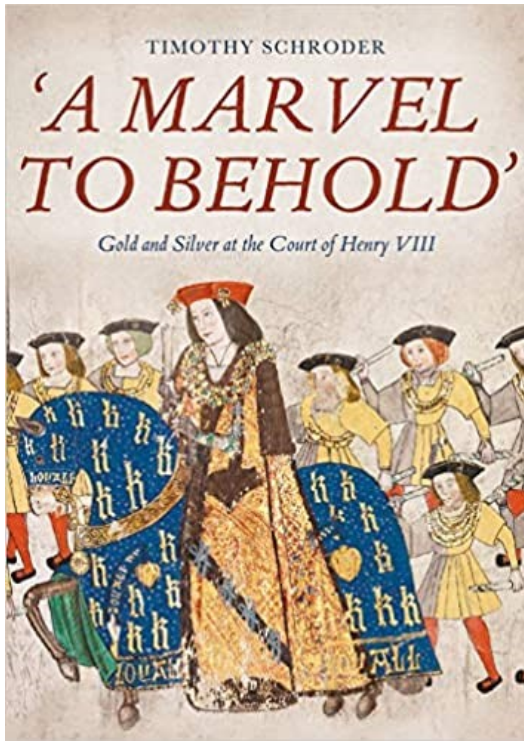


BOOK REVIEW

By Anne Thackray



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A major scholarly publication on goldsmiths' work at Henry's court has long been needed. There was just so much of the stuff:

'Henry VIII died possessed of more gold and silver than any other English monarch, before or since, and possibly more than any other monarch ever.'¹

Henry's collection of gold, silver and jewels must have been one of the finest ever assembled. But a coffee-table book loaded with gorgeous photographs of Henrician gold, silver and jewels is unlikely to appear anytime soon. Only four gold or silver items known to have belonged to Henry VIII still exist.²

Thankfully, Timothy Schroder has produced *'A Marvel to Behold: Gold and Silver at the Court of Henry VIII'*. His 366-page, well-illustrated volume is a remarkable achievement, founded on the author's discerning use of what does survive from the age of Henry VIII: a mass of evidence. Schroder has deduced information about lost and surviving Henrician treasures from inventories, lists, ambassadorial reports, goldsmiths' accounts, portraits, tapestries, designs, state papers, correspondence, and administrative memoranda.

Years of research must underpin this book. To consider just one document: the inventory of Henry's possessions, compiled over several years after the king's 1547 death, records some 50,000 items. Schroder rightly acknowledges the contribution of his research assistant, Dr. Charlotte Berry, an expert in deciphering sixteenth-century documents.

When relying on research by other scholars, Schroder also often names them in his main text, and not just in endnotes. This practice, not as common as it should be in the world of scholarship, is to his credit.

Schroder himself brings solid expertise to his subject. A former curator of Decorative Arts at the Los Angeles County Museum, and a Consultant Curator at the Victoria & Albert Museum, he is the author of publications on English domestic silver, the Gilbert Collection, and the Ashmolean Museum's British and continental silver – as well as Prime Warden of the Goldsmiths' Company, and President of the Silver Society.

In particular, Schroder's familiarity with continental – as well as British – goldsmiths' work, is an advantage when researching Henrician gold and silver. The king and his senior courtiers patronized

¹ Timothy Schroder, *'A Marvel to Behold'/Gold and Silver at the Court of Henry VIII* (Boydell Press, Woodbridge, 2020), p. 314.

² *Ibid.*, p. 318.

continental-trained goldsmiths, including ones who never worked in England. Also, when considering lost examples of Henry's silver, Schroder knows (and illustrates) comparable objects still extant in continental churches or museums, as well as in Oxford colleges. Where no example of work by Cornelius Hayes (a major royal goldsmith to Henry VIII) survives, Schroder is able to point out that, for example, one of the massive gold water pots hallmarked 1604-05 (Kremlin Army Museum, Moscow), may be a copy of a lost Hayes pot of c. 1530.³

At the opening of *'A Marvel to Behold'*, Schroder provides readers with a glossary defining Tudor terms like 'quillons'. He explains units of measurement for pre-decimal English money, 'troy measure', and the exchange rate between English pounds, Spanish ducats and French crowns during Henry's reign.

Schroder also clarifies the difference between the relative values of gold and silver in the sixteenth century, and in modern times, and compares the Tudor values of plate to other Tudor commodities. The book also includes a bibliography, useful footnotes, and an index.

As expected, *'A Marvel to Behold'* examines Tudor gold, silver and jewels: their types and styles, designers and goldsmiths, merchants and markets. But the author goes beyond this to examine the multiple ways in which gold and silver functioned at Henry VIII's court. It was used lavishly in court ceremonies both secular and religious. Even royal dining etiquette resembled the stately choreography of liturgy, while the king's 'cramp rings' were thought to heal illness. Gold, silver and jewels were the currency of exchange in diplomacy and in international financial transactions. They also functioned as a sign of social status at court, and as the concrete expression of Henry's changing relationships with wives, children, and courtiers.

