

Early American Silverplate, It's Not What You Think!

By: Judy Redfield

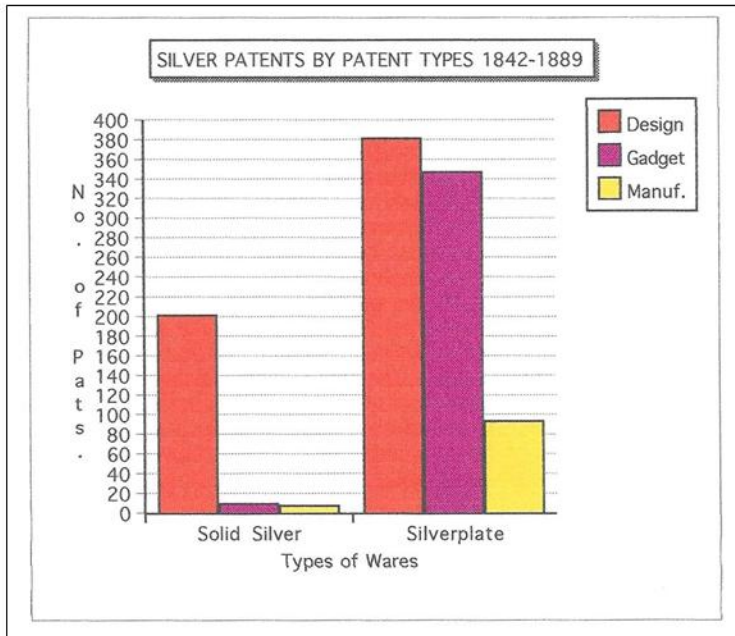


Figure 1. Chart of Silver Patents by patent types for both solid silver and silverplate 1842-1889

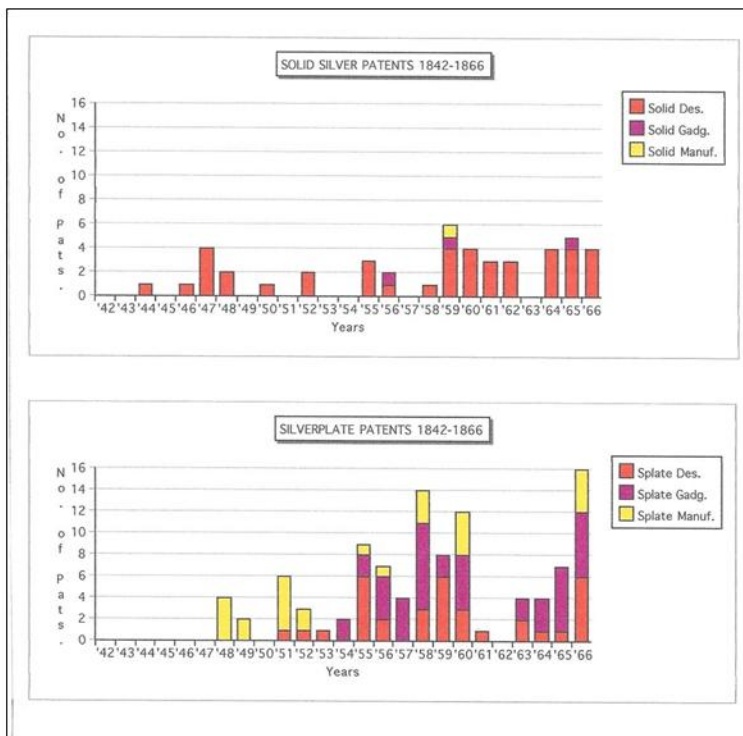


Figure 2. Comparison of solid silver and silverplate patents by year and type 1842-1866

