Silver Goods in Early America

Following the humble beginnings of early American life—marked by the challenge of defining a new collective social identity in a foreign land—the Colonies prospered. With the establishment of mercantile trade with England and the West Indies as well as indirect trade with the Far East, a new class of wealthy merchants soon populated the eastern seaboard. In exchange for natural resources like cattle, timber, and tobacco, such luxuries as silk, coffee, porcelain, and silver arrived in the Colonies. The increasing interest in, and subsequent need for, local craftsmen prompted silversmiths to establish workshops in urban centers. Appropriating European styles
from imported goods, design manuals, prints, and the work of immigrant craftsmen, colonial silversmiths catered to clients who sought to associate themselves with the sophisticated culture flourishing abroad.

Objects made of silver served various roles in the daily life of early Americans. Reflecting the preceding religious migrations from England, the first silver pieces produced in the Colonies were predominately for liturgical purposes. Subsequently, household items, including buttons, spoons, **porringers**, beakers, buckles, tankards, and teapots, became the most common silver objects. For those who could afford it, elaborately designed silver was prominently displayed in homes and community spaces, where it represented the social prestige and wealth of its owner as well as his or her awareness of the latest fashions.

The collection of American decorative arts at the Wadsworth Atheneum consists of more than eight hundred pieces of silver, including eleven tankards from various regions. Call (860) 838-4046 to confirm what is currently on view.

### What Is a Tankard?

Inventories of the day suggest that **tankards**—tall one-handled drinking vessels often with a hinged lid—were popular in colonial America. Made to hold substantial quantities of cider or alcohol, tankards played a vital role in the celebration of special occasions and were commonly passed around the table for communal drinking.

### About the Object

This monumental tankard is one of only thirty-four known examples by Paul Revere II, the legendary American silversmith and patriot. The tankard, which bears the engraved coat of arms of the Skillings family, was probably made for Captain Nehemiah Skillings, a wealthy merchant who owned docks in Boston harbor opposite those of John Hancock. As was common during the period, the owner’s initials appear on the handle of the tankard.
Skillings gave the tankard to Major Ezra Beaman, a member of the Sons of Liberty, who fought at the Battle of Bunker Hill. Beaman served as an aide to General George Washington during the siege of Boston and entertained the commander in chief at his residence. The tankard descended in the family to Harold C. Lovell Jr., a fifth great-grandson of Major Beaman, who resided in Stratford, Connecticut.

The Revere tankard dates from 1760-74 and reflects the transition from the Rococo (1740s–1780s) to the Neoclassical (1770s–1820s) style. The Rococo decorative elements include the artichoke finial and the engraved armorial with floral and leaf designs. The symmetry, columnar proportions, and domed lid exhibit Revere’s interest in Neoclassical design, an approach he and his fellow craftsmen would fully embrace following the Revolution. The Neoclassical style was inspired by the art and architecture of ancient Greece and Rome. This combination of stylistic influences suggests the evolution of Revere’s workmanship, his innovative artistic eye, and his knowledge of popular designs of the time, all of which served to solidify his place as a colonial tastemaker.

About the Artist: Paul Revere II (American, 1735–1818)

An American Silversmith
Paul Revere II began his career as an apprentice to his father, Apollos Rivoire (1702–1754), a French Huguenot who taught him the silversmithing trade. Upon his father’s death, Revere inherited his shop and assumed the production of silver cream jugs, tankards, and beakers while also supplying his patrons with imported luxuries from Europe. His superior skills, knowledge of the stylistic trends of his day, and active social life allowed him to build a broad clientele that included politicians, merchants, craftsmen, and churches—patriots and loyalists alike.

Revere’s refined talent in the art of engraving brought steady business for such printed materials as maps, paper money, and decorative prints.* As evidence of his ambition to expand his entrepreneurial pursuits, Revere’s silversmith shop would become just one facet of his diversified business ventures that included both a dentist’s office and a copper and brass foundry.

