

## DALLAS MUSEUM OF ART

### *Vanity in the Golden Age: A Silver Masterpiece*

Dr. Charles Venable

June 23, 2001

Carolyn Bess: Thanks to all of you for coming out today to celebrate the DMA's Gorham Silver Dressing Table. Our first speaker today is Dr. Charles Venable, Chief Curator and Curator of Decorative Arts here at the DMA, where he has worked since 1986. Charles received his PhD in American and New England studies from Boston University. He has published and lectured widely on decorative arts and his book *Silver in America, 1840-1940* won the Charles F. Montgomery prize for the best book in the decorative arts and the beautiful dressing table [*Martelé dressing table and stool*, 2000.356.A-B.MCD] that we are celebrating today was given by the Eugene and Margaret McDermott Art Fund actually in honor of Charles. His talk today is called *Vanity in the Golden Age: A Silver Masterpiece* and after his talk--we didn't start in the galleries today because of the cramped space--but after his talk, he is happy to take us to the galleries and answer any questions you might have there. Please join me in welcoming Charles Venable.

Charles Venable: I am so glad that a good crowd turned out on this beautiful Saturday afternoon to celebrate that what I think is a truly remarkable acquisition and if you haven't seen it in-person in the galleries, even if this is not perhaps your personal taste, it's a bit over-the-top to say the least. But some of you may like over-the-top things the way I do, but it almost takes your breath away to think how remarkable this object is. As you will see shortly in real life there is about 2,000 and some-odd ounces of sterling silver that was melted down in order to make this particular extraordinary masterpiece. Art museums sometimes I think use the word *masterpiece* a little loosely. It seems like every other show is masterpieces from here or there, everywhere, and so it has kind of watered down the value of that word. But I think when you see this thing, it almost looks like you can plug it in, it's so remarkable.

[00:02:00.17]

However, before we go and look at the object, I thought it would be nice, since, it's actually in the back of a gallery that's fairly small and there is no way that all of you nice people could get around this for me to talk about all of the detail on this piece much less keep you standing there where a few of you can see and everybody else probably can't, while I try to explain some of the circumstances around which an object like this would have been created. So I promise you we will get back to the real thing and we will also get back to more images and details of it.

But first of all I would like to take you back, just about exactly a century ago. This dressing table was made in 1899 and it took about six or seven men working almost an entire year to produce this particular object. And you might wonder why in the hell would anybody want to spend all that labor, all that money, all that material making up a sterling silver dressing table? Most people now in the 21st century and in the late last 30 or 40 years of the 20th century, spent a lot of time getting rid of their family silver because they didn't want to polish it anymore.

Perhaps grandmother, when she inherited it or great-grandmother when she bought it had other people who would polish it and it really wasn't up to them to say, "no ma'am, I don't want to polish this anymore." However, most of us have to polish our own silver these days and therefore silver has declined in terms of status and its value in our everyday life.

But 150 years ago that was very, very different. One of the things to achieve in your life if you were fortunate enough to make enough money to have a good home, a large home, would have been to have perhaps some servants to help you take care of it. It probably would have been a fairly large Victorian house. Dallas used to be full of them, a few of them survived, but most of them are gone. In fact there were major mansions here along Ross Avenue in the 1880s and 1890s, all of which except the Belo Mansion two blocks away have long been torn down.

However, the interiors of those houses often had very large dining room spaces and therefore you might have gotten a scene like this.

[00:04:06.04]

This is actually a grand dining room that we mocked up in a 1994 exhibition called *Silver in America* for which I wrote a catalog which amazingly is still in print. We borrowed this entire table service from the Rhode Island School of Design in Providence, Rhode Island which is where the Gorham Manufacturing Company that made our dressing table that is the heart of this discussion today that's where it's located. This was one of the most important table services they ever made. It was made in the late 1870s for a young couple who were 30-years-old.

He had done very well in the insurance business and went off and ordered a 700 and some odd piece table service which does not include the flatware. Most of us today when we think of silverware, we think of knives, forks and spoons and certainly that's always been an important part of the silver business, if not the most important part-- about 90% of the silver ever made in this country was knives, forks, and spoons.

However, what most people talked about at length were these kind of grand, grand objects like big candelabra centerpieces, etcetera and most of the silver was for the table. Things that were actually silver tables like the one you are

going to see were by far the great exception and were very, very rare even in this period where a lot of people liked silver and wanted to have a lot of silver. So it was really these things made for the table that drove the silver industry.

