

# Important Collectors and Collections:

## Thomas Feilenreiter: My collection of wine jugs

I am collecting silver for the last twenty years – it all started in my student days in Graz/Austria by spending my monthly allowance more on decanters than on textbooks. As with everything, starts are difficult. The best teachers are time and your own pocketbook – time to learn and to regret buying mistakes. By avid reading I learned about styles and marks, my trips to auction houses, conversations with knowledgeable dealers and exchanges of thoughts with other collectors were all part of my learning curve. My collection contains hundreds of examples of wine jugs, originating mainly from Austria, Germany, France, but also from Russia, England and Denmark. It might be one of the largest collections of its kind worldwide. I aim of course for quality rather than quantity, the collection is in constant flux as I am always trying to get better examples. The main focus of my collection is on claret jugs. A silver claret jug is a wine jug made of glass and silver for the so called *Claret*, which is a French Bordeaux wine. Claret jugs were produced from about 1830 to 1920. The vast majority were made of cut (sometimes



Wine jug London 1882, maker: Hukin & Heath, design Christopher Dresser

frosted) glass. The silver-mounted top incorporated hinged lids; handles extended down halfway or to the base. The mounts were often engraved or chased, and the glass bodies were found in many different shapes and varying ornamenta-



Claret jug, and spout detail,  
London 1898, maker: Charles Edwards

glass jugs, most of the diverse and now treasured designs are of British manufacture. British claret jugs have wonderful glass bodies and often outstanding silver decorated mountings. The same can be said of Russian pieces, especially those made by Gratchev or Fabergé, attaining the highest levels of quality.

tion. Some earlier examples were made entirely of silver. The level of craftsmanship and their aesthetic qualities determine their value. Unusual jugs, such as made by Charles Edwards or Christopher Dresser, or examples with finely engraved scenes may command high prices.

In the eighteenth century a wide production of silver mounted cruet stand bottles were offered. They were sized from 15-18 cm, but no taller or larger bottle suitable to serve wine was manufactured. The first examples of "wine" bottles were made in the 1830s and among the first were those manufactured in London by Reilly & Storer. Although glass was used for drinking vessels since the earliest times, only the nineteenth century saw the development of the claret jug. Silversmiths began modifying glass decanters used in the eighteenth century by the addition of simple bands of silver and replacing glass stoppers with silver hinged lids. In the second quarter of the century, silver handles and larger mounts were added, although, in most cases, the glass maintained the bottle-shape and was of restrained design.

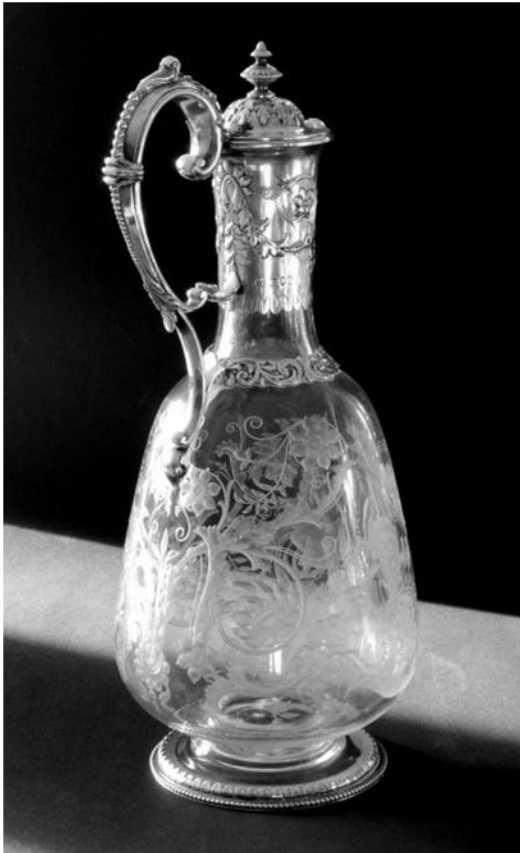
From the middle of the century, old rules were abandoned. Now artists chose the claret jug as a medium to display their skill and produced fabulously exotic and often bizarre designs. Claret jugs were produced throughout Europe and, although France had a large production of fine silver and



Turtle jug, German ca. 1880



French claret jug, ca. 1880



Claret jug, London 1866, maker: John Figg  
Note: the outstanding glass engraving