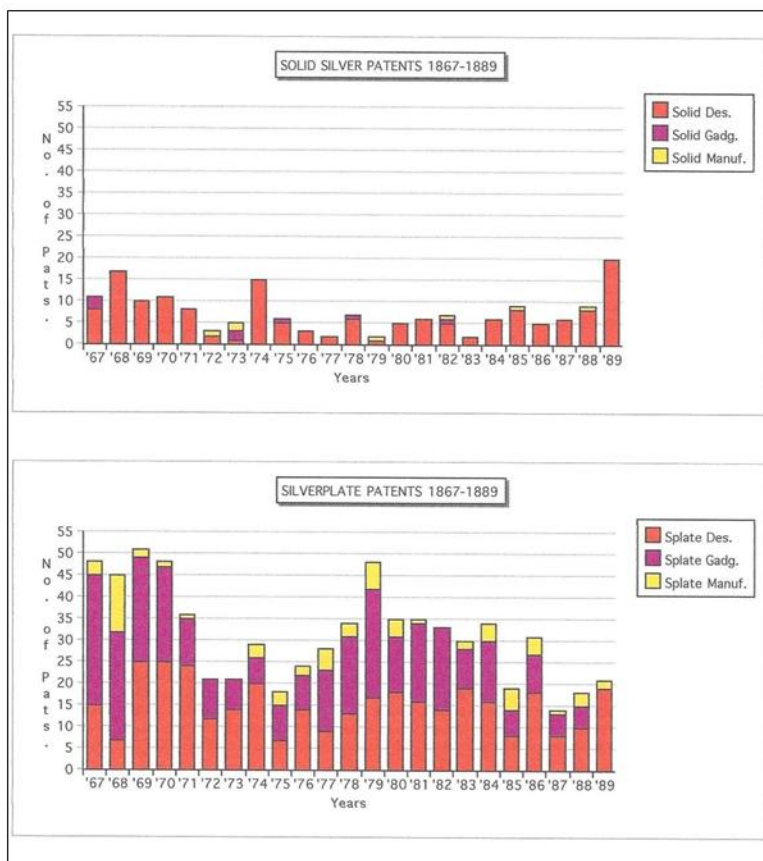
Early

American Silverplate has been largely ignored by both collectors and historians alike. Collectors have tended to focus their attention on related fields without recognizing the key role played by the silverplating industry in America. Pewter collectors study silverplate's antecedents, the everyday utility wares from which silverplate evolved. Solid silver collectors tend to focus on the prestige of individual craftsmanship and the elite market their industry served. Glass collectors see silverplate primarily as a source of convenient display stands for their focus of interest. Historians, following these leads, have traditionally tended to look on silverplate as a mere second rate reflection of what was going on in these other industries. The truth could not be more different.

One of the more prevalent myths is that solid silver


Figure 3. Comparison of solid silver and silverplate patents by year and type 1867-1889

manufacturers “wouldn’t be caught dead” having anything to do with silverplate. Actually, a variety of prominent solid silver manufacturers, like William Gale & Son and the Whiting Manufacturing Co. produced some of their own solid silver flatware patterns in



silverplate. Gorham initiated its own separate line of silverplate ware in 1865. In addition, some important solid silver manufacturers and designers developed and patented designs specifically for silverplate manufacturers. Joseph Fradley patented flatware designs for the Redfield & Rice Manufacturing Co. and the Derby Silver Co. Gorham’s noted designer, George Wilkinson, created an ice pitcher design for Adams, Hallock & Co. and later a souvenir spoon for Rogers and Hamilton. Augustus Conradt, who initially worked for solid silver manufacturer George Sharp of Philadelphia, later went on to become a major designer for the Middletown Plate Co. Another common myth is that the items produced by the silverplaters were

simply an imitation of the art of the solid silver industry. A study of the patent records comparing the numbers and types of patents obtained for the two industries between 1842 and 1889 easily refutes this claim. Even when the tally is restricted to a comparison of patents granted for similar types of wares, which reduces the score for silverplate significantly, silverplaters still received four times as many patents as solid silver manufacturers during that time period. The patents granted to solid silver manufacturers were almost exclusively limited to design patents for flatware. Silverplaters, on the other hand, were busy obtaining not only design patents for both flatware and hollowware, but also a large number of invention patents for a

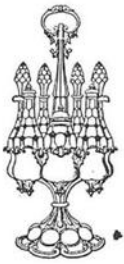



THE ROGERS BROTHERS MANUFACTURING COMPANY
 ESTABLISHED 1847. HARTFORD, CONNECTICUT.

