

A fortune at your fingertips

Thimbles are coming out of the sewing basket and into the display cabinet, says Bridget McConnell.

Why not cotton on and invest?



Thimbles have been collected seriously for at least 50 years, but they have not been widely recognised as a pleasurable and increasingly valuable investment until the last decade. Now they are a valued item in any auction catalogue, often fetching prices well in excess of the estimates.

Collecting societies have started up in many parts of the world, proof that thimble collecting is international. However, English collectors have an advantage in that Britain has been the home of some of the most famous thimble makers, throughout the long history of their manufacture.

Some form of thimble has been in continuous use for at least 2,000 years. If you consider the thimble's usefulness as well as the diversity of materials used and the delicate beauty of ever-evolving designs, it is not surprising that the thimble is becoming one of the most popular of all collectable items.

Thimbles have been made in stone, wood, horn, glass, bone, tortoiseshell, leather, bronze, porcelain, gold, silver, ivory, mother-of-pearl and many other materials. Given the additional variables of nationality, period, and design, thimble collecting would seem to offer a breadth of interest both artistically and historically, at a variety of investment levels. Men are generally more interested in the older thimbles and in historical research. Women are attracted by the thimble's social role and its aesthetic appeal.

The connection with sewing may be more easily made by women, especially those working in the textile or fashion industries, but thimble collecting is not an exclusively female preserve. What might get overlooked is the interest shown by male tailors, leather workers and perhaps surgeons. The collecting of thimbles is now extending

into the larger domain of other sewing tools. For example three growing categories are thimble containers, scissors and tape measures. Chatelaines, a group of tools suspended by silver chains, or boxed sewing sets, complete with thimbles, are also increasingly popular among collectors.

Until recently little literature was available to help collectors recognise and date thimbles that they had either bought or discovered. Dating helps to place your thimbles within a relevant social and artistic context. One reason why commemorative thimbles are so highly prized is the ease with which they can be put in context. A charming souvenir thimble — of, say, the Great Exhibition of 1851 — would have been taken home as an encouraging gift to the 'Angel of the House'. The beauty of this particular thimble's deep decorative band was achieved by a then novel technique of stamping the design onto a flat strip and then rolling it around the thimble.

A gold thimble will add glamour to any collection and gold commemorative thimbles are considered particularly important due to their extreme rarity. New collectors often ask if the carat affects the thimble's value. The answer is — very little; the value rests on rarity, design and in some cases a maker's attribution.

Because of their fragility and the artistry of the painting, porcelain antique thimbles command the highest prices; Worcester, Derby, and some early American porcelain examples all add international importance and beauty to your display, and display is one of the joys of ownership, be it from an antique display cabinet or dramatically lit modern wall cabinet, on a glass-topped coffee table or by wearing, for example, silver sewing tools as jewellery.

Do not be deterred from collecting if your starting budget is modest. Early 20th century thimbles with advertising slogans, or incorporating place names or gadgets,

Thimbles come in an astonishing range of designs and materials — from precious gold and amethysts (above right) to the less elaborate vegetable ivory (below right) made from the ivory nut.