Gorham Manufacturing Company started in the 1830s. It originally was a man by the name of Jabez Gorham who was a silversmith who mainly made small silver spoons and then he (by about 1850 had ten people working for him including his young son who eventually would take his company over) took his father's companies over and became one of the big industrialists in this country in the silver industry.

[00:06:03.14]

So from starting in 1840s and having more or less ten people by the time this factory was built outside of Providence, Rhode Island and opened in 1890-1892, there were 2,400 people making silver for Gorham. That tells you something about the importance of silver to Victorian Americans. 2400 people is certainly not an enormous industry compared to say, making automobiles in this country or steel or railway carriages in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, but for a luxury good that only a very few people could afford, that was a huge manufacturing plant for this type of an industry and here you see exactly how large it was.

It was this huge H shape plant. The sort of brain trust, I suppose if you will, where the executive stayed is that part up there in the very front where all the sidewalks lead to and then every place you see a window in the H shape section of that building, two silversmiths would have sat on stools in front of those windows. As I will show you in just a minute when we look at the floor plan because they were trying to make all this material using natural light, if you will.

You might also notice, probably just barely can see it here along the left-hand side, there is actually a spur line of a railway and this is before automobiles really became prevalent in this country or anywhere else and everything went out by rail. And so raw materials came in--this plant was so large that it had its own smelter for smelting down silver that would come in, in what they call *pigs* which basically look like a sterling silver meatloaf if you will, sort of a bundt shape pan of silver. It would then be melted down, it could be rolled. This was a very large fabricating plant for silver.

Most of the things they made were fairly plain. However, they also expended an enormous amount of hand labor.

[00:08:00.15]

We often think of silver as being very precious and all handmade and one of the things that made this company so avant-garde for its day was that it was able to wed industrial processes like lots of machinery of the latest order to old 18<sup>th</sup> century-style hand craftsmanship in order to produce large, large quantities of

silverware that would then be loaded into boxes and put on rail cars to be sent all over the United States and to some extent throughout the world.

Unfortunately I don't have a floor plan of the Gorham factory, none seems to have survived. But its great, great rival was the Tiffany Company which was -- though Tiffany & Company is located in New York obviously, its manufacturing plant was in Newark, New Jersey. This is actually the floor plan of the Tiffany Company but it's very similar to what the interior of the Gorham plant looked like and here you can see, instead of looking at the little windows on the outside of a building, you have to look for little holes in the wall basically and if you were up here where I am, you could see that they have drawn in little tiny stools and benches all the way around the perimeter of that building. And then in the center, that building that's by itself in the middle, that's actually the safe. Every night after you were working on silver which is a precious metal, you would take the piece you are working on and then it would be taken to the safe and locked up.

Also, there were all kinds of safety sort of valves, if you will, in these type of companies, so that the workman who would be covered in silver filings and dust or gold filings would actually have to go shake their clothes out over grates, so that the business could actually collect all of the little particles of silver off of their clothing and their body so that it could be remelted down and wouldn't be able -- the workman wouldn't be able to take that home and save it all up I suppose and cash it in later. One of the things you need to think about though, is that making silverware is not like making an automobile in which you have a mechanized conveyor belt with parts coming in as they are needed.

[00:10:03.16]

In the building come all of these parts and out of the other side of the building comes a readymade automobile. Most, except for flatware, which was produced in huge quantities, most of the hollowware: bowls, candelabra, dressing tables, were produced in very small quantities, relatively speaking.

And therefore it was cheaper actually to pay and pay a lot to these skilled crafts people both men and women who worked in these companies to produce small groups of these types of objects rather than to invent a machine to whip up a silver dressing table when you had only one of them ever to be made. It would have cost far more to invent the machine than it would to actually produce the piece of silver. So what really happened is though you have a giant company building, you have it divided into many, many smaller shops within that.

So you would have one department doing chasing, one department doing engraving, one department working at the smelter, one department making flatware, etcetera, etcetera, etcetera. And that's important to remember because there's a very specialized shop which is developed in Gorham in the

1890s in order to produce that dressing table and all the other things that were in the same line.

The other thing you have to remember is whereas by the mid-part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, most people where they bought their silverware was at the local jewelry store. And that certainly was true in the late 19th century as well. However, companies like Gorham, up until the First World War and even to some extent into the 1920s, were just like Tiffany & Company in that they had their own big flashy showroom in New York. This is the Gorham multistory building, not in Providence, Rhode Island, but in downtown New York. This is on 5th Avenue, right next door. If you could see the building to the right of this slide, that would be the New York Public Library. So it was at the very most fashionable part of New York. This building was finished, I believe, in 1902.

