

## **Black, Starr & Frost**

Black, Starr & Frost, arguably the first American luxury brand and the oldest jewellery firm still in operation, was established in 1810 by Isaac Marquand (1766-1838)<sup>1</sup>. As an established silversmith and clockmaker, Marquand started a small private firm, Marquand & Co. in New York City, selling jewellery and silverware<sup>2</sup>. It later became Black, Ball & Company and provided a greater variety of offerings, ranging from lamps, porcelain, paintings to jewellery<sup>3</sup>. After a series of changes in partnerships, locations and names over the next few decades, Robert C. Black (n.d.), Cortland W. Starr (n.d.), and Aaron Vail Frost (n.d.) reorganised the business as Black, Starr & Frost and relocated it to 251 Fifth Avenue, which is also known as the diamond district, in 1876<sup>4</sup>. By then, the company had focussed more on the making of jewellery and silver objects, and was slowly being recognised as one of the greatest American jewellers<sup>5</sup>.



Figure 1. Isaac Marquand (1766-1838)<sup>6</sup>

The company is renowned for its high quality and one-of-a-kind creations, catering to America's elite with a large clientele including the Rockefellers, Carnegies, Guggenheims, Vanderbilts and the Duke of Windsor<sup>7</sup>. The term "Carriage Trade", ornamenting special horse-drawn carriages to deliver goods to clients from the upper class, was first used by Black, Starr, and Frost in the 1860s<sup>8</sup>. Not only was the firm favoured by the new and dignitaries, it also attracted the stars of the silver screen and the stage. It is referenced in the song "Diamonds Are a Girl's Best Friend", sung by

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<sup>1</sup> Black, Starr & Frost (2022)

<sup>2</sup> Durand Co (2022)

<sup>3</sup> Black, Starr & Frost (2022)

<sup>4</sup> Durand Co (2022)

<sup>5</sup> Antique Jewelry University (2022)

<sup>6</sup> Black, Starr & Frost (2022)

<sup>7</sup> Durand Co (2022)

<sup>8</sup> Black, Starr & Frost (2022)

Marilyn Monroe (1926-1962) in the 1953 film ‘*Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*’, along with other renowned brands, including Cartier, Tiffany & Co. and Harry Winston<sup>9</sup>.

Known for many firsts, Black, Starr & Frost was the pioneer in the use of plate glass windows. In 1833, the firm installed large plate glass windows to display its merchandise to pedestrians walking by, serving as a means to attract luxury-loving pedestrians, contributing to the development of the renowned New York City pastime of window-shopping<sup>10</sup>. It is also the first firm to use the bald eagle, national bird of the country, as its logo which was later adopted by many other firms in America<sup>11</sup>.



Figure 2. Company logo of Black, Starr & Frost<sup>12</sup>

The business rose to prominence in 1851 when it showed a stunning 4-piece tea service made entirely of pure gold at the London Crystal Palace exhibition<sup>13</sup>. In 1939, the firm was invited to exhibit at New York’s World’s Fair as one of the five American jewellers invited. The firm displayed two unique, jewel-encrusted “mystery clocks”<sup>14</sup>. During the firm’s heyday, there were 32 branches and a flagship store at the Plaza Hotel of New York City but was shrunk to two salons in recent years<sup>15</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> The Wall Street Journal (2016)

<sup>10</sup> Hancocks London (2020)

<sup>11</sup> Hancocks London (2020)

<sup>12</sup> Black, Starr & Frost (2022)

<sup>13</sup> Durand Co (2022)

<sup>14</sup> Black, Starr & Frost (2022)

<sup>15</sup> Black, Starr & Frost (2022)



Figure 3. Mystery Clocks crafted by Black, Starr & Frost<sup>16</sup>

### **In the collection**

Liang Yi Museum houses 4 vanities and 3 sets of silver made by Black, Starr & Frost, ranging from 1900-1940. This rectangular *nécessaire* (fig. 4) is of oriental design, entirely enamelled in black, with blue-green enamel decorated on the narrow sides of the lid. Rose-cut diamonds are mounted on platinum, surrounding the blue-green enamel section at the centre of the lid. The compact reveals a mounted mirror and a large compartment engraved with the initials “L.A.” at the bottom, with two additional tubes of lipstick enclosed on both sides. The use of blue-green enamel here imitates the colour and texture of jade, a precious material typically used in Chinoiserie designs, and the rectilinear geometric elements of the Art Deco period<sup>17</sup>.

