

Museums & Galleries NSW

Cleaning Silver Items

Why does silver tarnish?

The black tarnish on silver is silver sulphide, a reaction between silver and sulphurous particles which come from:

- Wool (including felt)
- Silk
- Oils on hands
- Garlic and onions
- Smoke

Silver Cleaning

Much of the silver in collections is electroplated nickel silver (EPNS). This means that there is a thin layer of silver over a base metal. The action of polishing abrades the silver layer, eventually wearing it off in areas, exposing the yellower underlying metal. While there are occasions when it is necessary to clean silver, in most museum situations it only needs to be done once every year or so.

- Look for coatings or special surface treatment such as gilding or niello (a black colouring used to highlight decorative areas),
- Use gloves when cleaning silver as your fingers will leave marks on the newly cleaned surfaces,
- Start with a soft cotton cloth with methylated spirits,
- Where there are still some tarnished areas move to a silver polish cloth- clean the area with methylated spirits after this,
- For more indepth tarnishing use either a gentle silver cleaning polish (such as Haggertys or Goddards) or a silver dip,
- When you are using a silver polish you do not need a lot, be sparing. Ensure you have cleaned the item out thoroughly after use, polish residues leave an unsightly white residue which will turn green as it reacts with the underlying metal,
- Ensure that you thoroughly rinse off after using a silver dip as this is a mild acid, and
- REMEMBER- handle cleaned silver with gloves as your finger prints will etch into the surface

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