

What Should I Polish This With?  
By Kristina Malcolm, metalsmith

One of my most often asked question is “what do you use to polish silver?” I usually run down the whole gamut for the person asking. I say that I prefer polishing cloths. Don’t ever use baking soda (yeah, it gets the black stuff off but you are also scratching the polish off too.) But then I finish with “the best thing you can do for an art silver piece is wear it and love it. Let the oxidation form naturally. The wear areas will keep the piece looking great.” And conclude with “if you can’t wear it all the time, buy a good polishing cloth and lightly buff the high spots right before you use it and be careful not to touch it after you’re done.”

Bright, shinny silver jewelry is very hard not to fall in love with. There is something in our brains that fires or releases a chemical whenever we see something sparkle and it makes us stop and go “ohhh...”. Imagine Disney’s Little Mermaid with her cave of sparklies and think of how the suns’ rays reflecting off the metal caught our eyes. Biologically, we desire glitter and sterling silver delivers big time. However, sterling silver loses its shine over time. This is called tarnishing, oxidation, or patina.

Tarnishing is simply air reacting to the surface molecules of the metal; more specifically the minute trace acids present in our atmosphere. Rust is a form of tarnish on steel, the blue/green surface on a bronze sculpture is as well. But in this article, I’m going to talk about our shinny silver jewelry turning black.

As mentioned above, people like bright silver so I thought I’d bring it to your attention that tarnish is actually a good thing. These arguments may not prevent you from polishing your jewelry but may cause you to give it a second thought. Artists and crafts people often use many different techniques to deliberately impart tarnish as part of their finishing processes. Sculptors may use patina techniques to change the color of their bronze statue to brown or green or blue – to heighten the emotional response to their piece. I use products like Black Max and Liver of Sulfur to deliberately apply a tarnished finish to my work. I use Black Max around bezel cups (a type of stone setting) to create depth and textural change in silver pieces.

In fine art sterling silver jewelry, hindering the tarnish process or removing tarnish actually decreases the value of the artwork. Jason Adams, a jewelry historian says the following about tarnish on art jewelry:

Being a jewelry historian, I’ve become very sensitive to how we find art objects and the condition in which we find them. It’s extremely important to let people know to leave [the natural patina of a piece] alone. That’s the biggest advice I can give. To clean off a patina on silver, and this is my personal feeling, but I think most conservators will say don’t clean it, don’t polish it. A piece from over a hundred years ago has a patina or a surface that hasn’t been touched for a hundred years and that’s part of the history of the piece, that’s what makes it what it is, it’s not a mirror finish but then again, it probably was never a mirror finish. So if you put a mirror finish or a polish on a silver piece that was made a hundred years ago that wasn’t polished originally, you’ve altered that piece. It’s not what the artist intended any longer. Many of the Art Deco silver pieces that were made and Mexican silver, were not mirror polished. They were not polished on a wheel.

They were polished by hand. So their polish originally was not a high polish. The patina on the surface of a piece is an integral component of what it is – both as what it once was and what it has become. So by polishing it you completely change what the artist intent was. I don't polish or clean any of my things. Currently, I've actually refinished a piece by adding a patination to the surface that had been overly polished in hopes of letting the eye see what it once was and to enhance the pieces' features. It does affect the value as well – by polishing a piece you could decrease the value 10-20%.

Also, polishing something will take detail out because you are removing the top layer of metal and minor details, [and] at times, [those] were the most important part of the piece. You are removing metal if you polish a piece, regardless of how much you polish it. Over time, if you polish a piece and then in 20 years when you've decided you don't want that piece or it's been passed down to somebody else and they polish it again and then someone else polishes it again, you're losing metal. With that loss of metal, you're removing the surface design so you're removing the artists' intent and you're actually changing the piece. Through normal wear, some metal does wear away. I wear a bracelet every day that I've had on for 10 years and the raised silver dots are now half of what they were 10 years ago so through normal wear you're already wearing away metal.

So if you have older things, respect them for what they are and if you don't understand the patination process or if you like things to look new, then buy new. If you like authentic characteristics in a piece, leave the patination alone. Don't polish it.”

But to finish up, if you do want your silver to be bright there are many products out on the market to help achieve this. Silver polish comes in many forms. I prefer pre-impregnated polishing cloths. Also foam polishing pads are great (ProPolish Pads); they are what I tell my students to use when we are finishing up silver pieces or for specific jobs in my studio. As far as paste goes – well, let's just say the verdict is still out. I have tried multitudes of different products including: Flitz, Wenol car polish, Mr. polish, and Maas. None of them perform as I would want them to, so I use them interchangeably to try to observe any rhyme or reason to their ever-changing behaviors.

Also as a side note: copper is considered a reactive metal. Sterling contains copper, which is why it turns black. It is actually the copper attracting the tarnish to the sterling. Silver that does not contain copper is called fine silver. And finally, gold does not tarnish because it is considered to be a non-reactive metal.

Support your local artists and contact me, Kristina Malcolm (metalsmith extraordinaire) at [fluxusmetalworks @ gmail.com](mailto:fluxusmetalworks@gmail.com) and [www. fluxusmetalwork. com](http://www.fluxusmetalwork.com).