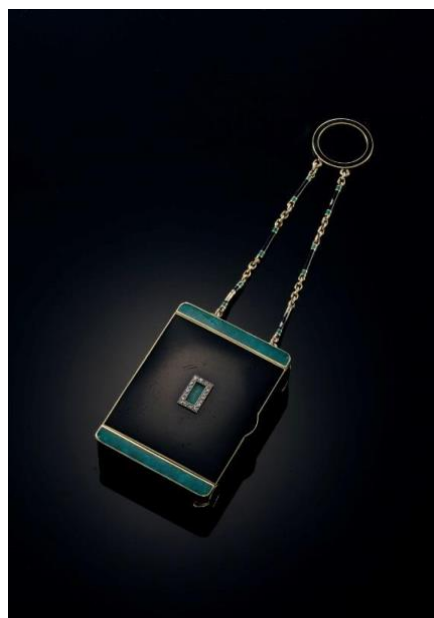


Figure 4. *Nécessaire*, Maker: Black, Starr & Frost, New York, c. 1925, Materials: Gold, enamel, diamond, Height 0.9 x Width 3.6 x Length 5.2 cm, Liang Yi Museum Collection.

<sup>16</sup> Black, Starr & Frost (2022)

<sup>17</sup> Wilson’s Estate Jewelry (2022)



Figure 5. Interior of Nécessaire (fig. 4).

This rectangular compact (fig. 6) presents a rather simple design, featuring black enamel at the centre and on the edges, ornamented with sections of blue lapis on both ends, adding textured gold and diamond accents between two shades of colours of enamel. Contrasting with the lapis, the thumb piece is set with an oval-shaped cabochon sapphire which is cut to have a smooth, glasslike lustrous surface, demonstrating its natural colour and beauty. The interior (fig. 7) comprises a mirror, two compartments and a lipstick holder, with the signature of Black, Starr & Frost.



Figure 6. Compact, Maker: Black, Starr & Frost, New York, c. 1920, Materials: Lapis lazuli, sapphire, gold, diamond, enamel, Height 1.8 x Width 4.7 x Length 8.8 cm, Liang Yi Museum Collection.



Figure 7. Interior of Compact (fig. 6).

Unlike the vanities above that are composed of multiple materials, this rectangular compact (fig. 8) is mainly enamelled in blue and outlined with gold, opening to reveal a gold gilt interior. The corners and centre of the lid are ornamented with frames of flowers and lush vines motifs in vivid shades of gold, blue, pink and green. While the four rectangle frames at the corners are of the same size, the one in the middle is larger, embodying the symmetrical and geometric features of Art Deco<sup>18</sup>. The back of the lid (fig. 9) contains a mirror on hinges, with one compartment closed by a hinged shutter.



Figure 8. Compact, Maker: Black, Starr & Frost, New York, c. 1920, Materials: Gold, enamel, Height 0.93 x Width 4.5 x Length 7.11 cm, Liang Yi Museum Collection.

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<sup>18</sup> Wilson's Estate Jewelry (2021)



Figure 9. Interior of Compact (fig. 8).

This square compact (fig. 10) is decorated with blue enamel with a central plaque inlaid with mother-of-pearl and gold accents featuring a Komainu gazing back. It is an example of oriental design during the 1920s of the Art Deco period, where experimented with oriental elements<sup>19</sup>. The Komainu is the symbolic Japanese guardian of the entrance<sup>20</sup>. Engraved cherry blossom motif is revealed in the interior of the compact (fig. 11), symbolising hope and reborn<sup>21</sup>. The use of mother-of-pearl inlay is also commonly found on oriental pieces.

