

C17 Silver in the Burrell Collection

by Robert Wenley May 2007

Burrell's tastes in C17 Silver

- 300 items of silver: mostly English, some Scottish, some European
- 35 from 1600-60 (9 on show; plus 5 drinking vessels, 5 dishes & 16 spoons)
- c80 from 1660-1702 (20 on show)
- Mostly less than £100 per item; only 2 over £1000

1600-1660: General

- Stuart silver more commonly found than Elizabethan.
- Pieces made after Civil War much more common than those from 1625-60.
- Private families suffered unequally during War according to accessibility of properties.
- Restoration innovations in eating & drinking (new drinks + tableware refinements) were of real significance in the development of C17 silver: i.e., 1660 not 1600 was the real divide.
- But even by 1640s, much greater variety of forms in use than in mid C16 - reflecting increasing refinement of domestic comfort even before 1660.
- Developments linked to evolution of English country house plan:
 - during C17, decline in number & social standing of servants; households shrank; formal dining rare; buffet displays unwieldy & inconvenient in smaller ceiled rooms typical of late C17
 - meals served to smaller numbers, with fewer dishes at each remove, so redundant buffet plate often converted into more fashionable & appropriate forms, used only by immediate family
- Thus Civil War confiscations were only a hiccup in this process.

Charles I period:

- simpler forms
- greater use of labour-saving types of decoration: e.g. matting, stamping, flat-chasing (but decline in engraving, & casting poor)
- decline in use of gilding
- reduction in provincial work
- More people had less money for investing in plate than before.
- Trend towards simplicity: in troubled times, melts were more likely, so it was considered extravagant to pay for unrecoverable costs of ornament.

1660-1702: General

- demand for silver in late C17 England was enormous & almost every household article could be made from it: chamber pots, colanders, saucepans [tho' all rare now];
- virtually every part of house, from kitchen to bedrooms, & especially dining room, had its complement of silver vessels;
- usage throughout the home peaked c. 1700: thereafter, porcelain & glass replace some vessels;
- demand grew from 1660, (1) to replace plate melted in 1640s & 50s; (2) because of taste for lavish interiors, typical of Restoration Court [& taste spread from Court];
- after 1660, more money to spare because now no taxes to pay for large army & commercial projects in the City began to pay, thus more surplus wealth;
- scale of vessels unprecedented: cisterns, 4pt tankards, tables, beds, etc;
- value: (1) expression of wealth; (2) easily cleaned; (3) could be burnished to hard surface; (4) retained heat well, so good for food & cooking; (5) easily engraved for armorials/ presentation

- newly-fashionable hot drinks (from West Indies, etc): tea, coffee, chocolate: vessels began to be made from 1660s; but common only from c.1700

Huguenots:

- 1689, Huguenot emigres begin to come to England with William III, because England was a safe refuge (nb arrival of Dutch king, but French fashions; royal bounty was also an incentive);
- Huguenots originally from France (1685, Louis XIV's Revocation of the Edict of Nantes led to emigration to Netherlands);
- native (English) goldsmiths tried to resist the influx, but Huguenots had advantages: (1) knew new fashions [e.g., cut-card work]; (2) had better techniques, so more efficient & lower costs [e.g. engraving].

Goldsmiths

- training: prentice as boy, 4-7 yrs; journeyman, for experience etc; entered guild after submitting a masterpiece
- Goldsmiths' Company: failure to enforce rules gave better skilled aliens - i.e. those born abroad (10% of total) - an advantage
- guilds: only c.450 members in London in mid C17
- status: according to social position: goldsmith-bankers; silversmith-retailers; silversmith-platemakers.

Techniques

- raising: hollow shape from flat disc - hammer on stakes/ anvils
- embossing: design pricked on reverse; no metal removed - light hammer & punches on pitch
- chasing: design pricked on front; no metal removed - light hammer & punches on pitch
- engraving: design cut into metal with burin/ graver
- gilding: amalgam of mercury & gold heated into paste; brushed onto surface; heated - mercury vaporises; gold adheres; gilded surface burnished

Hallmarks

- earliest form of consumer protection: place; master (maker); purity; assayer
- nb the master of a shop was not necessarily the maker or retailer whose mark applied;
- makers usually worked to commission, so object reflects taste of patron;
- 1697, Britannia Standard + mark (used till 1720): silver more pure than coinage [92.5 : 95.8%, rest was copper] had to be used, to protect coinage from being recycled

Further Reading

- P. Glanville, *Silver*, London, 1996
- P. Glanville, *Silver in England*, London, 1987
- P. Glanville, *Silver in Tudor and Early Stuart England*, London, 1989
- C. Oman, *Caroline Silver 1625-1688*, London, 1970
- C. Oman, *English Engraved Silver 1150-1900*, London, 1978 (pp.72-82)
- J.F. Hayward, *Huguenot Silver in England 1688-1727*, London, 1959