

WHAT VALUE

the family silver?

At W J Sanders we are often asked by a client who has brought in an item for restoration: 'What is the value of this item?' As a manufacturing silversmith we can offer a valuation on many articles based on the price of 're-making' it today. However such a valuation may differ greatly from what the item would actually bring at auction and also may not reflect the historical or heritage value of the item.

Many pieces that W J Sanders restores are family treasures with a high degree of sentimental value. These are often viewed by the owners as 'priceless'. However if our clients require a documented valuation we recommend they contact a professional valuation expert such as silver consultant historian and valuer Jolyon Warwick James.

To further enlighten us all on the intricacies of the valuation processes we invited Jolyon to put his thoughts in writing, and he responded with the following.

A VALUER'S OPINION

Oscar Wilde once famously said: 'A cynic is a man who knows the price of everything and the value of nothing.' Whilst we can appreciate the purpose of his words, there are, sadly, times when it is very necessary to be cynical and assign dollar values to items – especially in the art and antiques scene. Whilst we are principally concerned here with silver, most of what is said is very relevant to other media.

So what is value? Simply put, it is what someone will pay for the item – but it's not quite that simple. Let's look at three possibilities.

Firstly, we may need to know how much we might get for something if we sold it. Even here there are two possibilities: the fire sale – i.e. a quick emergency disposal often at auction, against the more usual (with no undue haste) sale, often through an agent or gallery. The urgent fire sale – with less extensive marketing and exposure, risks missing a target buyer and raising a lower sum.

Our second value is another figure, being how much you might need to pay for something if purchased from a good (retail) shop.

Our third value is somewhere in the middle of all this. It is the amount where a fortunate vendor identifies a private buyer. The vendor expects to get more in his pocket than if he sold it to a dealer or at auction and similarly the buyer expects to have to pay less than if he walked into a 'high street shop'. In effect they split the differential. It requires there to be both a willing but not anxious seller and a willing but not anxious buyer – terms often heard in the valuing world. Some will describe this figure as fair market value. However it is wise to be sure that this is what the speaker actually means if the term is used.

What is clear is that there is no single value for an item. The value of an item as determined by the dollars attributed to it depends on the terms of the valuation – and these need to be clearly understood. As we shall see, the unqualified word 'value' has little or no meaning on its own.

For all the above values there is one common determinant. That is, the state of the market for the item at that point in time. Times change, and so do values – and not always upwards – at least in the short term. The valuer's job is to know the market and attribute the appropriate value to the item in question – relevant of course to the purpose of

the valuation. But herein lies a second challenge. The valuer also has to know exactly what the item is and to evaluate it accordingly. Not just the name, function or purpose of the object (e.g. trophy cup, tea service etc), but the ingredients that go to making it more or less desirable to the market.

It takes an experienced and knowledgeable person to know if an item is in good condition. How many times has one heard an over-polished and shiny piece of silver described as being in 'unused, mint condition' by an inexperienced eye? What is inaccurately touted as the item's greatest asset is in fact of significant detriment. Another and very different question is that of quality. Where does the item fit into that spectrum? The two issues can be easily illustrated by appreciating that a Rolls Royce can be rusty, and a Trabant can be in genuinely pristine condition.

Other questions are those of artistic and historical significance. These can add significantly to an item by their presence and strength. They are sometimes not obvious but need to be detected. We may need to see an original design (or verifiable copy) to be sure of an artistic connection. In the case of historical significance we also need provenance – the history of the item – who owned it, where it's been, etc. Such evidence needs to be factual and not speculative. It makes a very positive difference if a candlestick was owned by Captain Cook – but we do need proof. The impact of the makers also needs to be considered.

THE VALUATION PROCESS

Let us take a piece and go through the valuation process.

Image 1 shows an 18 cm high chalice hallmarked for John Hardman, Birmingham 1850. Plus points are the excellent condition (determined by careful inspection). There is no damage or alteration from the original condition – deemed good by the market. Recognising this requires knowledge of what the original state should be and the most likely damage-prone areas. A keen eye is needed to spot repairs, which can significantly reduce value.

