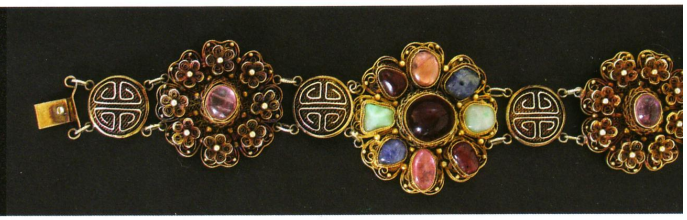
Centuries of Chinese silver

Sold by the kilo 150 years ago, it's now in demand

By Susan Dods

c.1920, Coral and turquoise set in vermeil with filigree forms of stylized butterflies and bats surrounding the stones, five centimetres wide.



c.1960, Rubies, lapis and jade set in silver vermeil with floral decoration.

One of the most rapidly expanding markets in the field of antique and vintage jewellery is Chinese silver ornaments. Several forces have combined to create a hot market and drive prices upward – expansion of the middle class in China, increased access to information and world markets via the Internet and the publication of the first book on the subject.

Photographs provided by: RidgewoodEntrust

c.1910, Necklace and earrings composed of 19th century silver and jade ornaments added to a chain designed for the western market.

Chinese antiquities and works of art have been eagerly sought after by western collectors since the summer palace of the Chinese emperor was sacked in 1850. For over 150 years collectors have bought porcelain, enamels, bronzes, art and large jade carvings. Silver was overlooked and undervalued until the late 20th century.

The Chinese have been making silver ornaments since 2000 BC, a craft handed down from father to son. Silversmiths and master stone carvers assumed that their sons would follow their craft. Young boys would learn the rudiments of their father's trade at the age of three, by ten or 12 they would be apprenticed in the shop that employed their father. Their skill, nimble fingers, immense patience and attention to detail is reflected in the silver ornaments as it is in all the decorative arts of China.

By the Qing dynasty (1644-1911) the Chinese produced the finest silverwork in Asia. In the 19th century the only silver imported by Louis Comfort Tiffany came from China. Silver adorned the wealthiest members of Chinese society. Gold was not in common use except by the nobles and members of the court, however the use of silver ornament extended through all cultural minority groups.

For many the first gift to a baby boy was a silver collar for protection from evil spirits (high infant mortality rates were blamed on evil spirits). Women wore elaborate silver hairpieces, silver apron holders, which hung from long decorative silver chains, and carried silver needle cases handed down from their mothers. Men had silver grooming kits, chatelaines, tobacco pouches and mustache combs all decorated with silver.

Dragon symbols

The Qing silversmiths were masters of repoussé, engraving and chasing – all techniques well known in the West – but the jewellery they produced still looks unusual to the western eye. Each piece is elaborately decorated with a symbolic language that reflects the mythology of 17th and 18th century China. Objects of adornment both functional and decorative are also amulets and talisman.

The symbol best known in the West, the dragon, represents male power. Two dragons chasing a pearl denote fertility and will often be seen on wedding ornaments and jewellery. The tortoise appears as a symbol of longevity and steadfastness, the pig as prosperity, fish as abundance and the bat as happiness. There are hundreds of symbols easily recognizable to most Chinese.

In 1911 the Qing dynasty fell out of power ending 2000 years of Imperial rule and the Republic of China emerged with a new set of values and priorities. Many of the objects of personal adornment that were associated with court life were shipped to international markets. Other pieces were reworked into designs that would appeal to western tastes.

It's common to find a piece of early 19th century silver used as the centerpiece of a 20th cen-

tury necklace. This movement of Chinese silver to western markets culminated in the 1970s. The Communist government required that all citizens surrender all silver ornaments to the government as an act of patriotism. The government then sold vast amounts of vintage handmade silver ornaments to western buyers – by the kilo.

As a result of these two massive waves of export there are now large quantities of beautiful older pieces of China trade silver in North America and Europe. With the industrial boom in China today there is a demand for luxury goods including all the pieces of cultural history and all those great pieces of early silver and adornment that were shipped to western countries over the last 100 years.

