

We've taken quite a shine to silver

A Victorian passion that still captivates us today

SILVER is always close by, whether hidden in a dusty attic or parked on the street. It wasn't so at one time. The precious metal's popularity began to fade from our lives along with the Victorian tea set. But we couldn't bear the loss and we had to have new silver objects to replace the old – cars, stainless steel range cookers and disco balls.

Victorian middle class households adored silver. They owned as much as they could. The objects were highly decorative and detailed to signify status and value. Keeping silver in a state of pristine shininess in a coal-smutted world was labour-intensive and a matter of household pride.

The demise of the silver-shining servant and our newfound love of convenient plastics marginalised the precious metal to largely decorative role. The impact of years of living with the mass-produced industrialised object has affected our taste in silver objects – the repetitive motif, the sleek, streamlined silhouette and unadorned surface fits in with the way we live now.

Silver is now an everyday symbol of expensive engineering, modernity and streamlined shimmering speed. It's a keepsake of the mysterious and elusive – the shimmer of a rainbow trout, the flicker of starlight on a still clear night.

The monetary value of a silver object is still dictated by the craftsmanship involved in making it, but the metal itself is doing just fine. Silver prices have doubled in the past six months.

The status of owning a highly decorative piece is solely a matter of taste. Think hard about whether you or your grandchildren will still like it

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and use it in 30 years. If the piece is on display, think about whether it will fit with its surroundings. Silver lasts pretty much forever.

In terms of choice, plain sponge is delicious but sometimes we like the more personal touch of icing on the cake. The latest silversmithing uses textural effects from the severely matt combined with elements of high shine to unusual organic forms. The Goldsmiths Company have commissioned beautiful cutting-edge pieces by leading silversmiths to add to their archive of 8,000 items dating back to 15th century.

The new objects include Clare Ransom's pleated vessel, which resembles an exotic seedpod, Junko Mori's ornament with sea anemone tendrils, and Sidel Dorph Jensen's textured containers that resemble tubes made from a much softer material. Some of the archive is on show later this year in Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery.

Silver lovers should beat a march to Richard Jarvis's shop in Pall Mall – possibly the best retail outlook in the capital, facing St James's Palace. Customers are offered a glass of wine while the Guards perform their duties in front of the window, as if by arrangement.

Jarvis, sage of all things silver, is at the heart of the English silver establishment. He started his career at crown jewellers Garrard as an apprentice silver buyer and ended up managing director.



Silver paintwork enhances the lines of stylish performance cars such as the Ferrari 360 Spider

Jarvis offers a shopping and advisory service sourcing antique and newly commissioned silver from designers and his own workshop, the Silver Roundhouse. The most lavish is a museum-standard model of HMS Victory in full sail.

The wood-panelled shop is packed with lovingly crafted pieces in their protective glass cases. Jarvis is a great promoter of the silversmithing craft and collector of silver cups. These vessels are an unpretentious simple shape without a stem, but can be embellished or not. A silver cup keeps water cold; no need for ice. He has some lovely ones depicting the seasons in flora and fauna that would make a wonderful gift for a baby.

Many of the smaller objects in the shop are humorous. A solid silver crocodile head or hippo head stapler would bring great pleasure to your desk life. One of his most popular objects is the rulers ruler. One lists English monarchs, another US presidents. One resides on a grand desk nearby.

A candlestick always looks good in silver. Jarvis has Georgian-designed examples and contemporary versions by Brett Payne, Martin Pugh and Richardson and Ottwill to name a couple.

Industrially made valuables have adopted silver the metal and the colour for their outer shells. The silver car will always have a classy European sleekness, especially on brands like Audi or Saab.

Simon Padian, Saab's brand design chief, says there are good reasons for this. Silver shows the forms and lines of the car, giving a good balance between highlight and shadow. It's sober and tasteful without being boring. Hence in the early stages of car design the colour silver is most commonly used, as with the Saab Aero X concept car recently showcased at the Frankfurt Motor show.

