



Trans-Oceanic on board the Queen, Long Beach, California

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Caring for your ocean liner silver

No matter where you live, your ocean liner silver is likely to tarnish, developing a dull black or brownish colored coating. This results from pollutants in the environment, such as car exhausts and industrial emissions. In fact, any time silver is near leather, rubber bands, newspapers, adhesives, some vegetables, or eggs, for example, it can come in contact with sulfurous gasses that will lead to tarnishing. Silver will tarnish more quickly in a damp environment.



Museums strive to maintain humidity levels that keep tarnishing to a minimum. They also limit contact with potential sources of pollution, often by filtering the air coming into the areas where their collections are displayed or stored. (They may also apply a coat of lacquer to objects to help forestall the development of tarnish, and we'll cover that in a bit.)

A typical ocean liner memorabilia collector rarely has the luxury of creating an optimal environment for artifact preservation, however.

And so the pieces of silver in most people's collections will, from time to time, gain a layer of tarnish. Beyond tarnish,

though, the way in which a silver item is handled has the potential to cause damage.

Assuming you have an item that is not tarnished and is ready for display, handle it only while wearing clean white cotton gloves. Cotton will not react with the silver and the white color will help you to see quickly if there are signs of corrosion because it will stain the gloves.

If possible, keep the artifact in a fully enclosed display. This could be a curio cabinet, for example. It doesn't have to be airtight, but just some place that will keep the onslaught of pollutants from readily reaching the piece.

If you need to clean the silver, remember some things:

- Silver is very soft and on most pieces, it's just a coating or plating. There's not an inexhaustible supply of silver to polish through. And if you're too aggressive with your cleaning and polishing, you may obliterate the hallmarks engraved in the bottom of the piece. These are important markers regarding the creator and era of the object. Be gentle in your cleaning and polishing. Despite what you may have been told, it's not elbow grease that's needed, but a soft touch (and patience).
- Silver objects sometimes have a patina or colored surface—and it might be there on purpose. The designer might have intended something other than a shiny silver surface for the piece. Removing that patina may lose the artist's original intent and reduce the object's value.
- If a cleaning product you're considering using is hard on your hands or nose, chances are it's pretty hard on the silver. Consider a less harsh alternative (discussed below).



- The piece has been cleaned many times before and each time it has been cleaned, or polished, it has lost some of its silver plating.



So you're ready to start cleaning. Generally the first job is to remove the tarnish. We follow these steps:

- Put on a pair of rubber, latex, or non-latex gloves. These will not only protect your hands (and keep grime from getting under your fingernails, but will also keep the oils from your hands from getting on the object—and those oils will eventually lead to spots and more tarnish).
- Choose a cleaner that is gentle. That doesn't mean the one that works fastest. There are cleaners on the market that promise you can wipe them on and the tarnish will disappear. They generally do work well to remove tarnish, but they can be quite harsh. And if you fail to get all of the cleaner off—or get

it off soon enough—it can etch or stain the object. Non-abrasive silver creams are generally a good choice for a private collection. Some museums use a fine polishing formula. While these are slightly abrasive, they are gentle enough to not cause scratches or wave patterns in the object. A solvent solution, such as NevrDull, is not abrasive, will remove tarnish, and provides a protective coating against further tarnishing. Do not use solvent products on objects that have been lacquered, however, because they will remove some of the protective lacquer coating and lead to splotching.

- Use the cleaner in small areas of the object. Select an area that is no more than two inches square and work to clean it. Move on to other equally small adjacent areas. It will be tedious, but this method helps ensure the cleaning is done evenly across the object. Use cotton swabs, real cotton balls (not those made from synthetic fibers because they may scratch the surface) or a clean cotton cloth to apply the cleaner. Use a back-and-forth motion, not circular so that you help avoid the possibility of developing swirls on the surface.
- After the piece is cleaned, change into a pair of new clean gloves. Wash the object in a bath of distilled water with a few drops of non-ionic detergent. You may want to use a soft clean natural bristle brush to get into crevices and engraved areas. Rinse the piece in a bath of distilled water.
- Dry the object thoroughly using clean white cotton cloths.
- After it is dry, you may want to use more clean white cotton cloths to bring out some of the luster of the object. Just apply a small amount of pressure and wipe in a back-and-forth motion.
- To protect the object from further tarnish, you have two primary choices of coatings. One is to use a clear lacquer. This is available from hardware stores and if properly applied will deter tarnish for up to 10 years. The other choice is a microcrystalline wax. Don't use bee's wax or similar products because they may contain other materials that will be hard to remove or may damage the object. Microcrystalline wax is available from conservator supply companies and can be removed with a mild acetone solution. Be aware, however, that wax coatings, while providing good protection against the elements, will tend to dull the object.



The information contained on this information sheet is considered to be reliable, but is not definitive. The condition and composition of a specific artifact may affect how it responds to cleaning and polishing. There is no guarantee that the results expected through the processes described here will occur for any given object. Always test any cleaning or polishing product or technique on a small inconspicuous areas of an artifact to ensure that it is appropriate for the object and the materials of which the object is composed.