

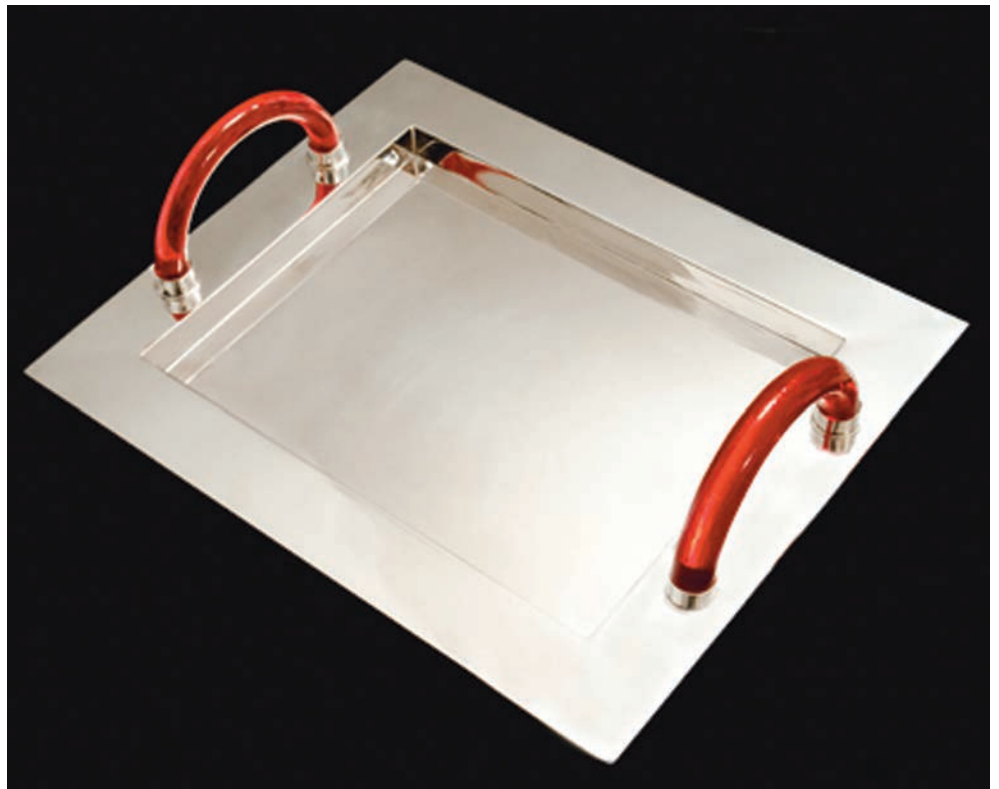
# CONTEMPORARY SILVER

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Contemporary silver is the neglected cousin of the decorative art family. As collectors move increasingly towards the contemporary and away from the antique, virtually every other field within the industry has enjoyed a significant boom from contemporary art, to furniture, glass, jewelry, porcelain and sculpture. And yet today, contemporary silver is dangerously on the point of extinction.

Almost 300 hundred years ago, contemporary silver was considered a true art form and the leading silversmiths and engravers were considered and held in the same esteem as the most successful artists of their day. William Hogarth, for example was revered equally as an engraver of silver as he was a painter of canvas.

Perhaps it was the industrial age of the mid-nineteenth century that the perception of artistry in silver deteriorated progressively to one of mechanized, mass production. The invention of electroplating silver in the 1840s provided an inexpensive alternative that every household could afford. The market for the masses that provided everyday domestic tableware in many ways severely wounded the contemporary silver business and moved it further away



as an art form.

Since its earliest history in the fourteenth century, contemporary silver was a display of wealth. Silver was the monetary currency of the day and those wealthy enough to have surplus cash would melt down their silver coinage and have silversmiths create silver tableware articles that would be put on prominent display. Over the centuries, the articles that were made always represented the height of fashion of the day, from the austere Queen Anne period, to the Adam neo classical, to the flamboyant Regency and even to the ornate Victorian.

Crawford Tray with Glass Handles, 2010

The status of contemporary silver today paints a very different picture. It may well be that within twenty years or less, contemporary silver will not exist. There may be no surviving silversmiths to make it. What student today wants to serve a five year apprenticeship, sure in the knowledge that it might take him or her ten years of training before they are qualified to work on a masterpiece?

Strangely, and despite all the industrial innovation and advanced computer technology, the few master



Crawford "Curly Wurly" Candelabra, 2011



Crawford Gurgling Fish Pitcher, 2010

needlepoint accuracy. Several hundred different tools are needed to fashion silver articles in varying shapes and sizes. Working in silver is not a task for the faint hearted. All too often, a silver object raises the inappropriate question –“How much silver is in the piece?” or “What does it weigh?” The question should be what level of skill and artistry was used in the piece. No one ever asked when looking at a Picasso painting or a Rodin sculpture what the materials cost to make it.

