

Elegant Arts Antiques

Points of Interest

A Newsletter for Collectors by Carolyn Meacham
July 2006



The Cutting Edge * Antique Scissors

History

Along with a needle, the most necessary tool in the sewing box has to be a pair of scissors. Needing a tool to cut both threads and fabric dates to the beginning of man's attempts to sew. Sets of needlework tools, both antique and modern, sometimes contain a dozen different tools, but even the most basic sets have a pair of scissors. Collecting them in good condition can be a challenge though, as they were often the most used pieces in a set. Their usefulness as a prying tool, hole punch and screw driver has also contributed to the destruction of many a pair.

For a quick history, the first scissors date to 2000-500 BC (depending on who you consult). They were U shaped with the bow at the back providing the spring. Sheep shears and specialized snips are still made in this form. Most experts agree that cross bladed scissors with a connecting element existed in Roman times but didn't come into common usage until the Middle Ages in Europe. These scissors consist of the bows (finger holes), the shank (length connecting the bows and blades), two blades and the rivet or screw holding the blades together. Three main characteristics make a pair of scissors cut properly. "Tension" is where friction is created between the blades by a slight bowing or arching of the blades toward the inside of the scissors. "Twist" is where both blades are turned along the side towards the cutting edge. "Sharpness" is the angle or bevel of the cutting edge. Smoothness is important here. Blades with pitting along the cutting edge will never cut properly. The blade connector needs to be tight and until the early 18th century, rivets were used. After that date, a screw is considered to indicate a higher quality pair of scissors. Some antique scissors have a rivet with an indentation across the top to make it look like a screw. Another indication of high quality is if the screw head is worked with filed decoration, is blued or has a precious metal applied (Fig.1).

Matching marks (symbols or numbers) are sometimes seen near the pivot area inside of both blades. In Sheffield, these were stamped after the makers matched up right and left hand forgings of similar size and then they were hardened and ground together. In some cases these marks indicate that the two blades were forged from the same piece of steel to insure that both were of the same hardness. This coding enabled them to be matched together after they were tempered, ground and polished. If one blade was even slightly harder than the other, it would wear down and blunt the softer blade.

Welcome to my first eBay newsletter.

My hope is to write something every month or two that gives information about the sewing antiques that I collect and love. This first newsletter is based on an article that I wrote for the Thimbles Collectors International Bulletin last Autumn, although it's been edited and expanded a bit. I would love to hear what you think of it as well as your thoughts on future topics. If any one has a collection they would like to share or interesting storage or display ideas, please let me know.



Figure 1. Decorated screws

Scissors are made for a large variety of special tasks including cutting grape stems, hair, cigars, paper, cuticles and sutures. The word “shears” indicates scissors that are over 8” long and have one bow larger than the other. I’m going to focus, however, on antique sewing and embroidery scissors. Starting in the 17th century, the popularity of cutwork and other fine embroidery techniques created a market for scissors that had needle sharp points and were smaller and finer than shears.

Steel Scissors

The earliest scissors were forged from iron. Steel gives a much better edge however, and it became the obvious choice for scissors as it became more affordable. Before the 1840s, steel scissors were made entirely by hand. Many skilled artisans (including a forger, filer, fitter, setter, grinder and various finishers) were needed and up to 150 different steps went into each pair. The fancy bow and shank patterns on these handmade scissors were filed completely by hand. The scissors in Fig. 2 are a good example of the amazing skill some of these artisans demonstrated. This pair is English and they date to circa 1850. Hand filed scissors can be identified by the smoothness of the steel even in the crevices and on the interior loops of the patterns. These areas are rougher on the later scissors that were hot forged.

With the development of mass production at the end of the 19th century, many of the beautiful hand work details ceased to exist on everyday scissors. The number of patterns and shapes available dropped dramatically and most were simplified. Hot forged scissors were pressed between hardened steel dies much like the dies used for striking coins. The patterns of these scissors are not as crisp as hand cut examples and the lines along the sides where the two dies came together are sometimes visible. The blades often continued to be hand ground however, so they cut well.