A testament to his talent and popularity, many of Revere’s contemporaries copied his work, an act considered more flattery than plagiarism during colonial times. John Singleton Copley, the most distinguished portraitist of the period, depicted Revere in a painting now in the collection of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (see Web Resources for image). He is posed with a silver teapot and surrounded by his tools, reflecting his respected social stature and artistic prowess.

*Revere is widely known for his engraving The Bloody Massacre (1770) that depicts British soldiers murdering five Boston men, including the famous Crispus Attucks (see Web Resources for image).

The Revolutionary War Patriot
Revere’s political involvement emerged from his well-established connections to the Freemasons, the Sons of Liberty, local business patrons, and Boston’s elite revolutionary groups. Having served as a courier for the Boston Committee of Correspondence and the Massachusetts Committee of Safety before the Revolution, Revere later played a central role in delivering intelligence to the Continental Congress in Philadelphia. He is best known for his
“Midnight Ride” on April 18, 1775, to alert the colonial militias of the impending British invasion, which culminated in the battles of Lexington and Concord. Revere led troops throughout the Revolution, serving as a lieutenant colonel in the Massachusetts Artillery in 1776 and later as a commander of Castle Island in Boston harbor.

Classroom Activities

Quick Curriculum Connections
Daily Life in Colonial America
Early Craft Production in Urban Colonial America
Keys Figures in the American Revolution: The Founding Fathers
Patriots Versus Loyalists
System of Apprenticeship
The American Revolution
Transatlantic Trade

Questions for Guided Looking
Investigate this object through a classroom dialogue. Begin by asking students questions that elicit descriptive and objective observations. Move toward more abstract and subjective questions that develop students’ critical thinking skills as they seek to interpret the object. Be sure that students provide visual evidence for their responses. Always encourage them to explore the object visually before you reveal any information about the piece.

Adapt the following questions to your students’ level of comprehension.

CONVERSATION STARTERS
What do you see? Describe the object’s color, lines, form, weight, and texture.
What material is it made of? Its color might give you a clue!
How is the object decorated? Does it have an elaborate or a simple design?
What clues do you see that suggest how the object might have been made?*
Do you think it is constructed of many parts or is it a single piece?*
How long might it have taken the artist to create the object?*
What purpose did the object serve? How and when do you think it was used?
Does the object remind you of anything you use in your daily life?
How can you tell that the object is from another time period?

*See High School Lesson Plan: The Evolution of Production for information concerning the production of this object.

DIGGING DEEPER
What kinds of objects do people use today to show off their wealth and social status?
In what ways do people today use symbols to represent themselves?
Does your family own any special objects that were passed down by relatives?
Why does your family consider them special?
How is this object functional as well as artistic?
Writing Activity: Selling Your Product

Many of the skills acquired through the process of carefully looking at objects are those needed by thoughtful writers. In fact, observation forms the foundation of good writing. Before beginning this activity, be sure to take time to look at the object with the students. Then use the exercise below to explore how art can serve as a catalyst for the development of students’ writing skills in the areas of description, persuasion, and creative expression.

Driven by his entrepreneurial ambitions, Paul Revere II actively promoted his numerous business pursuits to a wide prospective clientele. Historic advertisements in circulation throughout colonial Boston (c. 1765) illustrate his efforts (see Appendix). Viewing the object through this lens, ask students to write an advertisement for Revere’s silversmithing business based on the visual characteristics of the tankard. Students should consider how the visual elements of this object—form, decoration, style, and quality—might make it attractive to potential buyers. The goal of each student’s writing is to persuade his or her reader to purchase from the Revere workshop rather than his competitors. Teachers may choose to bring in contemporary advertisements from local newspapers to spark students’ imagination and creativity. Allow enough time for students to share their finished compositions with their classmates.

The Artist’s Hand: Creating a Personal Symbol

You have just explored this object with your eyes. Take a moment to respond with your hands.

Supplies needed: white paper, pencils and crayons, colored pencils or markers.

