

2b Silver of the 18th, 19th, & 20th Centuries

During the seventeenth century, tea imported from east Asia changed the drinking habits of Europe and, before long, the American colonies. The caffeine it contained was stimulating, but without the negative effects of the beer or ale Europeans and the colonists normally drank (even for breakfast), and — because it was made with water purified by boiling — it was healthier than plain water.

For European and colonist alike, tea was expensive, and drinking it was reserved for social occasions. A distinct etiquette developed around its consumption, and special utensils were designed for preparing and serving it. Teapots made of silver were the choice of the well-to-do. The metal retained heat and could be fashioned to make vessels of subtle sophistication and beauty. Its smooth surface was ideal for etching designs indicating ownership or commemorating events.

The teapots sparkled when moved and handled. When not in use, they were displayed, infusing light into dark corners of colonial interiors. They were not only a symbol of the owner's social standing and prosperity; silver vessels had monetary value

as well, and were a form of cash reserve that could be melted and used as currency.

Boston was one of the main centers of colonial silver craft, and Paul Revere was one of the city's leading silversmiths before and after the Revolution. The dramatically angled pot made by Revere in 1796, shown here, is radically different in style from the curvaceous prerevolutionary pot he holds in the 1768 painting by Copley (see 2-A).

Following the Revolutionary War, many American architects built in the Neoclassical style in honor of the new nation's political foundations, based on the ideals of ancient Greece and Rome. Some examples are Thomas Jefferson's Virginia State Capitol, Charles Bulfinch's Boston State House, and Benjamin Latrobe's designs for the U.S. Capitol. Paul Revere's teapot is in the Federalist style, an American version of Neoclassicism that developed in New England.

Seen from the side, Revere's teapot looks like a section of a fluted (grooved) classical column, but when viewed from the top, the vessel is oval and appears much lighter in mass. Its oval footprint has the advantage of allowing most of the pot's surface



**2-B.1 Paul Revere Jr. (1734–1818),
Teapot, 1796. Silver, overall 6 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 11 $\frac{1}{8}$ in.,
668.7 grams (15.4 x 29.5 cm., 21.499 troy
ounces); base 5 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 3 $\frac{3}{8}$ in. (14.4 x 9.5 cm.).
The Metropolitan Museum of Art,
Bequest of Alphonso T. Clearwater,
1933 (33.120.543). Photograph © 1986
The Metropolitan Museum of Art.**



2-B.2 Thomas William Brown (Wilmington, North Carolina), tea service. Silver, c. 1840–1850. © North Carolina Museum of History, Raleigh, N.C.

to be visible from the side when it is set on a shallow shelf. Etched garlands, as delicate as spider lace, loop in swags around its top and bottom. Their lightness adds grace to the teapot's form without disturbing its strength.

Revere was an energetic entrepreneur who understood the wisdom of diversifying. The market for his silver work was not limited to the wealthy, and he earned as much from many small jobs for people of more limited income as he did for the more expensive pieces made for the elite. He cast bells and cannon in bronze, and established the country's copper industry. He also developed a copper-rolling machine and supplied protective copper sheathing for hulls of ships and copper bolts and spikes for the *USS Constitution*.

Silver continued to be the metal of choice when Thomas William Brown designed this tea service around 1840–1850 for Edward Kidder, a prominent businessman in Wilmington, North Carolina, where Brown also lived.

The pieces were crafted in much the same way Revere's were a half century earlier. Each vessel began with a lump of silver that was hammered or rolled through a flattening press to form

a sheet. It was then shaped into a three-dimensional form by pounding it against a stake to bend it bit by bit. Revere's 1796 teapot has a soldered and riveted seam along the side with the handle, but a bowl shape could be hammered from a single sheet of silver without the need of soldering. Some parts, like finials (lid knobs) and feet (added to the pot to protect the surface of wooden tea tables from heat damage) were usually cast as solid pieces and attached by soldering.

After the pot was smoothed and polished, it was ready for engraving. The vessel was filled with pitch to support the metal and keep it from denting when the silversmith pressed the engraving tool into the surface. The work required a steady hand and a stable surface, so the pot was rested against a leather pad filled with sand (see the leather pad in Copley's portrait of Paul Revere, 2-A).

In contrast to Revere's compact forms, Brown's vessels are tall and stately. His tea service includes a lidded sugar bowl, a pitcher for cream, and a waste bowl (slop) to hold the dregs and unused tea when a new pot is to be brewed. Its owner was involved in several businesses and served on the board of directors of banks, community services, and charitable



2-B.3 Gene Theobald (active 1920s–1930s), “Diamant” teapot, 1928. Wilcox Silver Plate Company, American, (active 1867–1961), division of International Silver Company, American, founded 1898. Silverplate and plastic, overall 7½ x 6¼ x 3¼ in. (19.05 x 16.828 x 9.208 cm.). Location: Meriden, Connecticut. Dallas Museum of Art, Dallas, Tex., The Jewel Stern American Silver Collection, Gift of Jewel Stern.

organizations, and he may have entertained with some frequency. The set was designed to serve tea with ease and grace. Lids are attached, so there is no need to set them down where they might leave a ring, and the rim of the waste bowl is broad enough to catch a splash before it reaches the table. Because heat from the pot might be transferred to the handle, teapots sometimes were given wood handles, as, for example, with Revere’s teapot. The delicately scrolled silver handles on Brown’s service arc away from the heated pot and are inlaid with precious ivory.

