



A Chinoiserie dish ring by Charles Townsend

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OF THE MANY DIFFERENT SILVER FORMS MADE IN IRELAND, NONE HAS COME TO BE perceived as more quintessentially Irish than the dish ring, thereby accounting for its popular appellation at the end of the nineteenth century – ‘potato ring’. It first appeared in the seventeenth century in France, England and Ireland, and was intended to keep hot dishes from damaging tabletops, as well as to provide a bountiful appearance through a dish’s elevated presentation at a feast.¹ The earliest written record of its presence in Ireland can be found in the 1681 addendum to the 1674 inventory of the 1st Duke of Ormonde’s plate at Kilkenny Castle, where there is a listing for ‘ten ring stands two of them with whole bottoms’.² A fine example by the Dublin silversmith Charles Townsend (active 1770-85) plays a central role in the silver display in the exhibition *Ireland: Crossroads of Art and Design, 1690-1840* at the Art Institute of Chicago (Plate 1).

In terms of a silver dish ring’s appearance, it generally took one of two distinct forms: either it consisted of two utilitarian wire rings connected by three or four vertical wire supports, or it was formed by a sheet of silver shaped to resemble a spool with a broad concave surface, frequently pierced.³ While examples of each of these types survive from the early years of the eighteenth century, particularly in England, by the 1750s the spool-shaped form had become a staple of the Irish silver trade, especially in Dublin, and to a lesser degree in Cork and Limerick.⁴ Except during the second half of the eighteenth century when silver manufacturers in Sheffield produced examples in both silver and silver plate for the export market to Ireland, the manufacturing of dish rings in England had become negligible.⁵

Given that the Townsend dish ring takes the spool-shaped form, it is appropriate

1 – Charles Townsend, dish ring

1772, silver, 9.8 x 20.3 x 20.3 cm (The Art Institute of Chicago,

Kay and Frederick Krehbiel, Joseph P. Gromacki, Jenner and Block, *The Avrym Gray Family Fund*, 2011.1169)



2 – George Gallant, salt cellar
1640, silver, 11.4 x 14.6 x 14.6 cm,
(Minneapolis Institute of Arts,
gift of James F. and Louise H. Bell,
61.55.17 / photo: Minneapolis
Institute of Arts)

3 – Robert Calderwood,
dish ring
c.1760, silver, 8.9 x 19.7 x 19.7 cm
(Melinda and Paul Sullivan)



4 – William Townsend,
dish ring
c.1768, no date letter, silver,
repoussé, chased and pierced with
design scrolls, figures, flowers, birds,
fruit and animals, 18.4 cm diameter
(copyright National Museum of
Ireland, DM:1888.48)



first to consider its possible origins. In view of the close similarity in their spool shape, dish rings might well have evolved from scroll salt cellars, a form which entered England about 1630 from the Continent, and Dublin by 1640, judging from the example now at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts made in that year by George Gallant and included in the Chicago exhibition (Plate 2).⁶ With three or four scrolled arms protruding above the salt cellar's rim, their function was 'to bear up a dish', according to the diarist Samuel Pepys in 1662.⁷ Therefore, the earlier scroll salt cellar anticipated both in terms of its form and function the spool-shaped dish ring, making it a suggestive, if not conclusive, source of inspiration.

Pierced examples of spool-shaped dish rings provided an effective way to eliminate the build-up of heat from a hot dish and also decorative possibilities for a specialist piercer.⁸ As the growing popularity of the dish ring in Ireland conveniently coincided with the rise of the rococo style there, repoussé and chased asymmetrical scrolls, shells, flowers and fruit provided an endless repertoire of decorative motifs with which to enhance a dish ring's surface. By the 1760s, farmyard scenes had become dominant, with peasants shown engaged at work and play, along with sheep, cows, pigs and the occasional lion. The artisans responsible for the execution of these figurative scenes paid little regard to relative scale or perspective, resulting in charmingly chaotic compositions rarely encountered in silver made outside of Ireland. And in Ireland itself, such exuberant designs probably found their closest parallel in the rococo plasterwork that enlivened the walls and ceilings of domestic interiors, like Robert West's plasterwork of 1758 in the stair hall at 20 Dominick Street, Dublin.

