

The Golden Age of Bell Pushes

by

Over the past year, we have parted with most of our bell pushes. At the time, it occurred to us that in the over 50-year association with ABA we had never seen a comprehensive article on decorative bell pushes in *The Bell Tower*.

Prior to the advent of electricity, bells for the summoning of servants were operated with mechanical bell pulls situated throughout the house, mansion, or castle. Most were either narrow hand-stitched needlework hanging from the ceiling or solid pulls or cranks firmly attached to the walls. They, in turn, were connected to the bells via a series of wires and pivots embedded in the walls and ceilings. Each room had its own pull which was connected to a corresponding bell in the servants workplace. (Figures 1 and 2). Who, having watched *Downton Abbey*, doesn't remember the single bell in a large bank of them moving and ringing during the introduction to each episode?

The first use of electrical bell pushes to summon servants is attributed to Joseph Henry in 1831. Stringing electrical wires was much easier than the careful installation of pivots and accurately tensioned wires between them for bell pulls. Electrical bell pushes soon became commonplace. Now, craftsmen were not limited to devices firmly fastened to the ceiling or wall. As you will see, some bell pushes still hung from the ceiling, but now they could also sit



Figure 1. Indoor and outdoor bell pulls. The 74" needlepoint bell pull has been folded in half to show the glass handle... probably late 1800s. The other, possibly somewhat younger, is suitably weatherproof to be used to summon help to the front door. The spring-loaded bell at the top is typical of those mounted in the servants' workplace.

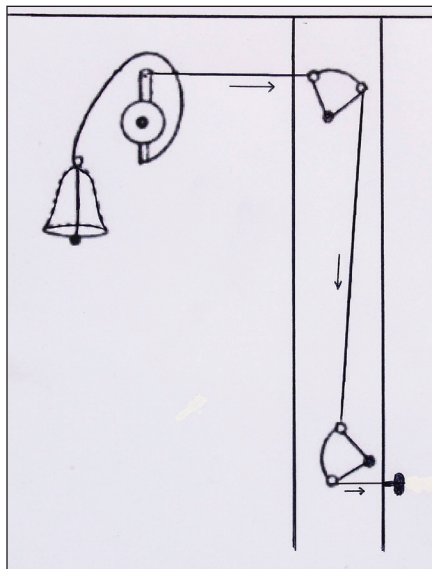


Figure 2. A sketch showing a very simple connection through the wall between a fixed wall pull and a servant's bell. Imagine the complexity of wires and pivots needed to connect the pull and bell together from three stories up to the servants in the basement at the other end of a large mansion or castle.

on the desk, parlor table, or night stand, and in many cases, could be moved from one location to another as well (Figure 3). The sky was the limit for creativity.

Shown here is a very modest collection of average bell pushes. Famous artisans like Fabergé created thousands of bell push art for the elite of Europe between the mid-1800s and the early 1900s. They incorporated precious metals and gemstones and sell today for thousands of dollars. Google "Fabergé bell pushes" or go to Pinterest for a trip into a world of creative fantasy. Both Anselm Lange's bell books, *Europäische Tischglocken* and *Electrische Tischklingeln*, also contain some beautiful photos.

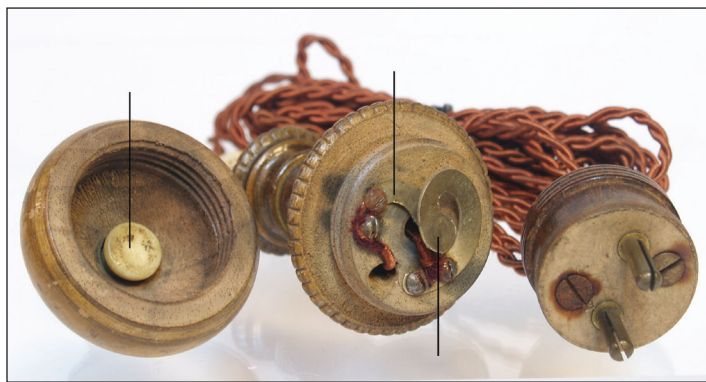


Figure 3. The inside of a typical electrical bell push. Note the bottom of the ivory push button which forces the two brass contacts together thereby completing the electrical circuit. DC batteries were used at first then AC to DC converters supplied the current. This particular bell push could be taken and plugged into outlets in several different locations if desired.

These bell pushes range in size from the tiny hanging elephant of a few ounces and 7/8" in length (Figure 7) to the massive 4 lb-1 oz, 7-1/2" desktop Setter (Figure 11). Most are not marked, vary in origin from the 1850s to the 1930s, and we believe are of European manufacture.



Figure 4. Detailed carved hanging pushes made of different woods and having ivory or Bakelite fittings at each end.



Figure 5. Silver hanging bell pushes. Left and right with ivory buttons are marked "800" and are therefore European. The middle one with a blue glass button is marked "PATT.D" and an unreadable marker's mark.



Figure 6. Nature was a common theme. Here, nicely carved acorns, one of ivory and the other wood both with ivory tips.