In colonial America, silversmiths often engraved objects with monograms, family crests, and inscriptions. Many of these engraved designs symbolized aspects of the owner’s social position, family history, personal accomplishments, and livelihood or trade. In similar fashion, this art-making activity will ask students to compose a personal symbol that represents who they are or who they would like to be.

Begin by listing common symbols found in everyday life (for example, stop signs). What messages do these symbols communicate? Discuss how individuals define themselves everyday through such preferences as the clothes they wear and the music they listen to. Brainstorm the different ways your students define themselves symbolically. Consider the following questions: Does your name have any special meaning? What is your favorite hobby? What items do you use daily? What object could you not live without? Conclude by asking if there are any shapes or symbols that your students can use to represent their answers.

Students are now ready to sketch a symbol that represents their individual identities using the ideas collected through this classroom dialogue. Remind students that their symbols should have personal meaning. Students will finish their designs by adding color, an element often used by artists to convey symbolic qualities. Collect the finished works and display them on a bulletin board. Invite students to guess which symbols represent each of their classmates.
Just Jargon

**Armorial**: As a noun, a coat of arms; as an adjective, of or relating to heraldry.

**Columnar**: Resembling the general shape of a column—in this case, particularly one from ancient Greece or Rome.

**Courier**: Person who delivers messages. In Revere’s day, a messenger responsible for carrying out official government business for the Colonies.

**Engraving**: The artistic practice of scratching a design onto the surface of an object using a sharp tool. Names, initials, family crests, and monograms along with naturalistic motifs and animals were often engraved on colonial American silver.

**Finial**: An ornament that terminates in a spire or pinnacle. Sculpted or molded, on furniture and architecture, these decorative elements often reflect an interest in naturalistic motifs.

**Freemasons**: Fraternal organization dating from late sixteenth-century Scotland and England. Revere’s association with the Masonic Order aided his political aspirations.

**Huguenots**: Sixteenth- and seventeenth-century French Protestants who fled France because of religious persecution and lived in Holland and England before settling in the American Colonies in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Many Huguenots were skilled artists and silversmiths and are considered among the most influential groups of foreign tradesmen with regard to the spread of European designs and techniques in the Colonies.

**John Singleton Copley (1738–1815)**: The best-known portraitist in colonial America, Copley immortalized Paul Revere II with his famous painting (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston) of the silversmith posed with his silver wares and workshop instruments. Copley’s portrait of Revere testifies to the high social status and respect afforded to the celebrated silversmith and patriot during the colonial period. Several works by Copley are in the collection of the Wadsworth Atheneum.

**Neoclassicism (adj. Neoclassical)**: Style that revived interest in the arts and architecture of ancient Greece and Rome, specifically elements of classical proportion and harmony in design. Popular in Europe in the second half of the eighteenth century, the Neoclassical style flourished in America from the 1770s to the 1820s.

**Porringer**: Small, shallow dish that colonial Americans used for porridges, caudles, and other soft or pureed foods. Caudles were therapeutic drinks that consisted of milk, wine or ale, bread, eggs, sugar, and various spices.

**Rococo**: Favoring dramatic ornamentation over the classical sensibilities of symmetry and order found in Neoclassicism, this earlier eighteenth-century decorative style became increasingly popular in the Colonies from the 1740s to 1780s. Nature proved to be the style’s greatest influence; its intricate designs combined flora and fauna in asymmetrical and abstract compositions.

**Sons of Liberty**: Secret organization of American patriots—predominantly tradesmen and shopkeepers—formed to protect the colonists from British taxation preceding the Revolution.

