

Contemporary Collectibles: Trivets to protect the holiday table

by *Linda_Rosenkrantz*

So you've taken out your best linen cloths for the holiday table and, not wanting to harm them with any hot platters, have produced a few trivets as well. The trivet - by definition a three-legged stand - an object we don't usually give much thought to, actually has a long history, from the hand-hammered examples used in colonial fireplaces through the more decorative foundry-made Victorian examples, and are being increasingly appreciated by collectors of vintage kitchenware.

The earliest trivets were forged by individual artisans, so each of them was unique. They were made primarily of cast iron in a variety of shapes, including round, square, triangular, oval, oblong, heart, gridiron, horseshoe, star, tulip and even more creative free forms, many of them fitted with wooden handles. Since they were often placed directly over the fire for cooking and warming food in the fireplace, many were made with long, resilient legs to support large iron kettles and pots, the three-leg structure providing stability on rough hearth floors.

On almost all hand-wrought iron trivets - and many 19th century cast-iron specimens as well - the legs pierce the top rather than being integral with them.

With the gradual introduction of mass production at numerous large and small foundries in the middle of the 19th century, designs, naturally, became more standardized, as well as more ornate. And as free-standing, wood-burning stoves replaced open hearths for cooking, the need for long-legged hearth trivets waned. At this point, the main function of the trivet became the support of the simple, heavy flatirons known as sadirons, and so were made roughly in the spadelike shape of the iron, while those intended for table use continued to be made in a variety of forms.

Many of the trivets of this period were marked with the name of the factory that produced them, while others were stamped with trade names and slogans, dates, initials of makers and even insignias and names of fraternal organizations. Trivets also became popular as souvenirs of conventions and such, and more fanciful symbols began to appear - snakes, eagles and owls, hearts (a favorite device of Pennsylvania Dutch makers), cherubs and lovebirds, flags and portraits of famous personages, as well as more abstract designs.

Of course, as time went on, a variety of other materials were used for tabletop trivets. Earthenware stands of the 19th century echoed the decorative themes of other pottery items of the period, such as Chinese dragon designs. Simple wooden ones were also made, as were those of metal wire, brass and copper, sterling silver, nickel plate, pressed glass, cut crystal and tile. Glass and tile trivets were set in metal frames with small button feet.

In the Victorian era there were unusual forms like petit point and beaded saucepan stands, and, for the tea table, there were four-legged brass and wrought-iron kettle stands known as "footmen." These were 16 to 26

inches and elaborately decorated, and are among the most highly valued types. Another desirable subcategory is the exceptionally hefty trivet made to hold a tailor's heavy pressing irons. In the art deco 1930s, when chrome became fashionable, this hard metal was used to gleaming effect.

Here are a few representative prices for vintage trivets reported in Kovels' 2007 edition of "Antiques and Collectibles Price List":

- Brass Georgian style trivet, 15 by 17 inches - \$480.

- Brass and iron trivet, engraved skirt, two-headed eagle, cabriole legs, penny feet, 9 by 9 inches - \$350.

- Wrought-iron heart-shaped trivet, three legs, circa 1800, 2 by 6 by 4 inches - \$253.

- Griswold iron trivet, lacy round, 4 inches - \$165.

- Sand cast-iron trivet with heart center, heart handle, 1800s, 11 inches - \$61.

Brass and iron trivet, D-shape, three legs, turned wood handle, 10 inches - \$143.

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