[00:12:00.16]

So just as that silver dressing table was coming back from the World's Fair where it had won a grand prize, this is the place where it probably went. It was displayed and then was purchased and went into a private home in New England. But a very grand building indeed. Also, you need to think that there are a lot of people involved in the creation of any type of object, whether it is a silver dressing table or as you'll hear later, a couture evening gown.

This is one of the most important. This man is named William Christmas—was his middle name--Christmas Codman. He was an English designer who had been wooed away from England, which produced many great silversmiths and designers in the 19th century where they had lot of trade schools for such things and he was hired by Gorham in the late 19th century and stayed until the early 1920s when he retired and moved back to his ancestral home of Great Britain.

But here you see him at his prime. He is very important to our story because when we go the galleries, if you walk by the gallery out here to your left when you go out of the front door of the auditorium, there's a large glass case with silver in it out in the hallway of the museum. And virtually all of that silver was made by the Gorham Company and virtually all of it was designed by this particular gentleman.

He was very much influenced by what was going on in Europe, which in the late 19th and early 20th century was really the Art Nouveau taste coming out of Paris. Gorham, thanks to him, was really the only major silver company in this country that produces Art Nouveau or the very curvilinear French styled silver at a very, very high level. Mr. Codman designed, we found out from the records, virtually every piece of an entire line which Gorham called Martelé. So on our labels out there, it'll say Martelé dressing table, Martelé cup and saucer, Martelé candelabra.

Martelé was a trade name that they took from the French word meaning “to hammer.”

[00:14:04.21]

And they wanted you everybody to know, if you knew a little bit of French, that these things were “handmade” and they created their own shop within that giant factory to do nothing but handwork on these types of Art Nouveau objects.

The very first ones were shown in about 1898 or so. Now what's extraordinary about this Art Nouveau style is that it was just the tip of the iceberg at Gorham. What most people wanted was not the new, the avant-garde, the sort of untested out there. Most people are very frightened, if you will, and all you have to do is look at residential architecture in a typical city like Dallas, Texas, and most people are not building very wild avant-garde, all glass and cantilevered houses.

Lots of people thought, for example, Frank Lloyd Wright would have been very contemporary with this silver dressing table. And his houses in Chicago, though we love them today, very few people ever commissioned him to build the house and people today walk through them but then would say, “I couldn't possibly live there.”

(00:15:05)

Most people have very conservative taste and therefore, they want tradition rather than the unknown future as their style for their home.

This is much more typical of the expensive objects that Gorham made. This is also in the Dallas Museum of Art's collection. It's from 1910, so just a few years later than the dressing table, but it's in a very traditional style. This is in the Louis XIV style. It's part of a giant table service made for Senator Clark of Montana and though I doubt if he was ever in Montana, this went to his big house in New York where he was there for the social season and the whole house was done in the Louis XIV taste and he had a table service including this tureen and candelabra and wine coolers, which after his death in the 1940s was broken up and sold and this came to the museum a few years ago.

But certainly, the quality of this material is really extraordinary.

[00:16:00.09]

If you look at all of the chasing, the casting of these wonderful sort of Renaissance-type of figures, the handles. The handles would have come out of mold having been casted but look at that band of fruit, for example, running behind the handles or these flower motifs and these little panels along the base of the side. All of that would have been done by hand just like the dressing table decoration that you are going to see very shortly.

So that could turn out many, many styles but the one that became very famous for in Europe at the World's Fair was this Art Nouveau style. This is one of the very earliest pieces ever made in the Martelé line which was the name, as I said, of this Art Nouveau style. This is one of the pair of candelabras that we have in the DMA upstairs in the main fourth floor American art galleries, and these were made about 1890, 1900 or so.

What's interesting about this is that this was originally supposed to have electric light bulbs sticking out of it. We may think, "Oh my god! How horrible that would have been? Wouldn't candles be better?" But remember, everybody had been using candles or kerosene for hundreds of years and electric lights were far more prestigious to be dining behind.

So these actually had sockets evidently according to factory records that you could stick in there and then run all those electrical wiring up to the ceiling and plug them in somewhere. So this probably looked even more Art Nouveau than it does in its current state because it would have had all of these curvy wires, draping all around your dining room. I am surprised somebody wasn't electrified eating much less playing with their candelabra. But the main point is that this is typical of this line in that, there are flowers all over. Most of the decoration in this type of silver from Gorham is covered in floral decoration.

This one happens all to be on the theme of poppies and if you know what a poppy pod looks like, if you look underneath, sort of hidden around the candle arms, you will see silver poppy pods.

