

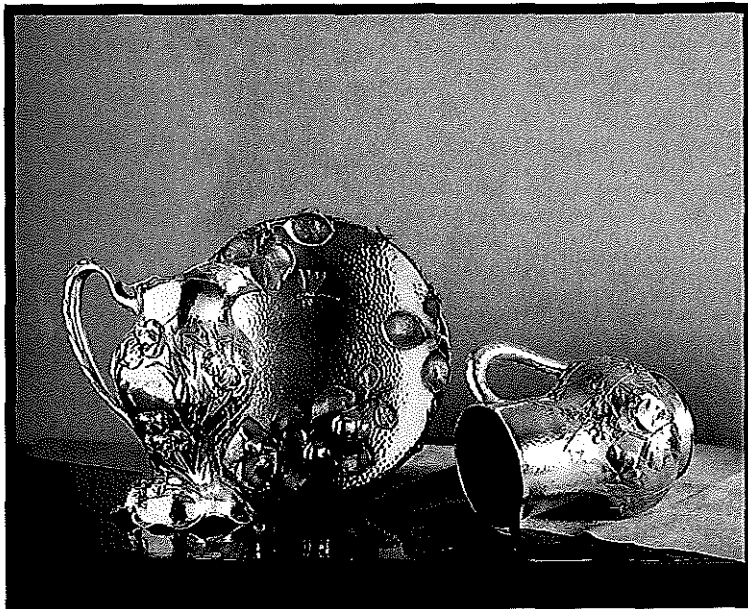
SILVER FUTURES

Always ahead of his time, Sam Wagstaff is now building a collection of nineteenth- and twentieth-century American silver

By Nicholas Fox Weber

There is a large silver nut spoon, its gleaming bowl partially lidded with leaves that seem to have been plucked only a moment ago from a tree in the sterling forest of a fairy tale. Its finial is a brilliantly sculpted squirrel clasping a nut on which he is about to gorge. On the matching nut picks, next to scattered mermaidlike cake knives and vine-covered serving spoons in the same drawer, the squirrels on the finials already have their little feasts firmly between their teeth.

There are lettuce forks and Stilton scoops. And ladles with handles topped with terrapins or with sleeping rabbits or fish trapped in nets. And various olive servers, from different shops and makers, each with a long intricately worked stem that has a pointed spoon on one end, a sort of miniature devil's pitchfork on the other. No chance that we would fail to catch our prey here, even out of the tallest, thinnest olive jar. The butter knives (a set from Ball, Black) have silver blades as richly covered as a Rococo ceiling. Their ivory handles are shaped like sheaves of wheat—of a color and verisimilitude that conjure fertile fields in a rippling breeze and the freshest of grain. An ice bucket is



A sampling of silver, left to right: bearded iris pitcher, Lebkuecher, 1902; high-style Aesthetic tray by Gorham with surround and dragonfly in copper; very rare pitcher, Dominick & Haff.

propped a few feet away on a painted radiator cover. Its surface vigorously etched so that its silvery patina is more muted than on many other pieces, the bucket has walls that are perfect facsimiles of glaciers. Polar bears stalk along the rims.

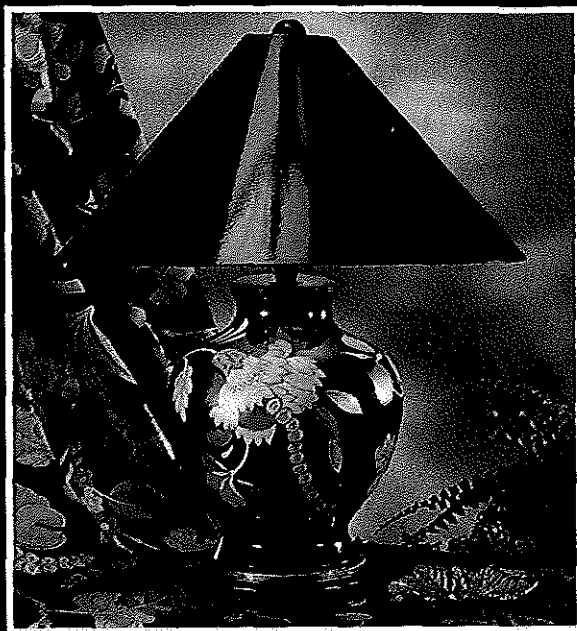
These objects elevate the pleasures of daily living as forcefully as silver itself reflects light. They link luxury with unbridled imagination, tastefulness with a passion for unmitigated fun. Their modern equivalents—as well as their ancestors—seem as restricted by rules, as guided by ideas of propriety, as utensils in a monastery.