Later, cold stamped scissors produced only shallow decoration and the cast blades didn’t hold an edge for long (Fig.3). They date mostly from 1920 to the present. Nickel plating was used by the Germans as early as 1850-60 to make these forged scissors look better and prevent rust, but the early plating had poor adhesion. Nickel plating is not



Figure 2. English hand filed steel scissors, c.1850

found on Sheffield scissors until the 1920s. Some fine quality scissors are still produced today however, and nearly all of those employ the same labor-intensive methods used by our ancestors.

England

English steel scissors were mostly simple and elegant in form from the late 18th century until around 1835. Then, for about 40 years, the makers seemed to be trying to outdo each other to create ornate examples. Fig.4 shows 4 pairs of English steel scissors dating from circa 1790 to 1890. Those with wedge shapes tend to be the earliest. Another way of dating English steel scissors is by any marks they may have (though many are not marked at all). Just a symbol or maker’s name (sometimes with address) is usually pre-1850. The word “Sheffield” (with or

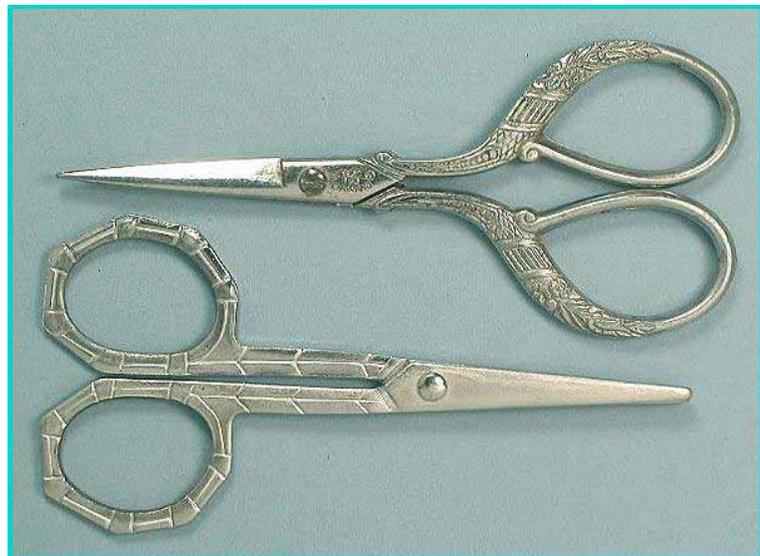


Figure 3. English cold stamped steel scissors, c.1910-1950

without a maker’s name) usually indicates circa 1850-1890. “England” was used between 1890-1920 and “Made in England” from about 1920 on. If they’re marked “Foreign” they were imported into England from about 1900-1930.



Figure 4. English Steel Scissors (from left to right)
c.1800, c.1820-30, c.1850 and c.1890

for sale. The filers had pattern books with scissors designs created by holding the scissors in a candle flame until blackened and then pressing them against the pages to give an impression. Because these hand filed scissors were individually made and the makers were vying with each other to see who could offer the most choice, it's hard (except for the simplest designs) to find 2 pairs with exactly the same pattern. The filers also did many pairs to special order. Scissors could be made with monograms, coats of arms and commemoratives. The talented filers usually designed these themselves.

Joseph Rodgers & Sons is a name that is often seen on English scissors. They have registered trade marks dating back to 1682 and were one of the premier 19th century scissors producers.

France

The French were noted for being masters of the finest hand cut steel scissors from much earlier dates than the English. They were especially fond of figural styles. Fig. 5 shows some early French hand filed steel embroidery scissors. Though their quality was considered superior, the French did not influence world markets as did the English and Germans because they didn't develop an extensive export trade in these items. The area around Thiers was (and is) where most French scissors were produced. Nogent and Paris were next in importance. If you see scissors stamped Nogent, it is not a maker's mark. Rather it's a sign that the maker was approved for their quality standards by the local regulatory guild.

Germany

Solingen in Germany has long been considered the principal competitor to Sheffield in the manufacture of cutlery. The earliest guild of cutlers was established there in 1401. Again, scissors stamped Solingen are not indicating the maker, but rather quality acceptance by the guilds (and now the government). Sheffield steel was still the best, however, and up until the Second World War the best German cutlery manufacturers imported their raw steel from England. From the beginning of the 20th century, Germany's scissor production far surpassed any other country, but the English were still known for superior detail and hand work on their scissors.



