

GEORGIAN GLOBE INKSTANDS – A SILVER LOVE AFFAIR

By Rolf Robert

Exhilarating are the collectors' objects equivalent to these rare objects. Both that confer the pleasure of the hunt, are items of beauty, function, and rare – the thrill of the purchase and the pride ity. And, not surprisingly, there are of ownership – a part of every collec- differences.

tor's DNA. The collection I am writing From a collector's point of view, one about makes this collector feel like of the differences between the globe HM, The Queen, and Malcolm Forbes, inkstands and Fabergé's eggs is the cornering the market of Fabergé elusiveness of documentation. While Easter Eggs. I like to think of my we know how many Fabergé eggs globe inkstands as the commoner's were produced, the number of globe



inkstands made remains a mystery. ink's uncontrollable runniness and impurities, in short: messiness. My searches make me believe that they are quite rare. Since starting to collect about thirty years ago I have only assembled 12.

Most silver globe inkstands date from around 1780 to 1810, with a short revival period under Queen Victoria. It should be noted that the Victorian versions were produced in Sheffield plate rather than sterling used in the previous century. It is clear that the silver stands were designed with the sole purpose of being decorative. Had they been designed for practical usage, a more durable material like brass or pewter would have been used. It is known that amongst the various styles there were matched pairs designed for partners' desks. It was the decorative element of these objets de vertu, sitting prettily in a gentleman's library that made them popular.

Still, decorative doesn't necessarily exclude usefulness. Apart from the unique globe shape, various decorations, including intricate stands and the spring loaded finial, the main features are the - today often missing - writing implements which of course mirror the state of the art of ink making, writing and the drying process - less sophisticated than today with the

The inkstands of the collection:

Love at first sight? Well, of course it could have ended there and then: with the first one - admired for its absolute and never seen before uniqueness and bought at a Düsseldorf antiques fair. In hindsight it was - except for the completeness of its contents - a rather plain example. The baronial or ducal crown engraved on one of the globe's upper segments intrigued me. My passion to learn more was sparked. And so the collection grew. Sizes range from 6 to 12 inches in height and 3 1/2 to 6 inches in diameter. The common elements are always the spring loaded, acorn shaped finial, the vertical circular supporting frame and the horizontal meridian equator band from which embellishments like floral swags or garlands, masks, lion heads or shells are suspended. The known continents are very rarely engraved on the two upper quadrants of the globe. When the finial is activated, these quadrants fall open, revealing the globe's content. The contents could include a pen holder, san-



Fig.1



Fig.2



Fig.3



Fig.5



Fig.4



Fig.6



Fig.7



Fig.8



Fig.9

Fig. 1 George III ink stand, Nathaniel Smith, Sheffield 1793

Fig. 2 George III ink stand, John Troby, London 1798, decorated with bright-cut swags

Fig. 3 George III, ink stand, John Robins, London 1793, note the cast foot in form of Hercules, foot is also decorated with a perpetual calendar

Fig. 4 George III ink stand, John Robins, London 1794

Fig. 5 George III ink stand, John Robins, London 1793

Fig. 6 Tula, ca. 1810, polished steel with inlays of gold, silver and pewter

Fig. 7, George III ink stand, John Robins, London 1800, decorated with a perpetual calendar

Fig. 8 George III ink stand, John Robins, London 1792, engraved with a baronial crest

Fig. 9 George III ink stand, silver-gilt, John Robins, London 1804



dredger, ivory writing plate and silver mounted glass wells.

Probably the greatest variety is seen in the stand or foot. These range from a plain circular base to one that boasts four scrolled feet, including ball and claw terminals. The epitome of inkstands in my collection is the Atlas inkstand, the mighty man holds the globe on his shoulders; the foot is an engraved revolving perpetual calendar. Another example of this rare form, pictured in Vanessa Brett's *The Sotheby's Directory of Silver 1600-1940*, page 233, is embellished with an owl shaped finial but has a plain foot.

The first piece I acquired was made by a well known although unexciting silversmith by the name of John Robins of London who was for years my only reference until a dealer and later experts at Christie's and Sotheby's added to my knowledge and to the collection by adding pieces designed by Joseph Wyatt and Nathaniel Smith. Which of course raises the questions: Who copied from whom? Was there such a thing as copyright? Were designs protected? From my research, it is clear that globe inkstands are unique to these three English makers.

While seafarer and discoverer nations such as the Netherlands, Spain, Portugal, and Germany produced terrestrial and celestial globes it was mostly English makers who fashioned miniature globes as inkstands in sterling and sometimes silver gilt. That being said, there is one major Russian exception, which is dear to me. Made by the Russian arms manufacturer of Tula, it is clearly "inspired" by English examples. Made of

steel featuring encrustations of gold, silver and other precious metals it can be considered truly rare. Although Tula excelled in manufacturing of heavy weapons, when arms sales stalled in peace times, Tula turned their talents to the fabrication of decorative luxury objects, enjoying even the support of Catherine the Great, Russia's most prominent collector.

A passionate collector of silver globe inkstands must acknowledge the importance of the twentieth century American master silversmith, William deMatteo. Purveyor to Courts, as well as to domestic and foreign dignitaries, deMatteo created a historically significant sterling silver globe inkstand of eighteenth century design, which was presented as a gift to former President Richard Nixon by the White House Correspondents Association in 1973. This unique stand will be housed in the Nixon Library in California.

Globe-shaped inkstands were also made in other media. The globe-shaped form was very popular for Viennese Biedermeier sewing tables. The Regency furniture maker, Morgan & Sanders, London, fashioned the extremely rare and valuable "Pitt's desk" of Luton Hoo with its human sized globe shaped secretaire auctioned at Sotheby's and that in the end - to my bank manager's and my own delight - I did not successfully bid for.

If owning is only part of the thrill what makes it complete? The answer surely lies in the hunt for the next object and expanding the knowledge about the collection. Firstly, by knowing how



many silver globe inkstands were produced in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the collector has a starting point for placing his acquired treasures in context. Secondly, one must also be prepared to accept that there may be one that eludes you, either by underbidding or failing to attend a fair where it might be found. Such unfortunate circumstances, both experienced, were made up by the sweet pleasure of finding two stands at the Grosvenor House Antiques Fair on the very same day. And of course, there is always reason to put the nose to the grindstone and search for that loose and elusive writing implements that were separated from their stands over the centuries.

Many authors mention the globe-shaped inkwells as a novelty item but nobody has extensively written about the subject. The late Gregor Norman-Wilcox, former curator of the Los Angeles County Museum and other Arts Institutions, has provided the most valuable references, now at the Winterthur Library in Delaware.

Like many collectors I currently have more questions than answers. My collecting colleagues tell me that the serious collector continuously raises questions. In the photos accompany-



ing my article many examples of my collection are introduced – you find more details about them in the picture captions – this is only a beginning, my love-affair with globe-shaped inkstand is enduring.

Rolf Robert is an avid collector of English Georgian furniture and silver globe inkstands in particular.