[00:18:08.03]

There are poppy leaves curling up around the center part of the candelabra and then the buds open up at the very top to where you can insert a candle.

There is also this wonderful pair of vases we have in our collection, again just trying to get you familiar with the style of this silver coming out of Gorham. Look how very curvy the bases are; they almost look like leaves sort of curling up in order to create the bases of this pair of large vases. They are probably about 18 inches tall I suppose and based on a theme of irises and tulips and you can see big irises, big German bearded irises, in the lower base and then there are tulips about half way up, running all the way up to the top of these.

I have mentioned the World's Fair in 1900, which even though they showed this line off a little bit in the United States before 1900, in 1898-99, they really saved up their best stuff to go to Paris where the World's Fair was being held. World's Fairs by 1900 had become these amazing events in which if you had the money, millions of people went to these World's Fair to see the very best in the world in terms of manufactured goods and art.

So Gorham and Tiffany and all their rivals from around the world really spent a lot of time and money trying to make extraordinary booths of goods. So it's

interesting that Tiffany and Gorham were sort of across the aisle from each other, these arch rivals in the United States, trying to beat each other up, showing off extraordinary objects. These vases happened to come from a line of 12-pair of vases that were made, from which they selected a couple of pair to go to the World's Fair.

A lot of the silver made in his line though was, again, table silver, trays, coffee pots, tea pots. They didn't make flatware in the line officially but they made lots of things like this, mugs, cups, etcetera.

[00:20:08.19]

This happens to be one of the finest trays known. This silver was so expensive that much of it was commissioned and we know that they were a couple of people here in Dallas, for example, whose ancestors actually ordered it from Gorham and said, we want a certain monogram, we want a certain flower on it. It would be made up to order. This particular tray, which is out in a case just to the left of the door of the auditorium as we walk in the gallery in a second, this was actually made by a man named Mr. Pope, made for him and he was a great bicycle manufacturer.

A lot of people were buying bicycles at the turn of the century. He was a very new millionaire in this country and so he ordered a game service. Now, people were much more specialized, I suppose, in the way they ate, and so you would have a dessert service, a game service, a fish service and they would all have their own types of decoration. I am sure many of you have seen, for example, porcelain fish services where there were different fishes painted on each of the plates and on the platter. This one was for serving game--he must have been a hunter of some kind--and when you look at it outside, you will see the mallard duck right at the very tiptop with some, probably herbs, chased right around it. Then there are all different types of game birds running around the outside of this.

We today may be kind of squeamish perhaps of having portraits of the animals we're eating on our dishes, but in the 19th century people were much closer to the realities of life in terms of either hunting and killing animals yourself or going down and wringing the necks of chickens or picking out animals that then were killed particularly for you to take home and to eat. So they didn't find this disturbing in the least.

Well, to finish my remarks here, I would like to spend just a second looking at some of the details on this particular object.

[00:22:05.20]

This is one of those things that was specifically made up for speculation. There was no client that came to Gorham and said, "I would very much like to have a large, 2000-ounce silver dressing table whipped up for me to use in my

bedroom." What happened was, they were preparing for the 1900 World's Fair and since really the 1860s and 70s, there was a major World's Fair in this country in 1878 in Philadelphia to celebrate the centennial of the American Revolution and that's where Tiffany had a big booth to start with.

Gorham, beginning in 1880s, started showing at these World's Fair; they showed in London, they showed in Paris, they showed in Italy; 1904, a huge World's Fair in Saint Louis. They continued apace up until about World War I, being these enormously important events particularly for companies that made luxury goods like silver. So in preparation for these events, often the company would have their very best workmen spend as much as six months or a year making up one or two objects that would just dazzle you when you walked into their booth at these fairs.

So that's what they did in this case. They had six or seven of their very best silversmiths work to the drawings of Mr. Codman, whose portrait you saw, and they wouldn't have been little tiny drawings. Drawings for this type of silverware were done life-size and so there would have been huge big pieces of paper in which he would have done major drawings of this entire thing. And we are not really talking at this time drawings that look like architectural plans; these are drawings that look more like paintings in which he would have done an entire water color study of this object to scale with all the decoration drawn in and then painted in so that the silversmiths would have been able to measure directly from those drawings and transfer it to the objects.

They also had to do a lot of engineering in order to make silver which is a very malleable, soft metal.

