

A Spoon with a Story

By Ross Morrow

Historic objects are imbued with the mystic ability to act as portals to the past. They are a tangible link to a different time and place and are a direct connection to the people who made, owned and used them. All too often though, this link is broken and their story lost. How many times, as collectors, have we looked at an object and said: “If only you could talk.”

With silver, we are fortunate that there is much we are able to learn about an item through examination. Hallmarks can tell us a great deal. We can tell where an item was made, from whose workshop it came, and the year in which it was made. This information is useful but incomplete. Yes, we know where it came from, and its use, but what about the people who first bought or owned the piece? It is easier to trace the history of grand items, as many bear personal identifying crests or armorials. They appear in wills and estate records and their provenance is sometimes recorded in auction catalogues. Yet for more utilitarian objects, this is not the case. Consider spoons, for instance.

There are many reasons people collect spoons. Some collect a specific type; others want examples from different time periods. Still others collect with the aim of completing a flatware set of a certain pattern. Many spoons bear an initial or small crest, but without additional information, we just don't know who owned and enjoyed them. I recently acquired a spoon that revealed a lot more than I expected.

To begin with, the spoon is in a faux crocodile skin cardboard box. (Fig. 1) This is not unusual, as many spoons came in boxes. These are often marked for the retailer rather than the maker.



Fig. 1

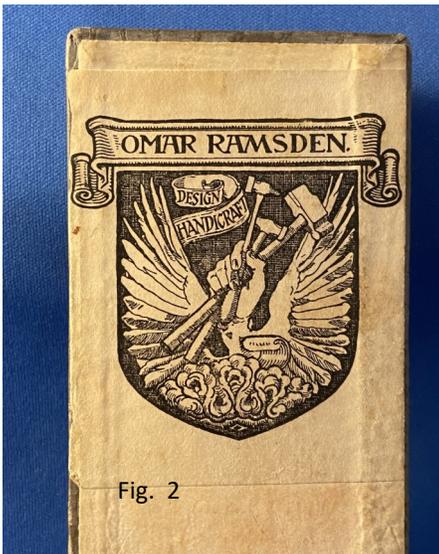


Fig. 2



Fig. 3



Fig. 4

Turning the box over, a name and business logo appeared on a paper label affixed to the bottom. It read 'Omar Ramsden' above a shield which incorporated the words 'DESIGN HANDICRAFT,' and a winged hand holding three silversmithing hammers aloft. (Fig. 2) This was already exciting, Omar Ramsden being well-known. Upon opening, the box revealed a spoon in the Arts and Crafts style. Protected in its original box, the spoon appeared almost new. It was heavy, the bowl hammered and the stem, a stylized tendril, ended in a laurel wreath surrounding an initialed shield. (Fig. 3) The initials, 'ERN,' were in an old style script. The back of the shield was dated 1923. The tendril stem ended in a rattail on the back of the bowl, which also bore the London hallmarks for 1922 and the sponsors mark for Omar Ramsden. (Fig. 4)

Omar Ramsden was a well-known designer in the Arts and Crafts style. He began his career in partnership with Alwyn Carr. He later started his own commercial studio which he ran as owner and designer rather than as a working silversmith. Without actual records from the shop, is it possible to garner further information about the spoon, such as how it was made? Fortunately the spoon can tell us a lot. The first clue was the weight of the spoon. Secondly, upon closer inspection, there was a small spot of porosity in the bowl. Both these clues pointed to the spoon having been cast. Casting is more economical than hammering the spoon out from an ingot. After casting, the bowl was planished with a heavy hammer. The hammer marks did not appear in the center of the bowl, as the rat tail on the back prevented this. The stem and laurel wreath had been hand-chased, after casting, to enhance their designs. The initials and the date had also been chased rather than engraved. The length of the spoon was 17.6 cm. Though not a baby spoon in the traditional sense the single set of initials and the date seemed to point toward it being a christening gift. At this stage there is not much more

that the spoon itself could tell me. For many other pieces, the story would end there; however, inside the box was a small card. Printed in copperplate style was the name 'Mr. Howard Gould.' In addition, written in ink with a fountain pen, on the card was 'For Little Elizabeth, with love from her Godfather. 1923.' We had suddenly gotten closer to the people involved. We knew that the 'E' in 'ERN' was for Elizabeth and given the hallmarked date and chased and written date, we knew that Mr. Gould had purchased this new for his little goddaughter and had enclosed his personal card with a handwritten note when he gave it to her. This was a charming addition to the history of the spoon. However, there was more . The next source of information came from a small piece of newsprint torn from a magazine and tucked under the card. It came from the bottom corner of page 81, and was titled and dated, "TIME, September 28, 1959." It was, in fact, a death notice for Howard Gould. It read, as follows:

"Died, Howard Gould, 88 third and last surviving of the four sons of Railroad baron Jay Gould, a yachtsman and globe-trotting chum of European royalty who developed a weakness for actresses, married a jaunty member of Buffalo Bill's circus troupe named Katherine Clemmons who, in 1909, enlivened a separation trial by complaining that it was hard to dress well on \$40,000 a year in Manhattan." (Fig. 5)

Suddenly we had a wealth of information, including a famous name. The portal was thrown wide open and with the power of the internet, we are whisked back in time to the end of the 19th century and the 'Belle Epoque' era of New York city. Jay Gould was one of a group of

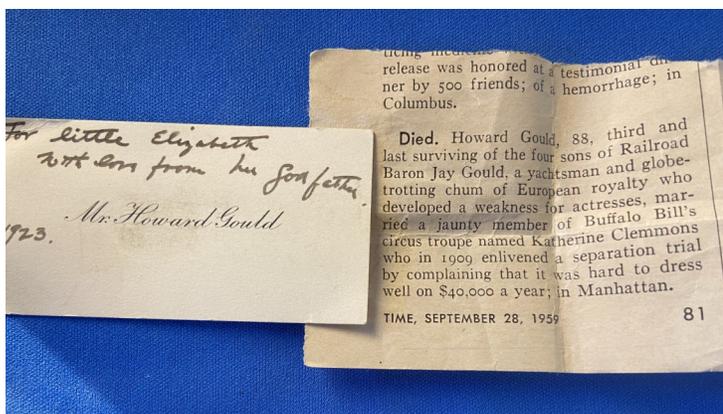


Fig. 5

vastly wealthy businessmen who were known as 'Robber Barons' for their less than ethical business practices. Jay's son, Howard Gould, married Katherine Clemmons. She was an actress and seemed to have had a role in Buffalo Bill Cody's Wild West Show. It turned out she and Cody were lovers and continued their affair even after she had married Howard. The separation trial referred to made history, as Katherine was awarded the largest divorce settlement ever recorded up to that point. Sadly, she did not receive the \$40,000 a year she asked for, two million in today's money, but she still received \$36,000 a year! Howard Gould spent a good part of the rest of his life in England and so it makes sense that he would have purchased this spoon from a leading silversmith like Omar Ramsden. There is more I could say about Howard and his life but unfortunately, the story of the spoon has come to the end. I have been unable to discover anymore about 'Little Elizabeth.' I only know her first name. What was her last name? Did she ever marry? Did she tear out the obituary from TIME magazine and place it in the box? We have learned a lot about this spoon and the people connected to it, but sadly not everything. Aah, objects; if only they could talk.

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