

## MARKETING SILVER IN THE 18th CENTURY

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## ABSTRACT

Few academic disciplines seem to neglect the history of their subject as much as does the field of marketing. Through its description and analysis of 18th century silver marketing, this paper endeavors to make a substantive contribution to research in marketing history and to reawaken a concern for history among marketing scholars and students.

## INTRODUCTION

Today, old silver is admired for its beauty, workmanship, and historical associations. It generates great enthusiasm among collectors and connoisseurs and has motivated scholarly research for over one hundred years. Rarely, however, do we appreciate that these antiques were the product of a reasonably well-articulated marketing system. The silversmith and his firm performed most of the marketing functions known today, albeit on a more limited and personal basis. Furthermore, the market for silver was just as complex and demanding as any modern consumer market. These original buyers and their motives are particularly worthy of investigation.

This paper describes and analyzes old silver from a marketing point of view. The scope is limited to the 18th century, an era before mass production and widespread affluence. The reader should bear in mind that, in a century when social status and true class distinctions governed everyday life, silver possessed a social significance far beyond that of later years. The scope is further limited to British and American silver. Although marketing practices on both sides of the Atlantic had much in common, a number of important differences will be indicated.

## THE SILVERSMITH'S CAREER AND STATUS

An apprentice silversmith usually came from a middle-class family since the tuition or premium for his apprenticeship was beyond the means of the poorer classes. Placing an apprentice with a good master also required family connections or some other personal relationship. Indeed, many apprentices were the sons of silversmiths. The apprentice served for at least seven years. He was housed, fed, and clothed by his master and gradually learned the skills that would one day make him a proficient artisan and, perhaps, a shrewd businessman.

Having served his apprenticeship and after paying a fee, the journeyman smith was given the freedom to ply his trade and start a business of his own. Like professionals establishing a private practice today, this required a fair amount of capital, with luck obtained from an inheritance or a

good marriage. More often, the silversmith had to work for a successful colleague and bide his time until he could amass his own nest egg. Some smiths never did obtain the wherewithal and remained journeymen for their entire working lives.

The prospects for a journeyman smith were generally brighter in America than in England. Except for the southern colonies where slave labor and a plantation economy limited craft development, economic opportunities were plentiful. As Bridenbaugh (1950) observes: "At no time in the eighteenth century were there ever enough journeymen, even though Philadelphia and Boston eventually turned out more than the local labor market absorbed" (p. 136). Only the most luckless, least talented, and least sober men of the craft remained journeymen in America.

It was possible to enter the trade without having served a formal apprenticeship. In England these silversmiths were called outworkers. They executed small jobs for master craftsmen with too many commissions and, as the name implies, lived outside the city limits and purview of the guild. In addition, women sometimes became silversmiths:

It was also the custom to accept a widow as a craftswoman in her own right, had she lived with her husband at least seven years--a kind of apprenticeship by marriage. This latter custom was often no more than a formality to enable the widow to control the business . . . (Shure 1959, p. 13).

When her husband, an outworker, died in 1760, Hester Bateman was accepted by the London guild and became one of the most famous smiths of her time. Finally, a few black slaves became silversmiths in the years prior to the Revolution (Bridenbaugh 1950, p. 140).

With the possible exception of makers of fine furniture, silversmiths were the wealthiest and most respected of craftsmen. They were clearly middle-class citizens in good standing. In some cases, such as Boston's Paul Revere, they were community leaders. Nevertheless, the silversmith's social position was beneath that of rich merchants which, in England, was less than that of the landed gentry and aristocracy. "No one could begin the climb toward gentility until he severed all active connection with trade and bought a country estate" (Willcox 1966, p. 42). Only after he retired to his country estate in 1760, was George Wickes, an extremely successful London silversmith, referred to as Mr. George Wickes, indicating gentrification (Barr 1980, p. 180).

#### THE PRODUCT LINE

In the 18th century, silver was fashioned into an extensive product line. The bottom end included spoons, forks, knives, and many other small utensils. In the middle one found mugs and tankards, tea caddies, sauce boats, jugs, creamers, and boxes of all kinds. The top of the line boasted beautiful tea, coffee, and chocolate pots, ornate trays and salvers, and magnificent ceremonial items. There were silver objects for the bedroom, for the person, and for a multitude of uses. Gentlemen's swords were hilted in silver and many fine flintlock pistols were furnished with silver mountings.

