

# THE 'LEPRECHAUN' FACTOR

Pieces of rare provincial Irish silver sometimes lack hallmarks, so how can you identify these highly collectable treasures?

The message that comes across loud and clear from dealers and collectors is that the only things worth collecting today, from an investment point of view, are those that are rare. So when it comes to antiques, where should you invest your spare cash? Probably one of the rarest of things to collect is provincial silver and aside from our own Cape

silver, Irish provincial silver is probably the rarest of all.

Irish silver was made in several different towns. In order of rarity come items from Limerick, Cork, Galway, Kinsale, Youghal and finally Clonmel. Find an item made in Clonmel and you could probably retire on the proceeds. "People

don't truly understand just how rare provincial Irish silver is," says specialist antique dealer Martin Weldon of Weldon in Dublin, a firm regarded as the world's leading expert on Georgian Irish silver. He adds that he's seen only one tankard from Galway in the last 10 years.

Advising you to invest in Irish silver while living in this country might sound like advising you to try find a needle in a haystack. Emigration, however, has been one of the salient features of Irish history, probably more than almost any other country in the world. Apart from the five million people in Ireland, there are an estimated 55 million people worldwide who can trace their ancestry back to Ireland, so there is always the possibility of finding a gem. Proof of

this is the extraordinary Rococo milk jug (pictured left), one of the finest pieces of Cork silver recorded, that local antique dealer Jeremy Astfalk of The Old Corkscrew discovered at a Cape

Town sale. (If you'd like to shop further afield, firms in Dublin, like Weldon, offer excellent service over the Internet.)

Even if you're lucky enough to come across one of these rare pieces in South Africa, it may be difficult to recognise as provincial Irish silver was often not hallmarked. Anything hallmarked in Dublin has always carried the 'Harp Crowned' mark making it instantly recognisable as Irish in origin, explains Jeremy. However, makers in

smaller places were reluctant to send their wares out on the dangerous roads to the Goldsmiths' Company of Dublin for assay.

Items from the smaller towns of Cork and Limerick, without a centrally controlled hallmarking authority, have always attracted keen collector interest. Here the master silversmiths would mark their wares with their names or initials and a variety of marks illustrating the quality of the silver. Examples include Sterling, Starling and Stirling all of which correspond to the required level of purity in order to be hallmarked in Dublin.

There are estimated to be only 185 surviving pieces of Irish silver plate made between 1600 and 1650 and of those only 16 have hallmarks. Even rarer are pieces from the preceding century; only six Apostle spoons and 15 chalices survived. Even the wonderful silver collection in the National Museum of Ireland, Decorative Arts & History in Dublin, is concentrated from the latter half of the 17th century, the Baroque period, onwards.

Michael Kenny, Keeper of Art and Industry at the museum, explains that silversmithing reached a peak between 1715 and 1800, when the Act of Union between Ireland and Britain saw the dissolution of the Irish parliament. Patronage of the craftsmen died as the high and mighty vacated their grand homes in Ireland and headed for London.

With or without assay marks, is there a defining style that can help you identify Irish silver? "How do you know a leprechaun if you see one

coming towards you down the street?" quips Jeremy. Certain items are fairly synonymous with Ireland such as dish rings (similar to a trivet) and freedom boxes, which were given to people to celebrate their induction as a freeman of a guild or corporation. But, says Jeremy, it's not quite as simple as that because for the most part Irish silver followed closely on the fashions and trends in the main English silver-making centres.

"However," says Martin, "Irish silver is different to anything else in the world with a different history and quality that's equal to, if not better than, the best silversmiths in England. Silversmiths such as the Calderwoods, Thomas Bolton, David King and the Walkers surpassed the work of English greats like Paul Storr." Perhaps it's this craftsmanship that gives a piece of Irish silver that 'leprechaun' factor that makes it stand out from the crowd. **GH**

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP, RIGHT:

- Candlestick, Dublin, circa 1795, no maker's mark.
- Neo-Celtic dish, Dublin, circa 1870, by Joseph Johnson.
- Vase and liner, Dublin, circa 1809, by Richard Williams.
- A rare Rococo milk jug. Stamped onto the base are the marks SW over STERLING and SW over WALSH, which were recorded as being used by Stephen Walsh in Cork between 1760 and 1780.
- Sugar caster, Cork, circa 1690, by Robert Goble.



## PENCIL IT IN

You can view Jeremy Astfalk's incredibly rare Rococo milk jug from Cork at The South African Antique Dealers' (SAADA) Fair which is taking place at the Wanderers Club in Illovo, Johannesburg between 9 – 11 October 2009. The fair is open from 10h00 – 18h00 daily and the entrance fee is R50. For details call Marylou Bawden on 011 880 0815 or e-mail [saada@telkomsa.net](mailto:saada@telkomsa.net)

## TRAVELLING TO IRELAND?

Don't miss a trip to the National Museum of Ireland, Decorative Arts and History at Collins Barracks in Dublin. For anyone wanting to learn about Irish silver this is the place to start; it offers an informative display of some five to six styles in chronological order including items from the Baroque, Rococo, neoclassic, Regency, Victorian, neo-Celtic and modern periods.

Further displays, carefully set up to mirror scenes in contemporary paintings, show how silver was used at the dining table, dressing table or writing table. There is also a fine collection of ecclesiastical silver, which has been invaluable in providing information about makers and their marks mainly because the items have been particularly well cared for over the centuries.

## SOURCES

**National Museum of Ireland**  
+353 1 6777444 or [www.museum.ie](http://www.museum.ie)  
**The Old Corkscrew** 021 876 3671  
**Tourism Ireland** 011 442 0822 or [www.discoverireland.com](http://www.discoverireland.com)  
**Weldon** +353 1 6771638 or [www.weldonsofdublin.com](http://www.weldonsofdublin.com)



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