Even the deterioration of Henry's personal character over time was marked by his increasing avidity for gold, silver, and jewels. The young king who did not desire gold or gems or precious metals⁴ was, by 1540, a prince 'so covetous that all the riches in the world will not satisfy him.'⁵

Schroder explains the important concept of 'princely magnificence'. Even today, wall displays of golden dishes (modest compared to Henry's) appear at Buckingham Palace state banquets. But during Henry's reign, a large display of silver might cost almost as much as a palace, and 'to be secure it was essential to be seen to be rich'.⁶

Domestically, Henry was the king of bling. Contemporary accounts of ceremonies, sporting events and festivities record his court as positively glittering. At special events, clothing, floors, ceilings, walls, and columns sparkled with gold or silver.

However, Schroder advocates caution in relying on uncorroborated reports by Henry's contemporaries, and even on royal inventories. He has checked Venetian accounts of the lavish use of gold at a banquet held at Greenwich in 1527 for French diplomats, against surviving lists of payments to goldsmiths – for huge amounts of gold leaf.⁷

Periodic inventories of the contents of Henry's Jewel House did not include the large proportion of Henry's gold and silver kept at his royal palaces, especially that in the king's private apartments. Schroder points out the implications of this: that we have less information about the gold and silver Henry used daily (and liked most) than about the rest. Similarly, the absence of rings listed in the 1537 *Boke of the Queen's Jewelles* means

³ *Ibid.*, p. 243-44, fig. 12.7. See also *Tudor, Stuarts & The Russian Tsars: Treasures of the Royal Courts*, ed. Olga Dmitrieva and Tessa Murdoch (V&A Publishing, London, 2013), at p. 93, fig. 105 (Moscow Kremlin Museums MZ-642).

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 39, citing Frank Mumby, (ed.), *The Youth of Henry VIII: A Narrative in Contemporary Letters* (London, 1913, p. 127).

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 282, citing the report of French ambassador Charles de Marillac, in J.S. Brewer and J. Gairdner, eds, *Letters and Papers, Foreign and Domestic of Henry VIII*, 21 vols (1862-1920), vol. 15, no. 954.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 100.



Fig. 1: Willem Kalf: Still Life

Image © National Gallery of Denmark

that this document recording Jane Seymour's jewellery is also probably incomplete.⁸

Henry VIII's expenditure on gold, silver and jewels was massive. The most spectacular event of his reign, the Field of the Cloth of Gold (a 1521 meeting near Calais between Henry and François I of France lasting two weeks) cost more than Henry's annual household budget. Still, as Schroder points out, it was cheaper than going to war with France.⁹ Henry's 1543-46 war against the French and Scots cost over two million Tudor pounds.¹⁰ At his accession, Henry VIII was probably the richest king in Europe (in cash, not lands), but to finance that war, he had to borrow funds.¹¹

Gold and silver were important to display, but also among the Crown's most liquid assets. When Henry VIII took plenty of plate to war with him, it was to impress others – and in case he ran out of money to pay his troops.¹² The primary function of royal gold and silver during his reign was as a form of wealth relatively easy to liquidate. The king repeatedly transferred large amounts of gold and silver objects from his Jewel House to his mint, for melting into coinage. The author suggests that so much of England's plate had been melted down by the end of Henry's reign that it 'partly explains why plate from pre-1560 is so much rarer than post-1560 plate'.¹³

The high turnover in goods stored in Henry's Jewel House was also due to fashion. It was important for the king and courtiers that their luxury goods should appear in up-to-date styles. Most of the cost of an item of goldsmith's work lay in its materials, not the goldsmith's skill or labor. Henry's inventory-takers routinely recorded an object's weight, and the numbers of pearls and different kinds of jewels it contained, while only briefly describing the object's appearance.

This makes it more difficult for scholars to trace whether, and for how long, a single object survived over the years by checking inventories. But the relative cheapness of goldsmith's labor meant that Henry could afford to have his gold and silver objects melted down, to be remade in a more modern style.

Schroder traces how during Henry's reign, gold and silver styles in English royal goldsmith's work evolved from medieval Gothic to a Northern European version of Italian-influenced 'antique'.¹⁴ The author makes good use of the abundance of designs for gold and silver surviving from 1530 to Henry's death in 1547.

The book's chapter on 'Holbein and the Antique' naturally focuses on Holbein (whose most important designs were for Henry VIII and the royal family), but also looks at the wider influence of continental fashions on English plate – and how Henry – and possibly Anne Boleyn – personally participated in designing royal objects.