The silversmith obtained his working material from worn out or unfashionable silver objects and, especially in the colonies, from silver coins, often looted from Spanish galleons. These were melted down into ingots. He also purchased silver sheets and ingots directly from a supplier.

Manufacture was a slow, tedious process of cutting and hammering, annealing, casting, soldering, and polishing. Finer objects were engraved, embossed, or pierced to add further decorative and artistic value. For a relatively small fee, the silversmith added the buyer's initials, coats of arms, and other personal touches. All of this work required great skill since the basic tools of the trade, hammers, dies and anvils, were quite simple. Rudimentary mechanical processes such as die stamping did not come into use until the end of the century (Ward and Ward 1979, p. 23). Production in the silver industry was slow. According to Hood (1971), ". . . it took ten working days to make a plain coffeepot . . . before the addition of any decoration" (p. 19). Simple objects such as shoe buckles or spoons may have been produced in as little as a day.

Many smiths concentrated on producing only a few types of items in popular demand. The more successful ones produced virtually anything the client required. By the 1730s specialization was beginning to become a common practice, at least in England. The bigger firms employed several journeymen, some responsible for product design and others assigned to casting or engraving. Apprentices and female employees were given menial tasks such as polishing. To a large extent this was a family business since these workers were frequently sons, brothers, wives, and inlaws. The successful smith also used subcontractors to supply component parts and even finished items lacking only the final engraving. The most successful silversmiths spent comparatively little time fabricating objects themselves. Their energies were devoted to administration and marketing.

#### REGULATION AND BRANDING

In England quality control had been regulated by the guilds since 1300 when, during the reign of Edward I, a law was passed that required a mark assuring the sterling standard (92.5 percent silver, 7.5 percent copper). It is said that this was the first consumer protection law in England (Ward and Ward 1979, p. 16), but the guild surely benefited as well. The marketability of silver products was enhanced and very wealthy and powerful customers were less likely to be cheated. Over the centuries additional marks, indicating the town and date of manufacture, were required by the guilds in London and in the provincial cities. The 18th century English silversmith took his product to the guild's assay office, paid a duty of six pence per ounce, and had the silver content, location, and date guaranteed by hallmarks.

Many pieces were never taken to the assay office. Marks were forged, transferred from a small object to a much larger one, or simply omitted entirely. There were many reasons for this duty-dodging aside from the obvious cost savings. The assay did take time and could potentially interfere with a promised date of delivery. Also, deeply stamped hallmarks could possibly harm the aesthetic appeal of an item. At worst, some silversmiths were completely dishonest and sold silver below the legal content. The penalties for noncompliance were harsh, ranging from a one hundred pound

fine to deportation to a penal colony for fourteen years. The number of surviving specimens with missing or incomplete marks indicates that enforcement was difficult (Luddington 1971; Bannister 1965).

Between 1697 and 1720 London silversmiths were required to mark their work with the first two letters of their surname. After 1720 they had to use the first initial of their Christian and surname. This was a rudimentary form of product branding. In contrast to modern brand names, however, these maker marks were often placed inconspicuously and sometimes omitted entirely. Since most selling was direct from the manufacturer to the consumer, there was no great need to identify a brand over a long channel of distribution. Nevertheless, maker marks must have had some value. When a smith purchased items from another smith, he would sometimes stamp his own mark over the mark of the producer. Ironically, maker marks probably have greater importance to modern collectors than they had to the original owners.

In the American colonies and early republic, the sophisticated English hallmark system was never instituted. Silversmiths marked their products with their initials or surname, but no external regulation made this mandatory. Reputation rather than guild control was the guarantee of silver content and product quality in America. Recent studies of the content of 18th century American silver show that the great majority of makers adhered to the sterling standard (Fales 1970).

