

Revere House Radio

Episode 11

Paul Revere: Silversmith

Welcome in to another episode of Revere House Radio, I am your host Robert Shimp. In keeping with the theme of Paul Revere's jobs, we are going to shift our focus today to one of his more well-known occupations. Outside of the Midnight Ride, Paul Revere is typically most known for his silver products which dot the fine arts museum landscape across the country. Revere silver has become an iconic part of American fine crafts, and it embodies the high quality and innovative work of an American artisan in the time of the Revolution. Revere made products of both high technical skill as well as ones for easy mass replication, and as Jeanine Falino has recently shown us in her Revere Express post, Revere's silver work was both fueled by and contributed to his complex social and political networks.

Paul Revere's career as a silversmith really spanned both sides of the Revolution, and the periods differed, sometimes widely, from each other. Prior to the Revolution, Revere began an apprenticeship with his father at the age of 13 following some education at the North Writing School in Boston's North End. As we have previously discussed, Paul's father Apollos Rivoire had Anglicized his name in the 1720s, some time after his apprenticeship with famed Boston silversmith John Coney ended with Coney's death. As a clarifying point, all three would have been defined in many cases as goldsmiths, but the vast majority of their work was with silver.

Our Paul Revere had a very good lineage of silversmiths to work with, then, with Coney and his father offering decades of experience and skill in Boston's market. In 1756, some twenty years before the Declaration of Independence, Paul Revere officially took over his father's shop at the age of 21, two years after Paul Sr.'s death. 21 years was the legal age to take over such a business and we believe the shop likely stayed in Paul's mother Deborah's name for the two year interim. He directly benefited from his father's full arsenal of materials and carefully compiled client list from years of work in Boston. Revere would continue to draw heavily from his father's clients, family members and friends, and through his own developed networks, especially the Freemasons.

Over the course of his career which spanned sections of five decades, Revere produced over 90 different objects. Samples ranged from spoons to buttons, buckets to tea pots, medical tools to children's whistles, and of course various tankards and drinkware. Revere also dabbled in some pieces that likely seem as exotic to us as they may have in the 18th century. He fashioned Silver handles on seashells, made a dish out of an ostrich egg, and a silver chain for a pet squirrel, a version of which can be seen in a portrait of a young Henry Pelham, the man who Revere would later 'borrow' his Massacre print from.

Stylistically, Revere transitioned from the very showy Rococo styles to helping literally produce the republicanism of the Revolution with neo-classical styles. His neo-classical pieces of his later career embraced an elegant simplicity that help to establish and reinforce the spirit of the age in the United States. Revere's quality as a silversmith is generally highly regarded by experts—certainly the name attached to his pieces make them highly valuable in comparative terms, but the quality tends to hold up with if not often exceed that of his peers in the eyes of specialists.

Any visitor to the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston over the last 10 years has been greeted by Revere's most famous silverwork straight away upon entering the Art of the Americas wing. Revere's Liberty Bowl on display there is his most iconic work, and his most political. The 1768 Bowl paid homage to the 92 Massachusetts General Court councilors who voted not to rescind a circular letter they had distributed to legislatures throughout the colonies which voiced strong opposition to the 1767 Townshend Duties. Revere inundated the bowl with revolutionary symbolism and spent many manual hours on the piece to finish it within 5 weeks of the General Court's vote.

The bowl is really an outlier to Revere's entire body of work, however. Over the course of his career, Revere produced somewhere over 5,000 documented pieces from his shop, as we know from his meticulously kept records. The vast majority of them were non-political. Most were made for personal, household use for close family, friends, or personal connections.

Revere didn't let politics get in the way of business leading up to the Revolution, though. He made items for British soldiers stationed in Boston, especially following their return to the town in 1774. One of his more elaborate sets was a 45 piece Tea service for known Tory Dr. William Paine.

In total, Revere had 757 known clients that spanned across the political and economic spectrum in Boston. He was a brilliant networker, and worked with both wealthy clients and those of humbler means. In doing so, Revere produced pieces for middle-and even lower-income families as a form of wealth storage and security. Additionally, in colonial and early America, silversmiths assessed the value of coins, and could ever further melt coins and other silver objects into more usable forms. A Maker's mark became essential in America to certify the quality and legitimacy of a product and coinage. In this way, Revere was literally an arbiter of worth for the community, an incredibly important position that required high levels of integrity and trust, especially during the early republic when currency valuation was in great flux.

Despite this importance, Revere's silver business itself, as was the case with so many other shops and operations in Boston, was a casualty to the Revolutionary War. The demand for silver products plummeted during the conflict, and besides, Revere turned his eye towards serving his nation and potential military glory. As we know, however, Revere had no laurels coming his way after the Midnight Ride and his unimpressive wartime involvements.

Following the Revolution's conclusion, Revere reopened and continued operating his silver shop, but its production focus shifted. The total number of items actually increased substantially, but the shop was more focused on pieces that could be mass produced and required less of an artistic touch to finish, such as flatware and harness fittings. This meant that Revere's direct

participation could decrease while the others in his shop, notably his son Paul Jr., but also that of journeymen and apprentices, increased. The shop's clientele turned over, as only 46 customers bought from Revere on both sides of the Revolution. With these changes, Revere's personal interests began to shift as well, as he aimed for ways to leverage his skills and networks to move up the socioeconomic ladder in the new nation.

Over the coming weeks, we will take a look at what these moves looked like for Revere. How did he pivot away from silver, and what skills did he carry over into his late-life professions as he strove for a 'gentleman's status in the early republic. In the meantime, stay in touch with us with your questions, and be sure to keep up with our social media and the *Revere Express* blog on our website. We hope to be in touch with more information as Massachusetts's phased reopening continues, so watch our spaces for updates. Until next time, stay safe, and thanks for listening.