Figure 7. Late 1880s bronze German elephants, one with ivory tusks and button. The other very small one could have been for a child's use.



Figure 8. Bronze bird hanging pushes. The owl is double-sided, the pheasant has a black enameled base, and there is a blue glass push button on the eagle.



Figure 9. Very detailed European bronze monkey with ivory push and a tiger with a turned agate base.



Figure 10. Two early 1900s bronze signed "Tereszczuk" hanging pushes with ivory buttons. On the right is pictured in Anselm Lange's "Electrische Tischklingeln," pg. 108. When in use with wires attached and hanging, the girls would appear to be playing with ropes.



Figure 11. Dogs of every breed were very popular. Very large bronze desktop Setter. Signed "CARTIER."



Figure 12. Turn of the century detailed bronze Dachshund on a black marble base which houses the contact mechanism.



Figure 13. Bronze wild boar with moonstone push and ivory ferule where the wire comes out.



Figure 14. Wise owls were a common motif. Bronze owl standing on a book, all mounted on a green-veined black marble base. Silver plated owl also standing on books. Note that all of the books have closures across the open end, something certainly not commonplace today.



Figure 15. This silver plated turtle mounted on a wooden base is unusual because the electrical contact is made when the turtle's chin touches the button underneath it.



Figure 16. Green-veined marble base holds a little boy and a trio of geese.



Figure 19. This bronze cigar-smoking boy was originally mounted on a base of some kind, either marble or wood. It is signed "P LODOR," and it is the very bell push shown on page 114 of Anselm Lange's "Electrische Tischklingelm."



Figure 17. A detailed young boy in typical Austrian attire mounted on a heavy brown and black marble base.



Figure 20. Macabre bronze human skull mounted on a book with closure typical of the time.



Figure 18. Bronze mandolin-playing Pierrot sitting on a black double marble base.



Figure 21. Press the "gem" on the wrist of this bronze hand to ring. It is mounted on a black wooden base.



Figure 22. The next four figures show the use of materials not common for bell pushes. This one has a gilded rose mounted on an oval crystal base.



Figure 25. An exquisite little Oriental ivory and gilded bronze desk push. The man appears to be stroking his pet monkey which is dressed in a jacket. The surface of the base and band surrounding it are beautifully engraved.



Figure 23. A hand-painted porcelain boy mounted on an intricately designed bronze platform. A metal disc fastened to the underside of the base is marked "MADE IN FRANCE B?LER 237, Rue St. Honoré." Obviously made for export.



Figure 26. A trio of rose quartz pushes of both the hanging and desktop variety.



Figure 24. Hand painted porcelain in floral motif, possibly of Oriental origin made for export in the early 1900s.



Figure 27. Other semiprecious stones were also used besides rose quartz. Here are shown blue lapis lazuli and green onyx pushes.



Figure 28. Silver tops on round Bakelite bases were popular. The cone-shaped one is marked with the German crescent moon, crown, 800 and an W.B. maker's mark. The other is marked with "830" and an undecipherable maker's mark.

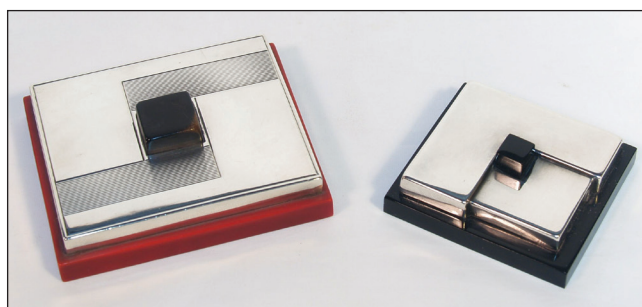


Figure 31. Art Deco designs of silver on Bakelite bases. Both have black Bakelite buttons. The red-based one is marked "925" on the silver. The other is German with a crescent moon, crown, 835S and an M&M maker's mark.



Figure 29. Some of the most beautiful small desktop pushes have guilloche decoration, are enamel over machine-turned or engraved silver bases. The upper left one is marked "74 925 CM&MD." The blue one is marked with a Viking ship and 5609 in an oval. A rose quartz button centers an engraved, hand painted and enameled bell push with an unreadable maker's mark. The last, a yellow one, is marked "935", a silver standard which was used only in Austria, Germany, and Switzerland between 1920 and 1940.



Figure 30. A relatively modern Art Deco design of green and black enamel over silver with a mother of pearl push button.



Figure 32. An indoor wall-mounted, hand-painted ceramic push. The ceramic disc screws onto a wooden base which would have been mounted on the wall. An impressed "1317" and hand-painted "2133" are on the underside rim of the ceramic disc.

It's not that we have abandoned the use of bell pushes in this day and age. What house doesn't have a front door "bell," although now it may be wireless and sound a buzzer or the Westminster Chimes? Apartment buildings all have banks of buttons alerting to the presence of a visitor in the foyer. Next time your doorbell sounds or you ring for friends in their apartment building, remember those beautiful bell pushes from long ago.