#### PRICING

The price of 18th century silver depended upon (1) the cost of bullion, (2) the cost of the silversmith's labor which varied according to the difficulty and embellishment of the piece, and (3) general business conditions. Simple objects, such as shoe buckles or spoons, might cost about one English pound. Tea and coffee pots ranged from ten English pounds for plain ones up to 100 pounds for highly decorated examples. Soup tureens, ceremonial urns, and other large objects cost up to 500 English pounds or more. Surviving ledgers show that the richest clients spent over 1000 pounds on silver in a year or two (Barr 1980), and English ambassadors were encouraged to spend approximately 3000 pounds to entertain in a fashion suitable for a representative of the crown (Ward and Ward 1979, p. 33).

It is difficult to say exactly what these prices represented without making reference to the prices of other goods and services. According to Barr (1980), a plain overcoat might cost about a pound, while a fancier one cost two or three pounds. It cost about fifteen pounds to feed an apprentice reasonably well for a year. George Wickes' London shop, four stories tall at 619 square feet per story, was insured for 500 pounds in 1781.

Using these prices as a rough guide, the simplest silver object cost almost as much as an overcoat; the best pieces cost as much as a good London property. In current dollars, therefore, the prices of 18th century silver ranged from around \$100 to well over \$100,000. Hood (1971) states: ". . . it is probably safe to say that a fine piece of silver cost as much as a significant art object for an individual today" (p. 12). As an aside, this is the approximate price range for fine antique silver today. Despite two hundred years of inflation, old silver has maintained its value.

## DISTRIBUTION

The channels of distribution for 18th century silver were quite short. In most instances the silversmith sold directly to the buyer. Less expensive objects were made on speculation and sold in the silversmith's retail store, usually located adjacent to his workshop. Engraving and other personal touches were added after the sale was made. Haggling over price was common until the end of the century when fixed prices became the rule in London (McKendrick, Brewer and Plumb 1982, p. 83). Larger objects were also made on speculation, but most were made on commission. In the second half of the century, smiths kept a pattern book, akin to a modern catalogue, to show potential customers the firm's repertoire. Elaborate pieces were designed on an item by item basis according to the specifications of the richest clients. Even this custom work repeated the basic forms, styles, and decorations illustrated in the current pattern book.

Silversmiths frequently sold small objects, as well as some larger ones, to their colleagues and, in this instance, extended the channels of distribution. Trade discounts were common. Silver was also sold to itinerant salesmen working the provinces and, perhaps, to fixed premise retailers in other lines of business. A snuff box could have been sold to a tobacconist who, in turn, resold it to one of his customers. Finally, there was an active export market. The products of London silversmiths were in high demand in the American colonies, particularly in the South. Selling to this market required additional intermediaries. For example, a tobacco planter in the Chesapeake region or a merchant in Charleston would ask his agent or merchant house in London to purchase silver for him, against future shipments of tobacco, rice, or indigo. American smiths also purchased silver from their English counterparts and resold this merchandise to their own clients.

Like modern retailers, silversmiths in the 18th century offered additional services to their customers. One such service was the extension of credit, a necessity since specie was in short supply on both sides of the Atlantic. Some smiths kept a double entry balance sheet, listing purchases and payments, for their most important clients. These wealthy customers sometimes took as long as a year to balance their accounts (Barr 1980) and a few never did pay their bills. For the average silversmith without a great reserve of capital, the extension of credit was a major problem. This was especially true in England where, as McKendrick, Brewer, and Plumb (1982) put it:

The patricians simply passed on their own indebtedness to the trader by taking credit and failing to pay their bills promptly, or, sometimes, not at all. No grievance was felt more strongly than this hidden subsidy to aristocratic wealth (p. 198).

A substantial proportion of the assets of nearly all 18th century businessmen was in the form of a short term credit (McKendrick, Brewer, and Plumb 1982, p. 209).

Storage was another extra service. Since the silversmith needed a secure place to store his own inventory, he was willing to keep that of his clients. Banks were uncommon in the 18th century and unknown in America until

circa 1781. Most important of all, silversmiths constantly repaired items for their customers. Surviving records of this repair work not only indicate just how heavily silver was used, but also suggest that servants were not very careful about handling their master's plate (Barr 1980).