Figure 5. French figural steel scissors
c.1820 and c.1780 (left to right)

As early as 1160, Sheffield was known for its iron smelting and working. It was a natural industry for the area as large deposits of both iron ore and coal were available there. Crucible steel was discovered around 1700 and impurity problems and improvements in the carbon content were worked out later in the century. By the 1770s makers were starting firms in Sheffield to manufacture scissors and other cutlery.

By the mid 19th century thousands of pairs were being produced each week. There were 120 cutlery manufacturers in Sheffield and each had hundreds of scissors patterns

Spain, Italy & the Netherlands

Other European countries had distinctive styles and patterns for their steel scissors, but produced them in far smaller quantities. Toledo and Seville were cutlery centers in Spain and were noted for decorative gold & silver damascened steel items of the highest quality. The Toledo blade was more famous however, when the sword was an important weapon. You can occasionally find older scissors from Toledo (Fig.6), but most are 20th century souvenir ware. Very similar to this pair in style are the ornately scrolled Italian scissors of the mid 19th century. Italian scissors were most often made in the Campobasso region and are frequently stamped with large initials to identify the



Figure 6. Toledo steel scissors with damascened blades, c.1890

maker. The most often seen mark is B.T. for Bartolomeo Terzano. (Fig.7) The Dutch produced a huge quantity of scissors, but most had silver handles and the steel blades were imported.

America

From early in their history, America imported almost all of their finer (embroidery) steel scissors from England and Germany. Silver handled scissors came into vogue in the late 19th century and many American silversmiths produced large quantities of ornately embossed pairs. They sometimes don't have a maker's mark, but almost all are stamped "Sterling". The blades however, nearly always came from England or Germany where the highest quality steel was manufactured. That's why you often find American sterling handled scissors with "Germany" stamped on the blades (1890-1920).

Steel Blades, Precious Handles

Although the very finest quality scissors were made entirely of steel, artisans embellished the scissors makers' blades with handles of gold, silver and mother of pearl. Again, the most elaborate of these are often French. Especially loved, are the delicate mother of pearl handled scissors from the



Figure 7. Italian steel scissors by Bartolomeo Terzano, c.1880



Figure 8. French mother-of-pearl scissors from Palais Royal boxes, c.1820

Palais Royal sewing boxes (Fig.8). These were made more for show and snipping the occasional thread as they were too fragile for serious use. Many of the Palais Royal boxes also included a pair of steel snips to actually use. Other handles were made of gold and set with gems (Fig.9). The French did far more silvergilt (gilded silver) and gold handled scissors than the English, but silver handled scissors were produced in great quantities in England from 1800-1910.



Figure 9. French 18 kt gold with turquoises, hallmark 1819-1838



Figure 10. English silver handled scissors, c.1790-1800



Figure 11. English silver handled scissors, c.1810-30

The blades for these English scissors were made in Sheffield and the silver handles in Birmingham. Almost none of these were hallmarked until the late 19th century when light weight items were no longer exempted from the hallmark laws. Some of the early silver sheaths will have a maker's mark. Samuel Pemberton (S.P) and Joseph Taylor (I.T) are the marks most often seen. Figure 10 shows two pair of sheathed

scissors most likely by Samuel Pemberton (Marks recorded from 1773-1813). His maker's mark appears on the sheath of the pair at the bottom. The handles on the top pair are sterling and the bows on the bottom pair are "close plated". This means that a layer of silver has been applied over the steel using tin as a binder. A soldering iron applied heat and pressure and the silver was molded over the steel while the tin was molten. This style of silver is one of the earliest attempts at silver plating and can often be recognized because bits of the silver will be missing and the steel shows through.

The ornate and fanciful silver scissors of Joseph Taylor are truly a delight. He worked as a silversmith from 1773 until the early 1820s. Most of these scissors were in leather boxed sewing sets which contained an equally ornate silver tape measure, basket style pincushion, pen-knife, tweezers/earspoon, bodkin, stiletto and/or thimble. They would also occasionally contain a needlecase, pencil or thread waxer. The handles of his scissors have deeply embossed designs on both sides and they all had matching sheaths. They were often figural and had designs that included birds, animals, flowers and fruits. Figure 11 show some of the styles of the scissors attributed to him. I've never seen a pair that were hallmarked. The only sewing items of his that I've seen with a maker's mark are a needlecase, bodkin, finger guard and his basket pincushions (marked under the handle of the basket).