MANUFACTURERS OF
SILVER AND GOLD PLATED WARES,
 IN GREAT VARIETY OF DESIGNS AND PATTERNS.
 WEIGHT OF PLATE, FINISH, AND QUALITY GUARANTEED.

LIST.


Wares of Italian and German Silver.		Wares of English Metal.	
Spoons,	Tee Sets,	Egg Cups and Stands,	Tee Sets,
Forks,	Urns,	Toast Racks,	Urns and Kettles,
Dessert and Dining Knives,	Kettles,	Salt Stands,	Casters,
Butter Knives,	Casters,	Mustard Cups,	Baskets,
Crush "	Cake, Card, and Sugar	Knife Sets,	Fishers,
Tea "	Trays,	Wine and Cordial Stands,	Cups and Goblets,
Cups "	Walters and Salvers,	Wine Coolers,	Syrup Pitchers,
Ice Cream "	Fishers,	Liquor Mixers,	Salt and Mustard Cups,
Fish "	Tureens,	Cups and Mugs,	Spoon Holders,
Fish Covers and Forks,	Vegetable Dishes,	Goblets,	Dish Covers,
Ladies,	Meat "	Tumblers,	Vegetable Dishes,
Sugar Scoops and Seals,	Entree "	Boquet Holders,	Entree "
Sugar Tongs and Silvers,	Dish Covers,	" Stands,	Tureens,
Ice and Asparagus Tongs,	Butter Coolers,	Flower Vases,	Wine Stands,
Napkin Rings,	Syrup Pitchers,	Speaking Trumpets,	Butter Coolers,
Spiceries,	Spoon Stands and Holders,	Communion Service.	Communion Service.

TRADE MARKS.—*ROGERS BRO'S A. I. AND ROGERS BRO'S MFG. CO.
 *GERMAN SILVER.

Descriptive Books of Plates, price \$5 00.

PRICE LISTS FORWARDED BY MAIL,
 UPON APPLICATION EITHER AT
THE FACTORY,
 OR THE
OFFICE AND SHOW ROOMS,



No. 17 MAIDEN LANE,
 NEW YORK,
 WHERE A
 Full assortment of Samples
 CAN BE SEEN.

Be particular in addressing all communications to "ROGERS BRO'S MFG. CO."

Figure 4.
 Rogers Brothers
 ad from
 Coulton's Adver-
 tising Atlas 1856

variety of interesting gadgets and im-
 portant manufacturing processes as
 well throughout the entire period. It
 was a silverplating firm, the Lippiatt
 Silverplating and Engraving Co., that
 first developed the "Satin Finish"
 process, for example. While there are
 a number of design similarities be-
 tween the solid silver and silverplate
 products of the period, "imitating
 solid silver" was clearly not the
 silverplate industry's top priority.

Almost from its inception around 1847,
 the silverplate industry showed itself
 much more alive to the possibilities of

advertising and promotion than the
 solid silver industry. The earliest
 known silverplate trade catalog was
 issued by the Meriden Britannia Co. in
 1855. The earliest known solid silver
 catalogs, one for Gorham and one for
 Towle, do not appear until 1888.
 Silverplaters also employed illustrated
 print advertising early, as shown by a
 Rogers Brothers Manufacturing Co.
 full page ad in Coulton's advertising
 atlas in 1856. An 1858 ad for E. P.
 Bray and Dauchy in Harper's Weekly
 provides an early example of an illus-
 trated silverplate company ad in more
 ephemeral media. Solid silver manu-

facturers, as far as I am aware, did not attempt this type of advertising until about 10 to 15 years later.

Another promotional strategy used by silverplaters was to have their goods given as premiums for the sale of other products. The G. G. Evans Co. of Philadelphia sold books through its mail order catalogs, and offered watches, jewelry, and silverplate items as premiums for purchases. An audited report prepared by that company indicates that it gave away more than \$12,600 worth of silverplate premiums supplied by prominent Philadelphia, New York, and Baltimore firms during 1859 and 1860 alone, at a time when the silverplate industry was still in its infancy.