French manufacturers, - perhaps as a consequence of the great tradition existing in wine production in their country -, displayed creations characterized by highly functional shapes. The British silversmiths, less conditioned by the culture of wine, demonstrated broader creativity, stronger innovation and frivolous attitudes in their designs. Since the 1850s, many of the leading British manufacturers were producing fabulous hand engraved glass bodies. As many of their factories were located in the north of the country, the majority of their silver mounts were hallmarked in Birmingham and Sheffield Assay Offices. As the English "wealthy minority" liked to travel to Europe and loved what they saw there, the demand of more fanciful models grew and designers drew their inspiration from European styles; ranging from geometric Grecian patterns to classical scenes in the "romantic" style of contemporary French painters. By the third quarter of the century, jugs of the most bizarre form were in great fashion and in many cases the glass bore little resemblance to the early "bottles". The mounts were often chased in perfect symmetry to the glass. Curiously, this was also the period characterized by some of the most delicate items and several prominent silversmiths created rare and unusual jugs in "naturalistic" form. Flowers, such as roses, crocuses and water lilies, were copied perfectly to silver mounts and glass decoration which then were assembled to perfection. From 1875 claret jug designs became influenced by the Aesthetic movement and the enthusiasm for Japan and oriental arts in general led to new experiments, which could be seen as forerunners to Art Nouveau. Butterflies and

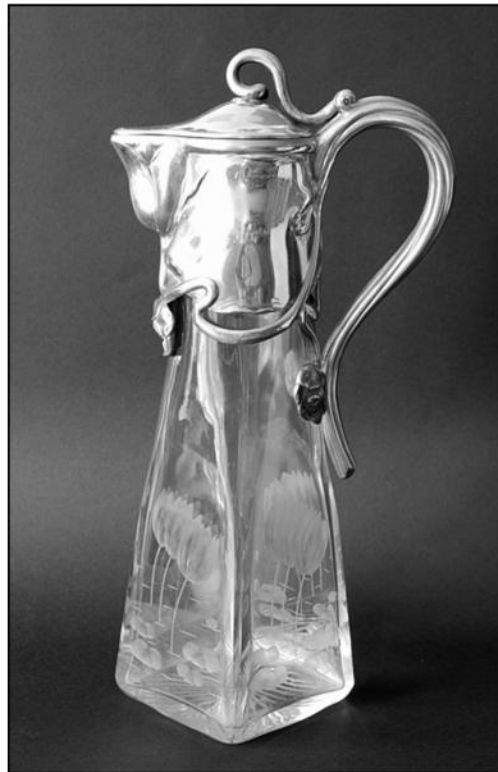
birds, but also plants and flowers, became common engraving motifs, often with the addition of other small subjects in Japanese taste - a delicately engraved fan was often added amidst birds and foliage.

The 1880s saw the start of the manufacture of the rarest jugs ever produced, in the form of animals, birds and fishes. These magnificent creations were made in very limited quantity and by a restricted number of silversmiths, presumably because they required the highest craftsmanship level to attend to their manufacture. The most stunning of these forms had the glass realistically cut and engraved to simulate the texture of the model in minute and intricate details (feathers of a duck or the hair of a monkey). In Germany and Austria the Art Nouveau period led to the production of claret jugs with wonderfully decorated glass bodies but also often with plain glass bodies.

A lot of highly unusual, unconventional and extravagant examples can be seen on the website "[www.claretjugs.com](http://www.claretjugs.com)", a collection formed by Richard Kent. My collection can be visited at [www.karaffensammler.at](http://www.karaffensammler.at). At the end of the nineteenth century the production of these beautiful objects ceased for a variety of reasons. The vivacious market of exotic Victoriana was replaced by the austerity of the Edwardian period, and this, coupled with the high cost of producing fine glassware, marked the end of seventy-five years of fine design and beauty. From the 1920s no more remarkable claret jugs were produced.

A few words in closing: A friend told me once that collecting will be painful – meaning of course that the collecting vice creates pain, but it also is one of the more rewarding pastimes. Objects, collected on a continuous basis, gain an importance in the collector's life, which not only contribute to his self definition but also create a small world for himself in which he has total control. That the outer world acknowledges his achievement as a collector is an added bonus. A collection has also a somewhat protective effect, the collector can submerge himself into this "universe", deal there with details and like-minded and have thus the blows from the external unpredictable world softened. Collecting might have many reasons,- some rooted in experiences or the past -, but it seems to be always a substitute for something, which is missing. And one other thing I have learned: be patient and buy instinctively – armed with good taste and knowledge it will bring excellent results.

***Thomas Feilenreiter is an art dealer, specializing in 19th and 20th century silver, based in Austria. He is currently working on the definite book on wine jugs.***



German Art Nouveau wine jug.  
Below a pair of French wine jugs, ca.1880