Figure 12. *Engraved silver handles, English, c.1840*



Figure 13. *Snowflake or filigree silver scissors, English, c.1840-50*



Figure 14. *French scissors with gilded silver handles, c.1860*

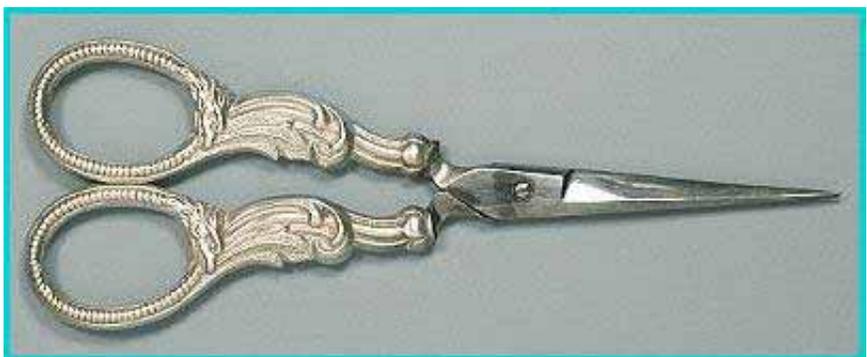


Figure 15. *German scissors with silver handles, c.1850*

In the 1830-50s the style of decoration on English silver scissors became more restrained. Hand engraving on a flat surface with swirls, scrolls and floral elements became popular (Figure 12). Another popular pattern of that era is called the filigree or snowflake pattern (Figure 13). As Victorian decoration became more ornate, silver design followed suit. Silver handled scissors from 1880-1910 had ornately embossed designs with Baroque scrollwork, flowers and pierced lattice patterns. Beginning in the 1880's hallmarks were required on even small silver items, so scissors now bore silver marks for the first time. Adie & Lovekin Ltd. (A&LLd) and Levi & Salaman (L&S) were leading Birmingham producers of scissors and sewing items during these years and their maker's marks are often the ones you see.

Silver handled scissors were also popular in France, Austria/Germany, the Netherlands and late in the 19th century, in America. The styles were distinctive in each country and are fairly easy to identify. (Fig.14-17) Dutch silversmiths were a large and talented group and produced beautiful silver handled scissors. Many of their designs had figural elements such as birds, animals, hearts, and flowers.

The silver hallmarks are also important tools for identifying the country of origin. Maybe I'll do a newsletter one of these days about the ones commonly found on silver & gold sewing tools. As the length of this newsletter seems to be getting out of hand, I think I'll save figural scissors, lace scissors, buttonhole scissors, folding scissors and scissors cases and holders for another time.



Figure 16. American sterling silver scissors (Unger Brothers) with German marked blades, c.1900

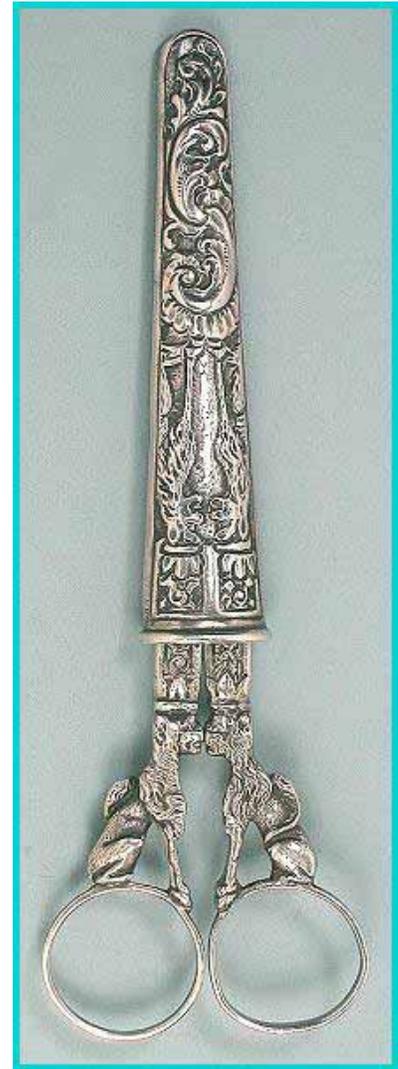


Figure 17. Dutch cast.833 silver scissors with matching sheath, c.1830-50

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