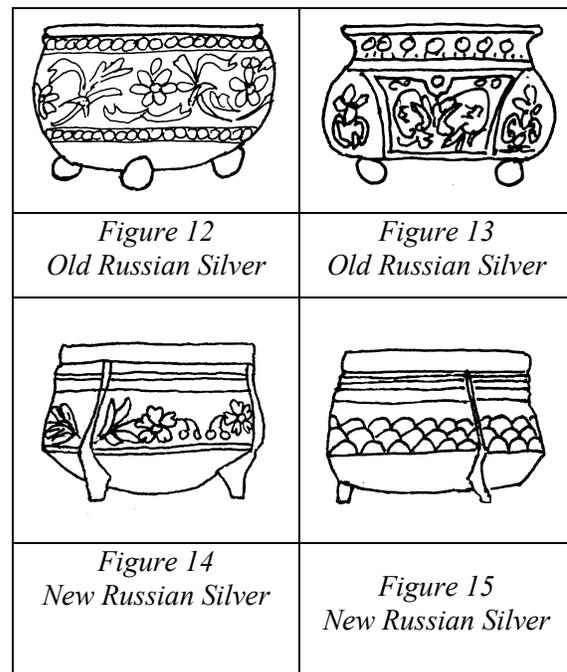
Chasing – The design is “punched” into the metal from the front, using a rigid back support or using a piece that has been filled with pitch to keep the back surface rigid.

From these definitions we have concluded that what we thought were our repoussé salts are all really embossed with an inverse design die on the back. On close examination we can see seams on them, where the design was stamped or rolled in and the ends of the piece joined afterwards.

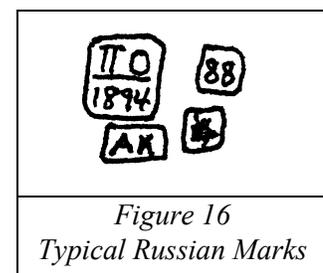
Besides the decorations on the bowl of the salt there are often decorative objects applied to it. Examples include the ram’s heads and butterflies, shown in Figures 10 and 11. These came on more expensive salts, because they were cast from silver in separate molds and soldered on to dish after it was shaped. Figural silver salts were cast in the same way. Remember, if a salt is marked “Sterling”, it must be 925 parts per thousand silver when melted down, which explains why heavier items were more expensive to make and cost more today.



There is one group of silver salts that are in a class by themselves – those made by the Russian silver smiths before the Russian revolution. They represent a lot of careful handiwork by true artists. Figures 12 and 13 show examples of these. This is recognized today, because the prices for Russian silver ones are quite high. If you examine one closely, you can see why they are valuable. The wires that form the cells are soldered on the dish by hand, and the cells are filled in with an enamel frit. When the dish is fired, the frit melts and becomes a colored glass. Some of the Russian salts have color on the color, which means they were fired at least twice. Modern Russian silver salts imitate the old, but are made in a way that requires much less skill and hand labor. The cells on the sides are formed by pressing the silver rather than by soldering individual wires. If you look at the inside of the sides, you can see the reverse impression where this was done. Examples of these salts are shown in Figures 14 and 15.



Pre-revolutionary Russian silver was controlled as strictly as English silver, so the marks can tell when the salt was made and by whom. The mark in Figure 16 is an example. The top left set is the assayer and the year (1894). Under it is the maker’s mark (Antip Kuznichev). The 88 indicates 88 zolotniks silver content (91.6%) and the squiggle at the lower right is the Moscow city mark, St. George slaying the dragon. My rendition of this latter is poor, but so is the impression on the salt. The new Russian silver has Cyrillic characters that look like OHMMET, and none of the other marks.



Another type of work by the Russian silversmiths is niello, shown on the salt in Figure 17. This is an old and very delicate process where the desired design is scratched into the silver. The scratches are then filled with a mixture of finely ground silver, copper, lead and sulfur. The dish is fired and the filler turns into a black glass, creating the picture. The work on this salt must have been done under a magnifying lens because there is so much fine detail in the pictures of buildings on the medallions. The remainder of the sides is chased – the design is formed by very fine punch marks in the silver. The marks identify the maker as I. Khlebnikov, Moscow, 1873.



Figure 17
Niello Salt

The English silver marking and identification system extends to all silver, even the metal rim of glass or ceramic salts. It is not unusual to find rim marks like this that will date the salt quite nicely, even though the primary material is not metal. If the rim is unmarked, or if it is marked EPNS or something similar, it is probably silver plate. Makers are usually very anxious to indicate when an item is sterling, because that increases its value, so they are careful to mark it as such.

