

Elegant Arts Antiques

Points of Interest

A Newsletter for Collectors by Carolyn Meacham
September 2006



Bodkins * An Overview

Bodkins are a fascinating collectible and infinitely varied so I thought a newsletter on them would be fun. I've noticed that many objects that are called bodkins on eBay are actually stilettoes, crochet hooks and other assorted tools. I frequently receive emails asking about the purpose of the bodkin that is usually in any set of needlework tools being sold. Here then is a brief study of the humble bodkin. A bodkin most often resembles a large needle with a blunt or knobbed end. The word was used in earlier centuries for sharp items such as small daggers, stilettoes and pointed hair ornaments.

Evidence suggests that bodkins have been used for working in both fabric and leather since ancient times. At first they were probably interchangeable with needles. Until the end of the 17th century, men and women used long bodkins, up to 7 inches in length, for running drawstrings and rethreading the cords and ribbons with which so many of their clothes were fastened. It was a very necessary item and was often carried on the person in a bodkin case to be on hand for emergency clothing repairs. These long bodkins were often made of silver and engraved with a date or initials. They sometimes

terminated in an ear spoon and were important enough to be listed in wills and bequests. Fig 1 shows several early bodkins with ear spoons. The second from the bottom has been engraved with the owner's initials.



Figure 1. 18th & 19th century bodkins with ear spoons. From top: 1: English steel. 2: English silver. 3: Dutch silver. 4-5: English silver, longest is 5 1/4" (13.3 cm).

In the 18th century bodkins became shorter but were still hand made and thick compared to later examples. Bodkins were made of steel, brass, silver, gold, tortoise shell, horn, ivory, bone, mother of pearl and some were even jeweled (Fig.2).

Figure 2. French gold bodkin set with rubies & pearls, c.1850. 2 3/4" long (7cm).



Often we have to rely on style or provenance to date bodkins and name their country of origin. Many were never hallmarked. Most of the lovely etuis and workboxes of the 18th and early 19th century contained bodkins.

French bodkins have a distinctive style and are generally silver, silver gilt, gold, steel or the famous mother of pearl examples of the Palais Royal (Fig. 3). Several silver and silvergilt French bodkins are shown in Fig. 4. The tiny French gold and silver hallmarks are easier to fit on small objects and are frequently seen on their bodkins.



Figure 3. French mother of pearl bodkins from Palais Royal work boxes, one with gold inlay, c.1810. 2 1/4" long (5.7 cm).



Figure 4. 19th century French silver and silvergilt bodkins. From top: 1: Silver, c.1830. 2 5/8" long (6.7 cm). 2: Silver, c.1880. 3 and 5: Silvergilt, c. 1850. 4: Silver, c.1850.

Most English silver bodkins were marked with only a maker's mark or not at all. A couple of exceptions that bear full hallmarks are shown in Fig. 5 and 6. The marvelous two color gold example in Fig. 7 is English and a hallmarked Dutch silver bodkin is shown in Fig. 8.

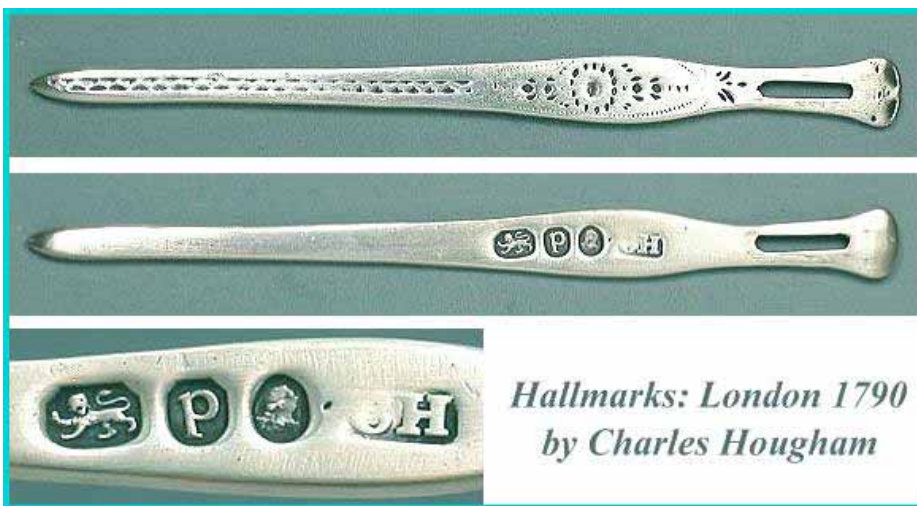


Figure 5. Rare fully hallmarked 18th century English silver bodkin. 3 1/2" long (8.9 cm).



Figure 7. English 2 color gold bodkin, c.1840. 2 3/4" long (7 cm).