Is it good quality? Design-wise it is very desirable, being Gothic revival with design overtones of famous 19th century British designer and architect Augustus Pugin (1812-1852) – a valuer needs to spot that. Whilst the original design is not to hand, the market would accept it as from the Pugin stable. Supporting this, John Hardman Jr (1811-1867) was a maker of much Pugin output.

What about the provenance? It's not known but originally it was probably placed in a church and unlikely to have belonged to any iconic figure (which would have dramatically increased its value) – no proof exists anyway. It is of average size-to-weight ratio, so no plusses or minuses there. Would you know what is normal here?

What is the value? For what purpose, it's important to know. Let's say retail purchase in a good antiques shop. Probably between \$2500 and \$3500, so the mid-point taken would be \$3000; that's an insurance valuation figure. So what would you get if you sold it to a knowledgeable and fair minded dealer? He should certainly offer you around \$1500 to \$2000. So, that's a 'realisation' value of say \$1750. If a vendor fortuitously identified a



Image 1: Sterling silver chalice hallmarked John Hardman (Birmingham) 1850, h: 18 cm



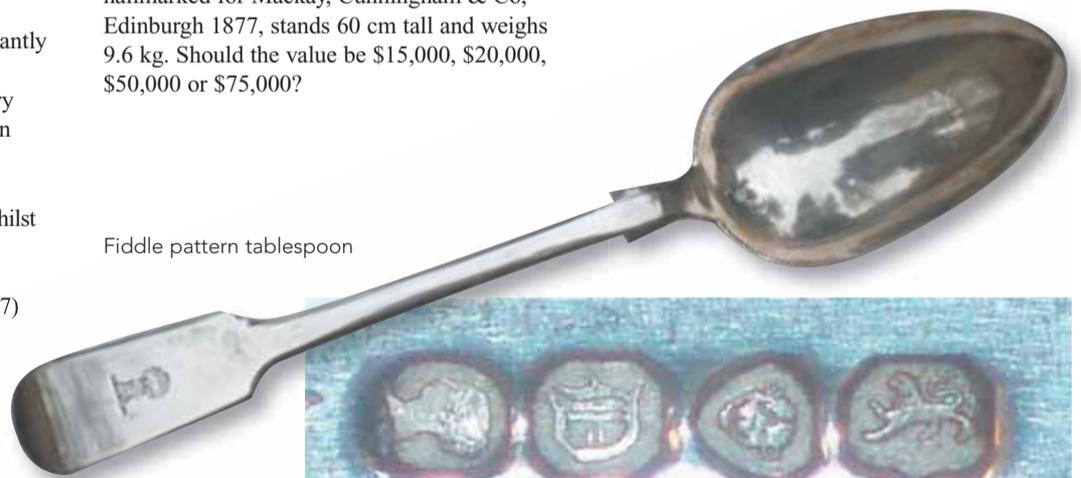
Image 2: Silver gilt candelabrum hallmarked for Mackay, Cunningham & Co (Edinburgh) 1877, h: 60 cm, weight: 9.6 kg

buyer, the mid-point agreed upon (fair market value) might be around \$2400. A mid 19th century chalice, vaguely similar but in worn condition and not exhibiting the attraction of a desirable designer, could easily be valued at \$1200 for insurance purposes and well under a \$1000 realisation value. Would you know the difference?

How would you value the massive candelabrum pictured for, say, insurance purposes? It depicts Ariel and Caliban from Shakespeare's *Tempest*. It is silver gilt, hallmarked for Mackay, Cunningham & Co, Edinburgh 1877, stands 60 cm tall and weighs 9.6 kg. Should the value be \$15,000, \$20,000, \$50,000 or \$75,000?

Also pictured is a normal fiddle pattern tablespoon. If it is stamped with the marks pictured in image (A), you could buy it from a reputable shop for around \$100. However, if it is stamped with the marks in image (B), you'd need to be prepared to pay possibly as much as \$2000. Do you know why?

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Fiddle pattern tablespoon

Image (A) Hallmarks attributing value to approximately \$100



Image (B) Hallmarks attributing value to approximately \$2000