

# Worldly Goods

A SOURCEBOOK TO THE UNIQUE AND EXTRAORDINARY

## SILVER SWOON

**P**EOPLE WHO BUY AN elegant new silver service may think that it's handmade, especially if they paid ten thousand dollars for it," says Edward Munves Jr., owner of James Robinson antiques in New York. "Usually they're mistaken. They may be buying hand-finished or hand-forged silver, but completely handmade? Well, no one does that anymore. Except us."

For 70 years, James Robinson has been selling exquisite sterling silver flatware handmade by C.W. Fletcher, a small family firm in Sheffield, England. Last year, after the Fletcher patriarch had died, Munves and his daughter, Joan Boening, bought the 500-year-old company, renaming it Fletcher Robinson. Today, the silver is still made in the traditional way by the same dozen artisans, some of whom have been with the firm for over 40 years.

Most silver companies—even highly respected brands—make their flatware by machine. After the utensil has been stamped out, a silversmith fine-tunes and polishes it. Fletcher Robinson, on the other hand, is stubbornly old-fashioned: They start with a rectangular strip of silver, then forge, hammer, file, shape, and polish it by hand until it's perfect. There are no machines, no trendy new flatware designs; they've made the same 23 patterns for two centuries.



**ONE OF A KIND** For over two centuries, Fletcher Robinson has made the same 23 gracious patterns, each of them entirely by hand, including (shown from left to right): Trifid, Shield End, Feather Edge, Kings, Scroll, and Fiddle.

The oldest, Trifid, is a simple and stately design from 1660; the newest, Kings, is an ornate Regency pattern from 1790. Some are classic styles featuring clamshell motifs, threaded borders, or feathered edges. Others, such as Scroll, look surprisingly modern.

"Feel this," Munves says, handing me a Kings fork. I cradle it in my palm, admiring the delicate scrollwork curling along its handle. The prongs are gracefully proportioned, the finish full of luster. But it's the weight that I notice first; it feels substantial.

"It's heavy and well-balanced because it was hammered by hand," Munves explains. "And also very strong. Silver is a soft material, which is why machine-made flatware gets dented and pockmarked so easily. If you want to make the metal harder, you need to compress it, and the only way to do that is by pounding it. It's very labor-intensive, but that's what makes our flatware last for generations without looking battered."

The finish on Fletcher Robinson silver is so durable that it gains a warm patina with age—even if you like to run your

service through the dishwasher every day. (If you do that with machine-made silverware, however, all of the banging around will abrade and dull the finish over time. As the surface wears down, your sterling will eventually start to look more like pewter.)

"Other companies pour money into research and development," Munves says. "But we've always known exactly what we want to produce and how to do it. So we spend our money training young silversmiths instead. They apprentice with us for five or six years, starting at about age sixteen."

Fletcher Robinson produces about 300 services a year. A customized service for 12 will take three or four months to make and costs between \$10,000 and \$13,000. To connoisseurs, though, finding such old-world craftsmanship in the 21st century is priceless. "We spoil people," Munves says proudly. "These pieces have memory." **WENDY GOODMAN**

*Available exclusively at James Robinson, 480 Park Avenue, New York; 212-752-6166; [www.jrobinson.com](http://www.jrobinson.com).*



## TAILORED FIT

Fletcher Robinson will happily suggest ways to alter a pattern to your taste. You can customize anything from the **SIZE** of the utensil (would you prefer a longer spoon, a more delicate fork?) to the **DETAILING** (do you want a different border or a beveled edge?).

**KNIFE HANDLES** in particular can be ordered in a wide variety of shapes, such as the "pistol," which curls to the side at the bottom like the profile of a gun, or the "cannon," which is completely round, much like a cannon muzzle.

Some customers request special **SERVING PIECES** such as slotted vegetable spoons or unusual utensils such as ice cream forks, marrow scoops, or honey dippers.

If your grandmother's silver service is missing a piece or two, Fletcher Robinson can create **REPLACEMENTS**, as long as the pattern is fairly plain.

"People often insist that other companies make their silver flatware by hand, too," says Munves. "So I always give them the same simple test: Just tell the firm in question that you like one of their silver patterns, but want three prongs on the fork instead of four. See what they say. If the flatware is really hand-made, it should be no problem to customize it."



**THE WAY IT WAS—AND STILL IS** Hand-hammering by craftsmen at the Fletcher workshop in Sheffield, England (ca. 1970), condenses the silver, making it heavier, more durable, and perfectly balanced.