

What to Know When Selling the Family Silver

Knowledge about what makes an ornate candelabra or decorative platter valuable can help you separate the good stuff from the giveaways.

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5 MIN READ

LONDON — When a great-uncle dies or an older parent downsizes, having to go through and organize boxes of family heirlooms can feel daunting. If the items include family silver, it can be especially overwhelming.

Finding out what's worth keeping and what should be donated or sold involves more knowledge and skills than it takes to sort through mementos and photos. But taking the time to gather information about value and provenance could help avoid costly mistakes.

“It’s certainly true that people do often give away valuable items without fully understanding their value,” wrote Simon Surtees of John Surtees, a shop in the London Silver Vaults, a subterranean market that reputedly holds the world’s largest retail selection of antique and contemporary silver. “Which is a shame considering how accessible content is these days online.”

For centuries, silver was ubiquitous: de rigueur on formal dining room tables or as valued wedding, anniversary and hostess gifts, and cherished as small tokens of affection between friends. But in the last several decades, society has become less formal in entertaining, and that has led to a decline in the desire to own things like silver tea services and decorative objets d’art.

There is, however, still a collector’s market for silver, both antique and more contemporary pieces.

At TEFAF Maastricht, starting next week, a few of the galleries will be exhibiting antique silver pieces: Piva & C. of Milan is displaying an 18th-century Neapolitan silver soup tureen with the coat of arms of the Lanza di Trabia family, while Koopman Rare Art of London is selling a pair of Georgian candlesticks, with stems in the form of male and female satyrs, that once belonged to the 20th Earl of Kildare.



A Chinese silver goblet, circa 1840 to 1860. S & J Stodel

“This top end of the market has held up rather well over the last few years,” wrote Jim McConnaughy, senior vice president of S. J. Shrubsole, a New York-based antique silver store that has shown at TEFAF in the past. “But general silver, even handsome but typical 18th-century pieces, are not as popular as they once were. Much older modern material is now sold by weight.”

While the chances are low that the decorative silver platter that has been in the family for generations or the Art Deco candelabra given as a wedding gift from the in-laws will have the value of museum-quality works exhibited at fairs like TEFAF, it does not mean that there is no market for them. But first they have to be properly valued.

Start Online

For those who have silver and want to find out if it is worth anything, experts said, it is useful to do internet research before contacting dealers, auction houses or museums.

Start by examining the pieces for hallmarks. Hallmarks are the stamps on the metal that can indicate not only the standard or purity of the piece but also who made it, when and where. According to Alastair Dickenson, a British silver dealer who has appeared as an expert on the BBC program “Antiques Roadshow” for more than 30 years, English hallmarking has been around for almost 700 years.

“It’s quite an old cliché,” he said, “but it’s the oldest form of consumer protection known.”



An English silver-gilt sewing case (1871). Bonhams

Some pieces will have four or more hallmarks. On English silver, for example, a lion passant (walking lion) denotes a guarantee that the silver is sterling — at least 92.5 percent pure — while French solid silver is stamped with Minerva’s head in profile. There will also often be a date mark, a maker’s mark and even a town mark. (In London, for example, a leopard’s head was used.)

American silver, however, often carried only the maker’s mark. “Tiffany are the one exception,” said Mr. Dickenson, “as they had their own personal dating system.” The place where a piece was manufactured can sometimes add value — particularly if it was somewhere that did not have a large silver making industry.

“There was a Georgian coffee pot which sold recently that was made in Malta,” said Adam Langford, who along with his brother runs Langfords, an antique and modern silver shop in the London Silver Vaults. “If it was an English coffee pot, it would have been £2,000 [\$2,406], but because it was Maltese it was £15,000 [\$18,050].”

Inscriptions Don’t Always Hurt

An inscription on a piece does not necessarily mean it will not be of interest on the silver market, especially if a connection could be made to a historical event.

“If it said, ‘To Jane on her christening,’ that would not necessarily be a good inscription,” said Stephen Stodel of S & J Stodel, which is in the London Silver Vaults and specializes in English, Chinese and Japanese silver. But a silver mug or bowl inscribed around an important historical event — say, a major horse race or a coronation — could be of interest and value, he said.

“There are people that just remove all inscriptions, and all the way through our dealing career we’ve had to battle with people trying to get them to sell us an item,” he said. “They think they’re doing the right thing by restoring it and removing something that could have some historical importance.”



An English silver sugar bowl, circa 1885. Bonhams

Get Help

Once research is done on the hallmarks, the next step often is contacting a dealer or an auction house. This can come down to a personal preference, as some auction houses may charge higher commissions than a private dealer.

Ellis Finch, head of Bonhams’ silver department in London, which holds eight silver auctions a year, said that his department got inquiries every day.

Many pieces, he said, are not particularly valuable. “But then if you’ve got a tea set that’s from the Victorian period or before, that could be made by, say, an eminent silversmith, like Paul Storr,” he said, “then suddenly you’ve discovered your tea set is going to be really commercial, very sellable and very collectible.”

Is It Museum-Worthy?

Museums might also be interested in silver pieces, especially if they are connected to the region where a museum is or might make an important contribution to an existing collection.

“As a curator, I actively seek metalwork that brings design, handwork and cultural significance to Winterthur’s collection,” wrote Ann Wagner, who is the curator of decorative arts for the Winterthur Museum, Garden and Library in Delaware. “My wish list is shaped by a sensitivity to today’s (and tomorrow’s) audiences as well as sensitivity to the museum founder’s standards.”

And if all else fails, silver still may have value as a special gift, she wrote. “My husband and I have been giving small items like 20th-century silver mugs and trays as presents to the younger generation,” she wrote, “as a way to pass on that message of artistry and affordability.”

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