In 2003 the first book on Chinese silver jewellery was published, "400 Years of Silver by Margaret Duda." The book contains 500 photos of more than 1,000 pieces of Qing dynasty silver. Well researched, with an extensive explanation of the symbolic language of the Chinese silversmiths, and the history of their work, this book has had a dramatic effect on the market. Prices on online sites have tripled since the book's publication.

What is popular?

Bracelets

Chinese silver bracelets in all variations have been selling quickly to a broad customer base: one collector buys only the oldest bracelets; another buys because she owns a gift shop that caters to Chinese tourists; another is putting together a collection for the baby daughter she just adopted; the next falls in love with the unusual colour and workmanship.

A pair of bracelets was the groom's traditional betrothal gift for many Chinese women, worn one on each wrist, so a large number of vintage and antique bracelets appear on the market.

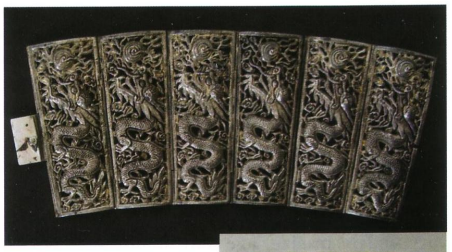
The materials vary from a narrow solid silver or jade, chased with good fortune and fertility symbols to a two to four centimetres wide silver cuff with scenic repoussé or enamel set with gemstones. There are also several distinct regional styles. The variety is enormous and the artistic quality of the detail in the silverwork is very exciting.

In the late 19th and early 20th century another style of bracelet emerged. Some literature refers to this as "Peking" style. The bracelets are still decorated with traditional Chinese motifs, but are now worked in openwork cloisonnés on a ground of silvermesh wirework. Some are also gold plated and most are set with semi-precious stones.

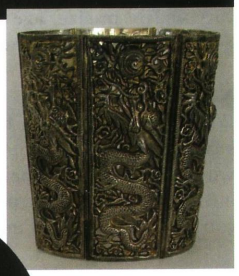
These bracelets range in size from 15 millimetres to 6 centimetres, and the wider bracelets tend to have more figural enamels. The enamel symbols most commonly seen are the bat (happiness and prosperity); clouds (good fortune); shou symbol (long life); and the endless knot (happiness and long life). During this period bracelets set with earlier stones start to appear – for example hand carved 19th century jade buttons and pendants often appear in early 20th century bracelets. These are highly desirable for collectors.

Prices on the early silver bangles,

Early 19th century, Pair of silver wedding bracelets with two dragons pursuing the sun, two centimetres wide.



c.1900. Dragon chasing the sun bracelet: two layers of silver, one repoussé and chased, both reticulated, eight centimetres wide.



Early 19th century, Silver apron holder, 8.5 centimetres, butterfly and bat with pomegranate and florals. These are often used as the centrepiece of 20th century designer necklaces.

c.1960-70, Silver vermeil set with tourmaline in five colours. The decoration on these later pieces becomes much less elaborate.

c.1910, Nephrite jade carving of a figure inside a temple, a symbol of protection. Set in silver with openwork cloisonné of bats, clouds and the shou symbol, six centimetres wide narrowing to two centimetres at the clasp.

c. 1920, Carnelian carved figure of Guanyin, symbol of the moon and fertility. Set in vermeil with openwork cloisonné of bats, clouds and the shou symbol, five centimetres wide.

which are more valuable as original pairs, will range from $600 to $800 for a pair.

The larger and less common bracelets rarely appear in pairs. They vary widely in size, age and quality and prices currently start at $600 with excellent examples over $1,000 or more.

Necklaces

For close to 100 years artisans, both East and West, have been constructing necklaces that combine Qing dynasty silver ornaments with other beads. In one period the Chinese government itself created thousands of these necklaces for the western markets. They are extremely popular and must be evaluated on an individual basis.

