



Professional Advice

When to Clean Silver

Silver becomes tarnished when it reacts with the atmosphere becoming silver sulphide.

The initial stage of tarnishing produces a brown colour on the surface of the metal. Silver ultimately will turn black with tarnish, at this stage it needs professional polishing.

Silver Foam

Silver foam is safe to use on all precious metals and is safe with gemstones apart from pearls. It is the favoured method of cleaning silver and the least abrasive. Always wear rubber gloves as the foam takes the natural oils from the skin leaving the hands dry.

Use Goddards Silver Foam (or similar brands) for items that are in use regularly. Apply the foam with the small sponge, supplied with each pot, and rinse thoroughly under running water. For items with intricate detail apply the foam with a small natural bristle brush. Do not use brushes with artificial bristles as these are hard and will scratch the surface. For heavily tarnished items first use silver dip and then finish with foam.

Silver Dip

Use Goddards Silver Dip (or similar brands) for items in collections that are in use regularly. Always wear rubber gloves while working with dip. Pour the dip into a large clean plastic bowl. Examine the item to check for any hollow spaces as dip will penetrate everywhere and any residue dip left behind will cause problems.

Use a small sponge or cotton wool if necessary to gently rub heavy tarnish. Cotton buds are very useful for hard to reach areas. After dipping wash thoroughly in warm soapy water and rinse in clean water, ensuring that all traces of dip are removed otherwise staining will result, then use the silver foam and running water to finish.

NB. 1 Do not dip items that are set with gems such as pearl, turquoise, emerald, or foil backed stones and ensure that steel knife blades are kept out of the dip. Use the silver foam alone for these types of item.

NB. 2 Different legal standards of silver should each have a separate container of silver dip otherwise contamination of the surface can occur which will spoil the appearance of the object i.e. where a fine silver article is placed in silver dip where standard silver items (925) have been cleaned, the residues of the standard alloys will transfer to the fine silver.

Plate Powder

Unfortunately this is no longer available.

Silver Wadding

This should only be used sparingly as it is very abrasive. Avoid using on engraved or highly decorated areas. Follow the manufacturer's instructions.

Commercial Polish in Tubes

As with the Silver Wadding these can be very abrasive and care should be taken when using the polish. Avoid using on engraved or highly decorated areas.

Impregnated Cloths

These are useful for giving a 'quick lift' to items that are looking a little dull or 'tired', but need to be kept in a plastic bag and discarded as soon as they begin to 'dry-out'.

Drying Silver

It is helpful to warm the item after cleaning to ensure thorough drying; a hairdryer is useful for this.

General Tips and Hints

Candle Wax

Remove candle wax using hot running water or white spirit. Never use any tools to scrape the wax off. Candles made from beeswax are best to use as this is easily dissolved away.

Wood and leather components

From time to time give these components a rub with micro-crystalline or pure beeswax polish. Rub in, leave for a few minutes, and then finish with a soft cloth.

Ivory components

Old ivory acquires a patina and is best left alone but if necessary clean using toothpaste applied with a soft cloth or cotton bud and finish by applying almond oil (taking care to remove any excess) or micro-crystalline or pure beeswax. Never expose ivory to water as it will eventually soften and crack.

Condiments

Always wash these items as soon as possible after use as salt and mustard are very corrosive on silver, and even if glass liners are used, there is always spillage. If salt and mustard are allowed to remain in the silver condiments, the resulting damage is best left to a professional silversmith to correct.

Handling

Work on a table with baize or similar covering to avoid marking surfaces. Gloves (either cotton or latex), should always be worn when handling ornamental silver (as opposed to domestic silver which is washed after use). The human hand contains natural oils, greases and salty moisture.

Therefore finger prints left on silver will leave marks that can be difficult to remove. If latex gloves are used the 'Fine Touch' powder free textured latex gloves are recommended. Do not use the powdered type as these can become sticky if they get wet.

The financial value of any item is intrinsically tied to its condition, i.e. crisp ornamentation and clear incised hallmarks. The policy at Goldsmiths' Hall is not to over-clean, rub hallmarks or highly polish any item.

Silver Gilt

Silver gilt, (gilded, parcel gilt or partially gilded), is a thin layer of gold plated onto the surface of the metal. This is best cleaned using a mixture of washing-up liquid and ammonia. Do not use abrasive cleaners as these will gradually remove the layer of gold. If necessary silver foam can be used to remove tarnishing that may appear from the underlying metal.

Storage

If an item is going to be stored for any length of time it is best to first wrap it in acid free tissue, never wrap an item directly in bubble wrap as this will rapidly stain the surface. 'Tarnpruf' bags such as "Corrosion Intercept" bags are also available to store items when not in use. These are extremely effective and will prevent tarnish and are available in many sizes including cutlery rolls.

Do not use rubber bands to secure several loose items as this will deeply mark the silver and avoid using sticky labels as these will also permanently mark the silver surface if left. The marks left will then need the attention of a professional silversmith to correct.

Modern Silver Surfaces

Many contemporary silversmiths use different surface finishes for artistic effect. These require specialist cleaning. Either obtain information from the silversmith themselves or consult the Silver Steward at Goldsmiths' Hall who is an expert in this area.

To contact the Silver Steward for advice please go through the Curator.

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