

For the love of eggs

Some of Australia's most unique and collectable silver pieces are those crafted by early Australian silversmiths using the eggs of emus and ostriches.

Such pieces were designed and used as goblets, tankards, ornate trophies, jewellery and condiment caskets, inkwells, candlesticks - or sometimes, just as table decorations. Famous designers include H Steiner, William Edwards and J M Wendt, all of whom created fabulous pieces during the mid to late 1800s. Many items were adorned with Aboriginal figures, Australian wildlife and exotic fauna - and sometimes eggs.

The silversmiths of W J Sanders recently have had the pleasure of working on egg pieces made or inspired by these great artisans. The major silver pieces using eggs were crafted in the 1800s. In the early 1900s, less ornate pieces were produced using brass or EPNS.

Going through the old records of W J Sanders (established 1911), we could find no evidence that our company crafted pieces using the eggs of birds. Little did we know that our first foray into egg pieces would earn repeat requests!



An intact J M Wendt piece, c. 1875

Eggshell love 1

In 2002, at the height of the ostrich and emu farming investment boom, the ASX charity fundraiser approached W J Sanders to make sterling silver bases for eight ostrich eggshells, which were painted by some of Australia's top artists who donated them to raise money for charity.



Before restoration

We settled on the design for the bases from a picture of an ostrich eggshell tankard that now resides in the National Gallery of Australia, made in 1883 by Adelaide silversmith H Steiner. W J Sander donated the eight bases for the painted eggshells; each was stamped with the traditional W J Sanders mark and hand engraved with the name of the painting, the artist and the year. The full set of eight was purchased at auction by an art investor.

Eggshell love 2

The organisers of the auction happened to have a number of spare ostrich eggs so in the following year (2003) W J Sanders agreed to replicate the famous 1883 Steiner tankard and donate it to the next charity auction. Although we had repaired and restored other Steiner pieces, this was a new and exciting challenge for the silversmiths as it was the first time they had created with eggshell. More excitement came from working on a design that owes its origin to 17th century German work, for this replica Steiner tankard

There were two distinct tasks, with the egg and then with the silver. First, the ostrich eggshell had to be cut into two sections, one for the lid, and one to contain a bowl spun in silver that had to sit precisely into the replicated base designed from the original. Up the side of the eggshell ran a rim to which the handle was attached. The decorative edging on the lid and on the body was hand cut. It was made entirely in sterling silver and stamped as such. The inside of the lid and bowl were 24-carat gold plated.

The W J Sander replicate of the Steiner tankard fetched a handsome price for a very worthwhile charity. Our silversmiths really enjoyed learning an old technique at the same time as helping needy Australians through a charity.

Eggshell love 3

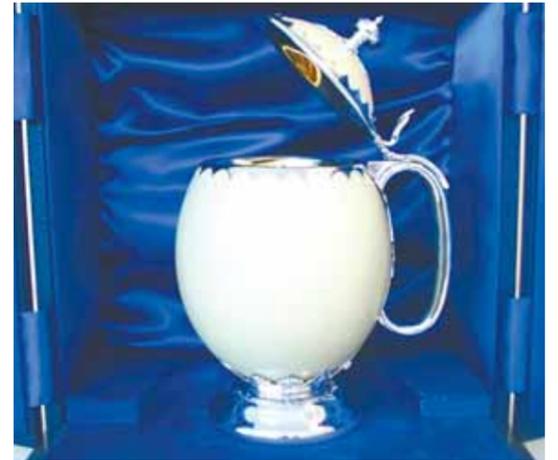
Our reputation must have travelled, as recently an early 1860s eggshell and silver piece was brought to W J Sanders to restore. William Edwards, an Englishman who arrived in Australia in the 1850s made it in Melbourne along with many unique Australian pieces. The story of this restoration follows in the next paragraphs and accompanying photographs.



Restoration completed



An illustration of the Steiner tankard now exhibited at the National Museum of Australia, Canberra



The replica made by W J Sanders and auctioned for charity in 2003

The first stage was to photograph the piece from several angles, as this would give important references during the course of the restoration. It became evident when dismantling it that previously it had been pulled apart and subsequently reassembled incorrectly. Our research confirmed this from reference books that included pieces crafted by Edwards, and that were very similar in design.

Only a badly damaged half of the original egg came with the piece that we deduced was originally the half shell that was on the base surround. For aesthetic reasons, after the top shell was broken someone had dismantled it and put it back onto the top surround.

The silver top and base surrounds were carefully measured with calipers to determine the size of the replacement egg needed. A trip to an emu farm in southern New South Wales included measuring over 100 emptied and dried eggshells, resulting in the purchase of three eggs that were exactly the required dimensions. Our silversmith then researched (on the internet) the best methods of working with shell for his first time.

The first step was to cut the egg exactly in half. The eggs were soaked in a solution of vinegar and water overnight to soften the shells, and then carefully measured to draw a trace line across the long circumference of the egg. Using a hand piece similar to a dental drill, the line was ground and cut around the egg. The first egg broke, but the attempt on the second eggshell was successful.

The inside of the egg was laminated using glue and paper to strengthen the two halves, prior to further restoration. The halves had to be ground down to fit exactly the original 1860s silver surrounds and very carefully drilled through on the top sections on which would sit the attachments to the old metal decoration. We even discovered how to clean the inside of an emu shell - use emu oil!

Meanwhile, the silver pieces were taken apart, each piece cleaned and repaired where necessary. The broken emu standing on the

summit was silver-soldered back into its original place. The plaster and pitch was removed from the base, after which the silver base was cleaned and then re-pitched. The insides of the eggshell were 24-carat gold plated as was the original. The ornamental surrounds were carefully pinned onto the egg.

From marks found underneath the base, we believed that the piece was originally attached to a wooden plinth, as our research on those days showed that some were and some were not. To complete the restoration we had a wooden base made in Queensland in the same style as many of the pieces crafted by Edwards. The base was attached and felted to complete the restoration.

J M Wendt, H Steiner's greatest rival was also from Adelaide. Like Steiner, he was responsible for producing silverware that won awards both in Australia and overseas. He was commissioned to make numerous spectacular trophies and other ornamental pieces. Also like Steiner and William Edwards, he made many Australian pieces incorporating Aboriginal figures, Australian animals and fauna... and of course emu eggs.

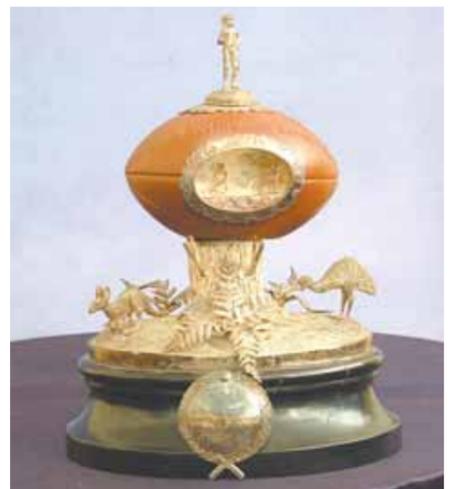
Our fourth eggshell work is just beginning. A cricket trophy made by J M Wendt has arrived at W J Sanders for restoration. At first, we were shocked to see that the emu egg had been replaced with a plastic 1980s Bank of NSW rugby league football money box (pictured). On second thoughts, this substitute was quite ingenious as the plastic football was cut to fit the silver insets and decoration, thus keeping the piece intact until restoration could take place.

Once again, we are off to the emu farm in search of another perfect sized egg - and another perfect restoration. ■

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Restoration completed - showing interior



Next project, with Bank of NSW money box, c. 1980 instead of original egg