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<sup>19</sup> Wilson's Estate Jewelry (2022)

<sup>20</sup> E-Museum (2022)

<sup>21</sup> Invaluable (2018)

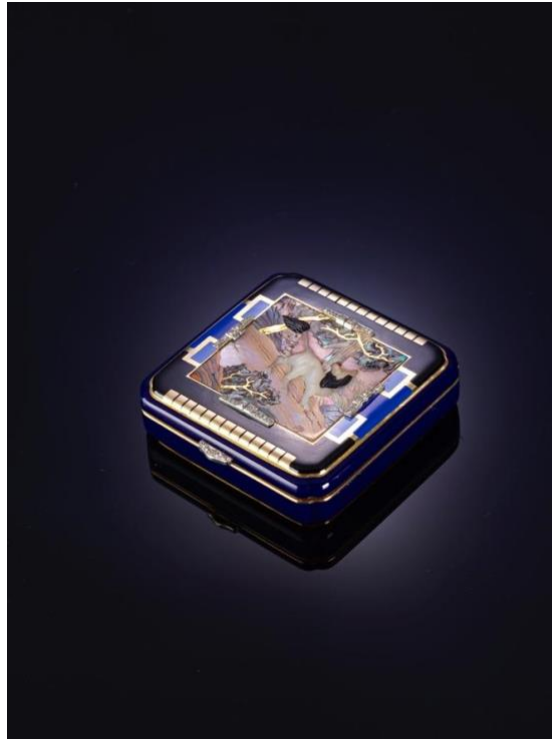


Figure 10. Compact, Maker: Black, Starr & Frost, New York, c. 1920, Materials: Gold, diamond, enamel, mother-of-pearl, Height 1.48 x Width 5.21 x Length 5.21 cm, Liang Yi Museum Collection.



Figure 11. Interior of Compact (fig. 10).

In addition to vanities, Black, Starr & Frost is also known for its silverware. This silver centrepiece bowl (fig. 12) is of a tapering circular shape with a spot-hammered surface and flared rim pierced with foliage. Supporting the main part is the openwork stem cast with beads and water lilies, and is stamped “sterling”. The silver centrepiece

played an important role in *Service à la Française*, the practice of serving a multitude of dishes on the dining table and requiring the diners to serve themselves from the serving dishes, grew in popularity in Europe and North America since the mid-17 century<sup>23</sup>. The decorative yet functional centrepiece serves as a symbol of aristocracy and wealth and is placed in the middle of the table, filled with sweets, fruits, and non-scented flower arrangements, along with other silverwares such as candelabra and flatware<sup>24</sup>. Compared with other centrepieces in our collection, this centrepiece is relatively simple in design and the decorations are mainly centred around the base.



Figure 12. An American Silver Centrepiece Bowl, Maker: Black, Starr & Frost-Groham, New York, 1929-1940, Materials: Silver, Diameter 33 x Height 21cm, Liang Yi Museum Collection.

The silver dish set (fig. 13) comprises two oblong meat dishes, 12 circular side places and a circular platter of neoclassical style, with a band of husk and bellflower border, decorated with swags, paterae, and urns, emphasising symmetry. The urn is a typical feature of neoclassical style<sup>25</sup>, ornamented with tongues rising from the base and figural heads in the centre. In comparison with the urns of classical style, the shape of the neoclassical one is flatter and more similar to a basin.

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<sup>23</sup> Griffin (2015)

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<sup>25</sup> Bienenstock Furniture Library (2017)





Figure 13. An American Silver Part Dinner-Service, Maker: Black, Starr & Frost-Groham, New York, Circa 1920, Materials: Silver,  
 A(circular small): Dia: 18 x H: 1.5cm  
 B(circular medium): Dia: 36 x H: 2.5 cm  
 C(oval): 2 x 46 x 32.5cm  
 D: 3 x 51 x 36cm

This hand-hammered silver tray (fig. 14) is a display plate of Art Nouveau style. It is for display rather than daily functional use. The stylised foliate design is engraved on the scroll rims and in the middle of the tray, confined in a lozenge, featuring two scrolling handles. The use of leaf and scroll-like motifs was prevalent amongst silverwares in the Art Nouveau style<sup>26</sup>. Different from the motifs of the Art Deco period that have been introduced above, the design in Art Nouveau is composed with more curves and free-flowing lines.



Figure 14. A Black, Starr and Frost Silver Tray, Maker: Black, Starr & Frost, New York, c. 1900, Materials: Silver, Height 7.6 x Width 54.3 x Length 76.8 cm, Liang Yi Museum Collection.

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<sup>26</sup> The Art Story (2022)

After coming under new ownership multiple times, Black, Starr & Frost, with a rich and colourful past, continues to bring creative design to excite its clientele, enhancing its enduring reputation for fine jewellery and taking it into a new era of prominence.

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