Figure 6. Hallmarked English sterling silver bodkin, dated 1900. 2 7/8" long (7.3 cm)

*Hallmarks:
Birmingham 1900
by Levi & Salaman*

After needle making machinery was introduced in England, steel bodkins were produced in quantity by all the large needlemakers. The introduction of elastic in the 1840s created a new use for them and they were part of every sewing set in the last half of the 19th century. The small round hole of the double eye was used for this purpose. I've never read this



*Dutch hallmarks:
by Joannes Ferdinandus Orthlieb
(1827-1846)*

Figure 8. Hallmarked Dutch 833 silver bodkin, c.1840. 2 1/4" long (5.7 cm).

anywhere, but in my experience, English bodkins, even the really early ones, often have this extra hole, whereas French, Dutch and other European bodkins usually do not. American 19th and 20th century bodkins also have it. A variety of English steel bodkins are shown in Fig 9 and some plainer examples are in Fig.10.



Figure 9. A variety of 19th century English steel bodkins. Longest at bottom is 3 5/8" long (9.2 cm).

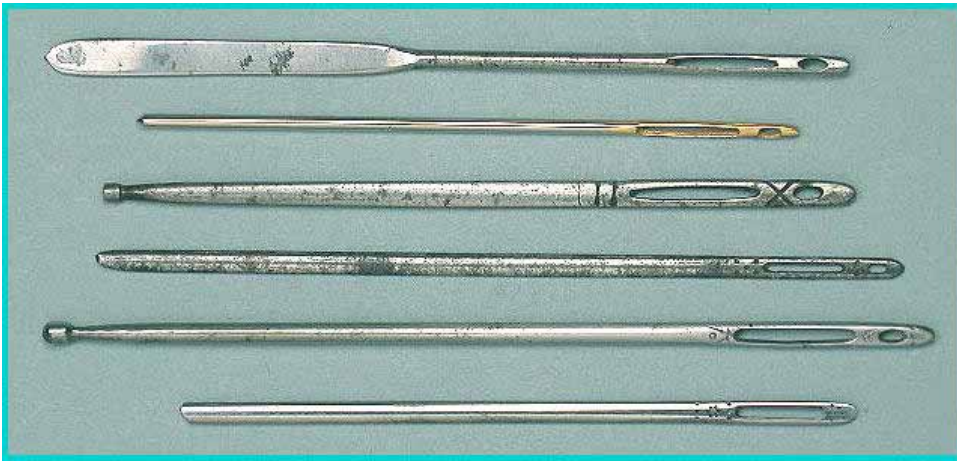


Figure 10. 6 common 19th century English steel bodkins. Longest is 3 3/8" long (8.6 cm).

Wider and flatter bodkins were produced in the late 19th and early 20th century. These were used for running ribbon of different widths through eyelets in lace and petticoats and sometimes came in sets with several sizes in a presentation case. (Fig. 11) This was particularly true in America where they were widely produced in silver. The variety of slit sizes at one end of the bodkin accommodated assorted sizes of ribbon and the round holes at the other end were used for a variety of cords, tapes and braids. This style of bodkin is sometimes called a ribbon or tape threader.

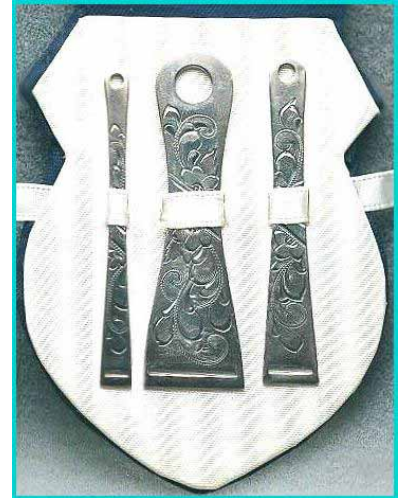


Figure 11. American sterling silver bodkin set, c. 1900. Bodkins are 3" long (7.6 cm).

The larger surface area of these American bodkins allowed for more scope in decoration. Figural pieces were especially popular and included fish, alligators, dachshunds and sporting pieces. The little eel in Fig. 12 and the fish in Fig. 13 are good examples and were made by Simons Bros. in Philadelphia. Webster Company, Gorham and Unger Bros. are other well known makers of these silver bodkin sets. Silver bodkins were even enameled. The example in Fig 14 was probably part of a set with matching enameled sewing tools. A rare twisted silver bodkin was made by Palmer & Peckham, a company that was only in business for 8 years (Fig. 15).



Figure 12. American sterling silver eel bodkin by Simons Bros., c.1900. 3 3/8" long (8.6 cm). Engraved on one side with the name "Peggy".