All these efforts at promotion paid off. The 1865 census of the State of New York provides the figures for manufactured goods from the Federal Census of 1860. Even at this early date, the "annual value of products" produced by manufacturers of "Silverplated and Britannia Ware" exceeded that of "Silversmiths, jewelers, and watchmakers": \$3,676,460 to \$3,571,654. When you consider the fact that the actual cost of a silverplate item was about 1/3 to 1/6 of the cost of a similar solid silver item at the time, the disparity in the actual production figures between the two industries was already dramatic.

Why all the silverplate gadgetry? Another clever way of promoting the product! Producing "handy" items designed with an eye to solving a variety of simple but irksome day to day household problems had a double duty appeal. Men, who did the bulk of the purchasing, found the gadgetry aspect appealing. At the same time, by bringing home such items, they could demonstrate their interest in helping their wives with their daily routine chores.

What sort of problems did the gadgeteers tackle? Keeping tea leaves and coffee grounds in the pot and out of the user's cup was one. For this purpose, everything from spout screens, either attached or removable, through inserts to hold the tea or coffee for brewing, and partitioned pots were tried. Some inventions were even designed to attempt to preserve the aroma of the brew as well.

Making ice pitchers more dependable and easier to use was another major effort. Various insulating techniques and spout valves were developed, beginning as early as the 1850s to help the pitchers keep their contents cooler longer. Because people tended to try to chop up ice inside the pitchers, interior liners had to be strengthened and improved to withstand the onslaught. Solutions for this problem varied, including reinforced seamless metal liners, porcelain coated cast iron liners, or alternatively, easily removable and replaceable glass or ironstone

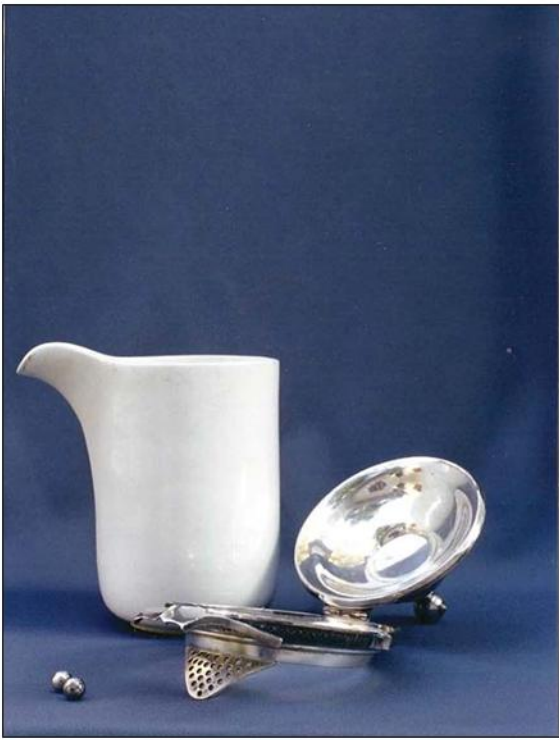


Figure 5:
Ice pitcher with
removable por-
celain liner,
Reed & Barton
ca. 1880.



Figure 6: A rotator butter dish from the late 1860 's. J. F. Curran & Co.

liners. Because ice pitchers were heavy to lift by hand, various forms of stands were developed. Because they tended to sweat and mar the table surface, drip pans were added, and so on.

Adding a call bell to a serving piece was another early invention, introduced by Roswell Gleason Jr. in 1859

on a table caster. Later innovators went on to both improve on the original idea and to apply it to other types of serving pieces, including waste bowls, spooners, and even the lids of sugar bowls.

Preventing sticky or greasy rings from occurring when lids were set down on a tablecloth was another task tackled by the gadgeteers. Early efforts applied to butter dishes in the late 1860s arranged for their lids to rotate down and be concealed in their bases instead of being set aside. During the late 1870s, various techniques for raising the lids vertically and holding them in position above the dish were developed. Similar concepts were applied to the lids of pickle casters and other serving pieces.