The opening of silver mines in the West, beginning with the discovery of the Comstock Lode in Nevada in 1859, and the development of new technologies like electroplating (applying a layer of silver over a cheaper base metal) made silver wares more widely available. In the economic boom that followed the Civil War, the taste for silver grew. Most homes of respectable means aspired to set a fine table, and homes of the elite desired ever more numerous and specialized silver utensils and containers.

Silver production transformed from a small shop business, where almost everything was done by hand by a few craftsmen, to a large-scale industry with machine manufacturing. Large silver companies like Gorham, Reed & Barton, and Tiffany were founded in the nineteenth century, and America’s silver industry became the largest in the world. An exhibition in Paris in 1925 exhibited a new style that celebrated the sleek sophistication

of the modern era, a style that became known as Art Deco. Art Deco taste favored the sleek efficiency of the modern machine age. (See 15-A for another example of the style.)

Designer Gene Theobald and product stylist Virginia Hamill developed a type of tea service called the dinette set, whose components fit closely together in a carrying tray. The set could be moved easily as a unit and took up less space in the chic apartments of the urban sophisticates for whom they were designed. The tongue-in-cheek humor of Theobald’s *Diamant Dinette Set* of 1928 makes it look less like a tea service than an ocean liner steaming across the table or a miniature version of the skyline glimpsed from an apartment window.

Inventive design was more important than the value of the raw material, and the set is plated rather than solid silver. A new machine-age material—a type of plastic developed between 1907 and 1909—was used for the knobs on the lids. The flat planes and straight lines of the silver reflect images and light differently than Revere’s or Brown’s pots. The earlier pots distort reflections, which glide over the surface and accent their curving shapes. The planes of the *Diamant Dinette Set* create mirror-like images, which sometimes makes the plane look solid and other times makes it look transparent. The reflective play of surface and depth gives the tea set a lively and sparkling appearance, a feature impossible to capture in a static photograph.

TEACHING ACTIVITIES

E = ELEMENTARY | M = MIDDLE | S = SECONDARY

Encourage students to look closely at these teapots and services.

DESCRIBE AND ANALYZE

E

Have students compare the form and texture of the three teapots on this poster. Ask students how they are alike.

They are all shiny metal with spouts, handles, and lids with knobs.

Which is most angular? *Theobald's is.*

Which has the most rounded form? *Brown's has.*

Which includes both straight and rounded forms? *Revere's does.*

Which teapots seem most vertical? *Brown's and Theobald's do.*

Which has an engraved design? *Revere's teapot does.*

Which teapot reflects light like a smooth, flat mirror? *Theobald's does; the other two would create distorted reflections.*

Which teapot looks like a machine made it? *Theobald's does.*

E | M | S

Ask students why Revere's teapot has a wooden handle.

The silver became hot when filled with boiling water. With a wooden handle, the users wouldn't burn their hands as they poured tea.

M | S

Have students compare Revere's 1796 teapot to the prerevolutionary teapot he holds in Copley's portrait of him in 2-A.

The prerevolutionary teapot is much more rounded than the later one.

How is Revere's 1796 teapot like classical architecture?

Its body is fluted like a classical column.

After the American Revolution why did this Neoclassical style appeal to Americans?

Neoclassical designs were based on Roman and Greek architecture, which reminded viewers that their new country's government was based on ancient Greek and Roman ideals.

INTERPRET

E | M

Host a tea party by serving the class hot tea. Because you'll probably use tea bags and disposable cups, explain to students how different this experience is from how tea was served in the eighteenth century, when tea leaves were carefully brewed in silver teapots and tea was served in fine china cups.

E | M | S

Ask students why drinking tea was a social event in the seventeenth century.

Because tea leaves were imported and expensive, an elaborate ritual for brewing and drinking it developed.

Why was drinking tea healthier than water? *Boiling water to brew tea purified the water.*

E | M | S

Have students describe the function of each of the pieces in Brown's tea service.

Left to right: The sugar bowl held sugar; the teapot brewed and served tea; the creamer held and served cream; and the waste bowl or slop caught the remains of cold tea and used tea leaves before more tea was served.

E | M | S

Ask students why seventeenth- and eighteenth-century teapots were made of silver.

The silver would hold the heat necessary for brewing tea, and silver teapots are beautiful.

M | S

In addition to their functionality and beauty, why did colonial Americans want to own teapots?

They indicated wealth, and because they could be engraved with the owner's identification, they were considered a safer financial investment than silver coins that could be stolen. If necessary, silver teapots could be melted and used as money.

M | S

Ask students what developments made teapots such as Theobald's more affordable than Revere's and Brown's teapots.

Silver was discovered in Nevada and electroplating or applying silver over a cheaper base metal was invented. Also, the introduction of industrialization meant that machines rather than individual craftsmen made teapots.

E | M | S

Ask students which teapot they would rather use—and why.

CONNECTIONS **Historical Connections:** Boston Tea Party; Intolerable Acts

Historical Figures: Paul Revere; King George III; Patrick Henry; John Adams; Samuel Adams

Economics: trade and mercantilism between mother country and the colonies; connection between economic issues and political upheaval