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Brunnier Art Museum

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Epergne History

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The epergne, a strange word, and an even stranger object to modern eyes. An epergne is essentially a spectacular centerpiece for the presentation of fruit, sweets (or what was called sweetmeats), and later flowers on the dining table. It would have been the dramatic central focus for a perfectly set table from the 18th century and into the 20th century. Throughout this over 200-year history, the epergne significantly changed in shape, design, and material. Like many luxury goods of the 18th century, the desire for and interest in owning an epergne trickled down from the tables of the wealthiest diners to the ever-growing middle classes of the 19th and 20th centuries. New materials, along with the Industrial Revolution, allowed expensive tableware to be more accessible and the demand for a well-laid table continued to grow. With the advent of Victorian life, the proliferation of tableware only heightened an interest in developing more unique, colorful, and extravagant epergnes.

The epergne is thought to have evolved from French dining customs where a table centerpiece held multiple components needed for dining, but the silver epergnes used primarily as ostentatious decoration were an English creation. In the 18th century, French silversmiths were well established in England, many having fled France after the persecution of protestants in the later 17th century. Epergnes were first created in silver by some of these craftspeople and in England there was a large class of wealthy landowners looking to display their prosperity and status through the acquisition of such extravagant silver goods. In the Rococo style of the early to mid-18th century, epergnes were fabulous feats of skill for the silversmith. The central support had numerous arms, each with a pierced basket dangling delicately waiting to hold whatever delectable and expensive treat may be placed within. Many included some of the best-known Rococo stylistic elements, such as Chinoiserie, which was an idealized European representation of Asian cultures. Silver was not cheap, considered at this time the height of taste and an important way to display wealth. To own such a large piece of silver such as an epergne was truly only accessible to the most affluent of the nobility.

These artful and ostentatious silver epergnes continued to be made in the more reserved Neoclassical style found in the second half of the 18th century. As the 19th century approached, the inclusion of cut-glass bowls, precariously perched on the central support and each silver arm, were favored. Cut glass added a brilliant element to the table, reflecting and refracting candle light as the evening went on. The invention of Sheffield plate in the 18th century, and electroplating later in the 19th century, allowed a thin layer of silver to be deposited on top of a core of cheaper metal, usually copper (with Sheffield plate) and later copper alloy or nickel. In electroplating the layer of silver coated the entire object made of the core metal, allowing the illusion of a pure silver object. This meant

there was significantly less pure silver needed for objects, yet could be worked similarly to silver, allowing most forms made in more expensive silver to be replicated in silver plate. The only caveat of silver plate in the 19th century Victorian home was over polishing and overuse leading to wear that would expose the interior metal. Along with the discovery of new sources of silver and these innovations in the material, silver was becoming accessible to many more consumers from the growing middle class.

By the late 19th century, the firmly established middle class and wealthier consumers continued to drive a demand for new and novel designs across the decorative arts. Epergnes, like other goods, readily transformed to suit the tastes and desires of the consumers. The development of Victorian and Art glass in the late 19th century allowed for over-the-top color, decoration, and wildly unique forms to be created. Epergnes were no longer vehicles for sweetmeats and fruit as they had been, or made primarily in silver, but became showy glass centerpieces in a range of vivid colors with multiple decorative embellishments. The most elaborate glass epergnes were made by 19th century English glassmakers in colors that are almost jarring in their boldness. These opulent centerpieces included floral form vases flanked by other sprouting floral vases, but also twisted and curled delicate blown glass arms with hanging glass baskets, which were very often lost and broken in time. As the interest in this new iteration of the epergne grew and spread to the United States, they began to be made more economically, with fewer vases and the elimination of the delicate arms and baskets.

With growing pressed glass manufacturing, pressed glass epergnes were also made of fewer pieces or even just one piece making them significantly smaller in size (yet still just as bold in color), and these less costly options became popular. As the 20th century progressed, life changed greatly. Post World War II living began to be more informal, and the goods once used for dining were relegated to the cupboard or disappeared altogether. Epergnes existed to beautify tables and enhance the dining experience, something modern diners often take for granted today with the influx of fast dining and busy lives led outside of the home.