**Tankard**: Tall one-handed drinking vessel, either with or without a hinged lid, that held substantial quantities of cider and ale. Colonists commonly used tankards for communal drinking at social gatherings.
Web Resources for Deeper Exploration

**Metropolitan Museum of Art**
Paul Revere II as Artist
http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/rvre/hd_rvre.htm

American Rococo
http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/roco/hd_roco.htm

Neoclassicism
http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/neoc_1/hd_neoc_1.htm

**Museum of Fine Arts, Boston**
John Singleton Copley’s *Paul Revere*, 1768
http://www.mfa.org/collections/object/paul-revere-32401

Works by Paul Revere II, including *The Bloody Massacre*, 1770
http://www.mfa.org/search/collections?keyword=paul+revere%2C+jr&images=1

**The Huguenot Society of America**
http://huguenotsocietyofamerica.org/?page=Huguenot-History

**The Patriot Resource**
http://www.patriotresource.com/amerrev/people/patriots/revere.html

**The Paul Revere House**
http://www.paulreverehouse.org/bio/

**Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art**
http://www.thewadsworth.org/american-decorative/
References


This teacher resource was written by Emily Pacini Ide, Assistant Museum Educator for Community Programs, with editorial assistance from the museum’s Curatorial and Education departments and Lynne Reznick, High School Social Studies Teacher at Classical Magnet School in Hartford.
Appendix

Historic Revere Advertisements

Just Published, and to be Sold by
PAUL REVERE,
Opposite Dr. Clark’s at the North-End,
And by the Printers hereof,
A Copper-Plate PRINT, containing
a View of Part of the Town of Boston in New-England,
and British Ships of War landing their Troops in
the Year 1768. Dedicated to the Earl of Hillsborough.

Boston Gazette, April 16, 1770

ARTIFICIAL-TEETH.

Paul Revere,

TAKES this Method of returning his most Grateful
Thanks to the Gentlemen and Ladies who have
employed him in the care of their Teeth; he would now
inform them and all others, who are so unfortunate as to
lose their Teeth by accident or otherwise, that he still
continues his Business of a Dentist, and flatters himself
that from the Experience he has had these Two Years, (in
which Time he has fixed some Hundreds of Teeth) that he
can fix them as well as any Surgeon-Dentist who ever
came from London, he fixes them in such a Manner that
they are not only an Ornament but of real Use in Speaking
and Eating. He cleanses the Teeth and will visit on any
Gentleman or Lady at their Lodgings, he may be spoke
with at his Shop opposite Dr. Clark’s at the North-End,
where the Gold and Silversmith’s Business is carried on in
all its Branches.

Boston Gazette, July 30, 1770
Paul Revere,

Directly opposite LIBERTY POLE, South End, Boston.

Has IMPORTED,

And will SELL at a very low advance

for CASH—

4d., 6d., 8d., 10d. and


Brads,

Door-Locks from 5 to 10 Inches}

with Rings or Knobs,

H L and H Hinges,

Closet, Chest, and Pad-Locks,

Knob, and Iron Latches,

Warming and Frying-Pans,

Flat Irons,

A very elegant Assortment of Prince's

Metal Candlesticks highly finished

in the newest Taste,

Fire Shovels and Tongs,

Kitchen and other Bellow's,

Brass Kettles,

Iron Candlesticks,

House, Cloaths and Shoe Brushes,

Pewter,

Cost and Waistcoat Buttons,

Some very elegant plated Spurs,

Cutlery,

Plated, green, white, black, and Sham

Stag-handle Knives and Forks,

Green, Ivory, Tortoise-Shell and

Buffalo Pen-knives,

Cutters, Razors, Scissors, Snuffers,

Black Shoe and Knee Buckles,

Black Lead Melting-Pots from No. 1 to 30.

Crucibles,

Binding Wire, and many other Articles.

N. B. The Gold and Silver Smith's

Business is carried on in all its Branches.

A few pair of elegant Stone Shoe Buckles

for Ladies, Stone Knee-Buckles, Brooches

and Pins set in Gold.

Independent Chronicle, November 27, 1783
Tankard, c. 1760–74
Paul Revere II (1735–1818)
American, Boston, Massachusetts
Gift of Harold C. Lovell, Jr. and Lulu K. Lovell,
In Memory of Harold C. Lovell, Sr., 2000.7.1
From the collection of the Wadsworth Atheneum
Museum of Art, Hartford, CT.