Rings and earrings

Silver and unusual gemstones, coral, tourmaline and lapis are the most popular for rings and earrings and in lower price ranges have sold well. These sales are to a younger customer who is experimenting with a style she has never seen before. She leaves, shows her friends and invariably returns for more. Last year one customer returned with four friends.

Hallmarks become important in evaluation. Pieces of Chinese silver made in the early 19th century are marked with Chinese ideogram, then later in the century makers begin to use a combination of ideograms with the maker's initials in English or Chinese and a quality stamp. The shop name – usually an ideogram – was actually used by a group of silversmiths working under one name. Fu Chi, Hsieh Ch'eng and Kwang-yuan are well-known examples. However some silversmiths used English letters: Cumshing (CS) and Cutshing (CUT or CU). The most famous shops to use English letters are Wang Hing(WH) from Queens Road, Hong Kong and Cum Wo(CW).

Collectors of vintage and antique silver jewellery place a high premium on patina so heavy polishing will devalue a piece. A light cloth buffing is adequate.

Many early Chinese silver ornaments have what appears to be mat enamel in bright blue. Proceed with caution, as it is actually an application of ground peacock feathers, quite fragile, and highly prized by collectors. It will disappear with cleaning.

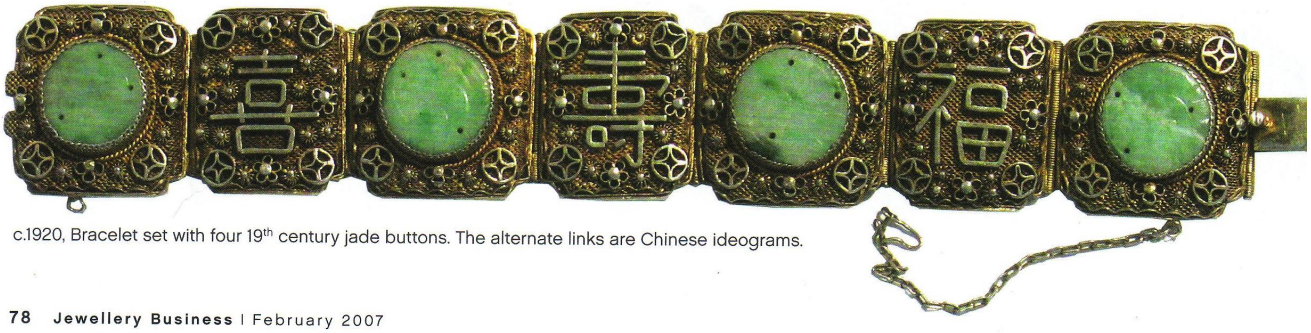
In early Chinese silver pieces the grade will vary from 700-900/1000. By the early 20th century, marks change for the western market. SILVER CHINA is the most common mark. Pieces with that mark test 900/1000 or better. Jewellery pieces simply marked CHINA are usually copper with a silver coating.

Confusion about dating the cloisonné and filigree bracelets arises because after 1970 a large number of similar bracelets were produced for the western market. The later bracelets use less expensive stones such as rose quartz and serpentine, the gilding is thicker and brighter and the enamels are abstract florals rather than traditional Chinese symbols. These later bracelets are usually marked 925.

At a show in September a major New York vintage jewellery dealer, Howard Auerbach, known for his ability to spot trends said, "This is the last great unresearched body of work." He was discussing and buying late 19th and early 20th century silver jewellery. This is an emerging market with wide customer appeal. It can be sold to one customer for its history and another for its unique craftsmanship. Pieces sold by the kilo in the 1970s are now widely disbursed, they turn up at antique malls, auctions of Orientalia, and online auction sites.

It's fair to assume that the coming Olympics in China will increase interest in Chinese culture and artifacts and that prices for this jewellery will continue to increase. ✧

Susan Dods has been actively collecting and selling antique silver jewellery for over 40 years. Susan is an advisor to the Ridgewood Foundation, a Canadian charity and has started a blog, www.susandods.com, with commentary and photographs of antique Chinese jewellery.



c.1920, Bracelet set with four 19th century jade buttons. The alternate links are Chinese ideograms.