Playing around with lid lifting also led to gadgets that might best be described

Figure 7:
Jewel box with roll-out drawer, Middletown
Plate Co., patented September 24, 1878 by
Augustus Conrad.

as “just for fun,” or “novelties.” Jewel boxes in particular benefited from this type of treatment. “Press the lever to raise the lid” or “lift the handle to open the drawer” were just two of the many variations that appeared circa 1880.

Other major silverplate innovations developed without a lot of patents being involved. In an effort to keep napkin rings from rolling off the table, their shape was changed from round to oval or triangular, or bases were placed under the rings. Then in the late 1860s, someone came up with the idea of using four little ball feet. By 1870, some manufacturers had switched to tiny figures for feet. They soon decided that big figures looked better. Before long, by borrowing finial and other decorative figures and placing them on a base beside the ring, manufacturers had come up with another popular novelty, the figural napkin ring. Other small figural forms such as paperweights, knife rests and toothpick and match holders had been introduced somewhat earlier.

Soon a wide variety of figures were being created for use on all sorts of small novelties, and some larger pieces as well. Figures large and small repre-



senting almost any imaginable subject, human, plant, animal or object were produced for use both singly and in groups, and in styles from classical to contemporary. Even popular artists of the day, like Kate Greenaway or Palmer Cox found their works replicated in silverplate.

Kate Greenaway figures in silverplate are so popular even today among collectors that they have given rise to yet another myth, namely that any silverplate child figure shown in 1800s contemporary dress must be a “Greenaway” figure. In point of fact, a variety of child figures were depicted on silverplate even before Kate Greenaway’s books were published. The young girl shown on the rose trellis fruit stand in Figure 13 later in this article is a good example. The manufacturer’s mark on the base of the piece dates it as being produced no later than 1877. Kate Greenaway’s



Figure 8: Classical boy gardener vase, with gold accent plating on bell, Meriden Britannia Co. circa 1870-1873.

first book, *Under the Window*, was not published until 1878 and it was a year or two after that before her designs began appearing in silverplate.

Various innovative decorating techniques were developed and applied to silverplate, of which satin finish, mentioned earlier, was one. Glass eyes were added to some silverplate figures beginning about 1871, and remained in use in various forms until the 1890s.

But perhaps the most important of these decorative elements was the use of accent plating with other metals to give silverplate items a multi-colored look. Some silverplaters were offering gold plating as an option as early as the 1850s, as shown in the Rogers Brothers 1856 ad. A variety of gold plated items, including salts, a mustard cup, and a figural toothpick holder and paperweight were offered in the 1867 Meriden Britannia catalog. The 1871 Rogers Smith & Co. catalog offered a selection of larger gilt pieces as well, including ice pitchers, cake baskets, fruit stands and vases. Obviously by the beginning of the early 1870s gilding was becoming an increasingly popular treatment.

From gilding it would have been a relatively simple step to move to accent plating. By coating a silverplate object with a resist while leaving some areas uncovered, highlights of gold, copper or other metal coloring could easily be added in a subsequent trip to the plating bath. Exactly when this technique was introduced is unclear, but it appears to have been established by the early 1870s. A vase bearing a “classical boy gardener” figure shows this treatment, in the form of bunches of gold grapes, on a silver, satin finished bell. According to the late E. P. Hogan, historian of the International Silver Company, the boy gardener, which appears on a variety of different silverplate items, was in production between 1868 and 1873.

Since the first patent for satin finish was granted in 1870, the dating of this piece can be further narrowed to between 1870 and 1873. The earliest firmly datable example of gold accent work documented thus far dates to the beginning of 1874. Horace C. Wilcox's Design patent No. 7,111 granted on January 13 of that year shows a high legged cake basket with a gilt cherub seated below the bowl.

