

Elkington & Co.

In the 1830s, George Richards Elkington founded G.R. Elkington & Co. with Henry Elkington, his cousin in Birmingham, England.¹ The two gradually mastered the technique of electroplating, which, using electricity, applies a thin layer of silver to another kind of metal. In the 1830s, they acquired the first patents for the technique. They perfected it in 1840 when they utilised the chemical discoveries by John Wright, a surgeon.² The new technique ensured that the layer of metal was “continuous, durable and shiny.” It especially suited the contemporary taste for complex ornamentation. By 1840, G.R. Elkington & Co. was a leading plating firm, with its patents licensed to other firms, for instance, Christofle in Paris.³

The firm produced a variety of silver products, ranging from tableware to fine display, and turned a profit rapidly, even managing to hire 1000 employees by 1880.⁴ The style of its production varied, from classical to contemporary designs. In recognition of its quality, Elkington & Co. secured the Royal Warrant of Queen Victoria, and also an Imperial and Royal Warrant of Appointment from the Austrian emperor.⁵

In the collection

In 1862, Elkington & Co. received a “special appointment to her gracious majesty the Queen” to craft a series of works for the International Exhibition (fig. 2).⁶ Among the works was a centrepiece, and a centrepiece of the same design is now in the permanent silver collection of Liang Yi Museum. The Victorian electrogilt and champlevé enamel nine-light candelabrum, supported by a mirror plateau (fig. 1), was designed by A.A. Willms, the chief designer of Elkington. It was lauded by J.B. Waring, one of the superintendents of the exhibition, who commented,

*“unusual elegance of taste and design, a judicious combination of coloured enamels with silver, and a degree of artistic finish which are not too often found even in the best works of this class”.*⁷

¹ Lomas 2001, pp. 81.

² Pushkin 2022.

³ Richard Redding 2022.

⁴ Pushkin 2022.

⁵ William Walter 2022.

⁶ Elkington & Co 1862, pp. 7.

⁷ Invaluable 2022.



Figure 1. A Victorian Electrogilt and Champlevé Enamel Nine-Light Candelabrum and Mirror Plateau, Maker: Elkington & Co., Birmingham, 1873, Material: silver-gilt and enamel, Height 70 cm, Liang Yi Museum.

The piece shines bright in gold, with cusped leaf patterns in light blue and deep brownish red. The candelabrum itself stands on a circular foot with three-pawed lion's feet, representing power. It is a classical monopodium foot motif which experienced a revival during the neoclassical movement in the Victorian period. At the base of the candelabrum stands three female figures: a Priestess of the Temple of Peace and two votaries of Agriculture and Commerce.⁸ At the centre rise three beaded stems to an open form which once held a glass

⁸ Elkington & Co 1862, pp. 7.

plate. The plate, however, has gone missing. Nine arms, delicately enamelled, extend from the central stems to hold candles. A mirrored plateau accompanies the candelabrum and offers a sight of the enamel and embroidery on the underside of the platter.



Figure 2. The Nine-Light Candelabrum as featured in the catalogue of the 1862 International Exhibition, London.

It is worth noting that the centrepiece came from a series of electroformed objects inspired by medieval European and early Islamic art and also the later aesthetic movement⁹. The cusped leaf patterns are also reminiscent of Persian ornamentation. The work is not a replica of medieval art but an original one, and demonstrates the technique of electroforming, a recent means to produce contemporary art.¹⁰

⁹ The Aesthetic Movement (1860-1900) focused on creating beautiful art without deeper meaning to contrast the 'ugliness' and 'materialism' of the Industrial Age (c. 1760-1840).

唯美主義運動（1860-1900年）專注於製作富有美感、淺顯易懂的藝術品，與「醜陋的」、「物質主義的」工業時代（約1760-1840年）形成鮮明對比。

¹⁰ Victoria and Albert Museum 2022.

Also in the Liang Yi collection are a pair of Victorian parcel-gilt silver salt-cellars and salt-spoons (fig. 3). The cellars have the shape of a seashell, with flowers and foliage engraved on the rim. The bowl of the spoons also mimics a seashell, the handle of them twisted and embroidered in the Rococo revival style that became increasingly popular throughout the 19th century. The set of utensils comes in a leather box, gilt and tooled, the inside of which is lined in oyster silk. The cover of the box is stamped “Elkington and Co / Manchester / by appointment / VR”. The initials probably stand for Victoria Regina who reigned at the time the objects were made.



Figure 3. A Pair of Victorian Parcel-Gilt Silver Salt-Cellars and Salt-Spoons. Maker: Elkington & Co., Birmingham, 1893, Material: silver, Bowl: Height 2.5 x Length 12 x Width 10 cm, Spoon: Length 12.5 x Width 3 cm, Liang Yi Museum.

Liang Yi Museum also houses a Victorian silver and cut-glass dessert stand (fig. 4). In an oval shape, the stand has four winged panthers as supports, with its rim finely decorated with palmettes. In medieval bestiary, the panther is a symbol of Christ, illustrated through three parallels. The panther's sweet roar draws other animals near, symbolising how Christ draws mankind to Him; the panther sleeps for three days, the same length of time elapsed between

Jesus' death and rebirth; and when the dragon, the panther's counterpart, hides from it, the panther's coat takes on a new colour, representing Christ's many virtuous qualities¹¹.



Figure 4. Victorian Silver and Cut-Glass Dessert Stand, Maker: Elkington, Birmingham, 1870, Material: silver, Height 24.5 x Length 32 x Width 25 cm, Liang Yi Museum.

Last but not least, Liang Yi Museum is home to a Victorian silver-gilt pastille burner and cover (fig. 5). In a time when sanitation was poor, a pastille burner was used to burn pieces of aromatic substances, emit perfume and combat the unpleasant odours that were a common feature of even the most refined lives.¹² In our collection, it is covered with trailing foliage, with a drop ring handle on three sides. It stands on a base with three scrolled feet. A plaque is attached to the base, with the engraving “Elkington 1011”. The cover of the burner is also finely decorated with foliage, with a baluster finial rising at the centre.

¹¹ Lipp, A. (2018)

¹² The Johnston Collection 2022.



Figure 5. Victorian Silver-Gilt Pastille Burner and Cover, Maker: Frederick Elkington, Birmingham, 1888, Material: silver, Diameter 24 x Height 38.5 cm, Liang Yi Museum.

The firm was renamed Elkington, Mason & Co. in 1842 when Josiah Mason became the third partner. In 1861, Mason left the partnership and the business continued as Elkington & Co.¹³ Four years later, the firm was entrusted to Elkington's sons following his death. In 1887, it became a limited company under the directorship of Frederick Elkington, one of G.R. Elkington's sons. The company remained independent until it was taken over by British Silverware Ltd. in 1963 and then Delta Metal Co. Ltd. in 1971.¹⁴ Half a century later, Elkington & Co. still remains a prestigious name in major auction houses and museums.

¹³ Lomas 2001, pp. 81.

¹⁴ Richard Redding 2022.

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