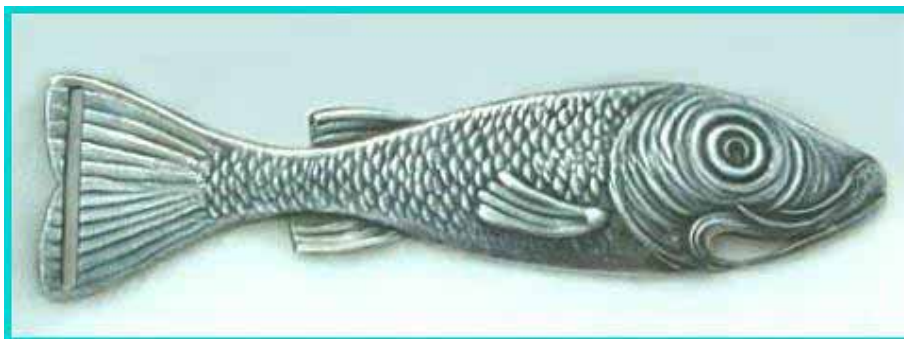


Figure 13. American sterling silver fish bodkin by Simons Bros., c.1900. 3 1/4" long (8.3 cm).



Figure 14. American sterling silver bodkin with guilloche enamel decoration, c.1900. Unidentified maker. 2 5/8" long (6.7 cm).

Figure 15. Unusual American twist top bobbin in sterling silver, c.1900. 3 3/4" long (9.5 cm).



Figure 16. English sterling silver and silvergilt examples of bodkins formed like fish, c.1830-1860. Longest is 3 1/4" long (8.3 cm).

Fish bodkins are probably the most often found of the figural bodkins and many date back to the early-mid 19th century. Figs. 16 and 17 show a variety of English bodkins in silver, silver gilt and gold that were made to resemble fish. Scales, gills and fins were often worked into the decoration. Metal was not the only material to be used and the fish in Fig. 18 are tortoise shell examples.



Figure 17. More English gold and sterling silver bodkins formed like fish, c.1830-1860. Longest is 2 1/2" long (6.4 cm).

Figure 18. English fish bodkins or ribbon threaders carved from tortoise shell, c.1870. Top fish is 2 5/8" long (6.7 cm) and bottom fish is 2 1/8" (5.4 cm).



In the 19th century, many bodkins were stamped as commemoratives of royal or other public events. They started in the early 19th century and there are examples commemorating the death of the Princess Caroline in 1817 (Fig.19) and the election of Andrew Jackson as President in 1829 (Fig. 20). Several events in Queen Victoria's life were noted on bodkins (Fig 21). They were also used to carry political slogans, souvenir place names, advertising and sentiments such as "Forget Me Not" or "Ever Love The Giver".



Figure 19. English steel bodkin commemorating the death of Princess Charlotte, c.1817. 2 1/8" long (5.4 cm).



Figure 20. American steel bodkin announcing the presidency of Andrew Jackson, c.1829. 2 1/8" (5.4 cm).

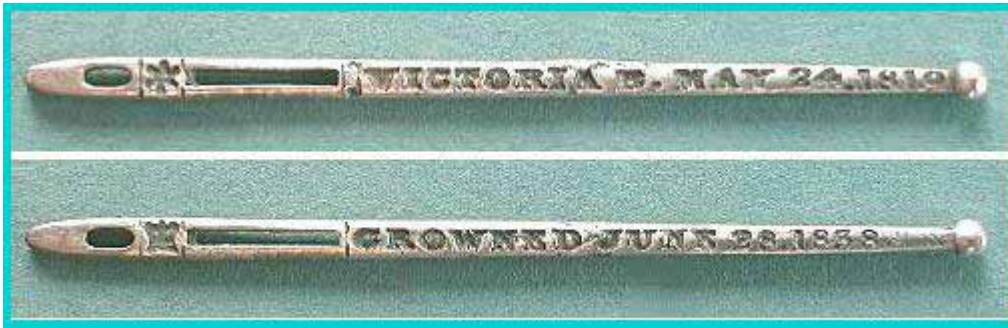


Figure 21. English steel bodkin commemorating the crowning of Queen Victoria, c.1838. 1 7/8" long (4.8 cm).

Carved bone bodkins were often seen (Fig 22), but ivory is relatively rare. Decorated gilded metal bodkins of the sort shown in Fig.23 are French and relatively easy to find. The painted bodkins in Fig.24 are American and date to the early-mid 20th century.