[00:24:04.17]

That's why when you polish it and you get all that black stuff off of it, that's actually silver molecules coming off on your rag and if you keep doing it over and over again, that's why engraving gets a little blurry. It's because you are polishing it all away because it's so soft. So sterling just normally beaten into sheets wouldn't be able to stand up, much less hold a piece of plate glass in the back of it or you wouldn't be able to sit on it. Yet they didn't really want in this case to have a wooden piece of furniture that just had silver decoration on it. That would have been to them kind of the easy way out, I suppose.

So what they did is they had sterling silver I-beam cast and though it's a little difficult and the guards get a little crazy in our gallery if you actually lay down on your back in the gallery and look up underneath it. But while I am in there, if you really, really, really, really want to do that, we can probably make that happen for you.

(00:25:01)

Underneath the entire top of this dressing table, a big cross of about 1.5-inch thick I-beams and then the supports that were made to go through those silver legs out of silver again is what holds this whole dressing table up. It's really quite a tour de force. They sent it off, shipped it all the way to Paris, it won the gold prize there. It was in front of the newspaper.

Gorham got a lot of marketing publicity out of this and then it came back to the United States, was shown off in their brand new showroom, which I showed you, in New York city and it was sold to an industrialist outside of Boston. It was in his home up until the early 1920s. As luck or un-luck, I suppose, would have it, he went bankrupt in the early 1920s and guess who got the dressing table? It was his banker who called in for non-payment of loans.

[00:26:01.02]

This very expensive object was transferred to the President of this bank and it stayed in his family until 1991 when it was actually sold at auction.

I desperately tried to buy it at auction for the DMA then and that's ten years ago and I couldn't raise the money at the time and it went to a private collector in Connecticut. Then he lent it to us for our 1994 Silver exhibition, the catalog of which I mentioned earlier, and that's when I sort of fell in love with this object.

Again, it's not necessarily my personal taste but I think it is such an extraordinary thing for anybody to have dreamed up and created and museums are about showing off spectacular kind of amazing objects and I think this is certainly one of those. Unfortunately, when I called to see if we could keep it here on loan after my show closed in 1995, I guess, he said "no, there had been an arrangement worked out with the Metropolitan Museum of Art in which it was going to go to the Met." So I was very, very depressed.

However, by then the price was so extraordinary for this object, even the Met could not afford it. So it stayed on loan there and eventually the Met decided they just were not going to be able to buy this object and that's when the foundation, the McDermott Art Fund here in Dallas, stepped in and acquired it for the Dallas Museum of Art.

So after ten years of pining away, this is the kind of thing that makes life worth living for a curator. Before we disappear, I do want to show you two slides of just the sort of extraordinary quality of this object. This is just the knee, if you will, of the upper part of one of the legs and very much in keeping with sort of Empire, if you will, then the interesting thing about this piece of furniture and that's why it's in the gallery in the back. It isn't up with the Art Nouveau stuff.

This is one of those pieces that combine several styles, it combines that very curvilinear French Art Nouveau style as you will see in just a second with a lot of traditional things that if you go up to our fourth floor galleries and look at our 18th century American furniture, for example, you will see things from 1750s,

60s and 70s have that curved leg with a claw and ball on it that a lot of us have copies of in our home.

[00:28:04.10]

So this one also has claw and ball feet on it, cabriole or these curved legs and then this swan with these feathers has really taken out of Napoleonic-styled furniture from about 1800. When this was displayed, they really didn't call this Art Nouveau in Paris, even though it was sort of Art Nouveau. They really said that this was more Louis XV style, who was a king in France when this curvy first go around-- the first Rococo period if you will, of curvilinear taste was fashionable.

Then to end with, this is the very tiptop of the back of the mirror and it will give you an idea and we can talk a little bit more about it in the galleries. There is actually symbols all over this table that speak to its purpose in life and you can imagine this is -- though there were in the 18th century dressing equipment made for men, by the 19th century, pretty much it has become the domain of women. Here is the tiptop and you see this sort of nude female figure rising out of this cluster of irises at the top and that is the goddess of the morning of the day. She has all the sort of daytime flowers awakening around her, almost like a Disney cartoon movie if you will.

But when you get into the galleries, look at the very bottom of the mirror and there you have an owl and you have poppies and you have all the symbols of the night. Of course, if you think about it, morning and night is when you would have used an object like this. This is when a woman would have gotten up, put on her makeup, her persona for the day and then at night, she would have taken her persona off for the evening.

So I am very pleased that you are here to celebrate one of our most important acquisitions ever in the Decorative Arts Department or for the whole museum.

[00:30:06.22]

And why don't we go out now and look at the real, live object and I will be happy to answer any questions out there. Thank you.

Duration: 31 Minutes

Audio file: VanityGoldenAge\_01\_Public.mp3