

Scottish Silver and Accessories

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33 Broughton Place

Edinburgh



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The ovoid coffee urn is perhaps the most unique design seen in Scottish silver; where the inspiration for this design emanates from still remains a mystery.

Even the use of these urns has caused debate and the general consensus seems to be that of a coffee urn. Previously often termed water urns, this now appears wrong.

During the period of these urns manufacture (circa 1719-1767) and particularly within the height of their manufacture (circa 1730 -1750) the number of standard pouring coffee pots is minimal. This and a reference in the John Rollo, Goldsmith Edinburgh, account book 'To one Coffe poot 62 oz 2dr at 7sh 6pe per oz - £23 - 5 - 8' and the survival of this piece adds great

weight to the theory of their use being for coffee.

Their functionality also is worthy of note, when it is considered that within contemporary accounts coffee is considered medicinal and should 'be drunk as hot as one can bear' the shape combined with the use of a burner (now lacking in most of extant examples) would have meant the contents could have been kept hot. While most of the surviving urns have now lost their burners, most (including this example) show signs of their use. The underside point of the urn (where most are marked) would have become polished out with the vigorous cleaning needed to remove the staining left behind by the burner.

The survival rate of these urns is extremely small with only fifteen currently recorded, and ten of these in institutional hands. The design of these urns seems to vary more by the period than maker, with the main flare of the maker coming in the outline shape of the body; they can vary in shape from elongated egg shaped to more compressed squat bodies.

While the marks to this example are now all but obliterated from polishing, it does seem possible to suggest a maker, when the whole survival of these urns is compared and stylistic trends noted.

Firstly the most prolific maker / workshop seen with the extant examples are unsurprisingly that of James Kerr / William Dempster, who would laterally become Kerr & Dempster. They were one of Scotland's most highly regarded goldsmiths and received many important commissions for the highest fashion silver of the day, it is therefore unsurprising that his marks are seen to the large percentage of these urns.

Also the design and quality of this urn is of note in many features. Firstly the quality of the chased decoration, the deep and bold decoration could only have come from a very high quality Edinburgh workshop such as Kerr & Dempster. Such is the quality of the chasing to this urn that it has previously been considered to have been the hand of Ebenezer Oliphant considered one of Edinburgh's finest chasers. Secondly the cast snake arms are of a mould recorded on other Kerr & Dempster urns, access to a prepared mould in

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the workshop must suggest a place of manufacture similar to the other urns featuring these handles. While this is the only urn with the textured finish to the handles this would have been added after the cast had been made. Thirdly the cast legs and importantly the appliqué between body and leg, are from the same mould as seen on other Kerr & Dempster urns.

The crossover of makers using the same moulds and patterns for handles, legs and spigot does add some confusion to these theories but the majority of urns using these moulds can be tied to the Kerr & Dempster workshop and must be considered when trying to attribute this urn to a specific maker.

Due to the fact that the Assay Masters mark of Hugh Gordon is still visible to this urn proves it must have been made 1744-1758, this does suggest that the most likely period of the Kerr & Dempster workshop would have been under the control of William Dempster, rather than Kerr and is considered that his name is the most obvious to be tied as maker of this item. While it has not been possible to prove William Dempster the maker of this urn it does now seem highly probable.

Provenance:

Christie's Scotland, 11th November 1987, lot 58
Christie's Glasgow, 25th April 1990, Private Collection

Exhibitions:

'Silver; Made In Scotland', National Museums of Scotland 2008

Reference:

Compendium of Scottish Silver, volume 1 page 523, R & J Diert 'Silver; Made In Scotland,' page 85, item 4.46, piece and detail illustrated, G Dalgleish & H Stuart Fotheringham





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A rare Scottish George II coffee urn

maker unknown, Edinburgh circa 1744-1759, of slightly compressed ovoid form with large chased border to upper body and rim with flower head and foliate scroll designs, containing twin blank scroll formed cartouches surmounted by lion mask detail, the slightly domed hinged cover with scroll border and diaper panels, with semi spiralled boss around ebony finial, the body set with twin scrolling serpent handles with detailed eyes and open mouths and with textured and chased bodies, the body set with straight spigot with ebony handle, the whole raised on three leaf capped cabriole legs with paw feet and shaped oval fluted appliqués to body

29cm high, 26.5cm wide (across handles), 55oz