

The Wellby Bequest

As has been reported in the national press, the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, has recently been left the silver collection of the late Michael Wellby. Numbering some 480 pieces, the collection comprises principally Continental European silver, dating from the 14th to the 18th centuries, with a few English pieces. Michael Wellby was a dealer of the old school: very discreet, very knowledgeable, whose collection was known only to a few friends and scholars. Timothy Wilson, the curator in charge of Western Art at the museum was introduced to Mr Wellby by Timothy Schroder who was cataloguing the museum's collection of silver. Prof.. Wilson then went on to cultivate the collector and to persuade him that the Ashmolean was the proper repository for his "goods" as Mr Wellby cheerfully called his silver. And what a collection it is, and what a coup for the museum, and for Prof.. Wilson in particular.

An initial display of just a few pieces was shown on 19 February, but a grander, and more complete, offering is planned in a style which will reflect the display at Mr Wellby's home and that of the *schatzkammern* of the great princely collections of Northern Europe in a separate gallery in the museum.

Curiously, for a collection of this kind, there is little by way of recorded provenance. Indeed it appears that Mr Wellby kept few records of his purchases. Of course, there are pieces which are recognisable from sales' catalogues but by and large the collection is unencumbered by details of previous history which will make the task of cataloguing something of a trial. This, however, should not detract from the extraordinary quality of the pieces themselves.

Among the largest group, that of German silver of the 16th and 17th century, is a delightful collection of cups formed as both animals and humans. Of these a cup formed as an owl dating from the 1570's and perhaps from Ulm is one of the most amusing and a stag dating from the first decade of the 17th century by the Augsburg goldsmith Elias Zorer, is amongst the most impressive. As will all these animal cups the heads, which detach to make drinking possible, although one suspects that they were intended for display alone, become missing with use and age, and figure of a bear attributed to Christopher Ritter would appear to have a rather newer head than might be expected. This group also contains a musketeer, and a pair of fruit pickers made in Holland in the early 17th century.

A further impressive group is formed from nautilus shells mounted in silver. A *tour de force* is a cup mounted in an elaborate cagework of silver and silver gilt, set on an openwork stem and foot, perhaps by Ulrich Munt of Augsburg. Not far short in terms of quality is a cup by David Stechmesser, Nuremberg, about 1580, which reflects the origin of the shell in its stem formed as a triton and the cover chased with Poseidon riding a dolphin through the waves. A much smaller shell is mounted as a crane.

Probably the largest piece in the collection is a massive Portuguese ewer chased with a myriad of figures and with applied cast grotesque monsters in a style which was current in that country in the early years of the 16th century. The cover is set with an enamelled print of the Royal arms of Portugal. However, while the blue enamelled band which adorns the collar of the ewer shows definite signs of age and devitrification, the arms appear pristine so it

should not be assumed that they are necessarily original to the cover. The piece is, despite that, a monument to the skills and innovation of Portuguese goldsmiths of the period.

The silver-gilt also includes a group of early German cups and covers, all however unmarked and therefore difficult to ascribe to any city, and, more importantly, to date. Two, a covered cup and a double cup, have been traced to the collection of the nefarious collector/dealer Frédéric Spitzer, whose sale in Paris in 1893 was the largest and most valuable collection sold at that time. The third, in terms of importance, is a covered beaker given a date of about 1490. All three have gilding of a remarkably similar colour which may suggest that either that they have been the subject of restoration, or that their dates might be challenged by scientific analysis.

In the bequest there are several mounted hardstones, of which the serpentine ewer and basin, mounted in silver-gilt is a remarkable survival. Attributed to Dresden about 1580, the basin is decorated with plaquettes probably after Peter Flötner, who worked mainly in Nuremberg, but whose models were widely circulated within Europe. An early 17th century lapis lazuli ewer with gold mounts is however among the most spectacular pieces in the bequest. Apparently acquired in a sale of 19th century works of art, the beautiful lapis has all the signs of having been cut in the Miseroni workshops, while the gold triton which acts as a handle, is said to be by Paulus van Vianen, when working in Prague around 1608, although an attribution to Jan Vermeyen, who was also working in the city at the same date should not be discounted. However, head and shoulders above all these, almost literally in size alone, is a magnificent enamelled silver-gilt mounted ostrich egg cup and cover. Tentatively attributed to an anonymous Nuremberg goldsmith, the cover is adorned with an ostrich holding a shield of arms with the inscription indicating that the piece was made for Christopher Bathoury, voivode of Transylvania, in 1576. The cup is, unusually, lined with chased silver-gilt, and this, combined with the quality of the decoration suggests that it might have been made, not in Germany, but in Transylvania itself, but at present too little is known about the goldsmiths' work from that country to make a positive attribution.

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