

# ARGENTUM

## The Leopard's Head



### NOTES ON SILVER STANDARDS AND MARKS

Bullion value has traditionally been the most important cost of a silver object. Since pure silver cannot be worked, it is always alloyed with some baser metal. It is possible to add up to one third of base metal to silver without changing the color of the finished product. Therefore, to protect the consumer, and ultimately the State which received silver as a tax or duty, governments always and everywhere took steps to regulate the quality of the metal in both coinage and silverware. It was the universal custom that the same standard applied to both, so that private owners as well as sovereigns could transfer their money and their stocks of silverware back and forth as the occasion demanded without going through a re-assay and re-valuation each time. From these requirements proceed all the hallmark systems in use throughout the world. Marks were used there to tell the owner and the government what the exact standard of metal was and who was legally responsible in case of fraud.

Americans tend to think of silver as being either "sterling" or "plate." In fact, many standards are and have been in use. Based on pure silver expressed as 1000/1000 fine, some of the more common are:

950/1000 fine. Britannia standard, compulsory in England for the years 1697 to 1718 and optional ever since. Also the French Royal Standard (slightly variant) in use until the revolution and optional ever since.

925/1000 fine. The sterling standard. England, from the 13th century. Adopted generally in America around 1868.

800 through 890 fine. Various European standards. the 800/1000 standard is the common German standard. The Russian standard is 84/96.

750/1000 fine. About the lowest authorized standard.

The decimal system of indicating fineness is universal since about 1885. before that, one may encounter standard marks based on the ancient Mark of Cologne, which was divided into 16 units, or deniers, from the Roman denarius. Thus a mark of "13" would indicate 13/16ths, or about 800 fine.

In many cases with older silver, there will be no numerical standard mark at all. In these cases, as in England, the mark of the Wardens of the Goldsmith's Guild (a lion

### FINE ANTIQUE SILVER

passant) indicated that the metal was of standard fineness, whatever the local law declared that to be.

*Special note. Whenever a legal marking authority, for example a certain town in Germany, went out of existence for legal purposes, there was nothing to prevent the use of that town's mark on illegal work. Thus, a vast quantity of nineteenth century silver is marked with town and standard marks of places which has not assayed silver in years. Such marks are "fantasy marks" only.*

## PLATED SILVER

There are three kinds of plated silver. Each is some method of placing a thin surface of silver on a base metal body. There are few rules about the marking of silver plate, since Governments usually did not set standards of quality for legal purposes. What marks that do exist are often meant to deceive. The three types of plate are:

"Silvering" or "Close plating." This is an ancient method, mostly used to coat steel or brass, which consisted of fixing a thin sheet of silver to the base metal using a flux and a hot soldering iron. It is not very durable on steel, as can be seen by the deteriorating plating often seen on silvered knife blades. Close plating may be encountered on 19th century English steel objects such as snuffers and coffin furniture, and sometimes on 18th century brass. Most early brass was originally silvered.

"Old Sheffield Plate." These words describe a method of plating, which consisted of fusing a sheet or sheets of sterling only a copper bar under heat and high pressure. The coated bar was then rolled out and made up into objects just as a bar of sterling would have been, with special methods used to conceal the copper center at the edges. This method dates from around 1760, and is marked in various ways. At first the manufacturers used pseudo-hallmarks, meant to look superficially like true London marks. This was forbidden by law after a few years and for the remainder of the 18th century Old Sheffield Plate never bears any marks at all. Most good Old Sheffield Plate is not marked. It can be identified by style and a careful examination of the methods of manufacture. In the early 19th century the law allowed the use of makers names and trademarks provided that they did not in any way resemble legal hall marks.

"Electroplate." First in commercial use around 1840, this method of plating requires that a finished object made of some base metal be placed in a bath containing silver in solution. By passing an electric current through the bath the silver is deposited evenly on the object. This method was cheaper and much more efficient, and soon supplanted Old Sheffield Plate, although many of the manufacturers continued to use the same trade marks. All American silver plate is electroplate. A large number of "standard" marks appear, both in England and

America, for example A-I, EPNS, EPBM, EPC, SILVER SOLDERED, QUADRUPLE, etc. None of these "standards" mean anything. The plating is either in good condition or it is worn off.