The pre-eminent illustrated guide to Irish dish rings is Kurt Ticher's *Irish Silver in the Rococo Period*, published in 1972. Of the twenty-one examples reproduced, fourteen are by different Dublin silversmiths, ranging alphabetically from Robert Calderwood⁹ to Richard Williams, with two by John Lloyd and four by William Townsend (Plate 3), Charles Townsend's father.¹⁰ While this selection suggests diversity in terms of makers engaged in the manufacture of dish rings, William Townsend, with four to his credit, emerges as the leader. In addition to two William Townsend dish rings in the Irish silver collection at the National Museum of Ireland, other forms by him in that collection range from a wine funnel (c.1745) to a kettle and lamp stand (c.1752). Perhaps the high point of Townsend's career came with the commission in about 1765 for a large parcel-gilt ceremonial mace for the use of the Lord Chancellor while he presided at sessions of the House of Lords.¹¹ Townsend is also represented in the Chicago exhibition by a rococo repoussé coffeepot with an arresting dragon spout, probably dating from about 1760.

William Townsend's dish ring, perhaps more than any other item from his hand, demonstrates not only his mastery of that form, but through it a sophisticated distillation of the rococo style using pattern-book sources. In a dish ring of about 1768 in the National Museum of Ireland, Townsend used the farmyard setting, but now introduced Chinoiserie subject matter, including a squatting Chinaman and a bearded sage with an umbrella (Plate 4). As noted by Joseph McDonnell, these figures were taken directly from a pattern book

popular at the time, *The ladies amusement; or whole art of jappanning made easy*.¹² Brought out in two editions (1758 and 1762) by the London publisher Robert Sayer, they in turn relied heavily on the engravings of the French artist Jean Pillement, including the two figures incorporated into the Townsend dish ring.

A year later, in 1769, William Townsend abandoned the earlier rococo C-scrolls and fruits which had been in vogue since the 1750s, and replaced them with a pierced diaper-work ground, as seen in a dish ring in the collection of the San Diego Museum of Art (Plate 5).¹³ The resulting design, using a trellis and star pattern, allowed the artisan to demonstrate his technical prowess. In the process, this light and airy design – almost gossamer-like in appearance – paved the way for the final phase in the evolution of the dish ring under the influence of Robert Adam's neoclassical style, with its ground of pierced grilles upon which swags and shields were often superimposed.

However, for a few years, between 1769 and the early 1770s, William Townsend took full advantage of using a diaper-work ground of trellis and stars in which to incorporate rococo cartouches, such as those Townsend copied from Henry Copland's *A new book of ornaments* (London, 1746) in the creation of his magnificent dish ring now in San Diego.¹⁴ As for other Dublin silversmiths who utilised the trellis and star pattern for their pierced dish rings, perhaps nobody did it more successfully than William Townsend's son Charles, as illustrated by the example from 1772 recently acquired by the Art Institute of Chicago.¹⁵

Charles's silversmithing career did not last nearly as long as that of his father, and he is only known to have employed three apprentices, while his father had nine in the course of their respective careers.¹⁶ This may well account for fewer surviving pieces of silver from Charles's shop. In addition to the Art Institute's dish ring, the National Museum of Ireland owns a pair of pierced wine coasters from 1775.¹⁷ There is also a pair of richly reticulated rococo lids from 1773 (possibly used at a later date to cover bowls filled with a potpourri of highly scented dried flowers, herbs and spices).¹⁸ These pierced covers recall rococo dish rings with farmyard scenes which became popular from the 1750s onwards. This pair incorporates a woman at a butter churn and a woman fishing in a lake. Both are shown framed within giant C-scrolls; they clearly demonstrate that silversmiths like Charles Townsend did not entirely abandon the earlier more robust rococo style.

In the absence of surviving ledgers from the shop of Charles Townsend, it is impossible to say if the Art Institute's 1772 dish ring was made for stock or with a particular client in mind. The contemporary coat of arms within a bow-knotted floral wreath indicate that its original owners were Sir Michael Cox, 3rd Baronet, and his wife, the Honorable Elizabeth Massy, daughter of Hugh Massy, 1st Baron Massy of Duntrileague, who married in 1762.¹⁹ The fact that the dish ring bears the Dublin date mark for 1772 suggests the possibility that it was acquired to mark the tenth anniversary of the Coxes' marriage.²⁰

Michael Cox came from a family with an appreciation for fine silver, his great-grandfather having commissioned an impressive monteith (a large punch bowl) by Thomas Bolton in 1703 (also owned by the Art Institute of Chicago and included in the



