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# In Honor of the Conspicuous Consumer: Tiffany & Co. Presentation Silver, 1875-1925

By Katherine S. Howe

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**B**etween 1875 and 1925, a unique confluence of circumstances spurred the production of some of America's most memorable monumental work in the genre known as presentation silver. Although it has been a tradition in the United States since 1618 at least, when "two persons, unknown" gave "faire Plate, and other rich Ornaments" to the church in Jamestown, Virginia, at no time in our history was presentation silver more imposing, more elaborate, and in some instances more eccentric than during the years surrounding 1900.<sup>1</sup>

Presentation silver is given by a group or individual to another group or individual, marking a specific occasion. Gold presentation objects are also included in this term because silversmiths and goldsmiths historically were often the same person, and, especially during the years 1875 to 1925, silver was frequently overlaid with gilt.

Silver and gold, of course, are among our most precious elements. Their relative rareness, value, rich color, malleability, and versatility make them unusually desirable for presentation. They can be transformed with comparative ease from undistinguished ingots into glittering, symbolic, highly personal objects. Implicit in these objects made from precious metals are tangible measures of the wealth of the donor and the esteem in which he holds his honoree. The more prominent the donor, the more important the recipient, and the greater the accomplishment, the more monumental the object. In an era noted for excess, presentation silver was a prime example of conspicuous consumption.<sup>2</sup>

In this context, one can see why special presentation silver commissions were perfectly suited for the industry barons of the Gilded Age. Indeed, some of the more remarkable presentation objects were made for such men, often as corporate gifts from one captain of industry to another. These pieces were intended strictly for display. Not meant for home use, they did not need to be

1. *Church Silver of Colonial Virginia* (Richmond: Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, 1970), p. 21, as quoted in David B. Warren, Katherine S. Howe, and Michael K. Brown, *Marks of Achievement: Four Centuries of American Presentation Silver* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1987), p. 25. This article had grown out of the *Marks of Achievement* book and its accompanying exhibition.

2. Although the phrase "conspicuous consumption" has often been used in the 1980s, it was employed, in fact, by the controversial economist Thorstein Veblen ninety years earlier. See Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899; reprint, New York, 1917) p. 75ff., in which Veblen argues that in a property-owning society there is a competitive need to accumulate wealth as a measure of prowess and success. The correlation, of course, is that it is also a measure of one's wealth and stature to be able to give bountiful gifts away without weakening one's own status or position.

**Fig. 1. James Horton  
Whitehouse, *Bryant Vase*,  
silver, gilt, h. 33 $\frac{3}{4}$ " , 97.5 cm,  
made by Tiffany & Co., 1875.  
Inscribed on the neck "Truth,  
crushed to earth" and on the  
back of the vase "Matthew  
Chap VI Verse 28, 29." The  
Metropolitan Museum of Art,  
New York, gift of William  
Cullen Bryant, 1877.  
(See page 62.)**



practical or conform to domestic scale. As a matter of fact, they did not have to function at all other than to make a symbolic statement about the importance of the people and events with which they were associated.

It is no accident that the great age of American presentation silver begins with the recovery of the United States from the Civil War. Although gold had been discovered in California in 1848 and silver in Nevada in 1859, the full impact of these discoveries was masked by the economic chaos surrounding the war. By 1875, however, the United States was well on the road to recovery, and a whole new class of railroad and industry barons was emerging. The Industrial Revolution not only provided silver companies with the necessary clientele but also gave them the technology to produce forms far more monumental than those made by craftsmen working in small shops. By the early 1870s, major silver manufacturers such as Tiffany and Gorham had made the transition from a shop tradition to steam-powered, belt-driven factories employing highly specialized workers such as die makers, turners, bobbars, and engravers.

In addition, because of productive new mines in the West, the United States had access to more raw silver and gold than at any time in its history. Although a tremendous amount of silver and gold was available in precolonial and colonial Latin America, until the nineteenth century most of these precious metals had been exported to Europe with only a small fraction returning to this continent as jewelry, plate, or specie. Gold and silver discoveries in the United States changed all that. Not since French Huguenot silversmiths emigrated to London in the late seventeenth century, taking with them elaborate, heavy, court styles with cast decoration, had there been such a radical change in silver styles as that which occurred in America after the Civil War.<sup>3</sup> Gone was the naturalistic *repoussé* of the rococo revival with its small scale and thinly gauged silver. In its place came thick-walled, heavy, monumental pieces decorated with elaborate cast and die-cut decoration and extraordinary iconography.

