

The elusive S.M. sponsor mark on Japanese silver now identified and a review of their spoons produced for Liberty's store.

By Simon Moore

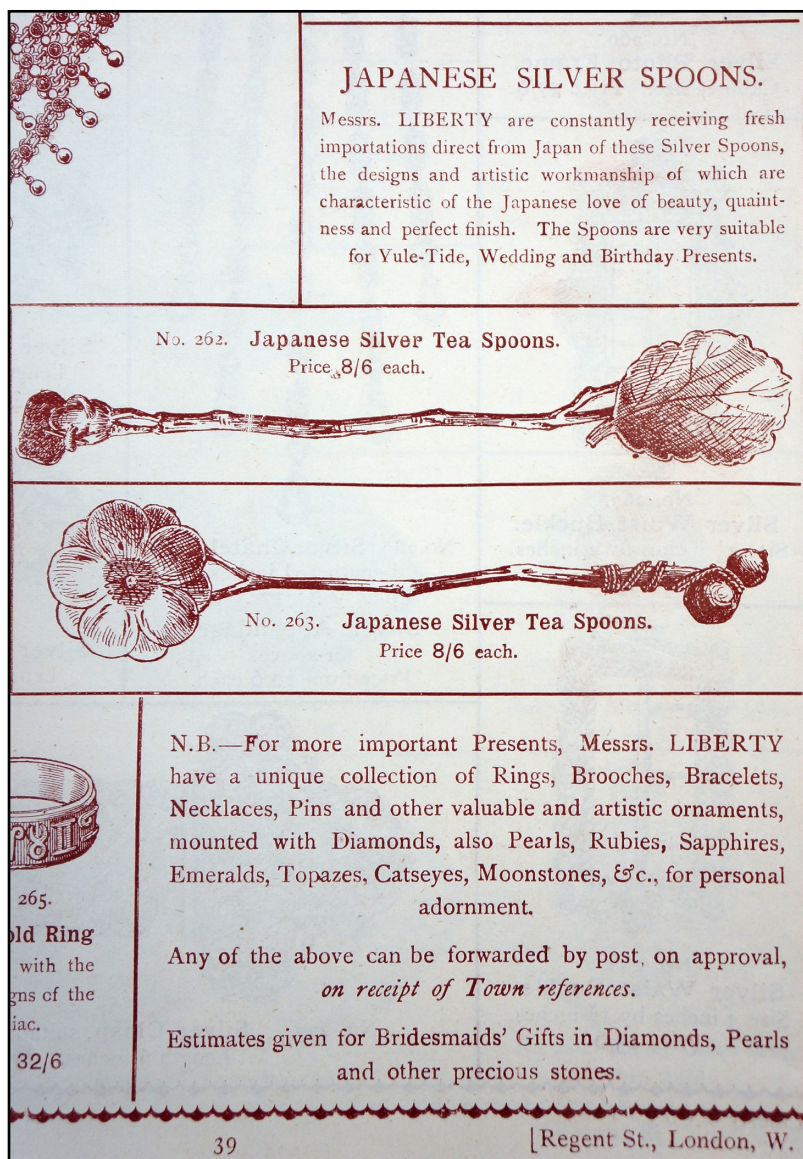


Adrien von Ferscht (an academic researcher into Chinese Qing Dynasty silver at Beijing Normal University and at Tsinghua University, Beijing) recently completed an in-depth research project into the S.M. sponsor mark, stamped on Japanese Meiji silver, some for the export market. Adrien's thought was that this work could be from a Chinese silversmith working in Yokohama from the 1890s, when most of the population was Chinese. This was partly based on some hallmarks that I had shown him (via photo) sometime before but the enquiry coincided with his carrying out further research to write a definitive paper to identify this elusive maker (von Ferscht, 2018).

Before this, my routes of enquiry had led up many blind alleys and concluding that the records might have been destroyed in 1945 since the main archive was based at Hiroshima. Von Ferscht's article outlines the history of Japan during the Meiji period that led to Yokohama becoming a 'treaty' port in 1859 and home to an ongoing centre for fine and export silversmithing among many other traditional Japanese crafts. One of the main traders and manufacturers in Japanese export silver was founded c. 1860 by Ozeki Yahei who was keen to feed the desire for *Japonisme* in Europe and especially Great Britain. Yahei's son, Ozeki Sadajiro managed the Yokohama business and opened a store naming it Musashiya at 66 Honcho-dori (Main Street). He was fired with much enthusiasm and commissioned the finest artisans in silversmithing that he could find to work for Musashiya, resulting in some of the most exquisite items. By the 1880s, Yokohama's permanent population was overwhelmingly Chinese, some of who were artisan silversmiths.

Many of Musashiya's spoons are generally unknown in European collector circles, except for a range that was commissioned by

Liberty's following the visit to Japan by Arthur Liberty in 1889. The success of his store's business in retailing, largely, textiles to a clientele that enjoyed the tastes of period aestheticism and naturalism, Liberty commissioned the store's first line of silverwares – some from India, later Norway but mainly from Japan. Most of the Japanese wares were imported in 1892 to 1893: to conform to British hallmarking, these had to be submitted for assay at the London Office before they could be retailed by Liberty's store. Arthur Liberty only just managed to get his store's sponsor mark registered at Goldsmiths' Hall before the store exhibited (and started to sell) these Japanese spoons and silverware, dating mainly from 1893 to 1894 (Moore, 2017).



Above: From the Liberty catalogue of 1892 and most likely the first mention of silver. It shows two of the S.M. spoons priced at 8 shillings and 6 pence (a modest 42.5 pence by direct conversion but about £45 in today's money). The catalogue also demonstrates Liberty's caution in only showing two spoons, to see whether this venture was going to work.

