



Sugar Tongs, Silver, Birmingham, London, ca. 1850 - 1870.

Sugar tongs were an essential part of the traditional English tea service, used for lifting sugar cubes into delicate teacups. A typical service or tableware included a teapot, coffeepot, hot-water pot, sugar bowl, milk strainer and sugar tongs or nippers.¹ First introduced in the 17th century, sugar tongs developed out of earlier sugar nips, which were designed to cut hard lumps from a sugarloaf. Silver sugar tongs offered both a practical and elegant means of handling sugar cubes without touching them by hand.² Most were assayed in London and other European and American cities³ and crafted with refined ornamentation, becoming both functional and fashionable accessories of polite society.

This particular pair of tongs diverges from a typical scissors-like shape, transforming an everyday tool into a dynamic character reminiscent of those found on stage. Crafted in the Silver material, commonly referred to as sugar nippers due to their scissor-like design, these tongs are crafted in the likeness of a Harlequin, the playful trickster from Italian theatre. This imaginative design brilliantly fuses practical use with a touch of whimsy.

The elongated legs of the Harlequin form the gripping arms of the tongs, ending in claw-like tips specifically designed for grasping sugar. Above his head, the Harlequin's arms hold two circular handles crafted in the shape of coiled snakes, each biting its own tail. Known as ouroboros, these serpentine rings are rich in ancient symbolism, representing continuity and eternity.⁴ In Victorian culture, the snake motif also echoed themes of love and devotion, embodying ideas of unbroken

¹Suzanne von Drachenfels, *The Art of the Table: A Complete Guide to Table Setting, Table Manners, and Tableware* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000).

²"The History & Use of Silver Sugar Tongs," *Dart Silver Ltd.*, accessed September 17, 2025, <https://dartsilverltd.co.uk/the-history-use-of-silver-sugar-tongs>.

³"Georgian Silver Sugar Tongs from 1770 to 1820," *Collectors Weekly*, accessed September 17, 2025, <https://www.collectorsweekly.com/articles/guest-column-georgian-silver-sugar-tongs-from-1770-to-1820>.

⁴"Ouroboros," *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, accessed September 17, 2025, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Ouroboros>.

connections, infinity, and the deeper mysteries of spiritual renewal.⁵ In this design, the ouroboros serves a dual purpose: it acts as a functional handle while also functioning as an ornamental element, adding layers of significance to the object that extend beyond its basic utility.

The Harlequin figure itself draws directly on the long history of pantomime, a theatrical tradition that grew out of *commedia dell'arte* in 16th-century Italy. With its blend of dance, acrobatics, music, and mischievous stock characters, *commedia* travelled across Europe, and by the early 18th century, Harlequin had become the star of English pantomime, or “Harlequinade.” His quick wit, playful tricks, and dazzling checkered costume made him instantly recognisable to audiences and a beloved subject. (For reference, an image has been attached.)⁶ The tongs capture him in miniature: his tilted body suggests movement, his engraved lozenge-patterned costume renders his identity unmistakable, and his smiling face beneath a jaunty cap brings a spark of mischief to the tea table.



As such, these silver sugar tongs are not only a functional object but also a performance in miniature. They reflect the Victorian delight in novelty silver. Lifting sugar with this Harlequin was not just a polite gesture of hospitality but a small act of theatre, transforming an everyday ritual into a moment of play. Comparable Harlequin figures in porcelain and print, such as those in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art (For reference, an image has been attached, LEFT)⁷ and the British Museum (For reference, an image has been attached, RIGHT.)⁸

⁵“Victorian Snake Jewellery,” *LAPADA Guides*, accessed September 17, 2025, <https://lapada.org/guides/victorian-snake-jewellery>.

⁶Victoria and Albert Museum, “The Story of Pantomime,” V&A, accessed September 17, 2025, <https://www.vam.ac.uk/articles/the-story-of-pantomime>.

⁷*Harlequin*, Nymphenburg, ca. mid-18th century, porcelain figure, collection accession number 06.77.196.1, Met Museum, accessed September 17, 2025, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/206046>.

⁸*Harlequin print*, image no. 1613953893, British Museum Collection, accessed September 17, 2025, <https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/image/1613953893>.

respectively, show how popular and widely reproduced this character was during the 18th and 19th centuries, celebrated as one of the most enduring comic types in European art and material culture.