Their collector has rarely bowed to anyone else's notion of rules. Samuel Wagstaff Jr. gets plenty of grief from most of his acquaintances for the intensity with which he amasses objects of late-nineteenth- and, occasionally, early-twentieth-century silver. People look in bewilderment at the storeroom in which much of this collection

is housed. They are puzzled by the shelves covered with disparate pitchers and bowls, by the large stack of metal flat files packed with flatware and serving utensils. Twelve years ago, when Sam Wagstaff began to fill those same file drawers with piles of vintage art

photographs, most of his acquaintances were equally derisive. When, three years ago, he sold those pictures to the Getty Museum and it was acclaimed as one of the most important private collections of photography in the world, they laughed less. He is convinced that soon enough most everyone will come around to the silver, too.

Wagstaff's first collection was of miniature cactus plants. He was ten years old, living in a house in Majorca during a two-year period that his New York-based family spent in Spain. Collecting was an inherited trait. "All the Wagstaffs have been collectors," says Sam. "If they had a nickel, they collected with nickels. If they had a dollar, they collected with dollars." His uncle, David Wagstaff, had assembled an outstanding collection of sporting books (now at Yale University). Like Sam, who knows every silver mark and maker, who speaks of each designer as if of an intimate, David was



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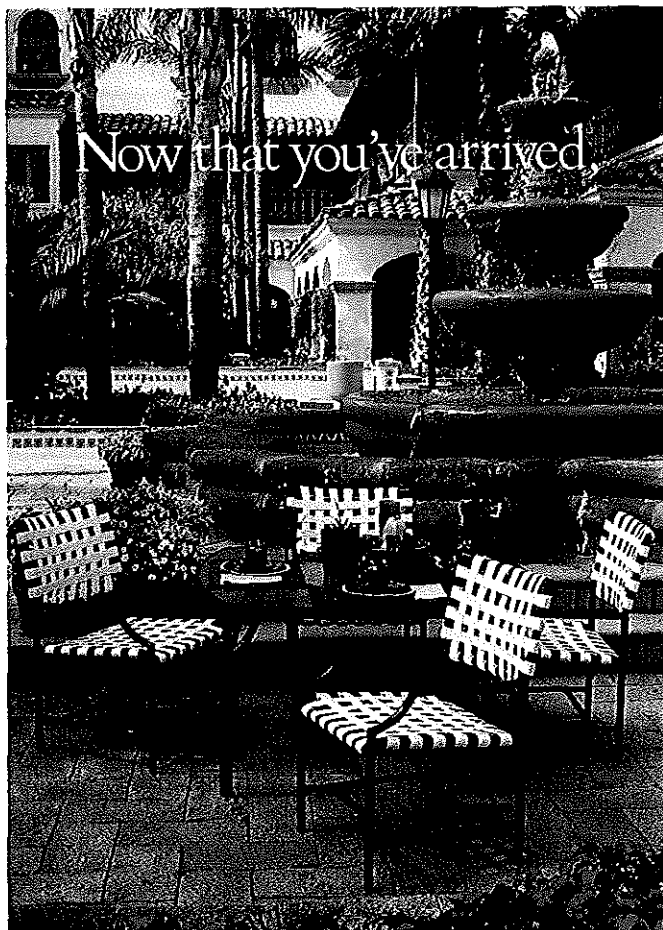
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considered the consummate expert in the field. As is the case with his nephew, David preferred to look further, learn more, and above all acquire more, rather than write or teach about his subject.

Born in 1921, Sam Wagstaff was graduated from Yale College in 1944. He attended the NYU Institute of Fine Arts and then spent two years on a fellowship to study museums abroad. After some time in the advertising business, he became, in the early sixties, a curator at the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford. There the sheer quality and pioneering choices of his exhibitions have made him a legend. There was "Black, White, and Gray"—the first major comprehensive show anywhere of Minimal art—in which the work of artists like Don Judd, Tony Smith, and Robert Morris was shown in startling juxtaposition. There was an exhibition of thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Italian panel painting, which transformed Hartford into a veritable Siena. Because of concerns over condition and cost, that show simply couldn't be done today; it could not have been done then either if Wagstaff had not been so particularly persuasive in his enthusiasm and had not done the exhibition in memory of one of his mentors at NYU, the art historian Richard Offner, who was highly esteemed by the lenders on whose generosity Sam was dependent.

