

# Finding Firnhaber treasures

Colonial Australian jewellery is rarely marked with the name of its maker or retailer. Perth jewellery dealer Trevor Hancock sticks his neck out and attributes several pieces to the German-born Adelaide jeweller C. E. Firnhaber, based on stylistic similarities of the works. All of them are illustrated here.

## TREVOR HANCOCK

This article tells a story which many Australiana Society members can relate to. It is a story of luck, good timing and the great satisfaction of discovering, identifying and saving our national treasures.

Some months ago I acquired an impressive gold memorial brooch with a daguerreotype on one side and an etched glass panel on the reverse (**plates 1–2**). I was unfamiliar with its massive, ‘massed vine’ decoration but bowled over by its weight and proportions. It definitely had the ‘feel’ of Australian colonial jewellery. I searched everywhere on the brooch for a mark, then also searched all the publications and my photographic records for a hint of its origin.

When I opened Robert Reason’s sumptuous 2012 publication *Bounty, Nineteenth-century South Australian Gold and Silver*,<sup>1</sup> I found the very same riotous ‘massed vine’ decoration on the title page. It was on the 1867 silver-gilt monstrance owned by St Augustine’s Catholic Parish, Salisbury, South Australia. Also shown in the publication is the 1865 “Lodge of Truth Masonic Cup” owned by Freemasons South Australia & Northern Territory. Both of these majestic silver masterpieces were created by Charles Edward Firnhaber (1805–1880), a German-trained silversmith who had arrived in South Australia in 1847, and



### 1-2.

Attributed to Charles Edward Firnhaber (1805–1880),  
*locket brooch with daguerreotype, Adelaide, c 1870.*  
Gold, glass, hand coloured daguerreotype, h 7.0, w 6.5 cm,  
wt 58.3 g. Collection: Trinity Antiques, Perth



Eureka! This was an exciting discovery, as now I knew of three pieces of jewellery attributed to Firnhaber. The first was the malachite gold brooch locket dated c 1859 in the Art Gallery of South Australia, illustrated in *Bounty*<sup>2</sup> (plate 3). This had formerly been attributed to Schomburgk, but while researching his exhibition and book, Robert Reason attributed it to Firnhaber after he located this reference, which clearly describes this brooch or another identical to it:

COLONIAL ART. – Mr. Firnhaber has shewn us a massive and beautiful brooch just manufactured by him, in South Australian gold and malachite. The setting of the malachite consists of a wreath of elaborately chased roses, shamrocks, and thistles. An ounce and a half of gold has been worked up in this elegant ornament, which is worth about £13.<sup>3</sup>

The second was the gold locket brooch which I acquired last year, and the third a locket with a lyrebird, inlaid

with diamonds, within a “floating” oval of ivy leaves, dated c 1872 and given to the Art Gallery of South Australia in 2014 (plate 4).<sup>4</sup> The lyrebird locket came in an original Henry Steiner box so he must have retailed it, but its lack of a maker’s mark led Robert Reason to conclude that it was an outworker piece, which he attributes to Firnhaber on stylistic grounds, although the leaves are less carefully modelled than in the earlier example.

Out of the blue, in February I received an email from Ben McHenry, Senior Collections Manager, Earth Sciences, at the South Australian Museum. He is mounting an important exhibition “Opal” to celebrate “The Centenary of the Discovery of our National Gemstone” in South Australia later this year and is seeking the loan of jewellery incorporating South Australian opal.

### 3.

Attributed to Charles Edward Firnhaber (1805–1880), *brooch locket, with border of roses, shamrocks and thistles*, Adelaide 1859. Gold, malachite, glass, h 7.9 w 7.0 cm. Collection: Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide, gift of Mrs Krogman 1944

### 4.

Attributed to Charles Edward Firnhaber (1805–1880), *locket with lyrebird*, Adelaide c 1872. Gold, diamonds, h 6.0 w 3.3 cm. Collection: Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide, gift of Tom Pearce with the assistance of the Pauline Colley Bequest through the Art Gallery of South Australia Foundation 2014





## 5–6.

Attributed to Charles Edward Firnhaber (1805–1880), *brooch*, Adelaide, c 1870. Malachite, gold, h 5.9 cm, w 5.0 cm wt 39.0 g. Collection: South Australian Museum, Adelaide

Per chance, I was going to Adelaide the following week, so arranged to meet Ben. After some very enjoyable time looking at breathtaking but underestimated South Australian opal specimens, Ben remembered he had a piece of jewellery locked away securely in the safe. After much dial-turning, keys turning and the clunk of bars retreating, he handed me a box. As I was opening the box, he said “It’s by Firnhaber.”

Sure enough, there before my eyes was a sister brooch to mine, only this one held an impressive piece of malachite, rather than a daguerreotype (plates 5–6). All four items are truly outstanding. This was remarkable, to go from one jewellery masterpiece attributed to Firnhaber to four in a space of six months.

Malachite, a banded green stone made up of copper carbonate, is especially associated with South Australia through the copper mines at Kapunda, where mining began in 1844, and Burra, where copper ore was discovered in 1845. As Ben will attest, I was quite emotional with this discovery. This significant piece of South Australian colonial jewellery had been gifted to the museum, prized because of the piece of malachite and kept under lock and key with other valuable “rock specimens”.

Ben McHenry and Robert Reason have since been talking and we now may have a chance to enjoy the Firnhaber brooch, which has been guarded by dinosaurs, elephant-eating sharks, blue-bottle jelly fish and prehistoric mammoths in the South Australian Museum.

Looking closely at and handling jewellery by Steiner, Wendt, Schomburgk, Hogarth & Erichsen, Charles Jones and Firnhaber, one is hugely impressed by their breathtaking work, made all the more impressive by the use of high carat gold. Their crafting of uniquely Australian pieces from local gold seemed uninhibited by cost, the only restraint being the ability of ladies (and the fabrics they wore) to bear the weight of these statement pieces.

Hopefully, one day, one of the major public galleries will exhibit a wide collection of Australian colonial silversmiths’ works together with their rarer gold jewellery masterpieces. They could even organise a seminar on the subject, where curators, dealers and collectors could meet, examine pieces and share their knowledge.

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### NOTES

- 1 Robert Reason, *Bounty, Nineteenth-century South Australian Gold and Silver*, Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide 2012.
- 2 *Ibid.* pp 17-18, 116.
- 3 *South Australian Advertiser* 28 Feb 1859 p 2.
- 4 Robert Reason, “C.E. Firnhaber”, *Articulate* no 18, Autumn 2015, p 32f.