5 – William Townsend, dish ring

1769, silver, 11.4 x 21.6 x 21.6 cm (courtesy San Diego Museum of Art; gift of Mr W.B. Miller, 1967.48)

Irish exhibition).²¹ That bowl had been made from melting down the Great Seal of Ireland from the reign of William III, then in possession of the Lord Chancellor, Sir Richard Cox, who became 1st Baronet in 1706. As the 3rd Baronet's great-grandfather, he outlived his own son by eight years. The title therefore passed to his grandson, also called Richard Cox, who became the 2nd Baronet from 1733 until his death in 1766.²² The monteith, however, passed to the 1st Baronet's fifth son Michael, for whom the 3rd Baronet was named.²³ In addition to sharing a first name (Michael), they both took Holy Orders, which has led to further confusion in the course of time, especially as the great uncle served as Archbishop of Cashel from 1755 until his death in 1779, and the 3rd Baronet was Archdeacon of Cashel from 1767 until his death in 1772.²⁴

The Cox family had a reputation for enjoying fine food at the Manor House, Dunmanway, county Cork, starting with Richard Cox, 1st Baronet.²⁵ Therefore, it should come as no surprise that they also set a handsome table. Richard Cox, 2nd Baronet, appears to have ordered a dinner service of armorial porcelain emblazoned with the Cox coat of arms from China about 1750.²⁶ David Howard has estimated that in the heyday of armorial porcelain, between 1700 and 1790, approximately 2,000 services were specially ordered from China for the English, Scottish and Welsh markets, while around a hundred services were made for Ireland.²⁷ If the Cox armorial plate did indeed see service at

Dunmanway, the 3rd Baronet and his wife's selection of a dish ring decorated with Chinese motifs seems particularly appropriate in 1772. In this way, a mandarin in a pagoda, a Chinaman under an umbrella, and a seated satyr would all have appeared quite at home within such surroundings.

As Sir Michael Cox, 3rd Baronet, died in July 1772, he scarcely got to enjoy Charles Townsend's dish ring, if at all. However, that was not to be the case for his widow Elizabeth, who would live until 1825, dying at age ninety-eight.²⁸ By then dish rings had been out of fashion for a decade or more, and hence not held in high esteem. But what goes around often comes around, and antique Irish silver in general, and dish rings in particular, came back into fashion in the second half of the nineteenth century. In 1884, for example, a silver collector and antiquarian from Cork, Dr Robert Day, FSA, recorded the following remarks about a dish ring in his possession:

DISH RING, Irish hall-marked [erasure], weight 8 oz 13 dwt

These rings were used to encircle potato platters – The platter was made of wood, covered by a Table napkin which served as a cover for the potatoes. The whole was contained in the Dish Ring. These beautiful pieces of National plate are [erasure] occurrence and sell for £2 per oz.

Even though there is no evidence for dish rings being used specifically for the presentation of potatoes in the eighteenth century, the 'potato ring' myth is clearly in evidence in the notes of the late nineteenth-century collector Dr Day.²⁹

The renewed interest in dish rings resulted in an escalation in demand and price, especially when deep-pocketed collectors entered the market, like the Earl of Altamont (whose collection of dish rings is still featured at Westport House, county Mayo), and Edward Cecil Guinness, 1st Earl of Iveagh.³⁰ Such activity inevitably led to the fabrication of fakes, which were made even more convincing through the addition of period hallmarks taken directly from actual forks and spoons. As these were readily available at a nominal cost to those indulging in this nefarious trade, collectors were frequently deceived.

There was also a demand for legitimate copies of dish rings, especially if they had been updated to incorporate clear or blue glass liners.³¹ In this new guise they made the perfect centrepiece for a dining room table when filled with fruit or flowers. By the turn of the last century they had become an ideal wedding or anniversary present. In April 1907, for example, Sir Algernon and Lady Coote of Ballyfin, county Laois, had their twenty-fifth wedding anniversary acknowledged by their employees through the presentation of 'a silver potato ring' by the estate carpenter, and oldest employee, William Russell.³²

Two Dublin silver firms which specialised in making copies of dish rings, or modern adaptations, were Edmond Johnson Jn and West & Son. The former firm is probably best known for its replicas of ancient Irish metalwork shown and sold at the Chicago World's Fair in 1893.³³ In 1907, two Johnson dish rings in the rococo style with giant C-scrolls – one incorporating a farmyard scene, the other a highly animated buck and doe

– were acquired for the permanent collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.³⁴ As they have the date letter ‘L’ for 1906/07, they entered the Met’s collection in the same year they were made.

