AA Thornton

Silver - *The Metal Of The Moon*

by Sally Thornton

So far this year I have written about *Gold and Hallmarking;* this month I am turning my attention to *Silver*.

I have always admired the beauty of *silver* and this is partly because I started my career in the jewellery business by training and qualifying as a Silversmith. I still have two bowls which were my first attempts to raise a piece of sheet Silver. As for any craftsman starting out, they were something of a trial but I keep them as a reminder of what I achieved and the effort that a silversmith puts into to their work.

Before I returned to Kettering to work for my father, one of my jobs led me to work for the renowned Danish silver company, Georg Jensen. Whilst working with them, my appreciation and love of for *silver* was rekindled and I hope that I can in some way pass part of my enthusiasm on.

Silver was once thought to be more precious than gold and has been referred to as the metal of the moon. Silver decorations and ornaments have been found in tombs dating back to 4000BC and earliest *Silver* mines of any size were those of the pre-Hittites of Cappadocia in Anatolia, modern day Turkey. In Roman and Greek mythology, the second Age was called Silver and Apollo, god of truth and light and teacher of medicine, carried a silver bow. In many cultures, *silver* is the symbol of purity and, in Christian symbolism, *silver* stands for divine wisdom.

Athens was founded on *silver*, just as in the nineteenth century Johannesburg was founded on *gold*. These silver mines made the Athenians rich but were eventually worked out. Interestingly, the chemical symbol for *silver* is Ag which comes from the Latin word for *silver*, argentum, which in turn derives from a Sanskrit word meaning 'white' or 'shining'.

By the sixteenth century, the Spanish Conquistadores had discovered and developed mines in Mexico, Bolivia and Peru, and I am sure we are all familiar with the exciting and romantic stories of galleons laden with silver bullion sailing back to Spain. These new world mines resulted in the rise of South and Central America as the largest silver producing areas in the world. The *silver* from here satisfied the needs of silversmiths and coiners of Europe until the nineteenth century, when the great finds and silver rushes in the USA began.

Silver can be found throughout the world although, today, the major mining areas include Peru, USA with the greatest producer being Mexico. In most cases, its production is a by-product of the mining of *lead, copper* and *zinc* which helps keeps the production costs down. There are, however, a few areas particularly in Mexico where the seams are rich enough for *silver* to be mined alone.

In Britain, at one time *silver* was mined as a by-product of the Cornish tin and lead mines, whilst the lead mine at Millclose in Derbyshire, which eventually closed down in 1961, produced just a few thousand ounces of silver a year.

I have already mentioned that *silver* had in the past great importance as a coin metal. Throughout history coins were, and are still in many places, used for internal and international trade. In Britain, this coinage dates back hundreds of years.

The name 'sterling' is said by some to have derived from the name 'starling' ,or 'sterling', given to the silver pennies used in Britain 700 years ago. They, in turn, are said to have derived the name from the Easterlings, coiners from Hansa in North Germany who made them. Other suggestions are that the name actually relates to the silver coins minted in the reign of Edward the Confessor, who had starlings on his coat of arms.

Up until 1922, silver coinage on Britain was struck from 925 sterling silver although, for the next quarter of a century, an alloy of only 50% silver was used until, finally in 1947, "silver" coins were made with no silver at all. With silver no longer being required by the Mint, it has been more than compensated by the growing demand of the electronic industries and, of course, in the huge growth in silver jewellery.

Silver, like *gold*, is a malleable and ductile metal. It cannot be beaten quite as thin or drawn quite as fine as gold, but it has excellent working qualities. The advantages it has over gold include its greater tensile strength, its relative lightness and its greater reflecting power.

The malleability enables a silversmith to form a bowl or other intricate shapes out of a flat disc of *silver* by carefully hammering a process known as 'raising'. There are indeed many techniques and processes a silversmith can use but they are far too numerous for me to mention here. These skills have been used and developed over the centuries for the crafting of many beautiful items such as salvers, tea and coffee pots, dishes and trays, candlesticks, trophies and canteens of cutlery. I am sure that in most homes you will be able to find something made out of *silver*.

In recent years, however, what has been most striking is the development of silver jewellery, where it properties have enabled modern designers and craftsmen to create some stunning pieces. This is not to say that that silver jewellery is something new, after all Georg Jensen started his workshop in 1904, 5 years before my great grandfather established AA Thornton.

So, why is silver jewellery now so appealing? I have already mentioned that *silver* has wonderful

properties to work with and is more competitively priced than say *gold* so I believe this is what is attracting the new designers. I always try to support and encourage these new designers wherever possible.

As a closing thought, I should point out that the *silver* we use for our jewellery is composed of purest silver alloyed with copper in order to strengthen it. This proportion of *silver* to *copper* is 92.5% to 7.5% copper and is the standard that we use in Britain; if you missed last moths article on Hallmarking it can be found on our website www.aathorntonjeweller.com

In other parts of the world, including parts of mainland Europe lower standards are used, often 800 *Silver* or 80% pure and is not acceptable here in Brittan.

I do hope you enjoyed this brief insight into a vast subject and, as ever, if you want to know more please do call in or visit our website.