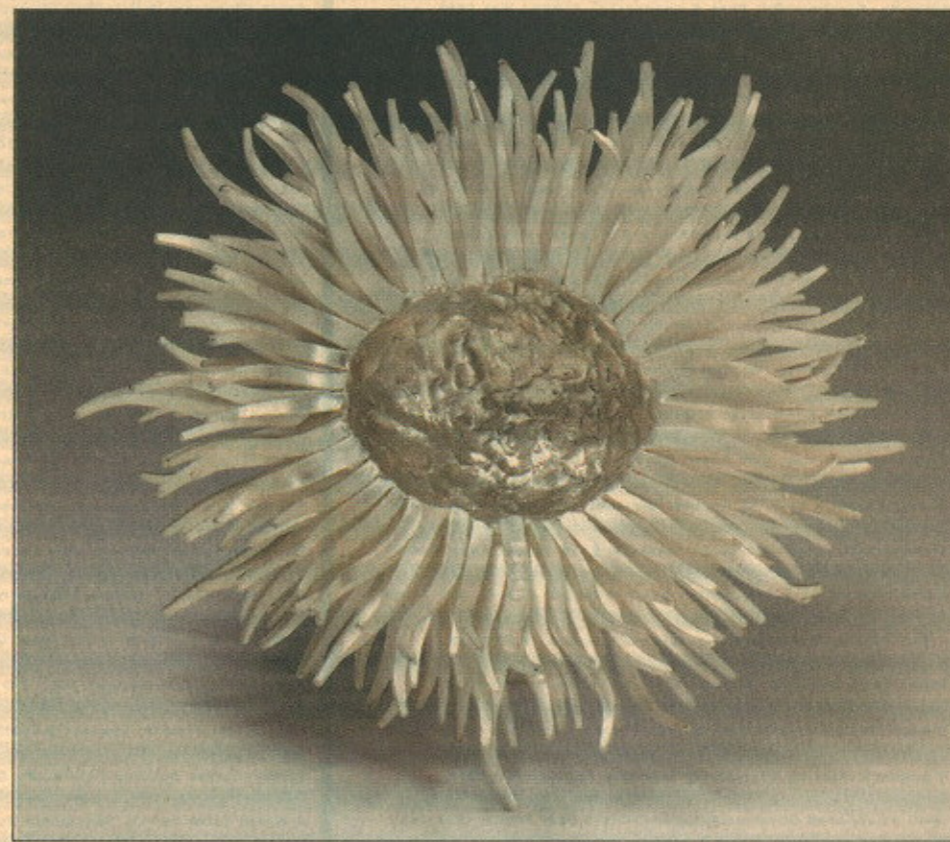
Nick Gartrell at P1, the luxury car club, says: "Many of the prestige and performance cars we offer are in shades of silver. Some marques such as Aston Martin and Porsche particu-

larly suit silver." Other manufacturers such as Maserati and Ferrari, Gartrell says, try to make silver sound more exotic by giving shades names like Grigio Touring and Argento Nurburgring.

Whether you enjoy your beloved British silver or not, its value is assured by its hallmark (originally meaning marked at the Goldsmiths' Hall). The Assay Offices award the sterling silver hallmarks to all that meets their standard in this country. They've been doing so since 1300, but as ever Brussels threatens a British tradition. The 925 mark (silver content, sometimes 950) has to be put on silver objects by European Commission regulation, but the date mark which has guided us through our silver heritage is now optional in law.

- Goldsmiths Company directory, www.whoswhoingoldandsilver.com
- Richard Jarvis, www.richardjarvisofpallmall.com
- P1, www.p1international.com
- Saab, www.saab.com

Set of cups with fish detail and sleek modern candle holders from Richard Jarvis in Pall Mall



Junko Mori's silver sea anemone ornament, commissioned recently by the Goldsmiths Company