Right: A pair of spoons with wirework and berry finials as per the catalogue illustration, the bowls are more simplistic and standardised.

As always, the spoons from Musashiya were exquisitely and cunningly made with full attention to biological accuracy. Looking through Liberty catalogues from this time reveals a range of small silver items, including spoons, that must have greatly appealed to Liberty's clientele. These were marked with London hallmarks, the F for foreign-import mark, slightly confusing with the S or T date letters and the L^Y & C^O sponsor mark for

Liberty's. Separate from these was the S.M. mark in a square cartouche and which von Ferscht (2018) has identified as standing for Sadajiro Musashiya.

The Japanese spoon bowls are largely modelled from flower inflorescences, shaped and engraved like those of many other Japanese manufacturers at this time, notably the Sakai silversmiths. Musashiya produced a range of more commercial sets for Liberty's to be sold for one guinea per set. What sets the Musashiya spoons apart is the making of the stems and this is immediately apparent in the more organic / textured stems of the spoons of superior quality to say nothing of the price in the Liberty's catalogue. The straight stems with traditional Japanese motifs for the figural finials typify the more commercial grade of spoons.

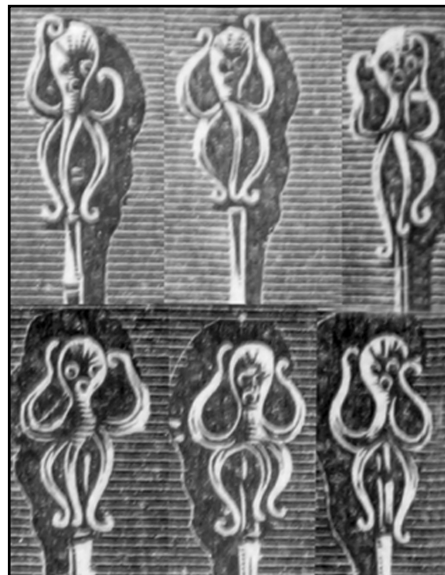


Above: From a Liberty catalogue in 1892. The individual spoons could also be purchased for 3/6d and 6/6d each respectively. There were eight mixed Japanese sets advertised in this catalogue as well as preserve spoons and salt cellars.

Probably the one of the most imaginative teaspoon sets made by Musashiya was the Octopus set, which Liberty's retailed for twice as much as the more standard sets (reduced to £1 15 shillings by 1901 when the 'home-grown' Cymric wares had been launched 2 years since). These were sold in a plush case with a Liberty's gilt stamp in the lid and the occasional set even extended to a pair of sugar tongs. The bowls for these spoons have been modelled from Abalone shells, also known as *awabi*, and supported on splayed bamboo stems, topped with a rather comical-looking octopus, each one slightly different from another and rendered as such, in the Liberty catalogue illustration.



Above: Set of six Japanese Octopus spoons with additional sugar tongs from Sadajiro (of) Musashiya, Yokohama, bearing London import marks for 1893-4 and Liberty's own mark at that time: L^y & C^o, in their original plush box. And details of shell spoon and octopus finials. [Courtesy of Style Gallery, London]



A pair of Octopus tongs showing the finial as depicted top right in the catalogue illustration.

Period Liberty catalogues enthused over their new wares: “Messrs LIBERTY are constantly receiving direct from Japan new modelling in Silver Work the designs and artistic workmanship of which are characteristic of Japanese skill in combining beauty with quaintness and perfection of finish. This novel and charming Silver Work is very suitable for Wedding and Birthday Presents and Yule Tide Gifts.”



Left: Another set of six teaspoons in their original box, with standard flower bowls and more carefully crafted twig and berry stems, assayed in London, 1893.

Right: Chrysanthemum spoon of naturalistic form, made by Musashiya and likely to have been part of the one guinea per spoon range (boxed) from the 1892 Liberty's catalogue and detail of spoon handle.



Musashiya also produced single spoons in the botanical style, the detailing and workmanship of these, as always, is exceptional. The chrysanthemum has always been an important flower in Japan and was chosen to be the crest or *Mon* of the Imperial Household. The 'flower spoons' also have branching twig-like extensions to support the underside of the bowl, slightly inaccurate botanically but showing a sensitive solution to practicality and combining aesthetic appeal that Liberty's store engendered.



Left: SM Hydrangea spoon, obviously 1893

Right: Another naturalistic spoon by Sadajiro (of) Musashiya, 1893 for Liberty's, with hydrangea flowers centred with gold piqué work in the bowl.



Musashiya for Liberty's spoon (1898) purchased from a *Finial* auction. With peach blossom decoration to the bowl and the usual exquisite and branching twig-like stem.

Right: details of the finial comprising a human figure of a fur-clad monk or farmer, complete with a small weapon or tool and a dome-like hat (*Taku hatsugasa*) slung across his back. The bowl has exquisite gold piqué work to enhance the blossom inflorescences.



Above: This aquatic plant teaspoon, from the cheaper Liberty range (one guinea per set of 6), finialled with a bud, an unfurling leaf on the stem and made with a leaf for the bowl. The bowl is backed with a simple rat-tail support rather than the branching stem and there is no gold work.

The influence from this period of Japanese silver-making had a long-lasting influence in Britain, especially for Christopher Dresser when he visited Japan in 1876 on behalf of the South Kensington Museum, as the V&A Museum was then known. The trend for Japanese taste revisits our Western fashions repeatedly and the trend seems to be reaching out to us once again.

As always, Oscar Wilde had the last word: "Liberty is the chosen resort of the artistic shopper."

References.

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Simon Moore has written extensively about flatware and cutlery. His most famous book is *Cutlery for the Table, A History of British Table and Pocket Cutlery*, The Hallamshire Press, 1999.