After Hartford, Wagstaff spent several years as a curator at the Detroit Institute of Arts, where he instigated happenings and other events that reflected a taste as avant-garde then as the interest in late-nineteenth-century silver is today. He left Detroit in 1972. Since then he has devoted himself essentially to collecting (facilitated in part by an inheritance from his stepfather) and to organizing exhibitions of his own collections. For some time he had been acquiring Indian baskets, contemporary painting and sculpture, and African art; his African collection was of sufficient quality to travel to numerous museums. In 1973 he began to devote himself to his photography holdings. A decade later they had become important enough to warrant three separate exhibitions. One of them traveled to seventeen museums, including the International Center of Photography in New York. The collection



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Tiffany chrysanthemum pitcher, 1893, and an Aesthetic pitcher, c. 1875-80, with copper overlay.

was of a magnitude to attract the burgeoning Getty and inspire a major *New York Times Sunday Magazine* article.

When asked how much silver he has today, Wagstaff replies, "Did you ever ask a gardener exactly how many flowers he has?" He does not seek works of one given movement or era. Nor does he try to round out his collection, fill gaps, or carefully include all the well-known designers or makers. He likes Gothic and "bright-cut" pieces from the 1850s, Aesthetic Movement objects of the 1870s and '80s (of the type recently the subject of a show at the Metropolitan Museum), and the Arts and Crafts designs that prevailed between 1890 and 1925. He reveres (the verb is particularly appropriate) a rather traditional pitcher made in Boston circa 1810 and rhapsodizes over a severely modern sugar and cream set from the 1930s. On the other hand, he has "hated Jensen ever since childhood"; his taste is his own.

According to his primary dealers, he has an extraordinary feeling for quality. Catherine Kurland in New York says he looks for work that is "unusual, exuberant, exotic, and original. . . . He has a truly personal eye. He listens and takes in information, but ultimately it's his decision. Unlike so many collectors, he has confidence—without arrogance." She described his purchase of a Tiffany chrysanthemum water pitcher that had been in the Columbian Exposition of 1893: "He couldn't keep his hands off of it. He fondled it lovingly, as he often does, while comparing it to vermicelli." The comparison to vermicelli—the pasta, not an obscure quattrocento painter—is apt for this fully rounded vase with its thickly carved, animated surface that is like a

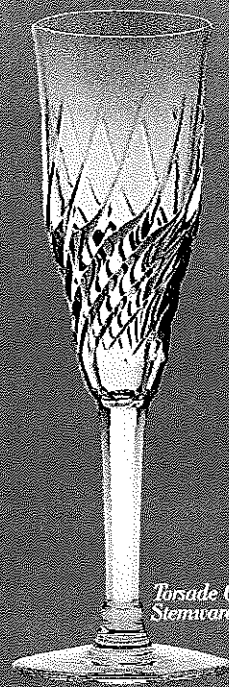
silver jungle of spider mums. This object is among the Aesthetic Movement gems in the Wagstaff collection. In the same category are some Cairo pattern spoons from Gorham into which copper and brass have been rolled and some other pitchers of Classical form with Oriental surface designs.

Another New York dealer, Ronald Hoffman, comments on Wagstaff's feelings for workmanship. "Other collectors care about what something weighs, or what they might sell it for. Sam only notices quality. If a piece has an odd twist in it that gives it extra zip, he bubbles. When he really loves something, he does a little dance."

Because of the current ascendancy of interest in the Aesthetic Movement, the Wagstaff collection suddenly has a new cachet. But he points out that most of what he owns has been buried and forgotten for some time. "This is archaeology. I'm digging up the past." And what a past it was! Imagine the taste of ice cream from spoons with bowls of smooth silver maple leaves. Those bowls are supported by delicate handles made from two intertwined stems terminating in a folded leaf. A glistening beetle rests on the leaf.