Within the process of creating contemporary silver, there remain today separate and proudly individual trades within any Silversmithy. There are designers, model makers, casters, chasers, polishers and of course silversmiths. They rarely overlap. Each trade requires a high level of artistry, years of experience and personal flair. As the most experienced artists within the industry, retire, die in harness or go out of business, they are sadly not replaced. In some cases the number of skilled professionals in the various Silversmithy trades today can be counted worldwide on less than one hand.

silversmiths that survive today, employ the same manual techniques that have barely changed in 250 years. Silver is not an easy material to work with. Georg Jensen, one of the twentieth century’s greatest designers and silversmiths said in 1926 “Silver is the best material we have, Gold is precious in value, but not in effect. The character of silver is satisfactorily obstinate, it has to be conquered.”

Silver requires great heat to work with. The melting point of silver is 1640 degrees Fahrenheit. Some considerable strength, skill and tenacity are needed to wield steel hammers to beat and fashion the metal under high temperatures to

It would not be difficult today to name the ten leading contemporary jewelers. Most of them are household names around the world. The same exercise could be applied to contemporary watch brands. Many

of the brands have been around for centuries. Others have been revived out of obscurity. Now try the same exercise with contemporary silver brands. Who is left? Georg Jensen; Tiffany; Buccellati; Christofle – perhaps even Asprey. Not one of them promotes or retails contemporary silver in a meaningful fashion and most of them have not produced a new design in years.

There is an encouraging, but modest revival of European silversmiths creating a small output of designs. There are a handful of underutilized silversmiths in the United States, many of whom will be soon retired. Even the countries that had a deep and successful history of producing contemporary silver, like India, China, Japan and Thailand no longer have the skilled silversmiths to produce fine silver items made by hand and by eye with artistry and skill.

The art of silversmithing has always been taught at the workbench with the apprentice looking over the shoulder of the master silversmith. The skills and techniques have been passed down this way without interruption from generation to generation. It is not knowledge that can be kick started online from a computer download. Once it disappears, it is not coming back.

There is, however, no reason whatsoever for contemporary silver to remain the neglected cousin in the

decorative art family. Contemporary silver is like sculpture or cutting edge third dimensional art, but art that is created with real passion and skill. Silver is a metal that will outlast generations, both in terms of durability and attraction. It requires minimal upkeep, it will not crack, fade or splinter. It will not warp or bend. And if damaged, can nearly always be restored to original condition.

Contemporary silver has had a long tradition of being created for practical domestic purposes that suit the fashion of the day. While the custom and demand for drinking tea (considered the height of expensive luxury in the eighteenth century) from elaborate tea sets on a daily basis has dwindled, there are manifold and purposeful items of contemporary silver that still serve a practical purpose – and do so in some considerable style. A pair of silver candelabra can literally light up a room. An eye-catching silver centrepiece can transform even the most pedestrian of tables. Why invest often considerably more on a shoddy, piece of dust-catching contemporary art that only has an artist's name to its merit and little else in terms of real quality, when contemporary silver offers your collection cutting edge, contemporary design - fashioned with real artistry and skill evolved over centuries?

Contemporary silver covers a wide field. Traditionally, it has been broken

into three categories: holloware, flatware and jewelry. We are primarily concerned here with holloware, which is loosely defined as everything in silver that is not flatware or jewelry such as candlesticks, bowls, trays, pitchers, etc.

Flatware does play a substantial –if not less exciting part. Contemporary silver flatware has been made for centuries and became a major industry at the end of the eighteenth century. In an age of stainless steel and even plastic and when the art of dining at home in elegance and style is outfavoured by the blandness of a commercial restaurant – it is still perhaps surprising that there is a market for silver flatware at all. The reality is however that the silver flatware market worldwide runs annually into many millions of dollars. The tragedy is that the contemporary designs tend to be made in stainless steel and the sterling flatware is made from the designs of yesteryear. Perhaps the challenge to bring an original contemporary design in the narrow confines of knives, forks and spoons is too daunting. Or perhaps too, it is the rapidly diminishing list of suppliers who are capable of manufacturing contemporary silver flatware.

Contemporary silver jewelry belongs more with the field of contemporary jewelry than it does with contemporary silver. Google

results under “contemporary silver,” but the majority of listings refer to silver jewelry. Given the substantial rise in the cost of gold, silver jewelry is becoming increasingly popular as a considerably less expensive alternative.

The contemporary silver market today, along with its counterparts in the decorative art fields, is emerging from a challenging trade cycle. At a time when cash and consumer confidence are both in short supply, it would not be unreasonable to assume that the low cost, mass produced market would be in favor. The obverse appears to be the case – and again in line with the other decorative art fields – it is the best of the best that is in demand. The problem with the contemporary silver market is one of supply and promotion. More contemporary silver needs to come on the market and more collectors need to be aware of the opportunities. It is a far cry from the slick marketing machines in the contemporary art world, but maybe that is what it will take to ignite the fire under the fragile, undiscovered world of contemporary silver.

Contemporary silver is one of the best kept secrets in the decorative art field. It is the undiscovered contemporary art form that has yet to take root in the art market. Fashions come and fashions go, but silver has gone on forever. Contemporary silver

has a deep and fascinating history that will stand it in good stead. Designers, collectors and followers of fashion should keep an open mind and a discerning eye over this precious resource. ■

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Crawford Magnum Cooler, 2009



Crawford Malachite Candlesticks, 2010