Were the silverplaters the first to introduce the concept of mixed metal effects, or were they copying the ideas of the solid silver manufacturers who were working on similar ideas at about the same time? Further research is needed to clarify this point. However, it is safe to say that mixed metal effects figured prominently in American silverplate production by the late 1870s and continued well into the 1880s. An article in the November 8, 1879 issue of *Scientific American* provides details of how accent plating was done at the Reed & Barton factory. Supplemental as well as main catalogs of major silverplate manufacturers in the early 1880s included color plates illustrating examples of these accent plated wares. The Meriden Britannia Co.'s supplement to its 1882 catalog contains six such plates. Reed & Barton's 1885 full catalog contains four.

Clearly silverplate manufacturers saw their products as being more than merely white and shiny. In addition to

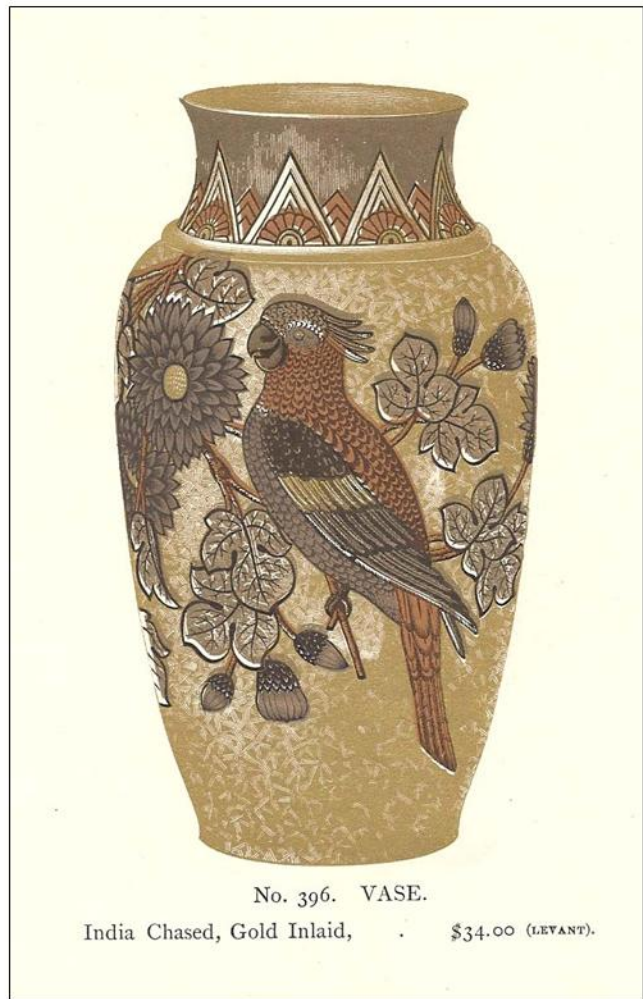


Figure 9: Accent plated mixed metal vase from plate V of the Meriden Britannia Co. Supplement to their 1882 catalog.

accent plating, numerous articles were produced with an oxidized finish. Precisely when oxidized finishes first appear is unclear. However, oxidized accents are frequent on the more elaborate pieces shown in the 1885 Reed & Barton catalog. Oxidized finish went on to become a standard option on virtually all types of hollowware items by the 1890s. Typical later oxidized pieces show a bright chased design on an overall dark background.

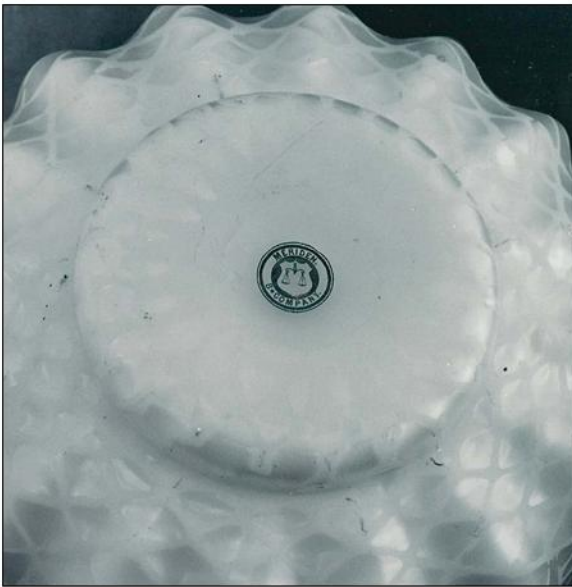


Figure 10: Meriden Britannia Co. mark on the bottom of a satin glass fruit bowl.