*Some warnings. Nothing marked "Sheffield" is Old Sheffield Plate. No plated wares marked "England" can date before the 1880's. Any mark incorporating the word "silver" such as "Nevada Silver" "German Silver" Brazil Silver" or the like means that the piece is nickle silver, a base metal which does not contain silver, and which may or may not be plated.*

*Replating. Old Sheffield Plate is valuable by definition because it is an antique object. It should not be replated, unless the piece is so worn that the antique value is gone already, in which case it might as well be replated. On the other hand, worn electroplate is almost worthless, so if the piece is worth saving it should and may be replated, which will only enhance the value.*

French and Russian "Old Sheffield Plate" type silverplate is marked with quality marks, however this sort of work is rare and is beyond the scope of this note.

### SILVER MARKS – SOLID SILVER

#### MARK

#### ORIGIN

Sterling, or 925,  
or 925/1000

Modern (after 1868) US silver, or silver made elsewhere for export to the US.



English sterling marks for London, 1856.  
Leopard's head facing: London assay office.  
Letter A: Date letter for 1856.  
Lion passant: Sterling standard mark.  
Queen's head: Duty stamp.  
Initials: maker's mark.



Britannia standard mark for London, 1863.  
The Leopard and Lion marks replaced with a figure of Britannia and a leopard's head erased.



German Federal mark after 1888.



Typical 18th century European marks. Rotterdam, mid 18th century.  
Crowned Lion; Province mark.  
Shield: Rotterdam town mark  
Z: Date letter.  
VL: Maker's mark.

Various marks used by the American silversmith Paul Revere.

PREMIUM, STANDARD,  
COIN, FRENCH FRANKS,  
SP.DOL, STER.AMER.MFG.,  
PURE SILVER COIN.

Marks used by American silversmiths in the first half of the 19th century.

"11oz" and "10:14:

Baltimore standard marks for sterling and coin silver, based on a 12 ounce Troy standard.

### SILVER MARKS: SILVER PLATE

MARK	ORIGIN
	English 18th-19th century close plate mark.
	English fused plate mark (Old Sheffield Plate.) Most is not-marked. If marked, either a symbol or a full name appear. The words "Sheffield, England, Silver on Copper" were never used on Sheffield Plate.
	English electroplate marks. Consists mostly of makers initials and quality marks such as AE, EPNS, EPB, or the like. Such marks are often arranged to look like hallmarks.
	American electroplate marks. Similar to the English marks.

### A BRIEF BIBLIOGRAPHY

- General books: Wyler, Seymour B. **THE BOOK OF OLD SILVER** (New York: Crown, 1937) Various editions. Good general marks book including English, American, European.
- English marks: Pickford, Ian **JACKSON'S SILVER AND GOLD MARKS OF ENGLAND, SCOTLAND AND IRELAND** (London: Antique Collector's Club, 1989) Various pocket editions of Jackson are in print with the hallmarks only.
- American marks: Kovel, Ralph M. & Terry H. **AMERICAN SILVER, PEWTER AND SILVER PLATE** (New York: Crown, 1975, and revised edition 1989) The best mark book for silversmiths working up to the Civil War. (Coin silver makers.)

**Rainwater, Dorothy and Judy Redfield, ENCYCLOPEDIA OF AMERICAN SILVER MANUFACTURERS (Antglen, PA.: Schiffer, 4th revised ed. 1998) For American manufacturers from circa 1860 to the present.**

**Plate Marks: Bradbury, Frederick HISTORY OF OLD SHEFFIELD PLATE (Sheffield, Northend, 1968 ed.) For Old Sheffield Plate. American plate marks can be found in Rainwater, above.**

**A general knowledge of hallmarking systems as practiced in England and on the Continent is essential to properly identifying objects. An individual mark, taken out of a series, is almost meaningless. Collectors should read Jackson carefully to learn what marks need to go together. Only when you understand the system can you effectively use the mark books. Tardy, for example, when giving Dutch marks, shows the province marks, the town marks, date letters, standard marks and the tax marks on separate tables, and it is really hard to understand how these marks should combine on one piece of silver. When studying American marks, which rarely include date letters, you need to consider the working dates of silversmiths, and have a general knowledge of styles so that you can date pieces with accuracy.**

**Remember that finding a mark is only the beginning to coming to terms with the nature and value of an object. An 18th century spoon may be worth only \$20.00, whereas a fine piece by a silversmith working in 1975 may be a Museum object. For a real silver collector, quality always trumps age, and historical interest or provenance trumps quality! For example:**

<b>A silver beaker.</b>	<b>\$80.00</b>
<b>but Coin silver circa 1815</b>	<b>800.00</b>
<b>but by Charles Burnett, working in Washington DC.</b>	<b>1800.00</b>
<b>but made for Thomas Jefferson.</b>	<b>18000.00</b>

**HAPPY HUNTING!**