Of particular interest here is the firm of West & Co. Possessed of a deep appreciation for Irish silver, they had provided great assistance to Charles James Jackson transcribing marks from plate in their possession for inclusion in his landmark publication *English Goldsmiths and their Marks* (1905, second edition 1921).³⁵ In 1927/28, the West firm made an exact copy of the Art Institute’s Charles Townsend Chinoiserie dish ring, but with the addition of a blue glass liner in keeping with current fashion.³⁶ As the cartouche for the Cox family coat of arms has been left vacant, its absence suggests that the copy had not been made for a Cox family descendant. Instead, it would appear that the ring’s aesthetic merits alone had inspired its reproduction in so exacting a manner and without consideration for familial associations.

Charles Townsend’s 1772 dish ring, with its engaging subject matter, superior workmanship and well-documented provenance, made it the ideal candidate for representing this form in both the Irish exhibition and permanent collection at the Art Institute of Chicago.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ Conor O’Brien, ‘The Evolution of Silver Dish Rings’, *Antique Collectors Guide*, January 1977, 71, where he quotes from Randle Holme, *The Academy of Armory* (Chester, 1688).
- ² Thomas Sinsteden, ‘Household plate of the dukes of Ormonde’, *Silver Studies: the Journal of the Silver Society*, 23, 2008, 130.
- ³ O’Brien, ‘The Evolution of Silver Dish Rings’, 71-72. For additional illustrations of early dish rings, see Kurt Ticher, *Irish Silver in the Rococo Period* (Shannon, 1972) pls 66, 67.
- ⁴ John Bowen and Conor O’Brien, *Cork Silver and Gold: four centuries of craftsmanship* (Cork, 2005) 170, 176; John Bowen and Conor O’Brien, *A Celebration of Limerick’s Silver* (Limerick, 2007) 175, 177, 186-87.
- ⁵ Ticher, *Irish Silver in the Rococo Period*, pls 93, 94. In recent correspondence with the Irish silver scholar Alison FitzGerald, she noted an advertisement in *Saunders’ Newsletter* (15th March 1782) for the Dublin ironmonger Jonathan Binns having recently imported from Britain plated ware, including dish rings. Also in the second half of the eighteenth century, Sheffield retailer Joseph Wilson supplied Irish clients with plated wares and silver goods, including dish rings, according to