#### PROMOTION

Personal selling was the most important form of promotion. The silversmith, acting like any other salesman, probably encouraged his best clients to buy additional objects and to spend more on decorating the ones already commissioned. Much of this personal selling took place in the silversmith's shop and, perhaps, in the homes of rich clients. Still more selling may have taken place in coffee shops, in clubs, and at family get-togethers. Family connections were quite important since a good portion of the smith's business came from relatives and the friends of relatives. It is even likely that a few provincial and colonial smiths traveled about, hawking samples of their wares (Holland 1983, pp. 26-27).

The 18th century silversmith advertised in the newspapers of his time. These newspapers were comparatively expensive and were generally written for the well-to-do rather than for a mass audience (Atwan 1979). Myer Myers, a famous New York silversmith, advertised regularly in the New York Gazette and the New York Weekly Mercury in 1754 and thereafter. Advertisements resembled modern classified ads. Most announced what was available, where, and from whom with a minimum of persuasion and puffery. The following ad appeared in The London Evening Post in June of 1735:

George Wickes, Goldsmith and Jeweller, late partner with Mr. John Craig, the corner of Norris-street, is removed to the King's Arms in Panton-street, the second door from St. James's, Hay market, where he continues as the maker to make and sell all sorts of curious work in gold and silver, jewels and watches after the best and newest fashion; and buys and sells all sorts of second-hand plate, jewels and watches (Barr 1980, pp. 26-27).

This restraint diminished in the second half of the century when ads of all types began to make great, unsubstantiated claims. Other forms of advertising included store signs and trade cards. The trade card of the 18th century was much more elaborate than today's business cards. "Their purpose was unequivocally to advertise; to draw attention to any special quality or distinctive patronage . . ." (McKendrick, Brewer, and Plumb 1982, pp. 83-84).

Finally, publicity and word-of-mouth could do much to promote a silversmith's business. If, for example, an aristocrat or rich merchant spoke favorably about a certain silversmith, others in the social class (or those wishing to emulate their betters) might seek out that maker. In the middle of his career, circa 1740, George Wickes was able to obtain the patronage of Frederick, the Prince of Wales. This led to other commissions from Frederick's friends and retainers. Wickes took advantage of his royal appointment by advertising the fact on his trade cards. Similar publicity must also have helped American silversmiths to increase their business. In general,

London silversmiths had the best reputations in the 18th century and their fashionable merchandise was highly regarded by individuals in provincial towns and in the colonies.

#### THE MARKET

The 18th century silver market can be divided into four buyer segments: churches and civic groups, royalty and aristocracy, rich citizens, and the middle classes.

Catholic, Anglican and Reformed churches, Jewish Synagogues, and various civic groups bought a wide variety of silver objects for purposes of ceremony and display. "Church plate" included chalices, communion cups, crosses, and many other specialized items. Myer Myers, himself a Jew, not only sold ribbonim (Torah scroll finials) to synagogues in New York, Philadelphia, and Newport, Rhode Island, but also made alms basins for the First Presbyterian Church of New York (Rosenbaum 1954, p. 34). The great pride that church members took in these objects would confer prestige upon the donor. Civic purchases were equally varied. Since modern studies provide relatively few descriptions of church and civic silver, production must have been limited. Thus, this was a small market segment for most 18th century silversmiths.

A much larger market consisted of royalty and aristocrats who bought silver for personal use, official entertainment, and gifts. Over the course of just a few years, Prince Frederick spent thousands of pounds on items purchased from, and repaired by, George Wickes. Some of these items were for the enjoyment of the Prince and his circle. Others were meant to be gifts to his friends, retainers, and even towns such as the city of Bath. Clients of this standing were frequently demanding and difficult and pieces were sometimes returned to the smith, much to his financial and professional embarrassment. Also, royalty and aristocrats often had fiscal problems of their own and their balances were sometimes in arrears for many months. Still, this must have been a lucrative market for those smiths fortunate enough to serve it. Obviously, American smiths did not have access to aristocrats and, as a consequence, this market was negligible in the colonies.

