

An Important Collection of Historic Canadian Silver

The sale of the John Kirk collection by A.H. Wilkens

By Dorothea Burstyn

The May 27th 2024, sale of Canadian silver at A.H. Wilkens was quite the event since no large collection of this type has come to market since the De Volpi sale, May 1979 and the Langdon sale at Ritchie's, November 1990. Most collectors of Canadian silver are limited to flatware and the occasional drinking cup, John Kirk managed to put together a collection covering silver items from the early 18th century workshop era, the factory production and modern studio silver.

John Kirk was a very successful Scottish businessman who immigrated to Canada after selling his business. He was a collector at heart, bringing with him a superb collection of Scottish arms and Scottish, Irish and English silver. In Toronto he became interested in Canadian silver, a member of the Silver Society of Canada, he was often seen at auctions, but also had good relations with leading dealers.

On the evening before the auction A. H. Wilkens gave a reception to which everybody who is somebody in the Toronto silver world showed up. A further treat was a lecture by Ross Morrow, a silversmith and longtime Wilkens' silver expert. In lively fashion he told the story of Canadian silver with illustrations of examples from the Kirk collection. He also related a few interesting anecdotes. Lot 1047 (Fig. 1) offered a typical nun's silver pendant in form of reliquary cross made by Pierre Lesperance. When in 1881 the Archbishop suggested that the sisters of the Hotel Dieu in Quebec should wear reliquary crosses just the same as worn by nuns in Notre Dames des Anges and Sacre Coeur the Reverend Mother gave Pierre Lesperance a large amount of old silver to defray the cost of the pendants. Upon hearing of this decision Gouverneur-General Douglas



Fig. 1

Fig. 1: Typical nun's pendant and a sacred heart (Lot 1048)



Fig. 2



Fig. 3

Sutherland Campbell, Marquis of Lorne offered to buy one of these items, a large silver mortar, thus saving one important piece of Canadian silver made pre 1749 by Paul Lambert. The Marquess of Lorne used it as wine cooler. In the 1940s the mortar came onto the London market and somehow ended up in the Henry Birks Collection and is now in the National Gallery.

The entrée dish made by Hendery & Leslie and retailed by Savage & Lyman (Fig. 2) is an exceptional piece of domestic silver, whose partner is held in the McCord Museum in Montreal. Probably while cleaning the lids of the dishes got mixed up; the offered dish shows the number 2 on the body and the number 1 on the lid. Chances that the right lid gets to the right body are of course very slim.

A silver double-armed trade cross of Loraine (Fig. 3) is only one of the 2500 items of trade silver Robert Cruickshank made. It is interesting to know that the Hudson Bay Company only used trade silver rarely while the Northwest Company used trade silver extensively hence these massive orders.

Unlike the Henry Birks Collection the Kirk collection has no presentation silver. There are of course many pieces of flatware, notable big soup ladles, once the pride of affluent hostesses. Spoons, sauce ladles and soup ladles sold mostly below or within their estimates with the notable exception of one made by Laurent Amiot which fetched \$ 1900.00. (This and all subsequently quoted prices are hammer prices without buyer's premiums and taxes.) Domestic Canadian silver is relatively rare, the sale had a good number of it. Next to mustard pots, there was a fair number of drinking cups, often given as christening presents. Here a Robert Cruickshank beaker made in Montreal ca.1790 fetched \$ 2000.00 and a late 18th century tumbler cup made by Igance Francois



Fig. 4



Fig. 5

Ranvoze fetched a healthy \$ 3000.00, three times the lower estimate. Exceptional were two other pieces made by Robert Cruickshank, one a heavy bowl with wonderful bright-cut decoration featuring a monogram and family crest. This piece had been bought from S.J. Shrubsole, fetching \$ 4600.00, the other a milk jug, dating to 1790 and decorated with a monogram within a wreath went for \$ 1300.00. 19th century tankards, most of them decorated with lovely floral chasing seemed to have fallen out of favour. A brandy bowl by Laurent Amiot, late 18th century is possibly a unique form in Canadian silver, it had been exhibited at the Laurent Amiot Canadian Silversmith exhibition but went below estimate for \$ 4200.00. As did a porringer made in 1770 by Laurent Amiot's brother Jean Niclas, it looked like a larger version of a wine taster and sold for only \$ 2000.00.

The sale had three snuff boxes, one in typical neoclassical style navette shaped with bright-cut decoration. (Fig. 4) If English it would be considered a run-of-the mill item, maybe selling in the \$ 300.00 range, but as a Canadian made example by Joseph Sassville it is considered very rare selling for ten times what an English box would fetch.

The sale offered fifteen pieces of church silver: nun's pendants, sacred hearts, reliquary crosses, several baptismal ewers, a pix, patens and a holy water font. The star lot here was a ceremonial chalice made by Paul Lambert in 1735, which was bought at a Montreal auction in 2008 and sold for a whopping \$ 26000.00, over 5 times the lower estimate.

All lots in the auction were meticulously researched, Ross Morrow also consulted his friend Rene Ville-neuve, curator emeritus at the National Gallery whose



Fig. 6



Fig. 7

exhibition of Laurent Amiot many Silver Society of Canada members have fond memories of. The catalogue of this exhibition is a staple in every collector's library.

If you have not been lucky to purchase a piece at this memorable auction, then at least you have the wonderful catalogue which A.H. Wilkens printed with fantastic photographs of all items and detailed descriptions, it could very well serve as a guideline for future purchases. More Canadian silver or pieces with important Canadian connections are out there. Here just one example. As Ross Morrow mentioned there is only one ragout spoon (1754-55) with the Joseph Gaspard Chaussegros de Lery coat of arms (Fig. 6 and 7) known so far, – what a challenge for collectors to find and cherish further pieces from this service.

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