- FitzGerald's research.
- ⁶ Francis Puig et al, *English and American silver in the collection of the Minneapolis Institute of Arts* (Minneapolis, 1989) 178; John Davis, *English Silver at Williamsburg* (Williamsburg, 1976) 142-44.
 - ⁷ O'Brien, 'The Evolution of Silver Dish Rings', 71-72.
 - ⁸ For insightful information on a piercer working in Dublin at the turn of the eighteenth century, see Paul Micio, 'Fantastic piercework by the unknown "Stencil Master"', *Apollo*, 491, January 2003, 22-31.
 - ⁹ Robert Calderwood's highly prolific career has been chronicled in Alison FitzGerald, 'Cosmopolitan Commerce: The Dublin Goldsmith Robert Calderwood', *Apollo*, 523, September 2005, 46-51.
 - ¹⁰ Ticher, *Irish Silver in the Rococo Period*, pls 66-92.
 - ¹¹ Ida Delamer and Conor O'Brien, *500 Years of Irish Silver* (Dublin, 2005) 52, 65, 125.
 - ¹² Joseph McDonnell, 'Irish Rococo Silver', *Irish Arts Review Yearbook*, 13 (Dublin, 1996) 85-86.
 - ¹³ William Chandler, 'British Domestic Silver', *Apollo*, CXV, June 1982, 62, 64.
 - ¹⁴ McDonnell, 'Irish Rococo Silver', 84-85.
 - ¹⁵ Bonhams, London, *Fine Silver and Gold Boxes*, sale 18996, 23rd November 2011, lot 211, 136-137. For a related dish ring by William Hughes utilising the star and trellis pattern, see Adams Auctioneers, Dublin, 9th March 2014, lot 165. S.J. Shrubsole, New York, exhibited a related pair of bottle stands or coasters by Christopher Haines at The European Fine Art Fair (TEFAF) in Maastricht, March 2014.
 - ¹⁶ Alison FitzGerald has established that Charles Townsend was William Townsend's son, and also provided the statistics for their respective use of apprentices. FitzGerald, 'Cosmopolitan Commerce', 47. She also notes that Robert Calderwood had fourteen apprentices in the course of his career, more than any other Dublin silversmith in the eighteenth century. For additional biographical information, see Douglas Bennett, *Irish Georgian Silver* (London, 1972) 332.
 - ¹⁷ John Teahan, *Irish Silver: a guide to the exhibition* (Dublin, 1979) 24.
 - ¹⁸ Bennett, *Irish Georgian Silver*, cover and 125. For a related pair by John Laughlin, see Chantal O'Sullivan and William Crofton, *Ireland's Silver Lining: Irish silver under the Georges* (New York, 2012) 24.
 - ¹⁹ George Edward Cokayne, *Complete Baronetage vol. IV (1665-1707)* (Exeter, 1904) 237-38.
 - ²⁰ On the role of silver as part of life's cycle, see Toby Barnard, *Making the Grand Figure: lives and possessions in Ireland, 1641-1770* (New Haven and London, 2004) 138-42.
 - ²¹ Patricia McCabe, 'Trappings of sovereignty: the accoutrements of the Lord Chancellor of Ireland', *Irish Architectural and Decorative Studies*, V, 2002, 57. Also see John McCormack, 'The Sumptuous Silver of Thomas Bolton (1658-1731)', *Irish Arts Review Yearbook*, 11 (Dublin, 1995) 112-16.
 - ²² Cokayne, *Complete Baronetage*, 238.
 - ²³ Sotheby & Co, *Catalogue of old English Silver*, London, 8th December 1933, lot 131, 18-19.
 - ²⁴ Cokayne, *Complete Baronetage*, 238. See also, The Knight of Glin, 'Castletown', in *Castletown House, Co. Kilkenny, Ireland*, Christie's, 7th-8th October 1991, 5-11. In the Bonham's sale catalogue of 2011, the provenance given for lot 211 ('An exceptionally fine George III Irish silver dish ring in the Chinoiserie manner by Charles Townsend, Dublin 1772') is erroneous: the author conflates the Rev Michael Cox of Castletown, county Kilkenny, who died in 1779, with his great nephew Rev Sir Michael Cox, 3rd Baronet of Dunmanway, county Cork, who died in 1772.
 - ²⁵ 'His letters tell us that he was a great trencherman, recommended bacon and sprouts after fish and making 'paradise cheese' at Dunmanway'. Glin, 'Castletown', 5.
 - ²⁶ This is illustrated in David Sanctuary Howard, *Chinese Armorial Porcelain* (London, 1974) 464.
 - ²⁷ David Sanctuary Howard, 'Chinese Armorial Porcelain for Ireland', *Bulletin of the Irish Georgian Society*, XXIX, nos 3 and 4, July-December 1986, 3-4.

- ²⁸ Cokayne, *Complete Baronetage*, 238.
- ²⁹ Thomas Sinsteden kindly brought the Day reference to the author's attention.
- ³⁰ Charles James Jackson, in *An Illustrated History of English Plate* (London, 1911) 933-39, relied heavily on three collectors for images of plate rings in their collections – the Earl of Altamont, Lord Iveagh and Robert Day.
- ³¹ There was an eighteenth-century precedent for the use of glass liners with Irish silver, including sugar bowls, butter dishes, salts, mustard pots and piggins.
- ³² Kevin V. Mulligan, *Ballyfin: the restoration of an Irish house and demesne* (Tralee, 2011) 69-70.
- ³³ Cheryl Washer, 'The Work of Edmond Johnson: Archaeology and Commerce', in T.J. Edelstein, *Imagining an Irish Past: the Celtic Revival 1840-1940* (Chicago, 1992) 106-21. Tara Kelly notes that both Edmond Johnson and West & Son participated in a loan exhibition in 1904 at the Dublin Science and Art Museum, where period metalwork was juxtaposed with facsimiles, including several Johnson-made dish rings. Tara A. Kelly, 'Commerce and the Celtic Revival: the history of the Irish facsimile industry, 1840-1940', unpublished PhD Thesis, Trinity College, Dublin, 2013, 211.
- ³⁴ Accession numbers 07.158.1 and 07.158.2.
- ³⁵ Sir Charles James Jackson, FSA, *English goldsmiths and their marks* (2nd ed., London, 1921) xi.
- ³⁶ The Dublin firm of antique silver dealers J.W. Weldon sold the West reproduction in 2012 to collectors living in America.
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