Because silver has been popular for so many years, many different salts have been made. Since they are small and silver is valuable, they tend to survive over the years. We saw lots of silver salts at the Florida antique shows when we were there. This surprised us until we considered that people would generally take small, valuable things with them when they retired – like silver salts. The quantity didn't do anything to reduce the prices, though.

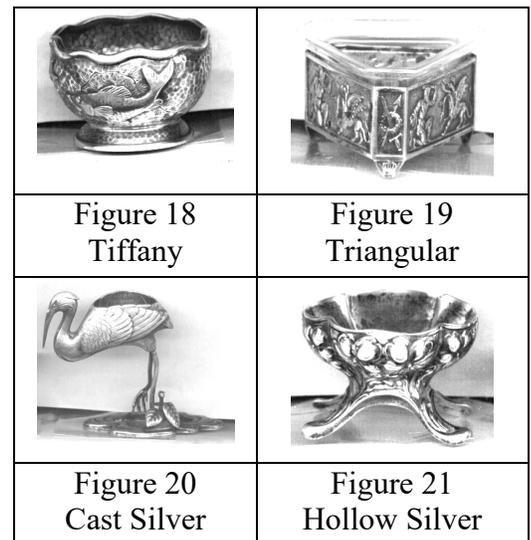
So what silver salts do we collect? As with any category, the first consideration is whether we like how it looks. If it's cute or different, we're interested. A high price can diminish its cuteness considerably. The quality of the workmanship is important to us, as are the marks that identify its maker and the year it was made. We haven't focused on any one area as yet, but rather have a variety that shows the range of what can be done with silver. We will show a few of them on the remainder of this page.

Figure 18 is by Tiffany, with a mark dating in the 1870's. The sides are hammered by hand, and the fish are applied afterwards. A matching spoon came with it.

Figure 19 is Continental silver, judging from the 800 mark on it. It is triangular and embossed, with gold wash and clear insert and no mark to show its maker or country.

Figure 20 is a cast silver wading bird with a bowl in his/her back. It is marked sterling but has no maker or country mark.

Figure 21 is fabricated from 4 pieces of stamped sheet silver fastened together – the 2 embossed sides which include 2 legs each, the 4-lobed bowl and a smooth curved plate that fits underneath. All are soldered so that no joints are evident. It looks solid, but really is hollow. Its only mark is "sterling" on the bottom.



We hope this abbreviated review of silver salts will help you appreciate them more and perhaps help you identify some you already have. They are relatively expensive, but if they show true artistry on the part of the silversmith, they are worth it.

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<u>Figure No.</u>	<u>Description</u>	<u>H&J No.</u>	<u>Smith No.</u>	<u>Others</u>
1	Standing Salt – 1592			
2	Trencher Salt – 1706			
3	Trencher Salt – 1723			
4	Table Salt 1771			
5	Table Salt – 1799	3857		
6	Perforated Holder, Cobalt Liner - 1776			
7	Silver Holder, Cobalt Liner - 1794			
8	Embossed and Engraved, 3 legs, Marked Coin, Fessenden, Boston			
10	Pedestal, Ram’s Heads on Sides, Gorham 1871			Tompkins Plate 144
11	Pedestal, Butterflies on Rim, Gorham 1868			Tompkins Plate 93
12	Old Russian Silver – Sasikov, Moscow, 1891		137-5-1	
13	Old Russian Silver – Kuznichev, Moscow, 1894			
14	New Russian Silver, Museum Gift Shop, Charlotte, NC, 1991			
15	New Russian Silver	2009	160-1-1	
17	Niello Silver, Khelebnikov, Moscow, 1873		229-1-3	
18	Applied Fish Salt, Tiffany Sterling, 1870’s			
19	Triangular Salt, Clear Liner, 800 Silver			
20	Cast Silver Wading Bird, Marked Sterling		103-3-2	
21	Hollow Silver, 4 Legs, Marked Sterling	4343	112-2-2	

- References: “Handbook of Gorham Open Salt Dishes”, by George & Carolyn Tompkins, \$26.95 with Price Guide from Carolyn Tompkins, 2578 Cranberry Heights Wareham, MA 02571
- “Guide to Russian Silver Hallmarks”, by Paul L. Paulson
- “Russian Gold and Silver Work”, by Rizzoli International Publications
- “The Book of Old Silver”, by Seymour B. Wyler
- “Encyclopedia of American Silver Manufacturers”, by Dorothy T. Rainwater
Encyclopedia Britannica
- “5000 Open Salts”, by William Heacock & Patricia Johnson
- “Open Salts Illustrated”, a series of 10 books by Alan B. & Helen B. Smith