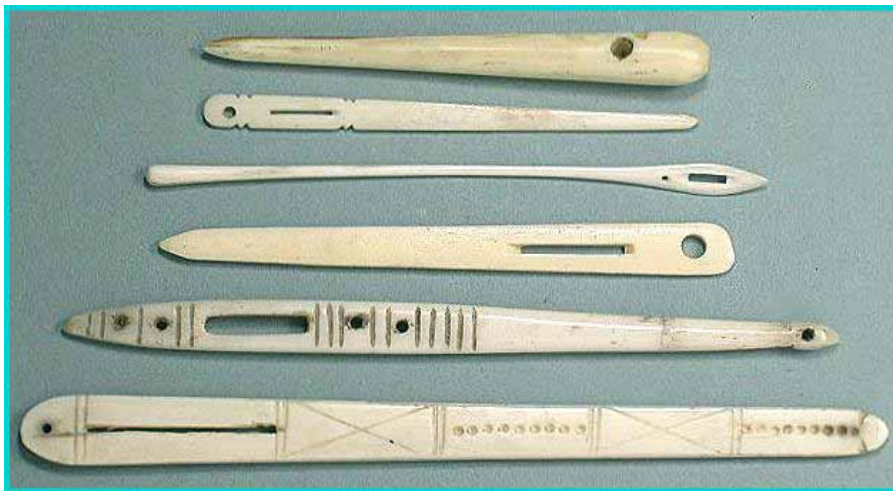


Figure 22. Various English carved bone bodkins, c.1820-1890. Longest is 4 1/8" long (10.5 cm).



Figure 23. French gilded metal bodkins from sets, c.1860. Longest is 2 7/8" long (7.3 cm).

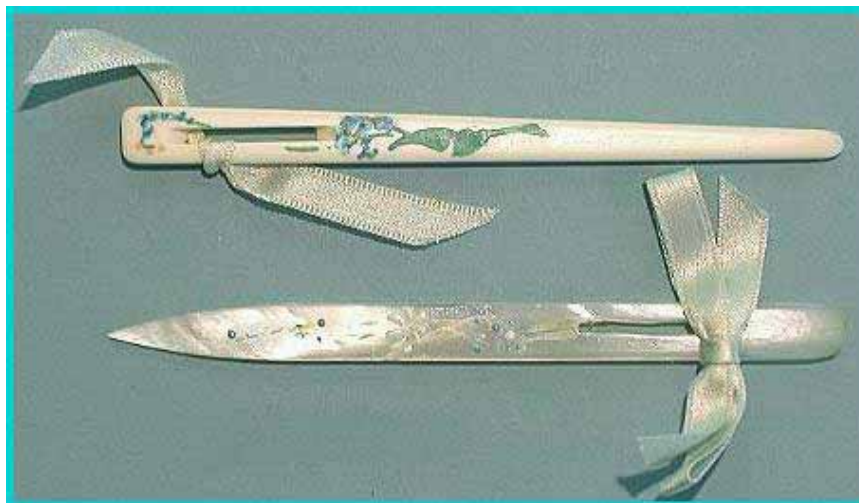


Figure 24. Handpainted American bodkins, c.1920. Top is carved bone and bottom is mother of pearl. Both 3 1/8" long (7.9 cm).

In the late 19th and early 20th century there were a variety of patented and "gadget" bodkins. Some incorporated safety pins, some were double ended and some had sliding clamp mechanisms (Fig. 25). An American sterling version of the clamping style was made by La Pierre and also came in multi size sets (Figs. 26 and 27). A sliding button on the side brings the two sides together and locks the little teeth into place on the ribbon to be threaded.



Figure 25. English and American metal, wood and gadget bodkins, c.1900-1920. Longest is 4" long (10.2 cm).



Figure 26. American sterling clamping bodkin, c.1900. 3" long (7.6 cm).

Bodkins were sometimes incorporated with other items and created a multi-use tool. We've already mentioned the ear spoon located at the end of some of the earlier ones. I've also seen them combined with stilettoes, needle cases, tweezers and crochet hooks (Fig. 28).



Figure 28. Combination crochet hooks/bodkins, c.1880. 4 1/2" long (11.4 cm).

Bodkin cases - The difference between a bodkin case and a needle case is primarily size. A small case to hold sewing needles would be owned by a lady, but the larger bodkin cases were carried by both men and women. 18th and early 19th century bodkin cases usually measure between 4-5 inches, whereas needle cases are seldom more than 3 1/2" long. Fig. 29 shows the comparison.

Figure 29. Bodkin and needle cases. From top: 1: English bone needle case, c.1850. 2 5/8" long (6.7 cm). 2: French Dieppe ivory bodkin case, c.1800. 4 1/4" long (10.8 cm). 3: English bone bodkin case, c.1760. 4 3/4" long (12.1 cm).



Figure 27. Set of American sterling clamping bodkins by La Pierre, c.1900. Longest is 3 1/4" long (8.3 cm).

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Special thanks to Mary Ann Yeager who generously shared many interesting resources on bodkins with me.