

# Conservator Hack - Silver Polishing

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Silver artifacts lose their allure when covered with a layer of tarnish and give visitors the false impression that staff are too busy or too uncaring to care for the collection. Tarnish interacts with the top layer of silver to form a protective patina though this is damaging on thinly plated silver artifacts that lack a substantial surface layer. Whether to protect them from damage or simply make them look good, silver artifacts require periodic cleaning and polishing.

The goal is to remove tarnish while removing as little as possible of the silver underneath it, and without leaving scratches. Electrolytic reduction cleaning (aluminum foil and baking soda in hot water) is not recommended as it removes a layer of silver off along with the tarnish. Polishing with commercial creams and polishes are the most common cleaning techniques but not all products are suitable. Some produce a nice shiny surface but leaves many fine scratches in the surface.



*Before polishing*



*After polishing*

*images from CCI video "How to Make and Use Precipitated Calcium Carbonate Silver Polish"*

Canadian Conservation Institute's [CCI Note 9/7: Silver – Care and Tarnish Removal](#) reviews the commonly available silver polishes and recommends those made by Twinkle, Silvo, Goddard and Hagerty. It also describes how to make and use a homemade solution of precipitated calcium carbonate. [CCI Note 9/11: How to Make and Use a Precipitated Calcium Carbonate Silver Polish](#) has instructions on how to mix the precipitated calcium carbonate solution and use the fine sludge at the bottom of the jar to clean silver. This is the least abrasive process. Unlike most commercial products, precipitated calcium carbonate (found in health food stores) has no odour so students and volunteers with sensitivities can use it without health issues. Polishing can be done using a soft cloth or by wearing clean tube socks over your hands. The Canadian Conservation Institute (CCI) also demonstrates the process on their YouTube channel in their videos [How to Polish Silver](#) and [How to Make and Use Precipitated Calcium Carbonate Silver Polish](#).

Once polished, silver artifacts that are returning to storage can be kept in a polyethylene (Ziploc) bag with a small piece of anti-tarnish cloth (Pacific Silver Cloth) or Static Intercept® Non-abrasive Anti-Tarnish Tab. These products absorb the gases that cause tarnish on silver. Suppliers of anti-tarnish cloth can be purchased from Carr McLean and may be available in Winnipeg through Birks Jewellers. Anti-Tarnish Tabs are available from [Gesswein Canada](#). Check the [AMM Suppliers List](#) for more details.

Are you interested in participating in a Zoom demonstration of silver cleaning? [Email](#) me to discuss