As London-trained goldsmiths could not rival the skills of those trained in Antwerp, Paris, Augsburg or Nuremberg,¹⁵ Henry VIII bought

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 257-58.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 275-76. ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 308, n. 78. Henry VIII's 1547 inventory includes this description as no. 3024. For a printed version of Henry VIII's 1547 inventory, see Starkey, David (ed.), *The Inventory of Henry VIII: Society of Antiquaries MS 129 and British Library MS Harley 1419*, vol. 1 (London, 1998), no. 3024.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 318.

directly from continental goldsmiths and merchants. He granted them import licenses (not only for gold, silver or jewels) in return for offering him first pick of their most desirable imports.¹⁶

The annual New Year's gifts the king exchanged with his family and leading courtiers generally enriched Henry at their expense. Displayed at court, the gifts also served to demonstrate to everyone who was in or out of royal favor. Henry's collection further increased as he appropriated the estates of courtiers or aristocrats accused of treason, most notably the Duke of Buckingham and Cardinal Wolsey.

The king recycled jewels from one wife to the next, bestowing or removing plate and jewels from his wives, and his daughter Princess Mary, to reward or punish them, and to humiliate them in the eyes of the court.

Schroder also considers major institutions involved in the procurement, protection and use of gold and silver during Henry's reign. Despite their nominal independence, shared personnel meant that the Jewel House, Mint, and Goldsmiths' Company functioned as interrelated institutions, despite their nominal independence - especially while Thomas Cromwell was Henry's Master of the Jewel House. From 1544, the lion passant hallmark (still in use today) appeared on English plate: a mark of Henry's appointment of royal officials to test the coin of the realm, after he debased it. The Goldsmiths' Company had traditionally tested the coinage, but was obliged to surrender its charter when Henry debased the currency.¹⁷

As one would expect, Schroder's book includes a chapter about Henry's dissolution of the monasteries. The *Act of Supremacy* in 1534 explicitly required clergy to reveal (and provide an inventory of) church gold and silver, enabling Henry to confiscate it. As Supreme Head of the English Church, Henry could take whatever he wanted – and did.

The Court of Augmentations was established in 1536 to administer and process the loot. Characteristically, Schroder warns that State papers recording the confiscation of Church property at the Dissolution are 'almost certainly incomplete'.¹⁸

Henry's most valuable targets were major cathedral and monastic shrines: above all, Canterbury's enormously rich shrine of St. Thomas Becket. The king may have personally attended the shrine's destruction in September 1538: by then he loathed Becket for defending Church rights against the monarchy. Henry ordered all images of Becket destroyed, and his cult erased from the liturgy; he even appropriated a famous jewel from the saint's shrine, to wear in a finger ring. Yet while confiscating religious images from England's churches, Henry increased (and



Fig. 2 Burghley Nef, Paris 1527-28

Image © Victoria & Albert Museum

embellished) his own stock of them. To his death, the king remained conservative in his personal religious beliefs.

To the end of his life, the king continued to spend major sums on fine gold and jewels. A rock crystal bowl of c. 1545, known as the 'Holbein Bowl' (Fig. 1) survives in the Schatzkammer der Residenz, Munich. The bowl appears in Willem Kalf's late-seventeenth century painting, *Still Life* (National Gallery of Denmark, Copenhagen), where it is shown still with its original tall finial decorated with hanging pearl drops, matching the description of a bowl in Henry's 1547 inventory.

Schroder explains that even this huge inventory, begun after Henry's death, is probably incomplete. However, unlike the Jewel House inventories, it includes plate kept in the Privy Chamber (the king's private apartments) at Whitehall, Henry's principal residence late in his reign. Accessible only to Henry, his family and elite courtiers, the Privy Chamber included the king's 'secret jewel house', and was filled with superb works of art. The collection, resembling those assembled over several generations in continental royal *Kunstkam- mers*, had been largely acquired by Henry VIII during his lifetime. It included natural marvels like 'unicorn horns' (narwhal tusks) and 'griffin' (ostrich) eggs, but also man-made inventions like clocks and scientific instruments (of special interest to the king), and coffered filled with jewels.

Most of this astonishing treasure had vanished by the end of the century. Though Henry VIII's successors tended to preserve some of the finest items in his collection, like Henry they mined the Jewel House for gold objects to melt down, either as coinage or to be remade in more modern styles.

Schroder finishes by considering the few surviving examples of plate known to have been owned by Henry VIII. He points out that the beautiful Burghley Nef, made in Paris in 1527-28 and now in the Victoria & Albert Museum (Fig. 2), corresponds closely to the description of a nef in Henry's 1547 inventory.¹⁹ If the Burghley Nef belonged to Henry VIII, which seems entirely likely, it is a heartbreaking reminder of the masterpieces of medieval and Renaissance goldsmiths' art now lost to us.

The author reminds his readers, however, that other Henrician objects may remain to be found, perhaps in some European *Kunstammer*, or in 'the rich and largely uncatalogued treasuries of the Spanish cathedrals.'²⁰ Hopefully, his excellent book will encourage scholars to research these under-studied collections.

Anne Thackray holds a doctorate in history of art from the Courtauld Institute of Art in London, where she researched Paris silversmiths. A graduate of Sotheby's decorative arts and Christie's history courses, she was formerly a junior curator at the National Portrait Gallery, and curatorial research fellow at the National Gallery in London. Now an independent art historian, she worked in the education department at the National Gallery of Canada, where she was research fellow in European art. She is the author of publications on European art.