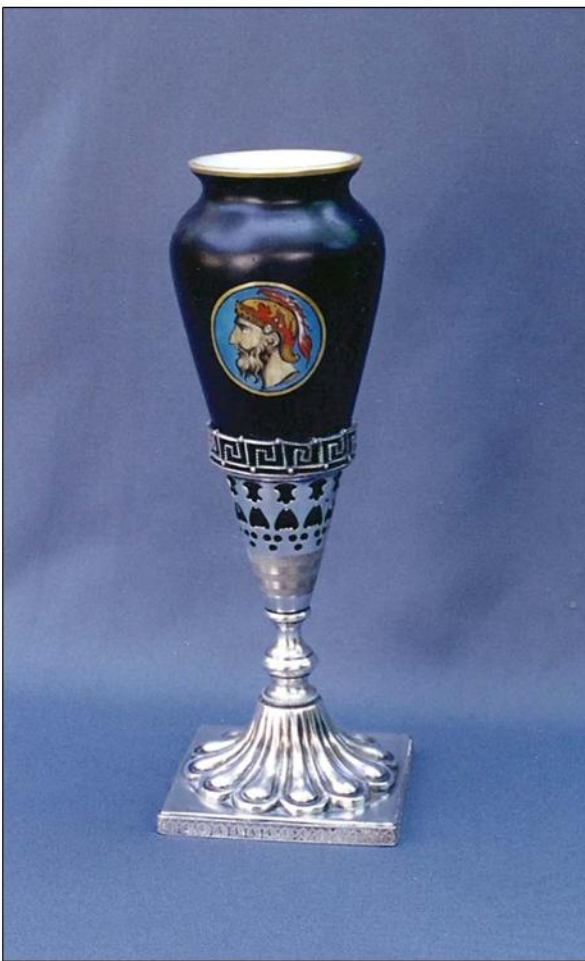


Figure 11: Reed & Barton polychrome vase showing Mars portrait dated ca. 1863

One of the most persistent myths about silverplate is that glass manufacturers employed silverplaters to make stands to set off their wares. In fact, there is ample evidence to show that the reverse is true. Glass items have been found bearing the marks of silverplate manufacturers such as Reed & Barton and the Meriden Britannia Co. No silverplate items bear glassmakers' marks. Patents for a variety of glassware items were granted to silverplate manufacturers. No patents for silverplate items were granted to glass manufacturers. Some silverplating firms, like the Wilcox Silver Plate Company, operated their own glass-cutting houses. The Meriden Britannia Co. even owned its own glassmaking firm from 1876 to 1883, as reported by Edmund P. Hogan in his book *An American Heritage*.

Another myth is that early glass in silverplate is clear in color and boring. Ironically, the earliest datable piece of original glass in silverplate that I have come across is a skillfully enameled polychrome vase produced about 1863 and decorated with medallion portraits of Mars and Mercury. While there is indeed quite a bit of early clear, frosted and cut glass found original to the 1860s, ruby flashed glass, blue opaline glass and milk glass were also employed during that time period. Catalogs list green glass as well, although I have not yet come across an actual example.

One of the more unusual glass treatments developed about 1870 was the application of a cranberry glass rim band to a clear glass insert. Many different people have reported to me that this glassware, sometimes referred to as “ribbon glass”, was made by the Mt. Washington Glass Co., but so far none of them have been able to provide any concrete evidence to support this opinion. Based on the “glass controls silverplate” theory, I have even had some tell me that the silverplate holders for the pieces must have been made by the Pairpoint Manufacturing Co. which was later associated with Mount Washington. They appear to conveniently ignore the fact that the Pairpoint Manufacturing Co. was not even founded until 1880! Whoever was making the glass, possibly the Boston & Sandwich Glass Co., was actually supplying it to a variety of different silverplate manufacturers: The Meriden Britannia Co.; The Wilcox Silver Plate Co.; Rogers Smith & Co.; Roswell Gleason & Sons; the Redfield & Rice Manufacturing Co.; and Manning, Robinson & Co. of Cincinnati are users that I have documented so far.