A lady's garter has a silver clasp by George Shiebler, a maker of novelties whose work was sold by Tiffany around the turn of the century. Wagstaff is a great fan of Shiebler and John Wendt—"one of the first great silver designers"—who worked in the 1850s. Two of his Wendt pieces are salad servers, unmarked like all of Wendt's work, but clearly identifiable to the aficionado. Each has, at the top of its handle, an embossed oval with a remarkably convincing silver lobster in relief. Another of his preferred designers is Carl Schon, who worked in Baltimore in the 1920s; he owns a Schon silver stickpin, with a carnelian eye, cast from the eye of an actual sea horse.

If detractors consider these pieces "the most ridiculous things in the world," he doesn't care. When the objects in question are out of fashion, "it helps you espouse the cause with more determination." He tells a story of an antiques dealer indoctrinating a new saleslady. The dealer's first pointer was, "There isn't one thing in this shop that anybody needs." Wagstaff keeps his silver in storage: "One doesn't show off with one's possessions. I

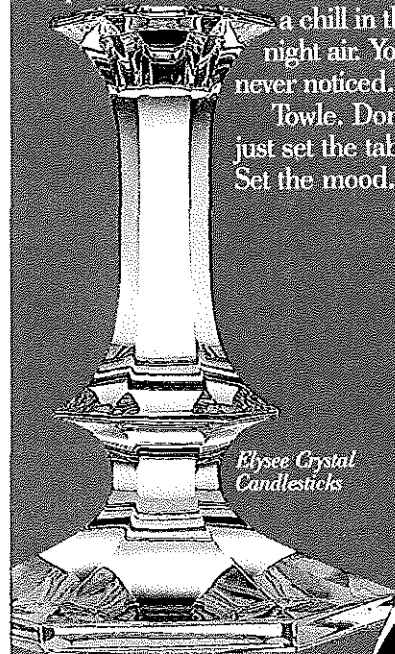


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don't collect things for any other reason than to please myself." He may in ways equate himself with the people who used this sort of silver, "people who understood high living and could do anything they wanted." But while for the robber barons they were accessories to living, passed by the servants, for Wagstaff they are the trophies of his most consuming quest, their study and maintenance his chosen task.

If one is hard-pressed to find the link between Minimal art, African masks, black-and-white photographs, and silver bowls covered with copper grapes, one can consider a statement of Nietzsche's that Wagstaff himself quoted in the catalogue for "Continuity and Change," an exhibition of American abstract painting he curated in Hartford in 1962: "If a man has character, he has also his typical experience, which always recurs." Faith and judgment along with a strong sense that the "most fun is to start at zero" help make up Wagstaff's recurring experience.

In a penthouse apartment some twenty floors above his storage room, more silver objects cover parts of the white linoleum floor and the tops of functional chrome-legged tables. On both sides of a mattress on the floor in the bedroom there are pieces of flatware, cake knives, more ice-cream servers. Some still have their auction-house labels. As one looks at a dazzling, utterly contemporary urban vista which includes the World Trade Center and the bridges that shoot off from the bottom of Manhattan like rays from the sun, one can fondle a ladle with a vine-stalk handle (John Wendt again), the blunt end perfectly engraved to resemble the cross section of a freshly cut stick. Or one holds a nightlight candle holder, complete with gilded croaking frog, that evokes the rambling Bar Harbor "cottage" it would have inhabited a century ago.

There is also a Black, Starr & Frost mug from the 1890s which Wagstaff identifies as having been manufac-

tured by the Kerr Company of Newark. Its acid-etched illustration shows a perfect-looking lad in a sailor suit and straw hat. He is holding an American flag and has his hobbyhorse next to him. He is flanked on either side by pairs of children in ethnic dress, all looking as if they don't quite belong.

On the opposite side of the cup from the boy in the sailor suit is the graceful, generous handle. It is flanked by panels on which a poem is engraved: "Little Indian, Sioux or Crow, Little Frost Eskimo, Little Turk or Japanese: Oh! Don't you wish that you were me?" Sam Wagstaff has none of the smugness or prejudice that mark that poem. But he does have the square-jawed, aristocratic ease of the young sailor. He combines the rugged energy of an all-American boy with the privileged elegance of a Bloomsbury-style aesthete. □

"The Wagstaff Collection of American Silver" will be on view at the New York Historical Society, March 20-August 16.

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