One key event and its commission mark a turning point in the history of American nineteenth-century presentation silver: in 1874, New York's Century Club chose to honor the eminent poet and owner/publisher of the *New York Evening Post*, William Cullen Bryant (1794–1878), on his eightieth birthday. To do so, the club issued a challenge to five major silver manufacturers—Tiffany & Co., Gorham, Whiting, Starr and Marcus, and Black, Starr & Frost—to produce “a commemorative vase, of original design and choice workmanship,” in the belief “that such a work will be an expressive fact of our coming National Centennial, and a permanent treasure of our Metropolitan Museum of Art.”<sup>4</sup> Tiffany & Co. recognized the immense public interest in the commission and its importance to the reputation of the winning firm. They spent \$10,000 to execute this \$5,000 commission: a large but minutely detailed object laden with biographical imagery.<sup>5</sup>

With the triumph of its *Bryant Vase* (fig. 1), Tiffany came to dominate the presentation silver market; the *Bryant Vase* set the standard against which other presentation silver, especially Tiffany's, could be measured. Subsequent major commissions share many traits with the *Bryant Vase*: extravagant use of this precious metal, grand scale, shapes that were variations on a Greek vasiform,

3. See John Hayward, *Huguenot Silver in England 1688–1727* (London: Faber and Faber, 1959).

4. *To William Cullen Bryant, at Eighty Years, from his Friends and Countrymen* (New York: Scribner, Armstrong & Co., 1876), p. 40.

5. *To William Cullen Bryant*, pp. 27–28.

**Fig. 2. Tiffany & Co., *West Hotel***

**Vase, silver, h. 33", 83.8 cm,**

**1884. Hennepin County**

**Historical Society Museum,**

**Minneapolis.**



designs that depended as much on surface decoration as the shape itself, elaborate castings, detailed engraving and chasing, personal iconography, and portraits of the recipients. Certainly two other major Tiffany commissions, the *West Hotel Vase* (fig. 2) and the transportation exhibit vase from the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition (cover illustration), share a number of these characteristics, as does the *Adams Vase* (fig. 4), a magnificent gold vase ordered from Tiffany & Co. by the shareholders of the American Cotton Oil Company for Edward Dean Adams, who had rescued the company from insolvency. The



Fig. 3. Tiffany & Co., *Hill*

*Plaque, silver, l. 33¼", 85.7 cm, 1884. The Minneapolis Institute of Arts, gift of Mr. and Mrs. G. Richard Slade.*



Fig. 4. Paulding Farnham, *Adams Vase*, gold, quartz, rock crystal, pearls, spessartites (garnets), tourmalines, amethysts, enamel, h. 19½", 49.5 cm, made by Tiffany & Co., 1893-1895. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, gift of Edward D. Adams, 1904.

*Adams Vase*, which Tiffany exhibited at the 1900 Paris Exposition, is made entirely of North American minerals, gems, and pearls. In this instance, American flora and fauna and allegories, including Atlas and Husbandry (holding a cotton branch), replace personal iconography.<sup>6</sup>

Although vases and their subsequent variation, the loving cup, were the more important turn-of-the-century presentation silver forms, punch bowls, plaques, and trays were also popular. The *Hill Plaque* (fig. 3), made in 1884 to honor James J. Hill and his company's new railroad bridge across the Mississippi River between Minneapolis and St. Paul, is a splendid example of civic boosterism. Commissioned from Tiffany & Co. by the same Minneapolis businessmen who commissioned the *West Hotel Vase*, the plaque is far more detailed and intimate than the vase, perhaps because Hill was a native son, whereas the hotel's owner, Charles W. West, lived in Cincinnati.<sup>7</sup>

Twenty years later, August Belmont, Jr. also turned to Tiffany & Co. to commemorate a railroad feat: the completion of New York's Interborough Rapid Transit Line. The *Belmont Tray* (fig. 5), in spite of the shovel handles with pickax brackets and railroad-track border, is more formal, symmetrical, and regimented than its lozenge-shaped predecessor. It is one more example of the extravagant use of materials, combined with conservatism in form, that pervaded much of the design mainstream in the early years of this century.

6. *The Adams Gold Vase*, 2nd ed. (New York: Tiffany & Co., 1900), pp. 6–22.

7. See Francis J. Puig, "The Hill Tray," *Minneapolis Institute of Arts Bulletin*, vol. 64 (1978–1980), pp. 44–53, and Ruth Zalusky Thorstenson, "The West Hotel," *Hennepin County Historical History*, vol. 37 (Fall 1978), pp. 3–9; vol. 37 (Winter 1978–1979), pp. 13–21; and vol. 38 (Spring 1979), pp. 3–11.



▲  
**Fig. 5. Tiffany & Co., Belmont**  
*Tray, silver, l. 37 $\frac{3}{4}$ " , 96 cm, 1904.*  
**Museum of the City of New**  
**York, gift of August Belmont,**  
**grandson of August Belmont.**





Although captains of industry such as Carl M. Loeb continued to receive presentation silver well into the twentieth century (fig. 6), the onset of the Depression marked the end of the great age of American presentation silver in general and of Tiffany silver in particular. The American economy could not sustain such extravagance. Deprived of a wealthy clientele, great factories had fewer requests for this extraordinary work, and it never again assumed the same prominence. Perhaps it lost favor for the same reasons it had been so popular before: its extravagance, great mass, weight, intricacy, uselessness, conspicuous display, and the raw value of the silver itself that made it expensive to buy and tempting to steal. In other words, conspicuousness was no longer a desirable attribute; in spite of its monetary value, by the 1930s presentation silver had lost its worth for the very people it was intended to impress. □

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**Fig. 6. Tiffany & Co., cigar  
humidor, silver, l. 14 $\frac{3}{8}$ "', 36.6 cm,  
1925. The Museum of Fine Arts,  
Houston, gift of "One Great  
Night in November," 1987.**