But glass was not the only material used to line silverplate holders. Quite a variety of pottery and porcelain liners were used from the 1870s into the 1880s. Catalogs for Rogers, Smith & Co. for 1871 and the Meriden Britannia Co. for 1873 also indicate that even silverplate liners were used in a few instances. Unfortunately such items, when



Figure 12: Examples of cranberry rimmed glass: a sugar bowl by the Wilcox Silver Plate Co., and a celery stand by the Meriden Britannia Co.

Figure 13: “Captive” ceramic rose trellis fruit stand, Rogers, Smith & Co., New Haven, ca. mid 1870s.

found, are usually presumed to be “put together mistakes” by most collectors and dealers. If the “inappropriate” liners are easily removable, they tend to be promptly replaced by a piece of glass to make them appear more “authentic.” The few pottery and porcelain pieces that do survive are usually items where the china portion is held “captive,” as in items such as tea tiles. The one example of silverplate liners that I have seen I passed over at the time, not then aware of its true significance.

By the 1880s all sorts of brightly colored and exotic art glass, both domestic and foreign, was being used by the silverplate manufacturers, and being given fancy names to match. Included in the mix were pressed, etched, engraved and cut glass, satin, amberina, Bohemian, Baccarat, craquelle and mosaic glass, opalescent glass and “plated” or cased glass. Enameled decoration was applied to many pieces as well. Truly a glass collector’s dream! It is easy to understand how such individuals could lose sight of the significance of the whole piece in their eagerness to embrace the glass itself.

Despite the rich variety and high degree of inventiveness present in the silverplating industry, by the late 1880s significant economic problems were beginning to loom. Laborers in both the solid silver and silverplate industries were organizing in an effort to obtain better wages and working conditions.

The price of silver had fallen to the point where silverplate was no longer necessarily a less expensive alternative to solid silver.

In addition, solid silver manufacturers were finally waking up to the fact that they could compete directly and successfully with silverplaters. The issuance of the Gorham and Towle catalogs in 1888 suggests a beginning awareness of this potential. By 1890 the patent record shows the process was in full swing. Instead of lagging behind the silverplaters in patents as they had previously done, suddenly the solid silver manufacturers were far outstripping them. By focusing on smaller items with low material costs, such as dresser wares, cane heads, and souvenir spoons, they were working to forge a new place for themselves in the market.

One can only speculate as to where this head to head competition might have lead if the severe depression of 1893 had not intervened. Financial conditions dictated significant cutbacks in both the solid silver and silverplate industries. Both groups economized by reducing, or in some cases eliminating hand decoration techniques like embossing or chasing. They both also came to embrace the “colonial revival” and “arts and crafts” styles which, due to their plainness, significantly lowered manufacturing costs. Although both industries also became involved in the Art Nouveau

movement, their participation was late and somewhat limited. By the early decades of the 1900s the age of innovation had become largely a memory.

Judy Redfield holds a Masters Degree in Physical Anthropology from Harvard, and completed all but her thesis for a Ph. D from that institution before deciding that raising a family was more important to her than an academic career. She first became interested in Victorian Silver Plate Hollowware while still a child. Attending country auctions whetted her interest, and led her to discover so many other intriguing bargains as well that she opened an antique shop. When she came across a silver plate company with Redfield in the name, she resolved to begin researching silver plate in earnest to learn more about both that firm and the silver plating industry as a whole. Now, more than thirty years later, she has published over two dozen articles on silver plate related topics in Silver Magazine for which she has also served as a Contributing Editor. In 1998, in collaboration with her longtime mentor and friend Dorothy Rainwater, she produced the forth edition of the Encyclopedia of American Silver Manufacturers.

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