Perhaps the best market for most silversmiths were rich citizens, major buyers of domestic silver. In his excellent study of American silver, Hood (1971) states that only the top five percent of society owned silver in any appreciable quantity (p. 12). This was truly a class market and the silversmith, whether in Britain or America, needed to be quite aware of current artistic tastes and fashions. Although silver styles changed less rapidly than styles in clothing, the design of silver evolved continuously during the course of the 18th century, passing through what moderns call the baroque, Queen Anne, rococo, and neo-classical periods. The American market was just as conscious of style as the one in England. American smiths strived to keep abreast of the current British styles, often making nearly identical copies of English imports. French and European tastes were not especially popular among rich Americans.

Finally, there was a middle and at times a working class market. The 18th century was a materialistic, status-driven age and owning even a few silver

objects would have denoted higher social standing. Wickes frequently sold silver, often on a barter arrangement, to the tradesmen who renovated his shop on Panton Street. The London building boom that reached a crescendo in the 1760s and 1770s enabled many small businessmen to thrive and, hence, flaunt their success with silver. Small buyers like these were surely distributed throughout Britain and America. They probably purchased small objects such as baptismal spoons, gifts for newly married couples, simple tea services, and mourning rings to remember the dead. They may not have been the biggest market, but were probably an important one, especially for second-tier smiths in the provincial towns and colonies. Indeed, the Bateman clan may have achieved its considerable success by catering to the middle-class, London market in the last part of the century (Banister 1965, pp. 168-169).

#### THE MEANING OF SILVER

Silver fulfilled a number of specific needs for the 18th century buyer. First, it was an important means of storing wealth. It was easily transportable, quite liquid, and generally maintained its value. Second, many silver objects were used in everyday activities such as dining and especially tea drinking which became a necessary social ritual. Silver spoons were used so frequently that surviving specimens can be found greatly worn on the side of the bowl that touched a plate. Third, silver marked important occasions. It lent dignity to births, marriages, and deaths and, when passed down from one generation to another, imparted a sense of permanence and stability. Decorations on the backs of spoon bowls and on the lids of small boxes also commemorated events of national importance, such as the election of George Washington or the release from jail of the English radical, John Wilkes. Fourth, silver was considered an important art form and the possession of beautiful pieces was an indicator of good taste and breeding. Finally, silver was a telling status symbol that demonstrated financial success and social pretension as much as did fine clothing. Following a practice that can be traced to Roman times, silver was openly displayed on cupboards and tea tables, expensive objects in their own right. The more silver a family owned, the higher its social standing.

Silver had served all of these purposes for centuries and continued to do so well into the 1800s. By the twentieth century, however, the use of silver to satisfy these needs had lessened considerably. Banks and other financial institutions provided more lucrative, equally liquid, and safer investment opportunities. Cheaper, mass produced, and silver-plated utensils served just as well for everyday use and, as other activities began to encroach on the time reserved for eating a leisurely meal, less emphasis was placed on owning luxury items as an adjunct to formal dining at home. Silver gifts continued to mark important occasions, but they became less and less relevant as these events were given new social definitions. Marriage, for example, began to lose its sense of permanence and economic importance, while death became something most moderns would rather not dwell upon.

Silver's standing as an art form declined throughout the 1800s, perhaps because it was being manufactured in vast quantities and was less frequently hand crafted. The artistic rank of painting and sculpture, in contrast, rose during this period. Silver also lost much of its importance as an

exclusive status symbol. Rising affluence meant that greater and greater numbers of people could afford silver, forcing the class market to direct its conspicuous consumption toward other products and services. In any event, since fewer and fewer people could afford servants, silver polishing became more and more of a nuisance. Today, although we still admire the ability of the silversmith, we generally limit our purchases to jewelry or a few, inexpensive items. Only art and antique collectors have the great enthusiasm for silver that characterized the 18th century market.

#### CONCLUSION

By applying modern marketing concepts to an 18th century product class, this paper has demonstrated their explanatory power and fundamental validity. The silversmith designed, priced, distributed, and promoted his products and kept a sharp eye on the ever changing demands of his market segments. This marketing sophistication was not just limited to the silversmith. McKendrick, Brewer, and Plumb (1982) provide examples of equally shrewd businessmen in other industries. Thus, the origins of modern marketing did not arise in the late 19th century as some would argue; they can be detected well over two hundred years ago.

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